

**Transformative Acts:  
Arab American Writing/Writing Arab America**

**by**

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## Taproot

Once she could have held anything steady  
and safe: a glass of tea, her brother's baby.  
Now her hands shake at the weight of a fork.

Yet neighbors still come to her for cuttings  
and she shows them how to let a stem breathe  
in water, settle soil around branching roots.

\*

After exile she built a house in the new place.  
With years the stone walls browned like summer skin;  
in her garden, peaches clustered like moons.

Uprooted, any stalk or vine  
would wither and die. But if the taproot  
is strong, a transplant can live.

\*

What she knows is a kernel of darkened sun.  
She could tell you how soldiers bulldozed trees,  
smashed wells, how exposed roots shrivel.

Lifting jars of oil in the kitchen  
(rich sustenance from bitter fruit)  
her hands tremble with the weight they bear.

\*

Sometimes, mounding dirt around new transplants  
in the garden, she pauses--  
fists knuckling, tenacious roots, into the earth.

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**In memory**  
**Isa Joudeh Majaj and Jean Caroline Stoltenberg Majaj**

**For Andreas N. Alexandrou**

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## Chapter 1

### Mapping the Terrain: Cultural Contexts, Literary Texts

*Culture is the medium of the present--the imagined equivalences and identifications through which the individual invents lived relationship with the national collective--but it is simultaneously the site that mediates the past--through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction...It is...in culture that individuals and collectivities struggle and remember and practice both subject and community differently.*

*Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts 2-3*

Arab American<sup>1</sup> literature is a literature of exiles and ethnics, travelers and homemakers. The Arab American literary texts that have emerged over the last century testify to the experience of Arab immigrants and their descendants as they negotiate displacement, engage with intersections of geographies, nationalities, languages, cultures, politics and identities, and claim, assert or create groundspace -- Arab, American, Arab American. This dissertation explores Arab American writing -- the narratives and poetics that result from the process of transplantation and its after-effects--and the intersections from which it originates. In chronicling the emergence of Arab American literature throughout the twentieth and into the twenty first century, I situate this writing within the context of issues --in particular, race, ethnicity, politics, war, and feminist critique--that have shaped not only Arab American literature and identity but also the emergence of Arab Americans as a recognizable ethnic group. And I explore some of the ways in which this literature challenges and transforms the boundaries of ethnicity even as it makes possible the articulation of

agency. Meanwhile, because I too inhabit this cultural borderland between Arab and American, part of my project here is to also offer a self-reflexive perspective on the writing of Arab America: to explore what it means to occupy and speak from that meeting place between cultures, communities and worlds. In order to do so I interpolate my critical analysis with personal and creative reflections on Arab American identity and experience, thereby suggesting not only some of the particular ways in which Arab American experience may be given literary voice, but also some of the implications – aesthetic, cultural and political – of such voicing.

In focusing critical attention on the narrative of a literature that has historically received little critical attention, I both situate this literature as an integral part of American literature and culture and simultaneously locate it within the context of “Arab American Studies.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, however, I also question formulations that would codify Arab American culture and experience on the basis of a linear trajectory from Arab to American. For as I hope to show, the narrative of Arab American literary expression, like that of Arab American ethnicity more generally, has not been a linear one. Even as Arab American literature has assumed a more established place in American literary contexts – its existence more and more taken for granted not only in ethnic contexts but also in more mainstream American literary contexts (a radical shift that has occurred in less than two decades) – it posits an implicit critique to the ways in which such identifications, whether “ethnic” or “American,” are constituted. And it pushes us toward a consideration of what Steven Salaita calls “the internationalization of the nation” (*Literary Fictions*, Chapter 2). For as Salaita argues,

As peoples across the globe continue migrating into North America and as North America continues to impose itself across the globe, the traditional values critics have ascribed to American literature—including its geographical values—

have been reworked and reinvented as something considerably more complex and infinitely far-reaching. This is all to say that there is no American literature anymore, at least not in any sense in which the category can be accompanied by inclusive criteria. There is only literature written by authors who happen to be American citizens or located in the United States. (Literary Fictions 83-84)

Salaita's comments not only reflect the global situatedness of all literary projects, they point toward the transnational connections that complicate bounded categories of identification, connections that are brought more and more into focus in contemporary discussions of literature and culture.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, the assumption of a linear trajectory from Arab to American has historically shaped much thinking about Arab American ethnicity, and it continues to be in evidence today not only in many of the ways in which Arab Americans are situated within the mainstream American context, but also in many of the ways in which Arab Americans continue to situate themselves. Arab Americans have implicitly and explicitly been compared to European immigrant groups, aligned along a progression that moves from arrival in the U.S., to a confrontation with prejudice and discrimination, a struggle for economic survival, assimilation into the American context, and a rediscovery of the "option" of ethnicity (Waters).<sup>4</sup> As Sarah Gualtieri notes,

The first monographs and edited volumes on Arabs in America fell within the celebratory tradition of immigration studies, a tradition that focused on the ability of an ethnic group to maintain a distinctive culture while assimilating into a mainstream American core. This 'tactical appeal to sameness' in Arab American studies emphasized the Americanness of Arab immigrants and their children and, in particular, their rapid incorporation into the middle class...[it] also aimed to counter the pervasive and deliberate vilification of Arabs in the American media, educational system, and government. (9)

This kind of focus was part and parcel of the consolidation of the idea of an “Arab American” ethnic identity and ethnic group consciousness. Early scholarship on Arab American literature similarly assumed a tone of ethnic celebration coexisting with assertion of Americanness, as critics sought to carve out space for Arab American literature on the basis of, as Michelle Hartman puts it, “equal time”: for instance, the idea that “Arab Americans deserve a poetic [or other literary] ‘anthology of their own’ because other similarly marginalized ethnic and racial groups have them” (Hartman 178).

Yet while such trajectories tell one part of the story, they risk glossing over other currents that complicate this not-so-linear route from immigrant to Arab American. These include the uneven racialization of Arabs in the U.S., political events in the Middle East that deeply affect Arab communities in the U.S. and that unsettle the “assimilation trajectory,” continuing immigration and the effect of overlapping cohorts, and the complexities of gendered ethnicity and portrayals of Arab womanhood in the U.S. context. Such discourses unsettle “ethnic” identification and force Arab Americans to continually grapple with the ways in which the categories of “Arab” and “American” impinge on each other and reshape each other. In the post 9-11 period, this process has been accentuated. Thus, for instance, as Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad notes, “many Arabs increasingly see their marginalized reality as deliberate and specific. In response they are developing a kind of survival mechanism appropriated as resistance to what is perceived and at times experienced as a manifestation of Western ‘anti Arab’ or ‘anti-Muslim’ sentiment.” Such shifts pose a challenge to processes of “Americanization.” By focusing on such complications, and by exploring not just the trajectory toward Americanization but also the ongoing and new mechanisms of “othering” that Arab Americans experience

in the contemporary period, scholars are better able to interrogate the racial, political, cultural and sociological forces--both within the U.S. and transnationally--that have delineated and shaped Arab American experience. For as Salah Hassan and Marcy Knopf-Newman observe,

academics who study Arab Americans have in the past focused on the sociological narrative of migration and as a result were methodologically and thematically stuck in a particular foundational moment that repeated itself with each new generation of Arab immigrants... However, a critical understanding of Arabs in the U.S. must move beyond the unifying story of migration, and the concomitant stories of assimilation and acculturation, which place so much emphasis on cultural particularism and neglect the political determinations of Arabs both in terms of US domestic racial policies and foreign affairs. (5)

And as Gualtieri similarly notes, “The preoccupation with defending a culture under siege in the United States...has constrained Arab American scholars...impeding more thorough explications of Arab culture here and abroad” (9).

Indeed, at the same time as Arab American literature has increasingly established itself as an American literature--and has increasingly claimed this stance without the apologetics and self-consciousness of earlier decades--it has become more comfortable with its simultaneous status as a literature deeply engaged with Arab themes and Arab realities. What Salaita terms the “searching diversities” (Literary Fictions 5) of Arab American experience not only complicate any overly rigid consolidation into any singular identification (and warn, too, against a too-easy consolidation into a simplified “Arab American” ethnic identity<sup>5</sup>); they also have complex effects on cultural production. Arab American authors and literary texts are located on a landscape upon which U.S. identification, both civic and cultural, coexists with a struggle against a deeply embedded anti-Arab racism and negative stereotyping, an ongoing diasporan consciousness played out through engagement

with political issues, events and geographical spaces in the Arab world and through multifaceted personal and cultural connections, and through a transnational information flow, and through multiple unsettling of the boundaries of identity. Such intersecting (and impinging) discursive, cultural and political forces have long shaped not only Arab American ethnicity but also the form and content of literary texts. This is apparent throughout Arab American writing, from early immigrant authors who adopted the narrative form of the immigrant autobiography to rewrite themselves as Americans,<sup>6</sup> to writers of the 1970s and 80s who claimed the genre of lyric poetry as their predominant literary mode, to the recent surge of fiction that takes as its organizational framework a trope of storytelling and a reworking of elements of Thousand and One Arabian Nights.<sup>7</sup>

One way of thinking about the narratives that situate and ground the concept of Arab American ethnicity and identity is, of course, in the context of articulating an “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s famous term. As we know, the development of an “imagined community,” whether of a nation or an ethnic group, depends not only on sociological and historical texts asserting the existence of a community, but also on literary narratives of this identity. Literary texts play a crucial role in communal identity formation, for they not only give voice to the experiences (real and imagined) of members of the community; they provide a framework within which notions of communal identity may be articulated and explored. Through narrative and poetic explorations of Arab American identity and agency, writers not only claim space for an Arab American identity in the wider social, cultural and political U.S. and diasporan context; they help to shape and articulate this identity. Indeed, given the central role of literary discourse in the formation and articulation of ethnicity and community, it is no surprise that the emergence of the concept of an

Arab American communal identity overlaps with the emergence of a body of Arab American literature, and of a body of critical discussion about this literature. Nor is it an accident that the consolidation of Arab American literature as a field of study is closely linked to the emergence of the field of Arab American Studies. Literary texts provide a framework for thinking about issues of cultural identity: they not only help us explore how individuals construct their relationship with the collective, including how the past is remembered and narrated and how the present and future are conceptualized; they also help to shape notions of this collective.

Indeed, a look at Arab American critical literature suggests a clear interplay between literary texts, literary criticism and the articulation and development of cultural identity. In this regard, the work of Evelyn Shakir, one of the first critics of Arab American literature in the contemporary period, is worthy of note. In a series of nuanced, historically-informed critical and creative publications, Evelyn Shakir, one of the earliest critics of Arab American literature in the contemporary period, not only traced the historical trajectory of Arab American writing, providing a cogent literary history and critical analysis of both early and contemporary Arab American writing, but also pointed toward the kinds of broader societal forces shaping Arab American texts. And she provided as well a feminist perspective on Arab American identity and articulation that set the stage for later examinations of the complex ways in which gender has helped to shape notions of Arab American identity.<sup>8</sup> In Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States, an interpolation of personal and critical writing, Shakir offered one of the first book-length discussions of Arab American women and Arab American gender issues, juxtaposing the issues of settled Arab American communities with those of more recent immigrants. Meanwhile, her own short stories and essays, which draw upon personal grounding in Arab American

experience as well as scholarly awareness of the issues at stake in literary representations of these experiences, point toward the complex contours of contemporary Arab American identity.<sup>9</sup> Throughout her multifaceted literary and critical production, Shakir charted an Arab America delineated in personal, communal, historical and literary terms, laid the groundwork for a feminist approach to Arab American concerns, and helped to delineate the field of Arab American literary criticism. By making visible the discursive contexts shaping literary texts, locating literary texts at the intersection between personal expression and the historically-inflected space of communal identification, Shakir helped to create the sense of an Arab American imaginary, situating it as both a source of creativity and an object of critically engaged analysis.

Similarly, the work of Stephen Salaita suggests the role that literary discourse has been played in the elaboration of the project of Arab American studies as well as the articulation of Arab American identity and agency. In a series of essays and books analyzing Arab American literature and culture<sup>10</sup> and the connections between U.S. and Middle Eastern contexts, Salaita grounds Arab American literature firmly within the context of Arab American cultural and political realities, examining the relationship between American culture and events and trajectories in the Middle East, and situating these discussions within an interdisciplinary, committed framework of engaged activism. In particular, his monograph Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics, the first book-length assessment of Arab American literature and culture, located the discussion of Arab American literature within the context of the emergence of Arab American Studies. Salaita's work also foregrounds the politicized context within which both Arab American Literature and Arab American Studies are situated – a context explored in several other of his titles,

including Arab American Racism in the USA: Where it Comes From and What it Means for Politics, and The Uncultured Wars: Arabs, Muslims and the Poverty of Liberal Thought.

Meanwhile, not only does literary discourse provide the context in which notions of identity and community can be asserted and shaped; it also provides the context within which such notions can be challenged and reframed. As Michelle Hartman points out, “Literary studies generally, and anthologies specifically, are important and urgent locations for the study of Arab American engagements with race and racialization....literary anthologies are particularly potent locations to challenge, establish and enshrine national, ethnic and/or racial identities” (172).<sup>11</sup> The coming of age of Arab American literature must be situated against an awareness of its ongoing complexity--simultaneously engaged with ethnic and diasporan and American contexts, nostalgia and critique, preservation and transformation. It is this complexity that underlies the various literary calls to action voiced by Arab American critics in the past decade, from Khaled Mattawa’s call for Arab American writers to engage more dynamically both with Arab culture (“Freeways and Resthouses”; “Arab American Writing and the Challenge of Reinventing Tradition”) and with the U.S. context (with Pauline Kaldas in introduction to Dinarzad’s Children); to Steven Salaita’s urge toward greater “interethnic dynamics,” engagement with indigenous native Indian nations and an analysis of the discursive and structural forces that situate minority writing in the US; to Hayan Charara’s insistence that Arab American writing resist not only the presumptions set into play by concepts of “Arab” or “Arab American” distinctiveness but also the “‘returns’ to culture and tradition” that “rise either from within the group itself or from outside it” (Inclined to Speak xix-xx). Underlying all these calls to action is the implicit resistance of Arab American

literature to assimilative trajectories that would gloss over the complexities at the heart of, for instance, an author writing in distinctly American English, with complex emotional engagement and deep affiliations to political realities in the Middle East, who makes common cause with other minority groups across dividing lines of “race” or culture. For one end goal of contemporary Arab American writing is surely not to become more “American,” but to show the diversity of ways in which not just American identity but also American agency can be articulated.

Charara brings the tension between the consolidation and unsettling of identity front and center. Aware, as he notes, of the implication of the category “Arab American” in U.S. racial categories and practices (cf Feldman), and of “the role that anthologizing Arab American poetry could play in reifying such practices” (Inclined to Speak xiii), Charara focuses not on consolidation or celebration of an Arab American identity, but rather on the disruptions to this identity--and the role that these disruptions may play in the articulation of a notion of an Arab American imagined community. “Without a doubt,” he notes, referring to the poems in his edited poetry anthology Inclined to Speak, “the poems here do their part to trouble and reshape any notions of a literature or a people called Arab American” (xiii). He continues:

Each in its own way disrupts the notions and expectations that most people have of Arab Americans, while simultaneously working together, as a body of literature, to express something that is undeniably Arab American, even if this something is always under constant modification... The idea of a single Arab American poetry (or people, or individual, or culture) is exploded through varied and complicated engagements with language, style, form, meaning, tradition, class, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, history, ideology, and of course the self.” (xiii-xiv; xvi)

Such disruptions are of particular importance in the post 9/11 period, a time in which the need to resist invisibility and marginality has in some ways shifted to the need to consolidate an Arab identity and to the demand that Arab Americans transmit or

translate their culture to mainstream Americans (cf Salaita, “Imperative Patriotism”) – for while having to prove that one exists requires a certain glossing over of complexity, having to explain one’s culture to an implicitly hostile audience similarly requires a certain consolidation and simplification.

Indeed, any assessment of Arab American life and culture must account not only for the demographic diversity inherent in any concept of an “Arab American” identity,<sup>12</sup> but also for the diversely constituted relationships to communal, religious, national, international, political and diasporan issues and contexts. It is in recognition of this diversity, for instance, that Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber, in titling their anthology Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging, refer to “Arab and Arab Americans,” thereby acknowledging the fact that the phrase “Arab American” may not sufficiently account for the complexity of identifications at play in the experience of Arab-identified individuals in the U.S. As they point out:

developments ‘back home’ as well as the ways that our homelands are imagined and remembered within and between our immigrant communities in the United States are just as significant to our lives as what happens “here.” In this sense, the interplay between homeland and diaspora, the Arab context and the United States, shapes our identities, experiences, loyalties, and affiliations. (xxiv-xxv)

This is, indeed, a paradigm shift. From an earlier period’s focus on asserting a place for Arab Americans within the American multicultural, and thereby insisting on the *Americanness* of Arab American identity, Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber here acknowledge that Arab American identity is firmly grounded in an Arab diasporan context as well – and that this grounding is not necessarily erased or attenuated by the trajectory of movement from Arab origin points to the U.S. or participation in U.S. civic, political and cultural contexts.

Such acknowledgement of a transnational identification that extends beyond, and subtly unsettles, a parochial sense of ethnicity has far-reaching implications not just for Arab American identity formation but also for Arab American cultural production. (It has implications, too, for how American culture conceives of itself.<sup>13</sup>) When Mattawa argued, over a decade ago, that “The three major factors that characterize Arab life in the U.S. are continuous contact with Arab culture through the homelands, an ambivalent relationship with American mainstream culture, and a struggle with Arab culture in the U.S. context” (“Freeways and Rest Houses” 60), he not only described a situation that has become more accentuated at the present time -- even as Arab American identity has claimed more definitive space in the U.S. context in the post 9-11 period -- he also challenged the ethnic trajectories that locate Arab Americans on a linear path from Arab to American and that relegate ongoing connection to Arab homelands to a nostalgic past. In so doing he put forward a model capable of accounting for the complexity and diversity of Arab American life and Arab American culture, both in the contemporary period and historically. (Notably, this is a model also capable of helping to shed light on the implicit, and till now largely unexplored, linkages between the *Mahjar* period and the contemporary period of Arab American writing, not only on the attempts of both early and contemporary writers to engage in cultural negotiation between “Arab” and “US” contexts,<sup>14</sup> but also on the activist political engagement in both periods with issues such as nationalism in the Arab world.<sup>15</sup>)

Contemporary Arab American writing increasingly seeks to address the complexity permeating the interface between “Arab” and “American,” and to embrace this complexity as a site of productive creativity – not in a simplistic celebration of “hybridity,”<sup>16</sup> but as a way of reframing the double bind that has for so long

delineated Arab American identity formations. Indeed, it is precisely such complexities of culture and identity and affiliation that make possible what Hayan Charara describes as “points of release from the binds created by the competing notions of identity” (Inclined to Speak, xvi). In the chapters that follow I seek to explore some of these complexities of culture and identity and affiliation, the points of release they enable, and the transformations made possible by this willing engagement with complexity. In charting Arab American literature’s interrogation of notions of identity and affiliation, its investigation of the interplay between homelands of land and of mind, I seek not only to constitute Arab American literature as a subject of analysis but also to investigate the ways in which Arab American writing engages in *transformative acts*—pushing at the boundaries of identity and agency to assert an Arab American consciousness that is concerned less with identity – who one is-- than with agency –what one does with who one is. Through my investigation of Arab American writing I have found myself questioning both my own location within this cultural and literary landscape, and my relationship to the historical forces that have shaped Arab American literature and culture. I have been struck, too, upon looking back at my own personal and creative writing, to find many of the same patterns emerging in my poetry and essays that I have observed in the texts I study as a literary critic. By juxtaposing creative and personal writing with critical analysis, and at times interweaving personal and critical perspectives within the same analytical space, I seek to acknowledge my personal interpolation in the narrative of Arab American literature, both as reader and as writer.

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At one time the kind of literary history and analysis I seek to present here had few precedents. As the late Evelyn Shakir, one of the earliest critics of contemporary

Arab American literature, has noted, it used to be that the story of Arab American literature could be “briefly told” (“Starting Anew” 23). Indeed, when I first started my exploration of Arab American writing, it was barely locatable on any map of American culture, ethnic or non-ethnic. That is not to say there were no Arab American writers or literary texts, or that there was no Arab American literary history. After all, the first few decades of the twentieth century saw a flourishing of Arab *Mahjar* writers in New York and Boston that was influential both in the Arab world and in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> But at the time I started my research, Arab American literature, especially contemporary Arab American literature, was hard to locate, not least because the term “Arab American” was not yet in general use, whether in academic or community contexts. As a result, exploring Arab American literature (beyond the work of authors such as Khalil Gibran, whom I did not at that time really think of as Arab American<sup>18</sup>) required an approach that fell somewhere between archeological excavation and detective work.

Today, however, Arab American literature and Arab American literary criticism have grown apace. What was once a relatively modest body of literature and an almost non-existent body of literary criticism has taken on substantive proportions, with an ever-burgeoning list of literary titles--not only poetry and fiction but also drama and creative nonfiction--and a surge in book-length studies of Arab American literature and culture.<sup>19</sup> The fact that it is no longer realistic to imagine accounting for all of Arab American literature in one overarching narrative (an undertaking which my early research and writing on the topic did, in fact, imagine) may be taken as a welcome measure of the distance that Arab American literature has traveled in the last two decades. In this manuscript I attempt both to account for this distance and to point toward the larger cultural and historical contexts from which this writing derives and

against which it is set. Although the chapters that follow do not attempt to account for the full range of Arab American literary concerns, as they navigate the borderland of Arab, American and Arab American, they explore the kinds of voices and the kinds of possibilities--personal, cultural and political--that may be brought to light from such a confluence of contexts and histories.

This focus on voice and possibility situates Arab American literature within an implicit framework of resistance and transformation. Indeed, my engagement with Arab American literature cannot be separated from my understanding of literature as (among its other functions) a vehicle for resistance, assertion and transformation: a way to explore the tenacity of individual and communal articulation in the face of history's often-overwhelming odds. I have been influenced in this regard by writers from many different ethnic and national backgrounds who interrogate and illustrate the relationship between personal and political, showing how acknowledging the personal facilitates both agency and transformation. By emphasizing the meeting point between personal and critical I not only acknowledge my own personal investment in my topic, I also foreground the extent to which both knowledge production and literary production emerge from the historically situated experiences of individuals. And I seek to understand the ways in which this relationship between personal and critical informs possibilities for agency, whether personal or cultural. For as Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber point out, "experiences allow us to identify, analyze and understand structures of power and privilege that shape our lives" (Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging, xxix). And once these structures are made visible, it becomes possible to imagine their transformation.

Such interweaving of analytical and personal has strong precedent in Arab American writing. Starting with Ameen Rihani, whose discursive explorations in

essay, fiction and poetry drew on, and were shaped by, his personal experiences as émigré, nationalist, and humanist, Arab American writing has long articulated its critical analyses through the vehicle of the personal. In the contemporary period, one might consider Gregory Orfalea's Before the Flames, which narrated the search for an Arab American history via a personal saga, and his updated The Arab Americans: A History; Joanna (now Joe) Kadi's edited anthology Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian Feminists, a landmark anthology which brought together personal narratives, poetry, and literary, cultural and sociological analysis in its exploration of Arab American feminist voices; Evelyn Shakir's Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States, which views Arab American women through the multiply focused lens of personal writing, interviews, literary criticism, historical and sociological analysis, and more; Edward Said's memoir, Out of Place, which, as Hosam Aboul-Ela notes, "narrates personal events as reflective of or constituted in world politics" and "connects personal experience with geopolitics" (24); Salaita's Anti-Arab Racism in the USA: Where it Comes from and What it Means for Politics Today, which addresses anti-Arab racism in politics, literature, education from a stance in which the personal and the political are inseparably woven; Susan Muaddi Darraj's anthology Scheherazad's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing, in which writers reflect on the personal origins of their literary craft; and Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber's above-mentioned Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging, which takes as its starting point "the production of knowledge that is drawn from individual and collective experiences" (xxix).

The important role played by personal insight and experience in Arab American critical writing arises in part from the fact that the issues that inform so

many Arab American literary texts are, in general, not theoretical. Rather, literary and critical endeavors are imbued with personal and communal significance. Arab American writers and readers alike negotiate shifting boundaries of identity amid the rough intrusion of historical, cultural and political events and exclusions, both in the U.S. and the Arab world. The tension between “violence” and “belonging” (the subject of Arab and Arab American Feminisms) decisively informs Arab American experience and cultural production. As a result, Arab American critics have much personally at stake when they address Arab American literary negotiations of this tension. Likewise, the questions that Arab American writers grapple with are frequently questions that engage the Arab American community as a whole: how to define (and defend) oneself and one’s community; how to ground one’s identity amid contesting pressures of identification and affiliation; how to assert agency in local, national and international spheres; how to engage with difference without relinquishing wholeness.<sup>20</sup>

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I have come to view Arab American literary texts as constituting a series of transformative acts. In the earliest period of Arab American literature, the *Mahjar* authors, including Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, Elia Abu Madi and others, wrote out of a variety of transformative impetuses. As poets writing in Arabic, they levied a significant challenge to Arabic literary conventions, rebelling against classic literary conventions and insisting on a “poetry of ‘sincerity’”(Shakir, “Starting Anew” 23); indeed, they have been credited with altering the course of Arabic poetry.<sup>21</sup> Inspired by the European Romantics and the American Transcendentalists, they wrote, too, out of a spirit of social, political, intellectual and religious reform, critiquing conditions in the Arab world and articulating a utopian vision of humanism and universalism.<sup>22</sup> As

Tannys Ludescher notes, “Freed from the constraints of the Arab world and bred on the American ideals of liberty and progress, the northern *Mahjar* writers challenged Arab cultural norms in ways that were heretofore unimaginable” (95). At the same time they also levied strong critiques of the U.S., in particular of American materialism, mechanism and economic injustice. Thus, for instance, Mikhail Naimy wrote of the dehumanization produced by the American notion of “progress,” while Ameen Rihani questioned the validity of “a society which can only exist on the misery of a section of its people” (quoted in Suleiman, “Impressions” 40). Michael Suleiman argues that such “critics, in a very real sense, anticipated the social and political reformers whose writings and activism on behalf of the poor and the lower classes eventually succeeded in implementing the social-welfare safety net, especially in the 1930s under the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration” (“Impressions” 45). Meanwhile, these writers also sought to critique their own Arab American communities on issues of gender, politics, religion and more.<sup>23</sup> (cf sections of Rihani’s The Book of Khalid; also publications in the English language The Syrian World and in Arabic language publications. Of particular interest here is the writing of Afifa Karam, one of the “pioneers” of Arab feminist discourse, whose work “engaged ‘the woman question’ to address larger issues of societal reform” [Gualtieri 148].)

Meanwhile, other Arab American writers engaged in different kinds of transformative acts. The literary strategies of authors such as Salom Rizk and Abraham Mitrie Rihbany (and other less literary autobiographers as well) often turned upon an investigation of self-transformation as a way to claim American identity: as such they wrote within a long-standing tradition of American immigrant autobiography in which the act of narration provided a way to rewrite the self as

American. While central to these efforts was the strategic role-playing so endemic to ethnic literature (evident for instance in Vance Nye Bourjaily's "The Fractional Man"<sup>24</sup> and in William Blatty's Which way to Mecca, Jack), by shaping themselves in their literary texts to fit into expectations of what it meant to be "American" or "ethnic," such authors also implicitly pointed toward the societal structures that required such self-transformation. That is, in showing how American idealism fell short in denying them their right to American identity, they made visible the racial and religious faultlines of American identity. And by making these structures visible, they laid the groundwork for the possibility of transformation.

The ethnic revivals of the 1960s and 70s, themselves indebted to the Black and Native power movements, provided the necessary context within which the imperatives of American assimilation could begin to be challenged. Writers began to focus less on transforming themselves to fit into American expectations, and more on unsettling the U.S. context that established these expectations. The writers publishing during the 1970s began to chart a different kind of Arab American sensibility, one that articulated Arab American experiences and identities with a new openness, but did so by drawing on American literary language and literary forms. This work heralded the beginning of what is now often thought of as contemporary Arab American literature – literature in English, by American authors, exploring ethnic concerns in distinctively American voices. While it is incorrect to suggest that Arab American literature started here, or to suggest that Arab American literature is only written in English,<sup>25</sup> the emergence during this period of Arab American free verse in English did indeed signal a new phase in Arab American letters.

However, the transnational trajectory of the Mahjar period was not subsumed by this assertion of U.S.-based thematics. The work of Etel Adnan provides a good

example. Adnan, a Lebanese-American writer, poet and visual artist, was born in Lebanon of Greek-Syrian heritage and educated in French schools in Beirut and in France. She moved to the U.S. in 1955, moved back to Beirut in 1972, and in 1977 returned to the U.S.; since then she continues to spend time in Paris and Beirut. Her writing draws upon her multiple geographical and political contexts as well as on multiple artistic influences, and as such implies the need to broaden or refigure concepts of “U.S. ethnicity” located too definitively within the borders of the U.S. nation state. Adnan’s experimental poetry links her to the Beat poets and to American free verse; meanwhile, her political engagement, especially evident in works such as her novel Sitt Marie Rose and her book length poem The Arab Apocalypse, and her geographical mobility situates her on a transnational landscape that is reminiscent of the transnational connections articulated by many of the Mahjar writers. In positing literature as a mode of resistance and a vehicle for cultural and political transformation, and in focusing on connections to political events in the Arab world, Adnan’s work implicitly reenergized the activist, humanist and transnationalist legacy of the *Mahjar* period, challenging political, social and cultural realities in the Arab world at the same time as she complicated U.S.-focused definitions of “ethnic literature.”<sup>26</sup> Her central role in the development of an Arab American literary community--organizationally, as president of RAWI, and on a literary and community level, through her intellectual and artistic leadership –suggests the extent to which Arab American literature cannot be contained within a narrow rubric of an “American ethnic literature” focused on preserving a cultural heritage. As Salaita points out,

A respected visual artist and author in English and French, and of Syrian Muslim and Greek Christian origin, with a Lebanese, French and American national position, Adnan in many ways exemplifies through her mere physical presence the cultural multiplicity inherent in Arab American. More important, though, Adnan has exemplified this cultural

multiplicity through her humanistic aesthetics and the philosophical tenor of her writing” (*Literary Fictions* 62).

Indeed, Adnan’s work points toward the ways in which contemporary Arab American literature echoes, extends and transforms the international and philosophical positioning of the *Mahjar* writers, whose focus on cultural bridging and political engagement made them not simply ethnic, but international writers. In her writing one finds not just a complexity of identity, but also an aesthetic and political positioning that expands the possibilities of Arab American literature and stakes out transnational groundspace.

Meanwhile, however, throughout the 1970s and 1980s and into the 1990s, Arab American writing found itself needing in many ways to focus not on its transnational location but on asserting a space within the U.S. context and on transforming Arab American invisibility into visibility.<sup>27</sup> As Nadine Naber has shown, “invisibility” has been a central theme in the historical narrative of Arabs in the U.S. (“Ambiguous Insiders”). Arab Americans have been erased on the U.S. map by a number of paradoxes: the reduction of multiplicity and diversity to monolithic stereotypes; the classification of Arabs on the U.S. racial map as “white, but not quite”, the conflation of Arab and Muslim with racial inferiority; and what Naber calls the “racialization of religion” (Naber 52). In response, Arab Americans have sought both to gain visibility and assert voice. The publication of a number of landmark anthologies of Arab American scholarship and literature during the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the establishment of “Arab American” as a recognizable category in academic and cultural contexts, not to mention library data bases.<sup>28</sup> The consolidation of a pan-ethnic Arab American consciousness (a consolidation that parallels similar developments in other ethnic groups, such as South Asians<sup>29</sup>) is also evident in the growth of national Arab American organizations during this time: the Association of

Arab American University Graduates (founded 1967), the National Association of Arab Americans (founded 1972), the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (founded 1980) and the Arab American Institute (founded 1985).<sup>30</sup>

However, the paradigm of transforming invisibility into visibility must be situated within the context of a critical reformulation of the structural forces that have precipitated invisibility (and, in the post 9/11 period, hyper-visibility). Arab American discourse has increasingly moved beyond the initial desire to assert visibility and carve out space, toward an examination of the conditions which make it possible to speak or not speak, be seen or not seen, heard or not heard. As Naber notes, “Although the voices and actions of individuals and community groups that make Arab Americans more visible in everyday life contribute to Arab American visibility, some scholars and activists suggest that additional socio-structural changes must be made to address the problem of ‘invisibility’” (“Ambiguous Insiders” 55). As Keith Feldman has noted, “Defining visibility as being seen, and seen differently...suggests that we consider how apparatuses for reading the body politic have been conceptualized in the first place”(36). Thus, for instance, Feldman describes the publication of Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa’s anthology 2004 Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction as representing not a breaking of previous silence so much as a reframing of the voices that were there all along. As he notes, discussing Kaldas and Mattawa’s introductory essay to Dinarzad’s Children,

It is not that [Arab American] writers...were not being read or read accurately [in an earlier period]; nor does the essay attempt to revise the image of Arab Americans in order to portray a more “accurate” picture of Arab America. Rather, Kaldas and Mattawa suggest that the socio-historical conditions ripened—particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and again after September 11, 2001—for Arab American writers to speak as “Arab American” in the first

place. Dinarzad's Children is thus framed as a collection in which writers demonstrate creative moves from silence to speech. By working through this distinction as opposed to invisibility and visibility, Kaldas and Mattawa work around the earlier racist "ocular inspection" logic. (47)

Such efforts to situate Arab American ethnicity not in terms of cultural essence or assimilation, but rather within the context of larger situating forces such as race, gender and political discourse, help to make possible a critical reexamination both of Arab American identity and of its possibilities for agency. The result has been, in many ways, a transformation of the Arab American cultural landscape. As authors increasingly engage with the complexities of diasporan identification and political realities overseas, and with issues such as sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia, their texts become more nuanced and more politically and culturally effective. One example of this may be seen in the context of Arab American feminism, in which attention to structuring forces, such as the mainstream feminist discourses of Arab women's "victimization" that make critical engagement with issues such as gender so difficult,<sup>31</sup> not only seeks to make visible the double binds that so often stymie Arab American women's attempts at feminist articulation, but also seeks to imply the possibility of restructuring. Similarly, the articulation of a queer Arab American consciousness focuses not just on making queer writers visible but on exploring the contexts within which visibility becomes possible.<sup>32</sup>

In the context of such critiques, the assumption of a schism between exile and ethnicity underlying Arab American literature and identity also becomes subject to critical reevaluation. Arab Americans are not simply on a trajectory from Arab to American; nor are they continual exiles longing for "return." Although for many Arab Americans the sense of a "split vision" or a schism between worlds continues to be a defining reality, Arab American scholarly, critical and creative production

increasingly explores the possibility of asserting or claiming ground-space despite this schism. For despite the risk of reifying the space of the hyphen as an end in itself, the attempt to “write beyond the binary” takes place in a world in which the pressures of exile and ethnicity coexist with each other. And despite the pitfalls of “identity politics” underlying discussions of ethnic identity, it is possible to see this identity both as historically constructed and as the basis for transformative action. The point is what one *does* with the rich mixture of cultural, political, historical, sociological, and experiential data upon which Arab American literature draws. As Charara points out, Arab American writers “have accepted...that the prevailing condition of Arab Americans is complicated, complex, and impossible to pin down... The prevailing condition is also a starting point from which Arab American literature, and identity, can be liberated from any encompassing narratives” (Inclined to Speak xxx).

The critical and creative texts that follow take as their impetus this recognition of, and engagement with, complexity. They attempt to investigate Arab American literature’s starting points and prevailing conditions; to explore this literature’s efforts to liberate itself from the “encompassing narratives” that constrain and prefigure what it means to be Arab American; and to probe what this “liberation” might mean for individuals as well as for cultures. Chapter One, “In Search of an Arab American Literature: Personal Explorations, Critical Questions,” offers a narrative interweaving my own discovery and exploration of Arab American literature with an account of the development of this literature. The chapter delineates the contours and thematics of Arab American writing and engages with the question of whether the existence of Arab American literary texts constitutes a “literature” – and what such a nomenclature might mean. Chapter Two, “Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race,” takes up the contested issue of Arab American racial identification and its consequences for

Arab American life and culture, exploring the legal and political discourses that have emerged around Arab American racial identification over the past century, and examining the implications of these discourses for Arab American literary texts.

Chapter Three, “Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory,” explores the role of memory in the constitution of Arab American identity and literature, critiquing the role of nostalgia and exploring the shift in contemporary Arab American literary texts toward memory as a vehicle of agency, resistance and connection across borders. Chapter Four, “Arab American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions and Cultural Negotiations,” examines the relevance of theories of ethnicity to Arab American experience and discusses some literary texts that seek to establish connections across and beyond the boundaries of ethnic and group identity. Chapter Five, “Representation and Resistance: Etel Adnan’s Sitt Marie Rose and the Critical Dimensions of Voice” brings into focus some of the philosophical imperatives and complications underlying the critique of unitary identification implied in such border crossings. Through a close reading of a single text, Etel Adnan’s novel of the Lebanese civil war Sitt Marie Rose -- a text that occupies iconic status in Arab American letters despite its distance from Arab American geographical contexts – this chapter interrogates some of the issues that confront Arab American writers as they wrestle with the vexed relationship between representation and resistance, particularly in contexts of violence. These issues have important implications for the larger questions that underlie so much Arab American writing: the relationship between art and politics, and the possibilities for artistic agency in the face of historical, sociological, political and discursive forces.

Chapter Six, “Transfigurations: Home-space in Arab American Women’s Writing,” examines the need for an Arab American “home space” as a place where

belonging and agency can coincide. Critiquing the binary oppositions so often implicit in discussions of Arab American experience between Arab and American, belonging and freedom, this chapter analyses novels by Mohja Kahf and Randa Jarrar, locating in these texts a concept of an Arab American “home-space” whose implications extend beyond literary discussions to Arab American life more generally. Chapter Seven, “Speaking Beyond Translation: Narratives and Interventions,” expands this search for home-space into the realm of personal writing, presenting a series of essays that delineate my personal engagement with, and journeys through, Arab American locations, in contexts of both exile and ethnicity. These narratives complicate the notion of an “Arab American” identity, neither locating it solely on U.S. ground nor identifying it as a trajectory toward an ethnic American self, but rather framing it in the context of issues of agency and voice. Chapter Eight, “Geographies of Light: Poems and Possibilities,” shifts this personal exploration into the realm of poetry, presenting a poetic engagement with Arab American themes and concerns that extends from exilic longings and ethnic negotiations to the trauma of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The conclusion, “The Road Forward: Arab American Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” offers reflections on some of the issues facing Arab American literature today. Throughout the manuscript as a whole, I seek not only to delineate the contours of Arab American writing, and thereby to chart the emergence and development of an Arab American literature, but also to suggest the ways in which Arab American writing--critical and creative, public and personal—itsself participates in the writing of Arab America.

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation I explore the literature of Arab Americans. How to define the category “Arab American” is of course a matter of some debate. For the purposes of this study I have limited my

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discussion for the most part to texts available in English written by immigrants from Arab countries to the U.S. and their descendants. I have, however, included mention of some Canadian Arab texts, because these texts circulate in the U.S. and are often considered part of “Arab American” literature (see further Salaita, Modern Arab American Fiction, p. 4-5). I am aware that, by defining “American” to mean mostly - but not entirely - the U.S., I have on the one hand expanded the term beyond its specific U.S. designation, yet on the other hand have not taken this expansion to its logical conclusion to include all of North America; nor extended it to include the texts of Arabs in Central and South America. I have made these choices partly for pragmatic reasons, because of own linguistic limitations and the need to delineate a manageable scope of inquiry. However, these decisions also reflect my desire to focus on the construction of an “Arab American” identity in the context of the complexities, racial, gendered and ethnic, of North American and especially U.S. discourses around Arab identity. Despite setting these limits for my own study, however, I believe that interesting and productive analyses can be made of Arab American literature that crosses national and linguistic boundaries within the Americas, and I hope that other researchers will take up such analyses. I am also happy about the expansion of research into Arabic-language Arab American literature in the U.S. (cf. Hassan, “The Rise of Arab-American Literature”; Ludescher, “The Orient is Ill”)

<sup>2</sup> While Arab American literature is in many ways a still-emergent literature, it has arguably attained enough presence and critical weight in recent decades to begin to challenge this description. This is reflected in the growing number of book-length literary publications (in dramatic distinction to the situation in the late 1980s, when any working bibliography of Arab American literature of necessity featured a great many journal and anthology publications but limited numbers of book-length titles), and the steady increase in critical discussion of these literary texts. It is also worth pointing out that Arab American literature has become an increasing focus of student research (eg Equeiq, Shalal-Esa, Wathington, Ludescher; in addition, I am the frequent recipient of queries from students in countries in Europe and the Middle East, as well as in the US, seeking to do theses or other projects on Arab American literature); of critical attention outside of the U.S. (eg Schaefer); and of projects translating both Arab American literature and Arab American secondary sources into Arabic (cf. the projects of the Spanish institution Casa Árabe, currently undertaking a book of translated essays on the Arab American experience; as well as translations into Arabic of various texts on and by Arab Americans, eg by Sueiman and by Kayyali.) For overviews of Arab American literature, see Abinader, “Children of Al Mahjar”; Charara, “Introduction,” Inclined to Speak; Gabriel, “Emergence of a Genre”; Ludescher, “From Nostalgia to Critique”; Majaj, “Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments,” “Arab-American Literature Today,” “The Hyphenated Author,” “New Directions,” “Of Stories and Storytellers”; “Two Worlds Emerging”; Orfalea and Elmusa, “Introduction,” Grape Leaves; Salaita, Literary Fictions and “Vision,” Shakir, “Starting Anew” and “Coming of Age”; and Zogby, “Memory, Image and Identity.” On the development of Arab American Studies, see Salaita, Literary Fictions, esp. 17-49; Gualtieri 8-11; Hassan and Knopf-Newman, 4-13. On “Arab American” as a category, see Feldman. On the role of literary anthologies in the articulation of Arab American identity and community, see Hartman.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Singh and Schmidt, “On the Borders Between U.S. Studies and Postcolonial Theory.” The field of diaspora and transnational studies has expanded significantly in recent years. As several examples, see Grewal, Transnational America; Rowe, Post-Nationalist American Studies; Fluck, Pease and Rowe, Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the 1994 edited volume, The Development of Arab-American Identity, which marked a “pivotal moment in the coalescence of Arab American scholarship as a specific entity” (Salaita, Literary Fictions 26), and which also signaled a scholarly shift, in certain essays, toward examination of issues of anti-Arab racism and violence, was nonetheless prefaced by (and therefore situated in context to) an essay on “the new immigration” from southern and eastern Europe: a gesture which located this anthology within the context of the trajectory of immigration and assimilation. The first book-length history of the Arab American experience, Alixa Naff’s Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience, similarly locates its analysis within this trajectory.

<sup>5</sup> As Salaita contends, the tension between “ethnic discreteness” and the stereotypes of Arabs that circulate in the mainstream is “not best contested by inventing a simulated ethnic identity” (Literary Fictions 9).

<sup>6</sup> On American immigrant and ethnic autobiography, see Bowelhower and Wong in Eakin’s American Autobiography.

<sup>7</sup> I will return to this point in my conclusion.

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<sup>8</sup> See further “Alive and Kicking,” “Arab Mothers, American Sons,” “Arab American Literature,” Bint Arab, “Coming of Age,” “Pretending to be Arab,” “Mother’s Milk,” “Starting Anew.”

<sup>9</sup> See further Remember Me to Lebanon (short stories) and the posthumous, forthcoming volume Teaching Arabs, Writing Self.

<sup>10</sup> See further Salaita, Anti-Arab Racism, “Beyond Orientalism and Islamophobia,” “Gazing East from the Americas,” The Holy Land in Transit, Literary Fictions, Modern Arab American Fiction, “Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam,” The Uncultured Wars, “Vision: Arab American Literary Criticism.”

<sup>11</sup> For detailed analyses of the role of anthologies in the production of an Arab American imaginary, see Hartman; see also Feldman.

<sup>12</sup> The demographic diversity of Arab Americans has often been noted. Arab Americans claim origin from 22 Arab countries, although the original Arab immigration was predominantly from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, with other substantial communities from Egypt, Yemen and Iraq. Similarly, Arab Americans identify with a variety of Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious sects. Arab immigration to North America is usually described as occurring in two major waves: the first from the 1870s to WWII, and the second from WWII to the present. The first wave of immigrants was overwhelmingly Christian; the second wave included many Muslims. (Cf. Suleiman, Arabs in America.)

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Salaita’s previously mentioned discussion of the internationalization of American literature in Literary Fictions; Singh and Schmidt; Rowe; Grewal.

<sup>14</sup> For some consideration of the ways in which this early *Mahjar* writing prefigured the attempts of contemporary Arab American writing to engage in cultural negotiation, see Hassan, “The Rise of Arab American Literature.”

<sup>15</sup> On the engagement of *Mahjar* writers with Arab nationalism, see Ludescher, “The Orient is Ill.”

<sup>16</sup> On the complexities of “hybridity,” see Singh and Schmidt, “On the Borders Between U.S. Studies and Postcolonial Theory,” especially 22-27.

<sup>17</sup> Publishing in both Arabic and English, these writers not only led a renaissance in Arabic letters; they initiated the development of Arab American literature. Elmaz Abinader comments that the *Mahjar* writers were “among the first immigrant writers to organize and to be recognized as a literary force by the broad U.S. literary community,” and that their work helped spark “an interest in immigrant writing [in the US] in general” (“Children of Al Mahjar,” screen 1-2). The literary organization they formed in 1920, *al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya* (the Pen League), with Gibran as its president, marked the beginning of Arab American literary endeavors. This early period of Arab American literary history is increasingly being subjected to critical exploration and illumination. See further Abinader, “Children of Al Mahjar”; Harb, “Orientalism and the Construction of American Identity”; Wail Hassan, “Gibran and Orientalism,” “The Rise of Arab-American Literature” and Immigrant Narratives; Ludescher, “From Nostalgia to Critique”; Nassar, “Cultural Discontinuity”; Pickens, “Presently Reading the Past”; Shakir, “Arab American Literature.”

<sup>18</sup> Kahlil Gibran is claimed by Lebanese literature as well as by Arab American literature. Had I paid more attention at the time, this dual identification would have provided me with an important early clue as to how to think about Arab American literature as not just an American ethnic literature situated solely on U.S. soil, but rather as a transnational literature located at the intersections of Arab and American, claimed simultaneously as a diasporan and a home-grown literature, and informed by histories of migration as well as by the experiences of the home country. Although most commentators have noted what Salma Jayyusi describes as “a very clear discontinuity between these far removed generations of Arab-American [*Mahjar*] writers and our generation” (Personal interview; quoted in Majaj, “Arab-American Literature Today”), I now believe that there may be more links between these two groups of writers than has been immediately apparent, and that such points of intersection are worth further exploration.

<sup>19</sup> Of particular note is the expansion in publication of Arab American fiction titles: some examples from the past decade include Abu-Jaber, Crescent, Origin, Birds of Paradise; Abulhawa, Mornings in Jenin; Alameddine, I, the Divine, The Hakawati; Chehade, Loom; Darraj, The Inheritance of Exile; Hage, De Niro’s Game, Cockroach; Halaby, West of the Jordan, Once in a Promised Land; Jarrar, A Map of Home; Kahf, The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf; Kaldas, The Time Between Places; Kaldas and Mattawa, Dinarzad’s Children; Lalami, Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits, Secret Son; Leone, Swimming Toward the Light; Majid, Si Yussef; Noble, The Situe Stories; Nye, Going, Going; Serageldin, The Cairo House, Love is Like Water, The Naqib’s Daughter; Ward, The Bullet Collection.

<sup>20</sup> The grassroots mode of investigation necessary at the time I began my investigation of Arab American literature also meant that my own relationship to the authors I was researching was

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personalized, and that the expected academic barrier between researcher and subject was as a result broken down. Moreover, my interest in helping to create connections between writers, at a time when Arab American authors often felt isolated, meant that I not only witnessed, but also participated in creating, a growing literary network of Arab American writers. The establishment of this network, eventually formalized in the creation of the Arab American literary organization RAWI: Radius of Arab American Writers, embedded me within the phenomenon which I was studying, complicating any attempt to view the issues I was researching from a dispassionate distance. For an account of the history of RAWI, see Majaj, "Of Stories and Storytellers."

<sup>21</sup> Arabic scholar M.M. Badawi argues that "It would be difficult to exaggerate the significant of the role they played.... Without their seminal minds, the course of Arabic poetry would in many ways have been different" (203).

<sup>22</sup> See further Gibran and Gibran, Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World; Hanna, "Gibran and Whitman: Their Literary Dialogue" and "An Arab Expatriate in America"; Jayyusi, "Arabic Poetry in North America"; Le Gassick, "The Lebanese-American Emigre Litterateurs--Gibran Naimy and Rihani."

<sup>23</sup> Examples include Rihani's Book of Khalid, as well as writings in the Syrian World and in Arabic language publications. Of particular interest here is the writing of Afifa Karam, one of the "pioneers" of Arab feminist discourse, whose work "engaged 'the woman question' to address larger issues of societal reform" (Gualtieri 148).

<sup>24</sup> See Shakir, "Pretending to be Arab."

<sup>25</sup> Much early Arab American writing was in Arabic. It is true that the majority of Arab American authors today write in English – indeed, Salaita argues, "As nearly all Arab Americans, even those who are bilingual, write in English, it is becoming obvious that English will be their primary artistic medium" (See "Vision: Arab American Literary Criticism"). However, Arab American literature in Arabic does exist: examples include the late Sargon Boulous, and Sinan Antoon.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the implications of the role of Adnan's novel Sitt Marie Rose as "the defining text of Arab American literature" see Salaita, Literary Fictions, 62-71. For further critical analysis of Etel Adnan, see the essays in Majaj and Amireh, Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab American Writer and Artist, as well as Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

<sup>27</sup> On Arab American invisibility, see Kadi, "Introduction," Food xix; Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders"; Jarmakani, "Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility in Arab American Feminist Discourse"; Saliba, "Resisting Invisibility."

<sup>28</sup> Literary anthologies published during this period included Orfalea, Wrapping the Grapeleaves; Orfalea and Elmusa, Grape Leaves; Kadi, Food For our Grandmothers; Akash and Mattawa, Post Gibran. Scholarly edited volumes included Hagopian and Paden, The Arab Americans: Studies in Assimilation; Hooglund, Crossing the Waters; McCarus, The Development of Arab American Identity; Suleiman, Arabs in America.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Singh, "The Possibilities of a Radical Consciousness: African Americans and New Immigrants."

<sup>30</sup> On the political identity of Arab Americans and the growth of Arab American political organizations, see Suleiman, "Arab-Americans and the Political Process"; Gualtieri, Between Arab and White, 171-180; Orfalea, Chapter 6, "The Political Awakening," The Arab Americans; Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders."

<sup>31</sup> See further Kadi, Food For our Grandmothers; Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber, Arab and Arab American Feminisms; Naber, "Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore"; Shakir, Bint Arab; Hatem, "The Invisible American Half"; Darraj, "It's Not an Oxymoron: The Case of Arab-American Feminism," and "Third World, Third Wave Feminism(s): The Evolution of Arab American Feminism"; Abdo, "Race, Gender and Politics"; Amireh and Majaj, Going Global.

<sup>32</sup> See further Bodhran, "Queer Arab American Literary Presence."

## Provenance

I come from olive and oleander  
pistachio, almond and fig  
from the many tendrils of vine

I come from light, strong and splintered  
from the *khamzin* browning the sky  
from walls of gentled stone chiseling a face

I come from a scraped knee, a bloody palm  
from trees climbed and fences scaled  
from the metallic whirl of roller skates across tile

I come from dust and smoke  
from the bleating of butchered animals  
and the spiny silence of cactus

I come from voices urgently raised  
and voices whispered  
from songs remembered across oceans

and songs that will not be sung again

I come from the hum  
of a woman walking a floor

with a sleepless child  
crooning an off-key melody  
tender undertones filling the dark

till the moon rises  
the night opens  
and all the stars shine out

## Chapter 2

### **In Search of an Arab American Literature: Personal Explorations, Critical Questions**

*Writing is a meeting point between a historical moment and the private identity.*

*--Etel Adnan, in Saba, "Etel Adnan's There"*

My research into Arab American literature was initiated in part by the desire to make sense of Arab American realities, including my own reality. In so doing, I situated myself within the analytical categories then available to me, of immigration and ethnic revival. In the near absence of relevant Arab American resources, I turned to the literary and sociological texts of other groups such as Jewish Americans, Italian Americans and Asian Americans for insight. In the anthologies of these and other ethnic groups, I found discussions that resonated with my own queries about what it meant to search for ethnic writing: about the difficulties of locating buried texts; and about the "self-politicization" (I take the term from Fred Gardaphe) involved in the search for much ethnic literature. I turned first to groups who had originally been racialized and othered in the U.S. context, such as Italians and Jews, but who had moved on to achieve mainstream acceptance and integration as "white." Although I was not completely cognizant of it at the time, by trying to compare Arab Americans with these other groups, I was implicitly drawing upon assimilative frameworks: searching for ways to "fit in" to American society (a search that reflected a deep sense

of personal unease – of always feeling, as Edward Said puts it, “out of place.”) My growing sense that assimilative frameworks did not quite work for Arabs in the U.S. (as they had not entirely worked for these other groups either) should have been an early indication that what I needed was a paradigm shift.

Indeed, the search for “who we are” framed in the terms of white ethnicity did not lead to the answers I expected or wanted. Rather, I was to find that my search for Arab American literature and history, and for insight into my relationship to this literature and history, laid bare the complexities of the historical, political, sociological and discursive contexts that shape individual voices. And in the case of Arab Americans -- who originate from many different countries, religious backgrounds, and temporal points of entry to the U.S. -- the quest for “who we are” is complex indeed. In much the same way that my own identity seemed to spill over the boundaries of what I thought of as “Arab American ethnicity,” so too I found that Arab American literary texts challenged the neat trajectories I thought “ethnic literature” was supposed to follow. Meanwhile, I was to discover that Arab American writing offered not so much the self-reflection I thought I was looking for, but rather multiple refractions and splintered shards. The fictions and poetry and prose I located testified not only to the tenacity of immigrants and ethnics but also to the shaping forces of race, gender, history and politics. Part of the process of coming to terms with Arab American literature, I learned, was to understand the extent to which voices are always historically situated. But, as I was to realize, out of recognition of this historical situatedness comes the possibility of agency. What follows narrates my early engagement with Arab American literature, and my attempts to understand what transforms individual texts into a body of literature – a journey in the course of which I gained insight both into how the boundaries within which members of an “imagined

community” locate and define themselves may be articulated, and how such boundaries may be reconfigured and transposed.<sup>1</sup>

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When I first began my search for Arab American literature, I thought I was looking for a reflection of my own experiences. Like many people who feel that they don’t quite fit in, I was eager for proof that there were others like me, that I wasn’t strange or crazy.<sup>2</sup> But even after I started discovering literature by Arab Americans about their ethnic identity and experience, I didn’t always find the reassurance I was looking for. Arab Americans, I discovered, are a diverse lot (hardly surprising when you consider that the very term “Arab American” is at best a pan-ethnic term, a shorthand way to reference people with origins in different countries, religions and backgrounds, sometimes recent immigrants, sometimes the children or grandchildren of immigrants). Besides, by now I’ve come to realize that searching for mirrors of our own experiences in literature isn’t always enough. After all, one of the reasons we read is to help us better our understanding of how to live—not just within our own communities, but with others, in mingled and diverse contexts. Ethnic literature, like other kinds of literature, helps us move across, and transform, the boundaries that separate us: ethnic from non-ethnic, non-white from white, male from female, Arab from Jew from Greek from Italian from Polish from African from Anglo-Saxon.

But it’s also true that in order to cross those boundaries, we first need to understand who and where we are, to ground ourselves in our personal locations. This kind of self-definition is not a matter of passive discovery, but of active investigation and affirmation: it takes work and commitment and tenacity and a certain kind of courage. It takes a consideration of the historical processes that situate and constrain

personal articulations, making it possible to “speak” or “not speak.” And it’s an ongoing endeavor.

What initiates this kind of search isn’t easily predictable. Sometimes it begins when we stumble across a novel or book of poetry that reflects our own reality in startling ways, or that cracks open doors we hadn’t dared peer behind before. Sometimes a single question or image thrusts us beyond ourselves, makes us see our lives in new ways. In my case the Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston<sup>3</sup> had much to do with my exploration, as did Native American poet Joy Harjo, and other writers whose work had nothing to say about being Arab or Arab American, but a great deal to say about being both different from what is considered ‘mainstream’ American society, and about struggling to meld the personal, the communal, and the historical.

I still remember the surge of risk and possibility I felt on first encountering Harjo’s She Had Some Horses, a couple of years after arriving in the U.S. for graduate school. As I read the opening poem, I felt a stirring deep inside me. “There is this edge where shadows/and bones of some of us walk/backwards./ Talk backwards,” writes Harjo. “There is this edge/ call it an ocean of fear of the dark. Or name it with other songs” (13). I knew about that edge, about backing away from histories I didn’t know how to – or didn’t dare to – explore. I knew, too, that I was tired of denial and fear: that it was time to name those histories “with other songs.” Then I read Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, a book that transformed the ways in which I had thought it possible to think about family history. If Kingston could weave something so sustaining and liberating out of that dense tangle of familial and cultural stories, I decided, surely others who juggled

complex cultural backgrounds could too. There must be an Arab American Hong Kingston or Joy Harjo: I would just have to look.

While it now seems hardly surprising that I would feel a need for literature that resonated on a personal level, at the time the realization that it was legitimate to write about one's own ethnic identity and family history felt like a revelation. I'd never had any reason to believe that my own convoluted background might be of any significance. Even if I had managed to find a book about the Arab American experience, it might not have helped, since I wasn't sure that I was, in fact, Arab American. According to the sociological studies I'd read, Arab Americans were people whose parents or grandparents had immigrated to the United States from Arab countries, and whose cultural identification was therefore a generational matter, as the parents' and grandparents' old-country heritage was retained, rejected or transformed by the younger generation. My discovery of Hansen's Law – "what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember"—reinforced this conceptual framework. Arab American experience, as far as I could tell, was played out between an Arab past and an American present, with cultural negotiations enacted across the grid of time.

I, on the other hand, had experienced my own cultural conflicts across a spatial grid, through the cracks of which I often felt in danger of slipping altogether. My father, a Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem, had come to the U.S. as a young man for a college education; he'd met my mother, an Iowa farm girl, at a Sioux City YMCA dance, and they'd married a year later. Although my father became an American citizen, he had trouble finding work and only stayed in the U.S. a few years. When I was around a year old he moved our small family first to Lebanon and then to Jordan, where I grew up.

My childhood environment was a confusing meld of American and Arab elements. We spoke only English at home, and I attended American schools, but my social existence was largely governed by Arab norms and played out within an Arab cultural universe. As a result I lived in-between opposing worlds, and felt marginalized in both. In that bifurcated existence, familial, “ethnic” definitions were not simply pitted against an outside norm, as in the case studies of ethnicity and assimilation I was later to read, but were turned inward against themselves; the rift was not just between but within school, home, family, outside society, language, food, friends. Although I was willing and eager to assimilate, it wasn’t clear which culture I should be assimilating to, Arab or American. No one told me then that I didn’t have to choose, but could simply be-- and after all, was – Arab American. Instead, I engaged in an intricate balancing act across a deep chasm. “I’m half Palestinian, half American,” I’d tell people – but as I spoke I could feel those halves jostling, never quite coming together into the melded whole that a hyphenated identity is supposed to suggest. Sometimes it felt as if I were standing spread-eagled, one foot on one continent, the other foot on another continent, bones creaking as land masses drifted inexorably apart, threatening to force me to relinquish one or the other foothold or else be torn apart.

Luckily I had early been given an indispensable tool of survival—the love of reading. The world of books was one of my mother’s most valuable legacies to me, although it was also at times a source of discomfort. Unfortunately, however, the books available to me during my childhood provided few models for how to go about reconciling my cultural conflicts. While the classic American texts on the school library shelves and my father’s personal collection of books on Palestinian history and politics helped me understand the individual facets of my background, they didn’t

help me understand how to be American and Arab at the same time. Nonetheless, literature remained my sustenance throughout an often confused and sometimes dramatic childhood. During the 1970 war against the Palestinians in Jordan, for instance, as we crouched below window level listening to the sound of gunfire just outside, I read entries from Anne Frank's diary, clinging to her clear voice as a bulwark against fear. Later, Fawaz Turki's The Disinherited held me with its stark illumination of the Palestinian experience of exile, helping me better understand what it meant to be Palestinian.

When I arrived in the U.S. for graduate school, after attending college at the American University of Beirut through Lebanon's war and the beginning of the 1982 Israeli invasion, I was eager for what I thought would be a homecoming to American culture. But while my American identity had always been accentuated in the Middle East, here I was suddenly an Arab. Moreover, Arabs, it appeared, were no longer the people I'd always known – loving and argumentative and sharp-witted and pragmatic, outstanding cooks and green-thumb gardeners, devoted parents and unbeatable businessmen and tireless backseat politicians. Instead, newspapers and movies and popular fiction and even so-called scholarly books offered portrayals of a violent, degraded people I didn't recognize. Meanwhile, I had to answer questions like, "So, did you ride a camel to school?" and "You mean there were people in Palestine before Israel?" I came to realize that I was confronting not just individual stereotypes, but a cultural climate in which there were practically no accurate images of Arabs or Arab Americans.

By this time I'd discovered ethnic literature. I read with growing interest – and a sense of relief—the work of Asian American, African American, Jewish American, Native American, and Hispanic American writers. Inevitably, I began to wonder

where the Arab American writers were, and why I wasn't being introduced to them. Determined to find the literature I was sure was out there, I embarked on a series of research projects on Arab American literature, learning in the process both how much literature actually existed and how little critical attention had been paid to it. My choice to focus my academic research on this little-recognized literature was at times met with hesitation and skepticism. But I was determined to find that Arab American Maxine Hong Kingston and Joy Harjo, not just from a disinterested scholarly interest in under-studied writers, but also because I needed them in my own life. Moreover, I had a strong sense that this was work that was needed to be done: for Arab Americans thirsty for literature that reflected their realities and addressed their concerns; for the writers themselves, whose work had been largely ignored both by mainstream literary circles and by advocates of multiethnic literature; and for other readers as well, so that those tenacious stereotypes of gun-brandishing terrorists and silent oppressed women needing to be 'saved' from their own culture could begin to be unsettled.

When I started my research, I began the traditional way – scouring card catalogues and bibliographies and indexes. But I soon found that researching Arab Americans was a tricky matter. For one thing, the very term "Arab American" was a fairly recent one that hadn't been widely used either by researchers or by Arab Americans themselves before the 1980s. As a result I had to look for citations under Lebanese American, Syrian American, Palestinian American and other categories, under religious denominations such as Melchite and Maronite (since most of the early immigrants were Christian), and even, in very early sources on immigration, under "Turks in Asia," since the area of "Greater Syria" from which most of the early immigrants originated had been under Ottoman rule. Several studies of Arabic literature mentioned the *Mahjar*, or immigrant, writers – Kahlil Gibran, Michail

Naimy, Ameen Rihani and other members of *Ar-Rabitah*, the New York Pen Guild established early in the century—whose work is claimed as both Arab and Arab American. But “Arab American literature” as a category was almost completely absent from listings of immigrant and ethnic American literature, as well as from specialized studies of the Arab American experience.

So I had to pursue my research through other methods, including poking through used bookstores, scanning the tables of contents of current literary journals for Arabic-sounding names, and writing literally hundreds of letters to Arab American organizations and individuals across the country, asking for information. It was a slow process, and often a frustrating one. In particular, I was disappointed by how little contemporary writing I was finding. I’d hoped for literature that would, on some level, explain me to myself. But what I was finding were autobiographies and stories and essays and poems and a tiny number of novels that sometimes reflected my own concern with issues of cultural negotiation, but often didn’t. Peter Baker’s Memoirs of an Arctic Arab (1976), for instance, told me a lot about the daily activities of a trader in the far north between 1907 and 1927, but offered little insight on what it meant to be an “Arctic Arab.” On the other hand, I read with interest autobiographies by Abraham Mitrie Rihbany, Salom Rizk, Michael Shadid (all pre-WWII immigrants), as well as articles, stories, and letters-to-the-editor in The Syrian World, an English language journal published in the 1920s that addressed the conflicts faced by immigrants and their American-born children.

The more I read, the more I realized that I couldn’t approach Arab American writing with a preset definition of what I thought should constitute this literature, but would have to start paying attention to what was actually there. For instance, it was clear that the xenophobia and assimilation pressures faced by immigrants had had an

immense effect on earlier writers. In Salom Rizk's Syrian Yankee (1943), the author's desire to become American – an identity he claims even before arrival in the U.S., since his mother was a naturalized American—dominated the narrative. “What a title!” a friend exclaimed when I showed her the book. Perhaps she thought “Syrian Yankee” was an oxymoron. But Rizk insists that being American is not a matter of place of birth or skin color or accent, but is something much larger – and that it includes him. Midway through his narrative, he is stopped in a small American town for peddling without a license. Bristling at being called a ‘dad-blasted furriner,’ he retorts, “I’m no furriner. I’m American. “You ain’t no Yankee American,” his accoster replies. “...If you’re American, this ain’t the United States” (157). But as Rizk later insists to a friend, “I’m not a foreigner. I’m just as much an American as people who were born here” (159). His autobiography, based on a series of lectures given under the auspices of the Reader’s Digest, takes as its goal the demonstration that a Syrian can indeed be an American – and a good one, at that.<sup>4</sup>

As I read further, I found that other writers were more interested in how to maintain both their Arab and their American identities without relinquishing one or the other. One of the most interesting of these was Ameen Rihani, whose novel The Book of Khalid lampooned the Syrian immigrant experience from a perspective we might now call transnationalist. Like Gibran, whose “Message to Young Syrian Americans of Syrian Origin,” published in the Syrian World, urged Syrian Americans to embrace both facets of their heritage, Rihani saw himself as a cultural ambassador and consciously tried to mediate between Arab and American contexts. His conscious attempt to displace singular perspectives in The Book of Khalid provided an interesting precursor to later ethnic writers’ attempts to construct hybrid identities.<sup>5</sup>

In an extended analysis of first-generation immigrant narratives and second-generation ethnic texts I tried to trace the struggle (sometimes successful, sometimes strained) of immigrant authors to negotiate the Arab and American facets of their experience, and to understand what this cultural legacy had meant for second-generation writers. An insightful article by Evelyn Shakir helped me begin to understand the relationship – or what seemed to be the lack of one—between these two bodies of literature. Discussing Vance Bourjaily’s “The Fractional Man,” the one chapter of his autobiographical Confessions of a Spent Youth (1960) that deals with his Lebanese-American background, Shakir suggests that because Bourjaily lacked sufficient grounding in either an ethnic or a familial heritage, he could only address his Arab American identity through role-playing (see “Pretending to be Arab”). “Role-playing,” I realized, was what William Peter Blatty (the author of The Exorcist) was doing as well in his autobiography Which Way to Mecca, Jack? (1960), a text that kept serious consideration of ethnic identity at arm’s length through an over-reliance on slapstick humor. Indeed, role-playing seemed to represent one of the few ways Arab American writers during this period could approach their cultural heritage—perhaps unsurprisingly, given a cultural climate in which Arabs were largely invisible, exotic, or hated. Even the popularization of ethnicity in the wake of Alex Haley’s Roots didn’t offset the stereotypes of Arabs inflamed by the 1967 War and the oil boycotts of the 1970s. This context, combined with community pressure on young Arab Americans to become business people or doctors or accountants rather than artists or writers, resulted in a general muting of Arab American voices.

However, I was also to learn that Arab Americans have played a larger role in American culture than has been readily apparent. Sometimes the Arab American presence has simply disappeared in general cultural consciousness. At times Arab

American writers haven't been recognizable as such because they themselves haven't wished to be labeled by their ethnicity. That Arab American writers who had achieved relatively mainstream literary careers did not focus on their ethnic background was perhaps understandable, especially in an earlier era when there was no category "Arab American literature" to make such an ethnic literary claim comprehensible. "Being an American of Arabic origin has nothing to do with [poetry] and shouldn't and can't have," writes Hazo (Orfalea and Elmusa 118). Yes and no, I wanted to respond. Facts of origin don't always define thematic material, but as Hazo himself goes on to note, "one writes out of what one is" (118)— and what one is perforce includes ethnicity.

But in writing of the 1970s and beyond I began to find more and more evidence of Arab American identity and heritage. Finding Eugene Paul Nassar's memoir, Wind of the Land (1979), offered a small breakthrough. In this memoir, Nassar attempted to make his childhood and youth in a Lebanese American community "prevail somewhat against time, the particular enemy of all non-mainstream social contexts" (Orfalea and Elmusa 150). The memoir, humorous and poignant, is decidedly "Arab American"; indeed, Evelyn Shakir termed it "the closest thing we have to a narrative defining the second-generation Arab-American experience and thus rescuing it from possible oblivion" ("Starting Anew" 27). But as Shakir also observes, Nassar's work seems more rooted in the literary tradition of the *Mahjar* writers such as Gibran and Rihani than in a contemporary literary context.

Meanwhile, I had found a pamphlet of Arab American poetry edited by Gregory Orfalea, Wrapping the Grapeleaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets (1982). Here was writing by Arab Americans on recognizably ethnic themes in language that was contemporary and compelling. It was, I later realized, no accident that this pamphlet was published in 1982. The 1982 Israeli invasion of

Lebanon had had a devastating impact on Arab Americans, many of whom were of Lebanese origin. In the wake of the invasion, Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata put together a slim collection of poetry by American poets titled And Not Surrender, which included several Arab American poets, and ADC published Wrapping the Grapeleaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab American Poets. Evelyn Shakir was to later comment, “As far as I know, that modest effort was the first attempt to bring together Arab American writers or even to think in such categories--at least, since Gibran and his contemporaries” (Interview).

Excitedly, I looked up the individual poets contained in the pamphlet -- Elmaz Abinader, Naomi Shihab Nye, Samuel Hazo, Joseph Awad, Sam Hamod, Ben Bannani, Gregory Orfalea—and tried to locate their work. Naomi Shihab Nye’s Different Ways to Pray (1980) was the first to come in on interlibrary loan. Turning pages as I walked back home from the library, I paused at the biography inside the back cover, startled to discover that, like me, Nye had a Palestinian father and an American mother. (Most of the writers I’d come across until that point had been Lebanese or Syrian in background.) I started reading Nye’s poems as I walked, going more and more slowly till I stopped walking altogether and sank down on a bench so I could focus on the words floating up from the page. I had a sense I’d be listening to this voice for a while.

It wasn’t even that Nye’s writing offered a particular reflection of my own life. Most of the poems in that first book and later volumes I was to track down – Hugging the Jukebox (1982), Yellow Glove (1986) Red Suitcase (1994), Words Under the Words (1995)<sup>6</sup>—weren’t about Palestinian or Arab American topics. Many came from her experiences in the American southwest and Latin America, locations I was totally unfamiliar with. But something about Nye’s clarity of language and

generosity of vision drew me in. I was struck by how her poetry grew quietly in the reading, so that everything felt linked and expanding. And I was captivated by the subtle insistence, in almost every poem, on the value of different perspectives, different ways of seeing and being in the world. Meanwhile, the poems that did reflect Nye's Palestinian background offered points of intersection where fragments of my own experience echoed, often refracted or transformed. Sometimes I found a familiarity of scene—stone and dust and light, the hospitality of coffee on a tray, the widening circle of family—that held me not so much because it was recognizable, but because it subtly expanded the boundaries of my personal experience. Sometimes an image flooded me with memories that were startlingly vivid. “My grandmother’s days are made of bread,” writes Nye; “a round pat-pat and the slow baking” (Words Under the Words). Suddenly I remembered my own grandmother, Tata Olga, rolling couscous by hand to make the *maftoul* that my father said was a specialty of her hometown of Jaffa – sleeves rolled to her elbows, wisps of gray hair straggling onto her forehead. Tata Olga never learned how to read or write. Her family became refugees in 1948. She lost two small daughters to typhus; her husband died when my father was still a baby. Although she was one of the most important people in my immediate universe when I was growing up, I never got fluent enough in Arabic to ask her much about her life. But I could hear her voice in these lines of Nye's: “Answer, if you hear the words under the words—otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges, difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones” (Words Under the Words).

The publication in 1988 of Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa's anthology Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry was an even more major event. Suddenly Arab American literature had public validity. I'd already found most of the

authors in Grape Leaves through my own research, but a few were new to me, and others, like Etel Adnan and Fawaz Turki, I hadn't thought to consider as Arab American.<sup>7</sup> It was exciting to see authors I'd learned of by chance be given greater recognition, and to read the work of poets I didn't know. Here was D.H. Melhem, whom I'd originally discovered through a single poem, writing of her mother, her grandmother's kitchen, the extended family that enveloped her childhood. Here was Lawrence Joseph, whose poems about growing up in Detroit were narrated in a voice I couldn't turn away from. Here was Sam Hamod, whose work I'd first discovered in David Kherdian's Traveling America and Settling America, with poignant portraits of loss and remembrance. Here were Naomi Shihab Nye and Doris Safie and Jack Marshall and Eugene Paul Nassar and Joseph Awad and Samuel Hazo and Ben Bennani and Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa – contemporary Arab American poets whose work in Grape Leaves was just a sample of what they had to offer. The publication of this anthology represented a watershed: not only did it assert the existence of Arab American literature; it asserted its historical presence over time. It also meant that perhaps for the first time since the *Mahjar* period Arab American writers could situate themselves in relation to the category "Arab American" – could claim, that is, a sense of a literary community. As Elmaz Abinader put it, "If Greg [Orfalea] hadn't done Grapeleaves ...we would still be clacking away in isolation."<sup>8</sup>

And as Evelyn Shakir was later to note,

in the early eighties I could come up with only a handful of contemporary writers.... I don't think even these writers necessarily thought of themselves as 'Arab American writers' or saw themselves as belonging to an ethnic movement or a moment in time. These days they and those who follow in their footsteps are almost forced either to identify themselves as Arab American writers or else to explain why they refuse that label. (Interview)

The authors I was discovering offered texts that made clear the importance not only of ethnic ties, but also of the political and historical contexts shaping ethnicity.

In D.H. Melhem's writing, for instance, I found a lyricism at once poignant and transformative, as well as an interestingly ecumenical approach to ethnicity:

"Baptized Greek Orthodox and confirmed as a Lutheran (the Protestant church nearest our house)," she writes, "imbued with pride in my cultural heritage, I also considered myself in turn an honorary Catholic, Jew, Briton, Native American, and, later, black, according to the backgrounds of my friends and my own deep interests" (Orfalea and Elmusa, Grape Leaves, 104). At the same time, she makes clear the responsibility that accompanies ethnicity: "Since ethnic aspects mirror economic and political forces, to be ethnic in a political void is an unaffordable luxury" (Orfalea and Elmusa, Grape Leaves, 104). In her work I found awareness of historical and contemporary injustices – in Lebanon, Palestine, the U.S.—as well as the energy of resistance.

As I continued to read, I became increasingly convinced that it was crucial for Arab American authors to be included in the focus on multicultural literature that was gaining ground in the academy. Although Orfalea and Elmusa's anthology had made Arab American authors visible in a way they hadn't been before, there was still little literary criticism to validate this writing – and if there was anything I'd learned from academia, it was that without critical attention, literature languishes in a vacuum. People who prided themselves on their expertise on ethnic literature would give me blank looks when I mentioned Arab American writing. Sometimes the very term "Arab" in conjunction with "literature" was apparently so unexpected that people heard it as "urban American literature." I grew tired of this erasure and ignorance, especially after the experience of Arab American during the Gulf War made clear the seriousness of its political implications.

One day Pauline Kaldas, herself now a recognized Egyptian-American poet, sent me a poem she'd seen in Poetry East – "Breath," by David Williams. It sounded

like he might be Arab American, but even if he wasn't, I knew I wanted to read more of his work. "Breath" arrested me with a voice that was at once compassionate and committed. "The people I come from were thrown away/ as if they were nothing," the poem began. By its end I was – well, breathless. "I'm thirsty for words to join that song—" William writes, "cupped hands at the spring, a cup of/rain passed hand to hand, rain pooled/ on stone, a living jewel, a clear/lens trembling with our breath" (). The communal energy of these lines, the conviction that it's possible to transform the difficult past into a living future, sang in my head for days. So I wrote David Williams care of Poetry East, and next thing I knew, I got a phone call. By a happy coincidence he lived in the same town; we met for coffee, and he handed me a typewritten manuscript – the poems that in a couple of years would be published by Alice James Books as Traveling Mercies (1993).

When I read the manuscript I was struck by the implicit connections the poems established, both between the various aspects of William's life and between the people whose experiences, from the most daily to the most devastating, were here given lyrical, unflinching voice. Linked by an extraordinary vision that takes in immigrants and exiles and ethnics, refugees and workers, parents and children, family members in the U.S. and in Lebanon, Americans and Mexicans and Indians and Salvadorans and Arabs, these poems bore out the faith I had seen embodied in "Breath": that what sustains us – poetry, water, bread – can be "passed hand to hand" in a life-bearing gesture of connection. Although Williams is indubitably an Arab American poet, his work expands the boundaries of that category, as if showing the necessity of strengthening our individual communities at the same time as we recognize – and act upon – our common membership in the human family. He isn't afraid of confronting the horrific things people do to each other in the name of

identity, but he makes clear that the defense against that kind of destructiveness also lies within—and can be given voice through the small ways in which we recognize ourselves in one another. The poem “Almost One,” written in the context of the Gulf War, foregrounds that dual awareness, as well as offering one of the most precise evocations of the double-consciousness of marginality that I’ve found: “‘Arabia’ and ‘the West’ keep bringing out the worst in each other, and what could save all our lives can barely be heard. And I, neither here nor there, got through the metal detector, with a double legacy and a double grief, the way, you might say, a camel carries water” (Traveling Mercies 67).

The poetry of Lawrence Joseph took this expansion of the boundaries of ethnicity and identity into new realms. While Williams’ vision seemed grounded in the natural world, and Nye’s poetry turned upon a close attention to the luminosity of dailiness, Joseph, in his books Shouting at No One (1983), Curriculum Vitae (1988) and Before Our Eyes (1993), emerged as an urban poet *par excellence*.<sup>9</sup> “I am the poet of my city,” he writes in Shouting at No One (44), and indeed, his poems render the streets and inhabitants and gray weight of river and sky of Detroit and New York with stark detail and tremendous passion. He is also poet of his Lebanese immigrant family – although despite the pressure of the past, there is scant nostalgia here, just fidelity to the workings of memory borne out through the exigencies of the present. And he is poet of “the age of postcapitalism,” wresting images from postmodern experience to forestall the loss of coherence: resistant fragments that “bring/depths to the surface [and] elevate sensuous experience into speech/ and the social contract” (Before Our Eyes 3). Wrought in language that demands progressively greater attention to the sheer materiality of image and detail, Joseph’s work infuses family narrative and ethnic identity with a relentless attention to structuring forces such as economics and

geopolitics. It's clear that, for Joseph, Arab American identity requires grappling not just with family history and the ethnic past, but with the relentless impress of the present.

Reading poets such as these, it seemed clear to me that Arab American literature had to come to terms with its contemporary location at the same time as it sustained a connection to the past. This called for a dual project—one of reclaiming personal, familiar and communal history without romanticization while also charting the movement into the future--that seemed to demand the more expansive scope of fiction. I was thus doubly pleased to discover Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey (1991), by Elmaz Abinader, and Through and Through: Toledo Stories (1990) by Joseph Geha. Whereas Abinader traces the difficult migrations of her forbears between Lebanon, South America and the United States, laying the groundwork for her own Lebanese American identity, Geha depicts immigrants and ethnics in settled Lebanese American communities who struggle to negotiate the facets of their hyphenated identities. Read back to back, these two books provide a compelling account of the Lebanese American past and present, while hinting at future directions.

Abinader's interwoven generational narrative (its division into women's and men's stories suggesting echoes of Maxine Hong Kingston's similar narration of family history along gendered lines) depicts a past that does not so much precede the present as permeate it. Reading Children of the Roojme I was struck by the courage required to explore and narrate these family histories, particularly since they are punctuated not just by the famine, locusts, epidemics, poverty and punitive Ottoman rule endured by Abinader's Lebanese forbears, and the economic and emotional difficulties of immigration, but also by a painful legacy of familial division and

harshness. Abinader doesn't flinch from showing that the extended family may function not just as a haven, but also as a locus of oppression, particularly for women. In so doing she presents a feminist perspective on Arab American heritage that is both compelling and nuanced, one that was, at the time of its publication, in some ways unprecedented. Children of the Roojme suggests that it's both possible and necessary to take a hard look at the gendered and economic politics of family relationships, without losing sight of either the historical pressures that situate these relationships, or the implicit poetry that nonetheless resonates through the lives of both men and women.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Geha's stories, which take up the narrative of the Lebanese experience more or less where Abinader leaves off, present an evocative portrayal of Arab American ethnicity that explores nuances of the cultural meld between Arab and American. Through and Through offers a poignant but rarely sentimentalized depiction of the conflicts which immigrants and subsequent generations negotiate. Geha's characters struggle with the tension between Arab communal values – the primacy of familial relations, the embeddedness of the individual within the group – and the individualism, freedom, and risk that America is seen to offer. But through this tension—not so much resolved as honored—the complexities of Arab American realities are given full scope.

The range of responses to the tension between “Arab” and “American” that Geha charts here makes clear the diversity of ways in which American ethnicity may be both narrated and lived. In one story, for instance, even as an immigrant widower recognizes that his son will grow up to be “American,” the bond between them—symbolized by the smell of coffee and its implicit link between past, present and future—promises amelioration of loss. In another story, the protagonist, who realizes

that despite all her attempts at Americanization she cannot escape her connection to her heavily-accented immigrant mother, nonetheless finds herself at a juncture in which “The next move is her own, then, and each one after that” (31). Indeed, many of these stories locate their characters at a moment of transition, the intersection of familial assumptions and individual choice. Transformation is inevitable at such a juncture, but it is almost always grounded on a sense of identity that has its origin in family and community. In one story, a young girl whose American mother has died and whose Arab father has gone away, leaving her with Arab grandmother and uncle, imagines setting out with her brother into “that huge strangeness, America...the two of them, luckless, free in Boston and Chicago and Holy Toledo, the rest of their lives lost in the American homesickness” (98). But even then, poised on the brink of that very American fantasy of a future unshackled by family or tradition or the past, she wonders, “What should they take with them?” (98). Although, as Geha shows, the shift from Arab to Arab American identity is made possible through a widening of the boundaries of community into a sense of individual agency, this transformation is nonetheless based on a recognition of what we carry with us into the “American homesickness”(98).

Although Grape Leaves went a long way toward establishing the sense of a body of Arab American literature, as I continued to get in touch with Arab American writers by letter, phone, and in person, I realized that for the most part writers still seemed to be working in relative isolation. “Tracking down Arab American writers is always tough,” one author commented, “Since we haven’t really congealed as a group.” (As another writer was later to put it, “It’s not like we’re listed in the yellow pages!”). While some, like Joseph and Nye, had achieved some stature within the broader American literature community, and others, like Nassar, were known and

appreciated within the Arab American community, in that early period of my research there wasn't much overlap between these communities.

Quite aside from my desire to see Arab American literature gain a place in the broader American literary context, and to see writers gain greater stature within the Arab American community, it also seemed to me that without a context in which both literary and ethnic concerns could be taken seriously, it would be difficult for Arab American writers to address sensitive issues effectively. Because of the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans, there was an understandable emphasis on circulating images that refute these stereotypes. As a result, it's often been difficult for Arab American writers to engage in serious self-criticism on issues such as gender inequities, racism, homophobia, and the like. While all ethnic writers battle stereotypes, the political implications that accompany negative stereotypes of Arabs have often been so serious that to venture beyond the unspoken boundaries that govern representation is to risk alienation from the ethnic community. Witness, for instance, the controversy that greeted Diana Abu-Jaber's Arabian Jazz, a novel whose comic portrayals of Arab American characters apparently veered too close to prevailing stereotypes of rich, jet-setting, sexually lascivious Arab men, Arab women whose families want only to marry them off, immigrants who massacre the English language, and so on. There is much in Abu-Jaber's novel that is funny, poignant, and revealing, including lyrical depictions of grief and loss, compelling depictions of anti-Arab racism, and insightful meditations on marginality. But viewed against the prevailing backdrop of stereotypical representations of Arabs, Abu-Jaber's novel, despite its intent and achievements, struck a wrong note for many Arab American readers.<sup>11</sup>

Debate over what kinds of representations are possible within an overdetermined discursive context is of course not limited to Arab Americans. Asian American, African American and Jewish American feminist writers, among others, have faced controversy within their communities over their representations of gender. But feminism is a particularly charged topic among many Arab Americans, not only because criticism of gender issues runs the risk of substantiating those peculiarly indefatigable images of oppressed Arab women but also because media stereotypes of feminism are—ironically enough for a group so sensitive to stereotypes—at times taken by Arab Americans themselves to be the antithesis of Arab ethnic values.

In this context, the publication of Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists (1994), edited by Joanna Kadi,<sup>12</sup> herself a fiction writer, poet and essayist, marked a particularly significant juncture. The collection charted new ground within both Arab American and American feminist communities, challenging the perception that “Arab/Arab American feminist” is an oxymoron, as well as the notion that feminist identity requires a rejection of ethnic identity. “We are lesbian, bisexuals, and heterosexuals,” writes Kadi; “of different generations; working class, middle class, upper-middle class; women born in the Arab world and women born here...[The collection] provides a helpful map for women and men in our community who are struggling with issues of culture, identity, history and activism” (xvii). Interweaving her invocation of the book as a map with personal memories of her grandmother braiding her long hair, Kadi denoted the conjunction of personal, communal and historical concerns shaping Arab American experiences and lives: “I know it is possible and I believe it is necessary to create maps that are alive, many-layered, multi-dimensional, open-ended, and braided. ... Take three strands -- one that is Gram, one that is me, one that is the

force of history -- twist, turn, and curve; do not pull so tightly that it hurts; do not weave so loosely that strands escape. It is difficult finding that balance” (Kadi, xiv).

This attempt to chart a new map adequate to the complicated and interwoven realities of Arab American women, and thereby lay claim to a home-space, Food for our Grandmothers opened a significant new chapter for Arab American women. Providing a forum for the work of over forty Arab American women--many of whom have since gone on to become established authors in their own right--the anthology also created a discursive context for an analysis of issues of gender, race and politics, the intersection of which would become increasingly important to discussions of Arab American identity formation. One of the most important implications of the publication of Food for our Grandmothers was its insistence that the concerns of Arab American women are not limited to gender oppression. Arab Americans have long had to battle against those tenacious stereotypes of Arab women victimized and oppressed by inherently misogynistic Arab societies and communities. As Shakir put it, "According to popular belief, all Arab women can be divided into two categories. Either they are shadowy nonentities, swathed in black from head to foot, or they are belly dancers -- seductive, provocative, and privy to exotic secrets of lovemaking. The two images, of course, are finally identical, adding up to a statement that all Arab women are, in one sense or another, men's instruments or slaves" ("Mother's Milk" 39). This binary stereotype has been astonishingly long-lived; as Amira Jamarkani has more recently pointed out, “the mythology of the veil is so powerful and so prolific that it is virtually impossible to talk about the realities of Arab and Arab American women’s lives without invoking, and necessarily responding to, the looming image and story that the mythology of the veil tells” (Abdulhadi, Naber and Alsultany, Gender, Nation and Belonging 131).

But the impact of such gender stereotypes is political as well as cultural. On the one hand, the portrayal of Arab masculinities as overly patriarchal and oppressive toward women becomes one more way of perpetuating colonial relationships between east and west, Arab and American/European – the familiar trope of “saving brown women.” On the other hand women who already feel isolated from their U.S. culture because of their Arab identity or their political views may feel they have to suppress their feminism in order to claim a sense of home in their Arab communities. Thus, for instance, Arab American women who speak out about gender inequality in their own communities, especially at times when Arab communities in the U.S. feel under siege, may feel implicitly positioned as traitors to their own groups. (It was such tensions that led to the creation of AMWAJ, Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice, as a space where Arab and Arab American feminists could speak openly about feminist issues.)

Meanwhile, it was clear that not only was Arab American writing a swiftly expanding field, but that what constituted “Arab American literature” itself was far from fixed. The Arab American authors emerging in the 1980s and 1990s included authors as diverse and disparate as Mona Simpson, of Syrian and Swiss-German background, for whom Arab ethnicity, as represented in her novels (including Anywhere but Here (1986), The Lost Father (1992) and A Regular Guy (1996), as well as her more recent Off Keck Road (2000) and My Hollywood (2010)) seems distant, alien, or simply absent; Lebanese Haas Mroue, now deceased, whose searing collection of poetry Beirut Seizures (1993) focused, as had Etel Adnan’s novel Sitt Marie Rose, on the Lebanese civil war; and Arab-Jewish Jack Marshall (born to an Iraqi Jewish father and Syrian Jewish mother), whose poetry in Sesame (1993), Arabian Nights (1987), Arriving on the Playing Fields of Paradise (1984), and other

volumes was at once distinctly American and deeply global. Such writing is not rooted in the folk culture of an Arab American past. When Mroue writes, in “Beirut Survivors Anonymous,” “we lived a war with no name/ and escaped. We now belong to culture/ that has no name” (11), there is no nostalgia here. Nor do explorations by these authors of the intersection of “Arab” and “American” share a common conclusion. These differences suggest the extent to which the category “ethnic” is one that must be placed under continual examination, not just by each generation, but—because Arab American literature resists categorization by neat boundaries of generation or national or religious origin—to some extent by each writer.

Yet clearly there were larger structural forces shaping this literature. Much as the 1967 war had precipitated a pan-Arab American identity and the Israeli invasion of 1982 had helped to spark a new wave of Arab American poetry, events such as the Gulf war continued to bring Arab Americans to both new visibility and new voice within the U.S., as the attacks of September 11, 2001 were later to do in a vastly more accentuated fashion. Amid the rising political tensions, Arab American writers at times had difficulty publishing their work.<sup>13</sup> But although this was certainly not the first time that Arab Americans had faced anti-Arab sentiments, something had changed. More and more, Arab American writers were no longer willing to obscure their Arab identities. And for perhaps the first time since the *Mahjar* period, Arab American writers began discussing the need for an organizational structure that would support their literary efforts.

The literary organization that emerged—RAWI: Radius of Arab American Writers, Inc – formalized the existence of Arab American literature and its diversity and created a context for Arab American writers that had hitherto been absent.

(Kaldas recalls her first encounter with the RAWI newsletter: “I remember looking at

it in astonishment. There was an organization for Arab-American writers! That would have to mean that there were actually other Arab-American writers out there”

(Interview). ) RAWI not only offered a response to the political and literary urgencies facing Arab Americans, it reflected, too, the lessons Arab Americans were learning from other U.S. minority groups about the need for a space where ethnic writers could speak freely about their own issues. *Rawi* means “storyteller” in Arabic: the name reflects the centrality of story-telling both to Arab literary tradition and to Arab American writing. Journalist Barbara Aziz, who played a key role in the formation of RAWI, points out that while many Arab Americans have come to writing out of their desire to record family history and cultural experiences, others write because of a political drive: the need to speak out against stereotypes, to “set the record straight” (Interview). Palestinian-American playwright Betty Shamieh similarly observes, “I think my desire to tell stories, whether through theatre or other forms of writing, is directly linked to my experience as a Palestinian, because all Palestinians (both in Palestine and outside of it) contend with the reality that our stories, our experiences, and our humanity are constantly in danger of being discounted or erased altogether” (Interview).

How Arab American literary texts should go about such story telling has been an ongoing question. In the 1999 anthology Post Gibrán Anthology of New Arab American Writing editors Mattawa and Munir Akash sought to move beyond an “American ethnic” perspective and to explore the ways in which authors could draw on Arab cultural and linguistic legacies to create a new Arab American vocabulary: to develop, as Mattawa put it, “a cultural identity rather than mere ethnic identification.” As he argues, “the staples of grandmotherly aphorism, thickly accented patriarchal traditionalism, culinary nostalgia, religious dogma, belly dancing and adoration for

Kahlil Gibran are meager nourishments for cultural identity, let alone a cultural revival and a subsequent engagement with the larger American culture “ (Post Gibran 61). (Mattawa’s calls for a revitalization of Arab American culture, a reinvigoration of points of contact with the Arab world and an examination (and reinterpretation) of U.S. cultural ground-space were reflected in his own poetry, including Ismailia Eclipse, Zodiac of Echoes, Amorisco, and most recently the challenging Tocqueville, as well as in his translations.)

At this point I could no longer avoid grappling with the question of what it was I was researching: whether there was, in fact, such a thing as an Arab American literature, rather than simply individual texts by Arab American writers.<sup>14</sup> Was there some “Arab American” essence defining and binding together individual texts as part of a larger whole? As far as I could tell, there were two main viewpoints on the matter, falling within the familiar contours of the “exile vs. ethnicity” debate. According to the first viewpoint, Arab American identity is in many ways a transplanted Arab identity, one that turns upon a connection to Arab culture and the Arab world. From this perspective, “Arab American literature,” if it is to qualify for the name, should contain identifiable “ethnic” or Arab markers. (By the same token, diminishment of “Arab” characteristics or involvement might be taken to suggest an attenuation of Arab American identity, and therefore a slip into assimilation.) According to the second viewpoint, Arab American identity is best understood in relation to the American context and American frameworks of ethnicity, whether assimilation or multiculturalism. From this perspective, the exploration of ethnic themes and topics is an American undertaking, to be accomplished in American language and through American literary forms. Texts that are set in non-U.S. contexts

or texts that don't include identifiable "ethnic" content might be viewed as not really "Arab American" literature.

The desire to define "Arab American literature" through specific thematic content is understandable, particularly in the context of the long history of Arab American invisibility and negative stereotyping. But what it means to write as an Arab American may not be so easily reducible to a checklist of "ethnic" themes. If Arab Americans have long written out of the need to render mainstream American images of Arabs "unrecognizable" (Mattawa, quoted in Charara, *Inclined to Speak* xvii), they have written too out of the need to render their own experiences recognizable to themselves. Moreover, thematic definitions of Arab American literature do not account for writers who identify as Arab American, but who do not always address recognizably "ethnic" or "Arab" themes. One example is Nye, who has broad visibility as one of the most prominent of Arab American writers, but whose work is far from limited to identifiably "Arab" thematic material. Similarly, even highly political poets at times publish material that is not overtly "Arab American." There are, to be sure, internal connections that permeate the work of such authors: a characteristic stance, a way of looking at the world. But such connections are not always overt, and not always easily definable as "ethnic." In the case of such writers, should only that part of their work that is recognizably "Arab" be characterized as "Arab American," while other parts of their literary oeuvre are excluded? And who should be charged with the authority to make these distinctions?

A series of interviews I conducted with RAWI members in 2004 provided insight into the diversity of views on contemporary Arab American literature. For some writers, Arab American literature is, at heart, "writing by Arab American writers that addresses concerns and experiences of Arab Americans" (Mattawa,

Interview). Many would concur with this definition; indeed, Shakir commented, “I’ve always had trouble understanding why work that does not address the Arab American experience should be labeled Arab American” (Interview). But for others, the presence of a growing body of texts, even with specific thematic content, does not make it a literature. Barbara Aziz, for instance, contends:

I don’t think there is YET an Arab American literature, in the way we can now identify African-American literature or Native American literature or Spanish-American literature... It may emerge from a writer of the skill and power of Toni Morrison or Maya Angelou with their role in helping shape African American voice... Or it may emerge from emulation of an outstanding writer in the community; or it may emerge from someone who is master of both Arabic and English and finds a way to bring the underlying idioms or structure of Arabic to our English language writing. I don’t see it yet. That content is of Arab life themes does not for me constitute a literature. (Interview)

Others insisted that Arab American writing should be recognized and discussed on the basis of its literary merits, not whether it adheres to any particular ethnic content. Yet others felt that Arab American literature should be situated in a broader context altogether, as just one part of the cultural work (including music and visual art) that minority communities use as a mode of resistance.

Part of the problem with categorizing Arab American literature has been that in many ways Arab American writers do not yet have an established literary tradition sustained over time on which to draw. As Nathalie Handal notes, despite the hundred years tradition established by the *Mahjar* poets, and despite the accomplishments of many writers since then, Arab American literature has exhibited “large voids – gaps – from [the *Mahjar*] poets to Etel Adnan, Adnan to Shihab Nye, Shihab Nye to the generation writing today” (Interview). Similarly, Mattawa observes: “We don’t have a Langston Hughes or a Zora Neale Hurston whose work we can build on. And so every Arab American writer is going about his or her own writing by drawing on

several American and international literary traditions, including the Arab literary tradition” (Interview).

Yet as authors write in the growing knowledge of an Arab American literary community, both the impact of literary influences and the bolstering effect of community increase. The greater the number of literary texts in publication, the more individual authors are relieved of the burden of being cultural spokespeople rather than artists; the more they are freed to produce not sociology, but literature. A literary community also allows readers to take for granted a knowledgeable and sympathetic readership – what Kaldas calls an “ideal audience,” one that is not just Arab-American, but rather is constituted of “people who exist in and between two worlds... anyone whose life encompasses more than one culture” (Kaldas, Interview).

Indeed, as Arab American cultural spaces expand, Arab American writers increasingly position themselves not simply in relation to dual, implicitly opposing, spheres of Arab and American culture (as was characteristic of the *Mahjar* writers), but consciously occupy a third space, one that is a product both of the diaspora and of ethnogenesis, seeking to articulate an identity that is open to and cognizant of multiple internal divisions. In this space, the most significant factor is perhaps not necessarily ethnic content, but rather perspective and stance: the ability not just to move between worlds but also to create new ways of looking at the world. Such a cultural space not only grounds Arab American realities, but also supports connections and solidarities with other minority groups. Certainly, a great number of Arab Americans take as their literary models writers from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds whose literary efforts focus on issues of social justice, cultural understanding and human rights. Aziz, for instance, comments “I still draw most of my inspiration in writing from non-Arab writers, mainly African American --

Baldwin, Morrison, Angelou, etc.” (Interview). Kaldas notes that although she reads Arab American literature, it is not her primary source of inspiration. “It is really the work of other multicultural writers,” she says, “like the poets Audre Lorde, Irena Klepfisz, Myung Mi Kim, and the fiction writers Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Jhumpa Lahiri that inspires me” (Interview). Abu-Jaber observes, “authors like Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison, and Maxine Hong Kingston gave me the courage to believe that there was room and openness for different sorts of stories. I believe this is true for all Arab-American writers – that writers of other cultural backgrounds can help open doors” (Interview).

Meanwhile, many contemporary Arab Americans also write out of a cultural space that is shot through with Arab connections, linguistic as well as thematic. Mattawa, for instance, a native Arabic speaker whose literary work involves both poetry in English and translations from the Arabic, notes that he is “drawn to writing that is trying to bridge an esthetic, linguistic, or cultural discrepancy, that is in some way or another engaged in deep translation” (Interview). Kaldas speaks of bringing Arabic into her English writing, sometimes in transliteration, sometimes in Arabic script. “I think of it as layering languages,” she says (interview). But although Arab American writers are engaged in modeling a hybrid literature, what has not yet been created, Mattawa has argued, is

a distinct hybrid for ourselves, one that takes on both the Arab and the American literary canons, and that’s the next and necessary step...most Arab American writers are engaged with either one or the other – I read many echoes of Mahmoud Darwish in Arab American poetry and I hear echoes of other American poets, but the two are not brought into dialogue.”(Mattawa, Interview)

Mattawa points to Edward Said, an academic rather than a creative writer, as the best example so far of an Arab American author able to bring the two traditions together in

a literary context—an indication, perhaps, of how far Arab American literature still has to go.

But although the need to define and claim the American ground-space remains a central preoccupation, such a goal by no means denies diasporan realities or the urgencies of international politics. Indeed, political focus has come to be a defining characteristic of much Arab American writing. In this sense, the sense of cultural responsibility that so motivated the *Mahjar* writers continues to hold for many Arab American writers. Kathy Haddad, who as executive director of Mizna reviews much Arab American writing, feels that that the strong ties to the Arab world and to international politics evidenced in Arab American literature make this literature unique among ethnic American writing (Interview). A focus on international events and their reverberations and implications within an American context provides another way of engaging with diverse cultural, political, and social contexts, allowing Arab Americans to take stock of the links that political events have created between settled generations of Arab Americans and newer immigrants.

Given contemporary political contexts (occupation and war in Arab countries; discrimination and violation of human rights in the U.S.) the activist strain permeating Arab American writing is not likely to become attenuated. The need to give voice to unspoken realities not only links Arab American writers to their specific Arab background but also links them to issues of social justice and resistance literature more generally, both in the U.S. and abroad. As Mattawa points out,

with the Iraq war and the support of Israel's no holds barred brutality... [we are] reminded of the mass slaughter of this country's native people, reminded of all the killing it has taken to bring about this nation as a superpower. The challenge that Arab American writers face is the same that most American writers face... to undo the American public's silence regarding all of this. (Interview)

The need for Arab Americans to attend to the lessons of violence and discrimination against other groups is a growing theme (cf Salaita, Literary Fictions). Indeed, for Arab Americans as for other groups, story-telling functions as a tool in the face of oppression: a way to speak truth to power.

But one of the challenges which Arab American writers face is to give voice to political perspectives without sacrificing artistic integrity, creativity, or the right to explore other artistic and thematic terrains. To do this in the context of a skewed reception context is often challenging. As David Williams notes, in an implicit echo of W.E. B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness":

Like many others, we write with a dual (or should I say "hyphenated"?) awareness, not only of who we are, but of how we are perceived. We not only have to find meaning and make sense, as all writers do, but we have to present that meaning in a context in which it may very well be distorted or ignored. And so, at the same time one is struggling, like any serious writer, to speak, one is also using the minority's dual awareness to be understood. And, to borrow a phrase from Adrienne Rich, hoping not to produce words "that can be used against us." (Interview)

Williams believes that recognizing differences is one way to see what we have in common. "What is sometimes dismissed as 'identity' literature has a lot to say about the human situation in general, for those who are willing to pay attention," he argues. "Acknowledging heritage doesn't have to spiral down to portraying isolated victimhood. On the contrary, it can spiral out to a greater sense of human solidarity. ... It is not a matter of speaking for others; it is a matter of acknowledging one's neighbors, with the intimacy of someone from the neighborhood" (Interview).

Contemporary Arab American literature also shows an increased level of self-critique and internal diversity. In a context in which Arab Americans have routinely been negatively stereotyped, it has historically been difficult for writers to explore controversial material or to challenge cultural boundaries. Writers have been taken to

task for being overly critical of Arab culture, as well as insufficiently critical; they have been accused of being overly political and not political enough. But recent literature shows a striking willingness to raise sensitive issues -- sexuality, domestic violence, and other formerly taboo subjects. Elie Chalala, editor of Al-Jadid, notes that “Thematically, more than ever the reader [of Arab American literature] is introduced to works that tackle taboo themes, and by this I mean sexuality, domestic abuse, and other topics that cannot even be brought into the open in some Arab societies” (Interview). Similarly, Shakir comments that over the past two decades she has noticed “an increased willingness to move beyond nostalgia and celebration and to represent a more complex and nuanced rendering of the Arab American community,” through portrayals of a wider cast of characters, and treatment not just of the conflict between Arab Americans and mainstream society, but also tensions within the family and community (Interview).

In many ways, the ability to move into these more nuanced arenas is a reflection of how much Arab American writers can now take for granted. When a community is still in the process of being established, there is little space for examination of internal tensions and rifts. But in the context of a thriving, diverse literary community the burden of representation is lifted. David Williams notes that “knowing that others are out there, working on similar material, is liberating—one can be relieved of feeling the burden of always starting from scratch and needing to explain everything, which is impossible anyway” (Interview). Playwright Jamil Khoury concurs: “Instead of feeling pressured to somehow represent ‘all’ Arab-Americans, or represent us only in a certain light, I feel safer and more comfortable to explore those voices, experiences, and images that interest me most” (Interview).

Yet reconciling the political challenges that threaten to silence Arabs and Arab Americans with the need for artistic freedom remains an ongoing task. For instance, Betty Shamieh, discussing the difficulty of tackling sensitive issues within an overcharged political climate, observes, “I am very cognizant of the fact that there are attempts to silence the Palestinian perspective... [this] makes it problematic for me to tackle certain tough issues, particularly the issues Arab women face today” (Interview). In a context in which what Edward Said has called the Palestinian “permission to narrate” is routinely denied, and when internal critique of Arab communities is too often used as a rationale to denigrate Palestinian and Arab cultures and realities, artists and writers find themselves needing to assess their choice of topic carefully, always aware of the ways in which their words may be co-opted in the service of subtle or blatant political agendas.

Such representational tensions are perhaps in part a result of the fact that for the current generation of writers, their artistic careers are caught up with their identities as Arab Americans in ways that were not true in previous generations. For most Arab American writers today, who they are in terms of ethnicity and gender and race and class grounds their writing in concrete ways, even as they reject any assumption that they should be judged on the basis of ethnicity rather than art. Kahf, for instance, holds that she doesn’t know “how, in writing anything more major than poems of a few lines, I could separate between the writer and the Syrian, Arab, Muslim woman that I am” (Interview). Kahf’s response is characteristic of a generation of writers who are no longer willing to obfuscate their identity. (Kahf notes, in characteristically iconoclastic fashion, “I did try to exit Muslim American discourse for a few years, but then it turned around and kicked me in the pants. So I re-entered that discourse, picked it up again in my writing, and am kicking IT in the

pants” (Interview).) Such views stand in stark contrast to the insistence of a previous generation that ethnicity should have nothing to do with literature (cf Hazo). And they reflect, too, shifts in American cultural discourse more broadly.

However, authors also increasingly resist the didacticism that threatens to accompany too much attention to identity. Patricia Sarrafian Ward, whose novel The Bullet Collection grapples with issues of identity and dislocation in the context of the Lebanese civil war and emigration to the U.S., comments, “I did not write this novel for a particular audience, or with conscious effort to make a cultural bridge. I was just telling the story I had to tell, the fiction that emerged from my experience.”<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Kaldas insists that “the writing comes first and the subject matter comes second. . . . it is language that I grapple with when I write, that I stretch, testing its boundaries and possibilities” (Interview).

As Arab American writers consolidate, define and give voice to Arab American identity, they also expand the boundaries and possibilities of this identity. Jamil Khoury, one of a relatively small number of openly gay Arab American writers, provides one example of a writer who brings together political activism and internal critique in the hope of creating connections across boundaries. Of mixed Syrian and Polish/Slovak ancestry, Khoury came out as a gay man at the age of 17, making a conscious decision that his “queer identity, feminist identity, and Arab American identity would somehow have to fuse” (Interview). After Sept. 11, Khoury and his partner Malik Gillani, wanting to respond to the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments sweeping the U.S., decided to start a theater company, The Silk Road Project, that would counter stereotypes with accurate and humanistic portrayals. The company’s inaugural production was Khoury’s play Precious Stones, a drama

portraying two women, one Jewish and the other Palestinian, who join forces to organize an Arab-Jewish dialogue group, only to find themselves falling in love.

In writing the play, Khoury says, he hoped to explore how the Palestinian conflict plays itself out in Diaspora communities. His choice to focus the story line on two lesbian women was, for him, an obvious one: the characters in his play, as queer women, are themselves “marginalized and oppressed within the militarist, masculinist, male-supremacist discourses that shape Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, and are thus, perhaps, better positioned to question and subvert those discourses” (Khoury, Interview). The storyline also made it possible for Khoury to levy multiple critiques and address multiple audiences: “Arab and Arab-American audiences on the issues of homosexuality... Jewish audiences on the issue of Israel-Palestine... American lesbian and gay audiences on the cross-cultural implications of American sexual politics... [and] all the above on the multiplicity of identities and conflicts in our own lives” (Interview).

But what emerges above all in the Arab American literature of the contemporary period is arguably a sense of agency, one that insists on making connections between different spheres, Arab and American, and on claiming the right to speak – and speak out. Suheir Hammad, the Palestinian-American author of Born Palestinian, Born Black, Drops of this Story (memoir), ZaatarDiva and Breaking Poems, provides an example of the ways in which Arab American writers chart an activist space of interconnections that makes visible the structural forces delineating this space. Writing out of the intersection of multiple cultural contexts, Hammad explores the intersections of gender, race and class. Her poetry volume Born Palestinian, Born Black takes its title from the well-known lines by African American June Jordan on Palestinians massacred in 1982 at the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps

in Lebanon: “I was born a black woman, and am become a Palestinian.” The solidarity and connection between oppressed peoples encapsulated in these lines becomes Hammad’s touchstone. Indeed, when asked about her affinity with and connection to Black America, she says, simply, “the marginalized always make these connections. Always” (Interview). Such interconnections are at the heart of Arab American writing today. Against the harsh delineations of political realities and the blunt outlines of stereotypes, such Arab American writers map out alternative spaces and engage with political realities and cultural forces to articulate something transformative and new.

Although I started my exploration of Arab American literary texts with a desire to bridge the dual worlds, Arab and American, that I had spent so much of my life moving uneasily between, my search took me into spaces that were often unfamiliar. I learned that the point of a bridge is not just about reaching the “other side,” but about the linkage it implies, and the travel it makes possible. In the poem “Arabic Coffee,” Naomi Shihab Nye, whose work in many ways marked the turning point of my Arab American literary odyssey, evokes a touchstone of Arab American culture: the serving of coffee, the widening circle of hospitality, the invitation to “stay, be seated, follow the talk/wherever it goes.” But in a characteristic gesture, what might have remained simply a cultural icon, an Arab American emblem, becomes the foundation for a widening of the self toward something larger. “The coffee was/ the center of the flower,” writes Nye. “Like clothes on a line saying,/ *You will live long enough to wear me,*/ a motion of faith. There is this,/ and there is more” (Yellow Glove 40).

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on three essays: “Two Worlds Emerging: Arab American Writing at the Crossroads,” which narrates the personal trajectory of my search for Arab American literature; “Arab American Literature Today,” which provides an overview of Arab American literature, and “The Hyphenated Author: Emerging Genre of ‘Arab American Literature,’” which explores some of the theoretical questions underlying discussions of Arab American writing as a literature.

<sup>2</sup> Years, later, I was to read a fictional portrayal by Randa Jarrar of an Arab American character who is emotionally devastated when she punches in “Arab” and “American” and “Women” and “Fiction” into the computer at her college library and finds nothing (“Lost in Freakin’ Yonkers” 52). The scene precipitated a rush of recognition: I too had once been that person searching for some conjunction of “Arab” and “American” and “Women” and “Literature,” and finding nothing.

<sup>3</sup> Other Arab American writers, including Elmaz Abinader, have spoken of the importance of Kingston’s memoir to them.

<sup>4</sup> Rizk’s text held personal appeal for me because like Rizk, my father had worked in a meat-packing plant in Sioux City, Iowa, on first arriving in the US as a young man. Like Rizk, my father had also tried to find a hearing for his “story” among American audiences. But in his case the story he wanted to tell was that of Palestinian dispossession, and unlike Rizk, he found little reception for that.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed consideration of Rihani’s attempts at cultural mediation, see Hassan, “The Rise of Arab-American Literature: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani.”

<sup>6</sup> Nye’s subsequent publications include the poetry volumes Fuel, 19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East, You and Yours, Tender Spot, Transfer; the novels Habibi and Going, Going; the prose volumes Never in a Hurry; Mint; Mint Snowball; There is no Long Distance Now; I’ll Ask You Three Times, are you OK?; poetry and prose for young adults including Honeybee and A Maze Me; childrens’ books including Sitti’s Secrets, Baby Radar, Lullaby Raft; and edited and co-edited anthologies including The Space Between our Footsteps; The Flag of Childhood; What Have you Lost; Come with Me: Poems for a Journey; I Feel a Little Jumpy Around You; Salting The Ocean; Time You Let me In; and The Tree is Older Than You Are.

<sup>7</sup> I now realize how much my early view of Arab American literature was constrained by notions of what constitutes “appropriate ethnicity.” On Adnan’s novel Sitt Marie Rose as one of Arab American literature’s initiating texts, see Salaita, Literary Fictions, chapter two.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, Nov. 20, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph has gone on to publish two more books of poetry: Codes, Precepts, Biases, and Taboos: Poems 1973-1993 (2005) and Into It (2005). He has also published two books of prose: Lawyerland (1997) and The Game Changed: Essays and Other Prose (2011).

<sup>10</sup> In a prologue titled “The Poetry of Men” Abinader depicts the *roojme* – a plaza of rocks built by the Abinader brothers in their home village—as a symbol of familial unity and foundation of her own life. Meanwhile, the “poetry” of women’s lives emerges through the small details of daily survival.

<sup>11</sup> For a thoughtful analysis of the reception of Arabian Jazz, see Kaldas, “Beyond Stereotypes.” Abu-Jaber has since gone on to publish several other books, some of which further the discussion about Arab American identity (Crescent; The Language of Baklava) while others implicitly make the point that Arab American writers need not be confined by the “ethnic” theme (Origin; Birds of Paradise.)

<sup>12</sup> Kadi went on to publish Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker. Kadi now writes under the name Joe Kadi.

<sup>13</sup> Abu-Jaber recalls having the manuscript of her novel Arabian Jazz rejected by an editor at a major publishing house who felt that Arabs as literary characters were “politically inappropriate” (Abu-Jaber, interview); and of having an agent agree to represent her work if she would only “delete all mention of Palestine and Palestinians!” (Personal communication, Dec. 2, 1990). Children’s author Sally Bahous Allen had the scheduled publication of her picture book Sitti and the Cats suddenly called off soon after the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, for what appeared to be political reasons (personal communication, Feb. 8, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> At the time I first wrote the essays this chapter is based on, there was almost no critical discussion to help me grapple with these issues. Since then, Steven Salaita has offered a number of interventions into the critical debates on Arab American literature. His recent definition of Arab American literature is worth quoting at length:

Arab American literature consists of creative work produced by American authors of Arab origin and that participates, in a conscious way or through its critical reception, in a category

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that has come to be known as ‘Arab American literature.’ Unless, of course, it does not actually participate in the category. Unless, furthermore, the writer is a Canadian citizen. Unless the work participates very strongly in the category of “Arab American literature” but has an author of non-Arab Middle Eastern ethnicity. And unless... OK, OK, I’ll stop....when you enter into a study of Arab American literature, you find something diverse and heterogeneous. In thinking about the words that compose Arab American literature, I tend to emphasize the writer’s ethnic origin in addition to thematic content...[But] the fact is that nobody will ever put together an analysis of an ethnic literary tradition that makes complete sense in terms of its choices of inclusion and exclusion. (Modern Arab American Fiction 4-5)

<sup>15</sup> Of Armenian-Danish-American background, Ward grew up in Lebanon, where she always thought of herself as ‘half Lebanese.’ She says, “it felt awkward to be called Arab-American; I felt a little guilty, like it was a bit of a sham. I have no Arab blood...in Lebanon, my mother would be perceived first as Armenian.” When one reviewer described her as “emerging from the ranks of Arab women writers,” Ward wondered, “Am I? I don’t even know!” (Interview).

## Guidelines

If they ask you what you are,  
say Arab. If they flinch, don't react,  
just remember your great-aunt's eyes.

If they ask you where you come from,  
say Toledo. Detroit. Mission Viejo.  
Fall Springs. Topeka. If they seem confused,

help them locate these places on a map,  
then inquire casually, Where are you from?  
Have you been here long? Do you like this country?

If they ask you what you eat,  
don't dissemble. If garlic is your secret friend,  
admit it. Likewise, crab cakes.

If they say you're not American,  
don't pull out your personal,  
wallet-sized flag. Instead, recall

the Bill of Rights. Mention the Constitution.  
Wear democracy like a favorite garment:  
comfortable, intimate.

If they wave newspapers in your face and shout,  
stay calm. Remember everything they never learned.  
Offer to take them to the library.

If they ask you if you're white, say it depends.  
Say no. Say maybe. If appropriate, inquire,  
Have you always been white, or is it recent?

If you take to the streets in protest,  
link hands with whomever is beside you.  
Keep your eye on the colonizer's maps,

geography's twisted strands, the many colors  
of struggle. No matter how far you've come, remember:  
the starting line is always closer than you think.

If they ask how long you plan to stay, say forever.  
Console them if they seem upset. Say, don't worry,  
you'll get used to it. Say, we live here. How about you?

## Chapter 3

### Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race

*Race...now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness that it rivals the old pseudo-scientific and class-informed racisms whose dynamics we are more used to deciphering.... American means white.*

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 47

*For better or for worse, without a clear racial identity a North American is in danger of having no identity.*

-Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions* 3

*No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind...just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities.*

-Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 336

The transformative possibilities of literary texts emerge not just in the idealized space between writer and reader, but within historicized and politicized contexts. This chapter situates Arab American literary texts within the context of the racial discourses that have shaped Arab American ethnicity over the past century, examining the implications of these discourses for Arab American identity, agency and literary expression.<sup>1</sup>

What “race” means to Arab Americans has taken on increasing significance in past decades, as Arab Americans, excluded from the rosters of minorities of color as well as of white ethnic groups, have debated whether to lobby for a categorization as “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” or to continue to struggle for inclusion as white Americans on other than merely “honorary” grounds.<sup>2</sup> Like other immigrant groups at various historical junctures, Arab Americans have long occupied a contested and unclear space within American racial and cultural discourse.<sup>3</sup> Although classified as “white” by current government definitions, they are conspicuously absent from discussions of white ethnicity, and are popularly perceived as non-white. Such racial liminality has had profound implications for Arab Americans as they attempt to assert a public identity, claim a voice within the American multicultural, and take collective action on issues of common concern. The implications of this liminality have become more acute in the post 9-11 period, despite what Nadine Naber describes as the “multiculturalist ‘add on’ approach that has tended to dominate official academic and popular discussions on Arab Americans since 9/11.” (“Introduction,” Race and Arab Americans 4). The racial liminality of Arab Americans not only has profound implications for Arab American life; it also makes clear the inability of prevailing American models of racial and ethnic classifications to fully account for the diversity of the American multicultural.

### ***Contested Categories***

Underlying the current status of Arab Americans is a history of inconsistent racialization. Although individual Arabs had traveled to the United States since before the beginning of the nation, Arabic-speaking immigration did not begin in earnest until the late nineteenth century. From the early days of their immigration there was much confusion over how to classify Arabic-speaking immigrants. As historian Alixa Naff notes, the immigrants --

largely Eastern-rite Christians from Mount Lebanon, at that time part of Ottoman-controlled “Greater Syria”(present-day Syria, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine) were considered an “enigma” and viewed with mingled curiosity and derision (14). Initially classified on immigration forms under the category “Turkey in Asia” or “other Asians” (Naff, Becoming American 109), they were subsequently termed “Syrians” by immigration officials, and adopted this nomenclature themselves, finding their more familiar categories of identification, according to familial, village or religious affiliation, of little relevance in the American context. Meanwhile, they were also characterized through a variety of derogatory racial terms, including “nigger,” “dago,” and “sheeny”(Naff 250-51). While the immigrants’ strong pride in their own cultural identity to some extent allowed them to shrug off such negative characterizations as a case of “mistaken identity,” the repercussions could nonetheless be serious.<sup>4</sup>

Arabic-speaking immigrants also had to contend with nativist rhetoric from government officials and scholars -- rhetoric that was particularly worrisome within the context of legislative and judicial debates about immigration and naturalization. The Naturalization Act of 1790 had granted the right of citizenship to what it termed “free white persons.” However, the definition of “white” remained a subject of intense debate. By 1899 the Bureau of Immigration had begun “to distinguish Syrians and Palestinians by ‘race’ from other Turkish subjects, considering them Caucasian” (Naff 109). But after 1906 immigrants from western Asia became caught up in new naturalization laws basing eligibility for citizenship on non-Asiatic identity. In 1910, Syrians, Palestinians, Turks, Armenians, and others were classified as ‘Asiatic’ by the U.S. Census Bureau. In 1911 the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization ordered court clerks to “reject applications for first papers from ‘aliens who were neither white persons nor persons of African birth

and descent “(Naff 253) – a ruling that targeted “Asiatics” for exclusion. A series of court cases ensued, known as the “prerequisite cases,” in which petitions for naturalization were challenged and in some instances denied on the basis of whether or not petitioners qualified as “white.” These cases not only decided the fate of individual immigrants, but also set precedents for the inclusion or exclusion of entire ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup>

At stake in these cases were competing and sometimes contradictory definitions of “whiteness.” As Ian F. Haney Lopez notes, “The courts had to establish by law whether, for example, a petitioner’s race was to be measured by skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry, the speculations of scientists, popular opinion, or some combination of these factors. Moreover, the courts also had to decide which of these or other factors would govern in the inevitable cases where the various indices of race contradicted one another” (2). The definition of whiteness was particularly at issue in the case of immigrants from south and west Asia, such as Arabs and Indians, whose darker complexion set them at odds with popular perceptions of whiteness, and whose immigration to the U.S. was limited under the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. Although such groups were scientifically identified as Caucasian, their popular perception as nonwhite was so persuasive that courts were willing to privilege common knowledge over scientific evidence when the two were at odds, thereby upholding politically motivated assumptions about the meaning of “whiteness.”<sup>6</sup>

This schism between scientific evidence and popular perception played a significant role in the series of prerequisite cases involving Arab applicants between 1909 and 1915 and again in the 1940s, in which courts declared Arab applicants to be variously white and non-white.<sup>7</sup> At stake in the cases were these questions: whether Arabs are

“white” in color; whether Arabs are Asian or Caucasian; whether whiteness is determined by race, color, geography, culture or religion; and whether there is an intrinsic connection between Caucasian identity and whiteness. The answers that emerged illustrate the contradictory and politicized meanings of race during this period of nativist xenophobia and generalized anxiety about American identity.

The arguments presented as rationale for challenging the right of Arabic-speaking applicants to naturalization included dark skin color, origin on the continent of Asia, distance (literal and metaphorical) from European culture, and cultural and geographical proximity to Islam. Despite – or perhaps because of – the difficulty of defining “whiteness,” the courts’ decisions were frequently made on the grounds of common-sense assumptions about race: judges were more likely to deem lighter-skinned applicants worthy of naturalization, and to deny naturalization to darker-skinned immigrants even when attributing rejection to other reasons. For instance, applicant Faras Shadid, described by the court as “walnut or somewhat darker than is the usual mulatto” (Ex Parte Shahid 813), and applicant George Dow, described as “darker than the usual person of white European descent” (Ex Parte Dow 487) were both initially excluded from naturalization, while applicant Tom Ellis, described as Semitic but “a markedly white type of the race,” was admitted (see Ferris 4).

However, “whiteness” was understood to involve not just racial appearance and skin color, but also geographical, cultural, linguistic and religious factors. Under the “white person” prerequisite, immigrants whose cultural background and place of origin seemed to have proximity to Europe were more likely to be judged admissible than those whose cultural background and place of origin were perceived as alien to European culture. Thus, although the judge who excluded George Dow presented a discourse on

the relative coloration of different west Asian peoples, he ultimately argued that in cases of ambiguous coloration “whiteness” must be construed on the basis of general affiliation with European identity. If an applicant from Syria “cannot rest on complexion,” he asserted, he “must find other grounds ... to establish any community of race with the European races assuming those last to be the white race” (In Re Dow 363).

Intrinsic to this European “community of race” was Christian identity. Although most of the early Arab immigrants were in fact Christian, this fact was obscured by the popular confusion between Arabs and Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Islamic culture was viewed as diametrically opposed to western European culture, and, in a conflation of religious and racial identity, was construed as intrinsically non-white.<sup>9</sup> In asserting their claims to “whiteness” and American citizenship, Syrian immigrants therefore tended to stress their Christian identity and their historical, geographical and religious relationship to the Holy Land, and to accentuate their distance from Islam. It comes as no surprise, for instance, that during Dow’s rehearing one of the arguments presented on his behalf was that the Syrians’ “connection through all times with the peoples to whom the Jewish and Christian peoples owed their religion, made it inconceivable that the Statute could be intended to exclude them” (In Re Dow 357). But even though non-Christian identity weighed heavily *against* applicants seeking naturalization, the link between Christian identity and whiteness was viewed as insufficient grounds for inclusion. Indeed, arguments for naturalization on the grounds of an intrinsic Syrian connection to the birthplace of Christianity were dismissed as “emotional” and having “no place in the judicial interpretation of a statute” (Ex Parte Shahid 816).

Although the prerequisite cases had various outcomes, most of the cases before 1920 were eventually resolved in favor of the applicants. As a result, scholars have

viewed the prerequisite controversy as an anomalous period in a relatively straightforward Arab American history of assimilation (eg Naff 259). Indeed, the official classification of Arabic-speaking immigrants as “white” seemed ensured by a 1917 decision of the Congress that drew the longitudinal and latitudinal lines of Asian exclusion along boundaries that situated immigrants from Greater Syria within the space of “whiteness” and American citizenship (see Ferris 22-4). This inclusion seemed solidified by the 1920 census, which identified Syrians and Palestinians, separately, under the category “Foreign-born white population” (Naff 117).<sup>10</sup>

However, the link between western, European, Christian identity and “whiteness,” and the importance of this link in defining American identity, persisted. So too did the connection between non-European, non-Christian and non-white identity. A 1942 case denying naturalization to a Yemeni applicant, Ahmed Hassan, made clear the extent to which “whiteness” continued to be interpreted as a characteristic of European Christians but not of non-Europeans or non-Christians. “Apart from the dark skin of the Arabs,” the judge argued, “it is well known that they are a part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominantly Christian peoples of Europe” (In Re Ahmed Hassan 845). Although affiliation to Christianity had earlier been held irrelevant as a rationale for inclusion of Arabs, in this case non-Christian cultural identity was viewed as convincing rationale for exclusion. In contrast, the judge noted that certain (non-Arab) applicants might be judged suitable for American citizenship on the basis of their relationship to Christian Europe. Although voicing “serious doubt as to whether any peoples of Asiatic stock could be considered white persons within the meaning of the statute,” he noted that Armenians could be considered “white” because they were Christian and were geographically closer to Europe (Re Ahmed Hassan, 845).<sup>11</sup>

Through such reasoning, markers of religion were assimilated into the geographical construction of race, with Islam relegated to the opposite side of the geographical boundary separating white, western Christian Europe from non-white, eastern, non-Christian Asia.<sup>12</sup>

The continuing association between western identity and whiteness also played a role, with different results, in a 1944 case that granted naturalization to an Arab applicant. In this case the judge argued that Arabs could be considered “white -- not in and of themselves, but because they had historically served as *transmitters* of western civilization. The basis for inclusion as white, the judge held, turned upon “whether the petitioner is a member of one of the ‘races [(a)] inhabiting Europe or [(b)] living along the shores of the Mediterranean’ or [(c)], perhaps, is a member of a race of ‘Asiatics whose long contiguity to European nations and assimilation with their culture has caused them to be thought of as of the same general characteristics’ (Ex Parte Mohriez 943). In contrast to earlier courts that had argued the distance of Arabs from European culture, this judge held that Arabs had accrued sufficient whiteness through their role in transmitting European civilization to be considered white. As he stated, “the Arab people stand as one of the chief channels by which the traditions of white Europe, especially the ancient Greek traditions, have been carried into the present” and therefore “the Arab passes muster as a white person” (Ex Parte Mohriez 943).

This ruling marked the end of explicit challenges on racial grounds to the suitability of Arab immigrants for naturalization. However, the question of racial classification reemerged in a 1987 discrimination case filed by an Iraqi professor charging that he had been denied tenure on the basis of being of “Arabian race” (Saint Francis College v. Al-Khazraji, 604). The case, filed under civil rights statute 42 U.S.C.

Section 1981, was initially thrown out of court because the civil rights statute assumes a non-white plaintiff. However, the Supreme Court subsequently determined that “although Arabs are Caucasians under current racial classifications, Congress, when it passed what is now [Section] 1981, did not limit its protections to those who today would be considered members of a race different from the defendant’s... at a minimum, [Section] 1981 reaches discrimination directed against an individual because he or she is genetically part of an ethnically and physiognomically distinctive subgrouping of *homo sapiens*” (Saint Francis College, 604). As Therese Saliba notes, the ruling not only “supports the claim of an ‘Arabian race’ within the arbitrary construction of racial categories” (16) but also challenges existing racial categories – for “once ‘Arabs’ as a category are included in racial politics, it is not in addition to already familiar groups of people of color covered under Affirmative Action, but rather, their inclusion leads to a dismantling of those categories” (Saliba 14).

Informing such legal debates both in the early period and at the present time are historical discourses of Orientalism and heathenism that situate non-Europeans and non-whites as uncivilized and inferior to white, Christian Europeans. As Edward Said has cogently demonstrated, Orientalism, functioning as a “system of knowledge” filtering the Orient into Western consciousness, has perpetuated “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Orientalism 5-7). In the orientalist worldview, the West is “rational, developed, humane, superior,” while the Orient is “aberrant, undeveloped, inferior” (Said, Orientalism 300). Islam fares particularly badly in orientalist portrayals; historically represented as a “menace” to the west and to Christianity, it has more recently been caricatured as the epitome of

barbarism, repression and irrational political violence, supplanting communism as the new enemy of the “civilized” west.

American views of Arabs have also drawn on the racially inflected “civilized/heathen” schism that historically opposed white American colonists to native peoples, immigrants and enslaved Africans. As the definition of “American” became equated with the characteristics of whiteness, Christianity, European/Anglo Saxon origin and “civilization,” other groups were both racialized and hierarchically ranked in relationship to these characteristics.<sup>13</sup> Immigrants whose tenuous racial status compromised their ability to assimilate into white America often sought to move up the racial scale, and hence accentuate their claim to American identity, by differentiating themselves from people of color. Thus, for instance, in their bid for acceptance in the American context, Irish and Italians immigrants sought to put as much distance as possible between themselves and African Americans.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Arabic-speaking immigrants, recognizing that perceptions of “whiteness” turned upon relative distance from the “darker” end of the racial spectrum, anxiously sought to assert their difference from blacks. Tellingly, in a 1929 Florida incident involving the lynching of a Syrian man after a car accident (see “Syrian and Wife Killed in Florida”), the Syrian immigrant community responded not only with outrage, but also with a defensive attempt to assert their “whiteness.” A letter published in a Syrian immigrant journal declaimed, “The Syrian is not a Negro whom Southerners feel they are justified in lynching when he is suspected of an attack on a white woman. The Syrian is a civilized white man who has excellent traditions and a glorious historical background” (“Has the Syrian Become a Negro” 42). While racist, such responses also made clear the immigrants’ anxieties about their own racial identification in a context where to be non-white had serious

consequences. As one immigrant journal warned: “*Al-Hoda* is of the opinion that the Syrians should proceed with extreme caution in this matter... A certain feeling of prejudice undeniably exists against the Syrians in some parts of the South and any rash action on their part might tend to aggravate matters unnecessarily” (“Syrian and Wife Killed in Florida” 47-48).

At the same time, the anomalous location of Arabs within the binary framework of American race relations sometimes positioned immigrants outside of this framework altogether. For instance, Egyptian students in racially segregated regions of the U.S. during the 1950s and early 1960s found that their foreignness often set them outside of the black-white racial dynamics that might otherwise have relegated them to a disadvantageous sphere. Despite their dark skin, they were welcomed as “foreign students” and assigned to “white” schools (Morsy 184). Similarly, Lebanese Catholics in racially-segregated Protestant Birmingham were able to sidestep some of the implications of being “colored” in the segregated south because their Catholic identity set them apart from both black and white Protestants (Conklin and Faires 80).<sup>15</sup>

In the contemporary period, perceptions of and attitudes toward Arabs draw not only upon Orientalist discourse and traditional racism, but also on what has been described as “political racism” (Samhan). Political racism is distinguishable from earlier, nativist strands of racism by a focus on Arab-oriented political activity, particularly activity related to the Palestinian struggle for national rights (Samhan 16). Post-WWII political events -- the 1948 creation of the state of Israel, the corresponding dispossession of the Palestinians and the military response of Arab states, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the oil boycott of the 1970s, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the 1990-91 Gulf Crisis, incidents of violence such as the 1995 bombing of the

Oklahoma City Federal Building, perpetrated by a white European-American but initially attributed to Arabs), and most especially the attacks of September 11, 2001 -- have resulted in a climate of hostility toward Arab Americans in general and politically active individuals in particular.<sup>16</sup> Arab American offices, homes and religious centers have been bombed and vandalized, and individuals have been threatened, beaten and murdered in politically-motivated assaults.<sup>17</sup> In 1985, following the murder of Alex Odeh, the west coast regional director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), FBI director William Webster warned that Arab Americans and others advocating “Arab points of view have come within the zone of danger”(quoted in Abraham 165).

The implications of the schism between official classification and popular perception emerge with particular clarity at moments of crisis. After the 1995 Oklahoma Federal Building bombing, carried out by the European-American Timothy McVeigh, government officials identified the suspects as “white males.” Surprised reporters, who had immediately raised the specter of Arab/Muslim terrorism, queried whether this identification excluded Middle Easterners.<sup>18</sup> Their disconcertion made clear their assumption that “white” and “Middle Eastern” -- and by extension, “American” and “Arab,” “American” and “terrorist” -- are mutually exclusive categories. Indeed, popular opinion clearly supported such views: despite the lack of evidence pointing toward Arab perpetrators, ordinary Arab Americans across the country were harassed, threatened, assaulted and abused in the days following the bombing.<sup>19</sup>

Federal government agencies have also played a role in targeting Arab Americans. As Helen Samhan notes, “While Arab American first amendment rights to speak and assemble are protected by the Constitution, government agencies in varying degrees have often abused those rights in the name of security against terrorism”

(“Politics and Exclusion” 17). One example was seen in the case of the “LA Eight” – the seven Palestinians and one Kenyan arrested in Los Angeles on January 26, 1987, incarcerated and publicly labeled a “terrorist threat” for legitimate First Amendment activities, who remain under threat of deportation at the present time (Abraham 199-203; Naber, “Arab-American In/Visibility” 7). After the passage of the 1996 Anti-Terrorism Bill targeting of Arab Americans increased. In addition to being subjected to special scrutiny at airports and other public places, Arab Americans were singled out by the bill’s provisions for arrest and detention on the basis of secret evidence. Thus, for instance, *all* of the detainees imprisoned on “secret evidence” by 1999 who faced deportation without being allowed to know either the charges levied against them nor the identity of their accusers were of Arab or Muslim identity.<sup>20</sup>

The post 9-11 period brought targeting of Arabs and Muslims to new heights. In the aftermath of the attacks, Arab Americans were transformed from invisible to hyper-visible subjects, the objects more than ever of both hate crimes and federal government targeting. As Amaney Jamal notes, “In 2003, The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that hate crimes against Muslim Americans were up by at least 300 percent from 2001. By 2005, hate crimes against Muslim Americans had increased by another 50 percent from 2004 levels” (“Civil Liberties,” Race and Arab Americans 115). Nadine Naber points out that “Government policies, such as the PATRIOT Act, special registration, and FBI investigations put the logic of “good Muslim/bad Muslim” into practice by targeting noncitizens as “potential terrorists” or “bad Muslims,” and distinguishing them from “citizens” or “good Muslims” (Naber, “Introduction,” Race and Arab Americans 3). The increased visibility of Arabs and Muslims, and their targeting within both public and governmental contexts, reflected an extension of discourses that

were already in existence, as the “not quite white” Arab became more “othered” than ever. That is, this post 9/11 targeting of Arabs and Muslims was not something new: it represented “a turning point, as opposed to the starting point, of histories of anti-Arab racism in the United States” (Naber, “Introduction,” Race and Arab Americans 4). As Louise Cainkar argues, “The ways in which Arabs, Muslims, and persons assumed to be Arabs and Muslims were held collectively responsible after the 9/11 attacks should alone provide convincing evidence that their racial denouement had been sufficiently sealed before the attacks occurred” (Cainkar, “Thinking Outside the Box” 51).

Given such realities, whether or not Arab are viewed as “white” or “non-white” matters both discursively and pragmatically. Classification as white makes Arab Americans culturally invisible, creates contradictions for dark-skinned Arabs who are not socially perceived as “white,”<sup>21</sup> and glosses over disparities between governmental as well as popular treatment of Arabs and Europeans in the American context. Classification and nomenclature play a role not just in community visibility, political power and access to resources, but also in the ability to claim protection from discrimination.

Governmental classifications that include Arab Americans with the majority white population have not protected Arab Americans from targeting on the basis of ethnicity. As Cainkar notes, “Arab Americans may have racial options...that members of other groups do not possess, but these options do not alter their grounded realities as a negatively stigmatized group” (“Thinking Outside the Box” 50.) Demographic research would arguably show that this group has “suffered historic, pervasive discrimination like other minority groups” (Gregory Nojeim, quoted in *ADC Times*, Aug-Sept. 1994: 11). Research also shows that in the past decade Arabs have suffered a curtailing of civil liberties that have specifically singled out Arab and Muslim Americans (cf Jamal, “Civil

Liberties” 114-115). Categorization as “white” obscures both specific incidents of discrimination and this more broad-based singling out of Arabs and Muslims, making it difficult to collect accurate statistics on Arab Americans and to assess their needs.<sup>22</sup>

The history of Arab and Muslim targeting and implicit or explicit racialization prior to 9/11 had convinced many Arab Americans that the designation “white,” with its implications of mainstream status, does not reflect the reality of their experiences. As a result, Arab American community leaders lobbied for a specific racial or ethnic classification, even as they remained divided over whether to work towards legal identification as “Arab Americans” or as “Middle Eastern Americans” (an identification that would include not just Arabs but also Iranians, Turks, Armenians and others).<sup>23</sup> At the time of the 1990 census, national Arab American organizations launched a concerted campaign to encourage Arab Americans to answer the ancestry question on the “long form” by writing in an Arab country of origin, rather than identifying as “white” or by a religious designation.<sup>24</sup> In 1994, following the decision of the Federal Office of Management and Budget to review the categories used for collecting data on race and ethnicity in preparation for the 2000 census, the Arab American Institute held discussions on the question of minority status (Naber, “Arab-American In/Visibility” 11-12). In the post 9-11 period, the question of an Arab category on the census became clouded, as fears of profiling caused even previous advocates for an Arab classification on the census forms to revise their stance. At the time of the 2010 Census, however, a number of campaigns were launched to encourage Arab Americans to identify as “Arab” on the census form. For instance, a “California-based group of Arab American leaders formed the Arab Complete Count Committee and launched a campaign dubbed “Check it Right, you Ain’t White” (“A Write-In Campaign,” Newsweek, The Daily Beast, Feb. 28, 2010).

The increasing turn to panethnic Arab identification among Arab Americans in the past decades has been due to the growing politicization of Arab Americans in response to both domestic and international events, as well as to demographic factors such as on-going immigration from Arab countries and the increasing proportion of Muslims among Arab Americans. However, a shift to a pan-ethnic Arab American categorization also reflects the general reliance in the American context on panethnic models of racial organization. As many scholars have argued, race, far from being a “biological” category, is “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle”(Omi and Winant 55), a fact that has long been evident in the shifting classifications of the U.S. census.<sup>25</sup> The current white-Black-Hispanic-Asian-American Indian pentagon<sup>26</sup> formalized during the Nixon era is a product of this political struggle between state-level ordering and community efforts to “claim or rearticulate identity” (Frankenberg 12). While panethnic categorization blurs distinctions between groups, it also helps minority groups to find a third space between specific ethnic identification and the binary opposition of black/white relations (Winant 60).<sup>27</sup> Recognizing this, Arab Americans, like other groups, have increasingly turned to panethnic delineation to confront their identity “in a political environment of heightened racial consciousness and mobilization” (Winant 61).

### ***Literary Negotiations***

Arab American literature both reflects and is situated within this history of contested racial categories. Literary texts from the first half of the century make clear the anxieties of Arab Americans as they struggled for inclusion as “white” Americans. Aware of their contested racial, legal and social status in the American context, early Arab American authors tended to emphasize those aspects of their identities more likely to gain

acceptance by white Americans, and to distance themselves from those elements of Arab culture viewed as particularly foreign and less readily assimilable. In particular, they stressed their Christian identity, their geographical origin in the “Holy Land,” and their “spirituality,” employing biblical rhetoric and religious parallels in their attempt to engage American readers and familiarize the “exotic,” while at the same time seeking to distance themselves from Islam.

A typical example of such strategic representation may be found in the work of Lebanese American Reverend Abraham Mitrie Rihbany. Rihbany, born and raised in Shweir, Mount Lebanon, emigrated to the U.S. in 1981. After briefly serving as editor to the first Arabic language newspaper in North America, *Kawkab Amrika* (The Star of America) he travelled through the U.S. lecturing on the Holy Land, and eventually became a Congregationalist minister in Michigan, Ohio and finally Boston. Rihbany’s first book, *A Far Journey* (1914), segments of which were first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1913, draws heavily on biblical themes, is structured along the lines of scriptural discourse and proclaims the immediacy and relevance of biblical events to life in the modern-day Middle East. Although Rihbany’s religious profession predisposed him to the use of such parallels, his emphasis on Christian imagery and language may also have had a historically situated rationale. The full-length text was published in 1914, the same year in which George Dow was refused American citizenship, spurring the Arab American community to various efforts in the attempt to prove their “white” identity.<sup>28</sup> In stressing his Christian identity and his intrinsic connection to the Holy Land, Rihbany sought to make the point that Syrian immigrants were not simply the recipients of American largesse, but had something of great value to offer to their new country: an ancient spiritual heritage. In later books Rihbany was to expound upon this argument.

For instance, in his 1922 Wise Men From the East and From the West, he argued that the Syrians, with their “deep reverence for moral and spiritual ideals” and their intrinsic Christian heritage, were not only “justly classed with the civilized peoples” (241-2) but also had the responsibility to impart this spirituality to the west. As he wrote, “The Oriental must never cease to teach his Occidental brother, nor ever allow himself to forget his own great spiritual maxims which have guided the course of his life for so many centuries (301).

Meanwhile, authors such as Rihbany not only stressed their connection to Christianity, but also engaged in a careful distancing from Islam (which in the American context was viewed as the antithesis of all that was Christian, western and white). This strategy paralleled efforts by Arab Americans to accentuate their “whiteness” by dissociating themselves from blacks. In A Far Journey, for instance, Rihbany describes the childhood injunctions he received upon going to Beirut: “I was not to gaze curiously at the Mohammedans, whom I knew by their white turbans. They considered us *kuffar* (infidels) and enemies of the faith; therefore they were ever ready for the slightest provocation to beat or even kill us”(81). His description not only made clear the difference between Muslims and Christians, it also played upon stereotypes of Muslims (here called by the inaccurate American term “Mohammedans”) as violent. Similarly, in Wise Men Rihbany refers to Muslims as “the traditional enemy of my people” (243-4). In so doing he implicitly aligns himself and other Christian Syrians with Christianity, Europe and the west – despite his acknowledgement that “we Christians of Syria and all the Arabic-speaking countries, although of various origins, have always loved to call ourselves Arabs” (243).<sup>29</sup>

In addition to using Christian identity to assert their intrinsic affinity to white American society, Arab American authors also made strategic use of the “exoticism” of their Holy Land origin. In so doing, they drew upon the overlapping paradigms of racial essentialism, assimilation and cultural pluralism that structured cultural interaction in the American context. While the essentialism that viewed races and ethnic groups as totally distinct set Arabs apart from European Americans, it also allowed them to assert their “uniqueness” (transposed onto a cultural and spiritual plane) as exotic emissaries from the Holy Land. At the same time, however, the assimilation paradigm held out the possibility of melding into American society, particularly given their similarities, as Christian Caucasians, with white Americans. By valorizing elements of their heritage viewed as compatible with American values, therefore, Syrian Christian immigrants were able to delineate themselves as both different *and* white.

As the century progressed, the strident assimilation pressures characterizing the early decades of the twentieth century gave way to a greater focus on cultural pluralism, and to a humanism characterized by the stance that different races and groups were “all the same under the skin.” However, these shifts notwithstanding, Arab Americans found that “American” continued to mean Christian, European, western, and white, and that they were still located outside of this definition. Meanwhile, the Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs held such sway that ordinary Arab Americans were often viewed as not “exotic” enough to be “authentic.”

Consider, for instance, the autobiography Which Way To Mecca, Jack?, published in 1960 by Lebanese-American William Blatty. The son of Lebanese immigrant parents, born and raised in New York City, Blatty is best known as the author of The Exorcist. In Which Way to Mecca Jack, Blatty negotiated his personal history through the lens of

slap-stick – and what some might consider painfully self-deprecating – humor. Although Blatty arguably seeks to affirm both his Lebanese and his American identities, the text makes clear that challenging American racial hierarchies is as difficult as challenging Orientalist stereotypes. Despite Blatty’s longing to fit in as a white American, for instance, his childhood desire is more limited: he wishes simply to be mistaken for a minority slightly higher on the racial hierarchy. “How I envied the Irish boys their snub noses, their pale skins,” he writes. “But...I was usually content to look forward to the now-and-then occasions when someone would call me ‘dago’ or ‘wop,’ for at least the Italians were a majority minority(29). In addition to failing to pass muster as a white person, Blatty also fails to meet Orientalist expectations regarding “Arab” identity. Attempting to get a part in the movie The Ten Commandments, he is rejected for not looking “authentic” enough, for he has blue, not brown, eyes. He subsequently takes revenge on Hollywood: disguising himself as an “Arab prince,” he is wined and dined by an establishment that fawns over “royalty.” But he can only achieve this by caricaturing Arabs, drawing on every Orientalist stereotype imaginable in order to prove his “authenticity.” As critic Evelyn Shakir points out, it is clear that “Hollywood has embraced not William Blatty, Arab-American, but ... a personification of its own romantic (and essentially Orientalist) fantasies about the East. To win the favor of an industry that trades in images, he has had to turn himself into a cartoon Arab” (“Coming of Age” 68).

Whether through tactics of assimilation or through the strategic deployment of exoticism, writers such as Rihbany and Blatty sought not to unsettle the racial categories of white America so much as to find acceptance within them. In contrast, however, contemporary Arab American writers increasingly seek to challenge established cultural

and racial boundaries in their articulation of Arab American identity, and to assert their identity on their own terms. Lebanese American Lawrence Joseph, Jordanian American Diana Abu-Jaber, and Egyptian American Pauline Kaldas provide examples of contemporary writers' efforts to grapple more directly with the racialization and politicization of Arab American experience and to assert their Arab American identity without apology.

Lawrence Joseph, the grandson of Lebanese Maronite and Syrian Melkite Eastern Catholics, was born in Detroit, Michigan. A professor of law at St. John's University School of Law in New York City, Joseph is the author of five critically acclaimed books of poetry (Shouting at No One, Curriculum Vitae, Before Our Eyes, Codes, Precepts, Biases and Taboos: Poems 1973-1993, and Into It) and two books of prose (Lawyerland: What Lawyers Talk About When They Talk About Law and The Game Changed: Essays and Other Prose). Throughout his work, Joseph simultaneously claims and critiques his Arab identity, even as he makes clear that the Arab American experience must be situated within a broader American context – in particular, that of racial tension. Consider, for instance, Joseph's poem "Sand Nigger," a poem that is frequently invested with iconic status in Arab American contexts (Curriculum Vitae 27-9). Drawing the reader into its interwoven mesh of history, memory and culture, the poem not only evokes the complexity of Arab American identity, but also probes the racial and cultural boundaries that delineate, situate and inform this identity. It begins with familiar markers of ethnicity--food, place names, familial intimacies; emblems easily recuperated into the paradigm of ethnic assimilation and "white ethnicity." From the "house in Detroit" where "Lebanon is everywhere" – in food and language and grandparents and backgammon and family quarrels – to war in Lebanon and labor injustices and racial slurs and the familiar

Arabic proverb of brother “against his brother,/ with his brother against his cousin,/ with cousin and brother/ against the stranger,” this poem charts the Lebanese immigrant experience in terms familiar to many Arab Americans. But instead of inscribing ethnicity at a transitional site between ethnic past and American future -- the strategy by which ethnic writers so often seek to contain markers of difference and seek to accrue “whiteness” – Joseph instead reconstitutes ethnicity at the intersection of American urban and international geopolitical contexts, and the fault lines of racial and intercommunal tensions: family quarrels, war in the Middle East, anti-Arab discrimination, the violence and poverty of Detroit. In so doing he insists on the need to move beyond nostalgia to a grappling with racialization and violence in contemporary Arab American experience.

Indeed, over the past two decades Arab American literature has increasingly explored issues of racialization and violence. Diana Abu-Jaber’s work provides a particular example. Abu-Jaber, of Palestinian, Jordanian and American heritage, the author of four novels (Arabian Jazz, Crescent, Origin and Birds of Paradise) and a memoir (The Language of Baklava), is one of the first Arab American fiction writers of the contemporary period. In an early short story titled “At the Continental Divide,” Abu-Jaber depicts a newly arrived Jordanian immigrant, Jamil, whose dark skin, foreignness, and ambiguous sexual identity make him the target of a policeman’s rage. The policeman, whose epithets are described as “brand[ing] Jamil’s skin,” snarls, “Oh, A-rab, one of *them*. Worse than niggers aren’t you? Kill your own babies and mothers, bomb planes with Americans on them...A-rab scum” (147). The physical beating that follows parallels this “branding,” reinscribing Jamil’s “non-white” identity onto his body in definitive terms.

However, Abu-Jaber makes clear that the response to such violent racial inscription should not be the assertion of “whiteness.” While some Arab Americans might be able to “pass,” others, marked by their dark skin and hair as well as by their Arab names, are pragmatically unable to do so. Besides, the cultural pressures toward assimilation enact their own kind of violence. As Abu-Jaber writes in a different essay, “Lighten the hair, thin the lips, change the name, cover the dress, hammer down the accent, stash away the strange gods, the poetry, the ancient disturbing pointless old stories. Smash it all down flat” (“Arabs and the Break in the Text,” 132).

Abu-Jaber explores such issues more fully in her novel Arabian Jazz. Examining the identification options open to her protagonist, Jemorah, daughter of a Jordanian father and a white American mother, Abu-Jaber depicts not just the identity confusions of mixed identity, but also the violence of racialized categories and the liminal positioning of Arab Americans within these categories. Not quite at home in either her Arab or her American contexts, Jemorah struggles to find a place for herself, but for much of the novel remains confused and stymied by her mixed identity. An interchange with her employer Portia brings to a crescendo these tensions. For Portia, the “good white blood” running in Jemorah’s veins from her American mother has been contaminated by her Arab father who “[isn’t] any better than Negroes” (294). But this Arab “taint” (294) is, for Portia, nonetheless recuperable into a framework of white ethnicity. As Portia tells Jemorah, “I’ve noticed that in certain lights it’s worse than in others... Now, if you were to change your name, make it Italian maybe, or even Greek, that might help some... We’ll try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you *American*” (295). Recoiling from such bigotry, Jemorah turns instead to her Arab identity, announcing her intention to marry an Arab cousin and move to Jordan. But Abu-Jaber

makes clear that such dualistic thinking is not a solution either. As Jemorah's cousin points out, "You're torn in two. You get two looks at a world. You may never have a perfect fit, but you see far more than most ever do. Why not accept it?" (330). Indeed, the novel turns in its final passage to a metaphor of jazz, positing cultural cross-over and improvisation as an alternative to unitary identification.

Indeed, contemporary Arab American literature increasingly probes the ways in which racial classification serves not as a mode of inclusion but as a form of containment and/or erasure. An early poem by Egyptian American Pauline Kaldas brings these issues to the foreground. Kaldas, who was born in Egypt and emigrated to the U.S. with her family as a child, is the author of Egyptian Compass (poems), The Time Between Places (stories) and Letters from Cairo (memoir). Her poem, "Exotic" by addresses the familiar issue of the "exotification" of Arab women focused through the lens of race. Beginning with an invocation of markers of "exotic" beauty, the poem explores the ways in which Arab women are excluded from "white" American identity, yet simultaneously recuperated into its domain through a neocolonial gesture of possession. Dark enough to be "interesting," yet white enough to be "safe," the Egyptian woman in the poem presents what Kaldas terms an "also permitted" alternative to the mainstream "golden beauty" (168). But such "permissible" difference turns not only upon exoticism but also upon the safety of categorization. The woman is surrounded by a swirl of voices that attempt to define and contain her in an ethnic kaleidoscope: "'Que pasa nina?' / 'Hey baby!' / 'What are you-- Lebanese, Armenian, Spanish, Puerto Rican, Italian, Mexican / c'mon what are you?' / 'You're either Spanish or Italian.'" By invoking ready-made slots of identification, these efforts at containment ward off an actual engagement with the

complexity of difference. As Kaldas writes, “The square edges me as it extends *White/ includes People from North Africa and the Middle East*” (“Exotic” 168).

The classification tensions evoked in Kaldas’ poem are not dissimilar from the tensions around race that informed the prerequisite cases earlier in the century. As in those court cases, here too Arab identity challenges the boundaries of available racial and ethnic classification, contained only by exclusion or by extending the meanings of whiteness. But while the definition of individual Arabs as “non-white” in the early period reflected a politics of exclusion, the contemporary location of “Arab” in the square of “white” is felt by many Arab Americans to obscure Arab American realities, silencing them through a strategy of containment and rendering them invisible.<sup>30</sup> The inadequacy of the category “white” to account for Arab American experience is reflected in Kaldas’ poem through images of food and embodiment that spill bodily over the square’s demarcation lines. “White?” she queries. “As fava beans stirred green with olive oil/ falafel fried sesame seeds burned black/ baklava and basboosa the aroma browned crisp in the oven/White is not my breasts growing at nine/... not my last menstruation at sixty (168-9). But official categories recuperate this bodily excess, containing it within the bounds of exoticism: the ethnic food aisle in the grocery store, the glass cases displaying mummies. Next to the identification box, which holds only a precise, anonymous X, the speaker writes her name. But her “guttural kha script / twirl[s] into ABC”; her body, its excesses contained, is wound by “lengths of cloth / mummy encased in glass” (169). If figurations of race are modes of scripting the embodied self, whiteness here is written in standardized typeset. Converted into “the exotic,” the speaker is commodified: the poem ends with the sardonic invitation, “taste a color not confined/by the squares” (“Exotic” 169).

Such recognition that Arabs constitute a “color not confined by the squares” underlies the growing search among Arab Americans for categories of identification able to account for their realities. As Edward Said has written, “No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind” (*Culture and Imperialism*, 336). The debate among Arab Americans over how to identify – as Arab, as Middle Eastern, as Asian or North African –comes together with the community’s internal diversity -- religious, national, cultural and ideological-- to underscore the inadequacy of rigid categories of identification. In response, as Abu-Jaber’s metaphor of “Arabian jazz” suggests, Arab Americans are beginning to explore alternative modes of self-representation.

While early Arab Americans sought to claim a space within white American culture through strategies of assimilation and strategic deployment of exoticism, contemporary Arab Americans increasingly seek to affirm their identities without minimizing complexity, and to claim a classification adequate to their experiences. Situated at boundaries delineated by racial and political pressures, Arab Americans seek to challenge what Ruth Frankenberg terms the “color evasiveness” and “power-evasiveness” of paradigms of assimilation and race-neutrality (14). But as Therese Saliba notes, “It is unclear how long we will inhabit this space of ambiguity which often excludes us from both mainstream and marginalized groups. And it is unclear when and if we will enter an age of “post-ethnicity” in which racialized relations will no longer be a considerable political factor in determining representation” (23).<sup>31</sup> These ambiguities inform and delineate cultural production. As Arab American writers probe the contradictions of their identities, they give voice to what Lebanese-American writer

David Williams terms the “double legacy” of Arab Americans, a heritage borne, in Williams’ words, “the way, you might say, a camel carries water” (*Traveling Mercies* 67).

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was first published in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States*, Eds. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (University of Mississippi Press, 2000): 320-337.

<sup>2</sup> On the term “honorary whiteness” see Joseph Massad, “Palestinians and the Limits of Racialized Discourse,” and Soheir Morsy, “Beyond the Honorary ‘White’ Classification of Egyptians: Societal Identity in Historical Context.”

<sup>3</sup> In *Racial Formation in the United States* Richard Omi and Howard Winant use Arabs as their example of groups “whose racial category is ambiguous at present” (162, note 3).

<sup>4</sup> For example, a Syrian merchant in an Oklahoma town was warned by the Ku Klux Klan to “keep away from the town at the risk of economic boycott and his own life,” while the store of another Syrian merchant “was burned down soon after he received a threat by mail ordering him to move away from the town.” See Shadid, “Syria for the Syrians” 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> Ian F. Haney Lopez provides a compelling analysis of these cases in *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*.

<sup>6</sup> See Haney Lopez 5-9 for a discussion of the clash between common knowledge and scientific evidence.

<sup>7</sup> Arab applicants were declared white in 1909 and 1910, non-white in 1913 and 1914, white in 1915, nonwhite in 1942, and white in 1944.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth pointing out that the current conflation between Arab and Muslim operative in U.S. discourse is not recent, but has been present throughout Arab immigration to the U.S., complicated by a conflation between Muslim and Turk with particularly disadvantageous implications for early Arab immigrants from the Ottoman empire.

<sup>9</sup> Nadine Naber terms this conflation the “racialization of religion” (“Arab American In/Visibility” 8)

<sup>10</sup> Although Naff cites the 1929 census this seems to be an error. See also Hitti, who notes that “In the reports of the fourteenth decennial census of 1920, the Syrians were for the first time treated as a separate people” (page 19 note 1).

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in a 1909 case involving an Armenian applicant, the circuit court judge held that the applicant should be granted citizenship because Armenians may readily become westernized and Europeanized, and because “history has shown that Christianity in the near East has generally manifested a sympathy with Europe rather than with Asia as a whole” (In Re Halladjian).

<sup>12</sup> Such racialization of geography and culture, while particularly glaring in the case of Arabs and Muslims, reflected the general tenor of the times. As Omi and Winant point out, in the wake of 19th century political and ideological struggles over the racial classification of Southern Europeans, Irish, and Jews, “Nativism was only effectively curbed by the institutionalization of a racial order that drew the color line *around*, rather than *within*, Europe” (65).

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Mexicans in California were considered “half civilized” because they spoke a romance language, were Christian, had been “Europeanized” through their colonization by Spain, and were racially assimilable because of their “mixed-blood” ancestry (Almaguer 54).

<sup>14</sup> Southern Italian immigrants, considered “tainted” by the “dusk of Saracenic or Berber ancestors showing in their cheeks” (a telling reflection of attitudes toward Middle Eastern peoples) and made to sit with black congregants in church, separated themselves from black Americans as much as possible (Orsi 318). Similarly, Irish immigrants attempted to facilitate their own transformation from “Irish” to “American” by positioning themselves in opposition to blacks (Takaki 151).

<sup>15</sup> However, such “honorary” white status was not always reliable. Soheir Morsy points out that although some Egyptians in the U.S. were exempted from classification as non-white on the basis of being foreign, others were denied housing, told to sit in the back of the bus, and refused service in restaurants, “often after long consultations among waitresses who were audibly debating our racial identity” (184-5).

<sup>16</sup> Nabeel Abraham argues that contemporary anti-Arab discrimination and hate crimes are rooted in three sources: traditional racism; politically-motivated racism, and jingoistic racism. The first, arising when

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Arabs are ethnically visible, is evident throughout the history of Arabs in the U.S. The second, linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict, is ideologically motivated and targets individuals who support Palestinian and other Arab causes. The third arises in the context of international unrest such as hijackings and military conflict, and involves a knee-jerk lashing out at “the enemy.” See his discussion in “Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States.”

<sup>17</sup> See Abraham, “Anti-Arab Racism,” for a detailed account of such incidents.

<sup>18</sup> Press conference with U. S Attorney General Janet Reno, April 20, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Two hundred twenty-two incidents were reported to ADC during the three-day period immediately following the bombing. In one incident, a pregnant Arab American woman lost her baby when her house was attacked by angry mobs. The 1995 Report on Anti-Arab Racism states that the woman “huddled in the bathroom with her two children as angry crowds grew outside, throwing stones and other objects at her house. Believing the loud noises were gunshots and terrified for her children, she began hemorrhaging. Shortly thereafter, her child was stillborn” (Khouri, Ramadan and Wingfield 4).

<sup>20</sup> See ADC Times 19, 5 (August/September 1998): 4.

<sup>21</sup> In an incident reported to ADC, a Palestinian American girl was forbidden from attending her school prom with *either* a black *or* a white date. She was allegedly told by her teacher, “You’re a foreigner. Go with someone who has the same features as you” (ADC mailing, fall 1994.)

<sup>22</sup> For instance, ADC has reported that, “Due to the absence of federal, state or local guidelines requesting census data on Arab Americans, the National Education Association (NEA) does not include Arab Americans in discussions of multiculturalism in school curricula (“The 2000 Census: Will We Count?”).

<sup>23</sup> The category “Arab American” has been proposed by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), while the Arab American Institute (AAI) has lobbied for the category “Middle Eastern.” Other possible modes of classification include identifying West Asian Arabs as Asian-American and North African Arabs as African American. However, while such categorizations have the advantage of fitting Arabs into existing classifications, they privilege geography over culture as the basis for identification, accentuate the invisibility of Arabs as they become subsumed within these larger groups, and risk dividing a community still struggling for unity.

<sup>24</sup> Given the diverse ways in which Arabs identify themselves, there were fears that Arab Americans who wrote in such answers as “Maronite” or “Muslim” would not be tabulated, resulting in an undercount of Arab Americans -- something that virtually all Arab American scholars agree occurred anyway.

<sup>25</sup> See Sharon M. Lee’s discussion of census classifications in “Racial Classifications in the US Census: 1890-1990.”

<sup>26</sup> This framework was first promulgated in a 1977 Office of Management and Budget circular, “Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting” (see Sanjek 109). David Hollinger notes that the issuing of this directive was “the single event most responsible for the lines that separate one bloc from another” (33).

<sup>27</sup> For example, although the category “Asian-American” obscures the linguistic, cultural, historical, and national distinctions between immigrants from different Asian countries, it also makes it possible for immigrants from these diverse countries to take action on issues that affect them *as Asians*, such as, “exclusionary immigration laws, restrictive naturalization laws, labor market segregation, and patterns of ghettoization by a polity and culture that treated all Asians as alike” (Winant 60).

<sup>28</sup> For instance, in preparation for Dow’s rehearing, a bilingual study titled Origin of the Modern Syrian was produced by Kalil Bishara, asserting and documenting the Syrian claim to “whiteness” in an attempt to prove the Caucasian origin of Arabs and hence their suitability for American citizenship. (See Suleiman, “Early Arab-Americans” 44-45.)

<sup>29</sup> Other Arab American writers of the pre-WWII period, such as Salom Rizk and Michael Shadid, similarly invoke the specter of Muslim hostility toward Christians, taking care to distance themselves from cultural elements associated with Islam. See Rizk’s Syrian Yankee (57) and Shadid’s Crusading Doctor (21-22). While not all Syrian-Americans spoke in such negative terms of Islam – the prolific writer Ameen Rihani was a noticeable exception -- the tendency to do so suggests awareness that association with Islam might problematize attempts to claim American identity. Strikingly, the volume The Origin of the Modern Syrian (see note 28), which provided lists of notable Semites, included the Prophet Mohammad only in the Arabic section of the text; the English section omitted the Prophet, in what appears to be a deliberate strategy intended to forestall American anti-Muslim prejudice. (See Suleiman, “Early Arab-Americans” 44-45.)

<sup>30</sup> As Joanna Kadi writes in introduction to Food For Our Grandmothers, “One reason it’s hard to find an accurate name [for Americans and Canadians of Arab, North African and Middle Eastern origin] has to do with our invisibility. It’s tough to name a group when most people aren’t aware the group exists” (xix).

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<sup>31</sup> Despite Arab American lobbying efforts for a separate racial/ethnic category with the federal government, and despite acknowledgement by the Federal Office of Management and Budget that classifying Arab Americans as “white” is problematic, on the 2000 census Arabs and Middle Easterners will still be classified as “white” (Naber, “Arab-American In/Visibility”<sup>12</sup>).

## Reunion

You'd think the dead would come at night:  
shadows on a midnight wind,  
shudders from the heart of mystery.

Instead they crowd in over my morning coffee,  
hover insistently in the steam,  
jostling their competing memories.

I tell them to come back later.  
All those years of longing  
and they think they can show up like creditors?

I have a family to feed, work to do.  
But they are like petulant children  
clamoring for attention.

My mother wants to give me  
the cracked white porcelain angel  
that stood on her dresser for years,

impervious to despair. I tell her *no*,  
but she presses it into my hands.  
While I'm pondering the pursed mouth,

the glue-stained wings, my father  
pulls my t-shirt into a pouch,  
fills it with clods of dry brown earth,

mumbling something about loss,  
remembrance, Palestinian inheritance.  
My uncle is next, holding

a glass of red wine to my lips.

On its surface I see faces  
shimmering as if in a lake:

his wife, safe and whole before the bomb  
that shook the East Jerusalem cobblestones  
all those decades ago,

his sisters before the cholera epidemic,  
his mother with a straight, young back.  
He urges me to drink, but I fling the glass away,

hear it shatter on the tile.  
My elderly aunt, our newest dead,  
comes forward to sweep up the mess,

muttering about the carelessness  
of the young. Ashamed,  
I try to take the broom from her,

but she tells me to drink my coffee,  
leave the dead to their own business.  
When I raise the cup to my lips,

my mouth fills with dregs:  
coarse, bittersweet, earth-dark,  
dense as unclaimed memory.

## Chapter 4

### The Politics of Memory

*Shadows are all a camera saves.  
Meaning's born from memory and faith  
and presence. These faces will be  
passed on, shadowed, illuminated,  
altered by what we name them  
and the current of our own quick flesh.*

--David Williams, *Traveling Mercies* 14

Memory plays a familiar role in the assertion of identity by members of ethnic and minority groups.<sup>1</sup> Family stories typically ground ethnic identification, and the popularized search for "roots" is often articulated as "remembering who you are." In this way, memory functions on both a cultural and a personal level to establish narratives of origin and belonging, as myths of people-hood, like memories of childhood, situate the subject and make agency possible. It is thus no surprise that Arab American literature turns repeatedly to memory to explore, assert, critique, and negotiate ethnic identity. But the role of memory in this literature is not monolithic. The texts explored in this essay--autobiography, fiction and poetry written by Arab immigrants in the early twentieth century, by their descendents, and by more recent Arab immigrants--turn to memory not just to substantiate ethnic assertion and invoke nostalgia, but also to facilitate assimilation, ground feminist critique, and make possible transformative relationships to ethnicity. What David Williams terms "memory as map" (*Far Sides* 19) informs not only literary articulation but also communal identification; and it grounds, too, the possibilities

of transformation.

This diversity of uses suggests that memory, like other modes of knowledge, is mediated and constructed at historicized and politicized junctures. Although Arab American literature resists neat generational categorization, the representation of ethnicity and ethnic memory in individual texts reflects the concerns of particular historical periods. Arab American immigrant autobiographies written in the first half of the century frequently reflect the ideology of assimilation, while texts of second and third generation authors are embedded in the affirmation of ethnicity popularized in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout all these texts, however, a strategic reliance upon essentialized depictions of ethnic identity emerges, suggesting their situatedness within particular discursive contexts, including that of Arab American exigencies: the difficulty of achieving panethnic group articulation, the uneasy political relationship between Arabs and Americans, the general delegitimization of Arab culture within mainstream American contexts.

Such recourse to essentialism, articulated most clearly through biological metaphors of cultural affiliation, often endorses nostalgia for an idealized, patriarchal ethnic past. However, contemporary Arab American writers increasingly critique this static conception of culture, turning to memory to negotiate an ethnic identity that is heterogeneous and engaged across cultural borders. In particular, current writers frequently interrogate the gendered assumptions implicit in essentialist models of ethnicity, articulating an affiliative model of identification in which ethnicity, reconstrued as a transformative engagement with the past, grounds and facilitates action in both present and future.

## **Ethnic Strategies**

Arab American identity is perhaps best understood as a panethnic identity, in which the coherence of group identity among Arab Americans from diverse geographical and religious backgrounds and contexts of migration is predicated upon "both a *common interest* ([a]...need for unity, often political), and a *common identity*, solidified and expressed by an overarching symbol system or 'cultural umbrella' that has the power to appeal across individual ethnic lines."<sup>2</sup> On a political level, Arab American "common interest" typically focuses upon anti-Arab discrimination and violence, stereotypes of Arabs in popular culture, and Middle Eastern events and their repercussions in the United States. On a cultural level, "common identity" invokes the conscious remembrance of Arab culture and history as a heritage relevant to contemporary Arab Americans. Memory grounds both identity and interest: invocation of a communal past and a projected communal future provides the basis for an emotionally resonant and politically coherent "imagined community" (Anderson).

Projects such as Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa's anthology Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry (1988), which seeks to construct and claim an Arab American literary tradition, typically invoke Arab communal legacy through touchstones of cultural memory: Arab contributions to world civilization, the Arab tradition of poetry, family and community ties, remembered ethnic foods, old world scenes of natural beauty. Such delineation often presumes a cultural essence latent within ethnic groups, accessible through and transmitted by personal and communal memory. For instance, Mary Zoghby, in a review of Grape Leaves, describes Arab American authors as being *awakened* to the influence of ethnicity within their creative works, and Lebanese Americans as having their consciousness raised to *recognize* their Arab identity. In such a context, memory

serves to resurrect a forgotten or suppressed cultural essence, identify precursors, and celebrate traditions.

Such “awakenings,” however, suggest that the category “Arab American” refers to an identity still constructing itself. As Mary Layoun has argued, national culture is “not ‘out there’ somewhere waiting to be recognized”; rather, the elements of cultural identity occupy “a critical site of conflict, a literal and metaphorical arena for national definition”(55-56).<sup>3</sup> Attempts to reify an Arab American cultural essence reveal internal contradictions, as any attempt to conflate the experiences of, for instance, third generation Christian Lebanese Americans, exiled Palestinians, and Muslim Yemeni migrants quickly demonstrates. Moreover, the very insistence upon categorizing Arab American literature as ethnic sometimes functions as an assertion of its *American* identity. For instance, Orfalea and Elmusa's comment that “There exist poetry anthologies for virtually every American ethnic group...Until now none has existed for a group whose love of poetry is native and deep: the two million Arab Americans” (xiii) implies that to have achieved the status of an ethnic group with its own poetry anthology is to have become truly “American.”

Such attempts to claim a cultural heritage that also facilitates assimilation into American society recur throughout discussions of Arab American identity, suggesting both the power of cultural inscriptions and their constructed nature. Assumptions about the role of poetry in Arabic culture provide a useful example of the tensions at work here. Depictions of Arab culture typically emphasize its poetic tradition, portraying such legacies as natural, even genetic. For instance, Orfalea and Elmusa argue that Arab Americans have an intrinsic relation to poetry, stemming in part from a transhistorical memory passed down through blood and history to Arabs and Arab Americans alike.

“The great Arab love of poetry [has] not been drained from New World veins,” they write, in a description which lends poetry the validation of nature as well as of history (xiii). Similarly, poet Samuel Hazo<sup>4</sup>, commenting on the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, asserts a naturalizing link between inheritance and culture:

It [a poem by Nye] is a genuine American poem in the sense that...the vision is American. But the sensibility as well as the sense of tradition echo the Arabic proving even that [sic] a generation gap cannot distort or destroy what is finally a matter of the soul and the blood. (54)

Hazo's suggestion that Nye, daughter of a Palestinian father and American mother, is heir to an Arab essence passed down across generations construes cultural memory to be both biological and spiritual, situating Nye in a tradition of Arabic culture by virtue of her poetry and in a poetic tradition by virtue of her Palestinian background.

This insistence upon a naturalized Arab cultural identity echoes, though to different ends, the strategies of Arab American authors before mid-century, whose writing asserted their claim to American identity. In depicting their homelands, authors such as Rev. Abraham Mitrie Rihbany, Gibran Kahlil Gibran, and Salom Rizk invoked as core cultural elements the venerability of Arab civilization, its poetic tradition, and the scriptural legacies of Syria and Lebanon. However, their pronounced use of biblical language and analogy suggests their concern to present themselves in terms to which an American audience would be receptive – a concern which at least partly inspired, as we have already seen, by the threat of exclusion from American citizenship on the basis of race. Despite portraying Arab culture as a heritage of global importance, the *Mahjar* writers, with the notable exception of Ameen Rihani, typically distanced themselves from its Islamic context, in a strategy reflecting not just their personal religious beliefs, but also their wariness of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, their texts

structure memory teleologically, so that depictions of childhood scenes, presented through biblical analogies at once familiar and "exotic" to American readers, in fact serve to substantiate the authors' progress toward Americanization. Thus, in his autobiography A Far Journey (1914), Rihbany depicts his religious and intellectual life as following a gradual but inevitable movement toward the "American" realms of Protestantism and enlightenment: an early encounter with a boy who "knew a great deal about America" is termed "destiny"(114), while his attendance at an American missionary school and subsequent conversion to Protestantism are described as an "awaken[ing]" (140).

Despite their reflection of assimilationist concerns, however, even those texts most concerned with Americanization are multi-layered. The memories which Rihbany invokes to portray the limitations of his Middle Eastern past often substantiate instead the richness of that same past: descriptions of his origins as meager, primitive, and dismal are juxtaposed to enthusiastic depictions of the beauty of the Syrian seasons and the richness of Syrian wedding celebrations. Even Rihbany's dedication to Protestantism proves ambivalent, as the following passage suggests: "So did we ignorantly practice the modes of worship of our remote Oriental ancestors, who poured their gifts to Astarte into the streams of Syria ages before Christianity was born. *And who are you, child of but yesterday, to say it was all empty superstition?*"(93-94; my italics). The distance between Rihbany and his "ignorant" Oriental ancestors quickly diminishes in his implicit invocation of the ancient wisdom of these same ancestors--wisdom to which Americans, as children of "but yesterday," have no access. Such attempts to claim Americanization while simultaneously affirming Arab cultural heritage recur throughout Arab American autobiographies, illustrating the tensions implicit in the negotiation of cultures.

Yet efforts to delineate a unified Arab American ethnicity too often run the risk of

reductionism. Gregory Orfalea's text Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans (1988) provides one example. Orfalea writes in his introduction, "...Arab Americans and their ancestors always seem to be caught standing before flames, staring into the ruins, heartbroken, more or less powerless to help those in them, at best taking their loved ones or just themselves to a new world"(x). While concern over war and political turmoil in the Middle East is a significant part of Arab American discourse, such a depiction threatens to reduce all of Arab history to tragedy, depicting the past as static, pessimistic, and lacking relevance to the present. The book's cover provides a graphic representation of this summation of Arab American identity, demonstrating both the limitations of reified ethnic symbols and the role of stereotypes in marketing. The illustration features an empty, faceless *hatta* (headdress) *abayyah* (robe), and *dishdash* (shirt-gown)-clothing unlikely to be worn regularly in the U.S.-- against a background of the American flag framed by a slightly off-color red, white and blue Arabesque design. Inside the *hatta* a flame burns. The empty headdress is eerily suggestive of a lack of internalized knowledge; the flame, suspended in thin air where a human face should be, seems to have burned away historical and cultural memory as well as future vision. What remains are the trappings of ethnicity with nothing inside but a consuming grief. This is, of course, a market-based cover and as such it depends heavily on stereotypes. Yet while the text does present a more complex view of Arab Americans,<sup>6</sup> the image nonetheless brings into sharp relief the risks of cultural reductionism.

However, while such images, with their elision of Arab American complexity, reinforce the notion of Arabs as a-historical, exotic "others," they also suggest that the work of cultural consolidation may not have progressed far enough to allow the productive interrogation of complexity. As Lisa Lowe argues with reference to Asian

American ethnicity, “the very freedom, in the 1990s, to explore the hybridities concealed beneath the desire of identity is permitted by the context of a strongly articulated essentialist politics”(39). Focus on an essentialized cultural identity--like the use of biological metaphors to assert an intrinsic relation to Arab tradition--points toward an initial, crucial need for cultural consolidation, while also laying the groundwork for the further articulation of cultural differences.

### **Memory and Nostalgia**

Such consolidation is frequently arrived at in Arab American writing through an invocation of the past in which personal and familial memories acquire representative cultural significance. Eugene Paul Nassar’s prose poem Wind of the Land (1979) which has been described as “the closest thing we have to a narrative defining the second-generation Arab-American experience and thus rescuing it from possible oblivion,”<sup>7</sup> turns to autobiography to celebrate and preserve Lebanese folk culture, invoking familiar ethnic markers: the emotional resonance of Arabic, reverence for traditional familial relationships and communal values, nostalgia for Arabic food, poetry viewed as an intrinsically Arab form of expression, a celebration of gardens. His narrative seeks to integrate the memories constituting familial and folk discourse into a wider Lebanese heritage, one which Nassar wishes both to preserve and to make the basis for present day Arab American identity.

This emphasis on memory takes the preservation of familial and ethnic history as constituting identity itself. Indeed, Nassar's depiction of ethnic identity as a familial inheritance posits memory not just as a vehicle of knowledge, but as a virtual bodily link, so intrinsic that the boy in Wind feels “he was becoming them [the men of the older generation]”(16): “The vivid imaginations of [the boy’s] parents, their values and their

humor, flowed into him as the spring flow through the branch or vine... it seemed later, as his mind grew full of symbols, that he knew himself best by remembering it all” (13). Memory here acquires redemptive power: though life in the present is celebrated, it acquires meaning only through the traditional values of the Lebanese past--family, authority, filiality, the home. As the past assumes moral authority over the present, the simplest actions take on mythic stature: observing the kindling of a ritual fire in his father's village, the narrator imagines generations of Lebanese boys lighting that fire; the sound of Lebanese village women singing seems to him to have “been part of the earth’s life for ages and ages” (67). In this poignant depiction, memory holds out hope of escaping not just the alienation of American life, but the passage of time itself.

This opposition of an organic Lebanese sphere to a sterile American present provides a recurring trope in Arab American literature. Vance Bourjaily's "The Fractional Man" in his autobiographical novel Confessions of a Spent Youth (1960) turns upon just this contrast. Upon visiting Kabb Elias, his father’s Lebanese village of origin, the narrator Quincy longs, briefly but intensely, to reclaim the heritage that he has known only indirectly from his Lebanese grandmother. Lebanon here offers the simplicity and strength, the nurturance and community, which Quincy’s American life has failed to provide; it offers, moreover, the foundational memory lacking in his family, which did not “preserve as anecdote or legend” cultural or familial narratives (237). Quincy’s alienation from his ethnic past, his lack of familial memory and his desperate attempt, in chapter after chapter of Confessions, to define himself anew contrasts vividly with the security and timelessness of the Lebanese village which represents his grandmother’s world, and hence his own past made present. But despite his longing to stay in Kabb Elias, the gap between the village and the American world to which Quincy returns is,

like the distance between childhood and adulthood, finally unbridgeable. Because Quincy is unable to establish the relevance of memory to his present identity, as his approach to his Arab identity as “role-playing” suggests (Shakir, "Pretending") memory ultimately becomes nostalgia--poignant, but untranslatable to the present context.

The sense of radical loss informing this text emerges in the poetry of H.S. Hamod as well. In his writing, Hamod, son of an immigrant Lebanese Muslim imam, turns to memory to negotiate his alienation as a Muslim in the American context. In “After the Funeral of Assam Hamady” Hamod describes his youthful embarrassment at having to stop his car in the middle of South Dakota so that his father and grandfather can perform their prayers by the side of the highway. From the perspective of time and age, Hamod views the older men’s faith as representative of a realm of value and meaning to which he has failed to earn access. All of the U.S.'s speed, mobility, and possibility are inadequate here, since they cannot restore his relationship to his father and grandfather, nor provide the spiritual peace these men possessed. As in “Dying with the Wrong Name,” an exploration of the truncation of immigrant names at Ellis Island, memory offers hope of gaining access to an earlier, ethnic realm: a place before loss, where memories of people and events, the resonance of Arabic language and names, all coalesce into a Lebanese reality submerged under the Americanized version of Hamod’s father’s name. But this reality is “unspeakable,” “sealed away/ with the wrong name/ except in this poem” (“Dying” 170).

As elsewhere in Arab American writing, poetry assumes great cultural importance here; like memory, it holds out the hope of reclaiming the legacy of the past, as well as offering generational connection to his father, who also “made up poems” (“Leaves,” 73). But neither poetry nor memory is able to finally alleviate Hamod's sense of the alienation

of American life. In the poem “Moving,” the sense of family cohesion which his father and grandfather were able to take for granted is depicted as dissipating inexorably:

..my children  
move further away like lost  
shipmates crying to me for help...  
...I sometime think about a life...  
in some old country of time that I remember my father and  
grandfather  
talking about...  
a certain amount of a reality  
where at least the whole tribe moved *together*...  
everyone everything stuck together things stayed  
and when they moved  
grandfathers grandmothers fathers  
mothers children grandchildren  
moved together, in the tents, the whole world  
moved in that tent...

(175-6)

Hamod's distance from the “reality” of that earlier world echoes the breach between himself and his children--a gap marked by the difficulty of translating that reality to the “new patterns” of his children's lives. Memory is infused with loss: the poem concludes, grieving, “now / I carry no one in my tent.”

### **(En)Gendering Memory**

The desire of Hamod, Nassar, and other writers to claim the ethnic past as a model for present life, and their insistence upon reclaiming traditional familial structures as redemptive features of ethnicity, offers a poignant but problematic interpretation of ethnicity. The distinction that such writers draw between the “reality” of the past and the diminished present often results in a reification of the past, making transformation of oppressive elements singularly difficult. As Adrienne Rich observes, “The obsession with origins...seems a way of stopping time in its tracks...The continuing spiritual power of an image lives in the interplay between what it reminds us of--what it *brings to mind*--and our own continuing actions in the present”(227). Celebration of and longing for the past

are not, I would argue with Rich, sufficient; nostalgic longing for a return to origins privileges a static conception of identity unamenable to change. Moreover, the metonymic slippage in nostalgic texts between family, community, tradition, ethnicity and the past implicitly affirms patriarchy as an ethnic value. This comment by John Zogby, the former director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), is illustrative: “We Arab-Americans need to know who we are and where we have been in order to understand where we are going.... [W]e must restore the authority and respect of the family, where traditionally each person has had a special role”(9,10). While Zogby's vision of the Arab American family as the repository of tradition and value affirms the need for historical consciousness, his validation of hierarchical authority ignores the oppressive elements of such structures.

One of the staples of nostalgia is the desire for a stable referent--in the family structure, in meaning, in language itself. In nostalgic writing, as Janice Doane and Devon Hodges note, women fulfill the function of this stable referent: nostalgic discourse longs for a world of fixed gender roles, “a past in which women ‘naturally’ function in the home to provide a haven of stability that is linguistic as well as psychic” (14). The embodiment of ethnicity through traditional images of women merges memories of childhood safety, warmth, and comfort--usually symbolized through maternal figures--with longing for the similar comforts of ethnicity: ethnic food, an intimately structured community context, the familial/ethnic language, traditional social roles. Although this emphasis invests the past, ethnicity, and the women who represent these with mythic stature, such mythologization traps women in a static representational structure, within which attempts to alter traditional roles are often taken as attempts to subvert ethnicity itself--an accusation that takes on particular potency when ethnic identity is fragile or

contested.

Wind of the Land provides especially clear examples of ethnicity reified in images of women. Nassar elsewhere describes the Lebanese culture of the immigrant generation as “one that humanizes nature, the universe, and God in terms of the Lebanese family, its garden, and its mountain village. The Father ideally rules the family, but only in the context of the worship of the Mother...all natural phenomena are seen in terms of brothers, sisters, cousins” (“Cultural Discontinuity,”33). This patriarchal vision posits Lebanese culture and the traditional family as a bulwark against the presumed instability of American life. In Wind of the Land, Lebanon, Lebanese women, the narrator’s mother, and the Lebanese American community merge into a “natural” order where hierarchies are honored and filiality is the basis for relationships. Zahleh, the Lebanese village of the narrator’s father, becomes the apotheosis of passionate lover, chaste maiden, and yearning mother, while romantic longing for Lebanon transmutes to nostalgic longing for home and mother. In contrast to the American context, where “The women have strings around the men’s testicles” and “The child punishes the father” (Wind, 24), ethnicity offers the dream of a world defined by traditional familial relationships. As a patriarch declaims at the text's conclusion,

Our bread is in the tales of our grandmother  
and the wisdom from her lips.  
Our wine in the pomegranate cheeks and the  
gentleness of roses in our wives.  
The sanctity of our mothers of the whiteness  
of orange blossoms,  
And our sisters’ strength of the hills and  
streams of Lebanon.

(147)

In such depictions, not only does the family become the measure of all things, but memory affirms the “naturalness” of hierarchical family relations and gender roles.

Such conflation of ethnic longing with nostalgia for a traditional order is hardly unusual. Micaela di Leonardo points out that “ethnic identity in the United States today is popularly assumed to imply an adherence to tradition, and tradition...encodes the ideal of the patriarchal family....A woman, in this ideological frame, is properly ethnic when she provides the nurturing, symbolically laden environment for which ethnic men can take credit”(221). Celebrations of Arab American ethnicity typically point with pride toward the reverence of the mother in Arab culture, a representation which appropriately refutes the pervasive stereotypes of passive, victimized Arab women.<sup>8</sup> But romanticization of ethnic mothers obscures the ways in which oppressive elements of fixed gender roles may be reified into ethnic expectations. D.H. Melhem’s depiction in Rest in Love (1978) of the nurturing but constraining domestic labor of her mother and grandmother provides a useful counterpoint to male nostalgia:

kneading dough, shelling peas, measuring pine nuts ... I bear witness to a daily translation of two women’s lives into pots and pans, the circumscription of kitchen walls...into patterns and patience, interchangeable days carried by movements worn to such precision that hand and object extend each other. How many times does the body yearn beyond clothesline and tar roof? Dough sticks to fingers; clock hands restrain.<sup>9</sup> (17)

While Melhem does invest ethnic foods and figures with symbolic weight, her intimate knowledge of what such symbolism entails for women, in terms both of labor and of foregone alternatives, prevents her from romanticizing their redemptive qualities.

Challenging discursive frameworks to subvert traditional gender roles is particularly difficult when these roles are heavily invested with ethnic or national significance. While these tensions are perhaps most obvious in Palestinian American discourse, where the exigencies of exile and nationalist priorities result in an urgent projection of the home culture onto women,<sup>10</sup> they emerge throughout Arab American

literature. Lebanese Canadian Abla Farhoud's play *The Girls from the Five and Ten* (1985) demonstrates the difficulties immigrant and ethnic women may face in conceptualizing alternative frameworks for identity and memory. Farhoud's play depicts the alienation of two French-speaking Lebanese immigrant sisters, Amira and Kaokab, from Canadian society, their peers, their family, their Lebanese past, and their own futures. Taken out of school by their father to work in the family store, the sisters exist in an isolation poignantly depicted through Kaokab's attempts to articulate into a tape recorder what she cannot express directly to her parents: her desperate need to leave the store, to go back to high school, to find connection and meaning in her life. The recordings offer a counter narrative through which Kaokab seeks to reconstruct memory and possibility: "This is for us," she tells Amira, "so we'll remember when we get older... Maybe someday I'll understand why..." (136). Unable to speak Arabic, since she only knows the "everyday words," Kaokab depends on her sister to translate, but Amira--"the big pitcher that swallowed everything"(153), as she sardonically terms herself late in the play--is unable to use her father's language to disrupt the paternal order: a point which becomes crucially clear when the sisters, having decided to ask for a vacation, realize that they know neither how to say "vacation" in Arabic nor even whether the word exists. Their lack of facility in Arabic distances them from their parents and from the Lebanese immigrant society; their lack of facility in English and their foreignness excludes them from Canadian culture. As Kaokab miserably puts it: "We're all alone" (123).

In such isolation the power of familial discourse is all-encompassing. The story that Farhoud relates is in some ways the typical immigrant narrative, defined by the exigencies of economic struggle, the loneliness of cultural dislocation, the chasm of linguistic barriers. It is, however, a gendered narrative. While Kaokab desperately longs

to return to high school, her brother goes on to college; while the sisters are trapped in the claustrophobic setting of the store, their brother is exempted from working. The gap between the girls and their family is figured through the attenuation of the home language, Arabic, and its failure to represent or mediate the external world of their experience. Though Kaokab struggles to find a means of articulating both past and future, she has neither the literal nor the conceptual language to communicate her despair.

This failure of communication is in part a result of incompatible memories. The father's image of Lebanon is, in the play's narration, nostalgic, patriarchal, and absolute, while the sisters' memories are more ambivalent. Koakab longingly invokes Lebanon as a land of plenitude and sunshine: "In the orchards of my village/There was sun enough for all/...There were oranges aplenty...."(121). But she knows this image is a construct of memory; they didn't, as Amira points out, eat oranges all the time. Koakab's father, on the other hand, views Lebanon uncritically through a film of nostalgia: in Lebanon, Kaokab acidly notes, he thinks that "Everything's so much better...The mountains are higher, the ocean is bluer, the stars brighter, the moon bigger, the fruit juicier, the vegetables fresher.... Heaven on earth, huh? Even the people are nicer; they have a sense of *honor*"(122). The father's vision of Lebanon differs from Kaokab's not so much in his longing for redemptive organicism as in her understanding that this romanticism coexists with a social code often oppressive to women. The sisters' fate is to be married off: as Amira warns, "None of us escape" (140). And marriage, in the stories they recount, is indeed a fate to escape: their examples include a young girl sent from Lebanon to the Yukon with a man twenty years her senior, and an immigrant aunt whose family, fearful of having an unwed daughter, arrange a marriage which leads to her early death. Clearly, to remember the utopian organicism of Lebanon is to remember only part of the story.

Memory finally ruptures the claustrophobia of the sisters' entrapment in the store, facilitating their angry claim to agency. Amira remembers filling the pitcher at the village well and watching it spill over: her recollection of the "woman who could take anything...poverty, misery, anything" but who picked up a butcher knife one day when her husband was about to beat her and said "not ever again" (153) erupts into her own furious determination that she too will tolerate no more. Unwilling to abandon their parents, or to sever their family ties, the sisters claim the only escape they can imagine: they decide to set the store on fire. Significantly, however, in their wild relief at the prospect of freedom they turn to modes of expression grounded in Lebanese culture: dancing as their mother used to when they were little, ululating like Arab women at a wedding. Memory both impells them to drastic action, and resituates them within the cultural and familial context that claims yet marginalizes them. Amira's cry that "when you burn, you have to burn everything" is countered by Kaokab's rush back into the burning store to save her tape-recorder, a gesture which suggests her desperate desire for some connection to the grounds of her selfhood. At the play's conclusion, Kaokab's taped voice emerging from the smoke sets memory and narration against destruction and despair, poignantly delineating her foreclosed struggle to claim a future commensurate with the lyric possibilities of childhood: "When I was little, I ran barefoot on the red earth, I ran barefoot on the red earth, I ran barefoot, I ran and ran and ran..." (158)

Despite the difficulties of imagining alternatives to such foreclosure of possibility, feminist reconstructions of memory and of the past offer some recourse. Elmaz Abinader's autobiographical novel Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey (1991) (based on her dissertation Letters from Home: Stories of Fathers and Sons), draws on diaries, letters, and family history to narrate the Abinader family's emigration from

Lebanon, exploring what romanticized depictions of the Lebanese emigrant past often overlook: war, famine, Ottoman rule, migration and displacement, as well as the exigencies of gender and class oppression. The reconstruction of memory from a multiplicity of gendered subject positions, as evident in Abinader's division of the text into "Stories of Fathers and Sons" and "Stories of Mothers and Daughters," points toward a particular concern with the ways in which gender inflects memory and narration. Although both women and men in these narratives experience fear, starvation, and alienation, the nature as well as the framing of their memories differ. Abinader's father, Jean, recalls thinking that "like the Phoenicians, their ancestors, they would leave Lebanon and return with knowledge and fame" (*Roojme*, 20); like his father, Rachid, he "wanted to come back rich and successful" (12). When his cousin and wife Camille leaves Lebanon as a child, however, after suffering extreme poverty, her mother, Mayme, intent upon getting her daughters out at all costs, speaks "not [of] the future, nor the past" (159). Instead of the Phoenician legacy, Mayme turns to small mementos for their journey's framework: "Here are the things we carry with us... Sheets, towels, bowls, a flowered dress...a memory of songs, a heart full of prayers..." (182). While the narratives of Rachid and Jean, Abinader's grandfather and father, recount adventures on the Amazon and the dangers of life under Ottoman rule, the narratives of Mayme and Camille explore the dailiness of what it means to be left behind when men emigrate. Their relation of the grim struggle for survival bears witness as well to the exigencies of gendered experience: the requirement of silent obedience to men, the necessity of bearing sons, the insistence upon public proof of virginity.

Abinader invests the *roojme* (a pile of rocks extending out from the mountainside in Abdelli) with symbolic weight, depicting it as representative of the Abinader family,

and of her own identity: “What I stood on, this pile of rocks, was my foundation”(5). The result of the joint labor of the Abinader brothers early in the century, the *roojme* represents familial unity and prosperity, its symbolism taking on great poignancy in the ensuing narratives of familial division and impoverishment. In the novel's initial chapter, “The Poetry of Men,” Abinader evocatively describes the *roojme* and the Lebanese village, noting the ways in which Lebanon had stayed unchanged in the thirty six years of her father’s absence. But later chapters document the inevitable gap between memory and present reality--a gap paralleling the distance between Abinader’s American life and the Lebanese experience of her father and previous generations. Memory connects Abinader to family history, but also underscores her distance from both previous generations and her own future: “I am not a foreigner with adventures to tell, and I am not an American," she writes in Letters. "I am one of the children, with the strange name, who cannot choose a culture. I must always live in-between” (11).

The question of memory’s function and sufficiency reverberates throughout Abinader's writing, and through other Arab American texts. Jean recalls his own father insisting, “Remember who you are”; he tells the family stories to his own children, asking, “Is it not enough?” (*Roojme* 27). Though narration offers a means of claiming memory, return to the past is impossible, as even Abinader's father realizes: reclamation of familial memory does not resolve liminality. However, in charting the complexity of memory’s interaction with history, Abinader not only preserves the family stories for their own sake, but also explores the relation of family history to her own agency. In the poem “The Burden of History” she writes, “...And I rise, a gold ring/ pressed into my hand. They gave them to me: the letters,/the diaries, the language, strange and stubborn. All the ones/ who died before my birth are visible to me (Letters, 16). Her assumption of

this “burden of history” construes the past as both a personal and communal legacy, one that not only invests her with the responsibility of remembrance and articulation, but also empowers her own voice. As the poem “Arabic Music” ventures, “soon it is quiet, and I start my own small song” (Letters 180).

### **Writing Across Borders**

The struggle to define a mode of agency capable of responding to the historical and political exigencies of the identity “Arab American” resonates throughout contemporary Arab American literature. In the texts of Lawrence Joseph, Joseph Geha, David Williams, Naomi Shihab Nye, and others, cultural identity is negotiated not within but across boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Writing as an Arab American becomes defined in their work as an accountability to location and an engagement with difference: these authors interrogate the grounds of their cultural location, their relationship to intersecting contexts, and the ways in which the process of transiting boundaries yields possibilities for agency and activism. Memory occupies a crucial role in this process, for it provides the knowledge through which positionality is delineated, articulated, and transformed.

The poetry of Lawrence Joseph maps the complexity of this ground of identification. Emphasizing the impact of historical, social, and political contexts upon individual negotiations of identity, Joseph interrogates cultural and racial tensions, moving beyond a culturally insular celebration of Lebanese culture to an exploration of the racial divisions riving contemporary American culture. The poem “Sand Nigger”(Curriculum Vitae, 27-29) offers a particularly clear example of his efforts at “critiquing...the racial--or ethnic or nationalist--designations or categorizations that exist throughout the American language” (Interview, 2). Situating his evocation of Arab American identity within the racially-fraught Detroit context,

Joseph examines the ways in which cultural and racial definitions divide and delineate American and Arab cultures. The poem begins by invoking the domestic inscription of Lebanon into immigrant households through familiar cultural markers: Lebanese foods, names and places chanted like a litany, familial intimacies. But the terms of their articulation shift, so that ethnicity, far from evoking nostalgia, is reconstituted at the fault lines of racial and intercommunal violence: family quarrels, relatives killed in Lebanon's civil war, the violence and poverty of Detroit. This shift signals both an insistence on exploring the meaning of the past to the present, and a refusal to obscure the complexity of group identification. Mapping Arab American identity at the liminal site between black and white, Lebanese and American contexts, Joseph interrogates the cross-cutting delineations that both situate and exclude Arab Americans. The term "sand nigger," for instance, invokes both the stark racial divisions of American culture and ethnic ambiguity: it thrusts Joseph into the American context while simultaneously relegating him to its fringes. The familiar Arab proverb with which the poem concludes--"against my brother, with my brother against my cousin, with brother and cousin against the stranger"--similarly locates him at a site of shifting and over-determined lines of inclusion and exclusion, this time within Arab culture. (29)

These shifting boundaries are crucial, for as Joseph's writing suggests, the process of border crossing in contemporary Arab American literature frequently emerges as an attempt to articulate an identity in relation not just to the Arab past and the ethnic American present, but to other groups as well. Joseph Geha's collection Through and Through: Toledo Stories (1990) which delineates the difficult transition from Arab to Arab American, also addresses the over-determined relationship between Jews and Arabs. The story "News from Phoenix" begins, "After three years in America, Isaac's mother was still afraid of Jews. Damascus remained fresh in her, the dark evenings

huddled with her sisters, fearful and giggling around the brazier while her uncle told stories" (64). Exploring Sofia's fear of Erwin and Charlotte Klein, the Jewish couple who befriend the immigrant family, the story traces the transformation of old identities and the forging of new relationships and possibilities. By the end of "News from Phoenix" it is clear that the boundaries of family and community have been redrawn to include Erwin and Charlotte. This shift also redefines the possibilities available to the child Isaac, whose later memories will include not just his mother's fear, but also the generosity of Charlotte and Erwin. Turning upon the construction of memories and their implications, the story's conclusion gestures toward what Isaac will remember of these moments, invoking both the bitterness of loss--Erwin's implicit death--and the necessity of change, both of which are symbolized by the bitter *yensoun* [anise tea] to which Isaac realizes he must "accustom himself." (81)

For Naomi Shihab Nye, the process of challenging boundaries provides the focus of most of her artistic projects. Moving between her Palestinian and American heritages, the multiple cultures of the southwest where she resides, and the different countries to which she travels, her poetry explores the markers of cross-cultural complexity. While honoring the specificity of culturally rooted lives, Nye also emphasizes the liberating possibilities of border-crossings; her poems trace the gift of knowing "that there are travelers, that people go places/larger than themselves." (Yellow Glove, 42) As the title poem of her first volume, Different Ways to Pray, suggests, Nye grounds selfhood upon the recognition and articulation of differences. Of note is her depiction of a sense of individual wholeness articulated through internal as well as external complexity. Thus, in the poem "The Whole Self" Nye writes of "the long history of the self/on its journey to becoming to whole self," a journey of perpetual process that acknowledges and makes space for self-division as well as continuity: "*Dance!*

The whole self was a current, a fragile cargo/ a raft someone was paddling through the jungle,/ and I was there, waving, and I would be there at the other end" (Different Ways, 13).

Similarly, the prose poem "Trouble with Spanish" insists on the complex processes through which identities are negotiated, delineating the interpenetration of lives and cultures upon which all of Nye's writing insists. In this poem, the familiarity of language which nonetheless spills out beyond the boundaries of comprehension becomes

the optimist's happy raft floating crazily on these wild waves. It may not save me. But I'm hanging onto it, with my deceptively confident rolling R and my threadbare Arabic, that likes to sneak into Spanish sentences whenever it can, as if, as if, it all went together, these fragments of language, these piecemeal lives (Mint, 15)

Like the familiarity of an almost-known language, memory serves as a raft --buoying Nye up, offering fragments of knowledge that intersect "as if, as if it all went together"--the hesitation of the repeated "as if" marking the gaps which language and memory must cross to forge meaning and narration in the "piecemeal lives" of those who move between diverse languages and cultures.

This complexity of identification both within and across cultural boundaries informs not only the concerns which intersect in Nye's writing and editing, but also her own positioning as a Palestinian American of mixed heritage. In the poem "Blood," Nye offers a nuanced meditation on the notion of cultural "blood inheritance," moving from a lightly humorous consideration of the possibilities of being a "true Arab" offered by her father's folk tales, to a deeply troubled questioning of the implications and responsibilities of this identity. The poem deconstructs the naturalization of an Arab cultural "essence," while simultaneously foregrounding the politicized overdetermination of Palestinian identity. "Years before, a girl knocked,/ wanted to see the Arab" Nye writes. "I said we didn't have one./ After that, my father told me who he was, 'Shihab'--'shooting star'--/a good name, borrowed from the sky."

But such affirmation is neither simple nor unburdened: the poem continues, "Today the headlines clot in my blood./[...]/Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root/ is too big for us." Nye's ability to take her father's "true Arab" identity and "change [it]... to fit the occasion" is juxtaposed to the starkness of inscription into the exigencies of Palestinian history. Written in the context of Phalangist massacres of Palestinians during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and its aftermath, "Blood" forces a hard look at the destructively exclusionary agendas frequently implicit in concepts of "true" identity, while insisting on the inescapable reality of the tragedies burdening Palestinian identity. The poem's concluding plea, imbued with a deep awareness of the ways in which memory informs present action, is at once urgent and despairing: "What does a true Arab do now?"(Yellow Glove, 31)

What, indeed? It is all too easy to become stunned to silence in the face of violence – to succumb to despair. Yet is precisely what Arab American writers in general refuse to do. Lebanese American David Williams provides one example of this insistence on remembering and bearing witness. In his collection Traveling Mercies (1993), Williams' exploration of the movement across boundaries of culture and experience comes together with an unwavering acknowledgement of dislocation and loss, voiced through poetry that insists not only upon the redemptive possibilities of memory and community but also on the necessity of agency. Informed by an understanding of memory that situates the individual within contexts of history and responsibility, Williams posits the past as a legacy to be both claimed and transformed. Ethnic identification here makes possible an exploration of individual relationship to history and to community, but it facilitates a deep sense not just of rootedness within, but also solidarity across, cultural borders. Memory functions in his work not as nostalgia, nor even simply as documentation (though the narration of untold stories is undertaken as a crucial task) but

as a transformative exploration of the relevance of the past to present and future action.

Williams brings to his work a keen consciousness of the fluidity of borders, a passionate awareness of the ways in which his experiences--as a Lebanese American, as an activist on Central American issues, as a teacher of Pueblo children and refugees, as a citizen of his local community--offer points of connection across what might seem to be disparate facets of experience. True to its title, the collection is informed by a sense of compassion, of *mercy*, not bounded in a particular location but traveling across and beyond specific definitions of heritage and identity, in a motion that expands the boundaries of the familiar notions of *family* and *community*. The book's structure echoes this recognition of interconnection: instead of being divided into predictable sections on Lebanon, Central America, and North America, Traveling Mercies unfolds into a complex negotiation between the tonalities of memory and the imperatives of history. Thus, poems of personal memory become meditations on communal history, firmly situated in the natural world, while poems of historical testimony are distilled through an acute consciousness of individual experience.

Although actively claiming connection to elements of Lebanese culture--its ancient history, its community and family ties, its capacity for "ecstatic" expression (Interview)--Williams demonstrates a clear acknowledgement of the oppressive as well as enriching cultural elements of this culture. In "My Grandmother and the *Dirbakeh*" (6-7), a man plays the *dirbakeh*--a traditionally male activity--while the grandmother's creative energies are confined to domestic labor. But the poem concludes with a gesture toward the transformative potential of memory. The speaker imagines his grandmother playing the drum in private, inspired by the memory of another woman who opposed tradition by preparing a waterpipe (usually smoked by men) for herself "like a tower from which to

praise God,/balance the coals, draw the smoke through the well,/taste it, blow it out, and laugh" (7). Although Williams can only imagine his grandmother playing the *dirbakeh* when alone, this imaginative gesture stands as a gesture of resistance to the gendered legacies of oppression. Such poems demonstrate a consistent faith in the possibility of a progressive future grounded in transformed legacies of the past. "Only the spirit never tires," he insists. "Try to feed off its blood/and your jaws lock, bone against bone./ But surrender it your pulse/ and generations link hands/ in the dance and stamp the earth/to wake the dead." (6)

Throughout Traveling Mercies, memory offers what "In Memory," a poem mourning the civil war in Lebanon, terms "a crazy faith" (43). Though seemingly ineffectual against the enormity of suffering, memory reaches back across the radical disjunction of war with a desperate potency, reflecting a faith as sure as that of people who tie bits of sick people's clothing to trees at mountain shrines in hopes of a cure:

But this is a strip of story  
tied to a tree. I'm telling you someone  
still remembers where the old springs are  
and can lay down stones to guide a runnel  
that will link the terraced crops.

No, listen, this is a crazy faith  
in the way rain slips between paving stones  
and finds crevices in rocks,  
and reaches a grotto as clear, cool drops  
a woman with steady eyes  
touches for a blessing to her breasts

(43)

"Crazy" or not, this belief in the tenacity of human spirit and memory offers sustenance throughout the recurring confrontations with "the chaos of grief" (66) which Traveling Mercies documents. It serves not just as a touchstone, but as bedrock – memory of a humanism forgotten during the war, of cultural and natural legacies.

Memory emerges not as a master narrative, however, but as fragments to be connected and understood through moments of clarity and vision. In “A Tree by the Water/Saltatory Process,” the speaker “work[s] to learn” his father’s history (13), memory’s saltatory process--a movement proceeding by leaps, like dancing--leading not to a straightforward transcription of history, but to a transformative engagement with the past. The facts upon which history relies tell only part of the story, and not always the most important part; rather, it is the personal engagement of memory that articulates the connections that yield meaning. Invoked as a kind of inheritance--though with none of the determinism such metaphors are capable of--memory offers the possibility of continuity despite historical and personal devastations: "The body keeps faith with something/ even stripping its own nerves./ A gesture, a glance, is passed on./Blue shadows of Lebanese cedars/ still move us over here,/ currents of a distant sea/ that take up what nerves/ can no longer bear."(15) Generating moments of coalescence, memory brings into focus the difficult histories within which subjectivity is embedded. “So much goes along with us/ on the border of vision," the poem concludes, "'street arabs,'/ orphans when we have no names/to bring them before our eyes.” (16)

Yet despite the difficulty of naming and remembrance suggested here, confrontation with the legacy of grief and silencing is presented as facilitating both community and agency. Indeed, the capacity for memory, like the “breath” (a word whose Arabic translation also means “spirit” or “soul”) that reverberates throughout these poems, situates people in relationship to communal and intercultural contexts as well as to individual agency. Thus, in the collection's opening poem, "Breath," Williams writes,

The people I come from were thrown away  
as if they were nothing...  
The stunned drone of grief becomes the fierce,  
tender undertone that bears up the world...

I'm thirsty for words to join that song --  
cupped hands at the spring, a cup of  
rain passed hand to hand, rain pooled  
on stone, a living jewel, a clear  
lens trembling with our breath.

(5)

While “the people I come from” are Williams’ Lebanese forbears, described in other poems as surviving blockade, Ottoman rule, famine, emigration, poverty, and civil war, the “undertone” of transformed grief extends in Traveling Mercies to include other people “thrown away” by history as well: Central American refugees, Native Americans, poor people everywhere. In these poems ethnicity is situated in a global context, voiced through affiliation, activism, and cultural interconnections.

Contemporary Arab American writing in general suggests that the future articulation of Arab American identity lies in precisely this kind of engagement across borders. The intercultural connections that emerge in the work of Williams, Nye, and others suggest that ethnicity cannot be understood as a singular cultural essence invoked through nostalgia, but must be explored at sites of multiple border crossings, where exclusionary divisions between Arab and American, Old World and New World, male and female, enemy and friend, self and other, give way to a far more fluid, tentative, and potentially transformative interaction. If, as Lisa Lowe argues, “the articulation of differences dialectically depends upon a socially constructed and practiced notion of identity” (39), Arab Americans, who have only in recent decades been able to sediment a “constructed and practiced...identity,” may yet need to continue the process of cultural validation and consolidation. Recent literature, however, suggests that this consolidation may – and perhaps should -- occur simultaneously with the articulation of heterogeneity and the interrogation of difference, establishing diverse and complex connections across borders. As Williams suggests, “there are different ways to tell the story” (Interview). Or

as Nye writes in the poem “Telling the Story” (Yellow Glove 44), a poem that explores the gestures through which people interpret their lives,

There should be an answer,  
and it should  
change.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter was first published as “Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory” in Memory and Cultural Politics: New Essays in American Ethnic Literatures, edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph Skerrett, and Robert E. Hogan (Northeastern University Press, 1996), 266-290.

<sup>2</sup> I take this definition of panethnicity from Laurie Kay Sommers' “Inventing Latinismo,” 35.

<sup>3</sup> The various ways in which Arab Americans have been identified during this century offer a useful example of the instabilities of identification. Early Arabic-speaking immigrants from the province of Greater Syria, then under Ottoman rule, were termed “Turks from Asia” or “Other Asians” on official records until 1920, after which the term “Syrian” was officially adopted. The creation of the independent state of Lebanon in 1945 provoked a debate about nomenclature among immigrants, and “Lebanese” identity gained currency. The panethnic term “Arab American” is relatively recent, and gained particular force with the emergence of national Arab American organizations such as AAUG and ADC. As Chapter 3 showed, the racial identification of Arabs Americans throughout this century reflects similar contestation.

<sup>4</sup> Hazo is the author of more than 40 volumes of poetry, fiction and essays. Founder and director of the International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he is McAnulty Distinguished Professor of English Emiritus at Duquesne University, and has received twelve honorary doctorates.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Chapter 3, p. 90. Clearly, prejudice against Muslims could have significant consequences: a Yemeni immigrant denied citizenship in 1942 was rejected in part on the grounds that as a Muslim he could not be assimilated into American culture. See Massad's discussion of this case in “Palestinians and the Limits of Racialized Discourse” 108-109.

<sup>6</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Shakir, “Starting Anew” 27. With the publication of more recent Arab American texts, this description has arguably been outdated.

<sup>8</sup> Shakir discusses the ways in which Arab American literature refutes Orientalist stereotypes while mythologizing Arab women in the process. See her “Mother’s Milk: Women in Arab-American Autobiography.”

<sup>9</sup> Strikingly, such domestic constraint was something that had not necessarily been the case for earlier Arab women immigrants to the U.S., who typically worked as peddlers, in family stores or in other venues. Historian Alixa Naff argues that between “75 and 80 percent of the women peddled during the pioneer period” –i.e. 1880s-1910 (Becoming American 178). In a 1911 article “Syrians in the United States,” Louise Houghton describes what Akram Fouad Khater terms “the misguided attempts of U.S. social workers to induce ‘Syrian’ women to abandon peddling for more “honorable and lady-like” pursuits” (Khater 83). Houghton asks, rhetorically, “why should she [an immigrant] give up the open air, the broad sky, the song of the birds, the smile of flowers, the right to work and rest at her own pleasure to immure herself within four noisy walls and be subject to the strict regime of the clock?” (quoted in Khater 83). The echoed invocation of the restriction of clock hands in Melhem’s piece is striking.

<sup>10</sup> Louise Cainkar’s sociological discussion of the intertwining of memory, gender and ethnicity in Palestinian American communities substantiates the concrete ways in which Palestinian women in the United States live out the symbolism and labor of cultural maintenance. Cainkar notes that the inscription of Palestinian women in the United States within traditional roles is usually only challenged through political activity on behalf of Palestine. Her study provides a useful context within which to read texts such as Palestinian American Hala Jabbour’s novel A Woman of Nazareth, which situates its critique of Arab gender roles within a didactic explication of the Palestinian struggle, embedding the possibilities for feminist action within the crucial necessity of political action.

## Cadence

The audience watches curiously  
as the Arab-American woman steps up  
to the podium. Light hair and skin,  
unaccented English...they thought  
she'd be more – you know -- *exotic*.

Or: the audience waits attentively  
as the Arab-American woman steps up  
to the podium. She is cousin, compatriot,  
fellow-traveler: Arab resonance  
in a place far from home.

The Arab-American woman hesitates.  
She's weary of living on only one side  
of the hyphen. Her poems aren't just translations.  
But if she blinks, someone always cries out,  
*Look at those Arab eyes!*

She longs to walk into the forest empty handed,  
climb up a mountain and down again,  
bearing no more than what any person  
needs to live. She dreams of shouting from  
a high place, her voice cascading down

wild rivers. Already she can hear the questions:  
“Do Arab women do things like that?”  
And the protests: “We have so many problems!  
-- our identity to defend, our cultures under siege.  
We can't waste time admiring trees!”

The Arab-American woman knows who she is,  
and it's not what you think. She's authentic

in jeans or in an embroidered dress.  
When she walks up a mountain, her identity  
goes up with her and comes back down again.

Besides, she's learned a secret.  
Two cultures can be lighter than one  
if the space between them is fluid,  
like wind, or light between two open hands,  
or the future, which knows how to change.

She's standing at the podium, waiting.  
She wants to read a poem about climbing  
a mountain. It's the song of what travelers  
take with them, leave behind, transform.  
From stillness, words ripple: clear cadence.

## Chapter 5

### Locations, Coalitions and Cultural Negotiations

*Windblown seeds can grow into a windbreak.*

*--David Williams, Far Sides of the Only World 10*

This chapter<sup>1</sup> examines the complex location of Arab Americans within the American multicultural. Ethnicity has frequently been discussed with reference to cultural pluralism, a theoretical model that emphasizes relatively stable boundaries among groups. Although this theoretical framework has been increasingly called into question, implicit models of cultural pluralism still inform discussions of American multiculturalism. As contemporary Arab-American writing suggests, however, ethnicity is articulated not only within but also across boundaries of group identity. Despite the pressures of the post 9-11 decade, and the resulting consolidation of an Arab American identity within discrete boundaries, Arab Americans have continued to critique cultural insularity and to affirm a stance emphasizing connections with others. This chapter interrogates the relevance of theoretical frameworks of ethnicity to the experience of Arab Americans, exploring in particular the writing of Palestinian American Naomi Shihab Nye and Lebanese American David Williams. Nye and Williams provide in their work early articulation of the ethnic border crossing that continues at the present time, despite the substantial impact of events of the past

decade and the pressures toward ethnic consolidation. Their work suggests the importance of situating Arab American issues in relation not only to group identity and concerns, but also to the global multicultural.

### **Theoretical Negotiations**

Discussions of ethnicity have typically been situated within paradigms of either assimilation or cultural pluralism -- interpretive frameworks that reflect, respectively, the conformist pressures exerted on immigrants to the United States during earlier periods, and the later emphasis upon celebrating cultural diversity. Central to cultural pluralism is ethnic assertion, or what Charles Taylor terms “the politics of recognition”-- the quest for public affirmation of group identity for the purpose of cultural survival. Such assertion is of particular importance to Arab Americans, who have historically been rendered invisible in the American context by their relatively small numbers, by their ambiguous location within American racial and ethnic categories, and by their tenuous status within American political and cultural contexts. Excluded from American citizenship at various times on the basis of being “Asian” or “non-white,” at the present time Arab Americans are officially classified as white. But this classification, while seeming to grant inclusion in mainstream American society, is ambiguous. Arab-American “whiteness” is at best a merely “honorary” status,<sup>2</sup> one readily stripped away at moments of crisis.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, classification as “white” means that Arab American experiences of racism and discrimination often go unredressed on the basis that “white” people cannot suffer racism. Such contradictions have significant implications for Arab Americans as they attempt to articulate a viable identity within the American context.

Earlier Arab immigrants, situated within a pre-WWII context that strongly emphasized assimilation, were by most accounts fairly successful in their efforts at

assimilating into the American context. Indeed, historian Alixa Naff has stated that were it not for renewed Arab immigration in the postwar period, Arab Americans might have “assimilated themselves out of existence” (Becoming American 330). At the present time, however, Arab Americans face rising, rather than diminishing, forces of hostility, violence and discrimination. In contrast to the earlier Arab immigrant population, comprised largely of Christians from Mount Lebanon, the present-day Arab-American community is far from homogeneous. It includes people of many different national origins and religions; recent immigrants and assimilated descendants of earlier immigrants; dark-skinned and light-skinned individuals; people who speak no Arabic, those who speak no English, and those whose dialects are unintelligible to each other; and children of mixed marriages whose hybrid identities locate them at the margins of both “Arab” and “American” identity. This increasingly diverse population often finds itself negotiating a political and cultural context that demonizes Arab and Muslim culture while often implicitly excluding Arab Americans from perceptions of “American” identity.

A study carried out in 1981 documented a sobering range of negative attitudes of Americans toward Arabs. A large proportion of respondents in the study held Arabs to be “‘barbaric, cruel’ (44%), ‘treacherous, cunning’ (49%), ‘mistreat women’ (51%), ‘warlike, bloodthirsty’ (50%)”; similarly, respondents viewed “‘most’ or ‘all’ Arabs [to be] ‘anti-Christian’ (40%) [and/or] ‘anti-Semitic’ (40%)” (Slade 147). Moreover, the study showed that the term “Arab” elicited more hostility than did individual Arab identities such as Lebanese, Egyptian, Saudi, or Palestinian. Such negative perceptions have persisted throughout decades, flaring at times of heightened tension. As Susan Akram and Kevin R. Johnson note,

The demonization of Arabs and Muslims in the United States, accompanied by harsh legal measures directed at them, began

well before the tragedy of September 11, 2001. It can be traced to popular stereotypes, years of mythmaking by film and media, racism during times of national crisis, and a campaign to build political support for US foreign policy in the Middle East. Since at least the 1970s, US laws and policies have been founded on the assumption that Arab and Muslim noncitizens are potential terrorists and have target this group for special treatment under the law. The post-September 11 targeting of Muslims and Arabs is simply the latest chapter in this history. (10)

Significantly, as Nabeel Abraham notes, not only does “anti-Arab racism, like other types of racism, [permeate] mainstream cultural and political institutions,” but in addition, “unlike other forms of racism, anti-Arab racism is often tolerated by mainstream society.” Abraham cites the case of a school newspaper that ran an advertisement for a roommate specifying ‘No Arabs.’ “One need only imagine the public outcry had a similar notice read ‘No Blacks,’ or ‘No Jews,’” comments Abraham, “to appreciate the level of complicity on the part of the school paper in this bit of racism” (190).

Moreover, as Akram and Johnson point out, “Because of the lack of differentiation between different types of Arabs and Muslims, terrorist acts by small groups of Arabs and Muslims often have been followed by generalized hostility toward entire communities of Arabs and Muslims in the United States” (17-18). Wayne Baker and Andrew Shyrock similarly note that, “Arab and Muslim Americans live in a contested zone of overlap between forms of otherness that, for much of American history, have been considered especially problematic and, at times, threatening” (14). The anti-Arab, anti-Muslim hostility that spiked during the 1980s (Abraham 161) and spiraled during periods of political tension such as the first Gulf War and the Oklahoma City bombing peaked after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Moreover, the targeting of Arab Americans as the “enemy within,” has become enshrined in legal discrimination against U.S. Arabs and Muslims via “the creation of

new legislation, regulations, data banks and technologies that potentially affect every citizen and noncitizen” (Hagopian, “Preface,” Civil Rights in Peril x), in particular the Patriot Act. What Nadine Naber describes as the intersection of “cultural racism” and “nation-based racism” (Naber, “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming!” 279) interpellates Arabs as internal “enemies” within the discourse of the US “war on terror” and as racialized subjects within the U.S. multicultural.

Contemporary efforts at asserting Arab-American ethnic identity are grounded in this intertwined history of assimilationist forces, contemporary hostility and unclear racial status. In response to various exclusionary pressures, Arab Americans increasingly sought to assert their ethnicity on both a political and a cultural level. The establishment of national Arab American organizations (eg the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee -ADC, Association of Arab-American University Graduates –AAUG, Arab American Institute- AAI) sought to consolidate Arab American identity on a political level and make it both visible and viable. The growing body of scholarship on Arab Americans published in scholarly and literary anthologies, as well as the growing body of literary texts and the growth, too, of Arab American cultural production in other arenas, such as drama and film, has helped to assert an Arab American cultural identity.<sup>4</sup> The establishment of the Arab American National Museum in particular established Arab Americans as a nationally visible group.

Such ethnic assertion reflects an important shift away from earlier generations' attempts to deny or hide their Arab identity. However, emphasis on ethnic affirmation is not unproblematic. Celebrations of Arab-American identity have at times been predicated on an implicit marginalization of individuals who do not fit into community norms (for instance, gays and lesbians). A focus on ethnic celebration

may distract attention from problems within the Arab-American community (examples include urban poverty, deteriorating family and social structures, domestic violence). And, although Arab Americans are highly cognizant of the politicized context situating their attempts at ethnic assertion, a focus on cultural pride may gloss over concerns such as ethnically- and religiously-motivated anti-Arab violence, employment discrimination, targeting by law-enforcement agents and airlines, and exclusion from resources aimed at improving minority educational, economic, social and political conditions.

At the same time, the tenuous location of Arab Americans within American political, cultural and racial frameworks complicates efforts at organizing around a clearly-identified minority status. This is evident in the internal debate within Arab-American communities over whether or not to lobby for official minority status as Arab American. The debate has largely turned upon the choice between a) claiming ethnic (and sometimes racial) distinctiveness as Arab Americans, and using this identity as a basis for activism, or b) emphasizing the formal classification of Arabs as “white” and seeking to make inclusion in mainstream American culture a matter of fact, not just nomenclature. The debate points toward a split in the Arab-American community between those who wish to safeguard whatever privileges Arab Americans possess as nominal “white” people, and those who feel that Arab Americans have both more to gain and more to contribute by identifying as (and with) people of color. The tension between inclusion and exclusion that results hinders efforts to organize Arab Americans on a national level, and complicates efforts at coalition-building between Arab Americans and other ethnic and racial groups.

The narration of Arab-American history in both popular and scholarly contexts has historically been informed by this tension between inclusion and

exclusion. Consider, for instance, the 1994 collection of essays The Development of Arab-American Identity. This collection begins by situating Arab-Americans in relationship to white immigrant groups of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and implicitly traces a trajectory in Arab-American history from assimilation through acculturation, awareness and ethnic assertion. However, the collection also demonstrates the ways in which this transition from assimilation to cultural pride is complicated by forces of politicization, racism and violence. The concluding essay by Nabeel Abraham, “Anti-Arab Racism and violence in the United States,” documents anti-Arab racism and violence in the contemporary American context. Both the content of the essay and its placement implicitly disrupt the smooth flow from assimilation to ethnic rejuvenation, forcing readers to shift from a framework of assimilation to one of confrontation, and to grapple with the sometimes violent implications of exclusion and difference. Documenting incidents of assault, murder, arson, bombings, vandalism, threats, harassment, and discrimination against Arab Americans, Abraham demonstrates the extent to which “anti-Arab racism continues to lie just beneath the surface of society.” This hostility surfaces, Abraham states, in “ideologically motivated violence” against Arab Americans by Jewish extremist groups (180), in anti-Arab xenophobia manifested through “locally inspired hostility and violence toward “ethnically visible” Arab Americans, Muslims and Middle Easterners and their institutions” (188), and in “jingoistic racism,” which Abraham describes as a “curious blend of knee-jerk patriotism and homegrown white racism toward non-European, non-Christian dark skinned peoples” (193). Such incidents make clear that, in contrast to white ethnic Americans, who enjoy what Mary Waters has called “ethnic options”-- the choice to affiliate with or distance oneself from one's

ethnic identity at will -- Arab Americans experience their identity not as a choice but as a fact from which they cannot escape.<sup>5</sup>

Central to the workings of ethnicity is the concept of boundary mechanisms. As Frederik Barth observed in the 1969 introduction to his pivotal Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, it is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses”(15). In their celebration of diversity, proponents of cultural pluralism tend to privilege relatively stable boundaries between groups, emphasizing internal group affirmation, cultural specificity and the distinctiveness of ethnic groups. In so doing, they privilege relatively stable boundaries between groups. But if it is at the site of the boundary that ethnic delineation occurs, it is also here that ethnic transformation and ethnic interaction take place. The emphasis on boundary maintenance implicit to cultural assertion tends to de-emphasize the corresponding process of cross-ethnic connections and coalition-building that also occurs at the site of the boundary, where groups both police their distinctiveness and come into contact with each other.

While the experience of exclusion and discrimination experienced by groups of color, as well as by more ambiguously located groups such as Arab Americans, frequently elicits a reactive focus on ethnic assertion and boundary maintenance, such experiences may also provide the basis for coalitions between similarly marginalized groups. Consider, for instance, the phenomenon of racism. In a discussion of the stereotyping of Arabs, Ronald Stockton argues that racism has less to do with the actual group being targeted than with the process of maintaining boundaries between “us” and “them.” Contemporary stereotypes of Arabs, he asserts, are not specific to Arabs. Rather, they are based upon ethnic archetypes repeated in different contexts with different groups. For instance, “an exceptional proportion of all hostile or

derogatory images targeted at Arabs are derived from or are parallel to classical images of Blacks and Jews, modified to fit contemporary circumstances”(121). Thus, for Stockton, “Images of Arabs cannot be seen in isolation, but are primarily derivative, rooted in a core of hostile archetypes that our culture applies to those with whom it clashes. When conflict or tension emerges they can be conjured up and adapted to new situations” (120).

As Stockton’s discussion suggests, ethnic affirmation requires not just an assertion of group identity, but also a consideration of the broader implications of cultural identities within a multicultural, transnational context: an awareness of how issues affect and unite people across the divides of ethnicity. Groups such as Arab-Americans, who have historically had little visibility of their own, and hence little power-- and who have had since 9/11 experienced hypervisibility, but arguably no greater power -- stand to benefit from recognizing such commonalities and forming coalitions with others around issues of common cause. The importance of such coalitions to Arab-Americans was made clear during the 1991 Gulf War, when Japanese American groups, Jewish American groups and Arab American groups took joint action in response to infringements on the civil rights of Arab Americans. The post 9/11 period has similarly seen such coalition building (Cainkar 8). Such coalitions make it possible to bridge the insularity of identity politics without diminishing ethnic affirmation or the specificity of ethnic concerns.

The need to interrogate multiculturalism's emphasis on ethnic insularity has been voiced by critics on both the right and the left. Although some commentators view multiculturalism and ethnicity as implicitly threatening to a presumed American “unity”(as does Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. in his The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society) other critics of multiculturalism speak from a

position receptive to ethnic and racial realities, even as they seek a median space between ethnic particularity and a more unified common ground. David Hollinger articulates one such view in Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism. Calling for a movement beyond multiculturalism as it is currently deployed, Hollinger makes a case for a “postethnic” perspective that would build upon, but not be limited by, ethnic identification, and that would infuse the emphasis on roots with a “critical renewal of cosmopolitanism”(5).

In Hollinger’s postethnic America, the affiliative nature of identities would be emphasized over the prescribed, “ethno-racial groups” would be recognized as constructed rather than biological categories, and ethnic identity would be treated “as a question rather than a given” (106). The current conflation between race and ethnicity, argues Hollinger, is a result of the extent to which our current classifications depend upon classical race thinking even as they seek to escape that legacy. This conflation brings to a point of contradiction “two valuable impulses in contemporary America: the impulse to protect historically disadvantaged populations from the effects of past and continuing discrimination, and the impulse to affirm the variety of cultures that now flourish within the United States” (Hollinger 49).<sup>6</sup> Calling for a more precise distinction between races, which he defines as “culture free” categories that are not “real” but that provide a necessary political tool for affirmative action, and cultures, which he defines as spheres of voluntary affiliation, Hollinger proposes that “ethno-racial affiliations” be viewed like religious affiliations, in which individuals possess “the right of exit, and also the dynamics of entry” into cultural spheres. By pursuing this parallel, Hollinger argues, educational institutions would no longer need to fulfill the “need for cultural self-validation on the part of ethno-racial groups,” while affirmative action programs could “continue to occupy the

political space that was theirs alone before culture began to take over the ethno-racial pentagon” (121-129).

Hollinger’s understanding of ethnicity as something to be negotiated rather than simply asserted, and his emphasis on flexibility and choice within a framework of necessary commitments, offers a possible point of entry into the problem of negotiating the claims of identity and community. His insistence that we ask not only “How wide the circle of the we?” but also “What identifies the we?” and “How is the authority to set its boundaries distributed?”(106) usefully shifts attention away from the concept of an essential core identity toward the boundaries at which identities are defined and redefined, bringing a useful perspective to what are frequently ambiguous discussions of race and ethnicity.

But despite its theoretical promise, Hollinger’s “postethnic” framework does not adequately account for the complexity of Arab-American identity and experience. For instance, Hollinger attempts to “symbolically cut down to size the whites who would otherwise continue to be anomalously unhistoricized” by defining “white” as “European” (31). But this definition explicitly excludes Arabs and Arab Americans, despite their official governmental categorization as whites. As non-Europeans racially included in “white” America but culturally excluded from this category,<sup>7</sup> Arab Americans are relegated to an undefined space. Similarly, the distinction between “culture” and “race” fails to account for the extent to which cultural identities such as those of Arab Americans may elicit the same kind of discrimination as racial identities. As a result, Arab Americans are once again pushed to the margins of available definitions.

Part of the problem lies in the reliance on liberal individualism for an understanding of identity. “A postethnic perspective challenges the right of one’s

grandfather or grandmother to determine primary identity,” Hollinger asserts.<sup>8</sup> “Individuals should be allowed to affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to an extent that they choose, while affiliating with whatever nondescent communities are available and appealing to them” (116). But while ethnic identity may be a matter of individual choice for some European ethnic groups, whose place in American society is at this point in time unquestioned, for Arab Americans -- still subject to identity-based discrimination as well to repercussions from political events in the Middle East -- ethnicity cannot be understood in isolation from factors affecting the group at large.<sup>9</sup>

More applicable to the Arab-American experience are theorizations of ethnicity and cultural pluralism that seek to grapple with power relations as well as cultural dynamics, and that negotiate ethnic boundaries on the level not just of the individual but also of the group. Two examples include Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s discussion of multiculturalism and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s discussion of ethnic coalitions. In Unthinking Eurocentrism, Shohat and Stam critique the cultural focus of liberal pluralism, seeking to move multiculturalism away from essentialist assumptions about identity toward “a radical critique of power relations,” and to turn it “into a rallying cry for a more substantive and reciprocal intercommunalism.” Their discussion emphasizes “ethnic relationality and community answerability” over issues of “blood” heritage, assuming that the basis for both identity and relationships is affiliation rather than kinship. At the heart of this concept of polycentric multiculturalism are identifications that are “multiple, unstable, historically situated, the products of ongoing differentiation and polymorphous identifications.” Within this framework, identity serves as a marker not simply of who one is, but of what one does with that information. Similarly, group identities “open the way for informed

affiliation on the basis of shared social desires and identification” and for “cultural exchange...between permeable, changing individuals and communities” (Shohat and Stam 47-49).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s discussion similarly emphasizes the process of building coalitions across ethnic boundaries in the context of shared struggle. She calls for

an 'imagined community' of third world oppositional struggles. 'Imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of the nation, calls 'horizontal comradeship.' (4)

This concept of “horizontal comradeship” turns to “political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance”: rather than being based on ethnicity, race, sex or class, group identity and action are grounded upon the implications of such delineations – “the political links we choose to make among and between struggles” (Mohanty 4). It is through such linkages, Mohanty asserts, that issues of racism, marginality, and exclusion can be challenged. Links across ethnic lines thus become ways both of affirming marginalized identities and of building coalitions between individuals and groups.

The question of how to establish connections and coalitions across ethnic boundaries is of increasing importance within Arab-American discourse. Given the marginalization of Arab Americans within American culture, and the on-going reality of anti-Arab discrimination and violence, the need to focus on protecting and strengthening Arab Americans as a group remains strong. However, it is also increasingly clear that ethnic identity cannot be constructed in isolation. On an

ideological level, the insularity that arises from a singular focus on Arab-American issues may result in an obfuscation of the principles of justice and equity that underlie Arab-American struggles, leading to a lack of solidarity with other groups.<sup>10</sup> On a pragmatic level, the anomalous position of Arab Americans within American racial categories means that Arab Americans may be unable to elicit responses to their concerns without affiliating with other minority groups. For instance, despite the problems inherent in the inclusion of Arab-Americans under the rubric of “Asian-American” (in the case of Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and other west Asians) or “African American” (in the case of Egyptians and other North Africans), such classification may, in its assertion of commonalities between Arab-Americans and other groups of color, and in its deployment of pan-ethnic categories, provide one way to gain a space for Arab-Americans within American frameworks of identity.

### **Literary Negotiations**

Contemporary Arab-American literature increasingly reflects this awareness of the need to forge connections beyond the insular boundaries of group identity. In contrast to earlier Arab-American writers, contemporary writers increasingly seek to articulate identity not only within but also across ethnic lines, from a stance of “reciprocal intercommunalism” (Shohat and Stam 47). Of particular note are Naomi Shihab Nye and David Williams, two writers whose work makes clear that Arab-American identity is not an end goal to be celebrated, but rather a starting point from which to redefine and resituate concepts of identity, relationship and community.<sup>11</sup> Instead of focusing on “Arab-American” themes to the exclusion of other concerns, Nye and Williams write about a variety of issues, peoples and locales: Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, South Asians, Lebanese, Palestinians; immigrants, laborers, family members; North and South America, Asia and the Middle East;

urban, village and wilderness contexts; war and poverty, resilience and joy. Their poetry and prose demonstrate the extent to which ethnicity may provide a foundation for new kinds of relationships across cultural divides.

### Naomi Shihab Nye

Naomi Shihab Nye is Palestinian American poet whose work has received much attention within both the United States and the Arab world. Daughter of a Palestinian Muslim father and of a European-American, Christian mother, Nye is often described as one of the most widely-known Arab-American writers: she is the author of twelve books of poetry, four books of prose, two novels for young adults, several children's picture books, and a number of edited collections of poetry; she has been featured on American national television programs such as Bill Moyers' "Language of Life" and the corresponding volume The Language of Life; and she is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the prestigious Guggenheim Award.<sup>12</sup> Nye is also increasingly well-known in Arab literary contexts: her work has been translated into Arabic and has been included in anthologies of Arab writing.<sup>13</sup> However, Nye's literary activities are not bounded by these two facets of her identity, Arab and American. Both her edited collections and her own writing draw upon, and reflect, a wide variety of cultural contexts and sources, including the culturally Hispanic southwest U.S., Mexico, Central and South America and Southeast Asia.

This diversity of subject matter sometimes appears to complicate Nye's categorization as an "Arab-American" poet. For instance, in a 1991 essay discussing the Arab aspects of Nye's work, Gregory Orfalea observes that although Nye

is the outstanding American poet of Palestinian origin, and one of the premier voices of her generation...of 155 poems in her three published collections, only 14 have a recognizably Arab or Palestinian content -- less than 9 percent. More deal with the Hispanic Southwest where she lives, and Latin America, where

she has traveled extensively, than the ancestral homeland of her father.” (35)

Orfalea’s essay is now, of course, outdated, and the publication of Nye’s work since then has included much material on Arab and Palestinian themes. But it remains true that Nye’s poetry cannot be completely accounted for in terms of ethnicity. As an American-born Palestinian of mixed heritage, Nye speaks and writes not as an exile, imbued with a sense of homelessness, but rather as a traveler with a reverence for local rootedness, someone who is at home wherever she finds herself. While her sense of her Palestinian heritage and what she has called “the gravities of ancestry” (Orfalea and Elmusa, Grape Leaves, 266) ground her work, they do not limit its parameters. Rather, they provide a basis from which other kinds of connections may be made. Nor can her work be adequately described by a simple division between “Arab” and “non-Arab,” “ethnic” and “non-ethnic.” Rather, Nye’s writing is undergirded by a consistency of approach best described as a stance of engagement with the world. As reviewer Philip Booth writes, in a discussion of Yellow Glove,

All her [Nye's] questions (and her own response to them) suggest to me an unstated question which seems to inform her best work: How do we come to terms with this world (literally this world) we cannot bear not to be part of?... Nye may not know any more than the rest of us what to do, but she knows more than most of us how many people(s) live; and she does justice to them, and to the need for change, by bringing home to readers both how variously and how similarly all people live. (162-3)

From this stance of listening and narration, and from her attunement to the differences and similarities that mark people’s lives, Nye forges connections across boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, gender and class. These linkages are most often personal rather than communal: Nye is above all a poet of the particular. But these particularities provide the basis for points of connection that in many of her poems take on metaphorical resonance. In a poem titled “Strings,” for instance, Nye evokes a sense

of connection that resonates across many kinds of distance. “Tonight it is possible to pull the long string and feel someone moving far away,” she writes; “to touch the fingers of one hand to the fingers of the other hand/ [...] to be linked to every mother/ every father’s father” (“Strings,” Fuel 86).

Writing in preface to the selection of her poetry in Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry, Nye notes the “gravities of ancestry,” the sense of “rapturous homecoming” that she experienced upon meeting Arab-American writers (266). While “all writers are engaged in the building of bridges,” she observes, “maybe bicultural writers who are actively conscious of or interested in heritage build another kind of bridge as well, this one between worlds. But it's not like a bridge, really -- it's closer, like a pulse”(266). In such passages Nye draws upon ethnicity as a foundation for the self – a common strategy. However, the imagery of a pulse not only suggests the notion of ethnicity as a blood inheritance, but also evokes processes of flow and interchange: much as a pulse signals the flow of blood through the body, ethnicity, for Nye, signals communication and interchange. Heritage, Nye suggests, matters not just for what it tells us about who we are, but also for how it informs what we *do*, the ways in which we draw upon our cultural identity for our interactions in the world. And while ethnicity does not provide *a priori* answers, it nonetheless makes it possible to ask necessary, if not always answerable, questions.

An essay about Nye's grandmother’s home in Palestine, “One Village,” clarifies this sense of ethnicity as the basis for a movement not only backwards and inwards, but also forwards and outwards. Describing her return to her Palestinian grandmother's village after fifteen years of absence, Nye at first seeks to relocate herself. “The village smells familiar,” she writes. “Whole scenes unfold like recent landscapes.” However, the village not only affirms who she is, but also shows her

how to listen to differences. “I was a teenager when last here, blind in the way of many teenagers,” Nye writes. “I wanted the world to be like me. Now there is nothing I would like less. I enter the world hoping for a journey out of self as much as in” (Never in a Hurry 49-50).

In this “journey out of self” Nye draws on her ethnic background in order to make connections beyond the boundaries of ethnicity. Consider, for instance, the title poem of her first book of poetry, Different Ways to Pray. Although Nye clearly evokes her Palestinian Muslim background here, this is not simply an “ethnic” poem. Rather, it uses the imagery of an Arab landscape in order to make a larger point about diversity and commonality. “Prayer,” here, is not just the conventional act of religious worship, but a generally reverential approach toward life. In addition to the expected modes of kneeling and making pilgrimage (both described with implicit reference to the Palestinian Muslim context), it also includes -- in what is for Nye a characteristic homage to dailiness -- such activities as “lugging water from the spring/ or balancing the baskets of grapes” (Different Ways 22). The pious, Nye suggests, include not only those who “bend to kiss the earth...their lean faces housing mystery” but also others such as “the old man Fowzi... Fowzi the fool/ who.../ insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats, / and was famous for his laugh” (23). Nye’s receptiveness here to a variety of perspectives points toward an ability to move beyond conventional boundaries while honoring the identities they delineate.

Meanwhile, of course, Nye has a personal interest in challenging rigid boundaries of identification. In a poem titled “Half and Half,” which evokes her mixed religious background, she describes an interlocutor for whom multiple allegiances are an impossible fragmentation: “If you love Jesus you can't love/ anyone else. Says he” (Fuel 60). In contrast, Nye celebrates difference, invoking the

possibility of transformation and a wholeness woven of multiplicity: “A woman opens a window -- here and here and here--/...She is making a soup out of what she had left/ in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean. She is leaving nothing out” (60).<sup>44</sup> “Leaving nothing out” might be viewed as a metaphor for Nye’s poetic practice as well as her approach to identity. Her poems are often about everyday objects and seemingly insignificant incidents, “the things which often go unnoticed.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, she draws on all parts of her identity, background and experience for a wholeness that eschews artificial unity. In an essay about her part-Palestinian son, Nye asks, “Why, if we're part anything, does it matter?” (Never in a Hurry 148). It matters, she suggests, because identity is constructed in relationship to difference. “I had to live in a mostly Mexican-American city to feel what it meant to be part Arab,” she writes. “It meant Take This Ribbon and Unwind It Slowly” (148).

But “leaving nothing out” for Nye, as for other Palestinian Americans, means, too, the need to come to terms with Palestinian history and with a legacy of occupation, injustice and exile. Given this history, Palestinian-American writers carry the burden of using their talents for Palestinian causes. Nye evokes this burden in “The Man Who Makes Brooms.” The poem begins,

So you come with these maps in your head  
and I come with voices chiding me to  
“speak for my people”  
and we march around like guardians of memory  
till we find the man on the short stool  
who makes brooms. (Words Under the Words 127).

Given the dearth of spokespeople for the Palestinians in the American context, and Nye’s stature as a prominent Arab-American writer, it is not surprising that she feels the pressure to “speak for [her] people.” But being a “guardian of memory” suggests the task of defending borders, a stance Nye would not be expected to take to readily.

Rather, she chooses to depict the resilience demonstrated by Palestinians in their daily life. Although on the surface a simple evocation of a craftsman in Jerusalem, her poem is in fact a political poem affirming Palestinian experience -- for as Nye explains in an interview, for the broom-maker to carry out his work with such precision and care under conditions of occupation is “a political act... Politics also involves the dignity of daily life” (Moyers 325-326).

In addition to depending on ordinary activities and objects that resonate across cultural lines for her depiction of “ethnic” themes, Nye also draws connections between Palestinians and others. In the poem, “Shrines,” a response to the massacre of Palestinians in Lebanon at Sabra and Chatila in 1982, Nye writes, “We cannot build enough shrines... If we light candles, we must light a million. / Lebanon, Salvador, Palestine, here” Jayyusi, Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature 357).

<sup>50</sup> The tragedies of the contemporary world cannot be viewed in isolation. Even Nye’s approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is informed by this desire to find points of connection. As she writes in “Jerusalem,” “I’m not interested in/ who suffered the most./ I’m interested in/ people getting over it... It’s late but everything comes next” (Red Suitcase 21-22).

Nye’s poems about other peoples, other locales grow out of this sense of connection across even the most intransigent of boundaries. Her work conveys a sense that to tell a fragment of a story –her own or that of someone else -- is to forge a link in the chain against erasure. In the poem “Remembered” Nye writes of the “need for remembrance,” a “ringing rising up out of the soil’s centuries, the ones/ who plowed this land, whose names we do not know” (Different Ways 54).<sup>52</sup> The gesture of remembrance carries particular weight for Palestinians, whose history is so often obscured or denied. But those “whose names we do not know” do not only reside

within one's own ethnic group, as is clear in a poem titled "The Endless Indian Nights." "I lay thinking of Afghanistan," Nye writes, "men who live in caves/ eating potatoes till their faces grow longer, their eyes blacken and will not close. / Someone said the world has never forgotten anyone better. / And I vowed to remember them/ though what good it would do, who knows" (Yellow Glove 46). Such poems situate Nye within a global community.

But establishing such linkages is not easy. In a poem titled "Kindness," Nye writes, "Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, / you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho/ lies dead by the side of the road. / You must see how this could be you, / how he too was someone/ who journeyed through the night with plans/ and the simple breath that kept him alive" (Different Ways 54). A sense of connection requires not pity, with its implicit stance of superiority, but rather the ability to recognize human commonalities without glossing over the specificity of others' experiences. To arrive at this sense of connection one must move beyond personal experience, viewing oneself within a wider context. You must "lose everything" and "wake up with sorrow," Nye writes; you must "speak to it [sorrow] till your voice/ catches the thread of all sorrows/ and you see the size of the cloth" (Different Ways 54).

Nye's understanding of her location within this wider context underlies the more joyful linkages that emerge throughout her writing. This is evident in the poem "For Lost and Found Brothers," in which a sense of familial and ethnic connections reverberates outward in widening ripples, suggesting connections that transit the globe:

For you, brothers.  
For the blood rivers invisibly harbored.  
For the grandfather who murmured the same songs.  
And for the ways we know each other years before meeting,

how strangely and suddenly, on the lonely porches,  
in the sleepless mouth of the night,  
the sadness drops away, we move forward,  
confident we were born into a large family,  
our brothers cover the earth. (Words Under the Words 51)

### David Williams

The poetry and prose of Lebanese-American David Williams similarly makes clear the need to make connections with others across the boundaries of ethnicity. Like Nye, Williams is a writer whose work defies simple categorization, making linkages between individual lives in diverse contexts. Throughout his work, Williams traces the ways in which a legacy of Arab heritage may lead not simply to the preservation of insular boundaries of group identity but also to cross-ethnic connections, grounding, as it does in Nye, a movement not only inwards but outwards as well. Drawing on his own experiences as a Lebanese American, an activist and a teacher, Williams writes of war, refugees, poverty, oppression and injustice. However, his poetry also searches for, and identifies, sources of hope, affirmation, endurance, resilience, and joy. Situating Arab-American identity within a global as well as a continental American context, Williams celebrates individual lives while forging connections between Arab Americans and others subjected to the vicissitudes of history, making clear the need for self-criticism as well as for coalitions across ethnic lines. As one reviewer observes of Traveling Mercies, Williams “attempts to find connections in a divided world... In a time that exalts the individual and the virtue of separate heritage, Williams recognizes that true heritage is never diluted by knowledge and understanding of other cultures” (Genoways 181).

In his poetry collections Traveling Mercies and Far Sides of the Only World, as well as in his unpublished texts Quick Prism (poetry) and Coyote Wells (a novel), Williams refracts multiple histories through a voice passionate with the desire to join

with others to bear witness to violence and protest injustice: as he puts it, a single ‘no’ might not be much, “but windblown/ seeds can grow into a windbreak.” (Palm to Palm: Conscientious Objections,” Far Sides 10). His writing is permeated with what he describes, in a poem after September 11, 2110, “this almost unbearable tenderness to save invisible/ stars from being crushed” (“Collapsing Distance,” Far Sides 36). And the voice that emerges from these texts carries many stories and lives within it. Williams points toward the possibility of uniting communities across cultural, ethnic and national boundaries, even as it honors and affirms individual resilience. Even the structure of Traveling Mercies echoes this insistence on interconnection, moving from grounding in personal identity and history to a recognition of the wider context of ethnicity and identity. Although the two parts of the book correspond in a general way to a division between personal experience and public testimony, this book – like Far Sides of the Only World, and like William’s unpublished manuscripts-- interweaves public and private themes, establishing connections between family, ethnicity and community, situating these within a historical and geographical context that extends from North and South America to the Middle East and Asia.

Rooted in realities of war, hunger, the connection to earth and the devastation of those forced to flee, Williams’ poetry invokes realities familiar to Arab Americans, as well as realities that draw from other contexts – Mexican immigrants, Guatemalan and Vietnamese refugees, Pueblo Indians. His poetry draws, above all, on a sense of connection to human realities, and as such holds the potential of speaking across cultural boundaries to people from many different backgrounds. “Breath,” the opening poem of Traveling Mercies, brings together themes of ethnic identity, connection and communal activism in a manner that is at once specific and general. The poem implicitly draws upon the links in Arabic between the word for “spirit” and

the word for “breath,” suggesting that Williams' Arab heritage underlies his poetic perception. However, it refrains from specifically naming Williams' Lebanese ancestry, speaking instead more generally. “The people I come from were thrown away,” writes Williams, “/as if they were nothing, whatever they might have / said become stone, beyond human patience, / except for the songs” (Traveling Mercies 5). The linguistic specificity of the Arabic word for “breath/spirit” expands to a human commonality of both fragility and strength, allowing the poem to open into a song of linked humanity: as “the people I come from” widen into other people “thrown away / as if they were nothing,” with whom Williams can join in common cause. Indeed, even as “Breath” invokes the individual, ordinary lives that profoundly matter amid the sweeping devastations of history, it situates these lives within the context of something larger, empowering. The ability to claim agency turns upon this recognition. Indeed, Williams' ability to transform grief into something life-sustaining – the touchstone of his writing --turns upon understanding both of the communal nature of suffering as well as of the communal efforts required to confront and transform it. Instead of claiming a solitary voice of testimony, Williams seeks to “join that song” of resistance and transformation – a song larger than he is, one that is grounded in history and that will extend beyond him. In this he affirms a consciousness that is not merely “ethnic” but that participates in a much broader humanism. His passionate assertion --“I'm thirsty for words to join that song -- / cupped hands at the spring, a cup of/ rain passed hand to hand” (Traveling Mercies 5)—becomes an activist's touchstone. His poetry embodies a faith that what sustains people -- poetry, water, bread -- can be passed on, “a cup of rain passed hand to hand... a clear/ lens trembling with our breath” (Traveling Mercies 5).

The need to move beyond ethnic insularity, and to recognize commonalities of both suffering and hope, is crystallized with particular clarity in the poem “Available Light” (Traveling Mercies 40). Juxtaposing personal grief over the death of an unnamed girl in Beirut to the historical resonances of a Vishniac photo of the Warsaw ghetto, this poem suggests that in the same way that historical images make claims on us beyond the specificity of group boundaries, individual suffering may perhaps be best understood by recognizing how our own experiences are reflected in those of others. “When I think of how/ you bled to death/ during the seige of Beirut,” Williams writes, “your face dissolves into grains of silver/ bromide, rocks on the moon/ we see as a human face.” This stark dissolution of grief leads to a more public image, that of the girl in the Warsaw Ghetto “who spent the winter in bed/ because she was hungry and had no shoes.” The two images intertwine, as the connections between the Arab in Beirut and the Jew in Warsaw emerge like shadows in a developing photograph:

I pick you out among all the lost  
a Jew, an Arab, who both could have passed  
for my daughters, your trace dark crystals  
on a negative, breath on a mirror,  
a steady, invisible light. (Traveling Mercies 40)

Belying the politics of cultural particularity as well as assumptions about group relationships (for instance, between Jews and Arabs) Williams challenges us to understand boundaries as not just dividing lines but linkages. In this and other poems, the possibility of forging connections across the borders that too often make us homeless emerges slowly but steadily, like human features becoming discernable in the moon's far face.

Throughout his work, Williams makes clear that ethnic identity in and of itself cannot always provide a sufficient basis for agency and resistance even though it

provides a source of sustenance and strength. Rather, affiliation is based on many factors -- gender, class, health, experiences of war -- none of which can be viewed in isolation. The prose poem "Lasts" makes clear such intersections. "I think of my mother heading back to the shoe factory the morning after her father told her, scholarship or no scholarship, girls didn't go to college," writes Williams. "...I can't help it, I think of the millions killed with no testament but their shoes tossed in a heap, and the others who, being barefoot, are even easier to forget" (Traveling Mercies 69). As he makes clear, individual experience can never be viewed in a historical vacuum. And language struggles to contain history's devastation and to establish connections: "our common language/ not broken but/ half formed// no facing page translation but/ what's inscribed in flesh" ("Between Words, Far Sides 11). But while the connections linking people are too often the inscriptions of suffering, such connections provide, nonetheless, a source of sustenance and resilience. "I need to join with everyone trying to say something true," Williams writes, and this communal context lends strength and clarity to his voice. The final lines of Traveling Mercies offer a compelling evocation of hope that parallels that put forward by Nye: "Everyone I have ever touched has put more life in my hands, and entered my blood, and lit my brain, and even now moves my tongue to speak." (Traveling Mercies 66-67).

Nye and Williams draw on their Arab-American ethnicity in their writing not simply to celebrate their heritage, but because this identity has serious implications in the contemporary context. As Williams suggests in the poem "Almost One," in the current American context, Arab-Americans are not quite "white" enough, not quite "American" enough, not quite whole (Traveling Mercies 66-67). By recognizing both the complexity of their identities and their commonalities with others, however, Arab Americans may begin to join forces with others marginalized by categories of identity

or by structures of violence and power. Evoking a radical, polycentric multiculturalism in which essentialist categories of kinship have been replaced by affiliative categories of relationship, Williams and Nye make clear the need to focus on Arab-American ethnicity in relation to other issues and groups, and to situate ethnic expression within a context of committed activism. While their poetry and prose may be read as an affirmation of Arab-American identity, it should be read, as well, as an exploration of how to situate that identity within a contemporary multicultural context in which Arab Americans have a great deal to lose by isolation.

It is true that until now few have aligned themselves with Arab-American causes. As a result, it might be argued, it is still premature for Arab Americans to become involved with the issues of others: rather, they should focus on asserting their own identity within strong cultural parameters. And indeed, in the post 9/11 period, the pressures on Arab Americans to consolidate as a group and affirm strong ethnic boundaries are greater than ever.<sup>15</sup> However, the global – and human -- interconnections that both Nye and Williams take as the basis for their poetic visions remain, and have arguably become more urgent than ever. In today's world, individual causes cannot be viewed in separation from the global structures of power that situate them; nor can the effects of these structures of power be isolated to a single group. To discuss Arab-American identity requires, more than ever, something different than either celebration or defensive assertion. What is needed is activism and agency on issues of justice, issues that traverse cultural and national boundaries. Whether undertaken from a sense of humanism, or from a pragmatic understanding of the need for allies, such communal activism is crucial if Arab Americans are to achieve success in their goals of fighting racism, violence and injustice and of

ensuring a more just and fulfilling future for themselves and others. The result of such communal awareness and agency can only be empowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter was first published in Arabs in America: Building a New Future, ed. Michael Suleiman, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 320-336.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the phenomenon of “honorary” whiteness experienced by Arab Americans, see Massad, “Palestinians and the Limits of Racialized Discourse; and Morsy, “Beyond the Honorary ‘White’ Classification of Egyptians.”

<sup>3</sup> In the post 9-11 period, examples of the targeting/racialization/de-Americanization of Arabs are unfortunately ample. See further Hagopian, Civil Rights in Peril; Jamal and Naber, Race and Arab Americans; Cainkar, Homeland Insecurity. However, the liminal status of Arab Americans as white until pushed back to non-white status have a long history. In this regard, the targeting of Arab Americans during the aftermath of the bombing of the Oklahoma Federal Building in 1995 is instructive. In the wake of the bombing, amid runaway media speculation on the presumed “Middle Eastern” connection, journalists expressed surprise at government statements that the suspected perpetrators were two “white males,” a response that indicated the extent to which “white” and “Arab” -- and by implication, “Arab” and “American” -- are presumed to be mutually exclusive categories.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include Hooglund, Crossing the Waters; McCarus, Development of Arab-American Identity; Suleiman, Arabs in America; Orfalea and Elmusa, Grape Leaves; Kadi, Food for our Grandmothers; Mattawa and Akash, Post Gibran. Kaldas and Mattawa, Dinarzad’s Children. Darraj, Scheherazad’s Legacy.

<sup>5</sup> See ADC Research Institute, 1995 Report on Anti-Arab Racism, Hate Crimes, Discrimination and Defamation of Arab Americans (Wash., DC: ADC Research Institute, 1996); and 1996-1997 Report on Hate Crimes and Discrimination Against Arab Americans (Wash., DC: ADC Research Institute, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> This confusion between race and ethnicity is particularly apparent, Hollinger argues, in the classification of Hispanic or Latino Americans -- previously classified as Caucasian, and identified according to their country of origin, but now increasingly considered a “race” (31-32). The lobby for a mixed-race census classification brings these contradictions to the forefront, and “threatens to destroy the whole structure” of the ethnic-racial pentagon by challenging the “one-drop rule” (44-45).

<sup>7</sup> The exclusion of Arabs from American citizenship has on occasion been justified on the basis that Arabs are inherently non-European. In the same way that Jews were once considered a separate “race,” Arabs occupy a different space in the American imagination than that indicated by their official classification.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Sollors makes a similar argument in his Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture.

<sup>9</sup> Cainkar argues that “Arab Americans may have racial identification options—a modification of Waters’s (1990) concept of ‘ethnic options’—that members of other groups historically racialized as nonwhite do not possess, even if they do not have ethnic options... Racial identity formation is probably best seen as unfolding and ongoing for Arab Americans at this point in time, and as a process that should be considered in its domestic and international context” (Homeland Insecurity 95).

<sup>10</sup> An anecdote will clarify this point. In a discussion about the stereotyping of Arabs in the movie Aladdin, on the Internet mailing list Arab-American in the fall of 1996, one participant commented that since the Aladdin story is actually Persian, not Arab, Arabs should not feel offended by the stereotyping. The flawed logic in such reasoning becomes clear when one considers the example of Pakistanis and Iranians physically assaulted during the first Gulf War and in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 because they were thought to be Arab; those injured were doubtless not comforted by the knowledge that it was not their own identity that was being targeted. Such dismissal of discrimination and injustice when it does not directly affect one’s own ethnic group ultimately limits the ability to address these problems when they are directed at one’s own group. Indeed, such attitudes rarify cultural identification to the point that it loses its meaning.

<sup>11</sup> This stance is by no means limited to these two authors. Other Arab-American authors who challenge ethnic boundaries include Elmaz Abinader, Diana Abu-Jaber, Etel Adnan, Suheir Hammad, Lawrence Joseph, Joe Kadi, Khaled Mattawa, Adele Nejame and others.

<sup>12</sup> “The Language of Life” series aired on PBS in the summer of 1995.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Nye, in Bill Moyers, The Language of Life, 324.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, a review of the edited book, Arabs in America, in which this chapter first appeared, singles out my essay for commentary on how things have changed in the post 9/11 period. The reviewer, Darcy Zabel, writes, “The collection concludes with a by-now-classic and well-known essay by Lisa Suhair Majaj on the place of Arab Americans in the late 1990s, which seems somewhat ironic in the wake of September 11. For the future, Majaj sees ‘a shift away from earlier generations’ attempt to deny or hide their Arab identity’ towards ‘a stance of reciprocal communalism’ that reaches ‘across cultural divides’ [322, 326]. Majaj of course could not have anticipated the violent policing of Arab American identity and attempted destruction of ethnic communalism that would occur in the wake of George Bush’s post-9/11 ‘war on terror’” (Zabel 252).

## Wildfire

Inside me  
live haunted creatures,  
resistance fighters

gone underground.  
Ravenous,  
they have nothing

to lose.  
They know the battle  
will be long

and fierce.  
They plan  
to win.

All night  
they gnaw my entrails,  
feed on the dark.

Daybreak  
brings words  
bruising

my ravaged throat.  
That cry  
bone-deep

dredged  
from my belly?  
It's poetry

burning a swathe  
taking the sky  
like wildfire.

## Chapter 6

### Representation and Resistance:

#### Etel Adnan's Sitt Marie Rose and the Critical Dimensions of Voice

*The imagination's object is not simply to alter the external world, or to alter the human being in his or her full array of capacities and needs, but also and more specifically, to alter the power of alteration itself, to act on and continually revise the nature of creating.*

--Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain

The chapter offers an analysis of a single text – that of Etel Adnan's Sitt Marie Rose – in order to bring into focus some of the political and representational issues that underlie Arab American writing: in particular, the relationship between art and politics, and the possibilities and implications for artistic agency in contexts of war and violence.<sup>1</sup>

Political events in Arab contexts have long played a central role in Arab American writing: as Salaita comments, “in the Arab American community, the things that happen overseas in the so-called Old World very much influence how we carry ourselves as Americans, a fact that has been more than peripheral in the maturation of the Arab American novel” (Literary Fictions 55). Indeed, one of the “defining texts” (Literary Fictions 63) of modern Arab American literature is Adnan's novel of the Lebanese civil

war, Sitt Marie Rose.<sup>11</sup> This novel's status in Arab American letters may in part be, as Salaita points out, because of Adnan's central role in Arab American literary life, because of the wide-ranging impact of the Lebanese civil war on Arab Americans (a majority of whom have in the past been of Lebanese origin) and because "its themes force readers to confront a variety of issues that have long been pertinent to Arab Americans" (Salaita, Literary Fictions 63) -- from the complexity and diversity of identifications contained within the rubric of a trans-Arab identity, to the contested issue of gender roles in Arab spaces, to colonial legacies, to the role of Palestine. More than this, however, the novel raises a number of representational issues that are crucial to Arab American literary aesthetics (cf Salaita 64). Prime among these is the issue of literary voice and its relation to agency in politicized contexts. Indeed, in posing questions about the role of literature as a mode of response to political, gendered and other contexts of violence and discrimination, Adnan's novel provides a lens through which to view Arab American literature as resistance literature.

Sitt Marie Rose is well-known for its critique of Lebanon's social and political conditions during the war, and for its strong feminist analysis. The novel, which occupies a significant position in both Arab American and Arab feminist literature, offers particular insight into the intersection of gendered, political, sectarian, class-based and colonial hierarchies of power. As critic Thomas Foster notes, Sitt Marie Rose posits "the writing of the gendered body as crucial for understanding recent Lebanese history," charting the pivotal role of "women's ideological repression within the political struggles of national formation, religious affiliation, and ethnic identities" (Foster 60; 67). As the first novel to be published on the Lebanon war, the first Arab American novel by a

woman in the contemporary period, and a landmark Arab and Arab American feminist text, *Sitt Marie Rose* demonstrates the necessity of situating Arab and Arab American feminism within political contexts.

In conjunction with this socio-political critique, however, *Sitt Marie Rose* also functions on a self-reflexive textual level, using its own narrative form and thematic content to raise questions about the efficacy of artistic representation in challenging structures of oppression and about the role of the artist in resisting injustice and violence. On its most fundamental level, the novel affirms the possibility of challenging oppressive power, and suggests that artistic representation may play a significant role in such resistance. It thus functions as a "resistance" text (see Harlow 1987); a text that seeks to expose, challenge and transform structures of oppression. At the same time, however, *Sitt Marie Rose* also makes clear that representation is inscribed within, and may become complicit with, structures of oppressive power. This tension between resistance and complicity is encapsulated most clearly in the novel's portrayal of articulation: the act of voicing, and hence representing, oneself or others. While the novel insists on the necessity of speaking out against oppression even within contexts of powerlessness, it also demonstrates the complexities inherent in trying to give voice to and depict subaltern experience.

Articulation, *Sitt Marie Rose* makes clear, functions as a fundamental vehicle of agency, understood as the ability to affirm the self and to take action in the world. Central to the novel's exploration of resistance and its complexities are themes of communication and failed communication, voicelessness and speech. The silencing of the powerless is dramatized in *Sitt Marie Rose* in several ways: metaphorically, through the political

voicelessness of women, laborers and other subalterns; literally, through the physical voicelessness of the “deaf-mute” children (who function in the novel as representative subalterns); and pragmatically, through the interrogation, torture and execution of the protagonist, Marie Rose. But although it champions resistance, the novel suggests that such silencing cannot simply be challenged by speaking out on behalf of the voiceless, because articulation is caught up in the problematics of representation: in particular, the tension between speaking for the ‘other’ and empowering the ‘other’ to speak for herself.

These tensions are particularly acute in resistance literature, in which the need to speak out on behalf of the oppressed is complicated by the hierarchies of power implicit in such representation. Resistance literature, in Barbara Harlow's definition, is a "category of literature that emerged significantly as part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East" (1987, xvii). "The term 'resistance,'" Harlow notes, "was first applied in a description of Palestinian literature in 1966 by the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in his study Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966" (2). Given the difficult contexts within which such writing arises, resistance literature "insists on the historical reality and consequences of works of literature and their specific place in the events of the world which they transcribe" (111). Frequently testimonial in nature, resistance texts use literary forms to expose specific social and political conditions, to suggest alternatives to these conditions, and to elicit responsive action from their readers. They provide counter-narratives through which subaltern voices may be heard or represented, and alternative political perspectives put forward. As a result of this focus on communicating suppressed narratives and empowering subaltern voices, through

which the literary act of testifying to oppression, or “writing human rights,” is crucially linked to political intervention, or “righting political wrongs” (Harlow 1992, 244; 256), articulation plays a central role in resistance texts. However, this link between “writing” and “righting” situations of oppression is complicated by the difficulties of narration and by the complexities inherent in the multi-layered act of representation. Among these complexities is the unequal relationship between, on the one hand, writers/artists, who possess access to modes and forums of production, and on the other hand, subaltern subjects of representation, who are rescued from silence through another’s narration or artistic mediation. While Adnan’s novel affirms the need to speak out against oppression, it also provides a self-reflexive critique of the representational modes through which such articulation may be achieved.

On the narrative level, Sitt Marie Rose offers a fictionalized account of the outbreak of the Lebanese war in 1975 and of the abduction and murder by Christian Lebanese militiamen of an actual person, Marie Rose Boulos, a Christian Syrian-Lebanese woman active in organizing social services among Palestinian refugees in Beirut (Harlow 1987, 110). Divided into two sections, Time I: A Million Birds and Time II: Marie Rose, the novel explores the possibilities of resisting oppressive power within the context of intersecting “circles of oppression” and “circles of repression” (Adnan 1982, 104), featuring female protagonists who seek to challenge, whether on their own behalf or on behalf of others, the boundaries that confine them. Time I: A Million Birds, written from the perspective of an unnamed first-person female narrator, depicts Lebanon at the outbreak of the 1975 war, situating both the war’s violence and Lebanon’s social and political hierarchies within the context of its colonial legacy. This section

portrays the narrator's failed attempt to collaborate with her friend Mounir, one of a group of wealthy Christian Lebanese men with a penchant for hunting, on a film that she hopes will give voice to the problems of Syrian migrant laborers in Beirut. The section thereby introduces both the problem of representing subaltern subjects and the question of the relationship between artistic representation and political/social resistance. Time II depicts the capture and execution of Marie Rose, a childhood friend of Mounir, as narrated through the voices of seven characters: Marie Rose herself, her captors (Mounir, his friends Fouad and Tony, and the priest Bouna Lias), the collective voice of the “deaf-mute” children whom Marie Rose teaches, and the narrator from Time I, who functions in Time II as an omniscient observer. As if in answer to the questions raised in Time I about how subalterns may be represented, Time II presents the transgressive figure of Marie Rose, who, as a teacher of “deaf-mute” children, empowers silenced subalterns to find their own voices and modes of communication. In contrast to the insular group definitions that her captors seek to uphold through violence, Marie Rose challenges the rigid binaries of gender, nationality, sect and class, grounding her resistance to oppression on an engagement with difference. Yet although Time II posits Marie Rose as a heroic figure, this section also makes clear the difficulty of achieving individual resistance within situations of unequal power. Read in conjunction, the novel's two sections suggest a framework of interpretation through which art as a mode of political activism is affirmed even while its limitations are acknowledged.

As the narration of a "true" story, Sitt Marie Rose provides the occasion for a discussion of the Lebanese war that moves beyond the binarisms of religion to a more complex analysis of the various factors contributing to the violence. This discussion is

situated within a critique of the problems facing the Arab world--problems portrayed as stemming from an inability to articulate (speak about, give voice to, make connections between) the oppressive and repressive forces that situate individuals. "Voice" thus emerges as a central concern of the novel, both metaphorically and thematically. Indeed, the narrator asserts in Time II that the "illness" troubling the Arab world, depicted here as a patient, is the inability to speak: the illness is "not the blood clogging his [the patient's] throat but the words, the words, the swamp of words that have been waiting there for so long" (Adnan 1982, 100). The novel's attention to issues of voice is similarly evident through its portrayal of characters who are literally or symbolically voiceless--the "deaf-mute" children, Syrian migrant laborers, women--and through narrative strategies such as the direct interior monologues of Time II. However, this focus on voice is situated within a narrative framework that not only raises questions about the possibility of achieving subaltern articulation, but also opens its own narrative project to scrutiny.

Representation may be understood both as artistic/linguistic depiction, and as the process by which an individual is spoken for (represented) in a political context. At stake in the representational process is the relationship between articulation/expression and agency: between the ability to speak, whether for oneself or others, and to take action in the world. This relationship is the subject of Elaine Scarry's meditative study The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. Scarry examines the ways in which language serves as "a consistent affirmation of the human being's capacity to move out beyond the boundaries of his or her own body into the external, shareable world" (1985, 5), and the extent to which situations of violence destroy this capacity for self-extension. While linguistic expression both results in and reflects an expansion of the self into the

world, violence and pain lead to the "contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body . . . bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). In other words, violence enacts a schism between body and voice, reducing the individual to aversive embodiment while simultaneously stripping the subject of his or her voice.

One particularly concrete example of such a schism occurs in situations of torture and interrogation, such as that undergone by Marie Rose in Adnan's novel. In such contexts, the voice of the dominated victim is not only silenced but is, in fact, taken over by the interrogator. The domination of the prisoner "both in physical acts and verbal acts" means that "the prisoner's ground become[s] increasingly physical and the torturer's increasingly verbal, that the prisoner become[s] a colossal body with no voice and the torturer a colossal voice (a voice composed of two voices) with no body, that eventually the prisoner experience[s] himself exclusively in terms of sentience and the torturer exclusively in terms of self-extension" (Scarry 1985, 57). This bifurcation of body and voice is taken to its furthest extension in the act of execution, in which the prisoner is permanently silenced, leaving the power of articulation and representation in the hands of the executioner.

But the schism between body and voice is not limited to situations of overt violence. Rather, it is characteristic of situations of oppressive power relations more generally. Indeed, Scarry asserts, a political situation "is almost by definition one in which the two locations of selfhood (body and voice] are in a skewed relation to one another or have wholly split apart and have begun to work, or be worked, against one another." As a result, "power is in its fraudulent as in its legitimate forms always based

on distance from the body” (Scarry 1985, 37; 46). This schism between body and voice may be seen in a variety of situations defined by unequal power. For instance, in patriarchal gender relations, women are reduced to emotionality and the body while men are viewed as rational agents of culture and intellect. In class relations the working class is associated with physicality while the upper class is defined in terms of intellectual activity. In race relations, people of color are stereotyped in bodily, often sexualized terms while white people are rarified as the "standard bearers of civilization." In all of these situations, articulation is associated with the dominant group, silent embodiment with the subordinate group.

Such schisms of power are evident throughout Sitt Marie Rose. In Time I, for instance, Syrian laborers, women, and Lebanese civilians are silenced and reduced to aversive embodiment by poverty, patriarchal oppression and the violence of war. Meanwhile, in Time II the correlation between silencing and embodiment is exemplified through the powerless “deaf-mute” children and through Marie Rose herself, whose heroic attempt to speak out on behalf of the voiceless is foreclosed by her brutal execution. Although both the children and Marie Rose “speak” within the context of the novel, and indeed achieve their agency primarily through articulation, their speech is only possible within the discursive parameters of the text, and is represented through pragmatically “impossible” interior monologues. The novel thus provides structural as well as thematic acknowledgement of the difficulties inherent in achieving articulation in contexts of oppressive power.

Such difficulties, Adnan makes clear, circumscribe the possibilities of agency. Agency involves both self-affirmation and action in the world; it requires the capacity for

protecting the embodied self from physical domination, and the capacity for self-representation (the verbal extension of the self into the world, and the corresponding assertion/extension of the self as subject within a political realm). These two capacities are aptly combined in the metaphor of "voice"--a term which, like agency, involves both a physical dimension (the vocal nature of speech) and a representational dimension (the metaphorical role of voice in representing the self). The centrality of voice to agency is particularly clear in the political realm, where, Scarry argues, power depends on the capacity for articulation, and more specifically on "the power of self-description" (1985, 279), and where the failure to achieve articulation leads to a failure of agency. Indeed, Scarry asserts, "the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be verbally represented also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be politically represented" (12).

Given this linkage between articulation and political power, "voice" takes on great significance in projects of subaltern resistance, often becoming a metaphor for agency itself. Indeed, implicit in many resistance texts is the suggestion that the subaltern is able to transcend her location through the fact of articulation alone--that the act of speech is in and of itself a revolutionary act. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson comment, "For the colonial [or marginalized] subject, the process of coming to writing is . . . a charting of the conditions that have historically placed her identity under erasure" (1992, xx). Articulation thus becomes "a process and a product of decolonization (xxi). Similarly, "giving voice to the voiceless"-- through testimonials meant to convey the sufferings of the common people with no access to literature -- is often a central goal of resistance texts. However, what is often inadequately acknowledged in such projects is the

problematic role of power--for no matter how liberatory the intention, to speak on behalf of others is implicitly to participate in the same power structures that make it possible for some people to speak while others are spoken for. Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" provides one of the most well known discussions of the problematic underlying subaltern articulation and representation of the subaltern. In this essay Spivak calls for a critique of the "transparent" role which intellectuals (and by extension, all who seek to represent subaltern subjects) play in the constitution of subaltern subjectivity. In their discussions of "the nonrepresented" subaltern subject, Spivak argues, intellectuals are "complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow" (1994, 74-75). However, intellectuals nonetheless play a necessary role in facilitating the voice of subaltern subjects who otherwise would disappear "between . . . subject-constitution and object-formation." Even if "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak," Spivak points out, intellectuals have "a circumscribed task" to fulfill--that of speaking to the subaltern subject at the same time as they critique their "institutional privileges of power (102-104; 75).

This complex relationship between power, agency and articulation informs Adnan's literary project of testimony and empowerment. Implicit in the act of representation is not only a power differential between representer and represented, but also a tension between the represented subject's inner voice/reality and the image/expression of this reality--between what Rey Chow calls "the politics of the image," a politics that is "conducted on surfaces," and a corresponding politics of authenticity--of "depths, hidden truths, and inner voices" (1993, 29). While articulation is presumed to emanate directly from the speaking subject, and hence is granted

authenticity and immediacy, representation (whether visual, textual, or political) of necessity functions at a remove from this immediacy. Attempts to give voice to subaltern subjectivity frequently falter over this tension between self-expression and representation. In Sitt Marie Rose these dynamics of power and privilege are brought to the foreground through the role of the narrator and her relationship to various "others" in the text. The narrator appears to share a number of characteristics with both Marie Rose and Adnan herself, including gender, class, nationality and postcolonial background. Moreover, all three women "speak" not only for themselves but also for others positioned as silenced subalterns: Syrian laborers, "deaf-mute" children, women victimized by the intersecting forces of patriarchy and militaristic violence, civilians caught in the war's violence. The narrative functions to rescue Marie Rose's voice from the silence of death, thereby challenging her captors' consolidation of power and articulation. At the same time, it empowers not just Marie Rose's voice, but also the voices of both the narrator and Adnan herself. And while these narrative voices insist on the necessity of testimony as a mode of resistance, the complex positions of intertwined power and powerlessness from which they emerge both facilitate and complicate the possibilities of articulation as a mode of resistance.

These subject positions are grounded in the postcolonial contradictions that inform Adnan's writing, artwork and personal life. Born in Lebanon to a Syrian Muslim father and a Greek Christian mother, Adnan spoke Greek and Turkish as a child, and is fluent in French (her first language of composition), English (the language of her most recent texts) and Arabic (the "language," she has stated, of her paintings).<sup>3</sup> She currently resides at different times of the year in the United States, France and Lebanon. As a child

in Lebanon, Adnan was subjected to the French educational system imposed on Lebanon under the colonial mandate, "a system of education totally conforming to . . . schools in France, an education which had nothing to do with the history and the geography of the children involved" (Adnan 1990, 7). As a result, Adnan has said, she grew up "thinking that the world was French. And that everything that mattered, that was 'in books,' or had authority (the nuns), did not concern our environment" (7). The implications of this legacy of alienation are evident in Adnan's own distance from the Arabic language, which she was forbidden to speak in school. Indeed, Sitt Marie Rose was written not in Arabic, but in French, and the novel was first published in France. This use of the language of the colonizer to portray the experiences of the colonized situates Adnan's authorial voice in complex relation to the Arab readers--themselves often French-speaking--to whom, and for whom, she attempts to speak.

Such complexity of identification and location leads to a stance paralleling what Rosi Braidotti has called "nomadic" subjectivity--a "kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior" and that functions as "a form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity" (1994, 5; 23). In childhood, Adnan writes, she "got used to standing between situations, to being a bit marginal and still a native, to getting acquainted with notions of truth which were relative" (1990, 11). This childhood experience of moving between cultural and religious backgrounds, like her adult experience of traveling between Lebanon, France and the U.S., undergirds a stance of identification that is fluid and adaptive. And indeed, Adnan suggests, despite its difficulties, a marginal stance has its uses, among which is the ability to interrogate into structures of power. (As she observes in Paris, When It's

Naked, "People from the Third World are better at seeing through [mainstream media manipulation of information]; for them it's a matter of survival. Citizens from dominant countries fool themselves by thinking that they don't need to know: that's the beginning of the beginning of their downfall" (Adnan 1993, 60.) However, as Elspeth Probyn has cautioned, "the recognition that the subaltern works across her positioning does not immediately entail a form of free agency (quoted in Kaplan 1994, 149). A marginal stance may yield insights but not the power to act upon them. Moreover, marginalized subjects also run the risk of becoming implicated in the structures of power that situate and constrain them. Indeed, in Paris, When Its Naked Adnan openly acknowledges the ways in which she is simultaneously marginalized from, resistant to, and yet drawn by French culture: "Paris is beautiful. Claude can say it innocently. It's harder for me to say so, it's also more poignant. It tears me apart. Paris is the heart of a lingering colonial power, and that knowledge goes to bed with me every night" (1993, 7).

Such tensions are central to Sitt Marie Rose, in which the contradictions of postcolonial identity are critiqued by female protagonists who are themselves caught in these contradictions. Although both the narrator and Marie Rose attempt to speak out against repression and oppression, whether their own or that of others, they are not able to disrupt the hierarchies of power that situate them as at once privileged and subordinate. Critically aware of the ways in which colonialism has constituted the modern Lebanese subject, they are nonetheless implicated in the hierarchies of value and power that situate them as upper class, Christian, educated women, and that view them as "Western" and "modern." This location and identification empowers their articulation even while it circumscribes their attempts at resistance.

The problem of speaking from a marginalized position is first addressed in Time I: A Million Birds. This section evokes situations of victimization and silencing, drawing implicit parallels between the birds shot down by hunters wielding machine guns, civilians slaughtered in the war, women subordinated by patriarchal structures, and exploited, objectified migrant laborers. Although the narrator of Time I offers sardonic insights into Lebanese gender relations and postcolonial subject positions, and stunned testimony to the ravages of war, she is unable to take significant action against the prevailing ideologies and perversions of power. Notwithstanding the narrator's efforts to challenge both her own silencing as a woman and the exploitation of the Syrian laborers Mounir plans to film, Time I traces the breakdown of both agency and articulation. This breakdown is made clear in the narrator's failure to assert her own voice in the film project, in the difficulties she faces in attempting to narrate the war's violence, and in her own retreat to inaction in the face of the violence.

Time I is structured around two films: the hunting film which opens the section, and the film which Mounir proposes to make with the narrator. These films serve as a lens through which the dichotomies of power underlying Lebanon's social and political contexts are brought into focus. The most obvious dichotomy operative here is that of gender, reflected in the masculinization of power. Mounir's hunting film opens with images of hunters "aim[ing] their rifles toward the sky like missile launchers," showing "their teeth, their vigor, their pleasure" (Adnan 1982, 2). As the birds fall, "All their faces glow. Except Fouad's . . . He suffers from never having killed enough . . . Fouad hunts as though obsessed. He prefers killing to kissing" (2). As these interwoven phallic and militaristic resonances suggest, underlying the hunters' hypermasculinity is reliance

upon force and a strategic maintenance of gendered oppositions, with their concomitant power differentials. Thus, to the women who watch his film Mounir comments disparagingly, "You didn't see anything, really . . . I can't tell you what the desert is. You have to see it. Only you women, you'll never see it" (4). Positioning himself as a privileged possessor of knowledge by virtue of his masculinity, Mounir seeks to keep power--whether gendered or representational--firmly within his locus of control.

The film Mounir proposes to make with the narrator similarly functions as a means of asserting his gendered, sectarian, and class authority. Mounir intends this film to stand as a monument to his commercial success, his artistic vision, and his patronizing view of the Syrians, whom he views as pastoral but primitive. His perspective on the film as an aesthetic and commercial project with no responsibility to external facts or to their political implications subsumes the voices of those he seeks to represent under his own. Similarly, although Mounir invites the narrator to write the screenplay, he co-opts her voice and agency, making it clear that he will control the final product and its message. "It will be my film," he tells her. "I just want to make it with you" (Adnan 1982, 4). To her suggestion that the film explore the actual lives of Syrian laborers, he retorts, "No, no. You don't understand. You'll write the script. I'll make the film" (7).

Mounir's exclusion of the female narrator from the domain of agency, and his appropriation of her voice as a function of his own, is paralleled by the general silencing of women throughout this section. Of the women in Time I, only the narrator actually speaks, and she voices her ironic critique not directly to Mounir, but indirectly, to the reader. Meanwhile, the narrator makes no verbal protest to Mounir's positioning of her as a helpmate rather than as an active partner on his film project. Despite her feminist

perspective, her subversive commentary, and her admission of the role she herself plays in her silencing, she too is circumscribed by her female status. In response to Mounir's claim that the women will never be able to really see the desert, she admits, "It's true. We 'women' were happy with this little bit of imperfect, colored cinema, which gave, for twenty minutes, a kind of additional prestige to these men we see every day. In this restrictive circle, the magic these males exert is once again reinforced. Everybody plays at this game" (Adnan 1982, 4).

Such silencing and self-silencing are not simply a function of gender, however. Rather, they indicate the broader difficulty of achieving articulation within contexts of hierarchical power. The images that open the book, like the gendered metaphors that inform the text as a whole (Beirut as a raped woman, Marie Rose as a bird shot down by hunters, Lebanon as a woman drawn and quartered) emphasize the gendered aspects of oppression. However, the novel also moves beyond a simple linkage between male sexual aggression and violence to a broader critique of binary power structures, exemplified through religion, sect, class, nationality, and colonial relations. Within this critique, hierarchies of gender are inflected by the postcolonial context that situates Arabs more generally. Thus, for instance, the conflation of masculinity and violence evident in Mounir's hunting film reflects not only anxiety about gendered roles, but also a fundamental anxiety about Lebanese identity in the context of internalized colonial structures. As the narrator notes, "Before, it was the Europeans with faces like the ones we saw on the screen, who went hunting in Syria and Iraq, and elsewhere. Now it's the Christian, modernized Lebanese who go wherever they like with their touristo-military gear. They bring their cameras to film their exploits, their puttees, their shoes, their

shorts, their buttons and zippers, their open shirts and their black hair showing" (Adnan 1982, 3).

As this passage suggests, the hunters' construction of masculine identity through dominance over bodies (female and animal) and tools (cars, guns and cameras) is embedded within the lingering structures of colonial relations that situate the Lebanese Christians at the site of conflicting locations of power and oppression, at once dominated (by the French colonial legacy) and dominant (in relations with Muslim Lebanese, Syrian laborers and Palestinians). Although Mounir insists that he "loves" Syria, his education in French colonial schools is predicated on a denial of his Arab identity. Like other Christian Lebanese, Mounir and his friends were "taught by Jesuits who oriented them toward Paris and the quarrels of the French kings" (Adnan 1982, 47). As a result of this early education, they longed to be "European" and "dream[ed] of a Christianity with helmets and boots, riding its horses into the clash of arms, spearing Moslem foot-soldiers like so many St. Georges with so many dragons" (47). The dilemma posed by this orientation is summed up in a childhood anecdote recalled by Marie Rose. Seeing Mounir dressed up like a Crusader to march in a procession, she tells him, "You come from here . . . You don't come from France or England. You could never be a Crusader." In response, Mounir asks sadly, "Then what am I going to become?" (48). Mounir's identification with Crusader imagery and with Europe, Christianity and the West--an identification representative of the Lebanese Maronites more generally -- provides the underpinnings of Mounir's political identity. From this perspective, Lebanese identity is predicated upon the establishment of clear boundaries between Christian and Muslim, east and west, Lebanese and Palestinian, "civilized" and

"primitive"--and upon the implicit relocation of the Christian Lebanese to the "western" side of the divide. The war simply accentuates this desire for decisive boundaries: as Mounir asserts, "It will be clean and definitive. There will be a victor and a vanquished, and we'll be able to talk, to reconstruct the country from a new base" (33).

As Kaja Silverman has noted, "It is by now a theoretical truism that hegemonic colonialism works by inspiring in the colonized subject the desire to assume the identity of his or her colonizers" (1989, 3). In Adnan's depiction, this desire is evidenced through the hunters' attempt to internalize not just the colonizer's identity but also the colonizer's modes of expression and representation: in particular, filmmaking and photography. Their cameras act as emblems of representational power, enabling them to refute the identity of 'native' and to claim instead the identity of tourist, militarist, photographer, voyeur. However, this gesture only serves to highlight their inscription within colonial relationships of power. By filming themselves, the hunters associate themselves with modern (read: western) modes of representation, yet simultaneously acknowledge their status as mute objects of this representation. Although they replace the "European . . . faces" that once dominated the screen, their representational power is only possible in relationship to other Arabs; as even Mounir admits, "a young Syrian in Beirut, it's like us in Paris" (Adnan 1982, 3; 6). Their attempts to identify as both European and Arab can only be enacted at the expense of those who more unambiguously occupy a subordinate role. Thus, for instance, in discussing the film that he wishes to make with the narrator, Mounir views the Syrians as "naturally" pastoral, primitive, and silent, while the Christian Lebanese are just as "naturally" assumed to be modern, European, articulate, and possessed of representational, social and political power. As he tells the narrator, "I

want to make [the film] from the point of view of the hunters. They're proud of their superiority . . . I want to show how happy [the villagers] are in those Syrian villages, what wisdom they had there, how integrated they are with Nature" (6; 8). Furthermore, in a comment that makes clear the violence underlying these hierarchies, Mounir conflates European identity with modern weaponry: "You see, before it was foreigners, now it's we who represent all that's modern . . . The power of our guns was unimaginable to them" (5).

Mounir's film project participates in what Johannes Fabian describes, in Time and the Other, as a "discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal" (Fabian 1983, xi). Within this discursive framework, the distance between western and nonwestern subjects is measured temporally as well as geographically and culturally, with the "other" situated outside of the space of modernity that defines the observer. For Mounir, the Syrian villages with "everything made of earth, everything golden in the sun" and "the people . . . very simple, very hospitable, not at all ruined" represent both a pastoral innocence and an indicator of how far he and other Lebanese Christians have traveled toward "modern," "western" identity. It is only with the arrival of the Lebanese, Mounir suggests, that the Syrians can escape their state of "pastoral innocence" and enter the "modern" world--the world of change. Describing his planned film, he states, "I go back more than once to this Syrian village. Each time they recognize us, and each time they have changed" (Adnan 1982, 6). Construing Arab culture as Muslim, Muslims as backwards, and both Muslims and Arabs as outside the space of modernity occupied by the Christian Lebanese, Mounir sets up a framework of postcolonial identity that is dependent upon colonial as well as patriarchal models of

identity formation. In particular, he draws on what Barbara Harlow terms "cultural paradigms of the colonized as either prelapsarian innocents or unschooled ignorants, the most 'deserving' among whom still await tutoring by their more politically advanced, 'developed' colonizers" (1992, 37). Much as the women watching Mounir's hunting film provide a backdrop against which the hunters construct their sense of masculinity, the Syrian villages provide a backdrop against which Mounir can articulate his own "modernity" and "Europeanness" while also laying claim to the cultural "authenticity" that the Syrian villages offer. As Thomas Foster observes, "Mounir's film resolves his contradictory desire both to participate in the European narrative of modernity and to narrate Lebanon's 'return' to a precolonial condition of autonomous national identity that never actually existed since the boundaries of Lebanon were artificially imposed by the French" (1995, 61).

But as the narrator realizes, the predication of subjecthood upon intersecting oppositions between Syrian and Lebanese, female and male, east and west, primitive and civilized depends upon the silencing and subordination of those with less power. Whether as representatives of backwardness or symbols of pastoral innocence, the Syrians do not function as agents in their own right: rather, they emerge as mute emblems of Mounir's projected desires. This silencing bothers the narrator, whose sense of affinity with the voiceless is informed by her own experience with the ways in which patriarchal social structures silence women. In contrast to Mounir, who plans to portray silent images of beautiful desert skies and happy peasants, the narrator wants to give voice to the concerns of the marginalized, and to represent the individual lives and suffering behind these images. "This film should say something," she argues. "These people have

problems, their own lives. There's something very important to be said" (Adnan 1982, 7). While Mounir believes it is possible to make a "nonpolitical" film, the narrator's insistence on the importance of speaking for the subaltern and the silenced makes claims for the moral and political role of art. Moreover, in contrast to Mounir, who is unwilling to let the material reality of the Syrians' lives jostle his preconceived ideas, the narrator seeks to ground her representation of the Syrians in actual facts. "Find me two or three construction sites," she says, "where I can go to familiarize myself with the life of Syrian workers in Lebanon" (6-7).

Despite her politically engaged stance, however, the narrator's role in the film project raises questions not only about the political efficacy of artistic representation, but also about her own subject position within a world structured by power relations, in which no location is entirely innocent. Despite her insights into gendered and postcolonial identities and relationships, her own position within the society of wealthy Lebanese complicates her attempt to speak on behalf of others, and ultimately undercuts her ability to levy an effective social and political critique. This becomes particularly clear when she attempts to interview the Syrians for the film. The seasonal laborers she seeks out at construction sites are, in her description, "small, supple, muscular, shy, furtive, and above all, silent" (Adnan 1982, 10). They are spoken to by the contractor at the site, who "arrives in superb and enormous cars," as if they are "beasts of burden who go on two legs only because the narrowness of the stairways makes it impossible to go on four" (10). Within the context of this disparity of wealth and poverty, power and vulnerability, the narrator's own identity as an educated, well-off Christian Lebanese involved in the arts, and her relationship to the poor, uneducated migrant workers she

hopes to represent, stands as an unaddressed problem. Arriving at the construction site, the narrator expects to find them willing to speak openly to her about their situation, and is frustrated by their reticence:

I try to get them talking. They refuse. According to them everything is always all right. At noon they sit on the ground, even in the dirt, as they did in their villages. A little cement mixes with their food. At night they sleep on the story where they are working . . . When it rains it's the same. They remain riveted to their places in the wind and the wet and wait for it to end . . . If a stone needs to be raised ten stories, it goes on foot. That's all.

I talk to them about their village. They say it's back there. Very far. Beirut is very nice . . . Do they like the Lebanese? Of course, they say. They're our brothers. They're just more advanced. They have big cars and beautiful houses.

When I tell Mounir that there is nothing to be had here but the circles under the eyes, the bent backs, the sorrow, the infernal noise of the cement mixers, the sun that beats, and the rain that gnaws, and that it could all be said very briefly with a few big images and nothing more, he's disappointed. His film, decidedly, turns around nothing. (10-11)

Notwithstanding the narrator's ironic awareness of the constraints on the Syrians' self-representation--clearly everything is not "always all right"--the ambiguity of her concluding comment, that the film turns around "nothing," is telling. On some level the narrator appears frustrated with the laborers for failing to cooperate in the representation of their suffering. But like the "deaf-mute" children of Time II, the Syrians are voiceless not because they have nothing to say, but because they do not have access to dominant languages and modes of representation. Moreover, as economically vulnerable workers they are, unsurprisingly, reluctant to voice complaints to a strange woman at their work-site. But these issues are not addressed by the narrator, despite her earlier recognition of both the ways in which power silences and the ways in which the powerless may

participate in their own silencing. Failing to acknowledge in the laborers' withheld articulation the complex relationship between political, social, economic and representational power, and frustrated at their apparent inability to provide the material she needs for the film, she appears to accept their silence at face value.

Underlying this response are the narrator's implicit views on political engagement, representation, and agency--views that in some ways replicate rather than challenge existing power relationships. For instance, despite her wish that the film should serve the role of empowering the voiceless, the narrator's expectation that the Syrians will cooperate with her plans is based on the implicit view that their agency will be made possible through her own articulation--in other words, that she will give voice to them (much as the narrator's own voice is co-opted by Mounir). This privileging of her voice over theirs is made apparent at the level of narrative, as the narrator distills the laborers' voices into her own discourse rather than reporting their actual dialogue. Implicitly portraying them as silent victims, rather than as subjects whose lack of self-articulation is due to the material workings of power, she concludes that "there is nothing to be had here" but the "big images" of mute bodily suffering: "the circles under the eyes, the bent backs . . . the sun that beats, and the rain that gnaws" (Adnan 1982, 11). But by thrusting the laborers into the role of timeless, suffering peasants instead of agents in the modern world, such depiction replicates in striking ways the schism between body and voice described by Scarry as characteristic of situations of unequal power. Although the narrator wants to represent the laborers' plight, her attempt founders not only on her inability to create conditions under which their articulation might become possible, but also on her failure to analyze the implications of her own position of privilege and power.

As a result her stance, however principled, bears an uncomfortable resemblance to that of Mounir, for whom the Syrians are nothing more than a projection of his own assumptions.

These complexities of voice and representation take on greater resonance because they are played out against the backdrop of the war's outbreak, a context that brings to crisis the problem of agency and articulation more generally. While the war reinscribes power along lines of gender, situating men at the center of violent interactions and pushing women back into traditional female realms, it also forces the narrator to confront not only her own helplessness but also her own desire for power and her capacity for violence. "I understood this need for violence one day in front of an electric wire torn from its socket," she admits. "In the two holes there remained two little bits of brilliant copper wire which seemed to call out to me. And I wanted to touch them, to reunite them in my hand, to make that current pass through my body, and see what it was like to burn. I resisted only with an extraordinary effort" (Adnan 1982, 13). Although she struggles to find a way of opposing the war's brutality, the only recourse she can imagine is a different form of violence. "I tell myself that it would be better to let loose a million birds in the sky over Lebanon," she says, "so that these hunters could practice on them, and this carnage could be avoided" (17).

The narrator's inscription into, and inability to intervene in, structures of violence is similarly reflected in the tensions underlying her narration of the war. "On the thirteenth of April 1975 Hatred erupts," she begins. The capitalization of "Hatred" evokes the enormity of the war's events through near-mythologization, as does the narrator's charged, poetic discourse--for instance, her portrayal of the city as "an electro-

magnetic field into which everyone wants to plug himself" (Adnan 1982, 13). But this poetic discourse eventually falters, replaced by abrupt, declarative sentences conveying the shocked contraction of being brought about by the war: "They fight in the moonlight. At night sounds are more distinct. . . . The artillery booms" (15). As if searching for a language commensurate to the violence, the narrator turns to journalistic accounts of the war. But the remote, disembodied language of journalism reflects a disconcerting disconnection between articulation and bodily reality. When the narrator picks up the paper, all she finds is a "rapid list of names and facts" that fail either to do justice to the human potential of the victims or to grapple with the meaning of their deaths. Instead, each murdered individual is ticked off --sometimes named, sometimes anonymous--as one more "incident." In the face of this schism between war's reality and the language used to describe it, the connections between actor and action become obscured: even "bullets seem to leave by themselves" (15). Although the narrator wants to take action against this violence-- if only by using the film project to portray the fate of Syrian workers rounded up and shot--in such a context she can do or say little. Even her withdrawal from the film project to protest Mounir's refusal to address the politicized wartime realities of the Syrian laborers in Beirut proves irrelevant. Mounir reassures her patronizingly, "Don't worry about it. Tony, Fouad Pierre and I will discuss it . . . You come to the house for dinner tonight" (24). Thus reminded of her "place" as a woman, she is simultaneously recuperated into the comfort of her class status, her voice and agency subsumed both by her marginalization and her privilege. It is perhaps no surprise that when the narrator reemerges in Time II, she does so as simply an observer, her narration but one of many voices, with no power to interfere in the inexorable movement towards

Marie Rose's death.

While Time I depicts a schism between articulation and the gendered, subjected body, Time II, which stands in synchronic relationship to the diachronic narrative of Time I, seeks to breach this schism, levying a social and political critique that brings to the foreground issues of communication and their relationship to agency. As if in response to the narrative and representational crises of Time I, Time II posits a new mode of narration, depicting the action entirely through the unattributed voices of individual characters. This strategy forces readers to discard their stance of uninvolved spectatorship and to enter into the time and space of the narrative, participating in the construction of meaning through careful listening. The multiple subjectivities of this section not only stand in contrast to the monolithic discourse and faceless violence of Time I, but also bring to the foreground the dialogical contexts within which agency and articulation become possible. At the same time, however, the narrative framework also contains and isolates individual voices, suggesting at a structural level the ways in which articulation is appropriated within structures of power.

At the center of Time II is the transgressive figure of Marie Rose, a woman who unsettles social, gendered, religious and political boundaries of identity. Like the actual Marie Rose Boulous upon whom the novel is based, Adnan's Marie Rose is a divorced Christian Lebanese woman living in Muslim West Beirut and active in educational reform, labor strikes, women's liberation, and the Palestinian cause. Her challenge to insular group power and to the boundaries, both actual and metaphorical, that maintain group identities, result in her being considered a "traitor": after the war breaks out she is kidnapped by Christian militiamen, and murdered. As one of her captors in the novel

puts it, "I don't understand. She's a Christian and she went over to the Moslem camp. She's Lebanese and she went over to the Palestinian camp. Where's the problem? We must do away with her like with every other enemy" (Adnan 1982, 36). In contrast to her captors' belief in maintaining closed circles of identification through physical violence, Marie Rose argues for a transgressive and liberating "love of the Stranger" that takes as its central element a willingness to listen to and engage with others across exclusionary boundaries of identification (Adnan 1982, 94-95). Yanked out of "the world of ordinary speech" (32) by her kidnappers--a world defined by a "language of coercion and violence, a discourse of power which suppresses the voices of its victims" (Harlow 1987, 112)-- Marie Rose posits an alternative mode of articulation and communication, one that takes as its goal the act of listening to and empowering the voice of the subaltern. While her captors' agency is predicated on physical coercion, Marie Rose's agency is predicated on the concept of dialogue: of listening and speaking to, rather than speaking for, others.

This mode of agency is exemplified in Time II through Marie Rose's impassioned debate with her captors, in particular with Mounir, whose prior relationship with her complicates the binary opposition of friend vs. enemy that structures the other men's world views. (As he admits, "I know her, and knowing is an extraordinarily strong bond" (Adnan 1982, 34-35).) The power dynamics structuring their interaction is clear: Marie Rose is caught in her captors' net like a "fish torn from the sea . . . thrashing with the same impotence" (32). Similarly, the fatal outcome of the encounter is evident early in Time II: as the narrator states, "I doubt Marie Rose will leave this confrontation alive" (40). Yet Marie Rose nonetheless dares to speak out, challenging her captors' political and social ideologies, their assumptions about the role of women in the political order

and about group loyalty, and their violent power. When Mounir warns her, "Marie-Rose, it's you who's being judged here, not us," she replies, "And who would prevent me from saying what I think since this is perhaps my last opportunity . . . There are knots to untie, abscesses to drain" (56-57).

Marie Rose's ability to speak out in the face of such overwhelming power is striking, particularly in light of the problems suggested in Time I about the limited possibilities of articulation in contexts of oppression and violence. What Time II suggests is that Marie Rose's articulation, moral efficacy, and agency are grounded in her attempt to listen to, rather than simply speak for, others, and to empower others to find their own voices. Because of this stance of caring and receptivity, Marie Rose's voice is heard across sectarian lines, as news of her capture ripples through the city, touching people in all sectors of the city regardless of political or religious affiliation. "'Allah bring her back,' some said, while others said 'Blessed Virgin, we'll light a hundred candles for you if you just send her back to us safe and sound'" (Adnan 1982, 72). In engaging with others across group lines, Marie Rose also destabilizes the boundaries of her own privilege as well as the structure of traditional group affiliations--the "concentric circles" that contain the individual within widening spheres of power. She crosses the green line dividing the war-torn city to teach the societally-outcast "deaf-mute" children; she supports the Palestinian cause despite the risk such support entails; and she refuses an offer to save her own life at the expense of that of her Palestinian lover.

However, her heroism is not unique; rather, it is part of a growing movement of resistance. As Marie Rose notes, "half of the country, made up of as many Christians as Moslems . . . are fighting for and with the Palestinians. I'm not the only one to do it"

(Adnan 1982, 57). Moreover, her stance is the result of a progression of events and changing structural conditions. As even Mounir recognizes, a "series of roads, of stages, of turning-points" made possible Marie Rose's resistance: rebellion against an unhappy marriage, a growing public life, participation in "conferences, protests, social action, planning committees, causes of all kinds" (35; 49). By stressing this progression, the novel points towards the growing role of Lebanese women in challenging Lebanon's political and social structures. As Barbara Harlow comments, "Sitt Marie Rose charts a trajectory by way of which women's access to the public arena of political activism can transform the structures of sectarianism that have killed [them]" (1992, 54). Moreover, the suggestion that Marie Rose is not unique in her resistance is reflected on a structural level by the narrative framework of Time II, for although this section focuses on the events leading up to Marie Rose's death, it does not unconditionally privilege Marie Rose's voice. Rather, Time II refracts the narration through different voices, suggesting--even as it makes clear Marie Rose's structural over-determination--that resistance is not a singular event, and that its story cannot be told through one voice alone.

The emphasis in Time II on direct speech and active listening is reflected metaphorically through Adnan's authorial decision to depict Marie Rose not as a teacher of retarded children, as was the real Marie Rose Boulos, but as a teacher of speech- and hearing-impaired children. In her role as a teacher of communication skills, Marie Rose does not speak for the children, but empowers them to speak for themselves. Hence, she offers an alternative to the problem confronted by the narrator in Time I of representing subaltern subjects: acknowledging the children's exclusion from dominant forms of discourse, she also gives them the tools of self-articulation with which to redress this

marginalization. Her call for a wholesale reform of modes of relationship and communication contrasts sharply not only with the moral “deafness” of her captors, but also with the narrator’s uninvolved but authoritative stance. At the same time, the children's discursively-realized "voice" not only asserts the possibility of subaltern articulation, but also holds the possibility of disrupting the monolithic discourse upon which the narrative of communal identity is predicated. The militiamen view the children as societal outcasts who are there to learn their place within the normative boundaries of the group, and to discover, as Fouad states, "what it costs to be a traitor" (Adnan 1982, 92). But the children are not simply mute witnesses to the events. Rather, they provide their own commentary and their own perspective. Instead of accepting Marie Rose's execution as a demonstration of the fact that, as Fouad puts it, "might makes right" (92), the children testify to the incomprehensible horror of her murder. "They've forgotten all about us, but we see everything," they cry. "Devils have come up from underground and they've fallen on her . . . No human being would ever do what they're doing" (82). Refuting the militiamen's attempt to define violence as "normal," the right of those with power, they testify to the atrocity of Marie Rose’s murder, making clear that such acts remain outside of the boundaries of "human" behavior.

But this testimony is circumscribed by the forces, discursive, social and political, that call both the children's voice and their agency into question. As they themselves acknowledge, "Perhaps one day speech and sound will be restored to us, we'll be able to hear and speak and say what happened. But it's not certain. Some sicknesses are incurable" (Adnan 1982, 82). The tenuous nature of their resistance is accentuated by their marginalization within the Lebanese social structure. Fulfilling a role similar to that

of the Syrian villagers of Time I, the children are situated in Time II as subaltern representatives of "the People," whose inclusion within the boundaries of the group is predicated upon their acquiescence to the status quo. As they observe, commenting on an Egyptian movie Marie Rose has taken them to see, "We have been told that to be The People is to be like in the film, lots and lots of smiling folks. When we grow up, we'll be The People too. And it's not only because we're poor. We're not all poor. It's not enough just to be poor to be The People. You have to be docile and innocent. You have to be a part of things like clouds are a part of the sky" (45). This pastoral inscription glosses over not only the violence underlying the homeostasis of the national body, but also the children's own internalization of the forces which render them "docile and innocent." For like the women watching the film in Time I, the children are to some extent complicit with the larger structures that situate them, longing not to transform so much as to participate in the structures of power. They comment, "She [Marie Rose] doesn't like the war. Neither do we, because we can't take part in it" (30). Their inability to speak or hear functions within the text not only as a sign of their subaltern status, but also as a metaphor for the perils of silence in a world of violent power relations, where silence too often becomes complicity. As the children themselves observe, "There's no noise in this world. That's why the war doesn't stop. Nobody wants to stop it . . . From the Gulf to the Atlantic, on our geography maps, the Arabs are all silent" (43).

The tensions underlying the relationship between voice, agency and resistance are brought more clearly into focus in Time II through the relationship between the narrator and Marie Rose. As various commentators have noted, the narrator and Marie Rose share many similarities.<sup>4</sup> Both challenge the intersection of gendered, class-based, sectarian,

nationalistic and religious hierarchies of power while also implicitly presenting a challenge to stereotypes of Arab women. (For instance, the revelation early in Time I that the narrator has been to Taos, New Mexico unsettles conventional assumptions about Arab women's lives.) Both seek to give voice to the sufferings of subaltern "others." And in their attempt to articulate an agency that will transform not only their own situation but that of others, both move uneasily between positions of privilege and marginalization. However, there are significant differences between the two. In contrast to Marie Rose, who stands in Time II as an exemplar of agency, courage and activism, the narrator in Time II does not seek to intervene, but functions strictly as an observer. Describing the men who kidnap Marie Rose, she depicts herself as "hover[ing] above this city, this country, and the continent to which they belong. I never lose sight of them. I have devoted myself to observing them up close" (Adnan 1982, 39). In a sense, this stance positions her as director of the film she wanted to make in Time I, the film in which she would finally "say something . . . important." Her omniscient commentary at the close of each subsection of Time II not only analyzes the political context in which Marie Rose's story is played out, but also hints at the unfolding plot. Observing, from a safe distance, a drama unfolding toward a foregone conclusion, the narrator predicts the outcome of Marie Rose's captivity in much the same way she predicted the denouement of Mounir's film. Describing Marie Rose as an challenge to the natural (or rather, naturalized) order of things, she concludes, "When the impossible mutation takes place, when, for example, someone like Marie-Rose leaves the normal order of things, the political body releases its antibodies in a blind, automatic process. The cell that contains the desire for liberty is killed, digested, reabsorbed" (76).

The precisely choreographed narrative structure of Time II echoes the homeostasis of the political and social body within which Marie Rose is but an errant cell to be contained and killed. Situating each character within a patterned narrative form, Time II privileges individual voices while at the same time making clear their structural overdetermination. The role of the narrator as both an omniscient narrator and a separate character whose voice is juxtaposed to, and at times intersects with, that of Marie Rose accentuates this tension between individual agency and structural inscription. Moreover, the narrator's position as the concluding speaker in each of the three subsections of Time II serves as a reminder of the mediating role of the artist/intellectual, bringing the narrator's role under scrutiny and disrupting the illusion of narrative transparency assumed by the film project of Time I.

This mediating role, and its corresponding implications for Adnan's own relationship to the text, is most evident in the final chapter of the novel. This chapter, an interior monologue by the narrator, opens with an aesthetic statement that emphasizes the narrative's status as a literary artifact and that points toward the authorial need to wrest resolution and meaning from tragedy. "I want to talk about the light on this day," the narrator begins. "An execution always lasts a long time. I want to say forever and forever that the sea is beautiful . . . It's only in it, in its immemorial blue, that the blood of all is finally mixed" (Adnan 1982, 98). Trying to encompass the horror of Marie Rose's execution, the narrator searches for understanding. But her search founders on the tension between visionary transcendence and brutal fact. "To discover a truth is to discover a fundamental limit," she says, "a kind of inner wall to the mind, so I fall again to the ground of passing time, and discover that it's Marie Rose who's right" (99-100).

Notwithstanding her sense of Marie Rose's "rightness" (which perhaps refers to Marie Rose's engagement, commitment, and grounding in the local) the narrator understands that Marie Rose is situated within a context of structural oppression, beneath the weight of which even the most visionary modes of activism falter. Indeed, she suggests, Marie Rose's death is the outcome of "universal Power" oppressing the Arab world more generally: "Marie-Rose is not alone in her death. Second by second the inhabitants of this city that were her comrades fall . . . Airplanes have become the flies of the Arab world, conceived in a frenzy of power, and the plague they carry is the vehicle of its new curse" (104).

Power, to return to Elaine Scarry's argument, depends on the capacity for articulation and specifically on the power of achieving self-description. While Sitt Marie Rose affirms both the possibility and the necessity of articulation in the face of oppression, and grants moral primacy to Marie Rose and her impassioned articulation, it also makes clear that narration, like other forms of representation, is too often co-opted by the structures of power. "It must be said," the narrator states, "so that this civilization . . . hears what its masses want to tell it"--the untold stories of oppression and repression, the words "that have been waiting there for so long" (Adnan 1982, 100). But the act of narration is caught up in the hierarchical relationship between those possessing the power of representation and those who are represented. In a clear reflection of this structural hierarchy, it is not Marie Rose's words or vision with which the text concludes, but the narrator's surreal description of the "deaf-mute" children dancing to the reverberations of bombs in the wake of Marie Rose's execution.

This final image brings to a crescendo the ambivalence surrounding the

possibilities of subaltern articulation and resistance in Sitt Marie Rose. "Whether you like it or not," the narrator asserts, echoing the recognition put forward in both Time I and Time II of the seductive nature of violence, "an execution is always a celebration. It is the dance of Signs and their stabilization in Death. It is the swift flight of silence without pardon. It is the explosion of absolute darkness among us. What can one do in the black Feast but dance? The deaf-mutes rise, and moved by the rhythm of falling bombs their bodies receive from the trembling earth, they begin to dance" (Adnan 1982, 104-5). The stabilization of the "dance of Signs" refers, of course, to Marie Rose's literal silencing in death, as well as to the discursive containment of her voice through the narrative structure of Time II. But the image also raises questions about the aestheticization of violence inherent in the use of artistic forms to narrate violent events. The "embodied articulation" of the children's dance in some ways functions to extend Marie Rose's singular voice beyond the limits of narrative frame, and thus to heal the schism between voice and body enacted in her death. But the novel's narrative structure also emphasizes the literary, discursive status of her voice, implicitly situating both narrative and narrator at a remove from the political context that makes the novel, as a resistance text, both possible and necessary. Although providing a powerful closure to Marie Rose's story, the final image of the children dancing propels the reader into an aesthetic realm where poetic transcendence provides perhaps the only possible response to unthinkable horror. As the narrator queries, "What can one do in this black Feast but dance?" (105).

This question, and the self-reflexivity of its narrative gesture, returns the reader to the questions raised in Time I regarding the efficacy of artistic representation in representing oppression and in giving voice to the voiceless. Like the children's dance,

the novel offers an aesthetic response to a violent event. While Time II, as we have seen, challenges Time I's failure to make possible subaltern articulation by putting forward the voice of both Marie Rose and the "deaf-mute" children, these voices are discursively constructed and contained. Thus, the narrative attempt in Time II to empower subaltern voices and to resist violence and oppression is ultimately recuperated within the confines of poetic discourse. Moreover, while it is true, as Elaine Scarry argues, that any artifact of human creativity, whether a coat, a chair or a poem, holds the potential to challenge the isolation of pain and thus to function as a vehicle of resistance, it may also be true that the complexities inherent in the act of representation work to undermine the efficacy of this resistance, rendering resistance literature on some level a poetic "dance" in the face of death.

This anxiety about the political efficacy of resistance literature is particularly significant in the case of Sitt Marie Rose because of the postcolonial tensions informing the text. As a novel by an author who is situated, like her narrator, at a remove from the events she depicts, Sitt Marie Rose confronts the problem of reaching an audience resistant to acknowledging their own social, religious, economic, political and military power, and their role in the war's violence (a problem that has far-reaching implications for Arab American writing more generally). The novel's efficacy as a resistance text depends upon whether or not it will be heard and responded to by those implicated in the social and political power structures it critiques. Similarly, the efficacy of Marie Rose's resistance within the novel rests on whether or not her speech will be heard by her captors, and, more generally, by the Christian Lebanese whom they represent.

It is this anxiety about the text's wider political efficacy that seems to underlie the

ambivalence with which the “deaf-mute” children's final *danse macabre* is presented. Located on the ground of history, where no action is innocent and not all illnesses are curable, the children’s dance is situated, like the novel itself, within a literary and poetic space circumscribed by a violent political context. The surreal dimensions of this dance accentuate its literary and discursive status. And indeed, unlike human rights reporting, which "entails both documentation and intervention" (Harlow 1992, 244), literary texts such as Sitt Marie Rose do not necessarily function as vehicles of explicit political intervention. Yet, both the children’s dance and the novel itself also gesture toward what Scarry calls the "sharability of sentience" (1985, 326)--the possibility of speaking beyond the structures of power that silence and isolate individuals. Although Sitt Marie Rose makes clear the problematics of representation, the novel stands as testimony to the crucial significance of speaking out against oppression, and to the possibility of healing the schism between body and voice. As Barbara Harlow asserts, "The silence imposed by the torturer is challenged by the demand for political resistance, raising again and again the urgent and critical relation between writing human rights and righting political wrongs" (1992, 256). This relation is never uncomplicated. But out of that complication rises the fierce power of Sitt Marie Rose.

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<sup>1</sup>A version of this chapter was first published in Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women’s Novels, Ed. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba (Syracuse University Press) under the title “Voice, Representation and Resistant: Etel Adnan’s Sitt Marie Rose.”

<sup>2</sup>First published in French by Des Femmes (Paris,1978), Sitt Marie Rose was translated into English by Georgina Kleege and published in the U.S. by Post-Apollo Press in 1982. All references herein are to the 1982 English translation.

<sup>3</sup> A visual artist as well as a writer, Adnan creates paintings, drawings, calligraphy and tapestry designs, in addition to publishing poetry, fiction, and non-fiction prose. In an interview with Hilary Kilpatrick, Adnan said, "In 1960 I began to paint, and I heard myself say out loud, ‘I paint in Arabic!’ At that moment my soul was at peace, as if I'd been given the answer to an important problem" (Kilpatrick 119). Adnan’s work often crosses over between visual and textual artistic mediums, as if to probe the limitations of representational forms and to interrogate the relationship between form and meaning. This is perhaps most

evident in The Arab Apocalypse, in which graphic symbols are used to convey meaning at the boundaries where language breaks down.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Foster argues that "the position shared by the narrator and Sitt Marie Rose provides a basis for . . . a critique of both Western representations of 'the Arabs' and of the Lebanese nationalism's representations of its own 'others' . . ." ("Circles of Oppression" 64). Similarly, Madeline Cassidy notes that "Marie-Rose and the film writer occupy a similar space, unbounded by delineations of gender, ethnicity and class" (284).

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## Homemaking

It was a place of stone and trees,  
stooped houses slanting  
into the road. Outside her window  
workers chipped rough-hewn limestone

to blocks, staccato labor  
splicing the air like rain.  
What could she speak of?  
Only the slow tick of light

across the floor, the chipped stone  
of loneliness. Afternoons,  
she watched shade drip  
down the wall, collect in puddles

on the tile. Sometimes dusk found her  
still there, ear pressed like a medic's  
to the house's chiseled skin,  
listening for the echo of her heartbeat,

for the measure of her life  
in the faint settling of stone.

\*

I was the child in the doorway, watching.  
I was the child who saw her turn silently away.  
I was the child who understood nothing.

I would be a pillow at the small of her back,  
a glass of cold water on a tray,  
a cloth shielding her from the sun.

I would be a dictionary  
holding all the languages known and unknown.  
I would save everything:

the space between moments,  
the silence between words,  
the sound of a door closing or opening.

\*

She crossed an ocean and found a world  
different and yet the same.  
A woman's labor is a woman's labor.  
It was enough, much of the time.

The birth pangs were another journey.  
The tidal wave bore down,  
left her storm-ravaged,  
the child a beached animal on her belly.

Sometimes she felt her own life  
flung up on herself  
in just that way.  
Once, slitting a pigeon for cooking,

underskin bloody beneath her knife,  
she found a gleaming of eggs,  
shells stark and tender  
as infant moons.

She grieved, then, for her girls,  
born to a world of men.

\*

I see her in an unheated room at a piano,  
door shut, too shy  
to sing in a voice that might be overheard,

too lonely to remain silent.

I am outside, straining for the melody  
that slips from the room

like the odor of baking bread.

Later she will move through the house  
lit with a quiet light.

\*

Once I woke early, birds were crying,  
she was not in her bed.

I wandered through the house, searching,

summer tile cool beneath my feet.

Opening the front door, I saw her,  
book in hand, robe crumpled loosely,

shoulders soft with the lingering touch  
of sleep. At the sound of my step  
she turned, the shine of privacy

still on her -- a singular beauty,  
like rain trembling on jasmine --  
and composed herself to a smile.

## Chapter 7

### Transfigurations: Home-space in Arab American Women's Fiction

*I want to remember what I've never lived  
a home within me within us  
where honey is offered from my belly*

*--Suheir Hammad, "Broken and Beirut," Born  
Palestinian, Born Black*

Arab American experience has often been played out within the context of a presumed binary schism between old world and new, Arab and American, exile and ethnicity. The paradigm of a trajectory from homelessness to belonging in Arab American literature informs not only narratives of exile from the old world and adaptation to the new, but also the attempts of later generations to make sense of and claim all sides of their complex heritages while simultaneously constructing new ground on which to stand. Within this trajectory, home-space, configured in both literal and metaphorical terms, takes on central importance, both as the domestic site of origin within which the drama of ethnicity is played out, and the desired end goal of belonging: the realm within which the ethnic self is constituted and the place where the fragmented self can become, finally, whole. In Arab-American contexts, "home" may refer to the Old World homeland, to a domestic ethnic U.S. home, to the broader home of an Arab-American community, to a home in American culture achieved through assimilation or multiculturalism, or to a transnational home-space that refutes

singular geographical or cultural or political orientations. But overarching all of these is the idea of a home in the self: a space shaped by cultural, political, social, religious, familial, gendered and geographical factors, but which cannot be reduced to any of these. In this sense home-space rewrites the multiple dimensions of exile – physical, cultural, emotional, spiritual and metaphorical -- and creates the grounds for both identity and agency.

Central to portrayals of exile and home-space are conceptions of home as an implicitly, and often relentlessly, gendered space. The concept of home as a gender-coded construct has been the subject of much feminist criticism generally. But in the context of immigrant and ethnic literature, issues of home-space take on particular gendered implications. With women posited as the standard-bearers of ethnic and national culture (cf Bulbeck), ethnic home-space becomes configured as the bastion of the old world it reflects and seeks to preserve. The metonymic and thematic slippage between home and the ethnic homeland often means that nostalgia for an ethnic past becomes conflated with nostalgia for tradition and for traditional structures such as patriarchy. As a result, the preservation of home-space may become a reification of patriarchy.<sup>1</sup>

This reification is accentuated by the domestic roles that women usually play in the maintenance and preservation of ethnicity. As Micaela di Leonardo has pointed out, ethnic identity “is popularly assumed to imply an adherence to tradition, and tradition...encodes the ideal of the patriarchal family” (221). In such constructs, women figure not just as emblems and repositories of the old world culture, but also as examples of how the ethnic community must change in order to ‘belong’ and find home-space in America. This linkage creates a slippage between ethnicity and patriarchy, Americanization and feminist liberation that poses troubling problems for

women who identify as both feminists and ethnics; who seek, that is, to articulate identity without eliding any aspect of their selfhood. As Evelyn Shakir observes, “It may be...that there is no contradiction between being feminist and being Arab, that working for women’s rights and working for Arab rights are two expressions of the same battle for human dignity. Nevertheless, Arab American women have not always found it comfortable or easy to be both feminist and ethnic” [104].

Central to the slippage between ethnicity and patriarchy is what Moulouk Berry has described as the “meta-narrative of gender inequality” in Arab and Muslim culture (124). Arab-American women undeniably face real challenges as they seek to transform cultural and familial gendered constructs from their location at the intersection of “sexism within our communities and racism in U.S. society” (Abdulhadi et. al, 20). But the stereotypes permeating both academic and popular discourse of Arab and Muslim cultures, of Arab culture as “rigidly patriarchal, subordinating... a place for male domination and male sexual fantasy” (Joseph 264), too often over-determine these efforts at transformation. Within the totalizing structure of this meta-narrative, feminist critiques may be recuperated as evidence of the implacable “truth” of Arab and Muslim gender oppression, while Arab-American women who speak or act as feminists may be presumed able to speak out *only* because they have “escaped” their home culture or have “evolved” through contact with Americanization to a “higher” level. By bringing attention to internal issues of patriarchy or sexism, feminists may find themselves accused by other community members not only of “airing dirty laundry in public,” but also of reinforcing a schism between “bad Arab culture” and its implied opposite, a “good American culture” in which gender inequity is supposedly absent. The result is too often the appropriation and containment of feminist voices.

As Suad Joseph has argued, one of the ways in which the Arab is represented as essentially different from the American is through the discourse of freedom so integral to American identity. The Arab is represented as ‘not-independent, not-autonomous, not-individual, not-free (258), while the American is presented as the opposite: independent, autonomous, individual, free. The construct reinforces broader notions of gendered ‘freedom’ which privilege American culture over Arab culture. Alia Malek points out that “American patriarchy ...posit[s] American culture as superior to Arab culture because American women are more ‘free’ than Arab women.... if Arab culture is bad, American culture must be good; if Arab women are oppressed, then American women are not”(178). Similarly, the norms of connective selfhood presumed to be a “sign of health and maturity’ in Arab countries (Joseph, 264) are dysfunctionalized in western discourses of selfhood which stress individualism above all else. In this context, the more traditionally Arab a woman is, the more oppressed and repressed she is assumed to be; the more sexually or sartorially liberated, the more American. If the process of assimilation is viewed as a movement away from tradition, then changes in ethnic gender roles are linked to the process of Americanization. This binary opposition suggests that the search for freedom or transformation is inextricably linked to a move away from Arab identity toward American identity, a linkage which places Arab-American women who claim both Arab and feminist identity in a constantly defensive posture, forced to reject one or another part of their identities. This situation has serious ramifications for the creative and activist potential of Arab-American women, as well as for the search for an integrated Arab-American home-space.

The need to address these apparent contradictions between feminist and ethnic self-assertion, and to locate or create a space capacious enough to heal these internal

tensions, is a topic of increasing discussion among Arab-Americans. Central to the debate is the need to articulate a space where belonging and agency can coincide, where the future may be claimed without discarding the past, and where new, flexible ways of thinking may become possible. As Amira Jarmakani puts it, Arab-American women must not just denounce but also re-inhabit stereotypes in order to find a new space for oppositional thinking:

It is not enough to name the politics of invisibility, or to point out the problematic shortcomings of predominant stereotypes about Arab womanhood... we must re-inhabit those categories of representation in order to re-animate them as oppositional and resistant forms... The work of Arab American feminists... must ... focus on creating a fruitful fluidity that constantly forges new possibilities for understanding the complex realities of Arab and Arab American women's lives. Utilizing the tools of an oppositional consciousness, we can do the urgent work of carving and crafting new spaces for the expression of Arab American feminists. [138]

How to locate and claim such spaces is the on-going sub-text of a great deal of Arab-American women's writing. As authors grapple with the need to sustain and yet interrogate, affirm and yet transform, the familial, communal, cultural and political spaces they inhabit, they raise questions which are central to the construction of Arab-American identity on both a personal and communal level: questions about how domestic spaces and gender roles limit or enable women's agency, and about where and what home is in a bifurcated, politically fraught and increasingly transnational context. In the process, they raise deeply personal questions of how gender constructs and gendered experiences, in realms ranging from the sexual to the spiritual, shape the possibilities of coming home to oneself.

These issues have taken on particular importance with the recent flourishing of Arab-American women's fiction. Authors such as Mohja Kahf and Randa Jarrar

address issues of home-space and agency across a geographical landscape that extends from the Arab world to the U.S. and across a spectrum that ranges from the political to the sexual to the spiritual. Their texts depict Arab-American home-spaces as complex, contested, often internally fractured, yet potentially transfigurative sites: spaces to be claimed and refigured, rather than escaped. While assessing the ways in which gender inequity originates from the home, they also show that it is in the home where a sense of agency is constituted and an understanding of feminism sparked. By focusing on, rather than defensively denying or ignoring, problematic gender issues, these authors unsettle the structures that limit the possibilities of Arab-American women's agency, and explore ways of healing the implicit schism between gender and ethnicity that continues to render Arab-American feminists metaphorically homeless. Moreover, in their attempt to articulate a home-space capable of housing feminist complexity, they implicitly interrogate the relentless gender-coding of immigrant/ethnic paradigms of exile and belonging and question the binaries -- Arab vs. American, patriarchal vs. progressive -- which structure immigrant narratives along a linear model of adaptation and assimilation. As a result they suggest new ways of thinking about Arab-American experience, identity, and agency in the contemporary period.

#### Mohja Kahf: The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf

Scholar, poet, and cultural critic Mohja Kahf refracts this search for home-space through a specifically Muslim lens. Kahf, the author of the critical text Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque and of the poetry volume E-mails from Scheherazad, is known within both academic and non-academic contexts for her energetic willingness to tackle difficult subjects. In 2006

Kahf came to broader public attention with the publication of her novel The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, a text which gave voice to an array of issues which had till then received scant literary attention. Through its richly detailed portrayal of Muslim immigrant life in the U.S., the novel forces readers to take a hard look at the assumptions structuring the meta-narrative through which American readers most often understand Islam. In the process it calls into question the immigrant trajectory which equates Americanization with a move away from religious and ethnic identity, and which locates proof of such assimilation in the liberation of Muslim women from the “inequity” of Islam. At the same time, however, it casts a critical gaze on internal community issues of sexism and racism. The result is a multifaceted critique with important implications for both Arab/Muslim feminist agency and for the question of where and how Arab and Muslim Americans fit within the American context.

For all its newness, in many ways The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf is a deeply familiar text. Its narrative trajectory offers a rendition of the classic immigrant search for belonging and home-space sketched by way of a number of recognizable American themes: the tension between cultural preservation and integration, the negotiation between ethnic and mainstream contexts, the dilemmas facing individuals in the ethnic community who wish neither to be trapped by the old nor lost in the new. The terrain of Kahf’s story—a Muslim Dawah in the heart of the U.S.—may seem unfamiliar to many readers. But when Kahf likens her Muslim characters to a brave band of pilgrims trekking the Oregon Trail in reverse (Tangerine 16), or describes them as “Lewis and Clarking” it through raspberry bushes (65), we realize that we are, in fact, on familiar ground. Indeed, Kahf’s characters, for all their refusal to be co-opted into mainstream America, are in many ways representative American

ethnics. And part of the novel's project is to show that Muslim Americans are as American as anyone else.

Yet, crucially, Kahf also shows that claiming American identity does not mean foreclosing difference. By placing at the center of her narrative a *hijab*-wearing female Muslim protagonist, Kahf not only refutes an array of stereotypes about Muslim women, but also challenges readers to examine the extent to which narratives of Americanization position Muslim women as the demarcation line between what is liberated, progressive, American, and what is not. While her novel interrogates the gender restrictions and racial dynamics of Muslim immigrant community norms, it situates this critique within an examination of the binary constructs which commodify and contain Arabs and Muslims, and which render Arab-American Muslim feminist home-space a purported impossibility. In order to think beyond the binary of Arab/Muslim vs. American, she suggests, we need to look at the ways in which gendered constructs keep that binary in place, and we need to ask what happens when gendered expectations are broken down, and the specificity of Arab and Muslim women's experiences accounted for. In this way, Kahf not only asks readers to consider what kinds of "home-spaces" are available to Muslim American women, she also asks us to imagine what kinds of transformations – of individuals and cultural spaces, representations and reading practices – are required to make such homecoming possible.

In an insightful discussion of Muslim literature in the U.S., Samaa Abdurraquib situates this literature in the context of immigrant writing more generally. Because Islam is considered "foreign" to the U.S. context, she posits, the narrative strategies Muslim authors use to deal with their subject material tend to echo the strategies of traditional immigrant texts --"assimilation, acculturation, or cultural

hybridity” (55)-- with the choice typically hinging upon whether the cultural climate at the time is one of hostility or acceptance. However, she argues, those texts which place religion, rather than culture, at their center encounter particular challenges, especially when they focus on women, because “Islam becomes the religion of the ‘other’ and the culture from which women need to be liberated.” Thus, “when Islam is conflated with cultural practices and is seen as oppressive, the female protagonists must consider compromising both religion and culture to incorporate themselves into American society” (56).

Interestingly, Abdurraquib suggests that texts by Muslim women who veil have a chance at escaping this binarism by simple virtue of the fact that assimilation is not an option for them. “Because their bodies cannot escape being marked as other and they, therefore, cannot reach the endpoint of being fully incorporated into American society... [they] can never construct a narrative in which comfortable assimilation is the denouement”(56). Instead, they face the challenge of creating “a new genre that defies the demands American culture places on conformity” (56). Thus, she argues, texts by women who veil challenge not only U.S. perceptions of Muslim women, but also the narrative structures by which ethnic experiences are understood. By shifting attention away from the negotiation of identity so central to immigrant fiction toward the context of reception and the structures within which identity is constructed and made visible, writers may escape the normative definitions that situate integration into the American context as the desired endpoint.

Part of Abdurraquib’s argument turns upon the fact that the format of poetry may be more successful than fiction at allowing authors to resist the immigrant plotline of assimilation, with its implicit subtext of character transformation as cultural compromise. Indeed, Abdurraquib argues that Kahf’s poetry succeeds in

positing “a new endpoint for Muslim immigrant writing” (68). Abdurraquib’s essay, very likely written before the publication of The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, makes no mention of Kahf’s novel. However, with the appearance of this novel the question of how fiction, too, can negotiate difference without acquiescing to assimilationist trajectories was brought to the forefront. What does it mean for an observant Muslim protagonist not just to resist assimilation but actively to claim home-space within American culture? Can a Muslim in the U.S. maintain a visible presence without retreating into an oppositional stance that is then recuperated into the terms of the binary? Is it possible to assert feminist identity without relinquishing aspects of Muslim identity such as the veil? And what kind of transformations of both individual and communal contexts might be required to make such homecoming possible?

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf engages with these questions both thematically and discursively. Homelessness in this novel spans the spectrum from the homelessness of the immigrant who has left the old world behind, to the homelessness of the culturally, religiously or sartorially-marked “Other” in the U.S., to the homelessness of individuals who challenge community norms. “Home-space” similarly spans the spectrum from the lost homeland (in this case, Syria), to the domestic realm of childhood, to the family, the ethnic community, the religious community, the wider span of the U.S. context. Yet, by the novel’s end, home emerges as not so much a place as a state of being--and becoming.

The novel opens with the familiar immigrant motif of exile, as the protagonist, Khadra Shamy, a religiously-observant Muslim-American photographer heading back to her home state on assignment, finds herself flooded with old emotions of homelessness:

“Liar,” she says to the highway sign that claims  
“The People of Indiana Welcome

You.”...Khadra Shamy spent most of her growing-up years in Indiana. She knows better than the sign... ‘None of it is for me.’ Between the flat land and the broad sky, she feels ground down to the grain, erased. [1-2].

This sense of erasure proves central to the novel’s subsequent exploration of home-space. Khadra’s sense of personal alienation is rooted in part in the communal racism experienced by the Muslim Dawah community. In the Hoosier society of her growing-up years, neighbors are hostile to their Muslim neighbors, children at school are cruel, the KKK blazons hateful slogans across the windows of the Dawah center, and racism reaches its extreme when a young black Muslim woman from the community is murdered. Such situations illustrate the extent to which the “ethnic options” Mary Waters describes (by which “white ethnics” enjoy the ability to choose when and how to identify as ethnic) may not apply to Arabs and Muslims, who may well be “white,” but whose visibility as Muslim marks them as “non-white,” and for whom “fitting in” may be impossible without stripping away core elements of themselves.

This is particularly true in the case of *hijab*-wearing women, whose visibility highlights the ways in which what is “foreign” and what is “American” are all too often gendered constructs, as *hijab* becomes a marker not just of foreignness but of a presumed gender oppression seen as fundamentally un-American. In the context of the slippage between Islam and patriarchy, Americanism and secular liberalism, the double-bind which informs Arab-American women’s experiences more generally becomes particularly acute. Can one be Muslim/Arab and American, religious and feminist at the same time? Or does assertion of one facet of identity require suppression of the others? In contexts where violence may result from one’s personal choices, these are not merely rhetorical questions.

One way to unsettle racist stereotypes, Kahf suggests, is to assert one's own claim to normative contexts. Thus, for instance, the Muslim community she depicts envision themselves as an intrepid band of pilgrims creating home-space in a hostile world—"loading up everything they owned on the luggage rack of the station wagon and set[ting] off over prairie and dale like pioneers" (*Tangerine* 15)---a gesture which lays claim to the most deeply rooted paradigms of Americanness. Another way, however, is to subvert—or invert--the interpretive process by which distinctions between normative and non-normative contexts are made. Thus, in an implicit response to stereotypes of "dirty Muslims," the novel posits cleanliness as the differentiating marker between Muslims and non-Muslims—but portrays *Muslims* as clean and Americans as dirty. As an early passage describes,

Her mother always ran the laundry twice in the Fallen Timbers basement laundry room with the coin machines. Because what if the person who used the washer before you had a dog? You never knew with Americans. Pee, poop, vomit, dog spit, and beer were impurities. Americans didn't care about impurities..... How Americans tolerate living in such filth is beyond me, her mother said. You come straight home. [4]

The juxtaposition of the "filth" of America and the admonishment to "come straight home" is not accidental. "Home" here functions as a safe space where the dangers and degradations of America can be protected against. The process of boundary-drawing is further accentuated in the matter of toilet hygiene. "Americans did not wash their buttocks with water when they pooped," the child Khadra learns. "This was a very big difference between them and Muslims" (68). Through this small detail Kahf effectively turns the slur of "dirty Muslim" on its head. How can Americans claim cultural and political superiority, Khadra's father wonders, when they do not even know how to wash themselves? "And they think they are more civilized than us, and tell us how to run our countries.' Wajdy shook his head. The Western imperialism and

high-handedness endured by the far-flung Muslim peoples of the world were that much more outrageous in light of the fact that its perpetrators did not even know how to properly clean their bottoms” (69). Such narrative moments situate Muslim communal norms as the template from which American culture deviates.

In setting up this dichotomy of Muslim vs. non-Muslim (and by extension, Muslim vs. American), Kahf turns the standard immigrant paradigm of exclusion from the host country on its head, and shows the ways in which the Muslim community sets *itself* apart. The separation is most visible in such practices as veiling, but is also marked out through the invisible lines of cultural practice and identity formation. An incident in which Khadra and her brother and two black Muslim children from the community are late coming home accentuates the extent to which the dividing line is enacted from within as well as from without. When the children are finally found and brought home, their mother, crazed with anxiety, screams,

“Do you think we are Americans? Do you think we have no limits? Do you think we leave our children wandering in the streets?...she scrubbed and scrubbed her daughter with an enormous loofah from Syria. We are not Americans!” she sobbed, her face twisted in grief. “We are not Americans!” [66-67]

In this passage, America functions not as the desired locus of integration, but as a threatening other which must be resisted at all costs. Indeed, instead of seeking assimilation, the Muslim community rigorously polices its boundaries to prevent contamination by “the white people who surrounded them, a crashing sea of unbelief in which the Dawah Center bobbed, a brave boat” (67). In such a context, every encounter with the outside world requires ritual and literal purification – a thorough scrubbing with the Syrian loofah. Although the narrative trajectory takes Khadra out of her natal community, her identity negotiations are never predicated upon an

opposition between accepting and rejecting Islam. Instead, Islam remains the home space within which she defines herself.

Moreover, the novel goes even further, asking readers to question the very desirability of American citizenship. When Khadra's family find they must, for practical reasons, take U.S. citizenship, Khadra is dismayed:

To her, taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in. After all she'd been through at school, defending her identity against the jeering kids who vaunted America's superiority as the clincher put-down to everything she said, everything she was. Wasn't she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman, a Nusayba, a Sumaya, an Um Salamah in exile? [141])

This is far indeed from the immigrant trajectory which situates assimilation into American culture as the desired end goal. Instead, the teenage Khadra scorns her parents' moderate Islamism as "not go[ing] far enough down the revolutionary path" [150]. Similarly, in college (until she is taught otherwise by an Arab-American friend) she disdains "second- and third-generation Americans descended from turn-of-the-century Arab immigrants [who] had failed to preserve their identity" [184] and were at best "McMuslim" [186].

Similarly, Kahf challenges the "meta-narrative" surrounding gender issues in Islam, thereby disrupting the dichotomized portrayal of Muslim culture as repressive to women and non-Muslim culture as liberating, and forcing readers to adjust their perceptions of what is normative. In so doing she asks readers to consider the extent to which transformation must occur not just in the immigrant protagonist confronting America, but also in the American context confronting the immigrant. She does this in particular through a focus on issues of *hijab*, which emerges here not as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, but as something both protective and empowering: an

affirmation of identity, a celebration of spirituality, and a coming-of-age ritual that holds much power. When Khadra first begins to wear hijab, she experiences it as

a thrill. Khadra had acquired vestments of a higher order. Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. [112]

Not surprisingly, Khadra's first memories of safety and belonging are situated amid a "forest of women in hijab, their *khimars* and saris and *jilbabs* and *thobes* and *depattas* fluttering and sweeping the floor and reaching out to everything" [55]. And as she learns from a black American member of the Muslim community, *hijab* symbolizes strength. "Imagine being made to stand naked in front of a whole bunch of people... That's how it was for black women back in slavery times. Up on the auction block. Covering up is a strong thing" (25).

If the novel went no further than to unsettle stereotypes through such positive depictions of Muslim communities, it would already have achieved something significant in American letters. But, crucially, Kahf goes further to interrogate, and ultimately transfigure, Muslim home-space itself. For as Khadra discovers, Muslim spaces too contain contradictions, exclusions and inequities. As the novel progresses, the questioning of a home-space predicated upon erasure is turned inward toward the very Muslim community which is so intimately depicted. Increasingly caught by the contradictions between theory and practice, Khadra comes to question the disparity between an Islam that preaches egalitarianism of race and gender, and communal norms that undermine this.

Representations of gender codes and gender norms, as we have seen, function as a way of signifying the boundaries between cultural contexts. In Indiana, to "belong" would require Khadra to erase her visibility as a *hijab*-wearing Muslim woman. But the novel's insistence on bringing Muslim women's identity to positive

visibility grapples not only with the wider American context that sees *hijabed* women as strangers, victims or threats, but also with the context of a Muslim community that sees women as familial members to be protected and cherished-- but does not necessarily provide space for interrogation and self-realization. Despite Khadra's early education in the egalitarianism of women and men in Islam, her lived experience shows her that cultural norms of gender too often win out over religious tenet. Islam may see no difference between women and men, all being equal in the eyes of God, but community norms suggest otherwise. Thus, for instance, although her brother was "sent to seminars in D.C and a two-month summer shariah program at Al-Azhar University, Cairo," Khadra was denied such opportunities: "Travel abroad, a girl alone? For the Shamys, it was out of the question" (153). Similarly, in college, when Khadra takes up Islamic studies at a mosque, sitting in on the men's *tajwid* class and learning the art form of Quranic recitation, the sheikh--although declaring her recitation "nearly flawless, the best in the class"--informs her that she cannot enter the Quranic recitation competition she has been preparing for, because it is not open to women.

When Khadra's family goes to Mecca on Haj, her ideals are even more forcefully shattered. After trying to enter the next-door mosque to pray, she is dragged home in humiliation by two policemen. Horrified by this discovery that women are not allowed to pray at the mosque, she cries out in disbelief:

'But, Baba, how can women not be allowed?' Khadra had never heard of such a thing. No mosque she had ever encountered hadn't had a place for women...Being a Muslim *meant* going to the mosque. 'Everyone knows women go to the mosque. Women have always gone to the mosque. It's part of Islam.' [167, 168].

Worse yet is an outing that turns into a clandestine meeting into the desert with lascivious young Saudi men who assume that because Khadra is from the U.S. she is

sexually available. When she fights off one young man's groping hands, he asks, incredulously, "what is the big *deal*... we've got our clothes on – and you grew up in *America* -- don't tell me you never do stuff like this in America--" (177-178). Here, the slippage between American identity and gender "liberation" so often deployed against Muslim women to decry their presumed "oppression" within Islam is used to decry, instead, Khadra's resistance to the violation of her bodily self-respect and sexual integrity. For Khadra, who has spent a lifetime struggling against the assimilationist narrative, this is the final insult. "I'm *not* American!" she yells in Arabic. But her idealistic conceptions of Islam's holy city have been undermined, and when, on the plane ride home, she sees the lights of Indianapolis spread out before her, she feels the tug of homecoming: "The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there – and only there, of all the earth" (179).

Khadra's decision to marry Juma, a Kuwaiti engineering student, brings the contradictions of gender and its role in creating or unsettling Islamic homespace in the U.S. to a critical point. When Khadra first realizes Juma's intention to propose, one of the issues she considers is what this will mean for her sense of homelessness. His intention to return to Kuwait seems, at first, attractive: "Maybe it was the answer to not belonging in America all these years. Maybe it was the "back" where she was supposed to go" (205). Meanwhile, it is a convenient time for her to marry – her parents are moving and she cannot, by the standards of her family and community, stay on campus alone as a young unmarried woman (207). And, as she tells her Syrian grandmother, who has traveled from Syria for the wedding, "I guess he's as good as any other guy I'd end up marrying, so why not?" (208). Although she shrugs off her grandmother's dismay at this lack of romance, she is also skeptical at her

grandmother's admonishment to keep her wedding present – three gold coins – hidden from her husband, as “security.” She trusts him, she insists.

But her grandmother's implicit feminism proves prophetic. It quickly becomes clear that whatever Islam has to say about gender equality, Juma's personal perspective on gender issues is another matter. Although the marriage initially goes well in all realms, sexual and interpersonal, Juma's cultural expectations about how a woman should behave soon interfere. Khadra's bike-riding becomes a major sticking point: he views it as unseemly, and forbids her to ride. Similarly, he expects her to assume full responsibility for the housework, despite Khadra's full class load and work-study commitments, and despite her protest that the Prophet did not expect his wives to do anything in the house for him. And he becomes progressively more controlling of her movements and interactions. When Khadra, feeling increasingly trapped, discovers that she is pregnant, matters come to a head. She decides that is not able to proceed with the pregnancy. But although she knows full well that Islam allows abortion, she soon learns that familial and cultural norms are a different matter. The issue breaks her marriage, with Juma particularly insulted by her offer of a *khulu'*, or wife-initiated divorce (so that he wouldn't have to pay her the deferred part of the *mahr*, or husband-provided dowry). “*She*, repudiate *him*? He'd never even heard of it” (251).

Khadra's realization that the safe space of Islam and of the Islamic community that had sheltered her throughout her life is not enough to protect her from the contradictions of cultural expectations might be expected, at this point, to lead to a narrative flight away from the Arab and Muslim home-spaces she has seemingly outgrown, and toward Americanization. Caught by the apparent dilemma of entrapment vs. escape, she has nightmares of “a brick cavity inside a house...A lamp

in the niche, walled up. Oil lamp, yes, or maybe child... Let the child be walled or pluck the child out?" (239).

However, the novel goes on to suggest, perhaps escape is not the only answer; perhaps freedom need not require abrogation of origins. Khadra's personal development is predicated not upon a flight from, but a re-visioning of the different home-spaces which claim her loyalty even as they ask her to tamp down an essential part of herself. Instead of privileging a narrative of character development in which the burden of transformation is singularly upon the individual, who must forge her own fate in defiance of her environment, the novel situates Khadra's personal transformation within the context of the discursive structure situating Muslims, and especially Muslim women, as "other." What is at stake is not just her individual transformation, but also the reader's transformation: as stereotypical perceptions of Islam are brought into visibility and focus, the reader learns to accommodate a shift in perspective.

Khadra's return, as an adult, to the Muslim community center of her childhood to do a photographic shoot, provides a metaphor for this shift. Her intention is not to offer an expose – the "Behind the veil...keyhole view of the hidden, inside world of Muslims" (48) which her boss would like her to produce. Rather, she seeks a new way of seeing. And in the process she discovers a new way of viewing both her community and herself. As in photographic development, Khadra learns, the process of personal development turns upon a tension between protection and exposure, veiling and unveiling. Moreover, it is in part a process of bringing to visibility what is already there.

As part of her self-exploration, Khadra returns (in what might be considered a very American gesture) to her ethnic homeland, Syria. There she connects with her

grandmother and other relatives, and assesses her connections to her land and culture of origin. It is in Syria that she discovers family secrets (including the shocking, although narratively undeveloped, fact that her mother was raped as a young girl), learns of the political repression that caused her parents to leave, and begins to explore her own relationship to the religion and culture which she had accepted unquestioningly in childhood. Significantly, it is in Syria that she experiments with unveiling, and comes to the understanding that *hijab* is just a manifestation, a tool:

Going out without hijab meant she would have to manifest the quality of modesty in her behavior... She had to do it on her own, now, without the jump-start that a jilbab offered. This was a rigorous challenge. Some days she just wanted her old friend hijab standing sentry by her side. [312]

Increasingly she understands that her location at the intersection of homecoming and homelessness enables her to interrogate how the boundary delineating “home” is constructed, and how, therefore, it can be redrawn. And, in a phenomenon typical of returns to the homeland which convince ethnics that they are, in fact, American, it is in Syria that she comes to the conclusion that “it was in the American crucible where her character had been forged, for good or ill” (313).

Yet the American home-space claimed at the end of the novel -- “Homeland America, *bismillah*” (313)—is a space predicated, like perhaps all home-spaces, upon contradiction as well as inclusion. The lesson Khadra learns is to view things whole, not just in part. When her brother objects to her insistence on including a full portrayal of the community in her photo article, instead of a glossed over view for public consumption, Khadra replies, “it takes both sides to make a whole picture – the dark and the bright” (435). Similarly, she comes to understand that self-realization is achieved not just through agency but also through acceptance. Contemplating her community of origin, Khadra muses, “Wrong and mulish they could be, but dear to

her and maddening and conformist and awful, but full of surprising beauty sometimes, and kindness ... In the end, then, they were just so very human and vulnerable, like anyone else” (423).

By the novel’s conclusion Khadra has developed a relationship with a childhood friend Hakim, a black Muslim – a relationship which would not have been approved in her natal community. Together they go to watch Hakim’s sister, Hanifa-- who left the community in disgrace many years before to have a child out of wedlock, and who is now a race car driver--about to race in the Indy 500. Watching Hanifa, Khadra comes to a number of realizations. One is that the distinction between Muslim and “American,” “us” and “them,” is no longer tenable. Indeed, she realizes, her family members are, in essence, “perfect Hoosiers” – “set in their ways, hardworking, steady, valuing God and family. Suspicious of change (438). Most important of all, however, she realizes finally where and what home-space is. It is not geographical or cultural or national or ethnic or religious. It is not located someplace else, whether Syria or the U.S.. It is not found in the presumed openness of American culture nor the sheltering but constricting security of the Dawah center. It is not reduceable to one or another definition of Islam. Rather, it is, for Khadra, a moment of being, in which all the facets of her identity --Muslim, American, Syrian, feminist, photographer— come together, the product of her own labor and discovery, as well as of surrender to all that has shaped her. What she achieves by the end of the narrative is not simply an integration of her Muslim identity into the American context. Rather, she maps out an Arab/Muslim home-space as a space of possibility, in which the past is reclaimed, the present transfigured, the future opening. And as the reference to the Islamic concept of “surrender” with which the novel concludes suggests, it is a space that is,

as well, deeply spiritual. For if homelessness is an existential separation from meaning, homecoming, here, is like the welcoming expansion of prayer.

### Randa Jarrar: A Map of Home

Like Kahf, Randa Jarrar enacts a gendered critique of home-space in her writing, arriving at a space of agency and acceptance, transformation and homecoming that is both personal and communal. Her novel, A Map of Home, charts a terrain of geographical, political, cultural and gendered homelessness, populated by Palestinians whose displacement is both literal and metaphorical. Within this terrain, issues of gender--contested, contradictory, passionate, sometimes violent—serve as a fulcrum for personal and cultural change. Depicting the growing-up years of Nidali, a Palestinian-Egyptian-Greek narrator whose attempts to make sense of her identity, sexuality and personhood turn upon an interplay of fragmentation and wholeness, the novel traces a trajectory not from Arab to American, oppression to freedom, but rather from contested familial definitions to an incompletely realized, but hopeful, dream of establishing Arab-American selfhood and community on new terms. Through depictions that are unsparing in their candor, Jarrar shows how the burdens of exile and dislocation come together with issues of gender and ethnicity to provide an unpredictable and sometimes explosive mix. In exploring both the ways in which women are written and the ways in which they write themselves into being, she interrogates the domestic, cultural and geographical home-spaces within which Arab-American female subjectivity is constituted. Her depiction is transfigurative precisely because it grapples with the full realities and contradictions of these home-spaces. For if the imposition of restrictive gender roles is a violation which creates an inherent

homelessness, silence and repression similarly create their own homelessness. Indeed, Jarrar suggests, silence is like assimilation--if you strip away the parts of yourself that are inconvenient, you may fit in, but you end up with a diminished self.

A Map of Home begins with an origin myth, a story about its protagonist's birth and naming which situates gender contradictions at the heart of homelessness. Jarrar's protagonist Nidali –born in Boston to an Egyptian Greek mother, Fairuza, and a Palestinian father, Waheed—is hardly in the world before her father, assuming the child to be a boy and anxious to record the name quickly, rushes to register it as Nidal, “struggle”. But Nidal is a male name, and the infant, Waheed discovers a moment later, is female. Rushing back to the registration desk, he grabs a pen and adds to the end of the name “a heavy, reflexive, feminizing, possessive, cursive, cursing ‘I’”(5). Thus begins the narrative of Nidali – literally, in Arabic, “my struggle”.

This act of gendering and possession through which Nidali enters the world is indicative. Her struggle is played out within the context of her father's and mother's expectations and desires, within the context of contradictory cultural norms which recognize women's strengths yet contain them within cultural confines, and within a fractured geopolitical context. What homelessness means, for Jarrar, has to do with war and exile and immigration, with lost homelands and lost dreams, with gender, sexuality, and thwarted passion. Nidali's father, Waheed, an architect by vocation, is a poet by avocation who has been forced to abandon his literary dreams in the interests of bread-winning. He teaches Nidali that although homelessness is part of being Palestinian, Palestinians “carry the homeland in their souls”—a notion that prompts the young Nidali to marvel at how heavy such a burden must be. As she

muses, “It...forced me to have compassion for Baba who, obviously, had an extremely heavy soul to drag around inside such a skinny body” (9). Her mother, Fairuza, is a musician without piano or musical opportunities, who teaches Nidali to approach life with zest and flare. As Nidali recounts, “Most of my friends had mamas who prayed; Mama did not. Their mamas cooked and didn’t play piano. Their mamas didn’t say bad words and didn’t yell at their husbands. Their mamas weren’t Mama”( ). While their artistic passions bring Wahid and Fairuza together, their inability to fulfill their individual dreams, whether because of displacement, economic constraints or gender expectations, becomes a source of conflict in the family. This tension both shapes and confuse the young Nidali’s understanding of what life choices and opportunities are available to her to as a girl, and what home-spaces she might be able to claim.

Much of Nidali’s struggle arises from the contradictions of gender expectations—contradictions which teach her from a young age that gender relations are a bit like putting on a garment; the trick is to make them fit. Just as her father at birth expected a boy but was forced to accommodate for her gender by patching a female identifying mark onto a male name, so too throughout her life he treats her in many ways like a boy, expecting her to succeed educationally and professionally on male terms, but tries to contain her femaleness through conventional cultural restrictions. This is a story repeated throughout Arab-American women’s experience, as fathers raise their daughters to have strong minds, to seek education, to ask questions, but then try to force them to fit into restrictive modes of appropriate gender behavior.<sup>1</sup> When a boyishly short hair cut inspires Nidali to exclaim, “I’m gonna be the best boy,” her father, frowning, quickly takes her to buy “girly earrings.” But almost immediately afterwards he admonishes her to study hard and not to succumb

to the constraints of gender, offering the example of his sisters as a warning: “None of ‘*amaatick*— your aunts--finished school past the sixth grade. They all raised babies and cooked and cleaned for their useless husbands. Do you want to be like them?” No, he answers his own question, “You don’t want to be like them. You want to be free...[and] to be free, you must be educated” (23). The connection between freedom and education is one that reverberates through Palestinian experience – for Waheed, like most Palestinians, views education as the one thing that cannot, unlike land or houses or money, be taken away. As he later tells Nidali, “I lost my home...And I gained an education...which later became my home.” Waheed’s dreams for her include earning a PhD in Literature and literary fame – the dreams he himself has had to relinquish. “You can be a doctor! A big professor of literature!...Write poetry and teach in England. Show those bastards the greatness of our literature” (65).

But as much as he wants Nidali to flout the sexism that would limit her possibilities, Waheed has a hard time breaking free of his own patriarchal, at times punitive, relationship to the women in his family. When Nidali wins a Quranic recitation competition which he has encouraged her to enter (and for which he has refused to allow her to cover her hair) he revels in the fact that her achievement challenges the contest’s implicit sexism: the certificate she receives refers to *tilmith*, a male student, and the judge, clearly unaccustomed to handing out certificates to little girls, has had to add a feminizing *ha* to make *tilmith* into *tilmitha*, a female student. But in helping Nidali study for the contest, Waheed is so upset when she makes mistakes that he beats her with a coat hanger. In another incident, Waheed, furious that his musician wife is spending more time at the piano she has finally managed to obtain for herself than on the housework, threatens divorce. When Fairuza retorts that “the Prophet Himself said you have to please your wife,” he takes the family for a ride

into the desert and, telling Fairuza to get out of the car, leaves her there. In other scenes, Waheed kicks Fairuza for burning his favorite shirt and beats and verbally abuses Nidali for going out without permission and for other violations. For the young Nidali, such scenes dramatize the contradictions at the heart of her family life. “I wondered how Baba could want me to win a boy’s contest and behave so cruelly to Mama, who’s a girl, like me, and I wondered why Mama let him” (66).

In depicting such scenes Jarrar insists on the necessity of critiquing the too-often-unvoiced issues such as domestic violence—of portraying the picture whole, with all its contradictions. But by doing so she runs the risk of providing more grist for the Arab/Muslim gender inequity mill. This is all the more the case because, unlike Kahf, whose novel first depicts a positive, nurturing Muslim home-space before exploring its internal flaws, Jarrar thrusts her readers immediately into a domestic space shot through with contradiction. Yet for all its frank portrayal of disturbing domestic scenes, the text does not portray Arab women as passive, oppressed victims. Rather, it depicts them as feisty individuals who possess agency, even if this agency is not always fulfilled. The relationship between Waheed and Fairuza may be troubling, but is also passionate and complicated, characterized by strong emotions on all sides. From an early age Nidali learns that gender relations are a bit like putting on a garment: the trick is to make them fit. And it is not always clear that patriarchal power holds sway in her family: when Fairuza returns home after the desert abandonment scene, having hitchhiked to a relative’s house, it is clear that it is not Waheed, but she who has won the Mama-Baba battle in their ongoing domestic war. Meanwhile the lesson Fairuza insists that the young Nidali learn is that “A sense of humor” (28) is one’s most important possession.

Indeed, humor and humanization provide two of the lenses through which Jarrar refracts the novel's more troubling scenes of familial discord and violence. By using both black humor and an understanding of human complexity, Jarrar is able to raise difficult issues, yet at the same time fend off cooptation. There is a danger, of course, that using humor as a narrative strategy will understate the seriousness of issues such as domestic violence, and normalize violence as a familial pattern. As Nidali says, she doesn't know anyone who is not beaten by their fathers. Similarly the text's portrayal of Waheed as a deeply complex and deeply human individual might also verge, on occasion, on seeming to rationalize his violence. At one point, Nidali, who wants to go away to college, but who has been forbidden to leave home, is trying to understand her father: "He wanted me to stay a virgin, to stay 'good'. He ...didn't want me to be a woman...Did Baba want me to stay a girl because he didn't want me to struggle, because he wanted to be there to help me when I did? Or was it because he loved me and didn't want me to go away from him? I decided that ...He just loved me." This assessment, coming after scenes of what are difficult to characterize as other than abuse, may seem simplistic. Yet it provides a necessary breach in the walls of the gender meta-narrative, whose totalizing discourse might otherwise reduce Waheed to simple oppressiveness and Nidali to simple oppression, thereby stripping the one of his humanity and the other of her agency.

Meanwhile, however, Jarrar reminds us that gender can never be viewed in isolation from larger political, cultural and social issues. Waheed, for all his flaws, is a man struggling with the vagaries of his time and place and culture: a father who wants his daughter to have the best chance at life, a Palestinian trying to find a home for himself across a landscape of homelessness and uncertainty, in which normative (patriarchal) gender relations offer a semblance of stability, but one which even he is

not always sure he wants. Heir to her father's legacy of Palestinian homelessness,<sup>1</sup> Nidali grapples with this fragmentation from an early age, seeking to understand the burden of homelessness and its tremendous weight. "In their first year of marriage, my parents had already moved twice. Baba said that moving was part of being Palestinian" (9).

Yet Nihadi understands, too, on some intuitive level, that one can be fragmented and whole at the same time. Playing with a set of Russian dolls, an image which invokes the embeddedness of identities, she pretends to be "the smallest Russian doll, the empty-bellied one that goes in her mama." But as she notices, "all the dolls were split in half except me, even though I was split in half: I was Egyptian and Palestinian. I was Greek and American" (8). This ability to be simultaneously fragmented and whole is a revelation whose implications Nidali spends much of the narrative absorbing: it informs her struggle to cope with cultural and gendered pressures and contradictions, as well as with her multiple displacements. As a child she would sit on the edge of the tub and repeat to herself, "*ana ana, ana ana, ana ana?* – Am I am I am I am I am I?...When I'd tricked my mind, it would float away, and I could see that I *am* just I. I'd see myself from outside my own mind: my life, my body, and I was not half something and half another, I was one whole, a circle" (58-59).

Given the complicated gender issues going on in her house, Nidali is desperately in need of role models that can help her make sense of herself. Early on her mother introduces her to what might be the perfect model for her mixed-identity, mixed-up self: Wonder Woman. Fairuza brings her a sticker collection featuring

a girl superhero: Woman of Wonder. She had shorts with stars on them, a golden lasso, and a crown that she wore like a hat. ...I loved her wavy black hair... black like Mama's hair, wavy like mine. I stared at the eagle on her top; it was golden

and resembled the eagle on the Egyptian flag. I admired her lasso because it reminded me of the rope women in Palestine tie on buckets and around goats' necks..... and when I saw the stars on her shorts, I was reminded of my blue passport, of how I was born in America. I wondered if Wonder Woman was Egyptian and Palestinian and American, like me. [41-42]

Nidali puts the stickers on her headboard, where the sound of her hair catching on them at night helps her fall asleep. Even when her religious cousin Esam, scandalized by the images of what he views as “a shameless prostitute,” strips them off, the white bits of paper that remain seem to her like “woman of Wonder ghosts,” which she imagines as representing “parts of God” (53). This image provides a way for Nidali to think about her own power as a woman. Given all the ways in which her life has taught her how “not to take credit for something [she'd] done all by [her]self”[44], this is of crucial importance. For the real challenge facing Nidali is to understand her own power – to ‘give herself credit’ for what she has survived and accomplished – and to claim the right to celebrate her own spirit, no matter what.

Female power is, of course, also a sexual matter, and part of Nidali's confusion is related to her budding sexuality. She masturbates over the bidet, kisses a boy, has sexual fantasies and a lesbian encounter (142), and toward the end of the novel loses her virginity. For Nidali, sexuality is confusing and risky, but it also becomes something to hang onto amid her multifaceted homelessness. When she kisses a girlfriend as a way to “practice” kissing boys, she describes it as “a mini-pilgrimage, my traveling the space between our heads, like running down the street when my legs were shorter, when I had another home to go to after the summer. I longed for that time again, for home” (174-5]. Sexuality becomes, that is, a way of finding her way back to her center, to a place of wholeness she has glimpsed from early childhood but which she doesn't know how to grasp.

This glimpse of wholeness is linked to her growing recognition that, for all that she is defined by her parents' histories and traumas, her life is her own. In an interview Jarrar notes: "Nidali's dad has suffered so much partly because he lost his home, and also because he's spent so much time and energy trying to regain it, even psychologically. Nidali has a different take, a different way to adapt to displacement. She can either find it tragic, the way her baba does, or she can find or cling to a new home, or she can realize that she is a borderless person; someone who can belong anywhere." That is, Jarrar suggests, there is a third choice beyond the classic immigrant dilemma of preservation vs. assimilation: that of a diasporic identity, flexible and negotiable, that finds home in the moment of being. When she looks at the map of Palestine – the "map of home" as her father calls it—she erases the western border, the northern border, the southern and eastern border, and tells herself "you are here' ...And oddly, I felt free" (32).

Defining and articulating this third choice requires, however, living with contradiction. When the family moves to the U.S., having fled Kuwait because of the Iraqi invasion, and Egypt because of the lack of economic prospects, Nidali discovers that America, far from offering liberation, in fact enacts losses on many levels – loss of home, loss of language, loss of her personality in language. As Nidali tries to deal with the flood of confusing newness that is America, she grapples with a sense of homelessness that is almost overwhelming. Not only does she begin to forget "where home really was" (221), she struggles to hold on to her self. "I remembered...how in Egyptian my language was full of songs and lilt and catchy turns of phrase. I wished ...that I could translate the way I was, my old way of being, speaking, and gesturing, to English: to translate myself" (225). And the losses are not just of language and culture, but also threaten a more intimate level of selfhood, for despite the greater

sexual freedom which the U.S. purportedly offers, Nidali discovers that the U.S. also involves loss of female sexual agency. Shocked that bathrooms in the U.S. do not have bidets, she wonders how girls masturbate in America. After she figures out how to lie on her back in the tub underneath the faucet and let the water flow into her crotch, she muses, “One could develop power issues orgasming in the tub: in a bidet, the girl is on top, but in America, where one has to do it in the bath, one is on the bottom, and so is always dominated.” Similarly, although the U.S. may be a place where “Daughters ... can teach their parents lessons,” where a girl beaten by her father can take her father to court, such freedoms come at a cost. When Nidali does take her father to court for beating her, the police record that is generated means that her family cannot buy a house. In this way the “freedom” of America merely accentuates their homelessness.

Set adrift by her father’s Palestinian dispossession and her mother’s willingness to share in that homelessness, caught between the gender constraints that require her to stay a virgin and deny her sexuality and the simultaneous message to live life fully, lost between political and economic dislocations and cultural exclusions, Nidali has been searching her whole life for home. In one of the more potent images of the book, she remembers how she used to believe “that when I was forced to run to a new home, the skin of my feet would collect sand and rocks and cactus and seed and grass until I had shoes made of everything I picked up from running” (284). Home, she suggests through this image, is not a place, nor a final destination. Rather, it is the accumulation of experiences that equip one to continue the journey. “I always thought that when I got those earth-shoes, I’d be able to stop running and settle down somewhere I’d never have to run away from again,” Nidali

notes. But such homecoming may not be possible in a diasporic world: rather, perhaps the only homecoming possible is to the self.

Indeed, by the end of the novel Nidali has achieved a sense of coming home to herself. Although her personal transformation coincides with her preparation to leave home for college, this departure offers not an escape, but a reclamation and a continuation. Of particular importance is the transformation of her relationship to her father. Having recognized Waheed's love for her, she is able to defy him, knowing that she will not lose him. It is through embracing complexity that she is able to claim her own agency. Earlier in the novel Waheed tries to dictate his memoir to Nidali. But because he wants it to be perfect, he never gets beyond the first sentence. Nidali, in contrast, knows that you have to start somewhere – to begin with what you have, all the messy and incongruent parts of it. The shoes she wears are formed of all the mud and stones and burs she has collected while running: homecoming is based on acceptance of the painful artifacts of experience. Hers is not a flight from Arab gender repression into American assimilation. Rather, it is a journey predicated upon accepting all aspects of the story she is living.

At the beginning of the narrative, her father grasps a pen to write her identity as a boy, but is stymied by her reality as a girl – a contradiction that Nidali spends her childhood trying to unwrite. At the end of the novel her mother throws out of the car window a pen that she fears conceals a secret microphone that has been recording all the family secrets. Both these attempts– one to impose an identity on another person, the other to deny or hide embarrassing realities--fail. Rather, the novel shows that agency and identity must be grounded upon the acknowledgement of difficult truths. The secrets concealed in the pen are part of the story, a story that must be told if it is to be changed. As Khaled Mattawa has observed, if “Arab American writers in the

past “have erred on the side of caution by telling a limited truth about Arab American life and Arab life,” what is needed now is “to tell the whole truth with all its complications” (Hassan, 143). Indeed, in the final line of the novel, Nidali writes, “I catch the pen now and listen to all our stories” (290).

By portraying Arab home spaces with all their flaws, Kahf and Jarrar lay claim to a home-coming that is predicated not on denial, but on reality. By looking hard at precisely those aspects of home-space that threaten to reinforce stereotypes about Arab patriarchy and cultural oppression, they seek to re-inhabit stereotypes and to show them for what they are: a part of the picture, but a picture that can be transformed. Until something is told, they suggest, it cannot be changed. Home-space emerges here as not a place but an active process of reclamation and narration, one that depends on agency as well as on self-critique. Through their works Kahf and Jarrar grant the act of both listening and telling transformative power. And through their words they insist that Arab-American women reclaim their selves even as they transfigure the spaces they inhabit as home. The result reverberates far beyond the fictional universes created in these novels. Home-space emerges as a space grounding both self-realization and the ability to take meaningful action in the world. As such it signifies a space within which all Arab-Americans might speak out without contradiction, without cooptation and without fear.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Sally Howell for sharing her unpublished essay “Home, Homeland and Identity Among Arab Americans: Domestic Literature and the Construction of Ethnic Individualism” with me.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, in an essay about Arab-American feminism, Susan Muaddi Darraj writes of the contradictions in her own family. Although restricted socially by her father’s mores – not allowed to date or talk to boys on the phone – at the same time she was pushed by her father to “excel in school, pursue a career, and be financially independent, something most of my friends’ fathers did not particularly encourage... To mimic my father’s thought process: why waste time on silly things like dating, going to the malls and the movies, when you can devote that time to your schoolwork, to reading, to building your future” [162]. Conversely, however, Khadra in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, complains, in internal dialogue with her father, “You raised me to go out and learn, but deep down you still want me to be just like your mother.”

## Claims

I am not soft, hennaed hands,  
a seduction of coral lips;  
not the enticement of jasmine musk  
through a tent flap at night;  
not a swirl of sequined hips,  
a glint of eyes unveiled.

I am neither harem's promise  
nor desire's fulfillment.

I am not a shapeless peasant  
trailing children like flies;  
not a second wife, concubine,  
kitchen drudge, house slave;  
not foul-smelling, moth-eaten, primitive,  
tent-dweller, grass-eater, rag-wearer.

I am neither a victim  
nor an anachronism.

I am not a camel jockey, sand nigger, terrorist,  
oil-rich, bloodthirsty, fiendish;  
not a pawn of politicians,  
nor a fanatic seeking violent heaven.

I am neither the mirror of your hatred and fear,  
nor the reflection of your pity and scorn.

I have learned the world's histories,  
and mine are among them.

My hands are open and empty:  
the weapon you place in them is your own.

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I am the woman remembering jasmine,  
bougainvillea against chipped white stone.

I am the laboring farmwife  
whose cracked hands claim this soil.  
I am the writer whose blacked-out words  
are birds' wings, razored and shorn.  
I am the lost one who flees,  
and the lost one returning;  
I am the dream, and the stillness,  
and the keen of mourning.

I am the wheat stalk, and I am  
the olive. I am plowed fields young  
with the music of crickets,  
I am ancient earth struggling  
to bear history's fruit.  
I am the shift of soil  
where green thrusts through,  
and I am the furrow  
embracing the seed again.

I am many rivulets watering  
a tree, and I am the tree.  
I am opposite banks of a river,  
and I am the bridge.  
I am light shimmering  
off water at night,  
and I am the dark sheen  
that swallows the moon whole.

I am neither the end of the world  
nor the beginning.

## Chapter 8

### Speaking Beyond Translation: Narratives and Interventions

*You must first confront yourself before confronting other people, or a whole country – that's also the political context of memory.*

-- Yousef Chahine, quoted in Alcalay, *Memories of Our Future*, 146

*I can no longer speak of the distances the body must travel to speak to itself.*

--Khaled Mattawa, *Amorisco* 2

*There is the homeland inside of us, the one we inhabit, the one in our dreams, maybe others. I forever thought of myself as being in the frame, when in fact, I was also everywhere in the painting...*

--Nathalie Handal, "Poetry as Homeland" 141

This chapter brings together a series of narratives that delineate and map a series of personal journeys within and through Arab American spaces.<sup>1</sup> While these narratives explore the ways in which the categories "Arab" and "American" impinge on each other; they do not confine the exploration of that impingement within a particular geographical space. Rather, they complicate the category "Arab American," neither locating it strictly on U.S. ground, nor identifying it as a one-way passage toward an ethnic American self. My own Arab American experience has been one of constant negotiation of identity and location within and across geographical boundaries. It has

has also been a constant negotiation of agency: for while I do not wish to romanticize the possibilities of voice, my own experience has taught me to recognize the urgencies – historical, political, discursive --that underlie and accompany Arab American, and perhaps especially Palestinian American, articulation. In the final analysis, writers write not simply to find themselves, but to speak beyond themselves; to take meaningful action in the world. Through these personal narratives, I search to transform the confusions of a “hybrid,” liminal, racialized identity to a space not only on which to stand, but more importantly, from which to speak. The complexities of Arab American identity underlie engagement with the literary act of “bearing witness” as a mode of negotiating both identity and agency,<sup>2</sup> and with a sense of the transformative possibilities of both writing and reading.

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### **I. Boundaries: Arab/American**

*So much goes along with us  
on the border of vision,  
"street arabs,"  
orphans when we have no names  
to bring them before our eyes.*

*-- David Williams, Traveling Mercies*

*Beyond this world there are twenty other worlds*

*--Naomi Shihab Nye, "Twenty Other Worlds"*

One evening a number of years ago, at a workshop on racism, I became aware--in one of those moments of realization that is not a definitive falling into place, but rather a slow groundswell of understanding--of the ways in which I experience my identity as not merely complex, but rather an uninterpretable excess.

Workshop participants were asked to group ourselves in the center of the room. As the facilitator called out a series of categories, we crossed to one side of the room or the other, according to our self-identification: white or person of color, heterosexual or lesbian/bisexual, middle/upper-class or working-class, born in the U.S. or in another country, at least one college-educated parent or parents with no higher education, English as a native language or a second language. Although I am used to thinking of myself in terms of marginality and difference, I found myself, time after time, on the mainstream side of the room. White (as I called myself for lack of a more appropriate category), heterosexual, middle-class, born in the U.S. to a college educated parent, native speaker of English, I seemed to be part of America's presumed majority.

I learned a great deal that night about how much I take for granted those aspects of my life that locate me in a privileged category. It is a lesson of which I remain acutely conscious, and for which I am grateful. But looking across the room at the cluster of women representing what American society understands as "other," I was disconcerted by the lack of fit between the definitions offered that evening and my personal reality. Born in the U.S., I have nonetheless lived much of my life outside it, in Jordan and Lebanon. My father was college-educated and middle-class, but Palestinian--hardly an identity suggestive of inclusion in mainstream American society. I considered myself white: my olive-tinged skin, while an asset in terms of acquiring a ready tan, did not seem a dramatic marker of difference. But I have received enough comments on my skin tone to make me aware that this is not entirely a neutral issue--and as I have learned the history of colonialism in the Arab world, I have come to understand the ways in which even light-skinned Arabs may be understood as people of color. Native speaker of English, I nonetheless grew up

alienated from the linguistic medium--Arabic--that swirled around me, living a life in some ways as marginal as that of a non-English speaker in the United States.

Although I do not think of myself as having an accent, I have more than once been assumed to be foreign; I speak with an intonation acquired from the British-inflected Jordanian English that delineated my childhood, or from years of the careful enunciation one adopts when addressing non-native speakers. I have been the target of various forms of harassment specifically linked to my Arab identity, from hostile comments to threatening phone calls, racist mail, and destruction of property. I have feared physical assault when wearing something that identifies me as an Arab. And so, standing on the majority side of the room that evening, observing the discrepancy between the facts of my life and the available categories of inclusion and exclusion, I could not help but wonder whether these categories are not insufficient, or insufficiently nuanced.

I recognize in this response my reluctance, here in this country which is so large, and which often seems--however inaccurately--so homogenous, to relinquish a sense of my own difference. When I arrived in the United States for graduate school in 1982, I felt oddly invisible. Walking down the crowded streets of Ann Arbor, Michigan I became aware, with a mixture of relief and unease, that no one was looking at me, trying to talk to me, or making comments under their breath. Years of living in Jordan and Lebanon, where my physical appearance, my style of dressing, my manner of walking had all coded me as foreign, had accustomed me to being the object of attention, curiosity, sometimes harassment. Although in Amman and Beirut I had tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible--walking close to walls, never meeting anyone's eyes--I always knew that people noted, assessed, commented on my presence. Even as I disliked and resented this attention, I grew to

expect it. As a girl and then woman with little self-confidence, the external gaze, intrusive as it was, perhaps offered the solace of definition: I am seen, therefore I exist. Without that gaze would I still know who I am?

The idea of such dependence upon external definition disturbs me now. I would like to say that I longed not to be defined by the gaze of the other, but to look out upon the world through eyes rooted in the boundaries of my own identity. But it is true that for much of my life I thought if I looked long enough I would find someone to tell me who I am. Turning to the world for some reflection of myself, however, I found only distortion. Perhaps it was asking too much of that younger self of mine, overwhelmed by a sense of my identity's invalidity no matter which culture I entered, to learn the necessary art of self-definition.

And if I had achieved that skill, would I have merely learned more quickly the cost of difference? Being American in the Arab world set me apart in ways I found profoundly disturbing. But I found out soon enough that being Arab in the United States -- worse, being Palestinian -- offers little in the way of reassurance. My hopeful belief that moving to the United States would be a homecoming was quickly shaken. Once I claimed a past, spoke my history, told my name, the walls of incomprehension and hostility rose, brick by brick: un-funny "ethnic" jokes, jibes about terrorists and *kalashnikovs*, about veiled women and camels; or worse, the awkward silences, the hasty shifts to other subjects. Searching for images of my Arab self in American culture I found only unrecognizable stereotypes. In the face of such incomprehension I could say nothing.

But I have grown weary of my silence and paranoia; my fear that if I wear a Palestine emblem, a *kafiyeh*, use my few words of Arabic, say my name or where I am from, I will open myself to suspicion or hatred. I am tired of being afraid to speak

who I am: American and Palestinian, not merely half of one thing and half of another, but both at once--and in that inexplicable melding that occurs when two cultures come together, not quite either, so that neither American nor Arab find themselves fully reflected in me, nor I in them.

Perhaps it should not have surprised me to cross and recross that room of divisions and find myself nowhere.

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I was born in 1960, in the small farming community of Hawarden, on Iowa's western border. My mother, Jean Caroline Stoltenberg, in whose home town I was born, was American, of German descent. From her I take my facial structure and features, the color of my hair, and more: an awkward shyness, a certain naivete, but also a capacity for survival and adaptation that exceeds my own expectations. I learned from her to value both pragmatism and a sense of humor. She liked to say that she was of farming stock, plain but sturdy. Twenty-three years in Jordan did not greatly alter her midwestern style; she met the unfamiliar with the same resolution and forthrightness with which she turned to her daily tasks. Despite her willing adjustment to Middle Eastern life, she never quite relinquished her longing for the seasonal landscapes of her Iowa childhood--summer's lush greenness, the white drifts of winter. Although I experienced her primarily against a Jordanian backdrop, my memories of her evoke midwestern images and echoes: fragrant platters of beef and potatoes, golden cornfields beneath wide, sultry skies, the strident music of crickets chanting at dusk.

My father, Isa Joudeh Majaj, a Palestinian of the generation which had reached young adulthood by the time of Israel's creation from the land of Palestine, was born in Bir Zeit, in what is now the occupied West Bank. From him I take the

olive tinge to my skin, the shape of my hands and nose, the texture of my hair, and a tendency toward inarticulate and contradictory emotion. From him, too, I take a certain stubbornness, and what he used to call "Palestinian determination." Named Isa, Arabic for Jesus, by his widowed mother in fulfillment of a vow, my father grew from childhood to adolescence in Jerusalem, that city where so many histories intersect.

Although distanced from each other by geographical origin, culture and more, my parents held in common their respect for the earth and for the people who till it. Never quite reconciled to his urban life, my father spoke longingly of the groves of orange and olive trees, the tomato plants and squash vines, by which Palestinian farmers live. He could identify the crop of a distant field by its merest wisp of green, had learned the secrets of grafting, knew when to plant and when to harvest. His strong attachment to the earth -- an emotion I have come to recognize among Palestinians -- made me understand his dispossession as a particular violence. I associate his life with loss and bitterness, but also with a life-bearing rootedness reminiscent of those olive trees in Jerusalem which date back to the time of Christ, or of jasmine flowering from vines twisted thick as tree trunks.

After a youth punctuated by the devastating events leading up to Israel's creation in 1948, during which he fought against the British and saw relatives lose both homes and lives, my father worked his way to the United States for a college education. In Sioux City, Iowa he attended Morningside College, shoveling mounds of hamburger in the stockyards during school breaks. At a YMCA dance he met my mother, a quiet young woman working as a secretary in a legal firm. A year later the two were married.

I do not know what drew my parents together. My father may have seen and valued in my mother both the shy pliancy cultivated by girls of her generation and the resilience learned in a farming family. Though he seemed to take her strength for granted, he assumed she would mold herself to his delineation. My mother, who by her own account had grown up imbued with visions of true romance, may have seen in my father an exemplar of the tall dark stranger. At their wedding she vowed both to love and to obey. My parents' marriage, complex from its outset, promised the richness of cultural interaction, but bore as well the fruit of much cultural contradiction. It is the complexity and contradictions of their relationship which I have inherited, and which mediate my interactions in the societies, Arab and American, that I claim as birthright, but experience all too often as alienation.

When I was born my mother claimed me in a gesture that in later years I understood to have been quite remarkable. The birth of my older sister three years previously had disappointed my father in his desire for a son and the title "Abu-Tarek," father of Tarek. Forced by his work to be absent before my own birth, he refused to choose a girl's name before he left--hoping, no doubt, that this second child would be a boy, as the first one had not been. I was born, and my mother called me Lisa Ann. But my father asserted his will over my identity from many thousands of miles away. Upon learning of my birth, he sent a telegram congratulating my mother on the arrival of Suhair Suzanne--Suhair, a name meaning "little star in the night;" Suzanne, an Americanization of the Arabic *Sausan*--in what he may have thought would be a cultural compromise. By the time she received the telegram my mother must have had me home, Lisa Ann firmly inscribed in the hospital records. But this did not deter my father, always a stubborn man. On his return I was baptized Suhair

Suzanne. In the one picture I possess of the event, I am cradled plumply in the arms of my aunt, indifferent to the saga of fractured identity about to ensue.

My mother, however, must have been stronger-willed than anyone expected. She acquiesced to the baptism, but her dutiful letters to the relatives in Jordan relate news of baby Lisa Suhair, with 'Lisa' crossed out by her own pen. This marvelously subversive gesture allowed her to appear to abide by my father's wishes while still wedging her own claims in. And somehow her persistence won out. My earliest memories are of myself as Lisa: birthday cards, baby books, all confirm it. Even my father only called me Suhair to tease me. But if my mother claimed victory in the colloquial, his was the legal victory. Both passport and birth certificate identified me as Suhair Suzanne, presaging a schism of worlds that would widen steadily as I grew.

When my sister and I were still very young, my parents moved first to Lebanon, then to Jordan. My father had had much difficulty finding work in the midwestern United States: people were suspicious of foreigners, and frequently anti-Semitic, and he was often assumed to be a Jew. Moving to the west coast did not greatly improve his opportunities. Finally, however, he was hired by a moving and packing firm which sent him to Beirut. From there we moved to Amman, where his mother and brother then lived. By my fourth birthday we were settled in the small stone house, in what is now thought of as "old" Amman, where we were to live for the next 20 years.

Despite the semblance of rootedness this move to Jordan offered, my childhood was permeated with the ambience of exile. If to my mother "home" was thousands of miles away, beyond the Atlantic, to my father it was tantalizingly close, yet maddeningly unattainable--just across the Jordan River. My early years were marked by a constant sense of displacement, the unsettling quality of which determined much of my personal ambivalence and sense of confusion, as well as a certain flexibility I

have come to value. I learned at an early age that there is always more than one way of doing things, but that this increased awareness of cultural relativity often means a more complicated, and painful, existence. I learned to live as if in a transitional state, waiting always for the time that we would go to Palestine, to the United States, to a place where I would belong. But trips to Iowa and to Jerusalem taught me that once I got there, "home" slipped away inexplicably, materializing again just beyond reach. If a sense of rootedness was what gave life meaning, as my parents' individual efforts to ward off alienation implied, this meaning seemed able to assume full import only in the imagination.

The world of my growing-up years consisted of intersecting cultural spheres which often harmonized, but more frequently, particularly as my sister and I grew older, clashed. Home provided, naturally enough, the site of both the greatest cultural intermingling and the most intense contradiction. My mother worked, despite my father's objections, at the American Community School in Amman from the time I entered kindergarten until several years before her death in 1986. Though in later years she began to articulate the independence she had muted for years, for most of her married life she acquiesced to a hierarchical structuring of the familial codes. Although the prime agent of my sister's and my own socialization, my mother transmitted to us largely those lessons of my father's choosing. But my father's failure to fully explain his assumptions often resulted in a gap in the translation from Arab to American. Thus, only after I had been away at college for some time did I explicitly learn that I should never go out except in large groups--a rule at the heart of which was a ban upon interactions with men. But such expectations hardly needed to be spelled out. My restricted upbringing and my own desire to maintain familial harmony had resulted in such an effective internalization of my father's expectations,

most of which had to do with the maintenance of honor, that I lived them out almost unconsciously.

Looking back on our family life from the perspective of a painfully won feminism, the gender dynamics pervading our household seem unambiguously problematic. In addressing them, however, I find myself becoming defensive, wanting to preserve my deep-rooted family loyalties, however conflicted. I had learned to understand my relationship to others through the medium of Arab cultural norms filtered through an uneven Americanization. My childhood was permeated by the lesson, incessantly reinforced, that family is not just vital to self, but is so inherent that family and self are in a sense one and the same. I am more familiar than I would choose to be with the constrictions implicit in such celebration of family ties. But the mesh of familial expectations stressed in Arab culture provided a sense of security not readily apparent in my experience of American relationships, with their emphasis on individualism. However restrictively articulated, the stable definitions of self available in my childhood context held a certain appeal for me, caught as I was in a confusion of cultures.

I have come to understand the constrictions that governed my life not as an innate characteristic of Arab culture, but as a particular, and gendered, product of cross-cultural interactions. In my experience, male children of mixed marriages are often able to claim both the rights of Arab men and an indefinable freedom usually attributed to western identity. Although the cultural mix imposes its burdens, a boy's situatedness between Arab and American identity is not debilitating. But for girls, relegated to the mother's sphere, the implications of a western identity in an Arab context can be so problematic that claustrophobic familial restrictions are often the result. Although modesty is required of all girls, those with American blood are at

particular risk and must be doubly protected, so that there is neither opportunity nor basis for gossip.

As a child, however, I was aware only that being Arab, even in part, mandated a profound rejection of any self-definition which contradicted the claims of familial bonds. When I wished, as an adult, to marry a non-Arab man against my father's wishes, and engaged in a bitter, painful attempt to do so without irrevocably severing family ties, some friends seemed unable to understand why I would not rebel simply and cleanly, claiming my life and my feminist principles on my own terms. But to do so would have meant the abrogation not just of emotional connections, but of my very identity. Such absolute definitions make it extremely difficult for those of us caught between cultures to challenge restrictive cultural codes: without the security of being able to first lay full claim to the identity one rejects, rebellion becomes precarious and difficult.

Although I lived in an Arabic-speaking country, in my private world English was the main language of communication. My Arab relatives (who had all, except for my grandmother, learned English at school) wished to make my mother welcome by speaking her language, and wished as well to practice their skills in English--the use of which, in a residue of colonialism, still constitutes a mark of status in Jordan. Though I learned "kitchen Arabic" quite early, and could speak with my grandmother on an elementary level, I never became proficient in the language that should have been mine from childhood. This lack resulted in my isolation from the culture in which I lived. I was unable to follow conversations in family gatherings when people did not speak English, as they often did not. I could not understand Arabic television shows or news broadcasts, was unable to speak to storekeepers or passersby, or to develop friendships with Arab children. As a result I remained trapped in a cultural

insularity--articulated through the American school, American church, and American friends constituting my world--that now mortifies me. My father's habit of speaking only English at home played a large part in this deficiency; it seems never to have occurred to him that my sister and I would not pick up Arabic. Perhaps he thought that language skills ran in the blood. Indeed, during my college years he once sent me an article in Arabic, and was surprised and dismayed at my inability to read it: he had expected me to be literate in his language.

These linguistic deficiencies, though partly self-willed, have come to haunt me. I mourned with particular potency when my grandmother died shortly after I started studying Arabic for the specific purpose of communicating with her more meaningfully. As a child I had received occasional Arabic lessons from a relative at home and during special lunch-hour classes at school. During my teens and early twenties, embarrassed by the limitations of monolingualism, I took various courses in spoken and written Arabic. Despite my efforts, however, I retained little of what I learned, and my father, perhaps taking my knowledge for granted, offered little reinforcement. During bursts of enthusiasm or guilt I would ask him to speak Arabic to me on a daily basis. But such resolutions rarely lasted. He was too busy and too impatient for my faltering efforts, and I must have harbored more internal resistance to learning Arabic than I then realized.

Similarly, my father seemed to believe that knowledge of Palestinian history was a blood inheritance. I therefore had only my personal experience of events such as the Six Day War, or Black September, and a basic awareness of key dates -- 1948, 1967, 1970, 1973 -- to guide me through this history which so defined my father's life, and my own. Only when challenged by my college peers in Lebanon did I begin to educate myself about my Palestinian background, a task that assumed more urgency

when I moved to the United States. Indeed, in a pattern which continues to repeat itself, I have come to understand myself primarily in oppositional contexts: in Jordan I learned the ways in which I am American, while in the United States I discovered the ways in which I am Arab.

Though my father's cultural codes regulated everything from the length of my hair to the friends I was permitted to visit, the surface texture of my life was indisputably American. I grew up reading Mother Goose, singing "Home on the Range," reciting "The Ride of Paul Revere," and drawing pictures of Pilgrims and Indians, Christmas trees and Santa Clauses, Valentines and Easter bunnies. At school I learned the standard colonialist narrative of white Pilgrims settling an empty new land, struggling bravely against savage Indians. Yet into this world came many Arab elements. My relatives would fill the house with their Palestinian dialect, the men arguing in loud voices, slamming the tric trac stones on the board, while the women chatted on the veranda or in the kitchen. Although my mother took advantage of my father's frequent business trips to serve meatloaf and potatoes, the plain American food she craved, much of the food we ate was Arabic: I grew up on yakhni and mahshi, wara' dawali and ma'aloubi. My father had taught my mother to cook these dishes when they lived in the United States: hungry for the food of his childhood, he was willing to enter the kitchen to teach her the art of rolling grapeleaves or hollowing squash. In Jordan my grandmother took over her culinary education, the two of them communicating through hand gestures and my mother's broken Arabic.

But even food was a marker of both integration and conflict. To my father's dismay, I learned from my mother to hate yoghurt, that staple of Middle Eastern diets: he took this as a form of betrayal. Holidays became arenas for suppressed cultural battles, as my father insisted that my mother prepare time-consuming pots of rolled

grapeleaves and stuffed squash in addition to the turkey and mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes and cranberry sauce; or that she dispense with the bread stuffing and substitute an Arabic filling of rice, lamb meat, and pine nuts. For periods of my childhood, having two cultural backgrounds seemed merely to mean more variety from which to choose, like the holiday dinners with two complete menus on the table. I learned to like both cuisines, and to this day crave the potent garlic, the distinctive cinnamon and allspice of the Arabic dishes I rarely, for lack of time, make. But early on I learned too that cultures, like flavors, often clash. And my sister and I, occupying through our very existence the point of tension where my mother's and father's worlds met, often provided the ground for this conflict.

Moving through childhood between the insular worlds of school and home, I remained constantly aware of the ways in which I was different. My relatively light skin and hair, while failing to grant me entrance to the blond, blue-eyed company of "real" Americans, set me apart from my Arab neighbors. There must have been some difference about me more elusive than that, however, for despite the fact that I knew Arabs with skin or hair lighter than my own, when I walked down the street I would hear the murmurs: *ajnabi*, foreigner. Even my body language marked me. When I was in my teens an Arab man once told me he would recognize my walk from blocks away. "You don't walk like an Arab girl," he said. "You take long steps; there's a bounce to your stride."

Instead of taking offense at what was in fact a criticism of my lack of "femininity," I hopefully interpreted this description to mean that perhaps I was, after all, American. I still clung to some shred of that old longing to be as confidently unambiguous as the diplomat kids who rode the Embassy bus, their lunchboxes filled with commissary treats--Oreos, Hershey bars--that we "locals" could never obtain. I

wanted an American life like the ones I read about in the books I helped my mother unpack for the school library each year, the odor of glue and paper filling me with longing. I wanted an American father who would come home for dinner at 6:00 p.m., allow me to sleep over at friends' houses, speak unaccented English and never misuse a colloquialism; who would be other than what he indisputably was--a Palestinian. As a child I convinced myself that we lived in Jordan by mistake, and that soon we would return to the United States, where I would become my true self: American, whole. I wanted to believe that my confusion and fragmentation were merely temporary.

Meanwhile, I searched for someone to explain me to myself. I knew that Arabs -- my relatives as much as neighbors and shopkeepers and strangers -- thought me foreign, that "real" Americans thought me foreign as well. I knew, too, the subtle hierarchies implicit in these assessments. At school the social order was clear: Embassy Americans, then non-Embassy Americans, and finally those of us with mixed blood, whose claim to the insular world of overseas Americans was at best partial. At the interdenominational church we attended, my mother and sister and I fielded the solicitude of missionaries who never quite believed that my father was not Moslem. When, after exhausting the resources of the American school, I transferred to a Jordanian high school offering courses in English, I learned that there too I was an outsider. My father's name didn't change the fact that I couldn't speak Arabic, lacked the cultural subtleties into which an Arab girl would have been socialized, and as an American female had automatically suspect morals.

I see now how orientalist representations of the Arab world find echoes in occidentalist perceptions of the west. When I walked down the streets of Amman I was categorized as foreign, female; a target of curiosity and harassment. My

appearance alone in public, and my foreignness, seemed to suggest sexual availability; whispers of charmoota, prostitute, echoed in my burning ears. The insidious touch of young men's hands on my body pursued me, their eyes taunting me in mock innocence when I whirled to confront them. Once, when a young man crowded me against a wall, brushing my hips with his hand as he passed, I cried out wildly and swung my bag at him. But he advanced threateningly toward me, shouting angrily at my effrontery. If I had spoken Arabic to him he might have retreated in shame. Because I did not he must have seen me simply as a foreign woman, flaunting a sexuality unmediated by the protection of men, the uncles and brothers and cousins whom an Arab woman would be assumed to have.

Despite such experiences, early in my teens I claimed walking as a mark of my individuality. Determined to assert my difference, since I could not eradicate it, I walked everywhere, consciously lengthening my stride and walking with a freedom of motion I longed to extend to the rest of my life. Walking offered a means both of setting myself off from and of confronting the Arab culture which I felt threatened to overwhelm me. I wanted to insist that I was "other" than these people whose language I barely spoke, even though they were my relatives; that I was American--as was, for that matter, my father. Lacking an understanding of his history, I remained oblivious to his awareness of his American citizenship as a bitter acquiescence to the realities of international politics and the denial of Palestinian identity. Instead, I clung to markers of our mutual Americanness. Didn't we cross the bridge to the West Bank with the foreigners, in air-conditioned comfort, instead of on the suffocatingly hot "Arab" side, where Palestinians returning to the Occupied Territories had to strip naked and send their shoes and suitcases to be x-rayed? Didn't we go to the Fourth of July picnics and Christmas bazaars? Weren't we as good as other Americans?

While my father shared my anger at being marginalized in the American community, he did not appreciate my attempts to reject his heritage. Despite his esteem for certain aspects of American culture--his fondness of small mid-western towns, his fascination with technological gadgetry, his admiration of the American work ethic--as I grew older he grew ever more disapproving of my efforts to identify as an American. Although he had left much of my sister's and my own upbringing to my mother, he had assumed that we would arrive at adolescence as model Arab girls: when we did not he was puzzled and annoyed. As walking became a measure of my independence, it became as well a measure of our conflict of wills. He did not like my "wandering in the streets;" it was not "becoming," and it threatened his own honor. I stole away for walks, therefore, during the drowsy hours after the heavy midday meal when most people, my father included, were either at work or at siesta. Walking in the early afternoon, especially during the summer months, accentuated my difference from the Jordanian culture I had determined to resist. A young woman walking quickly and alone through still, hot streets, past drowsy guards and bored shopkeepers, presented an anomaly: Arab girls, I had been told both subtly and explicitly, did not do such things--a fact which pleased me.

As my sister and I entered the "dangerous age," when our reputations were increasingly at stake and a wrong move would brand us as "loose," my father grew more and more rigid in his efforts to regulate our self-definitions. Our options in life were spelled out in terms of whom we would be permitted to marry. A Palestinian Christian, I knew, was the preferred choice. But even a Palestinian Muslim, my father said -- though I did not quite believe him, conscious of the crucial significance of religious distinctions in the Middle East-- would be better than a Jordanian. (I think of Black September, the days spent below window level, the nights of guns and

mortars, my grandmother's house burned after soldiers learned of my cousins' political affiliations, the horror of Palestinian families massacred in their homes by the Jordanian army, and I begin to understand.) To marry an American, British or Canadian man was out of the question. Westerners, I heard repeatedly, had no morals, no respect for family, no sense of honor--an opinion that seemed to derive in part from observations of real cultural differences between Arabs and westerners, in part from the weekly episodes of Peyton Place and other English-language programs aired on Jordan television. (I have been asked by Arabs whether Americans really get divorced six or seven times, abandon their elderly parents, and are all wealthy, and I have been asked by Americans whether Arabs really ride camels to work, all live in tents, and have never seen planes or hospitals.) Though I now appreciate the difficult balance my father sought to maintain between his identity as a Christian Palestinian in Muslim Jordan, the American characteristics he had embraced after years in the U.S., and the cultural requirements of Jordanian society, at the time I experienced his expectations as unreasonable and contradictory. Most difficult to accept was the implicit portrayal of my mother's American identity as a misfortune for which we all, she included, had to compensate. On constant trial to prove my virtue, held to a far stricter standard of behavior than my Arab cousins, I both resented and felt compelled to undertake the ongoing task of proving that I wasn't, in fact, American.

In my experience cultural marginality has been among the most painful of alienations. My childhood desire, often desperate, was not so much to be a particular nationality, to be American or Arab, but to be wholly one thing or another: to be something that I and the rest of the world could understand, categorize, label, predict. Although I spent years struggling to define my personal politics of location, I remained situated somewhere between Arab and American cultures-- never quite

rooted in either, always constrained by both. My sense of liminality grew as I became more aware of the rigid nature of definitions: Arab culture simultaneously claimed and excluded me, while the American identity I longed for retreated inexorably from my grasp.

My experiences in the United States in many ways reinforced this sense of exclusion. Upon arriving in Michigan for graduate school, after four years at the American University of Beirut during which both my American and Palestinian identities had been inevitably politicized, I yearned, yet again, for the simplicity of belonging. Thus I consciously drew as little attention as possible to my name, my family, my background; I avoided Middle Eastern organizations, and made no Arab friends at all. A few days after my arrival in the U.S., when a man asked me provocatively why I wore a "map of Israel" around my neck, I answered briefly that it was a map of historic Palestine, but then retreated from his persistent attempts to draw me into debate, shrinking deep into a cocoon of silence.

"Passing demands a desire to become invisible," writes Michelle Cliff. "A ghost-life. An ignorance of connections"(5). While the incidents which first made me afraid to reveal myself in the United States were minor -- pointed questions, sidelong glances, awkward silences -- they were enough to thrust me firmly back into a desire for invisibility. I sought anonymity, as if trying to erode the connections which had brought me, juncture by juncture, to where and who I was, the product of histories I could no more undo than I could undo my bone structure.

But passing, as I was to learn, wreaks implicit violence upon the lived reality of our experiences. "Passing demands quiet," Cliff warns. "And from that quiet-- silence" (5). I have learned to understand silence as something insidious. As a child, lost between the contradictory demands of the worlds I moved between, I claimed

silence as a tool of survival; I honed it still further in my American context. What I did not then realize was that silence, with time, atrophies the voice--a loss with such grave consequences that it is a form of dispossession. Silence made it possible for me to blend into my surroundings, chameleon-like; it enabled me to absorb without self-revelation what I needed to know. But its implications were disastrous. Silence wrapped itself around my limbs like cotton wool, wound itself into my ears and eyes, filled my mouth and muffled my throat. I do not know at what point I began to choke. Perhaps there was never a single incident, just a slow deposition of sediment over time. Until one day, retching, I spat out some unnamable substance. And attempted to speak.

By this time I was beginning to claim the tools of feminism. In Beirut I had pored over a copy of *The Feminine Mystique*, startled by the wave of recognition it evoked. Later, graduate school exposed me to the analytical training and the affirmation of voice that I had been lacking. Although I was later to discover its cultural insensibilities, American feminism enabled me to begin interrogating the entanglement of gender and culture in a search for my own definitions. While much in my experience had tempted me to reject Arab culture as misogynist, my growing awareness of the ways in which my experiences represented not Arab culture per se, but a conflicted interaction between Arab and American, led me to explore my Palestinian background for positive symbols, not just nationalistic but gendered, on which to draw for identification and strength.

This exploration resulted in my acute awareness of the misrepresentation of Arab culture in the United States. There are ways in which Palestinian women escape the typical stereotypes of Arab women--exotic, sensualized, victimized--only to be laden with the more male-coded, or perhaps merely generic, images of irrational

terrorists and pathetic refugees. But none of these images reflect the Arab women I know: my widowed Palestinian grandmother, for instance, who raised three boys and buried two girls, raising two grandchildren as well after their mother was killed by a Zionist group's bomb, whose strength and independence people still remember with awe; or my Lebanese aunt, a skilled nurse who ran a Jerusalem hospital ward for years, raised four children, gracefully met the social requirements of her husband's busy political and medical careers, and now directs a center for disabled children. My increasing anger at the portrayal of the Middle East as a chaotic realm outside the boundaries of rational Western comprehension, and a slowly developing confidence in my own political and cultural knowledge, came together with my burgeoning feminism to make possible an articulation which, although tentative, was more empowering than anything I had experienced before.

At some point I began to feel anger. At the jokes about kalashnikovs in my backpack, grenades in my purse. At the sheer amazement of a woman who asked my mother, "But why did you marry a terrorist?" At an acquaintance's incredulous look when I spoke of Arab feminism. At the comments that it must be dangerous to live in Jordan "because of all the terrorism." At the college professor who did not believe that Arabs could be Christians. At the knowledge that when I posted announcements of Arab cultural events on campus they would be torn down moments later. At the look of shock and dismay, quickly masked, on the face of a new acquaintance just learning of my Palestinian background. At the startled response of someone who, having assumed my Arab name to be my spouse's, made clear her surprise that I would have chosen to keep an Arab name. At the conversations in which I am forced to explain that Palestinians do indeed exist; that they claim a long history in Palestine.

And with the anger has come fear. Of the unknown person in my apartment building who intercepted packages I had ordered from an Arab American organization, strewing their contents, defaced with obscenities, at my door. Of the hostility of airport security personnel once they know my destination or origin point: the overly-thorough searches, the insistent questions. Of the anonymous person who dialed my home after I was interviewed by my local paper, shouting "Death to Palestinians!" Of the unsigned, racist mail. Of the mysterious hit-and-run driver who smashed my car as it was parked on a quiet residential street, a Palestine emblem clearly visible through the window.

Although such actions both inscribe their subjects within a singular, predetermined identity, and often elicit responses validating precisely this identity, such exclusionary identification remains, finally, untenable. During the Gulf War a radio commentator proclaimed, "In war there are no hyphenated Americans, just Americans and non-Americans." It is a familiar, and chilling, sentiment: Japanese Americans in particular can speak to its implications. But what is to become of those of us in-between, those of us who are neither "just" Americans, nor "just" non-Americans? I could say that I opposed the Gulf War as a human being first, as an American second, and only third as a Palestinian. But in fact my identities cannot be so neatly divided. I am never just an American, any more than I am just a Palestinian. Yet I am not therefore any less of an American, or less of a Palestinian. As I was rarely given the choice in the Middle East to claim or not claim my American identity, so I am not often given the choice in my American context to be or not to be Palestinian. At best I can attempt to pass, suppressing my identity and resorting to silence. And when this strategy fails--or when I reject it--then I am forced to take responsibility for both American and Palestinian histories in their contradictory

entireties--histories articulated through idealism, but resorting too often to violence. And in so doing I come to a fuller understanding of the contradictions, the excesses, that spill over the neat boundaries within which I am often expected to, and sometimes long to, reside.

It has taken personal loss to bring me to a fuller understanding of the connections and contradictions that form the warp and weft of my experience. The profundity of the loss I experienced at my parents' deaths, at the foreclosing of their attempts to negotiate difference in their lives together, compels me to claim and validate their legacy--the textured fabric of my life. I look in the mirror and recognize their mingled features in my own; I lift my hair and note the curl, the color bequeathed by their mixed genes. My skin, lighter now since my years away from the strong sun of Jordan and Lebanon, retains the faint tinge of olive that set me apart from my white-skinned playmates even in babyhood. Tata Olga, my Palestinian grandmother, used to lament my propensity to stay in the sun. "You'll never find a husband, dark like this," she would scold, speaking the words of internalized racism and sexism. But I search now for color in my life. On the shelf above my desk I keep a card depicting a small Maldivian girl whose richly-hued skin, deep brown eyes, and dark, unkempt hair compel me with their beauty. The Lebanese American poet who gave me this card recently adopted a vibrant Guatemalan child; the girl in the picture reminds me of his daughter. She reminds me as well of a group of Maldivian students from A.U.B. whose embracing presence and steady endurance during our exodus from Lebanon in 1982 sustained and comforted me. And she brings to mind all the small girls growing up in a world where women are less valued than men, dark skin less valued than light skin, poor people less valued than wealthy people, non-western cultures less valued than western cultures.

She reminds me, too, that it is through a willing encounter with difference that we come to a fuller realization of ourselves. I possess no representative photograph of a Palestinian American, no non-personal touchstone of my mixed heritage. And despite my longing for such tokens, perhaps they are unnecessary. Although I remain acutely aware of the importance of communal symbols in affirming individual and group consciousness, I find glimmers of myself in people I do not recognize, in faces which share with mine only questions. No closed circle of family or tribe or culture reflects from the Maldivian girl's eyes. She looks slightly away from the camera, her gaze directed wistfully at something just over my left shoulder, something I cannot see and which she may not be able to claim. The card identifies her as Laila, from a Maldivian fishing family, noting that Maldivians are a mix of Arabs, Singhalese and Malaysian: there are, after all, some connections between us. But I cannot intercept her gaze. Laila looks steadily beyond me, light planing her pensive face. Whatever she sees remains unspoken. I look at her often, remembering how much I do not know.

Like my parents, I am grounded in both history and alienation. But if it is true that we are ideologically determined, it is also true that our choices allow us a measure of resistance against the larger patterns which map us, a measure of self-creation. Constructed and reconstructed, always historically situated, identities embody the demarcation of possibilities at particular junctures. I claim the identity "Arab American" not as a heritage passed from generation to generation, but rather as an on-going negotiation of difference. My parents articulated their relationship oppositionally, assumptions colliding as they confronted each other's cultural boundaries. Child of their contradictions, I seek to transform that conflict into a constant motion testing the lines that encircle and embrace me, protect and imprison

me. I am caught within a web: lines fade and reappear, forming intricate patterns, a maze. I live at borders that are always overdetermined, constantly shifting. Gripped by the logic of translation, I still long to find my reflection on either side of the cultural divide. But the infinitely more complex web of music beckons, speaking beyond translation. Who can say how this will end?

## **II. The Road from Beirut**

They say that during pregnancy we absorb cells from our babies into our own bodies: Decades later those cells may still be floating in our bloodstreams. If the past can be so viscerally present within us, perhaps it's no surprise that almost 22 years after leaving Beirut, I still jump at the sound of a car backfiring and cringe at the sight of fireworks blossoming across a darkened sky. Or that a certain shade of gold--the color of the blossoms the day I left Beirut--still inspires in me a subtle sense of sorrow. Perhaps the past is not really past, but lives on in the cells of the body unnoticed, stirred to life by the slightest sensory input: a sound, a smell, a taste, a color.

I fled Beirut in June 1982, soon after the invading Israeli army had begun their destruction of Lebanon's Southern towns, but before it had encircled and begun to bomb Beirut itself. The American University of Beirut (AUB), where I was a senior, was abloom with the vibrant colors of a Mediterranean garden. Golden blossoms drifted gently down from the trees, clinging like sparks to the hair of passersby. Then the Israeli army crossed the border into southern Lebanon in its long-expected invasion, and the campus filled with students huddled in small groups, transistor radios pressed to their ears. In the dorms, students stared fixedly at televised images of destruction. Those with families in the South strained for any identifying mark that

might transform a pile of rubble to the ruins of their family house, a crumpled human form to the broken remnants of a loved one.

As a Palestinian-American who had lived in Lebanon for four years, I was a full participant in the collective grief, yet at the same time felt deeply implicated in the events. On the one hand, US support for Israel had made the invasion possible; on the other, the unwilling presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon had provided its rationale. In addition, of course, I was terrified. It was clear that the human cost of the Israeli invasion would be high (most estimates put the largely civilian death toll at 18,000 to 25,000), and that my American passport would not protect me from the bombs. As a passport holder with money in the bank, I at least had flight options. But what course of action I should take was far from clear. Should I remain on campus, hoping that the invasion would stop short of Beirut? Leave the city for a safer location? Flee the country altogether? Leaving seemed in some ways a betrayal, but I was vividly aware of how worried my family must be. (International telephone lines were down, the airport was closed, and I had no way of communicating with them.) I felt completely alone, confronted by a life-and-death decision that no one else could make for me.

Hoping for guidance, I called the US embassy. But the woman who answered the phone was curt to the point of rudeness. "You should not be here," she snapped.

"But I *am* here," I replied, "and I'm registered with the embassy. Don't you have any evacuation plans for civilians?"

"Sorry, no."

"Can you at least tell me what route out of Beirut is safest?"

"No, I have no advice."

I hung up the phone feeling utterly lost. Now what? My only clear thought was to get money in hand. I set out for the bank, cowering when a plane roared overhead, breaking the sound barrier as Israeli jets routinely did. At the bank I climbed the dirty marble stairs to find utter pandemonium. People jostled and shouted, forgoing any semblance of lines. I pushed my way into the office of a manager my father knew. He greeted me soberly, shaking his head when I told him I wanted to withdraw my account. "Not possible," he said. "We are allowing customers to withdraw a maximum of 400 pounds. But because of your father, I will double that." I accepted the crisp bills gratefully.

Back on campus, people milled about in uneasy groups. There was a car leaving for Syria, someone told me: The occupants were Americans, and there was space for one more. Did I want to go? I wrote down the phone number, but hesitated: I didn't know the people, and I had heard reports of the Damascus road being targeted. (I later learned that the road was bombed the day that car left, killing 57 people, including 4 foreigners.) Another friend mentioned an evacuation convoy to Jounieh; from there, sea transportation could be arranged out of the country. Although the convoy was for scholarship students, he knew the person in charge. This sounded like a safer choice. We went to the bursary office, where the secretary agreed to slip me onto the list. But as she wrote down my name, I felt a strange sense of disassociation. What would it mean to leave? I might live, while others might die?

Back in the dormitory I started packing. We had been advised to take one bag apiece, something we could run with if necessary. I had been in Beirut for four years and had accumulated far more possessions than could fit in one suitcase. As afternoon turned to evening I folded and refolded, weighing the merits of extra jeans over letters, sweaters over photo albums. I fell asleep late and woke early to the interwoven

sounds of birdsong and gunfire. Downstairs, the dormitory was still locked. Looking out the glass doors, I felt claustrophobic, trapped without exit in a country under siege, in a moment without a future.

At the cafeteria, our meeting place, rumors flowed freely: A student had been struck by shrapnel; someone had been shot on campus. I waited under the banyan trees until the trucks came, open-bedded vehicles with slatted sides. We boarded, handing our suitcases up. As we started to move I reached out and grasped a flowering branch. The truck lurched forward, and the branch pulled out of my grasp, leaving me with a fistful of crushed petals.

We drove through empty streets, past bombed-out buildings, beneath a birdless sky smudged with smoke. Once, some people called out as we went by, wanting to know whether our village had been destroyed. At the outskirts of Jounieh we stopped in an apparently Phalangist-controlled area, and the Cypriot students, who comprised the majority of passengers on our truck, were told to disembark. When I tried to get off too, a man asked me, "You, you from Cyprus?" I shook my head, and he motioned me back. Confused and frightened, I watched my friends escorted away. Later I learned the story behind this event: A Lebanese ship owner who had been blacklisted by the Cyprus government for smuggling arms via Cyprus to the Israel-allied Phalangists in Lebanon hoped to regain access to Cyprus ports by "rescuing" a group of Cypriot students. At the time, however, I had no way of knowing why some of us were being taken away while others were left on the truck, and so I was simply filled with panic. Where were they being taken? Would any of us be safe?

The truck moved on, much emptier now. We drove through Jounieh to a hotel run by AUB graduates who had agreed to let us sleep on their floor. In the hotel a small television set showed a broadcaster standing in front of a pile of rubble, the

remnants of a building in Saida. A young woman slumped on a metal folding chair in front of the TV, the sound of her weeping jagged and low. Later I went outside to watch the explosions down the coast: a stitchery of flame in gold, red and white, sound reverberating a few seconds after flaring light, the way thunder lags behind lightning. My inability to sleep that night was caused by more than the hard tile floor and the restless movements of unwashed bodies filling the hall.

The next day we waited: for Israeli permission to exit the port, for a boat, for news of the Cypriot students. In the early evening, news spread of a boat. But it proved to be a false alarm, and excitement soon changed to apathy. After another long night, we received word, this time accurate, that we would be leaving that afternoon. To prepare for the journey I bought water and crackers, despite the fact that I had had no appetite for days.

At the port we found our boat, the *S. S. Eddy*: a small, dirty cargo vessel that seemed unlikely to hold us all. We boarded in late afternoon. Behind us, the hills of Jounieh leaned into the harbor, bulwarks of tree and stone whose beauty seemed almost unbearable. As the boat slipped into the twilight, I watched their outlines grow fainter and fainter, till they disappeared into the darkness, signaling that Lebanon was behind us. Bereft, I took refuge at the far end of the boat, staring out to sea. Around us, the darkness became absolute. The only noise was that of waves splashing against the boat.

Suddenly a spotlight came out of nowhere, pinning me down like an insect. I could not breathe. After what seemed like eternity, the light moved on, playing slowly across the ship, pausing at each face to render the shocked, frightened features in stark detail. A voice came out of the darkness over a loudspeaker speaking, as I recall, in English: "*S. S. Eddy, S. S. Eddy. This is Israeli gunboat.*"

What came next was blurred by confusion and fear. Several Israeli soldiers with large, oddly shaped weapons boarded the boat as we stood at attention, passports clutched in our hands. They took four students off board (one, we learned later, was rowed around in the dark in a small boat in total silence for an extended period of time, a weapon pressed to his head). The rest of us were left standing there, rigid with fear. At one point I was overcome by a wave of dizziness and exhaustion, and collapsed. Several hours later I woke to find the ship moving through the dark, the deck around me littered with sleeping bodies.

With dawn, the orientation of the boat made clear where we were headed: Israel. At some point the gunboat pulled close: a massive steel-gray vessel with a surreal purple eye, complete with eyelashes, painted on the side. An Israeli soldier with a loudspeaker ordered us to turn over all cameras on board. If one hidden camera was found, he warned, we would "never reach Cyprus." Fearfully, we complied. Meanwhile, our boat continued its way down the coast, eventually pulling into a harbor ringed with red roofs: Haifa!

As we pulled into port, I could see journalists with television cameras on shore. Israeli soldiers boarded with crates of food: tomatoes and cucumbers, cheese and yogurt and bread. Despite the freshness of the food, I had no appetite. I could see the television crews filming, and could imagine the headline that would accompany those photos: Israeli Army Feeds Starving Refugees. Someone told me a reporter had asked to speak to an American, but I declined, fearing that to express my views would create problems for my relatives in the Occupied Territories.

Soon after the food was distributed, the soldiers returned, this time with clipboards. Separating us into national groups, they began an interrogation process that went on for the rest of the day. My own questioning was brief: I was asked a few

questions about my background and activities. Other Palestinians, however, were grilled for hours.

Night fell. At some point the Americans on board were taken to the US consulate. In a room lit with glaring fluorescent lights, a female officer patted me down and emptied my bag, seemingly disgusted by my grimy appearance and the trash in my pockets. I was unashamed. My disheveled state was as much the fault of the Americans as of the Israelis. In the consul's office we were offered tea--our first hot drink in days--and given the option of leaving the boat in Haifa. The choice was in some ways tempting. I could stay with my relatives in Jerusalem and cross the bridge to Jordan. But doing so meant traveling through the country that was at that very moment laying waste to Lebanon. I had until morning to make up my mind, but I knew what I would decide.

The next morning the Israelis returned our cameras (minus film) and allowed us to leave port. Our boat headed toward Cyprus across rough seas drenched with rain. As night fell I tried to find a corner in which to sleep, huddling into myself for warmth. I woke to find a towel draped over me: Some kind person had noticed my shivering. Drifting off to sleep again, I thought about the camaraderie that had grown among our shipboard community. We had shared food and water, blankets and toothpaste, fear and relief. We might never see each other again, but we had been linked by something we would never forget.

As dawn broke, I woke to find the ship approaching Cyprus. We staggered off the boat, grimy and exhausted, to be met by the American ambassador to Lebanon, dressed in shorts and a straw hat, sporting a recent sunburn. Before I could take in the implications of his presence--while his staff in Lebanon had been insisting they had no evacuation assistance to offer, he had been sunbathing--we were ushered into a vast

warehouse where our passports were processed and motherly Cypriot women plied us with orange juice and cookies. Eventually we were taken to the airport, where flights were arranged to our home countries. I contacted my parents and my Cypriot friends, safe after an adventure of their own, and boarded the plane to Jordan giddy with relief. I was going home, safe and whole; my family was waiting.

My relief lasted through my family's fierce embraces, through calls and visits from relatives and friends. It lasted until the moment my sister handed me an issue of Time magazine filled with glossy, terrible photos of what those brilliant flares down the coast had wrought. I turned the pages, haunted, shaken by the understanding of what I had journeyed through and by what the cost had been, and would be, for so many.

You could say that everything afterwards--my journey to the United States, where autumn leaves sparked fierce remembrances of those golden blossoms the morning of my departure; my slow, fumbling search for a political and poetic voice; my growing awareness of how little and how much one person can do--was shaped by that understanding. One way or another I have been traveling the road from Beirut ever since.

### **III. Journeys to Jerusalem**

For almost forty years I have been going to Jerusalem. Although I grew up in Amman, my earliest memories tap into the hills and stones of Jerusalem; splinter in its rocky soil. This is true even though my coherent recollections of Jerusalem begin later, after I turned seven, the biblical age of reason, and the eastern part of the city fell under Israeli occupation. Who is to say at what point experience turns to memory?

Traces register at the deepest layers of consciousness, and we are heir to things we cannot always name.

Before 1967, my older sister recalls, we could drive from Amman to Jerusalem for lunch and back in a single day, untrammelled by checkpoints and borders. (Now, when Palestinians cannot even go the short distance from Ramallah to Birzeit, much less from Amman to Jerusalem, without being forcibly reminded of their occupied status through multiple checkpoints, ditches dug across the roads, and barbed wire fences, this is wondrous to contemplate.) That this earlier time of unhindered Palestinian access to Jerusalem exists, for me, before the onset of clear memory, residing instead in a shadow realm of impression that is almost mythical, seems only appropriate. After all, despite the long legacy of United Nations resolutions, Palestinian claims to justice appear to have taken on the characteristics of a fairy tale: a story of wish fulfillment told at night to credulous children, but dismissed by the powers of the world in the light of day.

I have no explicit recollection of those early family visits to Jerusalem: the drive down into the richly fertile Jordan valley, past fields of banana and tomato, and then up again, toward the dun-colored Palestinian hills that formed the base note for Jerusalem's symphonic walls. But subtle impressions of light and shade, the smell of freshly turned earth, the springtime syncopation of poppies and wild mustard by the roadside, the off-white facades of stone buildings rising on the eastern approach to the city, chipped facets holding light like an internal glow, must have made their way into my subconscious, emerging later as a sensation of mysterious familiarity, till it was as if I had always been traveling this route. Mingled sights and sounds and smells of the city itself must similarly have registered on my earliest awareness: the majestic vista of the Dome of the Rock, its golden hemisphere casting a glow over the city; the worn

bulwark of the Old City walls, eloquent with antiquity; the streets filled with snarls of cars and people and sometimes donkeys, blaring horns, drivers shouting at each other, vendors calling out their wares; and the proliferation of odors, as car exhaust and perspiration collided with the distinct aromas of *za'atar* and freshly roasted coffee.

In contrast—for Jerusalem has always provided a study in contrasts--my relatives' house off Saladin Street, near Herod's Gate, must have provided then the oasis of calm that it does in later memories: cacophony of the street falling away as we passed through the tiled corridor leading to the internal garden fragrant with lemon and jasmine, and then to the house itself, there to be welcomed with kisses and exclamations. For if Jerusalem was a city rich with historical legacies and sensory texture, it was also an emotional space resonant with familial warmth and familial claims. For me, child of an American mother and a Palestinian father, reminded too often of my anomalous status in Palestinian culture, the embracing welcome offered by my Jerusalem relatives was a comfort: proof that one could be different and yet still belong. I might be *Americaniyeh*; my brown hair and hazel eyes might set me off from my black-haired, black-eyed cousins, whose fluency in English, German and Arabic put my monolingualism to shame; but within the familial space we were all *beit Majaj*, of the house of Majaj. And when my aunt called us to lunch, to a table groaning with *kusa mahshi* and *wara' dawali* and *baba ghanouj*, there was no distinction made between the cousins: we were simply "the children," expected to behave properly and eat well.

Within the context of Israeli occupation, moreover, we were all, American passports or no American passports, Palestinian. As a child I did not fully understand the words "occupation" and "military rule." But I could see how my father's face froze to an impassive mask when we approached Israeli officials at the bridge

crossing between Jordan and the West Bank; how soldiers gave orders and we were forced to obey. It did not escape me that although we made the crossing along with other foreign passport-holders, our documents processed in air-conditioned buildings instead of in the sweltering (or, in winter, freezing) tin-roofed areas where West Bank Palestinians spent long hours waiting to be cleared for passage, we were invariably treated differently: called to one side, searched and questioned while the tourists moved through unhampered. Most unsettling, from my child's perspective, was the extent to which my father, at home the epitome of power, was drained of his authority by these Israelis with guns rifling through our documents. As we waited for transportation away from the bridge into the occupied West Bank, I stared out at the Israeli flag blazoned onto the Palestinian hillside like a tattoo on raw flesh, and wondered what Palestinians had done to deserve this treatment.

When we finally reached Jerusalem and the haven of my aunt's house, however, these humiliations seemed in some way badges of honor. The more harassed we were on our journey to Jerusalem, the greater was our sense of being Palestinian. Even my American mother participated in this sense of communal belonging, as if by marrying a Palestinian she had married not only into a family, but into a national experience. (This was hammered home years later, when she checked into an Israeli hospital, seeking a diagnosis for the mysterious and debilitating skin problems that later proved to be manifestations of cancer. The Israeli nurses, who knew she was married to a Palestinian, would not change her blood-stained sheets: after she had asked for fresh linen for days, they finally tossed the clean sheets on the floor and told her to make the bed herself.)

Even at an early age I could see that to be Palestinian meant being part of something larger than the immediate family and its expectations. It meant being

connected to a land, a people and a history, all of which were symbolized by a single city: Jerusalem. If Palestine was the homeland whose echoes reverberated through our lives no matter where we lived or how we sought to distance ourselves, Jerusalem was the emotional center of this homeland, the focal point of Palestinian longing. And despite the fact that I grew up feeling in many ways distinctly American -- and, like so many Americans, distinctly lacking in political awareness -- on some level I too felt included in this national definition.

I recall one winter day in Jerusalem, when I was around nine. In the morning we walked through the Old City over cobblestones slick with rain, drinking in the sensory rush as shoppers bargained for vegetables and fruits, vendors pushed carts through the crowded streets, and food stalls enticed passersby with the scent of *shwarma* and *falafel*. After lunch we went for a drive to an outlying area of the city studded with olive groves and stone fences. After the tumult of the Old City, the open spaces of earth and sky were like a lyrical pause at the center of a musical score. My father and uncle stopped to talk to a farmer while I wandered a muddy path beside a low stone fence, drinking in the landscape of green and brown and gray, the olive trees pruned to simple lines, the intricate balance of stones laid carefully atop each other to form the orchard's bordering wall. Something about the landscape's energy, the careful industry of the olive grove and its surrounding wall, stayed with me, a small kernel I quietly harbored. On our return to Amman I tried to capture those perceptions in a painting, laboring to render the complexity of individual stones, the stark beauty of branches etched against a sky swollen with rain. My art teacher, a gentle Palestinian man whose name, as he loved to remind us, meant "friend," leaned over my page to ask me what I was painting. When I told him it was a scene from my recent trip to Jerusalem, he patted my shoulder. "You love Palestine," he said warmly,

as if it was a secret we shared. Although I sensed that the emotion he had in mind was larger than I could really comprehend, I nodded.

As experiences such as this one poured, wave by wave, over my consciousness, they laid down traces, so that even before I could recall specific trips to Jerusalem, the place had become part of my mental landscape. Going there seemed a bit like visiting a grandparent: something natural and inevitable, a right as well as an obligation. Jerusalem -- and through Jerusalem, Palestine -- lived in me the way a grandparent's genes live on in the body of a child: a mysterious habitation linking generations. It lived in me too like a destiny: something one might at times prefer to escape. (Sometimes I think that the melancholic strain in my personality comes from Palestine's proliferation of stone: I have never managed to raise my head under that weight.) No matter how much time passed between my visits, Jerusalem echoed through my consciousness, and with each arrival I was transfixed by that deep chord of familiarity: summer heat beating on stone, the drumming of winter rain.

Since childhood I have been testing my voice against this echo. And for forty years I have been making this journey to Jerusalem: the way a musician rehearses a melody, the way a swimmer goes to the sea.

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Throughout my childhood, going to Jerusalem was a descent and an ascent: the downward journey through the Jordan Valley, the actual passage across the river, bracketed by tedious waits on either side of the bridge, and then the upwards passage through the Palestinian landscape to the final destination: Jerusalem. At the heart of this journey lay the Allenby Bridge.

In my childhood recollections the bridge, Jordan's only portal to Palestine, was a simple wooden structure across a murky channel of water that seemed wholly unworthy of its mythical reputation. Was this muddy stream really the famous River Jordan, the place of Jesus' baptism, the river celebrated in literature and song? Even on winter crossings, when the water moved more swiftly, swollen with rain, and rushes laced the surface like camouflage, the river seemed disconcertingly unimpressive. Gazing down at it as we rattled across the bridge in the bus designated for that purpose (or, on occasion, walked across, suitcases in tow) I marveled at the importance granted this seemingly insignificant body of water. And I marveled, too, at the fact that this stream was all that separated Jordan and Israel: would these muddy banks really hold enemy tanks at bay?

I knew that "crossing the Jordan," whether in American culture or in Bible stories, was supposed to signify a passage from slavery to freedom. After all, I attended an American school until I was a teenager, and my best friends were missionary kids. But in the local Palestinian context that I also inhabited, the Jordan River stood, instead, as the demarcation line between dual oppressions: exile and occupation. On the eastern bank of the river Palestinians lived in forced separation from their homeland, often in desperately poor refugee camps. (Although we lived comfortably in a middle-class neighborhood of Amman, I knew that there were alternate universes to my own small world: that only a few minutes drive away were refugee camps where children with dirty faces and hungry eyes begged for food.) On the western bank of the river Palestinians lived under the boot of military rule, again often in refugee camps forgotten by the world. Between these two banks flowed the river itself, spanned by the insubstantial web of wood named after General Allenby

(the commander who led British troops into Palestine in 1917, starting, one might say, the whole Palestinian tragedy).

On the western bank of the river, my father was a Palestinian under occupation: his land confiscated, his identity denied. On the eastern bank, he was a Palestinian in exile: his future held hostage, his identity denied. And when he stood in the middle of the bridge, swaying between the poles of injustice, what then? Perhaps, beneath the façade of righteous anger that made him such an imposing figure in my childhood memory, he was like so many other Palestinians: simply bewildered, caught off-balance by history.

I turned seven in October 1967, soon after the June war that placed the remaining land of Palestine under occupation and made hundreds of thousands of Palestinians refugees, many for the second time. That fall my father brought home an oil painting of a man carrying his children across the Allenby Bridge. The painting, which now hangs in my study, was rendered with thick, nervous brush strokes in tones of black and yellow, the choppy paint surface evoking a sense of uneasiness. The man portrayed in it stands stiffly, leaning slightly to one side as if braced against his load. He hoists a small child in the crook of one arm, gripping the sleeve of another girl, who clings to his back, between his teeth. His gaze is directed vacantly off to one side, as if there is no point in meeting the viewer's eyes. Behind him, seen through the framework of the bridge, are indistinct figures in a long line: other refugees waiting to cross.

Taped to the back of the picture is a black and white photo of the scene which the painting replicates, along with a scrap of paper bearing a few typed lines: "The Israelis drove approximately a quarter of a million people out of their homes on the West Bank during and immediately after the war of June 1967. Here a father brings

his children to safety across the River Jordan.”<sup>1</sup> In the photo the man looks downward, as if focused on nothing more than the next exhausting step forward. In both photo and picture he carries nothing but his children: his free hand is splayed open, as if emphasizing the radical experience of his loss.

I grew up with this picture but did not really understand it. I knew it had to do not only with the presence of Israeli soldiers at the bridge crossing, but also with the war, which had entered my consciousness as fragmented shards of perception: the piercing spiral of air raid sirens, the terrifying roar of bomber planes overhead, the dank odor of perspiration and fear permeating the protected inner hallway where we huddled. A child, I had until then largely been spared knowledge of the world’s injustice. But I understood, even then, that there was no real hiding from the forces unleashing violence around us. As I grew older and experienced other wars, I began to understand what it was that could not be escaped: not so much the planes and bombs as Palestinian history itself.

If the 1967 war served as my first encounter with Palestinian history, crossing the Allenby Bridge to the West Bank on our journeys to Jerusalem provided a hands-on education in the realities of Palestinian identity. We were fortunate indeed to be able to make that journey across the river in the opposite direction: to go toward Jerusalem instead of fleeing. But we crossed the river on transit visas, our stay limited, the parameters of our journey beyond our control. And although as American passport holders we had a far easier time of it than did most Palestinians, still we could not escape the ramifications of being Palestinian. Those gray-green (later, blue) U.S. passports with their embossed seals made a significant difference in how we were treated. But they did not make all the difference. Although our crossing might

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<sup>1</sup> UN estimates place the number of refugees resulting from the war at up to half a million

take three hours instead of seven, although we were not usually subjected to strip-searching, did not have to send our shoes to be x-rayed, and were generally spared the humiliations that were the lot of most Palestinians seeking to enter their homeland, still we understood that in the eyes of the Israelis we were not “real” Americans: we were always Palestinian, always a threat.

For me, a bookworm and a budding would-be writer, one of the particular hardships of the crossing was that we could not carry anything printed or handwritten across the bridge, for fear of running afoul of the censor. How I longed for a book with which to pass the interminable wait! But it was impossible. Carrying anything printed, even a novel, meant long delays while we waited for clearance from the censor. (These restrictions did not appear to apply to foreign tourists: I remember watching jealously as northern European travelers sat casually reading books while they waited their turn.)

Handwritten documents were even more problematic. Once we were delayed at the bridge for hours: my sister had forgotten a letter from a friend in her purse, and we had to wait while the censor examined every word of that adolescent note for incriminating evidence. After that I developed a paranoia about having anything printed in my possession at the bridge. Even discovering a stray candy wrapper in my pocket with Arabic writing on it would set me into a frenzy of anxiety. And heaven forbid we carry names, telephone numbers, or addresses: these would trigger special attention, and would leave us worried over what trouble we might have inadvertently caused the persons so named, since one never knew how information would be used. For the same reason we never mentioned our relatives’ names at the bridge, but told the authorities that we would be staying at a local hotel.

Once, when I was a teenager, we planned to cross the bridge in company with British friends whom my father had promised to take on a tour of Jerusalem. It was a chilly day, and we felt fortunate to be spared the long lines where West Bank Palestinians waited their turn to have their suitcases unceremoniously dumped out onto large tables. Inside the building where our documents were processed, an Israeli soldier looked our names up on a computer, and then motioned my father into a cubicle. I could hear my father's angry voice, the insistent voice of the soldier. Suddenly my father stormed out of the cubicle and told my mother that we were going back to Jordan: he refused to submit to these conditions. The official had decided to strip-search my father, something our American passports usually spared us from. My mother was in a quandary: if we turned back, we would be abandoning the guests we had promised to accompany. Finally the situation was defused: the Israelis told my father he would only be required to take off his shirt and loosen his pants, and my father, urged by my mother, grudgingly agreed. We passed through border control without further incident, but as we seated ourselves in the Arab car that would take us to Jerusalem, I could still see the set of my father's jaw.

Years later, I found myself standing in a cubicle at the bridge with my sister, my pants around my ankles. The female Israeli soldier who had ordered me to unclothe was writing something on a clipboard and had not bothered to glance at my naked legs to verify that I was not, in fact, concealing contraband. My jaw was so tightly clenched that my teeth ached. My sister, who had only been required to take off her shoes, raised her eyebrows and shook her head at me. But I was too upset to heed her warning. "Why do I have to take off my pants but she doesn't have to take off her skirt?" I demanded of the soldier. "If you're worried about security, why don't you check us both?" Without looking up, the Israeli woman shrugged. "She can hide

something in her shoes, you can hide something in your pants.” I looked at my sister, whose open sandals revealed most of her feet, but whose long skirt, unlike my tight Capri pants, could have hidden all manner of things. The point, evidently, was not security but harassment. I had revealed more anger during our initial questioning than my sister, and I was being punished for it. I had a sudden vision of my father in perhaps that same cubicle, stripped to the waist while a bored young Israeli man wrote on a clipboard. Ten or fifteen years had passed, but the humiliation was the same.

Later, my sister and I rode in a taxi through Jericho, and I remembered stopping in Jericho’s central market, where my father bought large burlap sacks of oranges and tangerines to take to the Jerusalem relatives. The purchase, I now think, was more for my father than for the relatives, as if the familiar gesture of generosity could restore his trampled sense of honor. While he heaved the heavy sacks of fruit into the trunk of the car, I leaned my head against the cool window pane and watched the market’s swirling kaleidoscope of orange and green and brown. After my father had paid the stall owner for the fruit, he handed us a small sack of oranges and dates through the window, to eat in the car as we traveled. Although I had never liked dates much, I took one and bit into it. The taste that flooded my mouth was sweet and dense as earth. I could taste that grainy sweetness all the way to Jerusalem.

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In the El Al waiting lounge at Kennedy airport, even the babies had tiny yarmulkes askew on their round, bald heads. Orthodox Jews with long curls framing their faces mingled with women in tight shirts and skirts; men in yarmulkes pushed strollers. I was more than a little nervous about flying El Al: I had never gone to Jerusalem via Tel Aviv before, and was only doing so this time because the terms of

my U.S.I.S. speaking tour required it. But no one seemed to notice that I was Palestinian. I was traveling on crutches for a badly sprained ankle, and when I hobbled to the back of the line for boarding, a man scolded me in a friendly tone: “What are you doing back here? Go to the front: you do not need to wait for everyone. Go.”

On the plane, the woman next to me was eager to talk. She had made *aliya* a year before, she said, and was still bringing her things over. She had even managed to sneak an extra suitcase onto this flight. “What do you mean?” I asked. “I went up to a man with only one piece of luggage and asked him if he would carry a suitcase for me,” she responded, clearly pleased with herself. “But how could he accept to take something from a stranger?” I asked, horrified. “Oh,” she replied, “I knew he was religious, and I am too. You can tell, you know. We both knew it would be fine.” I stared at her. For a moment I thought of telling her that I had agreed to carry a suitcase for a strange Muslim, just to see her reaction. But the image of armed marshals escorting me off the plane made me refrain.

After takeoff the woman continued the conversation. “Is this your first trip to Israel?” she asked. “I’ve been to Jerusalem many times,” I replied, “but this is the first time I’ve flown into Tel Aviv.” I could sense her flicker of confusion. “What do you mean?” she asked. “How did you get to Israel?” “I crossed the bridge from Jordan,” I told her, a little reluctantly, knowing where this would lead. But she was still trying to make sense of me, to fit me into an unthreatening framework. “Ah,” she said a little too brightly. “You went by way of Egypt? You made the tour?” “I’ve been to Egypt a couple of times,” I told her, “but not as part of my trips to Jerusalem.” I could see the realization wash over her face: I was not just a tourist; I crossed the

bridge from Jordan the way the Arabs do. She turned and settled in her seat: our conversation was over. She did not speak to me again for the next nine hours.

At the Tel Aviv airport, light danced from every surface. Inside the arrival lounge, posters advertised the beauties of Israel. I tried to ignore them: I didn't want to see an advertisement for my grandmother's hometown. As I made my way slowly forward on crutches, an airline representative came to help me drag my suitcase off the belt. "Is anyone meeting you?" she asked, solicitously. Just then I saw two Palestinians holding a placard with my name. "Over there," I said. The waiting couple introduced themselves: Mohammed and Dena. I glanced at the El Al representative: the smile had been stripped from her face. "You won't be needing me anymore," she said coldly, turning away.

Outside, the air was as mild as lamb's wool. It had just rained, and the sky was clean and blue. We drove along the road leading from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and I stared out the window at the chalky embankments studded with occasional poppies. "This looks just like the West Bank," I started to say, and then caught myself. Of course it looked familiar: what was I thinking? One land: so close, so far. I wondered if I would recognize the Green Line when we crossed it. But before I realized it, we were in the familiar dusty streets of East Jerusalem.

In my relatives' house little seemed to have changed. The parlor was cool and dark, as always. I drank lemonade flavored with rose water, tasting like years slipped from memory, and listened to news about life under occupation. Conflicts were erupting over Jabal Abu-Ghnaïm, a green area in the West Bank taken over for a settlement against the protests of Palestinians as well as Israeli ecologists. The daughter of a friend called to collect the package I had brought for her from the United States. Perching on the edge of a chair, she told me, "Jerusalem is a dying

city.” That night I slept in the guest room, a room cluttered with books and photos. A picture of my dead mother looked down at me from the shelf above the television set: her face smiled me to sleep each night I was there.

A few days later, I stood on the Mount of Olives in the predawn, looking out over Jerusalem. It was Easter Sunday. The sun had not yet crept over the horizon, and in the darkness we could see the yellow lights of Road Number One: a swathe of highway slicing the hills like an airport runway, built over the ruins of many demolished Palestinian homes. Nearby, another set of yellow lights marked a settlement bypass road. My cousin pointed out a darker area, lit with only a few indistinct lights: an Arab neighborhood. Behind us, a hymn rang out from the assembled congregation. At that exact moment, the call to prayer resonated from one mosque, then another mosque. The sounds of worship, Christian and Muslim, wove together on the cold air: there seemed no conflict between the two.

Later, I sat in a parlor, waiting for a car that would take me to Amman, listening to two relatives and a neighbor share memories: The massacre of Deir Yassin; how survivors were paraded in trucks through the streets of Jerusalem, and my father and uncle threw jackets up to women in the trucks to cover themselves. The 1967 war: how a neighbor fled with his family on a road specified by the Israelis as a safe route, but returned soon after, alone, his entire family burned by napalm. 1948: how a family fled from Lydda on a road they were told led to safety, but which led instead into the desert; a road on which many died. The tellers’ eyes were sunk in their faces, their voices quick and low, as if relating something they didn’t want to remember but couldn’t let go of; as if history could be exorcised through narration.

When the driver who was to take me to the Allenby Bridge finally arrived, he told me that the West Bank roads had been closed down. A Palestinian student had

been killed at a checkpoint; there were tanks outside every town. We drove through back roads of the West Bank, passing by settlement after settlement: stone facades claiming the hillsides aggressively, occupying the slopes above Palestinian villages, whose contours, in contrast, blended into the landscape. The driver named every settlement, every village: a litany of names. When we arrived at the bridge, my passport was processed at a high window that made me feel small: I wondered if the height of the window was intentional. My last view of the occupied West Bank was of an Israeli flag leaning out over the muddy water of the Jordan River, planted on the last possible span of earth. Above us, even the sky seemed captive.

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The first time I entered Israel through Haifa, it was not by choice. It was June, 1982. I had been studying at the American University of Beirut, where my formal education centered upon English literature and sociology and my informal education centered on the politics of Palestinian-American identity. A few days before exam period, the Israeli army began their brutal invasion of Lebanon. I fled the city, squeezed onto an open truck full of sweaty, jostling bodies. Then I fled the country, crowded onto an open cargo boat filled with university students.

As dusk fell, our boat pulled away from shore. We were like travelers on a train pulling out of a station, watching the face of a loved one become smaller and smaller. The Israeli forces controlling the Lebanese harbor had granted our boat clearance, but an hour out of port, when darkness had fallen, we were apprehended by an Israeli gunboat. A spotlight played slowly over the boat, pinning us to the night. Then we were boarded and several students were taken off the boat. We stood on the open

deck for hours, dizzy with exhaustion, clutching our passports and waiting for the Israelis to return. When dawn came we realized where we were being taken: to Israel.

As we entered the port of Haifa I gazed, stunned, at the coastal view I had never imagined I would see: red shingled roofs, a backdrop of brown earth. Soldiers brought bread and tomatoes on board in wooden crates while television cameras rolled. We must have made good headlines: *Israeli army feeds hungry refugees*. But as soon as the reporters left, the interrogations began. The American citizens on board were taken to see the U.S. consul, offered the choice to return home via Israel instead of remaining on the crowded, ill-equipped boat. I thought about the option all night. But when morning came the land seemed a closed fist: I could not bring myself to enter.

Sixteen years later I came once more to Haifa from the sea. This time I was traveling from Cyprus to Jerusalem with my Greek Cypriot husband and our year-old daughter. Unable to find plane reservations to Jordan or Tel Aviv, we had decided to travel instead by boat. We journeyed all night, the boat's engine a steady roar beneath our sleep, and as dawn broke we found ourselves approaching Haifa. As we disembarked, memory washed over me like the ship's wake: light beating the coast, the land submissive beneath its weight. Inside the immigration hall, a female Israeli official chatted to my husband, smiled at my infant daughter. Then a burly Israeli man looked over her shoulder at my immigration form, with its space for "father's name." He said something in Hebrew, and within seconds, my passport had been stamped (which I had hoped to avoid) and I was hustled to one side for interrogation. Who was I? What was my relationship to my traveling companions? Where they really my husband, my daughter? What was the purpose of my visit? Whom did I plan to see? To speak to? Where did I plan to go? Did I have family in Israel? Did I intend to visit

them? (I wonder: do they think we travel so far and will not see our families? That we will wander like strangers in our grandparents' land?) The questions were relentless. When my child wailed, the interrogator merely raised her voice above the cries.

By the time I emerged from the immigration hall, I was furious. Despite our quantities of luggage, I insisted we take a local bus instead of a taxi to the depot where we planned to catch a bus to Jerusalem: I didn't want to spend any more money in Israel than I had to. My husband hefted our suitcases and baby equipment onto the bus without argument. An Israeli man got on the bus with us and started a conversation. Where were we going? Jerusalem? He would show us which stop for the depot, which bus to take. No problem, it was on his way. Yes, he was going to work, but he wouldn't be late, there would be another bus he could take. No problem. Yes, this stop; he would get off too. No problem, really! This line for the bus ticket, yes, that's right, he would wait. Got it? Good. It was that bus right over there, where the line was already forming to board. Did we see it? Yes, that one. All right, good. He'd be going then, had to get to work. Have a safe trip to Jerusalem, enjoy Israel!

As our self-appointed guide took himself off, strolling away in no apparent hurry, I turned to my husband. "What was all that about?" I asked. "Why would someone on his way to work get off the bus to guide a stranger? Why was he going to work at 8 a.m. from the port, anyway? And why so friendly -- what happened to the stereotypical Israeli brusqueness?" "Congratulations," my husband replied. "I'd say we were accompanied by security. To make sure we went where we said we were going to go; did what we said we were going to do. Look at it as a badge of authenticity, if you like: verification that you're Palestinian!"

Our bus wove through the streets of Haifa, the city melodious in morning light. My heart swelled as if in accompaniment to a movie score. The landscape seemed so

familiar I wanted to cry out in recognition: light like a bright hand over the hills. My grandmother came from Jaffa, a seaside town known as the “bride of Palestine”; its Canaanite founders called it Yafi, “beautiful.” Haifa lived in my mind as its sister: Palestine by the sea. Yet history had made me an outsider to the land.

The bus was half-filled with soldiers, men and women, their guns cradled casually, commandingly; their smooth faces a reminder of how youth is sabotaged in defense of the state. I held my year-old daughter close, whispering in her ear. She gazed out quietly at the coast, at the rows of white breakers punctuating the striking blueness of the sea. It was her second journey to Jerusalem. The first time, I had carried her deep inside my body, secure from the probing eyes of the security officers who wanted to know what I carried with me, whom I planned to speak to, where I intended to go. In my oversized coat, I did not look pregnant, and so she slipped across the border without being noticed: a small victory I knotted deep within me, a talisman against the humiliations of interrogation. A few days later, at a concert in Birzeit, my father’s hometown, I felt her move for the first time. A female vocalist was singing lines of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish: something about longing and freedom. She hit a high note and held it: the child stirred violently with me.

As we traveled inland, the scenery shifted from brown earth to cultivated fields, orchards, houses. The sun moved higher in the sky; olive trees leaned toward each other like old men trading stories. The road curved toward Jerusalem through wooded hills that made deep swells in the land’s body: a lover’s terrain.

Eventually my daughter grew restless, her uneasiness a reflection of my own growing ambivalence. I had only once before approached from the west, and the discord between the land’s Arab past and Israeli present strummed through my body, a clanging chord. Around us, soldiers shifted position, stretched and yawned. My

daughter stared at their guns, fascinated. When she poked a soldier in the back by mistake, I cringed, but he turned around and smiled.

Then Jerusalem broke upon our view like a wave cresting: stone and light on the ridge, buildings overtaking the land. The scene was resonant as sunlight, the city rising from the hills like the stone it was made of, integral to earth, inseparable from it. I felt a surge of mingled emotion: ache of familiarity, the painful atonality of alienation. As we wound through West Jerusalem neighborhoods, past stone houses that looked like those of my relatives, I saw that West Jerusalem was a splintered mirror image, part familiar, part strange. The city shone from every surface, as if breathing from within, indignities of entry and exclusion temporarily replaced by the constancy of stone, by light cascading down the hills, illuminating gray-green of pine and palm. But West Jerusalem was a closed world: we passed through as transients only, till the bus spat us out onto a summer sidewalk near the Green Line: into history, into the present.

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Jerusalem is a mosaic. Our personal stories are small chips of stone, part of a larger picture that can only be fully perceived from a distance: the Damascus Gate at sunset; an Israeli soldier atop the Old City walls; a street crowded with traffic leading to a quiet interior garden. We come to the city bearing private histories, private sorrows, and find ourselves in the heart of a public space: one ancient as history, and as tormented.

Jerusalem is not just a metaphor: it's a city. (I once showed a picture of a busy East Jerusalem street to an American woman who literally gasped in astonishment. "But it's a regular city," she said. "Cars and everything. I thought it would be more – you know, spiritual.") Jerusalem has trash on the streets, graffiti on the walls, people

of all kinds. There's love and hate, pollution and traffic jams, death and taxes. And for Palestinians, there are land confiscations, home demolitions, ID revocations; the shrinking circle of occupation. While Jewish Jerusalem expands into the West Bank, appropriation of Palestinian land cemented through the Israeli "security wall" being built to separate Israelis and West Bank Palestinians, Arab Jerusalem contracts. In East Jerusalem it is almost impossible for Palestinians to get permits for new construction: newlyweds are often forced to live with their families. Since 1996 Israel has implemented a policy of confiscating the ID cards of Jerusalem Palestinians, accentuating the sensation of a tightening noose around the Arab neighborhoods. There's a sense of erosion in East Jerusalem: people are trying to hold their own, but not always succeeding.

Last fall I traveled to Jerusalem to attend a family wedding. We came via Tel Aviv, where security officials paid special attention to my passport and that of my daughter, but did not detain us. We arrived in West Jerusalem around midnight. It was a Jewish holiday, and even that late at night the streets were filled with Hassidic Jews walking in groups down the sidewalk. The night air was soft around us. But the previous weeks had seen several suicide bombings, and every time our van stopped at a traffic light next to an Israeli bus, I held my breath. I did not relax until we arrived in East Jerusalem.

The day after we arrived, there was a family luncheon. Guests attended from several continents; they also came from the West Bank, which under the current conditions of occupation seemed further than a continent away. Flying from Cyprus only took me an hour; in contrast, it took the West Bank relatives two hours and three separate cars to traverse the once-short distance from Ramallah to Jerusalem, across roads severed by deep ditches and barbed wire fences. After lunch the relatives were

anxious to leave quickly, instead of lingering for another coffee, another drink. They wanted to get back before curfew, and were worried about being caught on the roads after dark. Sitting in my aunt's garden, I understood: they are living in a war zone.

The next day we went searching for Jerusalem pottery. As it happened, it was a Friday, prayer time. Outside the Damascus Gate Israeli soldiers prevented us from entering the Old City. On the other side of the street, Palestinian men barred from going to the mosque to pray had lined up facing the soldiers. As the call to prayer rang out, the Palestinians knelt on the filthy asphalt, without even a scrap of cardboard to protect them from the street, and bowed their heads to the ground. Between the Israelis and the Palestinians, cars rumbled past; the air was thick with fumes and dust. It was the most potent demonstration I had ever seen: unarmed men facing armed soldiers without shouting, without threats, without stone-throwing, praying in defiance.

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Going to Jerusalem is like entering a wound. We go to Jerusalem like bleeding medics, helpless against the injustices of the world. We go to Jerusalem like refugees from history, bearing nothing but our children, the future gripped between our teeth. We go to Jerusalem because the city lives inside us like the stone of a fruit. We go because we have voices, although the world does not have ears. We go because above Jerusalem's ancient walls the sky still rises, leavened with light.

.....

## V. Beyond Silence

*But when we are silent  
we are still afraid.  
-- Audre Lorde*

I have tried to name the things that have frightened me in my life. Spiders. Shadows under my bed. The angry voice of my father. Air-raid sirens. My mother's weeping. Jet bombers overhead. The rising noise of arguments late into the night. A lamp lit during black-out. Recurring nightmares. The half-eaten body of my cat's first kitten. A cloudless sky black with explosions. The sharp sound of bullets striking rock. An Israeli soldier's command, "Come to one side." A man whose hand brushes my hips or breasts, grabs at my crotch. Rows of tanks rolling across a border. The sharp look, the slight double-take, when I mention my Palestinian identity. Subtly hostile questions, indecipherable silences. A door which remained closed despite my desperate pounding, the stillness of death within. Proclamations of war. Racist scrawls across my possessions. Anonymous phone threats, anonymous mail. Red splashes of paint on the sidewalk marking spots where a rape has occurred: red paint at every corner. A man cursing women. A Jew cursing Arabs. An American cursing foreigners. Neo-Nazis brandishing swastikas. The sound of blows behind a wall. An airport overflowing with refugees. A man in a uniform, any uniform.

I could separate these fears into categories: those inspired by my troubled family life, by the implacable forces of war, by sexism, racism, violence. Thus separated, they seem more manageably distinct, more subject to control. The child screaming from a nightmare of terrible insects fears only her imagination, unlike the student knocked breathless by a bomb's enormous reverberation. The girl so trained in silence as to be rendered speechless is merely shy, unlike the frightened young woman called aside for strip-searching and questioning because her name marks her

as Arab, whose silence emerges from a politically circumscribed and historically grounded unease.

Yet these distinctions are too simple: they neglect the subtle connections between violence and repression, the myriad tendrils interweaving victimization and the ways in which we learn to inhabit our lives as victims. Besides, the visceral experience of fear respects no such distinctions. The autumn I turned ten I was troubled by a recurring dream of falling. In my dream I would slip off the rocky edge of a cliff and plunge downward, air hurtling past my gesticulating limbs, my vision clouded with the yellow film of nausea. I would wake to radio static, disembodied voices floating across the room, the distinctive retorts of guns and mortars beyond the windows, and the nausea would return. This was Amman, Jordan: Black September, 1970. The Jordanian army had moved to expel the Palestinians. Our house was unpropitiously located between a building held by the army and an empty lot occupied by Palestinian fighters. Chips of stone littered the pavement below our window where bullets had struck the house. We huddled for weeks below window level without water or electricity, eating canned food and drinking our diminishing stock of warm Pepsi. To awaken from a dream of falling to this shrouded darkness punctuated with gunfire, the urgent, surreal cadence of radio broadcasts, my parent's worried murmurs, the muffled breathing of sleeping relatives who had fled their exposed second floor apartment to shelter with us, was to continue falling.

That October my mother, sister and I left Amman for the quiet safety of my mother's Iowa hometown. Excited, at first, by the endless grocery aisles of colorful junk foods, the countless television channels, I soon grew silent before the sea of strange faces in my fifth grade classroom, the curious, pitying eyes of adults in church, the looks that marked me *waif, stranger*. My first day at school I stood

motionless while children swirled round me, shouting questions that blurred into taunts: Did I live in a tent? Ride a camel to school? Eat with my hands? When the confusion calmed, I settled into a routine of classes and recess and lunch, Saturday morning cartoons and Sunday morning church, ballasted by my grandfather's steady presence at the kitchen table where he drank one can of beer a day and listened to the corn index. Eventually I made friends with two girls in my class. We played marbles, tag, tetherball; traded comics and fifth grade jokes; wrote in each other's autograph books. I never spoke of Jordan, of the bullet holes in the wall above my grandmother's bed, the burned-out rooms of her home, the mortar shells we collected in the streets during ceasefire. Certainly I never mentioned my memories of the 1967 war with Israel, which these more recent events inevitably evoked: the pressure of my mother's frantic hands pushing my head into her damp apron as we huddled beneath the sink, the fierce whine of the air-raid siren piercing the dusty summer air, the acrid taste of fear flooding my mouth. Anxious for acceptance, I joined instead in chatter about marbles and Barbie dolls, choir practice and sledding, allowing the indecipherable outlines of my life to fade into a haze of silence.

Nine or ten months later, when school was out and the war was over, I returned to my circumscribed life amid the dusty rose bushes and low stone homes of Amman, the city the ancient Romans had called *Philadelphia, city of brotherly love*. I heeded that year's injunction to silence well; my return to Jordan reinforced the lesson. Although Palestinian life after 1970 was indelibly marked by the massacres and expulsions of that year, I managed to maintain a level of ignorance due not just to my parents' careful protectiveness of my childhood, but also to my own resistance of unsettling knowledge. I did listen with awe to stories of hungry families setting their starving pets loose to forage in the streets. But I juxtaposed these tales to reassuring

memories of a quiet Hawarden year, a winter of snow, two new friends. Before I left Hawarden, my friends and I had exchanged addresses and promised to keep in touch. For a few years we wrote faithfully--their letters arriving months late, by boat, because they kept forgetting to send them air mail; their script large and round and clear, reminding me of the calm pace of Hawarden life. But then the letters stopped--around the time that one of them became pregnant, rumor had it by her uncle or cousin. She was married off shortly before her fifteenth birthday. I did not hear from her, or from my other friend, again.

Teen pregnancy, sexual assault were as implausible to me then as gunfire ravaging Hawarden's quiet streets would have been. I was a girl who did not easily understand or accept violence; I wanted not to speak of such things, as I had not spoken of Black September, of the war. I wanted my life to be like a book, possessing coherence and closure. But by retreating into silence I rendered myself unable to articulate, and therefore to confront, the chaotic forces which pressed imperceptibly, irrefutably, upon my life. It is an old betrayal, silence: one too frequently chosen, for reasons we may or may not understand. When my friend stopped writing to me, did she stop speaking as well, thinking that wordlessness could protect her, cradling speech inside her like the child she was too young to carry? Her imposed or self-imposed silence was in its own way as stark a violation as the incest or rape that abducted her into a life with no horizon. I wonder, sometimes, if she ever reclaimed her voice, or whether that sheen of calmness sank her altogether.

Perhaps I only arrived at some semblance of adulthood when I began to understand the ways in which the quiet patterns of our daily lives are built upon semi-willed ignorance of the agony of people in different streets, different cities, different countries. This century has defined itself through massacres and expulsions:

Armenians, Jews, Palestinians, Kurds, Bosnians, Rwandans -- vast numbers of people exiled, murdered, leaving behind the translucent rubbish of ravaged lives. As an Arab American I find myself particularly attuned to Middle Eastern sufferings: Lebanese and Palestinian children riven by occupation and war; Iraqi children killed by bombs, by sanctions' hunger and disease; Lebanese villages crushed by Israeli air raids; Palestinian refugees still homeless after a half century of despair. What messages of fear will these children carry with them into their futures, scripted into the ligaments of their bodies, the shadows that hollow their eyes? And anguish knows no boundaries: a fierce current courses from South Central Los Angeles to South African townships, Sarajevo and Sebrenica to Khan Yunis and Gaza City. An undertone of horror echoes from women in Serbian rape camps, eyes and bodies taut with an unspeakable anguish, to deceptively ordinary American homes where someone whispers threateningly, "Don't tell."

*Don't tell.* It has taken me a lifetime to begin to understand the ways in which such words corrode, crushing palpable lives beneath the stone weight of fear. But who are we if we cannot speak out about what we have undergone, learned, become? We are the stories we tell; our words map the spaces of home. Our experiences etch themselves into our faces, the lines of grief and joy becoming sharper with age; our lives are timbered with a resonance underscored by the surprisingly fragile bass note of sorrow. To remain silent is to deny the embodied selves that bear us, rooted stalks, into the world: to become complicit in our homelessness. It is to deny, as well, those other narratives which inhabit us--the people crushed by tanks or bombs or guns or simple despair, the eyes and hands and voices whose pleas bind us to our jointly human state.

My attempts at writing are haunted by the Palestinian and other Arab lives so rarely given media space in human, personal terms. Voices I do not know press upon me, reminding me of the betrayal of silence. But the task of confronting, on both a personal and political level, the outrages of history requires a measure of personal confidence difficult for one schooled in silence. Like other Arab Americans, I have experienced hostility upon speaking out: threatening phone calls, anonymous mail, destruction of property, racist accusations. When I attempt to testify to the lives beyond the brief images of despair or anger flashed across the screen, I stumble over my own wariness of an environment so resistant to acknowledging Arab concerns, grievances, homelessness.

This silencing not only reinforces my sense of exile as a Palestinian, but also makes it difficult to explore other aspects of Arab American experience. The imperative of speaking out about political realities often claims precedence over more personal negotiations. But important as it is to challenge the daily litany of violence, the burden of testimony can become a means of avoiding a more personal self-confrontation. There are unspoken stories caught beneath our tongues: words we don't always understand, a mixture of Arabic and English welling up from deep within, frightening in its intensity. We are Arab American--but what guides can help negotiate this confluence of cultures? "I feel sorry for my Arab American students," an educator tells me. "They don't know who they are. They aren't American, they aren't Arab. They're nothing." I used to introduce myself as "half Palestinian, half American," moving in and out of these dual identities with the same rapidity and surreptitious fear with which I still tuck my Palestine map necklace inside my clothing when I wish to avoid confrontation, or pull it out when I am weary of avoidance. Though I now insist on the facets of my identity as integrally interrelated,

my articulation of selfhood against this landscape of homelessness is a matter of constant negotiation and renegotiation.

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If I could, would I rewrite myself? Born in Iowa to an American mother and a Palestinian father, I grew up in Jordan as a hybrid child, absorbing diverse and contradictory cultural nuances: both from the American Community School, where mixed heritage children were often disparaged by the "pure" Americans, and from my Arab relatives and neighbors, who viewed my limited Arabic, my relatively fair skin and hair, and my American-inflected manners as marks of foreignness. Despite the fact that English was our language of communication, in my family behavior was judged by Palestinian norms. Repeatedly told by my relatives and by others that I was Palestinian, that identity is bequeathed from one's father, I was also told--often by the same people--that I was American, different, an outsider. Chastised for not speaking Arabic, teased when I did speak it, I learned to keep quiet, drawing as little attention to myself as possible. In yellowing childhood snapshots I peer warily out at the camera, thick plastic glasses obscuring the expression in my eyes, one tip of my wiry braid in my mouth. I lived on the edge of language, surrounded by a swirl of Arabic and English, but came to words slowly. Even in my teens I lisped, my mouth moving awkwardly around s's as if they were foreign creatures. My own name pulled my speech out of alignment, and so I avoided naming myself whenever possible.

At some point I began to take solace in the written word. Though much of my childhood is a blur, certain memories emerge unbidden: lying sprawled on a hot tile sidewalk, absorbed in a thick edition of Moby Dick; crouching in the crook of a cherry tree, too transfixed by a Narnia tale to heed my cramped limbs or my mother's repeated call to lunch. I loved reading, the magical cadence of words, the narratives

that lifted me up and away from the anxiety of daily existence. Perhaps part of my pleasure came, too, from the sheer physicality of English, its square letters so distinct from the fluid forms of Arabic script, its sounds clear and plain--in contrast to the infinitely subtle differentiations of Arabic consonants, the difficult, arching' *ein* that coated the throat like *dibbes* (grape molasses). Unlike Arabic, which seemed far too complex--something that attracts me now--English seemed simple, its possibilities hemmed in by a reassuring certitude. Overwhelmed by my uncertainty about where I belonged, I turned longingly to the structures of English for a sense of home.

Besides, reading--and later, writing--offered a means of negotiating the fears that had started to rise within me: my anxieties about the familial tensions regulating our lives, the insecurity instilled by Christian missionaries who convinced me I was not "saved," my incomprehension about my budding, swiftly repressed sexuality, my fear of the political events which erupted like fireballs in my childhood sky. In the fall of 1970 I read and reread The Diary of Anne Frank, lying on the floor away from the windows, oblivious to the muted spiral of my parents' tension. When gunfire started riddling our days, and the protected back room filled with unwashed bodies rustling incessantly through the long nights, I returned again and again to Anne's diary, clinging to the amazing durability and resilience of language I found there, the evidence that homelessness and fear could be narrated, and through narration transformed. During the long evenings I sat cross-legged just outside the circle of lamplight, where the adults played endless games of pinochle and gin rummy, telling stories to myself as I formed figurines out of candle wax, turning instinctively to narrative to ward off the edging knowledge of darkness.

Looking back, however, I see the seeds of my adult alienation in the disjunction between my reading life and my actual environment. The books that

wooded me those early years were the classics of any American girlhood: Black Beauty, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Anne of Green Gables. My mother, secretary/librarian at the American school, would bring home stacks of newly arrived library books; I read these eagerly, turning the pages carefully so as not to dispell the aroma of newness. By the time I was twelve I had exhausted the school library. But these books merely reinforced my longing to be "really" American. They offered, moreover, no reflection of my own Jordanian life, no hint of a world east of Europe, of the land and culture which both bound me by its restrictions and claimed me, however tenuously, as its own. The American curriculum my teachers so assiduously followed taught me next to nothing about the Middle East. When my parents took us to see the ruins of Crusader castles at Karak and Ajloun, their massive stone structures invading the horizon, I knew the western narrative of the Crusaders' invasion and conquest, but could not begin to imagine what that epoch of history had meant for Arabs.

My knowledge about Palestinian issues was similarly limited. Palestine was never mentioned in my American classrooms, and my Palestinian relatives did not speak to me about their past. It may have been too painful, or perhaps they assumed that I would absorb Palestinian history by osmosis--something that did not happen, since their political discussions not only excluded me as a child and a girl, but also took place in Arabic. Much to my present dismay, the first book I read about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was Leon Uris' Exodus: oblivious to its distortions, I was riveted by the novel's sensationalism. It never occurred to me to search for an Arabic novel in translation, a book of Palestinian history, an Arabic poem. Perhaps I should not have been so irritated, recently, with an Arab American student who replied, when

I mentioned an anthology of Arabic poetry, that he "didn't know Arabs *had* poetry." After all, the gaps in his education are no starker than those in my own.

If this alienation occurred in Jordan, I can only guess at what growing up in the United States would have been like, where my identity as a Palestinian would have been even more tenuous. When I was a child I longed desperately to come to the United States, where I assumed I would "belong." Would I have had the fortitude to withstand the taunts of terrorist, "sand nigger," "camel jockey"; the profound silences or open hostility with which attempts at discussing Palestinian history are still met? Or would I have attempted to slough off my Palestinian identity altogether, becoming ever more silent in an attempt to prevent disclosure?

When I write or speak, I embark on a complex negotiation with the multiplicity of selves I carry with me, the silence so profoundly engrained in me. Often I feel like a well-educated foreigner who is not quite fluent in her adopted language and culture--whether that culture is Arab or American. Each part of my identity--Palestinian, American, woman--requires acknowledgment, affirmation; makes it both possible and necessary to speak. Yet each one of these identities has silenced me at various junctures of my life. Marginalized by my American identity in Jordan, my silence was reinforced by a sense of shame as I began to understand the role the U.S. has played in Middle Eastern history. As a Palestinian in the United States, my attempts at articulation have been met with hostility, incomprehension, ostracism. In both cultures I have been silenced as a woman--a silencing not necessarily more repressive in Arab culture, merely different. And though in the Middle East I experienced war and political violence, in the U.S. I fear sexual and physical assault in a manner I never did in Amman or Beirut.

I have wondered who I am writing for: Arabs, Americans, Arab Americans? But perhaps the question is better put: where am I writing from? For too long Arabs in the United States have had to stress what we are not: not ignorant peasants, bloodthirsty terrorists, wandering nomads; not harem girls, oppressed wives, seductive belly dancers; not oil-rich sheiks or evil emirs; not anti-Semites or anti-Christians. It is time, in contrast, to begin exploring who we are: women and men, straight and gay, artists, scientists, teachers, grocers, lawyers, carpenters, doctors, singers, gardeners: individuals only partially contained by any category or label, whose lives challenge the easy simplicity of identification. Beyond the stereotypes that cling with a terrible tenacity lies the fluid, subtle complexity of lived experience. Only when we begin to speak of our realities will our own voices finally welcome us home.

I recall a "high ropes course" I once participated in, in which I was expected to traverse a series of rope bridges and cables strung 30 feet in the air between trees. I began the course by scrambling up a bridge, balancing in a tree while switching to a safety rope. Then I turned to face a cable stretched through space across which I was expected to walk, and felt fear detonate within me: my body limp with nausea, my voice a congealed mass in my throat. I do not remember how I got myself onto, and across, that cable; I recall only the voice, distant yet comforting, of my partner who was holding the safety line, "I'll catch you if you fall." And the fierce recognition, solid as a fist in my belly, that *I had paid too much already to fear*.

Silence does not disperse fear, does not eliminate it. Rather, it is our voices and actions in the face of fear that are transformative. Coming to language is a process not unlike walking that cable high in the air with nothing but space below. I write by feeling my way along words that shape the silence around them, impelled by

a fierce awareness of the voicelessness that precedes me, the huge price I have already paid to fear. The farther I go the more I understand that words are not the tightrope on which we balance, but the steps themselves that carry us forward into the headiness of motion, toward the articulation of home. On one side of me lies the abyss of historical tragedy, against which my own voice threatens to disappear. On the other side is the trench of personal indulgence into which I can too easily fall. I move tentatively, testing my fragmented weight against voices that articulate the silence. As I move forward these voices become clearer. Some are Arab American, fellow-travelers on the path; others are guides and companions from other communities and places. With so many voices weaving the air into a shimmering mesh, who would not dare move forward into sound?

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter presents edited versions of several published essays. "Boundaries: Arab/American" was first published in Joanna Kadi's Food for our Grandmothers. "The Road from Beirut" was first published in Women's Review of Books. "Journeys to Jerusalem" was first published in South Atlantic Quarterly. "Beyond Silence" was first published in Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home.

<sup>2</sup> In this I find parallels with Jewish American literature that similarly takes up a mandate of "bearing witness" as a mode of "validating self in relation to a communal past" and thereby bearing witness "not only to the past but to a future." (Cf Aarons 61, 82. )

Seasons of Fire, Seasons of Light

*Is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?*

*-- Kahlil Gibran*

Outside Lebanon, New Hampshire  
a hundred trees are chanting of fall.  
When the wind stirs, gold coins flash  
under every tongue. Their fares have been paid,  
but the dead still can't cross  
to the other side. Bright ghosts, they linger  
on the chill New England air.

\*

We're still traveling the road from Beirut.  
Still remembering how blossoms trembled  
in gold clouds on the trees  
the morning of evacuation.  
We leaned out from the truck, grasped branches,  
clung till petals stripped off in our hands--  
delicate flakes that stuck a long time  
to our sweaty palms.

From the sea, refugees watched constellations erupt,  
fire searing the coast. All night the stars imploded.  
We fingered amulets into the long future:  
the ones who were lost.

\*

Here, leaves flare from dark wood,  
incandescent. A thousand tongues unfurl  
into flame, swirl orange smoke to the sky.  
Sumac glows, maple breathes fire.

Come winter, skeletons will grid the sky.

After the brilliance of autumn,  
nothing will be clearer than the simplicity of loss.

But a hidden current runs  
through the branches, sparks  
to green flame come spring.

\*

In Besharri, the cedars stand watch,  
green and steadfast. Years plant themselves,  
seeds sprouting from cracks  
in the rock above rushing torrents:  
*Nahr Qadisha* Blessed River,  
*Nahr Nabaat* River of the Springs.  
Lebanon's hills enfold all the dead,  
known and unknown. Memory trickles  
down limestone in steady rivulets,  
watering the vines that bear fruit,  
the trees whose roots lace the mountain.

When the war stilled, bulldozers clearing rubble  
found ancient ruins beneath the streets,  
forgotten histories brought to vision.  
Everything lost continues:  
a star's light streams past its dying,  
ripples widening beyond grief.

\*

Now autumn is moving further south.  
Sumac and dogwood and burningbush  
crest the hills in brilliant waves.  
Sassafras and sweetgum fill the hollows.

At *mahrajans*, immigrant melodies

coaxed from an *oud* or *nai*  
flow across oak leaves and open spaces,  
the way light moves through water  
or a voice trembles with memory.  
Listeners hum and sway, clap hands  
or slip into dance. They know what joy costs,  
how knives hollow wood to this resonant  
shell. Sojourners, they've paid the fare.  
They want musicians' hands flashing  
like larks, notes rippling in clear  
light strains, roads opening toward the sea.

\*

In Lebanon, spring comes early,  
almond trees whitening to mist  
in the sea's soft breath. Dawn  
sparks blossoms of dew to crystal.  
Buds break, tongue to green flame.

Travelers rising early to check the weather  
find the hills taken by fire.

## Chapter 9

### Geographies of Light: Poems and Possibilities

*this is the body of words and spaces  
I have found to re-construct*

--Suheir Hammad, *breaking poems* 11

This chapter presents a selection of my own poems<sup>1</sup> that gesture toward certain contours of an Arab American, and particularly Palestinian American, sensibility, and that seek to explore the possibilities of agency in the context of ethnicity, politics, history and personal experience. It presents as well an essay that explores the origins of my personal engagement with poetry, “Email to the Muse.”<sup>2</sup> In both poetry and prose I probe the possibilities of language for reclaiming the past, mapping the present and asserting the right to a future—all of which are, all too often, contested undertakings. In a forward to the anthology Language For a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from The Middle East, Asia and Beyond, edited by Tina Chang, Nathalie Handal and Ravi Shankar, Carolyn Forché locates the origins of the poems in that anthology in

the urge to sing, pray, cry, announce, and whisper; to write cultures into visibility; to write not after events but in their aftermath; through collisions in time and space, exile within and without; to walk around in the ruins of wars, awake. What wrote them was a determination to revolt against silence with a bit of speaking. (xxviii)

Similarly, the poems presented in this chapter search for words – if not by which to “write cultures into visibility” (a project for which my own words seem inadequate) then at least to “revolt against silence with a bit of speaking.” While they reflect certain themes that recur throughout much Arab American writing—the struggle to reclaim the past, to write beyond stereotypes, to negotiate multiple identities, and to respond to situations of war and violence from an emotionally, politically and poetically engaged stance—they do not seek to offer a thematically reductive discourse on what it means to be Arab American. Instead, they undertake what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe describes as the translation of experience inherent in the act of poetry: “What the poem translates, I propose we call experience, on condition that this word be taken literally—from Latin, *experiri*: the risky crossing” (quoted in Forche, “Forward,” Language for a New Century xxviii). The poems presented here (like those that appear throughout the dissertation between chapters) struggle both to translate experience and to speak in the world: to bear witness to the “risky crossing” inherent not only in ethnic articulation but in the human act of speaking, and speaking out. They do so with an awareness of the fragility of language, its vulnerability in the world; and of the ways in which historical discourses, political processes, and the violent workings of power shape and impede the risky crossing mandated by our engagement in the world – the worlds -- we live in.

### Words<sup>3</sup>

These too have bodies  
easily broken and maimed:  
war’s early casualties.

Provenance

I come from olive and oleander  
pistachio, almond and fig  
from the many tendrils of vine

I come from light, strong and splintered  
from the *khamsin* browning the sky  
from walls of gentled stone chiseling a face

I come from a scraped knee, a bloody palm  
from trees climbed and fences scaled  
from the metallic whirl of roller skates across tile

I come from dust and smoke  
from the bleating of butchered animals  
and the spiny silence of cactus

I come from voices urgently raised  
and voices whispered  
from songs remembered across oceans

and songs that will not be sung again

I come from the hum  
of a woman walking a floor

with a sleepless child  
crooning an off-key melody  
tender undertones filling the dark

till the moon rises  
the night opens  
and all the stars shine out

## Stone Fence

I was a small child climbing walls, defying my father's injunctions. *Who wants a tomboy for a wife?* I clambered up cherry trees, skinned my knees, rode my bike farther than I was allowed to go. On picnics I collected rocks, hoarding them in the old tin can I kept under my bed. It rattled like my mother's button box.

My father planted jasmine, watered rosebushes. My mother weeded the strawberry patch, picked berries, juice staining her mouth and hands. My grandmother gathered mint from the garden, boiled Easter eggs in onion skin, fasted each year in gratitude that her baby, my father, had lived.

That was years ago. Now they're gone, all of them. Chinks in me fill with voices like green things sprouting, wisps of life between rocks. Birds drop seed, soil collects in pockets.

I tilt toward the earth, leaning with the weather, held in place by little more than gravity and the tenacious will of someone who gathered stones from the field, placing them one atop another, trying to make something that would stay.

From how many lives? I build myself up as I go.

## True Lies<sup>4</sup>

My childhood was uneventful,  
and happy. My father raised wild goats  
in a small mountain village adrift  
with the odor of thyme. My mother  
baked bread on stones, wove blankets  
of goat hair, coaxed jam out of cactus fruit.  
Each morning I rose before dawn  
for the days' trek to water, balancing a jug  
on my head down the long steep path.  
In the winter we roasted chestnuts  
at the family hearth and told tall tales  
to entertain each other through the long  
dark nights. This was one of them.

## I Remember My Father's Hands

because they were large, and square  
fingers chunky, black hair like wire

because they fingered worry beads over and over  
(that constant motion, that muted clicking, that secular prayer)

because they ripped bread with quiet purpose  
dipped fresh green oil like a birthright

because after his mother's funeral they raised a tea cup  
set it down untouched, uncontrollably trembling

because when they trimmed hedges, pruned roses  
their tenderness caught my breath with jealousy

because once when I was a child they cupped my face  
dry and warm, flesh full and calloused, for a long moment

because over his wife's still form they faltered  
great mute helpless beasts

because when his own lungs filled and sank they reached out  
for the first time pleading

because when I look at my hands  
his own speak back

## In Season

My father knew the weight of words  
in balance, stones in a weathered wall.

He counseled patience,  
though, dying, refused his own advice.

Today his words surround me  
with the quiet intensity of growing things,

roots planted a long time ago  
lacing the distances of my heart.

What he didn't say is sprouting too,  
a surprise, like the *eskidinya* tree

that sprang from the smooth brown pit  
I tossed off the porch as a child.

Years now I've longed to pick that fruit,  
remembering how he'd sit

spitting seeds in a stream to the ground.  
But I know it's not yet ripe.

So I think instead of the lemon tree  
in my uncle's yard. When it died,

no one could bear to cut it down.  
They lopped off the branches

but kept the dead trunk, stumps

of arms upraised: each bearing,

like bird's nests, a potted plant.

Out of habit, they still water the trunk,

and as if in return, each branch sparks green --  
though every heart's separate, now,

not like the lemons that used to cluster  
like triple suns. Did my parents know

that what they planted,  
roots against the drought,

would survive? Today,  
I'm a stump of a branch.

Yet on my tongue a seed  
lies dormant, dense with life.

Unspoken years  
fill my mouth like citrus

in winter--sharp promise  
of sun. Outside, *eskidinya*

hang heavy as memory,  
orange flash from dusty leaves,

their season still ripening.

Oak

*In Memoriam: Evelyn Abdallah Menconi*

She took her slice of life  
then gave without measuring  
or counting

something for everyone  
extra for those  
who understood her gifts too late

I'd like to think she kept some for herself  
but if a crumb remained  
she'd feed the birds first, chuckling with pleasure

She carried stories in her head  
a pencil in her pocket  
laughter in her eyes

and in her heart  
the determination  
of an immigrant's daughter

When she visited sorrow  
she kept it short  
and always came back smiling

Maybe her heart was just too large for her body  
and so had to burst free  
flames breaking from a twisted oak

That last moment,  
turning to speak,

breath catching in her throat

did she remember sunlight  
daffodils, garlic  
the redolence of worn shoe leather?

Years before, a boy and a girl  
each set out on the journey  
to the new world

Whatever it cost them to exchange  
one country for another, they paid it  
and in the new place they found each other

Perhaps on the day of her birth  
they looked down at her waving fists  
smiled across at each other and nodded

*this one's a fighter*

## Another Place

Who knew the past would follow us so far,  
years collapsing like an ancient accordion,  
scraps of memory tucked like torn photographs  
into the sockets of our eyes?

Remember the gray Beirut seafront, car pulling up,  
men ordering, "Get in," our hearts thudding against bone  
as we broke and ran? Remember the splintered staccato  
of bullets against rock, the way dust rose  
in the stunned aftershock of silence?

Days were punctuated by static and news,  
nights by the brilliance of tracer bullets  
in flight. We huddled on campus steps,  
transistor radios pressed to our ears,  
straining for some echo of the future.

That day we finally fled the beleaguered city  
(tanks rolling in, danger a promise waiting  
patiently) the sun sank blazing behind us  
into the sea, marking a trail of blood-red light:  
a path offering return.

But return was a story scribbled in a notebook  
misplaced during flight. We journeyed far,  
exchanged one country for another,  
survived one war to live a lifetime within  
others. We learned to let our faces hide  
our selves, to speak our story in a private  
tongue, the past a shadow in our bones.

Salt water and sojourns leave their traces.

Decades later we hoard echoes,  
still breathe the dust of that place  
where banyan trees tangle  
in the earth, gesticulate toward light.  
Fragments of memory welter  
in our flesh, fierce  
and penetrating as shrapnel.

## Finding Your Way<sup>5</sup>

Directions are only as good as their destination.

Go back thirty years. Turn left at the senior prom you attended with your friend's brother who was bribed to take you. Accelerate, ignoring the speed bumps, and get the heck out of high school. Stop briefly at eighth grade to recall that kid with the freckles and innocent grin, indifferent to your yearning. Then get moving. Turn east, pausing long enough in fifth grade to note the effect of war on childhood. Then speed-drive back to kindergarten, toddlerhood, a cake-mix in a Jericho kitchen, your grandmother yelling about foreign brides, your mother weeping in the bedroom. Look for an image to anchor you.

The dragonfly on the Jericho pool will do. Fix it in your mind as a talisman against fear. Then ask yourself: Where are you going, and what do you need to know?

Tata Bahiyeh

*For that generation*

Tata Bahiyeh was light  
in the bones and older  
than anyone: hands stained  
with brown spots, flesh  
so dry it folded  
in ridges. Her touch  
was like jasmine  
flowering at night,  
secret life slow  
through the tough brown vine.

Bahiyeh loved apricots,  
sun's fruit, rivulets  
sweet down her storied  
skin. The pits she spat  
in her palm were a promise,  
not to be wasted. Cracked,  
you could eat the firm  
white heart within. Planted,  
seed pledged to grow.

Bahiyeh was like all  
the old ones, longing  
for earth and the light  
off *Al-Aqsa*, olive trees  
rooted on hills -- prayers  
under breathing. Their eyes  
were pathways, marked out  
and empty: at least  
to be buried there,  
earth cradling bones

in a final planting.

Like all of them,  
she tucked packets  
of tissue-wrapped seeds  
(each with its story)  
in drawers, behind  
clocks, on shelves:  
to plant in the better time,  
*insha'allah*. Meanwhile,  
travelers eastward  
brought cuttings, sprigs  
in the luggage: olive  
and plum, bitter orange  
and sweet black grape.

\*

She didn't want much  
in death, just a place  
to rest. She was lucky,  
had the papers, could cross.  
But when Bahiyeh died,  
the soldiers dumped her body  
without ceremony  
on the concrete floor,  
probed roughly  
into sheltered crevices  
of her stiffened corpse.  
They expected contraband,  
money, munitions,  
anything but death.  
They found  
what they should  
have expected.

What light  
remained in her bones  
still beyond desecrating hands  
shone hidden  
and private.

\*

When you look,  
you find seeds, dusty  
and shriveled,  
brown shells fragile  
like ancient bones.  
You remember  
how to lay kernels  
in earth, pour water,  
wait for the green  
shoot thrusting,  
amazed how seeds  
harbor their light  
within. Bahiyeh's bones  
lie buried in girlhood  
soil. You watch for  
that steady emanation  
of light. You learn  
how to wait  
after planting.

## Fair Exchange<sup>6</sup>

What my mother asked me to carry in my suitcase from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Amman, Jordan: Jelly Beans. Grape Jell-O. Hershey's Kisses. Philadelphia Cream Cheese. Wonder Bread. What I carried in my suitcase from Amman, Jordan to Ann Arbor, Michigan: Arabic coffee. *Zaatar*. Olives. A *tawleh* board. Dice. What I mailed to my father from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Amman, Jordan: *The New York Times*. *The Washington Post*. *The Herald Tribune*. A sociology essay. Acorns. What my father sent from Amman, Jordan to Ann Arbor, Michigan: A Palestinian flag. *The Jordan Times*. Worry beads. A letter in Arabic I couldn't read. Photos of our half-built house. What my sister sent from Washington, DC to Ann Arbor, Michigan: Cassette tapes of Suzanne Vega. A T-shirt dress. What I sent my sister from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Washington DC: Green bead earrings. My first real poem. What my mother mailed from Amman, Jordan to Ann Arbor, Michigan: Soil from the garden. A hand-knitted scarf. What I mailed from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Amman, Jordan: Leaves from the maple trees. A wishbone that had not been pulled. What I asked my mother to send me for my birthday: the chocolate half-way cookies of my childhood. What I actually got for my birthday: a winter coat. What my father promised me from his trip to Australia: an opal necklace. What he actually brought me from his trip to Australia: a stuffed kangaroo. What I didn't ask my mother before she died: if she was frightened. What my father didn't tell admit before he died: that he was frightened. What I asked of my parents: to keep on living. What I received: love's unearned memories.

## How We Lived<sup>7</sup>

As if we would be always young  
(doors opening and opening  
down a long sunlit corridor)

As if we could change our minds  
indefinitely  
and the answers wouldn't matter

As if our bones would carry us ever forward  
journey always lengthening  
day soft and wide as a mother's hips

\*

Behind us echoes stalked:  
a sentry, a roadblock,  
the faint odor of garbage.

The evening sky hummed bluely--  
reverberations of shelling,  
fragments of bread and smoke.

There was enough fear to go around;  
too many beliefs  
pegged out on the line to dry.

\*

That was long ago.  
We were travelers; we aspired  
to the absence of memory.

Our bodies were sultry, innocent.  
We slipped across borders to find

each other; left finger-trails

of salt on the windowsill,  
flecks of skin on the tile,  
seldom wrote home.

\*

From where we stood  
trees were closer than birds,  
birds closer than the sun.

We bent over a child's wails,  
peeled back the skin of solitude,  
swore we would banish sorrow.

(At the window,  
blinds rippled like a muscled animal:  
the future waiting to spring.)

\*

We had roads to travel,  
battles to win,  
histories to compensate for.

They told us hope sprang eternal,  
and we gazed at the blood poppies  
splayed across history's map

and said we believed them.

*The current ran darker than that  
but to admit it meant drowning.*

## It Wasn't Poetry

It wasn't poetry, those days  
(summer toothsome as a ripe fruit  
juice dripping down our wrists)

It was trees and shadows  
pieces of wind blown in from the sea  
boats and waves and bodies

It was the full moon  
yellow as a smoker's tooth  
red palms pressed against the sky

It was voices climbing atop each other  
like crazed people in a locked room  
a child's wail pulled from a private place

It was moonlight pooling on the concrete  
long oars of light  
the silver odor of blood

It was sentinels falling  
dregs of desperation  
ceasefire seizing the streets

and the future  
lifetimes away  
dreaming us safe

## Origins

My daughter knuckled her way down the birth canal, emerging as if from an ancient cave: eyes wide, brow furrowed at what she had witnessed. She had no words, just a cry echoing from the deep almond-shaped eyes that held my gaze insistently, daring me to look away. Where she had come from only minutes before, not one of us could go and she could not return. Did she know this, those first few minutes on my chest, her face still slimed with the mucus of birth? She came headfirst into a space of music, Fairuz singing *Jerusalem in My Heart*, safely delivered, as they say, as if she were a parcel that might have gotten lost en route, but instead had reached its final destination. We were both delivered, I of her and she of me, and thus we each ended one journey and started another, spinning with the planet's centrifugal whirl. We have been traveling ever since, at times in opposite directions, and often the only evidence I have of our common origins is the odor of almond clinging to her hair.

I am asked, do I hope she will one day return to Palestine, to the United States, to Cyprus, to any of her various points of origin? I think of lines on a map, the blue spaces we traverse with a single flight, the world so small that sometimes it seems we will all be swallowed by proximity, so large that we can never encompass its vastness. Behind every symphony is its origin point: a space redolent with silence. I look at myself in the mirror, I who am fractured at the core, yet whole inside my skin and in my heart. Behind my reflection I catch a glimpse of my daughter swimming, sun glinting off every wave. She will grow in her body, travel where she wishes, love whomever she chooses. And when she returns it will be to her own whole heart.

## Out of State

The clerk snaps, “I need to see some ID.”  
She shrugs, starts digging  
through her scuffed brown leather bag.

She’s got wiry hair, olive skin,  
eyes glinting dark and intense—  
in his view, clearly not local.

She hands him a passport:  
picture inside, family name,  
all the particulars

that would pull her out of line  
in another place. He peers  
at strange stamps, fluid text,

reads out loud: “Place of birth—  
Palestine.” A land  
with no borders, too many maps.

She’s waiting, resigned—  
It’s obvious she’s done this before.  
He’s flipping pages, brow furrowed.

Finally he looks up,  
shakes his head brusquely.

“Sorry, no out-of-state

passports accepted here.”

No out-of-state passports!

She’s got too much dignity to argue,

or even laugh. But as I watch her  
walk out, head held high,  
I picture that state, still dream

and desire, its slopes green  
with olives—those trees  
standing patient and unyielding

as memories of earth.

## Rain

\*

Fragments of bone stuck to balconies  
the word made flesh  
breath splintered like shrapnel

impossible to speak beyond the bodies

\*

how a word transforms us  
seedling taking delicate hold  
or a weed choking the tender plants

news enters us and puts down roots

\*

we plant grief  
drench it with our tears  
it will not grow

\*

the dead can't shield themselves  
the useless petals of their hands

outflung hands

\*

what weapon  
can silence a million birds  
crying at dawn for the sun?

\*

we have unlearned how to speak to one another

torn to flesh, what words can mend us?

you cry, give us peace!

we cry, give us our lives!

peace grows like any other plant, on the land

it needs earth and water

\*

our words flower from fragile bodies

sway on slender stalks

mouths tilted upward for the rain

## What She Said

*"They don't have snow days in Palestine, they have military invasion days."  
-International Solidarity Movement activists, describing Palestinian children's lives  
under occupation.*

She said, go play outside,  
but don't throw balls near the soldiers.  
When a jeep goes past  
keep your eyes on the ground.  
And don't pick up stones,  
not even for hopscotch.  
She said, don't bother the neighbors,  
their son was arrested last night.  
Hang the laundry, make the beds,  
scrub that graffiti off the walls  
before the soldiers see it. She said,  
there's no money; if your shoes  
are too tight, cut the ends off.  
This is what we have to eat,  
we won't eat again until tomorrow.  
No, we don't have any oranges,  
they chopped down the orange trees.  
I don't know why. Maybe the trees  
were threatening the tanks. She said,  
there's no water; we'll take baths next week,  
*insha'allah*. Meanwhile, don't flush the toilet.  
And don't go near the olive grove,  
there are settlers there with guns.  
No, I don't know how we'll harvest  
the olives, and I don't know what we'll do  
if they bulldoze the trees. God will provide  
if He wishes, or UNRWA, but certainly not  
the Americans. She said, you can't  
go out today, there's a curfew.

Keep away from those windows,  
can't you hear the shooting?  
No, I don't know why they bulldozed  
the neighbor's house. And if God knows,  
He's not telling. She said,  
there's no school today,  
it's a military invasion.  
No, I don't know when it will be over,  
or if it will be over. She said,  
don't think about the tanks  
or the planes or the guns  
or what happened to the neighbors.  
Come into the hallway,  
it's safer here. And turn off that news,  
you're too young for this. Listen,  
I'll tell you a story so you won't be scared.  
*Kan ya ma kan*--there was or there was not--  
a land called *Falastine*  
where children played in the streets  
and in the fields and in the orchards  
and picked apricots and almonds  
and wove jasmine garlands for their mothers.  
And when planes flew overhead  
they shouted happily and waved.  
*Kan ya ma kan*. Keep your head down.

Witness

Weeds burgeon by the roadside,  
fling bright-hued gestures to the sun.  
Trees branch leafy promises.

In rocky fields, olive trees  
lean into each other like old men,  
their knotted limbs a witness.

What prayers I breathe are secular.  
May I be tough enough to withstand the world,  
fragile enough to deserve it.

Tree<sup>8</sup>

Thick in the trunk,  
twisted, knobbed  
to a pained

beauty, bark  
like a crumbling  
map, circuitous paths

etched by wind, rain,  
the subtle violence  
of time. Branches

sawed off to stumps;  
circled whorls marking years  
of living.

Gray-green leaves  
like fingers  
scattering light.

Home to small insects,  
nesting birds.  
At wood's heart,

a circled privacy:  
old scars smoothed  
by growth rings.

Shade pools in violet hush.  
Curled at the roots  
a child lies sleeping.

Leaves murmur  
their distant melody:  
shadow, light.

Long day lengthens  
toward night.  
Tree stands watching.

## Hanneh<sup>9</sup>

She was a tiny, ferocious woman, so short she had to peer over the dashboard as she drove. I towered over her by the time I was pre-pubescent. Each time I stooped to kiss her wrinkled cheek, I could sense her flinch. It must have been hard to be so short in this world. And not only small, but single: unmarried in a culture that stressed families, a woman in a man's world. She made up for it by her furious energy. No floor was ever clean enough, no bookshelf sufficiently dusted. And let no one dare challenge her rights, whether how much she owned on the electricity bill or what she would do with her life. There was no "no" she would accept lightly. Once she attended Jordan's weekly citizen's forum, where ordinary people could bring their grievances to the king himself. I cannot remember what she complained about – perhaps the municipality's water supply. My mother told me about it later, laughing admiringly. Surely the king, himself a short man, could appreciate her insistence on standing tall in this world.

She was a professional when she might have been relegated to the role of spinster aunt, a librarian who took pride in her work. She knew the value of education, whether in school or in the world, and approved, in her prickly way, of my academic efforts. Although as a child I disliked the lessons she gave my mother and sister and me in Arabic, and did my best to avoid them, later I understood the resource we had squandered. She insisted on the value of travel, believing no girl should be ignorant of the world, and went abroad at a time women often stayed home. Later she took her nieces along with her on her travels, bringing the rest of us small souvenirs. At the time they often seemed little more than dust collectors. But although they are now packed away in boxes, taking closet space I don't have to spare, I can't bring myself to give them away.

Famous for her thrift, she tolerated no waste in her house: every shred of food was saved and reused, every grain of rice salvaged. In a dry country, she knew the value of water. No tap was turned on without a bucket underneath; no water was thrown away without being used and reused and finally thrown down the toilet in lieu of flushing. We grumbled about the way food appeared and reappeared on the table; about her insistence on taking showers standing in a dishpan. But she knew what she was doing,

and why, and wouldn't change her habits for anyone. After a lifetime of saving, she could have had more luxuries than she allowed herself. But when people urged her to buy new furniture, replace the sagging bed, relax about the water bill, she turned a deaf ear, complaining bitterly about the wastefulness of the young.

She was a Palestinian from Jerusalem: being in Jordan, where she spent much of the year, was a compromise. She never forgot where she came from, or where she belonged. From her I learned about both dignity and caution. Occasionally she would tell stories about the history she'd lived through, offering details that were few but chilling; how survivors of the Deir Yassin massacre were paraded through Jerusalem streets on trucks; the devastation of napalm. But when I arrived in Jerusalem from the U.S. on a lecture tour, she took me to one side and admonished me to watch what I said in public. "We have to live here," she said flatly, not needing to say the rest: that I did not.

When the news came that she had died, I was on my way to an airport in a foreign country. Perhaps it was fitting that knowledge of her passing reached me in that liminal space between borders, the space Palestinians are so often forced to call home. From the departure lounge I dialed Jerusalem unsteadily. The familiar voice of a relative on the other end of the receiver confirmed my sense of loneliness, the knowledge of a generation slipping irrevocably away.

The last time I saw her, I sat at a small table while she fussed about, plying me with tea, biscuits, gifts of Palestinian embroidery. I was hugely pregnant, a fact she approved of. As we made small-talk I noticed how the years had shrunk her yet further: she was easily half my size. Her wrinkled hands reminded me of my grandmother's. My five year old curled next to me, fascinated by this small bird-like person. When we said goodbye I stooped to kiss her shriveled cheek, and noted the familiar flinch of pride. I would like to think she died like that: staring death in the face, refusing to bend her head.

## Recognized Futures

Turning to you, my name --  
this necklace of gold, these letters  
in script I cannot read,  
this part of myself I long  
to recognize -- falls forward  
into my mouth.

You call my daily name, *Lisa*,  
the name I've finally declared  
my own, claiming a heritage  
half mine: corn fields silver  
in ripening haze, green music  
of crickets, summer light sloping  
to dusk on the Iowa farm.

This other name fills my mouth,  
a taste faintly metallic,  
blunt edges around which my tongue  
moves tentatively: *Suhair*,  
an old-fashioned name,  
*little star in the night*. The second girl,  
small light on a distanced horizon.

Throughout childhood this rending split:  
continents moving slowly apart,  
rift widening beneath taut limbs.  
A contested name, a constant  
longing, evening star rising mute  
through the Palestine night.  
Tongue cleft by impossible languages,  
fragments of narrative fractured  
to loss, homelands splintered

beyond bridgeless rivers,  
oceans of salt.

\*

From these fragments I feel  
a stirring, almost imperceptible.  
In the morning light these torn  
lives merge: a name on your lips,  
on mine, softly murmured,  
mutely scripted, both real  
and familiar, till I cannot  
distinguish between your voice  
and my silence, my words  
and this wordless knowledge,  
morning star rising  
through lightening sky,  
some music I can't quite  
hear, a distant melody,  
flute-like, *nai* through  
the olives, a cardinal calling,  
some possible language  
all our tongues can sing.

Rachel Corrie

Whatever words might have been adequate  
have become a high, fluted cry

like the keening *whit-tu-tu*  
of the unseen bird outside

my window. All day I have been trying  
to break free from the bulldozer's

blade, piled earth, steel treads fracturing  
skull and chest, that moment of protest,

stilled frame reverberating  
beyond the moment, like the kid

in Tiananmen Square before the tank.  
Rachel's bright orange jacket

and megaphone.  
Her kind and tired eyes.

All day I have been pierced  
by the high note of helplessness,

the ragged beat of despair.  
Shrouded body with its blur of blood.

The quiet hands of mourners  
bearing her, flag-sheathed, across the town.

\*

And why was she there?  
Ask the ones whose truths she saw

and sought to speak. Ask the child  
slumped atop concrete slabs –

debris of his demolished home.  
Ask the pregnant woman

trapped under crushing rubble  
cradling a toddler while she died.

Ask the families  
huddled in wind-ripped tents,

homes wrecked without warning  
to make way for the separation wall.

\*

Whatever words we have are useless  
against this cruel weight. The bird's cry

keens from every crack in the edifice  
of history. Before she died, Rachel Corrie wrote,

“I have a home.  
I am allowed to go see the ocean.”

*In memory of Rachel Corrie, 23 years old, member of the International Solidarity  
Movement, killed by an Israeli bulldozer while trying to prevent demolition of a  
Palestinian family's house.*

Night Sky

*(Nicosia, Cyprus)*

I line the candles up in my window:  
tall, short, fat, round, square.  
Lit, the flames burn equally.

Outside, the sky holds constellations  
I remember from childhood nights,  
my mother's patient voice

directing my gaze. Big Dipper.  
Little Dipper. Hunter Orion's belt.  
They shine unchanged

over this divided capital  
on a divided island  
in our divided world.

Candles and stars  
are easier than news.  
Television announcers describe

the infinite variety  
of bombs. One flattens everything  
in a two-kilometer radius:

libraries, movie theaters, schools.  
Another sucks up acres of oxygen,  
suffocating cats, cows, children.

From Baghdad, Barbara writes of families  
so desperate to get a child out

they stop any foreigner in the street.

She pleads, "Just imagine our lives."

Tilting my head to the night sky

I watch the stars shine calmly

over our small world.

From wherever we are,

Baghdad is not so far.

## No

There's no poetry in it,  
but I need to say something about No,  
how it stands up, no matter how unpopular,  
in the face of injustice. Maybe it can't  
thwart history: the powerful have always known  
what they can do, and they do it.  
No can't stop an avalanche.  
But No could be a retaining wall  
built of rough stones wrested from the earth,  
carried one by one up the hill on someone's back.  
No might be a tree in the middle of a village street:  
traffic shifts to flow around it, its presence  
a reminder of what used to be, what won't be  
forgotten. No is the perimeter of stubborn cactus  
springing up around destroyed villages.  
You can bulldoze houses, evict or kill the inhabitants,  
but the thorns of memory can't be eliminated.  
No is steadfast. It knows what it's like  
to have nothing in its hands but dignity.

## Cyclones and Seeds

Headlines declare retaliations,  
military strikes. But in the lanes  
kids bleed in the dust  
while soldiers bar the way  
to ambulances: no passage for mercy.

Love is in the details.  
I want to know what that man,  
twenty-five years old,  
killed at his window  
cradling his daughter in his arms,  
ate for breakfast.  
How many years of saving,  
one dinar at a time,  
it took to build that pile of rubble  
that was once a home.  
If the boy killed by a sniper  
on his way to school  
argued with his mother that morning.  
If the pregnant woman shot at the checkpoint  
was afraid of labor, anemic;  
what she felt when her infant  
turned beneath her heart.  
What that stillborn child might have been named  
if its desperate mother  
had gotten through to the hospital  
ringed with tanks.  
Was it a girl? First born?  
Fifth in a line of sons?  
  
I want to save everything broken:

collect shards of crockery  
from the rubble, gently blot the blood  
from the gouged-up earth,  
smooth the lashes that lie like tears  
on the dead boys' cheeks.  
I want to count the fingers and toes of each baby  
before it's tucked into the earth.

I want the killers to look survivors in the eye  
taste the gore of the dead in their mouths  
lie down in the dirt with the corpses they've created  
and remember their own history.  
I want them to never sleep at night again.

I want the politicians brought before a line-up  
Of one Palestinian child one Israeli child one Afghani child  
One American child one Iraqi child one British child  
(all little girls, age four, with neat pigtails,  
scrubbed faces, large trusting eyes).  
Let them choose the child with the greatest value.

I want the headlines to scream  
of Samer Suleiman Abu Mayaleh  
fourteen years old    stripped  
pushed face down in the street

soldiers fired one bullet at close range  
up his rectum  
it burned through his body  
penetrating liver, heart  
blood soaking the dust  
from veins three quarters drained

they said a heart attack killed the boy

don't tell me you believe them  
that you hadn't heard  
that you're too busy to protest  
that you couldn't do anything anyway  
that the powers- that-be never listen

so what if we're shouting into a storm  
if wind swallows words like rain  
it takes just a single voice to break the silence

the world turns in the night  
voices planted in darkness  
still spark the wounded earth to light

freedom is a seed a plant a prayer a chant a cyclone

it grows in hard places  
courses through the bones  
like light a song a sound a voice  
a river of voices  
bearing us forward

winged seeds upon the storm

Country

Here there are cypress trees  
tall enough to break through fear  
green as the promise to keep on living

here we are far away, and near

    cordon of gasps  
    breath flung in horror  
    hauling in grief

    stunned faces tilted upwards  
    too dazed to cry

broken phone lines  
endless dialing  
    paroxysm of fear  
till we reach those     there

voices broken by static

    oh safe!  
    train late  
    meeting cancelled  
    child sick  
but for a trick of fate  
would have been  
        there

country of agony  
    country of fear

\*

*James Wang, 21, a photography student...  
looked up and saw people high in the north tower...  
'They jumped. One woman, her dress  
was billowing out.'* --New York Times, Sept. 13, 2001

they threw themselves headfirst  
into the dark morning

some holding hands  
others swimming singly downwards  
minnows  
caught in the cascade  
of vertical fire

carried on the downdraft  
a short time

\*

*This is America," a man said. "How can it happen in America? How?  
--New York Times, Sept. 13, 2001*

no words for the suddenly empty skyline

smoke hangs over history  
ash blackening lungs

those crushed    burned  
killed in a desperate leap into

nothing

their absence a fierce wound  
borne

by the living

walls plastered with pleas for the disappeared

*looking for*

*Lydia, 21, birthmark on her left cheek*

*Robert, last seen on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor*

*Mary, brown hair, black eyes*

*Tom, walks with a limp*

grimed anguish

flapping in the rain

\*

beneath the news

smolder embers of history

with blurred vision, we peer into the dark

of America

*Here is a map of our country:*

*here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt...*

*A patriot is one who wrestles for the*

*soul of her country*

*as she wrestles for her own being...A patriot is a citizen trying  
to wake*

*from the burnt-out dream of innocence...to remember...*

*that every flag that flies today is a cry of pain"*

*(Adrienne Rich, An Atlas of the Difficult World)*

at the nation's borders

the desperate peer across rivers

deep as grief

wide as history

tributaries bridged by the reaching hands  
of children

ravines filled with sharp rocks, shrapnel,  
ravaged bodies, blackened earth

\*

we built tall buildings  
that did not make us large

now we are puny  
afraid to fly travel speak  
to stand tall

for justice

*These are the places the U.S. has bombed since WWII:  
China. Korea. Guatemala. Indonesia. Cuba. The Belgian  
Congo. Peru. Laos. Vietnam. Cambodia. Grenada. Libya.  
El Salvador. Nicaragua. Panama. Iraq. Bosnia. Sudan.  
Yugoslavia. And now Afghanistan.*

If our bombs are large enough      murderous enough  
our planes swift enough  
our guns big enough  
our soldiers fierce enough  
will we be unafraid?

(and what of the spirit  
loud and angry  
huddled inside its fear?)

\*

if only sorrow could be pieced together  
like the fragments of a broken bowl

each person a jagged shard  
in the whole

if only we could learn  
how large our hearts  
how fragile

\*

half a million Iraqi children  
cries stilled by hungry earth  
graves dug by sanctions  
by silence

in Afghanistan,  
thousands bombed to  
nothingness  
huts of mud and grass

a child in a hospital bed  
wakes to limbless  
orphan-hood

\*

What have the trees seen?

Every night the birds return to their nests  
perch on branches  
proffer insects to their young

their little lives beyond us  
part of us.

My heart, squeezed small,  
    strains against its hard shell  
of grief

the children whose unknowing  
    exploded in a fireball  
of pain

the mothers  
    who did not return,  
the fathers

(empty bellies,  
long winter of starvation)

\*

And if in my name bombs are dropped  
on other women, other men,  
children as precious as my own--  
and I stay silent?

Grief is not enough.  
Words are not enough.  
Dollars are not enough.

And when one day my daughter asks,  
where were you when children like me were dying?

\*

What is the calculus of death?  
How many small atrocities  
equal one large atrocity?

*Altogether, at least 18 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army in the past two days. Among those killed was a 71-year old man from Beit Likia, shot by soldiers for the crime of trying to bypass the earthen barrier blocking the single exit road from his village... another big-scale invasion by an armored column took place during the past day at the venerable town of Jericho, and there were sundry bombings and bombardments at various other spots. ---Gush Shalom, Sept. 14, 2001*

Palestinians distribute their children  
among the neighbors,  
in hopes that some, at least,  
will escape the shelling.

Another day,  
another home demolition.

\*

Sirens of mourning circle the world:  
black band of sorrow.

Children in foreign countries hang plaques  
on trees, remembering the New York dead.

Elsewhere, entire villages  
are demolished, flushed out, cleansed.  
Elected officials deny, excuse.

(Did you flip quickly to the comics?  
Was there even a story?)

\*

*oh beautiful for*

childhood mornings

overseas American

*I pledge allegiance to*

hot dog Fridays Halloween dodge-ball

library books shipped all the way

from the US of A

*my country 'tis*

to Jordan land of towel-heads

terrorists

camel jockeys

halfbreeds

litany of unbelonging

*not American enough not white enough*

litany of belonging

*who I was born as who my mother was who my children are*

hand on my heart

*one nation,*

*indivisible*

country of hatred

country of love

*and to the republic*

*for which*

and with belonging comes  
responsibility

*with liberty and justice  
for all*

\*

*Generations do not cease to be born. And we are responsible to them, because we are the only witnesses they have... the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out.--Tim Wise, Alternet, Sept. 13, 200)*

\*

God bless

America the beautiful

America the good

America the brave

America the weapons merchant

America the war-monger

Fortress America

America beacon of light and freedom

America quencher of democracy

America the righteous

America sponsor of torturers, assassins, dictators

America my country

God bless

\*

Oh Earth

my world!

### Living in History

It's true, what we do or don't do may come to haunt us.  
Outside a man walks by: blue shirt, bald head. He blends  
into the dusk, like the olive tree outside my window,  
the blue-gray sky washed clean by recent rain,  
the bird whose twittering heralds the evening.  
May we all fit together like this: trees, birds, sky,  
people, separate elements in a living portrait,  
outlines smoothed by the forgiving wash  
of lingering light. Whatever the skins we live in,  
the names we choose, the gods we claim or disavow,  
may we be like grains of sand on the beach at night:  
a hundred million separate particles  
creating a single expanse on which to lie back  
and study the stars. And may we remember the generosity  
of light: how it travels through unimaginable darkness,  
age after age, to light our small human night.

## **Email to the Muse**

From: LSM (poet/writer/activist/mother/chief-cook-and-bottle-washer/  
Palestinian-American/human being)  
To: The Muse  
Subject: The Writing Life

Dear Ms. Muse,

Remember me, your friendly neighborhood (globally speaking) writer? No, don't try to pretend you can't place me. There was a time when we knew each other pretty well, you and I; it's been a while, but not *that* long. Just because I had a couple of kids, haven't slept in a few years, can't find my desk under the stacks of plastic toys and picture books and felt-tip drawings of mermaids, do you think you can move out, leave town, find another writer to visit? Well, think again. You, the queen of creativity, don't pretend you don't see the link between birthing a child and birthing a poem! Have you forgotten how you paid me a surprise visit in the middle of my labor with my second child? How you inspired me to write haiku between contractions, flooding the spaces between pain with the astonishing gift of words? Even after the baby had surged his way out of my body, leaving me as exhausted and grateful as a boat-person who's crawled ashore and hasn't yet been turned over to immigration, you didn't disappear. The next morning, there you were, whispering in my ear about memory and parenthood and history and community and culture, forcing me to rummage around in my bedside table for pen and paper so that I could scribble notes over the top of my nursing newborn's head. It would have been easier to nap, but I didn't mind: I counted on you to help me make meaning out of that confusing welter

of pain and joy that is childbirth. And you rose to the task, reminding me that giving birth is, in some oblique way, like going through a war: in both cases one re-enters the world from a space of extremity, suffused with gratitude for what one has in one's hands, and changed utterly.

So what has happened to you lately, now that the state of the world grows grimmer by the day, stretching my soul to the breaking point, and I need poetry's lifeblood infusions more than ever? And where are you at those other moments when joy rises in me like a river, and the need for articulation rises with it? It's true, of course, that this lapse in our relationship isn't only your fault. I haven't had much time for you lately: children bring their own poetry into the world, but it's not always the kind that gets written down in words. And I suppose it must be hard work to inspire a writer who hasn't slept a full night in six years, who can't pick up a pen or turn on a computer without having someone small and utterly important demand immediate attention. But don't just turn your back and walk away, as if whatever we had going is history! Can't we at least talk?

Could it be that you're jealous? That you're comparing my current preoccupation, my lack of responsiveness to your charms, to the intensity I used to bring to our encounters? I remember the times I used to slip away from my "real" life to meet you, rationalizing our relationship in the manner of guilty lovers everywhere. You'd be seductive, alluring. I'd resist at first, but then give in to the promise of passion, letting your wild current, your torrent of sensory perceptions and images and memories carry me downstream in a mad rush, till I found myself flung at last, soaked and exhilarated, on the bank of the river -- disoriented, exhausted, my lips tingling with poetry. Those were the times I'd look up with a start from the scribbled lines on the page, the humming shimmer of my computer screen, to find the breakfast dishes

still in the sink as light faded in the sky, or worse, dawn seeping through the slats of my blinds after a late night stint. Sometimes I'd groan as I confronted the detritus of uncompleted tasks left behind in your wake. But the memory of our tumultuous encounter would stay with me even when I re-entered the prosaic domain. And if I was lucky, I would be left with a talisman: a poem whose jagged lines I could polish smooth over time, whose heart would resonate with the memory of that headlong plunge.

These days, there's rarely time or space for such whole-hearted immersion. I'll scribble half a line, then put down my pen to turn to some more pressing task, the ringing phone, the baby's cry; and all too often the hum of the half-formed thought has jelled to an indiscernible quiver by the time I return. It's hard to plunge passionately into the river of language when you've only got time for three words. But that's where you come in: you, the Muse. Remember your job description? To motivate, to inspire! You're not supposed to fall down on the job just because there are distractions or constraints! You're the specialist, after all, in spurring people to write at odd moments, in awkward places: halfway through a shower, or in between spreading the peanut butter and the jelly. You probably have a stock portfolio heavily invested in the companies that make those tiny notebooks, the kind you can shove in a hip pocket and pull out between the canned goods and the cereal in the grocery store. Surely it's in your interest to keep the inspiration flowing!

Besides, when did you ever take convenience into consideration? You always seemed to take special pleasure in inflaming me with poetry just when the pressures of regular life were greatest and writing seemed most like an indulgence. You'd drop by as I was struggling to meet a deadline, or anxiously counting the minutes left of my child-care time, and next thing I knew some item from the news would have come

together with the rain beading on trees outside my window, an odor from the neighbor's kitchen, a long-forgotten memory, and there I would be, scribbling madly in the margins of whatever I was supposed to be working on, following the crumb-trail of words into thickets I had never planned to explore. It used to be downright frustrating, how you only seemed to have time for me when I was busy with other things, while the days I'd sit and wait for you, you were nowhere to be found. But don't get me wrong: I believe you when you insist that it wasn't just coyness on your part. After all, maybe the most important gift you've ever given me is this: the understanding that no matter what the situation, poetry is never truly an indulgence. Rather, it's a matter of sanity: keeping one's own, and helping to create more in the world if we possibly can.

I remember those late night visits you'd pay me. I'd be staring at my computer screen, reading endless emails about Palestine and Iraq and other desperate places, feeling torn into a million jagged pieces by the state of the world and by the unlikelihood that ordinary people, especially those who happened to be Arab, would ever find justice. Outside the window, snow would hush its soft way down, or the sultry dark of summer would pool on the pane. Fragments of news would batter the inner recesses of my skull like moths trapped inside a lampshade: bulldozed homes and body counts, lives ravaged by the machinations of the powerful. I'd pick up my pen or open a blank document on my screen, searching for language adequate to the facts of the day. But a sense of helplessness would paralyze me. What use, I'd wonder, is language against the physical realities of injustice? And in the face of these realities, what right did I have to indulge myself in poems about trees or camping? But then there would be a small, subtle shift in energy -- as when someone has entered a room and you sense their presence before hearing or seeing them. I'd take a

breath, and on the exhale there you'd be, flooding me with words the way a hungry woman pours out rice for cooking. I'd write line after line, quickly, knowing you might disappear at any minute, every cell in my body trembling with the sheer relief of articulation. It wasn't as if you gave me poems scissored from whole-cloth, ready to be transcribed. With you nothing ever comes that easy! But you gave me something I could work with: the raw material of language. And that was the most precious gift of all: it was what made it possible to beat back despair. Writing got me through the griefs I couldn't push aside, the images that lodged inside me and festered. If it weren't for you I might have huddled down inside myself, stayed where it was silent and safe. Because of you, I could fight back. Because of you, I discovered my power. I remember reading this observation by Julia Cameron (you know, the creativity expert who specializes in introducing you to people as if she were your private match-maker): that creativity not only makes life useful to us, it makes us useful to life. That's it in a nutshell. Without you, I'm useless: brutalized by the news, helpless in the face of all that destroys our humanity on this planet. With you, life makes more sense: at least I can do something that matters, say something that might – somehow, somewhere, to somebody – make a difference. And it's a wonderful thing to be useful in this life: it makes all the jagged pieces fit together, like molecules of air flowing together in a single breath.

Because of you, too, I discovered something else: my joy. Imagine this: A woman is lost in the dark recesses of an endless cave. When she cries out her words return to her as echoes, distorted and misshapen. Then something changes: something stirs. Looking around her, she glimpses light, hears the murmur of running water. As she moves forward her excitement grows, the current of life quickening within her. Suddenly she finds herself at the opening of the cave, looking out into a vast clearing

lit with sun. She calls out, her words strong and melodic. Somewhere on the other side of the clearing a voice shouts out in return. Her heart expands like light: she is not alone! She runs forward into dappled air, joy rising in her like a river. Everywhere birds are singing.

But all too often this joy, this power is temporary. You come and then you leave: you always leave. The river sinks to a tepid trickle, dries to a cracked gully. Language shrivels to a hard dry nut. Suddenly I can't see two words ahead of me; can't write my way through a vegetable patch, much less a war zone. I know, you have your reasons. You get tired, I suppose, of the way the synapses in my brain fail to function after prolonged sleep deprivation; of how I'm constantly trying to squeeze you in between diapers and dishes and deadlines. You want more time and space than I can give you. No doubt there have been times you gave up on me altogether, times you were convinced that the snowy white page that stared back at me when I finally managed to pick up pen and paper would remain blank forever. I struggle to maintain an engagement with the world, to balance the hats of writer, academic and activist while shepherding two young children through non-stop days and sleepless nights, but childrearing sucks everything into its centrifugal force field. And in the face of parenthood's constant battle for those most basic of commodities -- sleep, time, energy -- what chance does poetry have? One can plant a nut, water it, hope it will grow. But germination takes time and patience, and something more: some life force arising from a mysterious conjunction of energies that can't simply be willed into being.

But that's where you come in -- you, the expert on the mysteries of creation. You know better than anyone about that confluence of energies giving rise to new life: about the fortuitous meeting of earth and sun, artist and medium, self and world.

After all, it's you who taught me to fling myself open-hearted into the world and trust that a spark would be generated. And perhaps the secret of balancing writing with all the other things we do in the course of a day lies in this knowledge - that the goals of creativity, whatever the context, are remarkably similar: to enrich our lives and the lives of those around us, to imagine and create a world that is saner and more beautiful than the current one, to cherish and honor and celebrate and nurture and advance life. And indeed, whether I'm soothing a crying baby, teaching a class, applauding a first-grader's drawings, penning a poem, editing a book or marching in a protest, my actions are rooted in a conviction that the world and the people in it are worth time and energy and talent and passion and love, that as individuals what we say and do matters, and that that birthing and nurturing, whether of children or of artistic creations, nourish us in the deepest recesses of our being -- as well as helping, in some small way, to change the world.

Of course, in one way or another you've been showing me this for years, long before I became either a mother or a writer. Perhaps you remember one afternoon when I was around eleven, when the possibilities of poetry seemed to permeate everything. My English assignment that day was to write a poem. I got off the bus and found that an unseasonal spring shower had been overtaken by sunshine. The jasmine vine twining up our front wall was beaded with rain, jeweled drops sparkling at the heart of each small blossom. The sparks of water lighting the flowers from within made me think of brilliant things: diamonds, candles, stars. Excitedly, I composed a series of small poems about the scene; each time I captured a shard of my perception in words, the world around me seemed to crystallize into something magical. Finding a verbal structure for my perceptions, for the particular beauty of that day, made me feel connected to something larger than myself: not just the natural

world, but a sense of my own power. Perhaps this is the moment when I first began to understand that articulation is a form of agency, one way to claim a place in the world. The next day the garden was back to its ordinary state, the jasmine un-jeweled and a bit dusty. But I had the poems, and in some oblique way neither I, nor my relation to the world, would ever be the same again.

Later that year, when my teacher, Sue Dahdah (a gifted educator whose conviction that education should nourish, not quash, the creative spirit still inspires me today) asked us to choose a project for English, I decided to write a book of poems. I still remember the adventure of wandering about with a notebook in my hand, awaiting inspiration; the excitement of filling page after page with my own poems and accompanying illustrations; the thrill of mastery as I labored to find the precise words, the exact rhythms necessary to each line. The poems themselves have (thankfully) been lost in the detritus of my childhood. But what has stayed with me is the sense of exhilaration that attended the act of writing: the sense that to create verbal structures was a meaningful act.

Do you remember that one poem I composed about a ravaged, stately tree whose aged branches gnarled like limbs? I no longer recall why I chose that tree as my topic: perhaps I was thinking about some ancient olive trees I'd seen in Jerusalem, whose resonance had permeated my being like the after-tone of a chiming bell. At any rate, as the afternoon light faded I wrote and wrote, scratching out lines and trying new ones, transfixed by the way one line of words branched into another, much like the branching limbs of the tree I was trying to describe. Time expanded as I wrote; it was as if the page was a doorway illumined with light. At that moment language seemed more supple and flexible than anything else had yet been in my fairly

constricted life. I had yet not heard of the Muse, but you must have been there, in one of your many guises, peering over my shoulder and smiling to yourself.

As I got older you showed me more clearly how poetry arises from the admixture of pain and beauty at the heart of any intense experience. In the manner of teenagers everywhere I was rent by extreme emotions, and writing seemed to offer some solace. I wrote poems about love and death and God and the meaning of life, anchoring my vague philosophical flounderings with occasional details from the physical world: the smoky pink streaks across a winter sky just before dusk, or the speckles of ash clinging to a fresh-baked egg from the *ka'ak* oven. Language was there for me when nothing else was. And when the words refused to come, as they often did, there was always reading to count on, stacks of books that transported me beyond the boundaries of daily life. (Helpfully, my mother, whose love of reading inspired my own, was the school librarian, and routinely brought home new arrivals to read before shelving them. To this day I can recall the particular odor of ink and paper which those new books exuded; the excitement of opening their glossy covers.)

Novels about war, especially World War II, drew me with particular intensity. Perhaps this was because I had had some experience of my own with war: the 1967 Israeli-Arab war, when Israeli bombers flew overhead and air raid sirens rent the air; Black September of 1970, when the Jordanian army fought Palestinian militias and combat raged in our back yard; the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, when we blue-d-out our windows and headlights in fear of air raids. I had a sense, too, of what it meant to be Palestinian, whether in Jordan or in the Occupied Territories. Unable to process the implications of these experiences, I didn't write about them until much later. But throughout my teenage years, books that pertained to war and conflict, that described

such things as food shortages, blackouts and bombings, seemed utterly relevant, and I read them voraciously.

Of course, my literary fare wasn't restricted to wartime narratives: you've always been eclectic in your influences, and for that I'm grateful. I read books about animals and nature and orphans and teen romance and girl explorers, about space travel and time travel and far-flung historical sagas. I read Dickens and Twain and Nancy Drew and Anne of Greene Gables, making little distinction between "famous authors" and serial fiction. And I memorized poems, both for school and for pleasure: to this day I can recite sections of "The Charge of the Light Brigade," memorized at age seven, as well as other poems whose cadences still inhabit my bones.

In college I continued my exploration of the possibilities of writing, grappling in particular with the connection between writing and war. Surely you recall our clandestine meetings during my years at the American University of Beirut, where I used to sit on rocks overlooking the sea and scribble in a tattered orange notebook, trying to make sense of the civil war that had enveloped the country. I was a teenager: vulnerable, lonely, with few resources through which to comprehend violence. You came to me in small ways, through images, colors, odors, offering language as a way to structure experience. All around me was the war: just beyond the campus boundaries, just beyond the limits of comprehension. But I couldn't write about it directly. It was too large and too terrible, and for all that I had a number of close calls during my time in Lebanon, my own experience of it was too limited. I could only write about small splinters of it, perceptions that pierced my awareness like shrapnel.

I recall, for instance, my first night in Beirut. For hours I huddled below the dormitory stairs, listening to the reverberations of artillery shells. My sister, who

shared the dorm room with me, refused to come downstairs: an old hand at Beirut life, she preferred to sleep through the bombardment. When I returned at dawn to our room she was still dozing, the pillow over her head. As the morning light stained the horizon gray, I sat by the window and wrote a poem whose constricted lines echoed the narrow space of the room behind me, the constriction in my chest. I had no clear images for what I had experienced that night, my sense of smallness in the face of terror. All I could articulate was the weight of the morning sky, the omnipresent grayness, the fact that even the staccato sound of tennis balls thudding against the tarmac of the nearby court sounded like gunfire.

Later more direct images forced their way into my consciousness. One experience that impressed itself on me with particular clarity occurred just before I left Lebanon in 1982. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon had begun, and refugees from the battered south were flooding into the capital. I was rushing past the university hospital, trying frantically to arrange the details of my own evacuation, when through the glass windows of the emergency room I saw a man standing, swaying slightly, clutching a child to his body. The child had a wound in his forehead. Blood had dripped on the floor at the man's feet, splattering the tiles, but neither man nor boy seemed to notice: their faces were vacant masks of exhaustion. Time froze for a moment as I stood before this stilled snapshot of war. But then, helpless to do anything, anxious about what I had to accomplish before dark made the streets unsafe, I moved on. As I made my way down the street, I had the sensation of buildings tilting towards me, of a city on the verge of collapse. A day or two later I left Beirut on an open truck with other refugees. Eventually, after various experiences (including the forced rerouting of our evacuation boat to Israel for interrogation) I made my way home to Jordan. Physically I was unscathed. But the memory of that

bleeding child, along with other memories, stayed lodged within me like a shard of twisted metal.

Shortly afterwards I moved to the United States to pursue graduate studies at a Midwestern university whose distance from Beirut seemed immeasurable. Gripped by terror that I would not succeed in my chosen field, I stayed up late night after night, laboring over studies for which I felt inadequately prepared. There was no time for poetry, at least not for the writing of it. But during the summer term I enrolled, almost guiltily, in a creative writing course. The required journaling and free-writing exercises forced me to venture beneath the barricaded surface of my mind, and what surfaced were poems and vignettes about Beirut, the invasion, other wars that shadowed my past. I think my classmates thought I was slightly odd: someone complained my poems were “too violent.” But despite the serenade of summer outside my window, the lure of cold beer and pizza at nearby student hangouts, I could not relinquish my subject matter. Writing about the war was like breaking a skin of ice on a dark pond: there were fish below the surface, massive creatures moving silently through the frigid dark, and poetry seemed one way to reel them in, to take stock of their hulking forms and assess the threat they posed.

At the same time I discovered – or remembered -- the ways in which writing offers not only a way to travel to the depths but also a way to live more fully on the surface. The more I wrote, the more poetry took me not only in and back, but also up and out. Lifting my head from the weight of winter, I found myself walking through the present, my senses alive to the world around me: a tree fleshing its bare silhouette into soft green leaf; light glinting off a wind-ruffled river; rough concrete warming the bare soles of my feet. At the time I was reading William Faulkner, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Francis: I felt my very being saturated with the possibilities of language. I

paced the sidewalks in a sort of trance, literary cadences measuring my tread. As it had on that long-ago afternoon when rain sparked the jasmine to fire, plunging into the river of words felt, then, like tapping into the heart of the world.

But this elation was short-lived: as seems to be your wont, you came and then you left. Working till 2 am every night left little time for creative writing, and in any case immersion in academia soon decimated any belief I had harbored in my own literary powers. I wrote privately, in spurts, but hid my writing and didn't take it seriously. Then my mother died of cancer, and you withdrew even further. A therapist I saw for grief management advised me to try writing in a journal, but the effort of dredging words from that ocean of pain only seemed to plunge me deeper into silence. Words could neither bring my mother back nor encompass the immensity of my loss, and so I abandoned the effort as useless. Wherever you were during that period, you hid yourself well. Perhaps this is the betrayal I blame you for most: that you saw me cast up on grief's rocky shore and left me there alone, battered and silent.

Over time, however, I slowly made my way back to writing – or perhaps it was you who made your way back to me. I wrote small poems about my mother's death, the process of articulation providing, at last, a small surcease for the pain lodged behind my breastbone. Then the first Palestinian intifada erupted, and the nightly images of bone-breaking and home-smashing made something break loose inside of me. Words began to crack the surface, like leaves sprouting from bone. When my father, too, died of cancer after a futile attempt at treatment, I found myself face to face with the Palestinian history his life had embodied. For the first time I began to see my own writing as meaningful in a broader context: to articulate some

small portion of the Palestinian experience of which my father's life had been a part was, perhaps, one way of standing up in the face of injustice.

Connection sparked connection, words branching outward and then arcing back in flashes of illumination. I joined an Arab-Jewish dialogue group as well as a Palestinian on-line discussion group; within these forums I began to clarify my identity as a Palestinian and to experiment with a more public, more political, voice. For the first time I began sending my writing out for publication. Iraq invaded Kuwait, the U.S. set its deadline for war, and I joined a local activist group of Americans and Arabs working for peace. I published a poem about the Intifada in a local journal, and read it – my first public poetry reading -- at an anti-war event; the connection between poetry and activism that was consolidated then has energized my work ever since. Meanwhile I had begun researching Arab American literature, and had established personal contact with a number of authors. The growing sense of an Arab American literary community – a space within which I might finally feel at home -- was exhilarating and empowering.

Throughout all of these developments, I now realize, you've been there, albeit often in the shadows. And what you've taught me is this: that language matters, that it makes a difference, and that we ignore it at our peril. As Adrienne Rich puts it, "Poetry never stood a chance/ of standing outside history...It doesn't matter what you think./Words are found responsible/ all you can do is choose them/or choose/to remain silent."<sup>10</sup> For all that I've railed against your absences, I'll always remember that if it weren't for you I might never have learned to stand up with a simple NO on my lips, nor to claim my YES; that I might never have understood that every story begins with a single word. What you have shown me, in different ways, is this: that writing is, at its heart, a way of living in the world. It's a way to resist, to celebrate, to

take action. It's a vehicle for exploration and empowerment and grief and protest and laughter. And it's one of the richest ways I've discovered of being human. (There are, of course, other ways: parenting is surely one.). For helping me to plunge into that river of language, to ride its wild and wonderful currents, I remain grateful to you. Yes, sometimes I've wished you would give me more: more inspiration, more poems, more "success." But perhaps that's not the point. After all, the writing life isn't a race to see who can stockpile the most publications. It's a matter of living with language. Poems and stories and essays are always alive within us: our job is to help give them birth; to midwife them toward the light.

Lately, I realize, you've been visiting my young daughter as well. It isn't just the poems she started dictating to me at the age of four, about flowers and mermaid stars, about her heart "walking in [her] chest because it feels happy." It's other things as well, like the scrap of paper I recently found on which she had painstakingly written, "Poery [sic] Against the War." It didn't matter that she had copied the words from a poster I had on my wall. Those crooked red felt-tip letters were the best vindication I could ever have of why poetry matters. As I hugged her, I imagined you hovering somewhere nearby, smiling to yourself at the idea that a small poet-activist might be coming to light.

These days, as the crazed agendas of demagogues make the world less and less habitable for any of us, I realize how much I depend on you to get me through. The other day, for instance, I signed onto my computer and found a report about the death of an eight-year-old girl named Aaya Fayad. Aaya, it seems, had been excitedly awaiting the start of the school year: like my own daughter, she had insisted on carrying her new school bag around the house, on wearing her new school clothes in anticipation of the big day. But Aaya never made it to school. The Saturday before,

she was riding her bicycle in the Anum Sarwi neighbourhood of Khan Yunis when Israeli soldiers began shooting into the neighbourhood from a nearby settlement. Aaya, the report says, died instantly. She was a Palestinian: she might not have had much of a future. But she was a child; she had her life ahead of her. And now that too has been lost.

What am I to make of such news? Without you I'm helpless, bludgeoned to silence. Do I cry? Rage helplessly? I can't even call my representative to express my horror at what is being funded with my U.S. tax dollars, because I live in Cyprus and no longer have a local representative. I could walk down the street to the American embassy to protest, but if they knew my mission they would never let me through the heavy metal doors and the metal detectors and the double sets of walls and the guards and the machines that check for any trace of explosives.

It's not that I expect you to comfort me, exactly. What you do best is something else: you force me to articulate, to imagine. And from this comes action: the ability to rage purposefully. As I write, American troops occupy Iraq and Afghanistan; Israel has just passed a racist law aimed at stripping residency rights from non-Jews; the "separation wall" imprisoning Palestinians grows higher; violence routinely claims the lives of innocents; civil rights in the U.S. and elsewhere are sacrificed to hysteria. There's no denying that it's a dark time. And now Edward Said has died – peerless intellectual, writer, teacher, musician, standard bearer of justice for Palestinians and upholder of the principle of justice for everyone. Without his voice, his words, his passion, his commitment, his leadership we are all bereft.

But daily I am buoyed by my community of family and friends and fellow-travellers on the planet –a global community, maintained by the grace of email. Daily the faces of my children offer reasons to hope, reasons to persevere. Daily the natural

world proffers its blessings. And daily I remember that there is always language to fall back on: there is always writing. I count on you, the Muse, to help me claim and honor these gifts: the ability to walk with awareness through the world, to articulate some part of what it means to be human. In the face of all that the world brings to bear, what poetry can do seems little indeed. But each time the river of language rises in me, I am able to believe, once again, that it is enough.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these poems appear in Geographies of Light. Poems published elsewhere are footnoted and cited individually in the bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Published in Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab-American Women on Writing. Ed. Susan Muaddi Darraj. Greenwood/Praeger, 2004.22-32.

<sup>3</sup> Published in Eating the Pure Light: Homage to Thomas McGrath. Ed. John Bradley. Omaha, NE: The Backwaters Press, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Published in Banipal 38: 99.

<sup>5</sup> Published in Banipal 38: 99.

<sup>6</sup> Published in Banipal 38: 97.

<sup>7</sup> Published in Cadences 6 (Fall 2010): 80-81.

<sup>8</sup> Published in 91st Meridian 6.3 (Summer 2009). Online.

<sup>9</sup> Published in Cadences 1.1 (June 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Rich, "North American Time," Your Native Land, Your Life 33-34

Doorway

The distance between one breath and another  
is like the miles starlight travels to reach

my dreams. I write my way toward my death,  
behind me a crumb trail of words erasing,

birds carrying morsels to their hungry chicks.  
Years I've traveled the byways

of language, searching for that doorway --  
light spilling over the threshold.

Voices murmur beneath sleep,  
weave a sky dense with memory.

Once a poet read lines so beautiful  
I knew I could follow her down

the hardest road without faltering.  
My feet grew tired, but I remembered my name.

## Chapter 10

### Arab American Literature Today: The Road Forward

*...I  
will craft my own drum...I  
will not be played...I will dance  
and resist and dance and  
persist and dance.*

*Suheir Hammad, Zaatar Diva 61*

What it means to write as an Arab American is a matter of on-going negotiation. It also a matter of increasing urgency -- with implications not just for ethnic life but for ethical life. The past century has charted the emergence of an Arab American identity and literary consciousness across a spectrum of exile, ethnicity, American identification, and a diasporic transnationalism: At various moments and in various contexts, Arab Americans have identified as exiles longing to return, as immigrants seeking to assimilate into the American context, as ethnics reasserting their ethnic identities, as U.S. citizens insisting on equal access, and as transnationals negotiating the pull between homes and homelands. There is no clear linearity inherent in this spectrum: while a glance at the past century of writing suggests broad trajectories of identification within different historical periods, it also makes clear the ways in which a temporal movement from exile to ethnic, from migrant to American, has been implicitly disrupted at every juncture, as both the descendants of earlier generations and newer immigrants negotiate and renegotiate their relationship to Arab spaces of origin and American spaces of adoption or birth. At every point, as Arab American writers have claimed ground-space they have continued to unsettle assumptions about

what it means to be Arab, or American, or Arab American. This unsettling *matters* because it disrupts the stereotypes that de-humanize live human beings; and it matters because it establishes connections across human geographies. As David Williams notes, “the ‘de-centered’ worldview presents a new center: the value of human life that authors affirm through their compassionate attention to particular people and events, presented with the understanding that what happens ‘there’ is inextricably tied to what happens ‘here’” (“This Hyphen Called My Spinal Cord” 55).

In negotiating complexities of identities, experiences, and cultural legacies contemporary writers, like their predecessors, not only inhabit multiple cultures but also write for multiple audiences. This multiplicity of stance has created at once a richness of perspective, and an on-going sense of schism, as Arab Americans have kept one eye trained on an American present that “others” them (even as it demands what Steven Salaita has termed “imperative patriotism”) and the other eye turned to the Arab homelands from which they are distanced – physically, linguistically, and in other ways -- yet emotionally, culturally and politically connected. As Kaldas and Mattawa put it, “With their place of origin still beckoning and their place of relocation continuously wincing at their presence, Arab Americans have lived on unsettled ground” (*Dinarzad’s Children*, xiii). The experience of living on “unsettled ground” is played out both domestically and transnationally (and is particularly accentuated in the case of Arab Americans for whom “return” is physically or legally impossible.)

Yet contemporary literature increasingly insists on the ability of Arab Americans to write beyond the century-long vacillation between there and here, articulated not so much as an idealistic union at the space of the hyphen, but rather a critical insight into the positioning of Arab Americans at intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion and other axes of identification. Seeking to claim the past

and chart the future even as they lay claim to the present, and speaking in voices that are at once both homegrown and transnational, contemporary writers increasingly expand the boundaries of each term, explore the space between, and articulate new possibilities.

Certainly, the current moment presents pressures. The post 9-11 period has precipitated a time of escalating fear and militarism, when the lines between “Arab” and “American” in American culture have been more rigidly defined than ever. The implications of such positioning extend beyond emotional repercussions of negative stereotyping to what Elaine Hagopian terms “the legal, political and social diminution of ... civil and human rights” (Civil Rights in Peril x). The processes of “de-Americanization” (Hing), enacted through an array of both private behaviors (eg discrimination, hate crimes) and governmental actions (legislation, secret evidence trials, deportation etc.), have had profound implications for Arab American articulation. The intolerance of dissent poses particular concerns for writers, for literature, if it is to be of depth and value, must engage with complex realities, not simplistic reaffirmations, whether of ethnic or mainstream US identification.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, in the post 9/11 period Arab Americans have also been accorded new visibility as Arab *Americans* – the ethnic group about which everyone wants to know.<sup>2</sup> The result has been an accentuated sense of consolidation as a group – a consolidation that threatens to objectify and even endanger, but that also marks out new ground-space for articulation and opens possibilities for new points of connection with other communities. Thus, for instance, in a study of the Arab American and Muslim American experience after 9/11, Louise Cainkar notes that

much has changed in the United States since the 9/11 attacks, and some of these changes...have been positive for Arab and Muslim Americans. The mobilizations, coalitions, and solidarities that emerged after 9/11 to defend Arab and

Muslim Americans, as well as the launch of local-level homeland security ‘community roundtables,’ effectively transformed their predominant social status in many U.S. locations from socially excluded ‘outsiders’ or ‘unknown’ communities to embraced, civically engaged, and known.” (Cainkar, Homeland Insecurity 8)

Similarly, Evelyn Alsultany notes that U.S. television programming has seen shifts toward an increase in the number of Arab and Muslim American characters as well as more sympathetic portrayals of these characters – although such positive shifts are not uncomplicated. As Alsultany notes, analyzing the portrayal of Arab Americans in television serials, “Audience sympathy is evoked for the plight of the Arab American after 9/11, but the right to be racist and suspicious of Arab and Muslim Americans is affirmed, and government practices to profile racially, detain, deport, and terrorize Arabs and Muslims are accepted” (“Prime-Time Plight” 225).

Within this context, Arab American writers continue to negotiate their location upon American ground-space, interrogating both the diversity of the cultural roots on which they draw and the diverse ways in which these cultural roots play out in the U.S. Some take identity as a means by which to explore an American location and American possibilities. For others, Arab American literature takes its place on a global canvas, as one component of a worldwide Arab diaspora in which cultural ties can be reinvigorated. For yet others, their explorations take place on other terrains. Arab American authors may disagree whether the past is something to recover, or to recover from, as Mattawa has put it. But what is clear is that Arab American expression is a matter not just of the past, but of the present and future.

Contemporary writers bring a range of approaches to these issues, as a recent article by Anis Shivani demonstrates.<sup>3</sup> Some see a division in Arab American writing between writers who engage in “self-orientalization” and those who assume the dissenting role of the role of “barbarian in Rome” (Shivani screen 1). Others celebrate

the proliferation of Arab American themes and voices. Common among Arab American writers' perspectives today is an awareness of the ongoing pressures on writers to present and represent themselves against an array of assumptions about the Arab world, such that writers are always burdened with speaking for and explaining "where you're from." As Nathalie Handal puts it, "The distinction lies not in the literature produced as much as in the responsibility that is often thrust on the author—one where he or she must explain or defend a region and its diverse people and cultures" (Shivani screen 9). Similarly, writers experience and write out of what Hosam Aboul-Ela describes as the "tension between the grand foreign policy narrative of 'home' and the injustices visited upon 'homeland'" (Shivani screen 4). Although there is an increasing insistence on the right of artists to be *artists*, the divided contexts within which Arab American literature has emerged continue to shape Arab American writing, not only in theme, but also, to some extent, in form.

For instance, the fact that Arab American literary production has until recently leaned heavily toward poetry has often been noted. At the moment we are seeing a surge of fiction, as well as new forays into drama and other genres such as comedy. But poetry remains a predominant, if no longer *the* predominant, Arab American literary genre. Several reasons for this have been put forward, including the essentialist assertion that Arabs have an intrinsic cultural propensity towards poetry (even though most contemporary Arab American poets write solidly out of an American literary tradition of free verse and do not read or write Arabic) and the sociological explanation that as a small and beleaguered ethnic group, the kind of support systems, both economic and social, needed for the writing of fiction have not been in place until recently (even though early Arab American writers did produce book-length prose.)

A different explanation may be that Arab Americans have often focused on poetry because poetry as a genre is particularly suited to emotions of high intensity. Arab Americans have throughout the twentieth century negotiated between an identity articulated through intense familial and communal relationships and an equally intense engagement with political events. Perhaps it is no surprise that in order to give voice to these experiences writers have often turned to the literary genre typically used to articulate intense emotion: that of the lyric. Defined as a poem that expresses the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker, the lyric as a literary mode is particularly suited to moments of intensity and illumination. It provides a ready vehicle not only for celebrations of family and community, but also for depictions of war and suffering, both of which have played a large role in Arab American experience and expression.

Certainly Arab American poetry has produced a wealth of titles, far more than I have been able to encompass in my discussion, with striking work covering a range of literary and geographical and cultural and communal and personal terrain and charting sensibilities acutely attuned to the complexities of Arab American experiences.<sup>4</sup> Strikingly, some writers are exploring themes that have historically been almost untouched in Arab American literature (one thinks of the work of queer writers such as Trish Salah or Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhran). Others insist on unsettling the constructs dividing “over there” from “here,” and insist, too, on the moral and humanist imperative underlying the act of writing (one thinks of the work of Suheir Hammad, Elmaz Abinader, Fady Joudah, Philip Metres and others).

Poetry’s lyric mode is arguably less effective, however, in providing a broader forum for representation, analysis, discussion and critique. Its poetic compression favors vignettes rather than narratives, moments of insight over sustained analysis; as

a result it tends to evoke rather than explain. The predominance of the lyric mode in Arab American literature until recently suggests a group focus on self-assertion rather than internal analysis and critique. This is not surprising, and it reflects similar trajectories in the literatures of other ethnic groups. After all, only after the self – personal and communal -- has been established as a presence can it be examined and questioned. Given the Arab American history of invisibility, exclusion, and stereotyping in the US and ongoing realities of war and occupation in locations of origin, perhaps it is no surprise that writers have felt the need to assert identity and mourn the ravages of political events. But as a genre, poetry has not always provided an adequate forum within which to probe the full complexity of Arab American experience. As Arab identity has become increasingly visible on the American landscape, Arab Americans have increasingly recognized the need not just to assert presence, but also to explore, question and critique identity and community. The result has been an enormous increase in fiction publications over the past decades.

In the introduction to Dinarzad's Children, Kaldas and Mattawa link this matter of genre to representational tensions. The lyric poem, they suggest, afforded Arab Americans “a way to speak as individuals to individuals, and a way to affirm that they were speaking for themselves even when their poems contained the concerns of multitudes around the world... [but] in shying away from fiction and prose narrative in general, Arab American writers may have wished to exert greater control over the representation of their community.” (xi). Indeed, given the reception issues surrounding Arab American texts, there is still a reluctance among Arab Americans to openly discuss issues that may reinforce prevailing negative stereotypes of Arabs. Given the political pressures facing Arab Americans, and the omnipresent stereotypes of Arab culture, writers may feel (and readers may expect) that their task is to affirm

Arab identity and to translate this identity to outsiders, not to lay bare divisive or problematic themes for the scrutiny of others.

However, recent years have seen increasing recognition of the need to move beyond both nostalgia and the kind of reactivity generated by political pressures toward a more critical, reflective, creative and transformative engagement with the many strands of Arab American experience (including the Arab cultural and literary heritage, paid lip service to by many but rarely explored in any depth.) As Mattawa notes, Arab American literature largely emerged as a “survival mode of writing” (“Arab American Writing” 16), in which authors wrote out of a sense of political and ethnic crisis. Yet in confronting the existential need to assert their humanity in the face of a culture that dehumanizes them on ethnic, racial and political grounds, while at the same time mourning an old world culture under siege, Arab American writers run the risk of becoming trapped within a Manichean formula, one that pits a dehumanized American present against a nostalgic, romanticized Arab past. Not only is the schism a reductionist one, the role of victim allows a writer room for little except bemoaning their fate. The result of such alienation, Mattawa correctly argues, may be a cultural protectiveness that can lead to “philosophical and ethical vagueness” and that makes it difficult to address issues such as “misogyny, chauvinism, and racism” (“Arab American Writing” 16). To move away from defensive nostalgia and stereotypical “ethnic” themes toward more intellectually and thematically daring material arguably requires an expansion of literary style and genre; conversely, different literary genres make possible different kinds of conversations. (It is noticeable, for instance, that the emergence of a body of feminist Arab American writing, as well as growing attention to issues of race and class, corresponds with a shift toward prose writing, both fiction and nonfiction.)

The surge in fiction is worthy of note. Although the first Arab American novel, Rihani's English language The Book of Khalid, was published in 1911, and Vance Nye Bourjaily was publishing novels at a time when Arab Americans were barely visible on the American scene, literary or otherwise, it was not until the 1990s that Arab American fiction began to assert itself on the Arab American literary landscape. Titles include Kathryn Abdul-Baki's Tower of Dreams (1995) and Ghost Songs (2000), Diana Abu-Jaber's Arabian Jazz, (1993) Crescent (2003), Origin (2007) and Birds of Paradise (2011); Susan Abulhawa's Mornings in Jenin (2010; first published in 2006 in a different version as The Scar of David) Rabih Alameddine's Koolaid: The Art of War (1998) I, The Divine: A Novel in First Chapters (2002), and The Hakawati (2008); Therese Soukar Chehade's Loom (2010); Susan Muaddi Darraj's The Inheritance of Exile (2007); Alicia Erian's Towelhead (2001) and The Brutal Language of Love (2005); Rawi Hage's De Niro's Game (2006) and Cockroach (2010); Laila Halaby's West of the Jordan (2003) and Once in a Promised Land (2007); Randa Jarrar's A Map of Home (2008); Mohja Kahf's The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf (2006); Pauline Kaldas, The Time Between Places (2010); Laila Lalami's Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits (2005) and Secret Son (2009); Angela Tehaan Leone's Swimming Toward the Light (2007); Anouar Majid's Si Yussef (1998); Frances Khirallah Noble's The Situe Stories (2000) and The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy (2007); Naomi Shihab Nye's teen novels Habibi (1999) and Going, Going (2005); Samia Serageldin's The Cairo House (2000), Love is Like Water (2009), and The Naqib's Daughter (2009), Evelyn Shakir's Remember Me to Lebanon (2007); Mona Simpson's Anywhere But Here (1992), The Lost Father (1992), A Regular Guy (1996), Off Keck Road (2000), My Hollywood (2010); Alia Yunis, The Night Counter (2010), Patricia Sarrafian Ward's The Bullet Collection

(2003).

A look at this list returns us to the question of how to define the parameters of an “Arab American literature.” This listing includes texts set in the U.S. and set in the Middle East; it includes texts that do not contain any direct reference to Arab American issues and texts that are decidedly problematic in their representation of Arab American characters. Steven Salaita, taking up the question of how to define Arab American literature, notes that he “tend[s] to emphasize the writer’s ethnic origin in addition to thematic content” (Modern American Fiction 4). Perhaps for this reason his own listing of Arab American fiction, which largely dovetails with the listing above, does not include the novels of Mona Simpson, a writer who spends little time in her fiction on issues of Arab identity. However, Salaita does include (as I also do here) fiction set in North Africa. But must Arab American literature necessarily privilege the “Arab” component over the “American”? What do such distinctions mean for Arab American literature, and what do they mean for Arab Americans? Or, to move away from fiction toward nonfiction prose, what does it mean that the writer Anwar Accawi, of Lebanese descent, author of The Boy From the Tower of the Moon, who has been living and writing in the U.S. since 1965, and whose essay “The Telephone” was included in the 1998 Best American Essays (Houghton Mifflin), is almost never included in discussions of Arab American literature?

Such questions are increasingly taken up within the context of the expanding body of Arab American literary criticism. Indeed, it is probably no accident that hand in hand with the move toward different genres and themes has come an expansion of critical exploration. One reason for this may be that the scope of fiction makes it possible to address historical issues in a far more direct way, and this expansion of scope calls for more in-depth discussion of the theoretical and critical issues at stake.

In any case, the growth of critical writing is a shift of some significance. Criticism has a crucial role to play in exploring the cultural and sociological aspects of Arab American writing, situating this writing within the context of community-wide issues. It also has a crucial role to play in highlighting the literary dimension of Arab American writing, and in making visible the kinds of literary and cultural traditions upon which Arab American writers draw--an examination that is useful not only for readers and teachers but also for writers. A body of informed and nuanced literary criticism would play a significant role in situating Arab American literature for both Arab and non-Arab readers, lessening somewhat the pressure on Arab American writers to serve as “translators” and guardians of their culture.<sup>5</sup> And of course, a literature that is not critically analyzed possesses less reach and is therefore more insular: its texts will be less well-known and less likely to be read by readers outside the community. The development of an Arab American literary criticism thus holds out the possibility of highlighting both the “Arab” components of this literature and its “American” status.

In my essay “New Directions,” a manifesto about the status of Arab American literature upon which my discussion here draws, I outlined some areas in which I felt Arab American literature could productively expand. Recent years have seen a significant development of a number of the points on that “wish list.” Yet I believe that these remain areas that can continue to be productively addressed by Arab American writers, and therefore I will review them here. They include: (1) The need to move away from nostalgia and cultural celebration toward a more direct confrontation with Arab American history and realities, including difficult or unflattering aspects of this history. (2) More investigation into the ways in which Arab Americans have been racialized, and more investigation of links with other

groups of color. (This topic has been taken up in much scholarly and critical literature of late, in particular Jamal and Naber's Race and Arab Americans and Gualtieri's Between Arab and White.) (3) Continued attention to issues of feminism and the implications of feminist discourse for articulations of Arab American identity. (This is a topic that has also been addressed in much greater depth of late, as in Adulhadi, Alsultany and Naber's Arab and Arab American Feminisms; Naber's "Arab American Femininities" and her forthcoming Articulating Arabness: Gender and Cultural Identity in the Diaspora; the novels by Jarrar and Kahf discussed in Chapter 6; and more). (4) More social criticism in general (including issues of classism, racism, homophobia). (5) Literary explorations of the process of ethnogenesis: that is, of Arab American identity as not merely a translation from one world to another, but as something new. 6. Increased portrayals of diverse Arab American experience, especially including gays and lesbians. (7) Expansion into different genres, including drama, film, performance art; exploration of linguistic interfaces between Arabic and English. (8) Increased attention to the implications of diverse audiences – Arab American and non Arab American; critical work on the reception context. (9) Continued awareness of the intersection of activist concerns with literary concerns; in this regard, more historically-grounded fiction.<sup>6</sup> (10) More children's literature, especially young people's novels; more attention, to, to the possibilities of artistic collaborations between writers and visual artists.<sup>7</sup> (11) A reclamation of the right of artists to be artists: and as such, an expansion of the terrain of Arab American literature beyond pre-defined boundaries of "ethnicity" and the pressures to assert or defend that identity, and into terrain that cannot be so neatly defined as "ethnic."

Indeed, even as the post 9-11 period has put Arab Americans under renewed pressure to assert and defend their identities, current literature shows that writers have

also taken as their task that of expanding and transforming ethnic boundaries and definitions. The world that emerges from Arab American writing is made of many cultural strands. But it also expands beyond those strands. As Randa Jarrar puts it:

Our past achievements were sometimes marred by self-exoticization: a focus on food ("Look, grape leaves! Baklava! Don't hate us--you love our food!") and the Arabian Nights ("Don't pay attention to these bearded weirdos--check out this hot chick in our past who told stories and saved 1,001 virgins! Including herself! She rocks!"). I'm hoping we'll continue our path away from these themes; away from convincing people that we're "universal"--last I checked, Arab-Americans are human beings and don't need to prove this fact to anyone. (Shivani Screen 2)

Similarly, Deema Shehabi notes: "Ultimately, I believe that what is distinctive about Arab American writing is the ambition of its scope, the humanism of its subject matter, and the potential it carries for formulating through language a hybrid, unclassifiable identity" (Shivani, screen 8). What is overridingly clear at the contemporary moment is that while Arab American writers write from a location that is deeply inflected and shaped by pressures exerted from both within and without, within a context in which 'Arab American' identity is at once hypervisible yet constantly under erasure, their voices cannot be readily constrained by preset definitions of what this "communal" identity entails. Even as they seek to negotiate between preservation and transformation, they undertake this as a strategy aimed at making Arab American identity more viable--not as an end in itself, but as a way to reclaim the human.

Of particular note in contemporary Arab American writing is an emphasis on a thematics of storytelling; in particular the narrative frame invoking Scheherazad and the Thousand and One Arabian Nights that shapes or frames a number of recent Arab American texts. Examples include Abu-Jaber's Crescent, Halaby's Once in a

Promised Land, Alameddine's Hakawati, Yunis' The Night Counter, Kaldas and Mattawa's Dinarzad's Children, Kahf's Emails from SchereraZad, and Darraj's Scherahazad's Legacy. This reliance on the Thousand and One Arabian Nights as a narrative frame for so many recent books is worthy of a separate investigation; while it seems to reflect in part a desire to engage more directly with Arab literary sources and to bring those sources into the American literary context, I also wonder if this focus reflects something about the tropes available to mediate between Arab and American literary contexts. Clearly, however, while Arab Americans have been making stories and poems for over a century, the stories they make increasingly seek to remake the world they live in. As Gregory Orfalea comments, "the Arab American novelist has indeed a mission beyond the normal one of making moving art. The Arab American novelist is giving birth to images of humanness" ("The Arab American Novel" 117). The need for this arises in part because of the legacy of stereotypes and the ongoing realities of racialization and othering that make Arab American identity a far more contested identity than, say, Italian American identity. But it suggests that the literary impulse underlying Arab American fiction is at heart a transformative one.

In her memoir, The Language of Baklava, Diana AbuJaber asks, "Why must there be only one home?" (328). It's a question that echoes throughout Arab American literature. Clearly, there has never been one definition, one claim, one identity that will work for everyone. But in examining the evolution of Arab American literature over a century, it is clear that while Arab American authors have not always been given the choice to choose where or what home is, they are engaged in the writing – and re-writing -- of it: in transformative acts, of homemaking and road-breaking alike. And as Arab American literature has moved from a stance of defensiveness to assertion and critique – of self and of world-- it has become

increasingly clear that the road forward is neither toward an American future nor an Arab past. It is a journey toward reclamation, recreation and transformation of the present: the space in which we live.

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<sup>1</sup> My own location outside of the United States has insulated me to some extent from the effects of these kinds of processes, but not completely. As one example: in 2005 I was invited to give a reading at Saint Mary's College for a Women's History Month Symposium entitled "Women, War and Peace: Feminist Interventions in a Time of Conflict." An article published in the local publication The Observer before the date of my event accused the symposium of being "propaganda effort against the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Israeli 'occupation' of Palestine," and singled out my up-coming presentation in particular. The writer charged me with being "anti-Semitic" on the basis of my poem "Rachel Corrie" (included in Chapter 8 of this dissertation). The writer asserted that "Corrie, contrary to the imagery evoked in Majaj's poem, was killed while she was attempting to impede an Israeli bulldozer knocking down the homes of Palestinian terrorists and buildings hiding tunnels through which illegal weapons were being smuggled through by terrorists." (It remains unclear to me how portraying Corrie in human terms translates to anti-Semitism.) The writer furthermore accused me of aiding terrorism (no small charge in the post 9/11 period): "Another work of Majaj, an essay found at [www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org), accuses Israelis of violations of the Geneva Accords. In a region openly hostile to its very existence, Israel has for nearly 60 years been a beacon of hope, democracy and freedom ... Accusing Israel of violating the Geneva Accords plays right into the terrorists' playbook" (Budzynski, "Symposium on Women in War Biased"). The piece was published just before I left Cyprus to travel to the U.S. to give this and other presentations. On my way to the US, my luggage, which contained a number of books about Palestine, was, quite unusually, delayed, arriving two days late despite ample layover time in London. At every airport I passed through in the U.S. I was taken aside for special security. When I asked one official why I was being singled out, I was told to look at my boarding pass at a string of S's. "You're in the security system," the security official told me. "You can expect this attention for the rest of your trip." He was correct. Moreover, on my return home my luggage once again was significantly delayed, arriving a number of days after me. The special attention from security officials throughout my trip, and the inability of my luggage to make it onto the same plane with me, immediately following the publication of an article charging me with anti-Semitism and accusing me of playing into the schemes of terrorists, is no doubt a coincidence. Yet I cannot deny that the effect was chilling. Had I lived in the U.S. I might have felt more constrained in what I subsequently wrote and published.

<sup>2</sup> As Steven Salaita notes, "Before 9/11 scholars examined Arab American invisibility or marginality—or whatever other term they employed to denote peripherality—but after 9/11 they were faced with a demand to transmit or translate their culture to mainstream Americans. The demand was matched by an insatiable curiosity about Arabs and Arab Americans; everybody from "everyday" Americans to high-ranking politics wanted to know about the people who had irrevocably altered American life. Arab Americans suddenly were visible, and because of the pernicious intentions of various law and intelligence agencies, that visibility was not necessarily embraced...these issues suddenly forced Arab Americans into a paradigm shift whose implications are enormous because there was no stable paradigm from which to shift emphasis in the first place" (Anti-Arab Racism in the USA 74-75).

<sup>3</sup> See Shivani, "What is Distinctive about Arab American Writing Today?"

<sup>4</sup> Arab American poets include Elmaz Abinader, Etel Adnan, Saladin Ahmed, Kazim Ali, Assef Al-Jundi, Alise Alousi, Nuar Alsadir, Sinan Antoon, Joseph Awad, Walid Bitar, Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhran, Hayan Charara, Sharif Elmusa, Hedy Habra, Marian Haddad, Suheir Hammad, Sam Hamod, Nathalie Handal, Samuel Hazo, Fady Joudah, Lawrence Joseph, Mohja Kahf, Pauline Kaldas, Jack Marshall, Khaled Mattawa, D. H. Melhem, Philip Metres, Haas Mroue, Adele NeJame, Naomi Shihab Nye, Gregory Orfalea, Sekeena Shaben, Deema Shehabi, Matthew Shenoda, David Williams, Elliot Khalil Wilson, Zaid Shlah – and others.

<sup>5</sup> Salaita's Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide takes up this task of presenting Arab American literature to a reading public that may have little awareness of this literature or its cultural context.

<sup>6</sup> Notable in this regard is Susan Abulhawa's Mornings in Jenin.

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<sup>7</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye remains the premier voice in this area.

## Practicing Loving Kindness

Bless the maniac  
barreling down the one-way street  
the wrong way,  
who shakes his fist when I honk.  
May he live long enough  
to take driving lessons.

Bless the postman  
puffing under the no-smoking sign.  
(When I complain, my mail  
goes mysteriously missing  
for months.) Bless all those  
who debauch the air:  
the mother wafting fumes  
across her baby's carriage,  
the man whose glowing stub  
accosts a pregnant woman's face.  
May they unlearn how to exhale.

Bless the politicians  
who both give and receive  
bribes and favors.  
Bless the constituents  
seeking personal gain,  
the thieves, the liars, the sharks.  
And bless the fools  
who make corruption easy.

May they be spared  
both wealth and penury.

Bless the soldiers guarding checkpoints  
where women labor and give birth  
in the dirt. Bless the settlers  
swinging clubs into teenager's faces,  
the boys shooting boys with bullets  
aimed to kill, the men driving bulldozers  
that flatten lives to rubble.  
May they wake from the dream of power,  
drenched in the cold sweat  
of understanding. May they learn  
the body's frailty, the immensity of the soul.

Bless the destroyers of Falluja,  
the wreckers of Babylon,  
the torturers of Abu Ghraib  
and Guantanamo Bay.  
May they understand desolation,  
may they comprehend despair.

Bless the peace makers,  
the teachers, the word-workers;  
the wavers of flags  
and the makers of fighter jets.  
May we know the ends of our labor,  
and the means. May we make

reparations. May we rebuild.

Bless this planet, so cudgeled,  
so bounteous: the rain forests,  
the tundra, the ozone layer.

May it persevere beyond  
our human follies. May it bloom.

Bless cynicism. Bless hope.

Bless the fingers that type,  
the computer that processes,  
the printer that prints.

Bless email and snail mail.

Bless poetry books that cross oceans  
in battered envelopes,  
bearing small flames of words.

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