

**Arab American Women's Poetry: Violence and Boundaries in the Levantine Diaspora**

by

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Daniel Clayton LaRose, and my *teta*, Najla Simon.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF APPENDICES	viii
ABSTRACT	ix
CHAPTER	
<b>I. Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>II. Arab Diasporas and Poetic Negotiations of Spatiotemporal Boundaries</b> .....	22
<b>III. Rethinking Boundaries of the Human Subject: Relational Identity in a Post- Anthropocentric Era</b> .....	68
<b>IV. Childhood Epistemologies: Ethical Response to Violence in the Interstices of Arab-U.S. Boundaries</b> .....	113
<b>V. Deterritorialized and Archival Poetic Imaginaries: Neoliberal Critique, Caring Labor, and the Boundaries of Gender Roles</b> .....	143
<b>VI. Conclusion</b> .....	185

APPENDICES	195
BIBLIOGRAPHY	207



## **LIST OF APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX**

A. Topics of Arab American Women's Poetry	196
B. Arab American Women Poets and Relational Identity	201
C. Themes in Arab American Women's Poetry about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict	203

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation fills a research gap: to date there has not been a published scholarly monograph exclusively about Arab American women's poetry. The study focuses on an insufficiently explored textual corpus: women poets with heritage in the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories) because this is the region from which most Arab Americans trace their ancestry. Analyzing the work of twelve Arab American women who published at least one full-length poetry collection, composed in or translated into English, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the dissertation takes as its source material poems from Etel Adnan, Naomi Shihab Nye, Nathalie Handal, Suheir Hammad, Mohja Kahf, Elmaz Abinader, Hedy Habra, Marian Haddad, Laila Halaby, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Deema Shehabi, and Hala Alyan.

By using poems as case studies, the dissertation explores how Arab American women poets represent the problem of violence and articulate peace-building strategies in the Levantine region and transnationally. This research discusses how Arab American women poets address the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after WWI, the subsequent French and British colonial interventions, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Lebanese Civil War, the Gulf War, and the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These poets, writing in the diasporic afterlives of violent origins, often reflect on boundaries. A simple definition of a boundary is a line that marks the limit of something; limits can be physical, political, historical, temporal, embodied, behavioral, psychological, emotional, or spiritual.

These poets evince a contemplative relationship to boundaries by illuminating how boundaries are reimagined by those who survived the traumas of violence and displacement. A contemplative relationship to boundaries does not create lawlessness or chaos but promotes considerations about how to improve the conditions of life. Although these poets or their ancestors experienced or witnessed acts of violence, these poets do not view themselves as victims, but as agents who contribute insights that benefit Arab Americans and a wider collective. These poets conceptualize the writing of poetry as a process that, through engagement with readers, results in healing from violence. Each chapter inquires how these poets claim agency because of diasporic displacement, and how they respond to violent conflicts in ways that renegotiate and reimagine boundaries.

Chapter 1 observes that Abinader, Kahf, and Handal ponder the nature of boundaries, both spatial and temporal, and argues that these poets develop transnational Arab subject formations that both extend and modify central ideas of the 19th century Mahjar (migrant) literary tradition for late-twentieth and early twenty-first century audiences. The chapter also attends to how Handal engages with Samuel Huntington's (1993) "clash of civilizations" thesis. Chapter 2 investigates how Shehabi, Halaby, and Adnan deliberate on the boundaries of the human subject by placing their poetry into dialogue with contemporary theorizing on identity and by highlighting their emphasis on relational identity. Chapter 3 questions how Abinader, Majaj, Nye, and Shehabi contemplate the boundaries of childhood through child characters and perspectives. In the process, the chapter examines how these poets' work supports a critique of epistemic privilege. Chapter 4 seeks to understand how Abinader, Hammad, Alyan, Habra, Haddad, and Nye meditate on the boundaries of gender roles. Specifically, the chapter centers on

how these poets denaturalize neoliberalism and value caring labor as central to a post-neoliberal social order.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

*“there is no precision in traveling –  
it unweaves the body,  
invents its lines and directions”*

— Nathalie Handal, “The Traveler” from *Poet in Andalucía* (2012)

The internecine war in Syria has brought international attention to the problems of Arab regional violence and the resulting displacement of populations. Although the Syrian refugee crisis began in 2011, mass migrations of people from the Middle East have been occurring since the late nineteenth century. One voice uniquely situated to illuminate the complexities of Arab diasporas is that of the poet Nathalie Handal, a descendant of exiled Palestinians who was born in Haiti and has lived in Europe, Latin America, the Arab region, and the United States. In her poem “The Traveler” (2012), Handal focuses on how diasporic experiences have impacted both individual bodies and the collective body politics of the nation states to which Arabs have migrated. Handal’s five poetry collections belong to a larger textual corpus of Arab American women’s poetry, a body of work that seeks to understand the complex dynamics of migrations from the Arab region to the Americas. Although scholars have increasingly concentrated, especially over the past twenty years, on

Arab American literature and poetry, Arab American women poets have received limited critical attention.

Arab American women poets merit inclusion in scholarship on American poetry, not because they have been understudied, and not because they are an ethnic minority, but because they illuminate some of the most consequential sociopolitical crises from the late-nineteenth century to the present. Through their writings, Arab American women poets provide insights into conflicts in the Arab region, and how those conflicts have led to political instability, various forms of violence, and migrations of people around the world. These poets help us to understand the human costs of political conflicts in the Arab region, including impacts on noncombatants, experiences of displacement, and movements across national boundaries.

Although Arab American women's lives have been explored in both social and cultural studies<sup>1</sup> as well as in the humanities<sup>2</sup> it is important that such research be supplemented by a sustained investigation of Arab American women's literary expression, particularly poetry. Scholars have long documented the ways in which poetic expression through language, symbol, and story is ideally suited for addressing the range and depth of traumatic experiences.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Arab American women, traumatic experiences include

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<sup>1</sup>Cultural studies and social sciences research on Arab American women includes: Abdulhadi, Naber, and Alsultany 2010; Karem Albrecht 2015; Cainkar 1988; Elia 2006; Gualtieri 2004; Hyndman-Rizk 2011; Jacobs 2014, 2015; Jarmakani 2008; Joseph 2009, 2012; Moosnick 2012; Naber 2012; Read 2004; Shakir 1997. This list is by no means complete.

<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive, though by no means complete, list of research on Arab American women's literary and artistic productions includes: Abdelrazek 2007; Darraj 2004; El Hajj and Harb 2016; Fadda-Conrey 2014; Golley 2007; Majaj, Sunderman, and Saliba 2002; Mehta 2014; Pickens 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide*, edited by Charles R. Figley. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012.

witnessing or directly experiencing physical violence, and undergoing forms of psychological, social, and economic violence that result from displacement, migration, and refugee status. This dissertation begins with the premise that we cannot understand the problem of violence in the Arab region, and its consequences, without considering the voices of women who have been affected by this violence.

The term “Arab American,” in its broadest sense, refers to diasporic Arabs who migrated to North and South America. Today, approximately nine million people of Arab descent live in Brazil, about five million of whom trace their ancestry to Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> The second-largest number of diasporic Arabs live in the United States, where an estimated 3.7 million people trace their roots to an Arab country.<sup>5</sup> The category “Arab American” encompasses a diverse group of individuals who trace their origins to a geographical space consisting of twenty-two Arab League countries. The Arab region consists of three main areas: the *Mashriq* (the Arab east), which includes Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories; the *Maghreb* (the Arab west), which consists of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania; and the Gulf region, which encompasses Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. While the term Arab American creates group cohesion—a homogeneous ethnic identity category that facilitates comparisons with other ethnic minority groups in the United States—the designation Arab American is unable to capture significant differences in diverse histories, cultures, religions, and linguistic

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<sup>4</sup> This figure comes from “The Arabs of Brazil” in *Saudi Aramco World*, <http://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200505/the.arabs.of.brazil.htm>. Accessed 31 Oct. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> This figure comes from the Arab American Institute, <http://www.aaiusa.org/demographics>. Accessed 31 Oct. 2016.

dialects throughout the Arab region.

For this reason, I adopt a regional approach to Arab American literature. I attend to an understudied textual corpus: Arab American women poets with heritage in the *Mashriq*, also known as the Levant (I use these terms interchangeably), because this is the region from which Arab emigration began, and the place from which most Arab Americans trace their ancestry.<sup>6</sup> Through a transnational analysis, I examine poetry that illuminates the heritage of people from this region. Focusing on Anglophone women poets, I analyze those who were born in, or trace their ancestry to, the Levant and who live, or have spent a significant part of their lives, in the United States. Some Arab American women poets were born in the U.S. and write about their ancestors who left the Arab region in the late-nineteenth century during the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Others were born in the Arab region and later migrated to the U.S. during periods of intense political instability as nation-states formed in the aftermath of European colonialism. Although a detailed political history of the region is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to highlight the antecedents that precipitated Arab migrations to the United States.

### **Arab Migrations to America and Arab American Literature**

The First World War had a significant impact on the Arab region, among other parts of the world, as David Held (1998) observes, because it demonstrated that “war between great

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<sup>6</sup> The Arab American Institute states that most Arab Americans trace their heritage to Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. <http://www.aaiusa.org/demographics>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2016.



powers in the industrial age could no longer be confined exclusively to the combatants on the battlefield.”<sup>7</sup> During WWI, the British and French seized Middle Eastern lands. In 1916, British and French diplomats signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement which provided for British control of Mesopotamia and Palestine, and French control of Syria and Lebanon. In addition, the British foreign secretary Arthur James Balfour, issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917 which called for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. In the aftermath of WWI, the mandate system, implemented by Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, formally gave control of Palestine and Iraq to the British.<sup>8</sup>

The consequences of the First World War, particularly the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire, had dire consequences in this region and marked the beginning of the *Mahjar*, the Arabic term for the diaspora of Arabs around the world. Arab immigration to United States has historically been characterized by a “wave” model. While some historians, such as Alixa Naff (1985) and Michael Suleiman (1999), observe two major waves of immigration, from the 1870s to WWII, and from WWII to the present, other scholars, such as Orfalea (2006), propose a three-wave model: 1870s-1924, 1940-67, and 1967-present. Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis (1987) distinguish between five waves of Arab immigration: the first wave, from 1875-1912, consisted mostly of young men from Lebanon and present-day Syria; the second-wave, from 1918-22, was comprised of Arab relatives of the first wave; the third wave, from 1930-38, was primary composed of relatives of all the previous Arab immigrants;

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<sup>7</sup> Held, David. et al., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, and Culture*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999, pg. 97.

<sup>8</sup> The history in this paragraph is summarized from the entry on “Middle East” by Younes Abouyoub in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*, edited by Peter N. Stearns. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

the fourth wave, from 1947-60, consisted of Palestinian refugees and urban elites seeking higher education and better opportunities; and the fifth wave began in 1967 in response to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which reversed the historic preference for European immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Although Haddad and Lummis propose a nuanced model, I adopt the three-wave model throughout this dissertation because I believe that it captures the major periods of Arab immigration to the United States more succinctly.

Data on the number of first generation Arab immigrants to the United States varies, mainly because of their historically ambiguous position within U.S. racial classification schemas. As Lisa Suhair Majaj (2000) has documented, in the late 19th century, Arabic-speaking immigrants from Greater Syria were initially classified on US immigration forms as “Turkey in Asia” or as “Other Asians.” In 1910, the U.S. Census classified Syrians, Palestinians, Turks, Armenians, and others as “Asiatic.” In 1911, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization ordered court clerks to reject applications for first papers from aliens who were neither white nor African—a ruling that targeted “Asiatics” for exclusion. A series of court cases followed, known as the “prerequisite cases,” in which petitions for naturalization were challenged on whether the petitioners qualified as “white.” Sarah Gualtieri (2009) examined racial prerequisite cases heard in U.S. federal courts between 1909 and 1923, observing that Syrians’ ethnicity emerged in a U.S. racial order that scrutinized their identity and repeatedly questioned whether they could become white Americans. At times, Syrians were classified as “white,” and at other times as “not white.” As Majaj observes, whiteness

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<sup>9</sup> This description of Haddad and Lummis’ five-wave model of Arab immigration comes from Karen Isaken Leonard’s *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003, pg. 10.

consisted of not just skin color but also geographical, cultural, linguistic, and religious factors—intrinsic to the European “community of race” was Christian identity. In 1914, the United States Court of Appeals Fourth Circuit court ruled, in *Dow v. United States*, that Syrians were to be classified as white.

Amid these racial classification complexities, scholars estimate that, between 1880 and 1924, approximately 95,000 people of Arab descent came to America.<sup>10</sup> Most of these immigrants were Christians from the Ottoman province of Greater Syria, also known as the Levant, the *Mashriq* (Arabic for “the land where the sun rises”), and *Bilad ash-Sham* (Arabic for “land of the North”), a region that now consists of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories.<sup>11</sup> In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of factors precipitated the mass exodus of people from Greater Syria, including the persecution of Christians, the decline of silk production in the region, and the Ottoman Empire’s entry into WWI on the side of the German Kaiser, which increased military conscription of men from the region.<sup>12</sup> A subsequent British and French blockade (1915-18) of the Syrian and Lebanese coastlines impeded the entry of food and caused the deaths, from starvation, of

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<sup>10</sup> See Arab American National Museum – Arab American History: <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/Arab+American+History.id.150.htm>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2016.

<sup>11</sup> The Levantine region consists of former Byzantine territories of the Diocese of the East organized soon after the Muslim Conquest of Syria in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. This region was a Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid Caliphate province (632-1515), and then a province of the Ottoman Empire (1516-1918), which controlled it until the end of World War I.

<sup>12</sup> One of the earliest scholarly books on the experiences of diasporic Arabs who settled in the United States is Phillip Hitti’s *The Syrians in America* (1924). Other influential scholars on this topic include Phillip and Joseph Kayal (1975), Sameer and Nabeel Abraham (1983), Eric Hoogland (1987), Adele Younis (1993), Michael Suleiman (1999), and Gregory Orfalea (2006).

more than 100,000 people—a quarter of the population.<sup>13</sup>

During this first wave of Arab migration to the United States, people from Greater Syria almost immediately began to engage in literary production. By 1900, over half of Syrians in America lived in New York City, home to a thriving immigrant community, “Little Syria,” and the *Mahjar* (Arabic for “migrant”) poets.<sup>14</sup> The “Pen League” (*Al-Rabitah al-qalamiyyah*), founded by Nasib Arida and Abd al-Masih Haddad around 1916, included Khalil Gibran as a member, who reformed and assumed leadership of the league in 1920. These writers began a tradition of Arab American poetry, one that continued throughout the twentieth century by a wide range of poets who contributed to literary magazines and published single-authored collections.<sup>15</sup> The first Arab American woman poet, Afifa Karam (1883-1924), who wrote in Arabic, also composed fiction and nonfiction. As a journalist, she contributed to the Arabic-language newspaper, *Al-Hoda (The Guidance)*, and in 1911 she founded a monthly women’s periodical, *al-‘Ālam al-Jadīd al-Nisā’ī (The New Women’s World)* which gave way two years later to a second publication, *al-‘Imra’a al-Sūrīyya (Syrian Woman)*.<sup>16</sup>

Although Arab American literature flourished in the early part of the twentieth century, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Quota Act drastically limited numbers of new immigrants,

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<sup>13</sup> See Gualtieri’s Chapter 1, “From Internal to International Migration”; Evelyn Shakir’s *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (1997); and Gregory Orfalea’s *The Arab Americans: A History* (2006).

<sup>14</sup> *A Community of Many Worlds: Arab Americans in New York City* (2002).

<sup>15</sup> A great deal of this work has been collected in seven anthologies of Arab American poetry edited by: Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa (1988), Joe Kadi (1994), Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa (1999), D.H. Melhem and Leila Diab (2000), Nathalie Handal (2001), Susan Muaddi Darraj (2004), and Hayan Charara (2008).

<sup>16</sup> Shakir, Evelyn. *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997, pg. 55.

and during this period Arab Americans generally concentrated more on assimilation than on preserving or exploring their ancestry.<sup>17</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, however, a second wave of Arab migration to the United States began after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 displaced an estimated 711,000 Palestinians.<sup>18</sup> During this time, approximately 80,000 Arabs immigrated to the United States; the majority were Palestinians while the second largest group was made up of Egyptians.<sup>19</sup> The third wave of Arab migration began after Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act (also called the Hart-Celler Act), in 1965, which eliminated national origin, race, and ancestry as a basis for immigration. This legislation enabled the entry of immigrants from the Arab region fleeing from numerous conflicts including the Six-Day War between Israel and the Arab states in 1967, the Lebanese civil war (1975-90), the First Gulf War (1990-91), and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath.<sup>20</sup>

By the late 1960s, annual immigration from the Arab world reached an average of 14,000 to 15,000; Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and Iraqis joined and often surpassed Lebanon and Syria as major sources of new U.S. immigrants.<sup>21</sup> The changes in U.S.

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<sup>17</sup> See Alixa Naff's *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> In September 1949, the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine estimated that 711,000 Palestinian refugees lived outside Israel.

<sup>19</sup> Many of the Arabs who immigrated between 1950-65 were members of the established elite in countries like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq who fled due to popular revolutions and the new regimes that came with them. See Gregory Orfalea's *The Arab Americans: A History*. Northampton: Olive Branch Publishing, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> See Carol Fadda-Conrey's *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York: NYU Press, 2014, pg. 105.

<sup>21</sup> According to Helen Hatab Samhan's "Not Quite White: Race Classification and the Arab-American Experience," in *Arabs in America: Building Toward a New Future*, edited by Michael Suleiman. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.

immigration policy gave preference to relatives of U.S. citizens, to professionals, and to other individuals with specialized skills. Because of these changes in immigration law, Arab immigrants began to come from a variety of countries, mostly Muslim, and were often more highly educated and more politically engaged than the previous generation of Arab Americans.<sup>22</sup> Arabs who came to the United States in this period began to write and publish literature in English. During this time, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements created new spaces for ethnic literary voices, including the publication of more works by African Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans, and other minority groups. In this context, many Arab Americans found it easier to write about their ethnic heritage and find publishers and audiences. The first book of English-language poetry published by an Arab American woman was Etel Adnan's *Moonshots* (1966).

Since the mid-1960s, Arab American women poets have meditated on their experiences in an increasingly multi-ethnic American society. Beginning approximately in the 1990s, these poets' writings reflected a broader trend of Arab Americans identifying as people of color and articulating alliances with other minority groups, rather than attempting to "pass" as white—an identity to which previous generations of Arabs in America had aspired. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 transformed Arab Americans, as Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber write, "from invisible citizens to visible subjects."<sup>23</sup> Quickly denouncing the attacks, the Arab American community, including Arab American poets, increasingly wrote

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<sup>22</sup> Majaj, Lisa Suhair. "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments." *American Studies Journal*. 52 (2008).

<sup>23</sup> This term comes from the subtitle of the book *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2008.

about ongoing political instability in the Arab region, civilian deaths, and mass refugee migrations.

Although the field of Arab American literary studies has, over the past decade, begun to include a focus on Arab American women writers, to date there has been little scholarly research on Arab American women's poetry. Currently, there are a handful of books that center on Arab American women's poetry, but none of them do so exclusively. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's collection *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing* (2007) contains an essay by Keith Feldman which argues that the poetry of Etel Adnan and Suheir Hammad revalues "Arab as a transnational category through which to forward specific literary projects in order to imagine a viable and inclusive Arab society built in a transnational context and through transnational solidarities."<sup>24</sup> In this same collection, Carol Fadda-Conrey ruminates on how Mohja Kahf and Suheir Hammad highlight a collective Arab American experience.<sup>25</sup> Amal Talaat Abdelrazek's *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (2008) analyzes one Arab American women poet, Mohja Kahf, arguing that Kahf "emphasizes hybridity and diaspora rather than roots as a primary means of resisting essentialized identity politics."<sup>26</sup> Carol Fadda-Conrey's *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (2014) considers literary and occasional visual texts dating from the 1990s that

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<sup>24</sup> "Poetic Geographies: Interracial Insurgency in Arab American Autobiographical Spaces," in Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> "Weaving Poetic Autobiographies: Individual and Communal Identities in the Poetry of Mohja Kahf and Suheir Hammad," in Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> See Abdelrazek's *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*, pg. 68.

“produce anti-imperialist and antihegemonic modalities of Arab-American citizenship and belonging that pave the way for more solid connections among various communities of color.”<sup>27</sup> Fadda-Conrey includes all genres of writing, and she also incorporates poetry by Suheir Hammad, Naomi Shihab Nye, D.H. Melhem, Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Pauline Kaldas, Etel Adnan, Leila Halaby, and Dima Hilal. Finally, Theri Pickens’ *New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States* (2014) contains one chapter, “Respirating Resistance: Suheir Hammad’s Invocation of Breath,” which contends that Hammad mobilizes breath to challenge circumstances surrounding occupied Palestine.

While all these scholars have provided valuable contributions, there is a need to consider Arab American women’s poetry as a collective body of work. To fill this research gap, I began my study of this poetry in 1966—the year Etel Adnan published *Moonshots*—and continued until 2016. This dissertation analyzes twelve Arab American women who published at least one full-length poetry collection, composed in or translated into English, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: Lebanese Americans Etel Adnan, Elmaz Abinader, and Hedy Habra; Syrian Americans Marian Haddad and Mohja Kahf; Jordanian American Laila Halaby; and Palestinian Americans Naomi Shihab Nye, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Nathalie Handal, Deema Shehabi, Suheir Hammad, and Hala Alyan. This group encompasses nearly all the Arab American women poets who have written at least one full-length collection of poetry and who trace their heritage to the *Mashriq*.<sup>28</sup> After closely reading all

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pg. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Notable poets who are not analyzed in this dissertation include Lebanese Americans D.H. Mehlem and Adele Ne Jame, Iraqi American Dunya Mikhail, and Egyptian American Pauline Kaldas, whose works did not prove as relevant to the lines of inquiry pursued in this dissertation.



these poetry collections—a total of nearly 1,400 poems—I identified the most prevalent themes: violence, maternity, love, memory, nature, death, ancestry, religion, urbanity, and Palestine.<sup>29</sup> Because violence is the most prevalent theme in this corpus, I contemplate specifically how the poets respond to violence. My approach prioritizes the impact of Arab regional violence, displacement, diaspora, and cross-cultural interactions.<sup>30</sup>

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

I take seriously Steven Salaita's (2007) proposition that "it is possible to extract a sociological epistemology from literature without ignoring its aesthetic integrity."<sup>31</sup> Salaita draws the distinction between politicized criticism, which treats literature "as a metaphorical straw man to facilitate a polemic," and aesthetic criticism, which "invokes the political" and "illustrates how political events are rendered artistically."<sup>32</sup> I do not seek to advance a polemic—at least not intentionally—nor do I solely notice how political events are rendered artistically. Instead, I attempt to understand how Arab American women create poetic imaginaries that are responsive to both historical circumstances and to their contemporaneous sociocultural and political contexts. I comment on the broader significance of these poetic

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<sup>29</sup> See Appendix A for a more detailed catalogue of themes in Arab American women's poetry.

<sup>30</sup> Because of my methodological focus on these themes, I concentrate less on providing a chronological account of the historical and sociopolitical factors that have caused Arab regional violence. I also focus less on other dimensions of this poetry, for example, the use of language and aesthetics. It is my hope that scholars in the future will take up these topics, among others.

<sup>31</sup> Salaita, Steven. *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics*. New York: Palgrave, 2007, pg. 52.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 60-1.

imaginaries, aiming to understand how these writers—when considered collectively—articulate a normative vision for the future of Arabs, both in America and in a transnational context.

Throughout, this dissertation highlights how Arab American women’s poetry addresses the impact of Arab regional violence. In recent years, scholars of Arab literature have sought to understand the types of violence that impacts people from this region. In her work on Arab women’s literary responses to violence, Brinda Mehta (2014) defines violence in a broad sense as “a physical and symbolic act of dismemberment.”<sup>33</sup> From Mehta’s perspective, physical acts of dismemberment include war, poverty, sexual violence, border violence, detention, and clandestine migration. Symbolic acts of dismemberment, on the other hand, include patriarchal credos, minority citizenship, and the omissions of women in historical accounts. Mehta conducts close readings of postcolonial Arab women writers from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, and investigates migrations from this region to European countries, mainly France. In contrast, I analyze Arab women poets who trace their heritage to the *Mashriq* countries and on migrations primarily to the United States.

I do not examine what Mehta calls “symbolic violence” but rather the material consequences of political and economic violence because the poets more often address these types of violence. These poets write about various forms of political violence—colonialism, internecine wars, domestic instability, foreign interventions—and the consequences for refugee populations in diaspora. I attend to three predominant forms of political violence that the poets address: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which precipitated Arab exile from

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<sup>33</sup> Mehta, Brinda J. *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices Against Violence*. New York: Routledge, 2014, pg. 3.

Greater Syria at the end of the nineteenth century; the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, which displaced approximately 711,000 Palestinians; and the U.S. wars in Iraq. The poets also address forms of economic violence resulting from the penury that often accompanies diasporic populations. For this reason, I contemplate how these poets discuss the forms of labor necessitated by Arab diasporic populations in the United States.

This dissertation draws together theoretical frameworks from Arab diaspora studies, Arab American literary studies, women's studies, and postcolonial studies. As Ottmar Ette (2006) observes, the wars and persecutions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the resulting displacements of people, have transformed world literature. Millions of refugees, stateless persons, and migrants have created multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural movements, producing various kinds of cultural juxtaposition amounting to what Ette calls "nomadic interaction." The United States has become a meeting point and platform for diverse developments in the worldwide literary network. The mobile, dynamic, and transient figures in the context of a fractal, discontinuous, and post-Euclidean geometry of literature necessitates what Ette calls a "fully elaborated poetics of movement."<sup>34</sup>

Jahan Ramazani (2009) engages in a similar line of inquiry by pondering how transnational poetry's globe-traversing influences, energies, and resistances have styled and shaped English poetry from the modernist era to the present. He asserts that English can be classified as a world language for poets, or "at least a semi-global conduit through which poets encounter, advance, and redirect cross-cultural flows of tropes and words, ideas and

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<sup>34</sup> See Ette's essay, "Literatures without a Fixed Abode: Figures of Vectorial Imagination Beyond Dichotomies of National and World Literature," published in *ArabAmericas. Literary Entanglements of the American Hemisphere and the Arab World*, edited by Ottmar Ette and Friederike Pannewick. Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 2006.

images.”<sup>35</sup> Ramazani investigates how poets’ imaginative as well as literal mingling and merging creates new inter-geographic spaces and new compound identities. While Ramazani does not analyze Arab American women who write in English, I extend his focus on geography and identity to their poetry.

Scholars of Arab literatures have long documented the impact of colonialism, internecine wars, domestic instability, and foreign interventions on people in the Arab region and those in diaspora. Edward Said examines how the experiences of colonialism and diaspora have impacted literature. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he argues that “literary experiences overlap and are interdependent despite national boundaries and coercively legislated national autonomies.” For this reason, he underscores how literature is “crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of the classic canonic enclosures.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than what he calls “the partial analysis offered by the various national or systematically theoretical schools,” Said proposes “contrapuntal analysis...in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together,” an analysis that takes “into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices—inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions—all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography.”<sup>37</sup> I draw upon two elements of contrapuntal analysis in this dissertation. First, I meditate on how Arab American women poets depict the experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories. Additionally, I concentrate on how Arab American women

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<sup>35</sup> Ramazani, Jahan. *A Transnational Poetics*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009, pg. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993, pg. 317.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 318.

poets' spatial and geographical practices elucidate a "complex and uneven topography"—one that complicates boundaries of time, space, homeland, new country, the human subject, childhood, and gender roles.

In the context of Arab American studies, I draw on the theoretical frameworks of scholars who have scrutinized how boundaries are not only coercive, but also provide opportunities for contemplation and insight. Nabeel Abraham (2000), for example, argues that the "unmarked areas that exist between, across, and in spite of sociopolitical boundaries are not simply areas of exclusion; they are also areas of innovation, creativity, and fundamental change."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Lisa Suhair Majaj (1999) argues that "we need not stronger and more definitive boundaries of identity, but rather an expansion and transformation of these boundaries."<sup>39</sup> More recently, Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber (2010) have emphasized that the geographic boundaries between Arab homelands and diasporas are fluid and overlapping.<sup>40</sup> In my attempt to understand the role of boundaries in this poetry, I dialogue with a wide range of scholarship that addresses boundaries in the context of women's diasporic experiences, identity, trauma and recovery, childhood, neoliberalism, and caring labor.

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<sup>38</sup> *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*, pg. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Majaj, Lisa Suhair. "New Directions: Arab American Writing at Century's End." *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, edited by Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash. New York: Syracuse UP, 1999, pg. 77.

<sup>40</sup> Abdulhadi, Rabab, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, editors. *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2010. See the preface.

## Arguments and Organization of Chapters

Arab American women poets, writing in the diasporic afterlives of violent origins, often reflect on boundaries. A simple definition of a boundary is a line that marks the limit of something—limits can be physical, political, historical, temporal, embodied, behavioral, psychological, emotional, or spiritual. These poets demonstrate what I call a contemplative relationship to boundaries, meaning that they do not view boundaries as sacrosanct, but rather as capable of being reimagined and transformed by those affected by the traumas of violence and displacement. A contemplative relationship to boundaries does not create lawlessness or chaos but considers how to improve the conditions of life. Arab American women poets relate to boundaries in ways that are often generative, reparative, and restorative. Although they or their ancestors have experienced or witnessed acts of violence, these poets do not perceive people who have experienced violence as victims, but as agents who can contribute insights that benefit not only Arab Americans, but also a wider collective. These Arab American women poets conceptualize the writing of poetry as a process that, through engagement with readers, moves in the direction of healing from violence. Throughout this dissertation, I notice how these poets claim agency because of diasporic displacement, and how they respond to the aftermath of violent conflicts in ways that document a complication, negotiation, and reimagination of boundaries. These poets reflect on boundaries between the homeland and the new country, and the past and the present (Chapter 1); the boundaries of the human subject (Chapter 2); the boundaries of childhood (Chapter 3); and the boundaries of gender roles (Chapter 4).

In Chapter 1, “Early Arab Diasporas and Poetic Negotiations of Spatiotemporal

Boundaries,” I argue that critical practices of theorizing diaspora as a polarity between the homeland and the new country are inadequate because they do not reflect the temporal and spatial complexities of diasporic experiences. I seek to understand how Arab American women poets articulate a transnational Arab subject formation that both extends and modifies central ideas of the *Mahjar* literary tradition for late-twentieth and early twenty-first century audiences. The first two poets I analyze—Lebanese American Elmaz Abinader and Syrian American Mohja Kahf—engage directly with the period in which the *Mahjar* writers produced their work. I explore how Abinader and Kahf develop what I call ancestralism. Next, I attend to how Palestinian American Nathalie Handal extends the philosophical contributions of the *Mahjar* writer Ameen Rihani. Specifically, I highlight how Handal creates a what I call a cultural synthesis approach and focus on how her poetry critically interrogates the viability of Samuel Huntington’s (1993) “clash of civilizations” thesis.

In Chapter 2, “Rethinking Boundaries of the Human Subject: Relational Identity in a Post-Anthropocentric Era,” I observe that Arab American women’s poetry does not elucidate a unified vision of the Arab American subject. Some Arab American women poets, in particular Suheir Hammad and Mohja Kahf, articulate a kind of identity politics by making political their social locations. These poets mobilize poetry to register resistance and to make calls for transformation. There are compelling reasons to embrace identity politics because it provides a way for people to claim a history and find a voice. In this chapter, I concentrate on critiques of identity politics that point out the limits of fixing a location in difference. Rather than concentrating on how individual identity has been shaped by structural power inequalities, the Arab American women poets I focus on in this chapter—Deema Shehabi, Leila Halaby, and Etel Adnan—respond to the conditions of diaspora by imagining identity as

dynamic and by moving beyond politicized social locations. This conception of identity prioritizes individuals' coexistence with other people and the environment. I analyze how these poets' portrayals of identity resonates with feminists and post-humanists who are troubling the boundaries of the human subject.

Chapter 3, "Childhood Epistemologies: Ethical Response to Violence in the Interstices of Arab-U.S. Boundaries," observes that several poets—Elmaz Abinader, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Deema Shehabi—reimagine the boundaries and roles of the child. This chapter is not about the boundaries of childhood, *per se*, but about the creation of childhood as an epistemological space through which boundaries between America and the Arab region can be opened for the purpose of understanding. The poets I focus on in this chapter do not depict childhood as a period in the lifecycle but as an epistemological space from which to articulate insights into the problem of violence in the Arab region. Through children's perspectives, these poets illuminate specific ethical positions on how to respond appropriately to acts of violence. These poets overwhelmingly concentrate on two primary domains—domestic spaces and the natural environment—and their work contemplates how healing from violence in the Arab region can occur by integrating insights that emerge from both spaces. Although these poets specifically address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and wars in Iraq, their insights also have more general application because they establish broad ethical parameters for responding to violence.

Chapter 4, "Deterritorialized and Archival Poetic Imaginaries: Neoliberal Critique, Caring Labor, and the Boundaries of Gender Roles," evaluates how Elmaz Abinader, Suheir Hammad, Hala Alyan, Hedy Habra, Marian Haddad, and Naomi Shihab Nye reimagine boundaries of gender roles. These poets address the importance of caring labor, which



involves connecting to other people and trying to help them meet their needs. I focus on how these poets portray depicting caring labor as a response to violence in the Arab region and transnational dislocation. I also explore how Arab American women poets politicize the affective dimensions of caring labor as a collective body of knowledge and consider what implications this knowledge might have for the body politic of American society. These poets emphasize that, during an incident of violence or in the context of war, labor breaks down traditional gender roles, and these changes persist in diaspora. These poets also notice how caring labor, in the context of a web of kinship, becomes an act of political resistance to imperial violence. By unfixing caring labor from its association with female gender, Arab American women poets depict men in a wide range of caregiving roles, including in the natural world, and these characterizations illuminate ecologically sustainable labor practices. Moreover, Arab American women poets articulate formations of caring labor that merge the natural and the human landscapes—a perspective that does not externalize the environment, but rather integrates the environment into production processes. The use of caring labor as a mechanism for attempting to resolve trauma can serve as a basis for sustainable economic practices that might help to facilitate a more inclusive social landscape.

## CHAPTER II

### Arab Diasporas and Poetic Negotiations of Spatiotemporal Boundaries

#### Introduction

In her poem “Young Women” from *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999), Elmaz Abinader meditates, from her perspective in late-twentieth century America, on her mother’s childhood in the region that was once the Ottoman province of Greater Syria. Abinader portrays her relationship with her mother as a process of mutual effort in reconstructing their ancestral legacy. “We examine each other’s lives,” she writes, “not able to distinguish one line from the next, lost in the tissue of legacy.” In these lines, Abinader emphasizes that ancestral connections cut through boundaries of time and space, a prominent theme that recurs in the larger corpus of Arab American women’s poetry. This chapter investigates how Arab American women who have experienced the conditions of diaspora reflect on boundaries, both spatial and temporal, in their poetry. More broadly, the chapter aims to illuminate the sociocultural and political significance of these themes.

Arab American women poets, writing from diverse standpoints—secular, Muslim, and Christian—grapple with experiences of displacement, a vitally important topic in an era of transnational migrations. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha observes, “Where,

once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature.”<sup>41</sup> He argues that “a range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.”<sup>42</sup> Bhabha’s observations are especially salient in the years after 2011, when the largest refugee crisis since WWII—mostly Syrians fleeing internecine war—brought international attention to Arab regional conflicts and displacement. Arab American women poets attempt to negotiate, as Bhabha puts it, “journeys of migration” and “dwellings of the diasporic.”<sup>43</sup>

This chapter focuses on collections by Arab American women poets published between 1999 and 2012, a period of many significant events including the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the subsequent “war on terror,” the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the destabilization of Iraq, the Arab Spring movements, the removal of Gaddafi, and the civil war in Syria, which began in 2011 and displaced an estimated five million people outside of the country. During this period, in the U.S., and indeed in most Western countries, an increasingly polarized discourse about migration can be generalized into two broad perspectives. The first, an assimilationist approach, prioritizes migrants adopting the values of their new country. The second, a multicultural approach, encourages migrants to retain their

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<sup>41</sup> See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994, pg. 12.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 172.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 213.

original culture. Proponents of assimilation find the multicultural approach problematic because they value the primacy of the nation state and a unified national culture. Advocates of multiculturalism see flaws in the assimilationist approach because they believe that it does not often recognize importance of migrants' original cultures and may not adequately consider the legacy of Western imperialism. This chapter examines how Arab American women poets contribute to discourses on the phenomenon of Arab migrations to Western countries in a manner that does not recapitulate either the assimilation or the multicultural framework. The poets, through their transnational and historicized accounts of Arab migrations, ponder the nature of intergenerational and transnational relationships.

Over the past decade, scholars have expanded the terrain of Arab American literary studies to include transnational migrations. Steven Salaita (2007) advocates for a study of Arab American literature that emphasizes transcultural interchange. Keith Feldman (2007) concentrates on the development of "Arab as a transnational category through which to forward specific literary projects in order to imagine a viable and inclusive Arab society built in a transnational context and through transnational solidarities."<sup>44</sup> Amal Talaat Abdelrazek (2008) argues that, in the late-twentieth century, Arab American writers moved from an emphasis on assimilation to transnational hybridity.<sup>45</sup> Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) contends that "Arab-Americans...by asserting themselves within a US framework while maintaining transnational connections to their Arab homelands, overturn the exclusionary belongings

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<sup>44</sup> Feldman focuses specifically on the works of Etel Adnan and Suheir Hammad in his essay "Poetic Geographies: Interracial Insurgency in Arab American Autobiographical Spaces" in Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's edited collection, *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Abdelrazek, Amal Talaat. *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*. New York: Cambria, 2008, pg. 5.

dictated by the US nation state, producing “anti-imperialist and antihegemonic modalities of Arab-American citizenship and belonging that pave the way for more solid connections among various communities of color.”<sup>46</sup> While all these scholars have made vital contributions, what has been less studied is how contemporary Arab American writers, in their transnationally-focused work, build on, and depart from, earlier Arab American literary traditions.

A notable exception is Wail Hassan (2011), who studies the development of Arab American literature from its origins in the late-nineteenth century to the present. He observes that the first Arab American writers—who identified their tradition as the *Mahjar* (migrant) literary movement—aimed to synthesize what they viewed as the “East” and “West.” Ameen Rihani’s novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), for example, envisioned a Hegelian dynamic that would eventually blend east and west into a higher synthesis of civilizations. Khalil Gibran’s *The Prophet* (1923)—Knopf’s bestselling title ever—blended several genres: Romantic visionary, Nietzschean idealist, Eastern mystic, and Christian evangelist. Hassan argues that Gibran “embraced the role of Oriental prophet and hermit” and that Gibran’s spiritualism “emerges out of an Orientalist typology and denotes an undifferentiated, trans-historical monolith, the polar opposite of secular ‘Western’ rationalism.”<sup>47</sup> Hassan’s analysis of the *Mahjar* period is important because the writers of this period articulated philosophical questions, thematics, and aesthetics that established an Arab American transnational literary

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<sup>46</sup> Carol Fadda-Conrey. *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York: NYU Press, 2014, pg. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Hassan, Wail. *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011, pg. 73.

tradition that influenced several generations of Arab American writers. Hassan's investigations of the *Mahjar* writers' contributions, however, has not yet been considered in studies of Arab American women's poetry.

In this chapter, I seek to understand how Arab American women poets develop a transnational Arab subject formation that both extends and modifies central ideas of the *Mahjar* literary tradition for late-twentieth and early twenty-first century audiences. The first two poets I analyze—Lebanese American Elmaz Abinader and Syrian American Mohja Kahf—engage directly with the period in which the *Mahjar* writers produced their work. I investigate how Abinader and Kahf represent what I call ancestralism. Next, I explore how Palestinian American Nathalie Handal extends the philosophical interest of the influential *Mahjar* writer Ameen Rihani. Specifically, I examine how Handal articulates a what I call a cultural synthesis approach and explore how her poetry critically interrogates the viability of Samuel Huntington's (1993) "clash of civilizations" thesis.

### **Ancestralism and Maternal Cartographies: Ottoman Period Migrations to Brazil**

Elmaz Abinader's poetry collection *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999) and Mohja Kahf's *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003) are unique among Arab American women poets for their attention to late-nineteenth century Arab migrations to Brazil and the U.S. Abinader (b. 1954) is a second-generation immigrant, born in the U.S. to parents who migrated from what is now the nation-state of Lebanon, while Kahf (b. 1967) is a first-generation immigrant, born in Syria, whose family came to the U.S. in 1971. Both poets portray the earliest period of Arab mass migration to Brazil and America by exploring the impact of political violence that

precipitated Arab exile from Greater Syria at the end of the nineteenth century. Both Abinader and Kahf engage in poetic recovery projects by incorporating the lives of their female ancestors and their descendants into the history of the *Mahjar* period.<sup>48</sup>

In this section, I observe in the work of Abinader and Kahf a response to the phenomenon of Arab migrations that I call ancestralism. Although several Arab American women poets incorporate ancestralism into their work, the strongest examples can be found in Abinader and Kahf's poetry. By ancestralism, I mean the ways in which diasporic Arabs perform emotional and cultural labor to connect their new country to their homeland. The purpose of ancestralism is to heal the trauma of displacement by reconnecting to ancestors. Ancestralism is a personal and familial-focused endeavor that creates the conditions for Arab survival in Western countries.

The concept "maternal cartographies" signifies the method by which both Abinader and Kahf articulate ancestralism. I use the word maternal to denote the ways in which these poems do not necessarily center on mothers (although mothers are present in these poems) but on the maternal as a concept. I use the term "cartographies" to indicate that this poetry draws figurative maps of Arab migrations to North and South America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These maternal cartographies illuminate the ways in which diasporic Arabs experience and portray dislocation from their homelands. Through maternal cartographies, Abinader and Kahf characterize the responses of female ancestors to the circumstances of the violence they endured in the Arab region, and their responses as displaced people in Brazil. These poets use maternal cartographies to reimagine boundaries of

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<sup>48</sup> Except for Afifa Karam, the *Mahjar* period had a dearth of female writers and cultural representations of women's lives.

space and time. They do not use maternal figures to show how “the ancestral homeland is mostly unattainable,” as Carol Fadda-Conrey argues.<sup>49</sup> Rather, maternal cartographies are the method through which these poets attempt to understand the problem of violence in their ancestral homelands, and through which they articulate the process of building new lives in the aftermath of violence. Through maternal cartographies, Abinader and Kahf connect their homelands and the new land through the symbolic healing of intergenerational trauma.

Abinader revisits and reconfigures her personal transnational geography at a historical moment in which Arab Americans began to consider themselves to be “people of color.” Abinader’s *In the Country of My Dreams* was published in 1999, five years after Joe Kadi’s anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. This anthology emerged in the context of U.S. women of color feminist thought and aimed, among other goals, to establish Arab American women as a subject formation analogous to other women of color in the United States, to establish a search for origins that is cognizant of the historical legacy of colonialism, and to emphasize the impact of ancestors on shaping heritage and identity.<sup>50</sup> Abinader’s poetry collection was published two years after Evelyn Shakir’s *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (1997). Shakir describes her book—a collection of auto/biographical essays based on her life and on the lives of her mother, grandmothers, and the larger community of Arab American women—in metaphorical terms as a maternal project. Shakir further characterizes her book as “the

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<sup>49</sup> Fadda-Conrey focuses on how Arab American literature often positions the grandmother as “an authoritative representation of (for the most part) an unattainable ancestral homeland,” pg. 39.

<sup>50</sup> See the introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*.



house our mothers built” in which “all the branches of the family” converge, the “doors thrown open to old and young and middle-aged, Muslim and Christian, Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian, Iraqi, north African, and Arabian, all the kin.”<sup>51</sup>

Abinader’s *In the Country of My Dreams*, by extending the maternal project of Shakir and the women of color feminist project of Kadi, does several types of cultural work. One accomplishment is that Abinader writes women into the history of the *Mahjar* period by reflecting, from the late-twentieth century, on the trauma her ancestors endured in this period and the legacy of this trauma in the late-twentieth century. Abinader’s poetry is a psychologically and politically significant contribution to Arab American literature based on ancestral healing in the context of emerging articulations of transnational woman of color identity formations. Her writings develop an inclusive transnational Arab community that privileges intergenerational relationships. Unlike the *Mahjar* poets, Abinader’s *In the Country of My Dreams* is not concerned with synthesizing Arab and Western cultures; her interest is in using poetry to symbolically heal the traumatic legacies of late-nineteenth century Arab migrations.

In her poem “Pleasure is Freedom-song” (1999), Abinader calls attention to the impact of violence perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks, specifically exploring how this violence motivated her ancestors’ migrations to Brazil and the United States. Beginning in the mid-1870s, more than 95,000 people from the Ottoman province of Greater Syria (now the nation-states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories) left their homelands

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<sup>51</sup> Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*, pg. 196.

and immigrated mostly to the United States and Brazil.<sup>52</sup> Immigration from this region to the United States continued until 1924, when the U.S. severely limited immigration from non-European countries. Abinader's poem considers the same historical conditions as the *Mahjar* writer Abraham Rihbany, who came of age in Ottoman-controlled Greater Syria. In his autobiography, *A Far Journey* (1913), Rihbany describes the reign of Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) as "an iron cage against which our wings beat in vain...nothing was really secure in a land where the ruler maintained a firm hold upon his subjects by promoting divisions and instigating massacres among them."<sup>53</sup> Rihbany's memoir examines his personal experiences during the decline of the Ottoman empire, while Abinader creates a maternal cartography that represents the relationships between the poet, her aunt, and her mother.

Abinader begins "Pleasure is Freedom-song" with an image of her Aunt Azzizy at her home in the United States, standing in her living room, "surrounded by pictures of Christ." In late-nineteenth century, Christians, a religious minority in Greater Syria, comprised an estimated 90 percent of those who left to establish a new life abroad.<sup>54</sup> As Anna Akasoy (2006) observes, "During the two decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century the Levant witnessed a mass exodus unprecedented in its history. Famines, political violence, oppression and in general the severe socio-economic crisis the Ottoman Empire suffered during the last years of its existence drove substantial numbers into exile, above all members

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<sup>52</sup> Most scholars, including Randa Kayyali (2006), estimate the number of Arabs immigrating to the United States during this period at 95,000. Large numbers also immigrated to Brazil during this time.

<sup>53</sup> Rihbany, *A Far Journey*, pg. 156-7.

<sup>54</sup> Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*: "Most who came—90 percent or more—were Christian," pg. 24.

of the Christian confessions.”<sup>55</sup> During the long nineteenth century (1798-1922), as Donald Quataert (2000) writes, the central Ottoman state exerted more power over its subjects and over competing domestic power clusters than ever before in Ottoman history, due to its loss of territory because of domestic rebellions and imperial wars.<sup>56</sup> The central state employed an expanding bureaucracy and military—and a host of other new technologies such as the telegraph, railroads, and photography—to control, weaken, or destroy domestic rivals. In the 1830s, state surveillance systems attained new levels of intrusiveness. Networks of spies, at least in Istanbul, began systematically reporting to state agencies on all manner of conversations among the general public.<sup>57</sup>

Deprived of political rights and suffering from impoverishment, at least 95,000 Ottoman subjects immigrated to the Americas between 1880 and 1924.<sup>58</sup> The vast majority were Christians, and many left after 1909, when conscription of Ottoman Christians was enacted. Abinader’s family migrated from the Ottoman province of Greater Syria, specifically the territory that is now known as the nation-state of Lebanon. As Suad Joseph (2009) points out, “Most Lebanese have histories of migration either internally within Lebanon, regionally in the Arab world, or to non-Arab countries.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, between 1840 and 1870, about one-

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<sup>55</sup> Akasoy, Anna. “Exile and Alienation in the Poetry of the Early Southern Mahjar” in Ottmar Ette and Friederike Pannewick, eds. *ArabAmericas. Literary Entanglements of the American Hemisphere and the Arab World*. Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> See Donald Quataert’s *The Ottoman Empire, 1800-1922*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000, pg. 54.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 63.

<sup>58</sup> See Arab American National Museum – Arab American History:  
<<http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/Arab+American+History.id.150.htm>> Accessed 9 Apr. 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph, Suad. “Geographies of Lebanese Families: Women as Transnationals, Men as Nationals, and Other Problems with Transnationalism.” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*. 5.3 (2009): 120-144, pg. 139.

fourth of the population of Mount Lebanon left the region; and between 1890 and 1920, over one-third of the peasant population of Mount Lebanon migrated to the Americas. During WWI, a British and French blockade (1915-18) of the Syrian and Lebanese coastlines impeded the entry of food and caused the deaths, from starvation, of more than 100,000 people—a quarter of the population.<sup>60</sup>

Imperial violence in the Ottoman province of Greater Syria interceded into the domestic sphere with devastating effects. Abinader describes how her Aunt Azzizy “cried / out to her dead father,” then transitions to a memory of his emigration from Greater Syria: Azzizy “looks into his eyes / as he leaves the village to go to Brazil / afraid she’ll never see him again.” At this point, Abinader situates herself in the scene as an observer who sees Azzizy watching her father leaving, disappearing “into the mist that hides the Turks / who arrive some days later to take / all they own: pots, jewelry, jars of food. / Everything but what was hidden on their bodies.” In this stanza, Abinader asserts a desire to return to the scene of her aunt’s traumatic memory: her father’s decision to leave Greater Syria to escape religious, political, and economic repression amid the collapsing Ottoman Empire.

In *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (2011), Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller reflect on the role of generational histories and genealogies in acts of memory as well as fantasies of return. As they assert, “The desire for return always arises from a need to redress an injustice, one often inflicted upon an entire group of people caused by displacement or dispossession, the loss of home and of family autonomy, the

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<sup>60</sup> See Gualtieri’s Chapter 1, “From Internal to International Migration”; Evelyn Shakir’s *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (1997); and Gregory Orfalea’s *The Arab Americans: A History* (2006).

conditions of expulsion, colonization, and migration.”<sup>61</sup> Abinader’s maternal cartography reimagines the boundaries of time and space by articulating an imaginary return to Greater Syria amidst the moment of her aunt’s father’s migration. By situating herself as a witness, and by dramatizing her aunt’s cries and fears, Abinader articulates a redress to the injustice experienced by her ancestors. Abinader’s positioning of herself in this historical moment is an example of what Nancy K. Miller calls the transpersonal, which “emphasizes the links that connect an individual not only back in time vertically through earlier generations but also in a horizontal, present tense of affinities.”<sup>62</sup> Abinader interacts with the Syrian homeland from the perspective of the late-twentieth century United States. Her poetic imaginary breaks down the boundaries of time and space to engage with her aunt’s traumatic memories during the *Mahjar* period, thereby incorporating her aunt’s memories into the corpus of Arab American literature.

Abinader also develops maternal cartographies through her mother’s memories of her family’s persecution in Ottoman Greater Syria. Abinader’s mother migrated from Greater Syria to the United States and later shared her experiences with her poet daughter, who remembers these stories as vivid flashes of scenes: “My mother’s face closes as her stories unfold: / the one of the uncle buried in a cave, his body / smothered in the mountains of chalk and limestone, / another of a great uncle hung by his feet / while soldiers burned what named them— / photographs, letters, diaries; old books.” Abinader contemplates the trauma of the physical violence and deaths endured by her ancestors under Turkish rule, emphasizing

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<sup>61</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller. *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (2011), pg. 7.

<sup>62</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller. *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (2011), pg. 5.

attacks on their identity as commemorated in the specific artifacts that gave her uncles' lives meaning as individuals. Abinader emphasizes how Turkish soldiers burned her great-uncles' written work: their letters and diaries, items that "named them." The collective social trauma of Turkish repression entailed destroying Christian subjects' writings, depriving them of the ability to name themselves, to make their own meaning both in relationship to themselves, as signified by their diaries, and in relationship with others, as represented by their letters. Abinader observes the importance of writing—specifically the relationship of her ancestors' written work to her own poetry—as an integral part of healing intergenerational trauma. Although Abinader's elucidation of her family's experiences under Turkish rule includes a literal image of excavation, as her mother's memory of her uncle requires excavating the memory of his body from its burial in a cave, these memories are not simply buried beneath the surface. Abinader's reflection on her ancestors' traumatic memories in the Ottoman province of Greater Syria does not position the homeland in the past; rather, it is imbricated in the present and emerges from her mother's memories in a visual tableau embedded in the present moment: the narrative space of the poem.

Abinader's maternal cartographies memorialize the *Mahjar* period by articulating intergenerational trauma as an embodied experience, specifically the impact of this trauma on her mother: "She shivers touching her own belly, the womb / that held children who did not live / and she stares at the once empty arms." Here Abinader shows how her mother's individual psychological trauma of losing her children enables her to understand the collective social trauma of losing her uncles in the context of Turkish political violence. Abinader's attention to the intergenerational and transnational nature of maternal archetypes and memories is important because, as Alison Jaggar's (1989) research on epistemology points

out, emotions are helpful and even necessary to the construction of knowledge. Women's work of emotional nurturance, Jaggar asserts, has given them a special acuity in recognizing hidden emotions and in understanding the genesis of those emotions. Jaggar contends that perspectives from the standpoint of subordinated people—which in part at least is the standpoint of women—is a perspective that offers a less partial and distorted and therefore more reliable view.<sup>63</sup>

Abinader's poem "Pleasure is Freedom-song" contributes several insights to Jaggar's theory on the epistemology of emotions. First, Abinader's maternal cartographies show that poetry is an important source of ascertaining women's epistemological vantage points because poetry illuminates the responses of women to their specific historical circumstances.

Abinader's poetry brings together the viewpoint of the author, who is writing in late-twentieth century America, and the time she addresses: the late-nineteenth century migration of her ancestors from Greater Syria. In this way, Abinader's maternal cartographies emphasize an intergenerational context. Moreover, Abinader's maternal cartographies reveal that what Jaggar calls the "standpoint of the subordinated" can arise from embodied experiences such as maternal loss.

In "Young Women," Abinader creates another type of maternal cartography that reflects on the impact of her mother's exile from Greater Syria. Throughout the poem, Abinader engages in a dialogue with her mother, a process of examination grounded in embodied manifestations of pain, specifically in the hands. The poem explores the legacy of pain as the poet imagines her mother preparing to immigrate to America—"on a steamer trunk

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<sup>63</sup> Jaggar, Alison M. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." *The Feminist Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2013, pg. 487.

/ at twenty-four—two years a bride.” The narrator connects to her mother through an empathetic understanding of the pains associated with domestic labor. At the beginning of the poem, the narrator, while straightening a rug on her floor, notices that her hands are like her mother’s and asks, “What kind of pain made your thumbs split? / Your wedding night, you scrubbed the house on your hands and knees.” This experience of physical pain creates a bond between the narrator and her mother, and the poem articulates the nature of their relationship as a process of mutual effort in reconstructing their ancestral legacy:

We examine each other’s lives, scratch  
at the scar of hope left by our own fingers,  
not able to distinguish one line from the next,  
lost in the tissue of legacy, one hand breaking it open;  
the other sewing it closed. Out of respect for survival,  
we do not speak or signal, but run our fingers  
quietly on the road maps leading us away from here.

In this passage, the poet illuminates the reciprocity involved in understanding her relationship with her mother: they examine “each other’s lives” as a process of mutual understanding. This understanding comes through reflecting on the pain of intergenerational trauma, which, as the phrase “the scar of hope” indicates, is inextricably linked to hope. Abinader uses an image of a scar to show that the mother and daughter learn how to mend their pain. Importantly, this healing process is nonverbal—“we do not speak or signal”—but instead based in an embodied experience of both mother and daughter using their scar-bearing, yet healed, fingers to physically touch the “road maps” that have led both of them away from their homeland.

Although Abinader’s maternal cartographies emphasize the intergenerational transmission of physical pain from mother to daughter, Abinader does not remain fixated only on pain. She concludes the poem by expressing her desire to give her mother educational opportunities as part of a liberatory process. The narrator searches her mother’s trunk “for the



signs of a young woman,” but is not able to find any reading material, so she wants to give her mother a book. Abinader addresses her mother directly: “I want to give you one made / of rice paper or send you to Rio / where you can dance. Where you can / wave your hands in the air and no one / can capture them.” Here, Abinader emphasizes her desire to change the course of her mother’s life by either providing her with educational access, or by sending her mother to a new location—Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—home to the largest number of diasporic Arabs. The image of her mother’s hands waving in the air creates a visual image of liberation, illuminating Abinader’s desire to heal her mother from the pains of domestic labor.

Abinader articulates a maternal cartography as a process of transcending pain through the imagination. She resolves her mother’s traumatic experiences by imagining her mother with educational opportunities and by envisioning her mother—liberated from the pain of domestic labor—in a new location: Rio de Janeiro, a reimagination of both spatial and temporal boundaries. Through her emphasis on the role of language and literacy in creating imagined possibilities for her mother’s life, Abinader’s ancestralism portrays the process of healing from intergenerational trauma and is entirely focused on reimagining ancestral relationships. Abinader’s maternal cartographies have both psychological and political significance as an affirmation of transnational ancestral relationships in the context of late-twentieth century U.S. women of color political consciousness.

Abinader’s exploration of the traumas endured by her ancestors in Ottoman-controlled Greater Syria and their resettlement in Brazil are taken up by Mohja Kahf in her 2003 poetry collection *E-mails from Scheherazad*. This collection, published in the United States shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, is often read as testament, as Suaad Muhammad Alqahtani (2017) puts it, to the “unending struggles faced by Muslims to fit in the American

community.”<sup>64</sup> While Kahf does indeed reflect on Muslim American subjectivity in the context of increasing discrimination and surveillance, lesser studied are Kahf’s historical poems, which develop a transnational *Mashriqi* perspective that considers her origins in Damascus, Syria and emigration to America as a young child in 1971. Kahf’s book, published in 2003, followed in the wake of two important contributions to Arab American feminist scholarship. The first, Ella Shohat’s edited collection *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (2001), discusses a “transnational imaginary that places in synergistic relations diverse narratives offering prospects of critical community with minorities who have “analogical structure of feelings.”<sup>65</sup> The following year, in 2002, Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber began a series of conversations which led to a 2005 special journal issue and a 2010 anthology, *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*.<sup>66</sup> This anthology, as the editors write, “belongs to the tradition of Arab and Arab American knowledge production” that “engages in a ‘theory in the flesh’ or knowledge derived from lived experiences and producing critical lenses through which we see and analyze the social and political world.”<sup>67</sup> These editors state that the authors in this volume aim to build alliances between Arab and Arab American feminists, Native feminists, U.S. feminists of color, and diasporic feminists from the global South. Moreover,

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<sup>64</sup> Alqahtani, Suaad Muhammad. “Arab-American Poetic Resistance in E-mails from Scheherazad.” *Studies in Language and Literature*. 14.5 (2017): 19-25. See pg. 20.

<sup>65</sup> Shohat, Ella. *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, pg. 32.

<sup>66</sup> See the special issue “Arab and Arab American Feminist Perspectives” in the *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* (2005) and Abdulhadi, Rabab, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, editors. *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Abdulhadi, Rabab, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, editors. *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2010, pg. xxx.

book aims to “make clear how the geographic boundaries between Arab homelands and diasporas are fluid and overlapping.”<sup>68</sup> This sociopolitical milieu provides a context in which to analyze Kahf’s historical poems.

Kahf’s “The Skaff Mother Tells the Story” and “Word from the Younger Skaff”—both of which trace the history of Ottoman Turks’ conscription of men from Greater Syria to fight wars on behalf of the languishing Ottoman Empire—might not, upon a first reading, seem relevant to the late-twentieth and twenty-first century. Yet Kahf’s historical poems affirm a transnational *Mashriqi* subjectivity at a time of increasing polarizations between the U.S. and the Arab region. Kahf’s work, like Abinader’s, engages in a process of poetic recovery to write the stories of women and their descendants into the history of the *Mahjar* period. However, unlike Abinader’s historical poems, Kahf configures an Arab male subjectivity that both humanizes Arab men and establishes a genealogy of Arab male ancestry in the Western hemisphere. Kahf does not follow the *Mahjar* poets’ inquiry into the question of whether a philosophical synthesis between the West and the Arab region is possible. Instead, Kahf’s historical poems evince an eminently pragmatic approach to the phenomenon of Arab migrations. Kahf underscores ancestral Arab culture as a basis for survival in Western countries.

While Abinader’s poems locate the speaker in the late-twentieth century United States, Kahf’s poem “The Skaff Mother Tells the Story” (2001) is a sestina written from the perspective of a woman who helped her sons to flee Greater Syria, thus avoiding Turkish conscription to fight the Balkan War (1912). The sestina form—comprised of six stanzas of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pg. xxxv.

six lines followed by a tercet (a stanza of three lines)—is structured through a recurrent pattern of the words that end each line. Kahf chooses the following end words: bundle, wool, survive, away, war, and boys, reflecting the central themes involved in her evocation of maternal cartographies. Kahf’s ancestralism, like Abinader’s approach, develops maternal cartographies through the mother’s first-person point of view.

At the beginning of the poem, Kahf establishes the historical context: “The *Safar Barlik* had begun—the Balkan War—And the Turks were conscripting all our boys, / Wasting their lives.” Through the first-person point of perspective, Kahf describes the mother’s desire to save her sons’ lives by preparing for their migration. Evelyn Shakir (1997) documents the struggles of people during this period, when women in the Ottoman province of Greater Syria bore the brunt of caring for their families.<sup>69</sup> Like Abinader, Kahf portrays women’s caretaking labor—the mother wraps a bundle for her sons with “mincemeat pies, a scarf of wool”—undertaken amidst Turkish violence: “Turks stormed our homes, bayoneted the bundled / Carpets to find the hidden sons, take them to war.” Kahf utilizes the sestina form to repeat the image of the bundle, thereby drawing the connection between the bundled resources she prepared for her sons, and the sons themselves hidden in bundled carpets—both are desperate acts aimed at achieving the most basic of maternal goals: survival. Kahf illuminates the specific type of violence attending military conscription in this period: political violence interceding into the domestic space. The boys were saved by a “cousin who knew a merchant who exported wool / And had a ship in port. They hid and sailed away.”

After her husband’s death from cholera, the woman is left with her thoughts,

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<sup>69</sup> *Bint Arab*, pg. 32

wondering about her sons' fate: "are they cared for, have they survived / The sea, the tides of life, these years?" With no one to care for, the mother has "spun forty years' worth" of wool. Over this period, she has contemplated her sons' experiences: "Their lives' small bundle / Must have wasted smaller. Word stopped. We survived / On scraps, rumors passed across the ocean about my boys." Here Kahf connects the survival of her sons with the mother's survival. Left behind, in a community of similarly situated mothers, the narrator of the poem equates her son's physical survival with her own emotional survival. Ultimately, the mother relates her individual psychological trauma to a collective social trauma experienced by many people in Ottoman-controlled Greater Syria: "We sent them away, / I swear, to keep them with us; they were only boys. / Fourteen and fifteen is too young to suffer war." The emotional cost is devastating, and tragically ironic: the mother's desperation for her son's survival meant that she would have to suffer the loss of her sons. At the end of the poem, the mother reflects on the "wool" of her heart, which "is threadbare after all these years and wars." She is left to "Keep in a bundle the names of my boys / *Survive*, we told them, and sent them unthinkably away." Through the voice of one mother, Kahf documents the struggles of a generation of women left behind in Greater Syria.

While conventional immigration narratives tend to focus on Arabs' lives after leaving the homeland, Kahf's poem centers on the lives of those who never left Greater Syria. Renate Papke (2008) discusses how poverty and war force women to practice different forms of mothering. When men are forced to join the international labor force or the army, they abandon their families for long intervals or forever."<sup>70</sup> In Kahf's poem, the woman's husband is not forced to join a labor force or army; he dies of cholera, while her sons end up in Brazil,

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<sup>70</sup> *Poems at the Edge of Differences: Mothering in New English Poetry by Women* (2008), pg. 37.

one of the major locations of Arabs who left their homelands. Kahf's documentation of one mother's response to sending her sons away is an example of ancestralism produced through a maternal cartography that connects women in Greater Syria to other regions of the world where their children established new lives. Although Kahf depicts the emotional hardship of the mother, to some extent relying on the "*mater dolorosa*" (mother of sorrows) archetype (Cooke 1996), she also portrays the mother's active engagement in her son's survival, which requires an awareness of opportunities in Brazil and an imaginative engagement in her sons' lives there after fleeing the Syrian homeland. What is important here—at the time of the poem's publication in a post-September 11, 2001 context—is that Kahf humanizes the Arab son and situates him a transnational Arab community with a long history in North America.

Kahf reimagines spatial and temporal boundaries in the son's response to the mother, which is articulated in her poem "Word from the Younger Skaff" (2001). Kahf uses the form of the son's letter to reflect on ancestral transmission from a son in diaspora to his mother, left behind in the Syrian homeland. The maternal cartography of this poem moves, as he writes, "like the sea voyage / from Beirut to Brazil." From Brazil, the adult son—"fifty-five now, married"—writes to tell his mother about his physical and emotional journeys, specifically his process of healing from trauma. Kahf begins the poem with the son's description of the artifacts his parents gave him: "The Ottoman liras / father gave us and the mincemeat pies / you wrapped in a woolen bundle / were everything I and my brother / had from home. They had to last a lifetime." Kahf emphasizes survival, both physical and emotional, as the son is aware that he will never see his parents again. The artifacts—both the father's Ottoman liras and the mother's mincemeat pies—fixate, for him, the survival of his parents in his memory. Kahf writes that the son's hunger "still lurches" inside of him, "like the sea voyage from

Beirut to Brazil.” Here, Kahf depicts how the son’s memories of the sea voyage are still lodged in his body, and how the hunger he feels provides a connection between his homeland and his forced resettlement in Brazil. Kahf’s ancestralism collapses the spatial boundaries between Beirut and Brazil, and the temporal boundaries between the time of the son’s departure from Beirut and his adult life in diaspora.

Throughout the poem, Kahf underscores the son’s literal and figurative hunger for his homeland by showing how his ancestry becomes concretized in domestic labor, specifically through the preparation of food with his daughter: “My little girl knows how / to make your mincemeat pies. / I described them to her and we mixed / flour in yeast in different measures, / laughing at failures until we got it.” Here, the son’s active engagement with his daughter in the process of remembering—and eventually successfully reproducing his mother’s mincemeat pies—links the memory of his mother’s caretaking labor in Ottoman Syria to his life in Brazil. The son’s collaborative effort with his daughter to produce mincemeat pies is itself a maternal cartography, one that connects the memory of his mother in Greater Syria to his daughter in Brazil. Kahf creates a maternal cartography that is inextricably tied to ancestral relationships. The son’s wife is not able to learn how to make the mincemeat pies, as she “cooked only dishes / she’d learned from her own *avó*.” Here, Kahf indicates through the Portuguese word “*avó*,” meaning grandmother, that the son married a Brazilian woman. In the last stanza of the poem, Kahf has the son address his mother with in Portuguese—“*O mãe*”—which shows how his forced dislocation affected his linguistic patterns:

Wherever you are *O mãe*  
I bet it fills your belly to know  
there’s a twelve-year-old Brazilian girl  
with your hair and eyes, who,  
though she’s never seen

you or your kitchen fire, makes  
Syrian meat pies proper,  
baked golden and sealed  
with your same thumbpress,  
precise as an Ottoman coin.

In this stanza, the son, writing from Brazil after his mother's death, memorializes his mother by emphasizing the continuation of her heritage through her granddaughter. Kahf evokes several elements of this maternal cartography: geographical dislocation, ancestral heritage, and the importance of maintaining relationships through acts of domestic labor. The son's act of preparing food with his daughter is a transmission of his mother's caretaking ritual that was severed when the mother had to send her sons to Brazil to escape Ottoman conscription.

Kahf's rendering of an Arab man's caretaking ritual revises Nathalie Handal's observations about the role of food in Arab American women's poetry. Handal (2006) argues that food has been one of the most powerful cultural transmitters enabling Arab Americans to preserve their roots.<sup>71</sup> She observes how Arab American women poets use food to define Arab societies, people, and the writers themselves. It is often through food that these women writers experience Arab culture, become Arab, and pass this culture down to their children. Although the preparation of food has often been seen as taking freedom away from women, Arab American women writers have viewed being in the kitchen as liberating instead of being oppressive, as offering avenues of creativity instead of being confining. They have used food

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<sup>71</sup> Handal, Nathalie. "Our Roots in the Mezze: The Politics of Food and Arab-American Women Poets." *ArabAmericas. Literary Entanglements of the American Hemisphere and the Arab World*, edited by Ottmar Ette and Friederike Pannewick. Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 2006, pg. 138.



rhetoric as a vehicle to create a new space where the kitchen is a place of expression, personal and cultural, a place of self-development and enrichment. Arab American women view food as an important source of roots, identity, strength and self-assertiveness.

What is unique about Kahf's interest in food is that a male figure performs the domestic labor that maintains ancestral connections; the meat pies are transplanted from their place of origin in Syria and survive in Brazil as a legacy of his mother's life and work. The son's active engagement with his daughter in the process of remembering, and eventually successfully reproducing, his mother's mincemeat pies, links the memory of his mother's caretaking labor in Ottoman Syria to his life in Brazil. The son's collaborative effort with his daughter to produce mincemeat pies reimagines the boundaries between the two places, enabling them to exist simultaneously.

In Kahf's formulation, responses to violence are inextricably linked to reproducing maternal relationships through cooking—not only the process of cooking, but also the act of writing about cooking. Through a letter, Kahf illumines the son's process of healing from trauma: cooking resurrects an ancestral caretaking ritual that he participates in with his daughter. Kahf's creation of a maternal male figure unfixes the maternal from its association with biological female sex by showing how men can also perform maternal roles. This poem's 2003 publication in the U.S., amidst the increased discrimination and surveillance, particularly of Muslim men, provides an important articulation of a humanized male subjectivity with a long history in the Western hemisphere. While Kahf and Abinader do not examine, in these poems, the philosophical question of whether a synthesis between Western and Arab cultures is possible, the poetry of Nathalie Handal takes up this issue, and it is to her

poetry on Palestinian exile that I now turn as a source of insight into another poetic response to the phenomenon of Arab migrations to Western countries.

### **Cultural Synthesis and Transnational Palestinian Exile in the Poetry of Nathalie Handal**

Large migrations of Palestinians to the United States began in 1948 when the U.S. Congress relaxed quotas and enabled 80,000 Arabs, most of whom were Palestinians, to immigrate.<sup>72</sup> Palestinian American women poets—including Nathalie Handal, Naomi Shihab Nye, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Deema Shehabi, Suheir Hammad, and Hala Alyan—represent nuanced perspectives on the experiences of Palestinians in diaspora. Hammad, Shehabi, and Alyan primarily attempt to recover memories of Palestine and to articulate Palestinian American identity formations. While Handal is interested in these topics, her work is more cosmopolitan in scope. Although like Handal, Naomi Shihab Nye considers her travels—mostly to the Arab region and to Latin America—Handal’s poetry concentrates more on transnational cultural exchanges between regions, not only between Palestine and America, but also the Caribbean, England, and France.

Handal was born in Haiti, in 1969, to Palestinians exiled from their homeland due to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. She defines herself as a “Bethlehemite—who is also French and American—with Latin American, African and Asian influences,” and as a “Mediterranean who is also very much a city person.”<sup>73</sup> Although she has lived in several

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<sup>72</sup> See Michael Suleiman, *Arabs in America: Building Toward a New Future*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.

<sup>73</sup> From an interview with Nathalie Handal, by Rewa Zeinati, published in *Sukoon Magazine*, 13 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.sukoonmag.com/responsive/interview-with-nathalie-handal/>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2016.

cities in France, the Arab region, the United Kingdom, and the United States, currently she divides her time between Paris and New York City. When reflecting on her exile, Handal explains, “I don’t have a mother tongue. I grew up speaking many languages, and these different languages have slipped into my English. My English is cross-fertilized with French, Spanish, Arabic, Creole...I love the idea of a bridge of words, a bridge of poems connecting us...showing us what it means to be human.”<sup>74</sup> Handal composes her work in English and incorporates French, Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Creole, and, to a lesser extent Russian and Sanskrit words.

When reading Handal’s poetry, it is useful to place her poetry into conversation with her contemporary, the Palestinian scholar Edward Said who in “Reflections on Exile” (2002) distinguishes exiles from refugees, expatriates, and émigrés. The term émigré broadly refers to anyone who emigrates to a new country, while the word expatriate signifies one who voluntarily lives in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons. The concept of a refugee, Said argues, is “a creation of the twentieth-century state” and suggests “large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance.”<sup>75</sup> In contrast, Said states that exile is “an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.”<sup>76</sup> As Said writes, “true exile is a condition of terminal loss” in which “exiles are cut off from their roots,

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<sup>74</sup> From an interview with Nathalie Handal, by Kaitlyn Seay, published in *Wild River Review*, <http://www.wildriverreview.com/lit/poetry/love-and-strange-horses-the-freedom-of-poetry/>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Said, Edward. “Reflections on Exile.” *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002, pg. 137.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

their land, their past.”<sup>77</sup> The role of exiled poets and writers, he contends, is to lend dignity to a condition “legislated to deny dignity.”<sup>78</sup> Said argues that “exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives out an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider.”<sup>79</sup>

Handal’s poetry complicates Said’s understanding of exile by showing a different perspective on the nature of exile. Although Handal, like Said, discusses the misery and stigma of exile, she also embraces traveling as a means of establishing peaceful cross-cultural interactions. It is important to emphasize that Handal’s ability to travel is a privilege that is not available to most Palestinians. Despite this fact, her writings are significant because it documents experiences of exile through engagements with a wide range of geographical spaces. In this section, I read Handal’s poem “Amrika” from her collection *The Lives of Rain* (2005) as a revival of the cultural synthesis approach articulated in the early-twentieth century *Mahjar* (migrant) literary movement, applied to the sociocultural circumstances of the early twenty-first century. In contemplating how Handal’s work revitalizes the central philosophical themes of the *Mahjar* tradition, I examine the ideas of Ameen Rihani, the main figure of this literary movement. As Wail Hassan (2011) points out, Rihani, like other *Mahjar* writers, envisioned a Hegelian dynamic that would eventually blend east and west into a higher synthesis of civilizations. Rihani attempted to develop a transnational pan-Arab identity that, as Jacob Berman (2012) describes, “blends Orient and Occident, modern and traditional,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pg. 143-4.

Islamic and Christian, America and Arabia to create *Mahjar* or migrant identity.”<sup>80</sup> Rihani accepted the Orientalist distinction between East and West, but rejected its historical immutability in favor of a conception of East and West as values and attitudes of mind that are not geographically determined and which can, therefore, circulate among cultures over long historical periods.<sup>81</sup> Rihani’s cultural synthesis is based on combining the positive values of Arab cultural heritage with the positive values of Western civilization. Ultimately, his writings developed an Arab-Western cultural synthesis that could be implemented in the Arab region.<sup>82</sup>

Handal’s cultural synthesis approach revisits the *Mahjar* tradition. In contrast to Rihani’s interest in integrating Arab and Western civilizations to transform the Arab region, Handal documents the process of a diasporic Palestinian who attempts to integrate an Arab identity into a Western context. Handal does not aim to transform Western sociopolitical structures, but to synthesize the strongest elements of both Arab and Western cultures to generate the conditions for Arab survival in Western countries. Handal’s articulation of cultural synthesis acknowledges the trauma of displacement while also constructing a future that does not reject her cultural, linguistic, or spiritual heritage. The first-person narrator of “Amrika” documents a yearning for a cultural synthesis but she is hindered in this pursuit by the complex sociopolitical circumstances of the Palestinian diasporic population.

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<sup>80</sup> Berman, Jacob Rama. *American Arabesque: Arabs and Islam in the Nineteenth Century Imaginary*. New York: NYU Press, 2012, pg. 29.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> In the final section of *The Book of Khalid*, the narrator makes an explicit call for removing Turkish control and building an Arab Empire grounded in an “up-to-date Koran.” See pg. 299-303.

Handal's "Amrika" (an Arabic pronunciation for America) from *The Lives of Rain* (2005)—a long poem comprised of eight sections—explores the possibility of cultural synthesis in several locations: France, the West Indies, England, and the United States. In her descriptions of France, Handal describes of the impact of exile as a "tyranny," and the experience of being a Palestinian in France as a difficult one; the differences in language, culture, and lived experience have made her conscious of being a minority in French society. The year of her collection's publication in 2005 is significant because in October and November of that year, a series of riots occurred in the suburbs of Paris and other French cities. The riots took the form of car-burning and fighting, with groups of youths (mostly of immigrant descent and jobless) confronting the police.<sup>83</sup> Many scholars have demonstrated that the riots were a result of a process of ghettoization has been at work in France for over twenty years—a consequence, to a significant extent, of exclusionary processes generated by poor housing, educational, and labor opportunities for immigrants.<sup>84</sup>

While Handal's poem does not comment directly upon the 2005 French riots, she does depict the complexities of life for immigrants in France. She refers, for instance, to the journey "from Jaffa to Marseille" and wonders how one can "begin to understand the difference between *Sabaah el Khayr* and *bonjour*, / the difference between the city of light and black-outs." Here Handal highlights the linguistic and socioeconomic disparities between

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<sup>83</sup> Laurent Mucchielli, "Autumn 2005: A Review of the Most Important Riot in the History of French Contemporary Society." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35.5 (2009): 231-51.

<sup>84</sup> See Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Michael J. Balz, "The October Riots in France: A Failed Immigration Policy or the Empire Strikes Back?" *International Migration* 44.2 (2006): 23-34; Koff, Harlan. "Understanding 'La Contagion': Power, Exclusion and Urban Violence in France and the United States." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35.5 (2009): 771-90; Dominique Duprez, "Urban Rioting as an Indicator of Crisis in the Integration Model for Ethnic Minority Youth in France." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35.5 (2009): 753-70.

Arab—particularly Palestinian—and French culture, contrasting the stable living conditions in France with the “black-outs” of the Palestinian territories. Although Handal seems to desire a cultural synthesis between her Arab heritage and French culture, she acknowledges the complexity of living in France as a Palestinian woman. For instance, she quotes a line of dialogue—“*C’est comme cela, tout change habibti,*”—“That’s how everything changes, darling,” yet she observes that “our names stay the same, / our eyes remain, our memory.” She articulates, in French, an understanding that the experience of diaspora has produced a change, yet there are still aspects of Palestinian identity that remain constant. For Handal, her sense of identity as a Palestinian is amplified by living in different cultural surroundings. She locates her identity in Arabic language and culture, as well as in her memories.

Nevertheless, Handal attempts to integrate her Palestinian identity into French culture: “I sing *Inshallah* in French as I walk les banlieues Parisienne.” Here she uses French to state an Arabic expression for “God willing” as she walks the banlieue Parisienne—the Paris suburbs, which Brinda J. Mehta (2014) describes as “third-world” settlements and a “colonial residue” in a “permanent state of crisis.”<sup>85</sup> Although Handal attempts a cultural synthesis of Palestinians in France, her poem is not optimistic for this possibility, given the exclusion of many Palestinians from French society. However, in her travels to the West Indies, Handal is more hopeful about the possibility of cultural synthesis. She discusses, for example, her appreciation of “the Kreyol”—a French-based creole which includes elements of Carib and African languages; the language is itself a cultural synthesis.

Whereas in the West Indies, Handal’s poetry articulates the possibility of cultural

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<sup>85</sup> Brinda J. Mehta, *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices Against Violence*. New York: Routledge, 2014, pg. 151.

synthesis through language, her poetry about New England discusses the difficulties of cultural synthesis. In New England, Handal notices “the difference between where we are from / and where we are now.” The location of New England facilitates her awareness of her father’s grief, which she describes as “the years behind a broken door...only later do I hear the Arabic / in his footsteps.” The stark differences in the physical environment of New England, in contrast to her native Palestine, makes Handal aware of her father’s grief over losing his homeland. She depicts her father’s heritage as following him while he travels; it is a grief that breaks down barriers of space and time. Although the narrator is in Boston, walking “through Fenway Park, through / streets with names that escape me,” she is cognizant of her Palestinian heritage, hearing “their stories of sea / their cries for a stranger’s grief. / I understand—no one can bear partings.” Handal describes the feeling of being in exile—“time looks different now, / it wears another hat and owns a car, / and we are comfortable in foreign tongues / but the music that continues to move us / is a melody from the east— / an opening of whispers in our shivers.” In her travels to New England, she experiences stark differences in the physical environment, in contrast to her native Palestine; these differences make her aware of her father’s grief over losing his homeland. Handal’s poetry about New England reveals that although Palestinians in exile have settled in America to a certain extent, they are still impacted by the Arab region from which they came. Cultural synthesis, though difficult, is not impossible in New England, as evidenced by her discussion of being comfortable speaking in “foreign tongues.”

Handal meditates on the limits and possibilities of cultural synthesis at the end of the poem, when she travels to England and New York. In the seventh section, “Incantations,” Handal discusses reading “Yeats and Beckett” while “smoking *sheesha* / on Edgeware Road.”



In these lines, both English and Arabic culture exist in a synthesis. Handal describes London as a place “where I came to know / the silent rain inside of me / as the Thames had come / to the rhythm of my breathing.” This experience makes her aware of her calm physiological state, which indicates that her experiences in London are not entirely negative.

In the eighth and final section, “Debke in New York,” Handal presents another configuration of cultural synthesis. As she writes: “I wear jeans, tennis shoes, walk Broadway, pass Columbia, / read Said and Twain, / wonder why we are obsessed with difference, / our need to change the other?” These lines emphasize cultural synthesis as a means by which Handal is able to function in America. She questions the utility of an obsession with difference—with the “need” to change others—and finds ways to embrace both Arab and American cultures, specifically by exposing herself to the ideas of Said and Twain. Another presentation of cultural synthesis occurs when the poet discusses going to “the tip of the Hudson River,” where she “recites a verse by Ibn Arabi / and between subway rides, / to that place I now call home,” listens “to Abdel Halim and Nina Simone / hunt for the small things / I have lost inside of myself— / and at the corner of Bleeker and Mercer / though a window with faded Arabic letters / see a New York *debke*...” At the end of the poem, she imagines that she has found her “way home.” In these lines, Handal stresses the role of the poetic imagination in facilitating the peaceful existence of Palestinians in the United States. The poem illustrates how cultural synthesis functions, specifically by focusing on how an individual can blend elements of both Arab and Western culture—poetry, music, languages, and dance.

Handal’s poetry is acutely conscious of the problem of violence in the Palestinian territories from which her family escaped, and how these memories of violence affect her and

her family, haunting her while she lives in exile and travels to different places. Yet Handal's work also contributes a different perspective about the nature of exile, in contrast to Said's formulation, who views only the negative affects associated with exile. Handal's poetry develops a more nuanced outlook on exile—a cultural synthesis—as she emphasizes both the positive and the negative affects associated with being in exile. Handal is unique in this approach because most Palestinian American women poets meditate on the legacy of trauma. Handal's perception of exile is not a life of banishment, as Said discusses, but rather is a commitment to embracing traveling to other countries, and in the process, being exposed to different languages and cultures. This immersion amplifies her understanding of her Palestinian heritage due to its contrast with the new environments in which she travels. Handal's poetry creates a space for forging a path forward for Palestinians in exile, who live as minorities in a different culture, but one that enables the possibility for a peaceful integration of cultural elements such as language, literature, music, and food.

Handal's cultural synthesis approach to the experience of diasporic Palestinians in the United States aligns with contemporaneous sociological research on Palestinian American women. Louise Cainkar's study of immigrant Palestinian women in the United States reports that Palestinian women "carry the burden of statelessness on their backs and do not forget it, no matter what good fortune they may find outside of Palestine."<sup>86</sup> As Cainkar puts it, "Palestinian pain is a communal pain" which is exacerbated by not feeling accepted in the United States.<sup>87</sup> However, Cainkar found that the Palestinian women in America also felt that

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<sup>86</sup> See Cainkar, Louise. *Coping with Tradition, Change and Alienation: Palestinian Muslim Women in the US*. 1988. Northwestern U, PhD dissertation, pg. 52.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 54.

that their lives were substantially better than their mother's lives because of more education, less time spent on household chores, more time spent with husbands, and fewer children.<sup>88</sup> While very few women in Cainkar's study expressed a desire to change places with American women, the Palestinian women in America discussed a wish to integrate the best elements of both cultures. As one woman put it, "We should take the good things from each culture and get rid of the bad."<sup>89</sup>

Handal—a descendant of exiled Palestinians who has been exposed both to Western and Arab cultures, languages, and histories—represents her experiences of exile in Western geographical spaces by expressing her trauma, estrangement, alienation, and minority status. Yet Handal also documents her agency by writing about her travels and her aim to establish peaceful cross-cultural interactions. Handal's poetic articulation of cultural synthesis considers the late-twentieth century and early twenty-first centuries. However, it is also important to study her poetry about an earlier historical period—medieval and early modern Andalucía—because this poetry illuminates the historical precedents for contemporary discourses of migration.

### **Interrogating the "Clash of Civilizations" Thesis: Andalucía as a Historical Precedent**

Nathalie Handal's 2012 collection *Poet in Andalucía* is unique and important in contemporary Arab American cultural expression. Handal's transnational experiences—

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pg. 51.

particularly her part-year residency in France and her extended travels in Spain—have attuned her to the complexities associated with Arab migrations in Europe. Handal’s interest in Europe is a departure from most Arab American women poets who write about their status as minority subjects in American society, recollecting incidents of discrimination and promoting what might be called ancestral pride.<sup>90</sup> In addition, Handal’s collection expands the historical scope of Arab American literature—most of which centers on late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century issues—by representing longer scale historical trajectories.

Specifically, Handal writes about medieval and early modern Europe, investigating interactions between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish populations. Her poems document alternating periods of Christian and Islamic rule and implicitly engage with Samuel Huntington’s (1993) “clash of civilizations” thesis, which predicts that conflicts between Islam and the West will increase because the West’s attempt to universalize values and institutions, and maintain military superiority, has generated intense resentment within Muslim communities. Huntington also posits that Muslim population growth has generated large numbers of unemployed and dissatisfied youth that become recruits to Islamist causes, among other factors.<sup>91</sup>

Handal published her collection *Poet in Andalucía* in 2012, the year after the Syrian refugee crisis began. However, large migrations of Arabs into Europe have been occurring since the end of WWII, when mostly *Maghribi* men and women—recruited as “guest

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<sup>90</sup> See Elmaz Abinader (1999, 2014); Leila Halaby (2012); Suheir Hammad (1996, 2005); Mohja Kahf (2003); Pauline Kaldas (2006); D.H. Melhem (1972); Deema Shehabi (2011).

<sup>91</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996. See pages 207-11.

workers”—moved north across the Mediterranean in large numbers.<sup>92</sup> Currently, fifty-five percent of international migrants from the Arab world live outside of the region; the majority live in Europe. The following countries are home to ninety percent of current migrants from Arab countries: France, the United States, Spain, Italy, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, and Belgium.<sup>93</sup> Currently, there are approximately two million Muslims in Spain, approximately 4% of the country’s population.<sup>94</sup>

Handal’s collection *Poet in Andalucía*, as she explains in her preface, recreates—in reverse—the journey of poet Federico García Lorca, who traveled from Spain to New York. Eighty years after Lorca’s journey to New York, which resulted in his collection *Poet in New York* (1940), Handal went to Spain to write *Poet in Andalucía*. In this collection, Handal observes “the persistent tragedy of otherness” and “acknowledges a refusal to remain in that stark darkness” by searching “for the possibility of human coexistence.”<sup>95</sup> Her intention to explore the “possibility of human coexistence” poses a challenge to Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis which denies the possibility of multiculturalism. Handal’s poetry in this collection—which she calls “a meditation on the past and the present”—interrogates whether multiculturalism is possible, or whether multiculturalism is a phenomenon that exists when one civilization begins to decline, and another begins the process of arising to dominance. Handal explains that she wanted to “weave hope into the poems, staying true to [her] vision

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<sup>92</sup> Cainkar, Louise. “Global Arab World Migrations and Diasporas.” *The Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2013, pp. 126-65. See pg. 136.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 135.

<sup>94</sup> “Los musulmanes aumentan en España en 300.000 en cinco años.” *El País*. 10 April 2016. [https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2016/04/10/actualidad/1460313231\\_421587.html](https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2016/04/10/actualidad/1460313231_421587.html). Accessed 25 Oct. 2017.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

while also understanding the fundamental forces that continue to lead us into conflict states instead of conciliatory ones.”<sup>96</sup> Her book “renders in poetry a region that seems to hold the pulse of our earth, where all of our stories assemble. It is a meditation on what has changed, and what insists on remaining the same, on the mysteries that trouble and intrigue us.”<sup>97</sup>

Handal takes as her subject Andalucía, a region located in the south of the Iberian Peninsula which was conquered by the Umayyad Caliphate in 711. Andalucía, known in Arabic as *Al-Andalus*, was profoundly influenced by over seven centuries of rule by Muslim caliphates and emirates. This region, as Handal writes, has “always been the place where racial, ethnic, and religious forces converge and contend, where Islamic, Judaic, and Christian traditions remain a mirror of a past that is terrible and beautiful.”<sup>98</sup> The region of Andalucía is important because it provides a historical precedent for relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Handal ruminates on the interstices of these religions in medieval and early modern Andalucía.

She explains the concept of *convivencia* which in Spanish means “coexistence” as a time when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived in relative harmony in Islamic Spain. There are numerous debates surrounding notions of tolerance in *Al-Andalus* during the Middle Ages. However, Handal emphasizes that one cannot deny the rich and prosperous cultural and artistic life that existed during that period—a life that these communities created together.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> From an interview with Nathalie Handal, by Rewa Zeinati, published in *Sukoon Magazine*, 13 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.sukoonmag.com/responsive/interview-with-nathalie-handal/>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Handal, Nathalie. *Poet in Andalucía*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2012, pg. vii.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> From an interview with Nathalie Handal by Rewa Zeinati, published in *Sukoon Magazine*, 13 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.sukoonmag.com/responsive/interview-with-nathalie-handal/>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2016.

Although this period is sometimes cited as an ideal example of interfaith harmony, it was fairly short and was supplanted by the tensions, prejudices, and ill treatment of minorities by both Muslims and Christians that have often characterized relationships between these communities.<sup>100</sup> By the 10th century the Iberian Peninsula was beset by hostilities between the Christian kingdom of León in the north and the larger Muslim *Al-Andalus* in the south.<sup>101</sup> Beginning in the 10th century, the Christians of northern Spain began the *Reconquista*, the reconquest of Spain for Christendom. In 1492, the fall of Granada put an end to Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula.

Handal lived in Andalucía to write the collection, and her experiences as a Palestinian in exile reflect Edward Said's observation that, while "most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal."<sup>102</sup> Said develops the concept of contrapuntal analysis in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which scrutinizes the response to Western dominance which culminated in decolonization movements. Specifically, he focuses on novels, an important cultural formation of modern Western empires connected to the expanding colonies of Britain and France. Said explains his choice to concentrate primarily on novels because "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized peoples use to assert their own identity and the existence of

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<sup>100</sup> See Smith, Jane. "Muslim-Christian Relations: Historical and Contemporary Realities." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015, and Darío Fernández-Morera, *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*. Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993, pg. xiii.

their own history.”<sup>103</sup> Said’s contrapuntal analysis, as he makes clear here, distinguishes between colonial powers and colonized territories. Yet his theory does not account for geographical spaces in which there was not a clear separation between a Western imperial power and the native inhabitants of a colonized region. The case of Andalucía is one such example—a region characterized by intervening periods of Christian and Islamic rule.

In this section, I analyze how Handal contributes to Said’s concept of contrapuntal analysis by observing the coexistence of alternately dominant Christian and Islamic civilizations in the same geographical region. Handal’s poetry shows that the phenomenon of Arab migrations to Western countries cannot be understood through Said’s original binary of Western colonial powers and colonized territories. Her work reveals that it is necessary to modify contrapuntal analysis to highlight the existence of multiple civilizations within the same geographical space. By focusing on how Handal’s poetry revises contrapuntal analysis, it becomes clear how she implicitly engages with Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis, and how she imaginatively returns to early modern Spain to consider Muslim-Christian relationships—an important topic at the time of her collection’s publication, which occurred amidst an increase in Islamic migration to Europe.

In her poem “The Courtyard of Colegiata del Salvador” Handal reflects on the unstable boundaries between Muslim and Christian rule in early modern Andalucía, and the ways in which violence was required to maintain those boundaries. The title of the poem references a 16th century church on the site of the former main mosque of Albayzín, Granada—the old Moorish quarter of the city. The courtyard of what was once Albayzín’s great mosque is attached to the church of the Colegiata del Salvador. Granada was the last

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.



Muslim kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula. Although many Muslims in Christian-ruled Spain emigrated to North Africa, those who remained under Christian rule became known as *mudéjars*, and were permitted to practice Islam, subject to certain restrictions. However, in 1492 the Catholic monarchs completed the reconquest of Spain by securing the surrender of Granada. Jews were expelled from Spain the same year and forced conversions of Muslims followed in the first decade of the sixteenth century.<sup>104</sup> Although Handal does not specify the time in which the events of the poem occurred, she is most likely referencing the early 16th century period.

In this context, Handal introduces an Arab Muslim man, Saïd, and represents his adaptations to Christian Spain. As Saïd traveled “across the Strait of Gibraltar”—the narrow body of water that separates Morocco from Peninsular Spain—he remembered his father’s words, “We are strange when we are lost.” Once he arrived in Spain, Saïd was subject to Christian conversion; he “learned to pray differently,” “knelt instead of bowed,” and “spoke any language but his own.” The central moment of the poem occurs years later, as Saïd was “sitting in a courtyard he is startled / by the loudness of the wind, / almost like the start of the *adhan*,” the Muslim call to prayer. At this moment, he “feels a small fire / alongside his heart, / and hears his father’s voice— / *we are nothing / but an image / growing from our sleep— / how do we explain / our journey to others?*” Handal documents Saïd’s response to the confluence of the Christian church courtyard and what he hears as the Muslim call to prayer. This confluence creates “a small fire alongside his heart” and, in this moment, he recalls his

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<sup>104</sup> Hendrickson, Jocelyn. “Andalusia.” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, 2009. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195305135.001.0001/acref-9780195305135-e-1129>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2017

father's voice, which emphasizes the question of explaining his journey to others. This journey could mean the physical journey Saïd took from North Africa to Spain, but it could also mean explaining a spiritual journey to "others"—those from different faiths.

At the end of the poem, Saïd "looks at the grounds of the courtyard / where a mosque once stood / and understands what his father hadn't— / what's sacred always returns." Here, Handal refers to the fact that the Colegiata del Salvador, the Collegiate Church of the Savior, was built on the site of what was once a mosque. Because Saïd hears the Muslim call to prayer in the courtyard of this church, he comes to understand that his Muslim faith has not been lost, but rather "always returns." Handal's ending to this poem—"what's sacred always returns"—is a highly ambiguous phrase. One interpretation is that Saïd's faith is strictly a personal experience, and that the return of the sacred will not have a larger social impact in Spain. However, another interpretation of "what's sacred always returns" is that the Islamic faith will return to Spain, although it is unclear whether Handal's poem predicts a future Muslim majority in the region.

When reading this poem through the framework of contrapuntal analysis, it is important to keep in mind Saïd's definition: "contrapuntal analysis should be modeled not...on a symphony but rather on an atonal ensemble; we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices—inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions—all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography."<sup>105</sup> Handal's evocation of a Muslim man in a Christian country dramatizes the constraints of Christian culture in the context of early 16th century Spain and the inflection of Islam within this setting. The resulting phenomenon—a Muslim man, in a church, recalling the historic

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pg. 318.

role of Islam in Spain—is an articulation of what Said describes as a “complex and uneven topography.” Published in 2012, at a time of debates in Europe over Islamic immigration, the poem attempts to focus on the dynamics that lead to conciliatory states between populations. Handal’s choice of a male character is important because she portrays a Muslim man who practices his faith—without alienation or conflict—in a Christian-majority country. The poem can be read as an articulation of what Handal calls the “possibility of human coexistence” between Christian and Muslim populations, an attempt to counter the “clash of civilizations” thesis that denies the possibility of multicultural societies.

While Handal meditates on Muslim and Christian relationships in her poetry about Grenada, in her work on Córdoba, she ruminates on that city’s once “thriving and multicultural community consisting of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian artists, writers, scholars and philosophers.” Handal uses Córdoba as an example of a multi-ethnic, cultural, and religious society. The poem highlights the city’s Roman, Spanish, Jewish, Christian, and Arab heritage. In “Alhandal y las Murallas de Córdoba”—which she describes as “a poem about tolerance”—Handal establishes the setting: “the garden of la Mezquita,” which refers to the *Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba*, the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba. The site was originally home to a Christian church. When Muslims conquered Spain in 711, the church building was divided into halves between the Muslims and Christians, until 784, when the Christian half was purchased by the Emir 'Abd al-Rahman I, who demolished the original structure and built the grand mosque of Córdoba on its ground. Córdoba returned to Christian rule in 1236, and the building was converted to a Roman Catholic church. The area around the Mezquita, which means mosque in Spanish—now called the Mezquita-catedral—is today one of the most

impressive examples of Spain's Moorish heritage.<sup>106</sup>

In her poem about the mezquita-catedral, Handal references a conversation with an unnamed person who tells her, "People will build together again," an optimistic statement that indicates Handal's hope for the possibility of tolerance and peaceful interfaith coexistence. Handal writes of Córdoba, "The past is here, / the song of the Arabs here, / the song of the Jews, / the Romans, / the Spaniards," emphasizing the multicultural heritage in this geographical location that is not concretized in the past, but still exists in the present. Handal discusses the influence of both Christian and Muslim faiths in Córdoba by invoking "Mary, Jesus, and Moses," and by observing that, in Córdoba, "Fatima is everywhere— / her five fingers / the five laws / of the Koran." Handal also emphasizes the Jewish heritage of Córdoba: "see Córdoba, as I have— / enter Bab al-Yawz, now Almodóvar Gate." Here Handal refers to the only surviving gate of the nine built by Abd al-Rahman I. The Almodóvar Gate leads "to the Judería," the Jewish Quarter. Handal mentions important Jewish figures who lived in this region—Maimónides, a Sephardic Jewish philosopher and astronomer, and Judá-Levi, one of the greatest Hebrew poets—in addition to Casa de Sefarad, a museum devoted to the Sephardic Jewish tradition.

At the end of the poem, Handal invokes the "Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos," the Castle of the Christian Monarchs, which was once a palace under the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates. After Christian forces took Córdoba during the Reconquista, Alfonso XI of Castile began building the present-day structure on part of the site in 1328. The Inquisition began using the Alcázar as one of its headquarters in 1482, and it was the site where Isabella

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<sup>106</sup> Handal, Nathalie. *Poet in Andalucía*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2012, pg. 117.

and Ferdinand met Christopher Columbus as he prepared to take his first voyage to the Americas. By using this location as the title of her poem, Handal emphasizes how both Christian and Islamic history are inextricably linked to the conquest of the Americas. She also returns to the Islamic foundations of the castle, which was once a palace under the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates. Handal makes a direct address to the readers: “pray east, / then walk to the Torre de la Calhorra,” the Calahorra Tower, a fortified gate in the historic center of Córdoba, Spain, of Islamic origin, built during the late 12th century to protect the nearby Roman bridge. Handal’s poem illuminates that there is not a linear progression of history, but that history is often cyclical, and the past is always imbricated in the present.

Handal’s poem about Córdoba, when placed into dialogue with Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, sheds light on some important underlying assumptions present in Said’s contrapuntal analysis. Said argues that there are phases of emancipation from imperialism, first with nationalist independence movements, and second with liberation struggles. Said’s theory is implicitly grounded in a teleology of progress from colonial period to emancipation. In contrast, Handal’s poem about Córdoba stresses the cyclical nature of history. At the end of the poem, Handal reimagines spatiotemporal boundaries by writing the present into the past and the past into the present. Handal discusses how she stands and looks at Córdoba, allowing “it to be what it is, glorious and alive.” She further underscores the existence of the past in the present. Although the city is “without flag and music, / without guards and rules, / without singers and poets, without guitars and ouds,” there are still elements of the multicultural city that remain, specifically the wall of Córdoba, the poems of Sufis, the Spanish language, and Andalucía—“its pomegranates, almonds, / oranges, / its ancient walls / and its heart.” In these lines, Handal reflects on the passage of time, observing that although the multicultural

heritage of Córdoba has, to some extent, been lost, this heritage has left a legacy in the city through language, literature, and architecture. These cultural products are the result of various periods of sometimes violently-achieved rule. Handal's exploration of multiculturalism in medieval and early modern Andalucía portrays the fragile coexistence of multiple faiths, showing that Handal considers—and indeed hopes for—the possibility of multiculturalism.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I observed three Arab American women poets' explorations of the phenomenon of Arab migrations to Western countries. Specifically, I concentrated on these poets' engagements at the time of their production and in the context of their reception. Specifically, I analyzed how Arab American women poets implicitly dialogue with central ideas of the *Mahjar* literary tradition for late-twentieth and early twenty-first century audiences. The first two poets I evaluated—Lebanese American Elmaz Abinader and Syrian American Mohja Kahf—articulate an approach that I call “ancestralism.” As a personal endeavor, ancestralism does not attempt to change Western countries, but rather to create the conditions for Arab survival in those countries. In the second section, I argued that Handal's poetry on transnational Palestinian exile extends the philosophical contributions of the eminent *Mahjar* writer Ameen Rihani. Specifically, I explored how Handal develops a what I call a cultural synthesis approach that attempts to integrate Arab identity in a Western context, not to remake the Western society to make it more Arab, but to synthesize the strongest elements of both.

In the final section, I analyzed Handal's 2012 collection, *Poet in Andalucía* to argue that Said's concept of contrapuntal analysis requires a revision. While Said's contrapuntal analysis illuminates Western European powers' relationships with geographically distant colonies, it is also necessary to reflect on regions such as Andalucía where it is difficult to distinguish between colonizer and colonized because the region experienced alternating periods of Christian and Muslim control. Handal's intention is to interrogate the "possibility of human coexistence" between Christian and Muslim populations, and her poetry remains open to the possibility of multiculturalism. In the next chapters, I will turn to the third period of Arab migration to America, which began in 1968 when the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 went into effect and increased migration from the Arab region to the United States. I will attend to how Arab American women poets who immigrated to the U.S. during this period address important social, political, and economic issues in the contemporary United States.

## CHAPTER III

### Rethinking Boundaries of the Human Subject: Relational Identity in a Post-Anthropocentric Era

#### Introduction

In her 2008 collection *Seasons*, Etel Adnan portrays identity as radically unstable. “The whole system named the ‘I,’” she writes, “is unreliable, unbalanced.”<sup>107</sup> This chapter addresses how Arab American women poets offer insights that contribute to contemporary theorizing on identity. Some Arab American women poets, notably Suheir Hammad and Mohja Kahf, articulate an identity politics by making their social locations political. The term “identity politics” signifies “a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups.”<sup>108</sup> There are compelling reasons to embrace identity politics because it provides a way for people to claim a shared history, find a collective voice, and effect social transformation. The poets I analyze in this chapter—Deema Shehabi, Leila Halaby, and Etel Adnan—respond to the conditions of diaspora by imagining identity as dynamic and by moving beyond politicized social locations.

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<sup>107</sup> *Seasons*. Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2008, pg. 23.

<sup>108</sup> Heyes, Cressida, “Identity Politics.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/identity-politics>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2017.



Rather than calling attention to how individual identity has been shaped by structural power inequalities, these poets provide insights into the epistemological consequences of considering a capacious view of power that includes the beyond-human world, by which I signify spiritual and environmental dynamics.

To understand how these poets contribute to contemporary theorizing on identity, I put their writings into dialogue with several theoretical frameworks relevant to this topic: intersectionality, affect theory, new materialism, and post-humanism. In the first section, I examine some limitations of one of the most prominent approaches to theorizing identity: intersectionality. Specifically, I focus on raised by Jasbir Puar (2011) and others that intersectionality may be limited by its Euro-American emphasis on the individual, which might not be as emphasized in other cultural contexts. I also reflect on the claim that intersectionality as an analytic is limited by its general lack of emphasis on environmental factors. By observing how these poets write about identity, I find that they do not concentrate on the individual, autonomous subject; rather, they illuminate what I call relational identity. In the second section, I define the concept of relational identity and argue that this type of identity is important for intersectional analysis to evaluate because relational identity has benefits—in the form of collective social goods—that may be more difficult to discern by adhering to a strict focus on embodied identity.

In the final section, I read the work of Etel Adnan as a way of understanding complex processes that new materialism investigates at a theoretical level. In my readings of Adnan's poetry, I analyze how her accounts of what I term the networked mind contemplate the importance of nonhuman factors in human consciousness. In doing so, I underscore how Adnan's poetry can be read as developing an ethical framework—grounded in affect—for

human-environmental interactions. Finally, I show, through my readings of Adnan’s work, how she addresses an oversight in intersectionality: the general absence of spirituality and religion as a category of analysis. I examine how her perspectives on spirituality can serve as an ethical foundation for human-environmental interactions.

### **Intersectionality and Its Discontents**

Many contemporary theories of identity are based on intersectionality, a term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, one of the founders of critical race theory in the U.S. legal academy.<sup>109</sup> Crenshaw developed intersectionality as a metaphor in 1989, and in 1991 she elaborated it as a “provisional concept” to demonstrate the inadequacy of approaches that separate systems of oppression, isolating and focusing on one, while occluding others.<sup>110</sup> By placing Black women at the center of her analysis of U.S. discrimination law—at the intersection of juridical categories of race and sex discrimination—Crenshaw revealed the inadequacy of doctrinal definitions of discrimination to capture and remedy Black women’s concrete experiences of discrimination.<sup>111</sup> Although intersectionality began with an analysis

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<sup>109</sup> Although Crenshaw introduced the term “intersectionality,” the concepts she explored have a long genealogy. As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, Black women confronted the simultaneity of gender and racial oppression—see Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* (1892). Additional precursors include Beal’s concept of “double jeopardy” (1970), King’s idea of “multiple jeopardy” (1988), and the Combahee River Collective’s (1977) articulations of “interlocking oppressions.” The 1980s saw an upsurge in scholarship about race and gender by women of color (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982; Davis 1983; hooks 1984; Giddings 1985; Anzaluda 1987).

<sup>110</sup> See Carastathis, Anna. “The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory.” *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2014, pp. 304-14, pg. 305.

<sup>111</sup> In her 1991 essay, “Mapping the Margins,” Crenshaw offers a threefold definition of intersectionality. The first, “structural intersectionality,” refers to “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection

of Black women in a legal context, it became more widely applied in the social sciences and humanities in order to examine the ways in which power structures interact to produce disparate conditions of social inequality that affect groups and individuals differently (Cho 2013).

In a more recent article, Crenshaw, along with Sumi Cho and Leslie McCall (2013), defines intersectionality as an “analytic disposition” based on “thinking about the problem of sameness and difference” in relation to power.<sup>112</sup> Intersectionality conceives of categories “not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power.”<sup>113</sup> As Vivian M. May (2014) notes, “intersectionality can be considered one example of counter-hegemonic knowledge crafted ‘interstitially’—in spaces between dominant frames—and fashioned within (and across) marginalized locations.”<sup>114</sup> Although intersectionality has been lauded by some academics as “the most important contribution that women’s studies has made so far,”<sup>115</sup> scholars have advanced numerous critiques of intersectionality.<sup>116</sup>

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of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women.” The second, “political intersectionality” describes the fact that, historically, feminist and antiracist politics in the U.S. “have functioned in tandem to marginalize issues facing Black women.” The third, “representational intersectionality,” concerns the production of images of women of color drawing on sexist and racist narrative tropes, as well as the ways that critiques of these representations marginalize or reproduce the objectification of women of color. See Crenshaw, pgs. 1245, 1283.

<sup>112</sup> Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis.” *Signs*, vol. 38, no. 4, (2013), pp. 785-810. See pg. 795.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 788.

<sup>114</sup> “‘Speaking into the Void’? Intersectionality Critiques and Epistemic Backlash.” *Hypatia*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2014, pp. 94-112.

<sup>115</sup> McCall, Leslie. “The Complexity of Intersectionality.” *Signs*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2005, pp. 1771-800. See pg. 1771.

<sup>116</sup> Theorists have debated the problem of using categories at all, suggesting that what is needed is a more transversal approach—a thinking *across* categories (Yuval-Davis 2006). Discussions have also emerged about

Kathy Davis (2008), for instance, observes that theorists have long debated which categories, and how many, should be included in intersectional analysis. Categories of difference came to matter in intersectional analysis because of a concern with how people are located differently in relation to systems of power. As Alice Ludvig (2006) puts it, intersectionality theorists are faced with a definitional problem: “who defines when, where, which, and why particular differences are given recognition while others are not?”<sup>117</sup> Helema Lutz (2002) provided a list of fourteen possible lines of difference to contemplate in intersectionality: gender, sexuality, race or skin color, ethnicity, national belonging, class, culture, religion, able-bodiedness, age, sedentariness, property ownership, geographical location, and status in terms of tradition and development. However, in practice, intersectional theorists usually analyze fewer categories. Leiprecht and Lutz (2006) assert that race, class, and gender are the “minimum standard” for an intersectional analysis, although other categories can be added, depending on the context and the specifics of the research problem. Most frequently, intersectional analysts attend to gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability status.

When performing an intersectional analysis, should one use poetry as source material? Although Jennifer Nash (2008) argues that poetry has been used as a “primary vehicle for evoking the experiences of marginalized subjects,” she asserts that a reliance on poetry

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the scope of intersectional analysis. Should it be primarily concerned with theorizing identity (Staunæs 2003; Buitelaar 2006; Prins 2006) or is the problem that it has been too focused on identity to the detriment of social structures? In addition, theorists have argued about how intersectional theory should be applied to solve social problems (Burman 2003, Carastathis 2008, Bilge 2013).

<sup>117</sup> Ludvig, Alice. “Differences Between Women? Intersecting Voices in a Female Narrative.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, pp. 245-58. See pg. 247.

suggests a shortcoming in the methodological orientation of intersectional theory.<sup>118</sup> She contends that using poetry as source material indicates that intersectionality theory “has yet to produce a mechanism for systematically articulating, aggregating, or examining the multiple levels of consciousness that form the basis of their study of identity.”<sup>119</sup> On this point, I disagree with Nash, as I believe that poetry—especially confessional poetry—is a genre ideally suited for the exploration of marginalized subjects’ intersectional experiences. Confessional poetry, in which the author describes parts of his or her life that would not ordinarily be in the public domain, enables marginalized individuals to ponder personal experiences resulting from their unique social locations.<sup>120</sup> Confessional poetry, which reduces the distance between the persona and the author, often addresses experiences of relationships, affective responses, and trauma. Over the past few decades, types of confessional poetry, such as spoken word and slam, have become increasingly popular in marginalized communities as modes of expression for individuals who have experienced the consequences of social inequalities. For this reason, poetry, especially in the autobiographical or confessional mode, can serve as valuable source material for understanding how individuals have been affected by their social locations.

Whereas most intersectional analysis provides a systematic account of how human-produced power imbalances shape subjects, Arab American women poets open the possibility

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<sup>118</sup> In her article, “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” Jennifer Nash discusses the use of poetry in intersectional theory, citing A.K. Wing’s article, “Brief reflections toward a multiplicative theory and praxis of being.” *Berkeley Women’s Law Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1990, pp. 181-201. See pg. 182.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> “Confessional Poetry.” *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry*, edited by Ian Hamilton and Jeremy Noel-Tod. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

for a form of intersectional analysis that does not ignore or transcend these power imbalances, but rather expands the discourse of identity to an understanding of human life that is less attached to the individual subject and centered more on commonalities among subjects. One might argue that, if these poets are not attuned to power disparities between individuals, then they are not performing an intersectional analysis. However, I contend that Arab American women poets *are* attuned to power disparities, but that they develop a capacious understanding of power that extends beyond the human. Arab American women poets articulate at least two important insights that might be useful for intersectionality: turning away from an understanding of identity as based exclusively on *embodied* identity and broadening the definition of power to include nonhuman power dynamics. These insights are important for intersectionality, for several reasons.

First, a focus on identity may be limited by its Euro-American emphasis on the individual, which might not be as prioritized in other cultural contexts. Jasbir Puar (2011) critiques what she calls the “Euro-American bias” of intersectionality, arguing that it problematically “produces an Other, and that Other is always a Woman Of Color (WOC), who must invariably be shown to be resistant, subversive, or articulating a grievance.”<sup>121</sup> Transnational and postcolonial scholars have emphasized that the categories privileged by intersectional analysis—starting with race, class, gender, and now including sexuality, nation, religion, age, and disability—are the product of modernist colonial agendas and regimes of epistemic violence, operative through a Western/Euro-American epistemological

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<sup>121</sup> Puar, Jasbir. “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics.” *Transversal*, 2011.

formation.<sup>122</sup>

Indeed, in her thirty years of ethnographic fieldwork on Lebanese women, Suad Joseph found that most Arab women do not conceptualize themselves as singular subjects but rather in a relational context of familial matrices that are crucial to Arab societies.<sup>123</sup> For Arab women, as she writes, the person “may not be the most productive points of departure for locating the subject, or at least not the exclusive point of departure.”<sup>124</sup> Instead, Joseph argues, “we might consider the subject as constantly re-consolidating, reconfiguring in relation—a notion of identity that is always in motion.”<sup>125</sup> She uses the term “connectivity” to describe the relationality of identity. Rather than theorizing a singular subject, Joseph asserts that we need “methodologies of observation to capture the moments and conditionalities of constructing identity.”<sup>126</sup> I analyze how Arab American women’s poetry articulates these “methodologies of observation.” By centering on how these poets portray identity, I find that they do not focus on the individual, autonomous subject; rather, they explore relational identity, which I will scrutinize in greater detail later.

Second, I argue that Arab American women’s poetry calls attention to how intersectionality as an analytic is limited by its focus on how individual subjects are impacted by unequal power relations. As Puar puts it, “intersectionality functions as a problematic

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Joseph, Suad. “Thinking Intentionality: Arab Women’s Subjectivity and its Discontents.” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2012, pp: 1-25. See pg. 14.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pg. 16.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pg. 17.

reinvestment in the subject,” especially since many scholars have seriously questioned whether the marginalized subject is still a viable site from which to produce politics, much less whether the subject is a necessary precursor for politics.<sup>127</sup> Puar argues that intersectionality as an intellectual rubric and a tool for political intervention must be supplemented, and perhaps complicated, by the concept of assemblages, which comes from Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).<sup>128</sup> Many theorists have commented on the influence of Deleuze and Guattari’s work. As Stacy Alaimo (2000) puts it, *A Thousand Plateaus* “eludes centuries of dualistic, anthropocentric Western thought by forwarding concepts such as rhizomes, strata, and assemblages that not only transgress boundaries but also intrepidly ignore divisions between human life and nonhuman nature.”<sup>129</sup> In Puar’s view, a focus on assemblages has several important analytic benefits: de-privileging the human body as a discrete organic entity,<sup>130</sup> destabilizing the human/nature binary, showing how multiple forms of matter can be bodies (such as bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on), and emphasizing process rather than location.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Puar, Jasbir. “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics.” *Transversal*, 2011.

<sup>128</sup> The term “assemblage” is, as Puar points out, “an awkward translation,” as “the original term in Deleuze and Guattari’s work is not the French word *assemblage*, but actually “*agencement*,” a term which means design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations--the focus being not on content but on relations, relations of patterns.”

<sup>129</sup> Alaimo, Stacy. *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2000, pg. 12.

<sup>130</sup> As Puar summarizes Haraway’s work: “the body does not end at the skin. We leave traces of our DNA everywhere we go, we live with other bodies within us, microbes and bacteria, we are enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information.” Puar, Jasbir. “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics.” *Transversal*, 2011.

<sup>131</sup> As Karen Barad shows in her theory of performative metaphysics, matter is not a “thing” but a doing. See “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Signs*, vol. 28, no.3, 2003, pp: 801-31.



I agree with Puar that the concept of assemblages can serve as a useful analytical framework. However, I take my point of departure for reading Arab American women's poets' conceptions of identity from another concept in Deleuze and Guattari's work: "disjunctive synthesis." Rather than conceiving disjunction as a relationship between two distinct alternatives (expressed syntactically as "either/or"), Deleuze and Guattari formulate disjunction as the production of differences (expressed syntactically as "either...or...or").<sup>132</sup> This concept is important because it enables us to break down binary structures of thought. Arab American women poets do not identify a distance between "self" and "other"—a binary that opens up the possibility for discord, enmity, and violence. Instead, the poets render a disjunctive synthesis that eclipses, or sometimes eliminates, distinctions between self and other. In the next section, I explore how Arab American women poets do not concentrate on the embodied subject but rather meditate on relational identity. This type of identity is important for intersectional analysis to investigate because relational identity has benefits—in the form of collective social goods—that may be more difficult to discern by adhering to a strict focus on embodied identity.

### **Relational Identity: Reconsidering the Boundaries of the Human Subject**

Most Arab American women poets articulate relational identity—in addition to Deema Shehabi, Laila Halaby, and Etel Adnan, examples of relational identity can be found in the

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<sup>132</sup> See Mai Al-Nakib's "Disjunctive Synthesis: Deleuze and Arab Feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 459-82. See pg. 463.

work of D.H. Melhem, Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hammad, Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Nathalie Handal, Pauline Kaldas, and Hedy Habra.<sup>133</sup> In this section, I examine three poets who develop the strongest examples of relational identity. I distinguish relational identity from the concept of relational autonomy which has a long history and was perhaps most famously defined by Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1993). In this book, Gilligan argues that psychology had systematically ignored women in trying to answer questions about how humans make ethical judgments. Drawing on the psychoanalyst and sociologist Nancy Chodorow, Gilligan claims that men make decisions based on individual rights, while women are concerned with responsibilities to others—a form of ethical judgment that Gilligan argues should be taken seriously and elevated as advantageous.

Later scholars (Nedelsky 1989, Oshana 1998, Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000) advanced the concept of relational autonomy, a term that describes self-governing agents who are also socially constituted and who define value commitments in terms of interpersonal relations and mutual dependencies. As John Christman (2004) writes, “Relational views of the autonomous person underscore the social embeddedness of selves.”<sup>134</sup> I depart from the term relational autonomy and use the concept of relational identity because I want to indicate that Arab American women poets do not place emphasis on the dominant definition of autonomy, which highlights the self-governing and agential capacities of individuals. As I will analyze in more detail later, these poets contribute insights to new materialist perspectives which, as Karen

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<sup>133</sup> See Appendix B for a detailed catalogue of Arab American women poets who articulate relational identity.

<sup>134</sup> Christman, John. “Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves.” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 117, no. 1/2, 2004, pp. 143-64. See pg. 143.

Barad states, do not conceptualize agency as “a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements.”<sup>135</sup> Moreover, by using the term “identity,” I intend to signify that I am addressing how my readings of Arab American women’s poetry contribute to larger discourses on identity—including intersectionality—to show how this poetry vocalizes an implicit critique of identity politics.

There are certainly potential disadvantages to a relational conceptualization of identity. After all, individuals who have experienced a historical legacy of exclusion from political and socioeconomic opportunities—especially women—have made gains in political, social, and economic spheres based largely on liberal feminist conceptualizations of women as equal individuals entitled to the responsibilities and privileges of democratic citizenship. In moving from an emphasis on the individual subject to relational identity, is there not a danger in implicitly or explicitly downplaying individual needs and rights in service of a larger collective? When reflecting on these questions, it is important to interrogate whether it is accurate to create a binary opposition between the individual and the collective. Moreover, is it inevitable that shifting the focus from the individual to relationships will have oppressive consequences for the individual subject? Do the definitions of identity and oppression articulated in intersectionality—which has been critiqued for its Euro-American perspective—have universal applicability?

As Saba Mahmood writes in her research on the grassroots Islamic women’s piety movement in Egypt, “the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of

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<sup>135</sup> From an interview with Karen Barad in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin’s *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.

subordination and subversion. In doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance.”<sup>136</sup> Mahmood’s research has important implications for intersectionality. Rather than valorizing resistance to oppression—what she calls a “rather narrow and parochial way of being human in the world”<sup>137</sup>—Mahmood urges analysts to reflect on “other kinds of social and political projects and moral-ethical aspirations.”<sup>138</sup> I analyze Arab American women poetry as precisely this type of social and political project. Specifically, I read in this poetry an implicit opportunity for intersectional analysts to investigate the importance of both human relationships and elements of life beyond the human.

Deema Shehabi’s poetry explores how relational identity is based on interconnected physical, imaginative, and affective processes. Shehabi, born in Kuwait in 1970 to a mother from Gaza and a father from Jerusalem, came to the United States in 1998 to study at Tufts University and now resides in California. In this section, I focus on her debut poetry collection *Thirteen Departures from the Moon* (2011). In an interview, Shehabi states that most of her poetry “searches for the interconnectedness between the exiled spaces of my youth and adulthood. I write poetry to immortalize the dead, to give length and breadth to the living, and to nurture the spirit.”<sup>139</sup> Poetry is ideally suited for meditating on the nature of

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<sup>136</sup> Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005, pg. 14.

<sup>137</sup> Mahmood, as quoted in Nermeen Shaikh’s *The Present as History: Critical Perspectives on Global Power*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007, pg. 151.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 149. The work of Patricia Hill Collins and Gloria Anzaldúa serves as an example of what Mahmood calls for, as their writing highlights the multiple, diverse, and empowering dimensions of marginalized subjects.

<sup>139</sup> From an interview with Deema Shehabi by Liz Castellano, <http://philipmetres.com/deema/>. Accessed 27 Oct. 2016.

affective transmission because of the genre's attention to visceral experiences. As poets filter these experiences through the domain of the imagination, they scrutinize a wide range of affective responses.

The term “affect,” from the Latin *affectus*—which can be translated as “passion” or “emotion”—has a complex genealogy and was perhaps first explored in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.<sup>140</sup> In the seventeenth century, Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677), which continues to influence many scholars, defined affect as “affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time the ideas of these affections.”<sup>141</sup> The role of ideas, and the imagination, play a crucial role in Spinoza's philosophy. As Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd (1999) observe, Spinoza's theories exhibit a “strong orientation towards the collective dimensions of imagination, and the imagination is based on materiality.”<sup>142</sup> The experience of other bodies together with one's own is the basis of Spinoza's account of the affects. Individual bodies, in Spinoza's view, retain traces of the changes brought about in them by the impinging of other bodies. Individual selfhood for Spinoza therefore involves bodily awareness—the modification of one's bodies by others.

The modification of bodies by other bodies, in the context of Israeli-Palestinian relations, is the topic of Deema Shehabi's poem “At the Dome of the Rock” (2011). In an interview, Shehabi discusses how she was often moved by her mother's recollections of her

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<sup>140</sup> Aristotle organized the affects in terms of “anger and mildness, love and hatred, fear and confidence, shame and esteem, kindness and unkindness, pity and indignation, envy and emulation.” As quoted in Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*, pg. 3.

<sup>141</sup> Spinoza, Benedict. *Ethics*. New York: Penguin, 1994, pg. 70.

<sup>142</sup> Gatens, Moira and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1999, pg. 35-9.

girlhood in Gaza. When reflecting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Shehabi said, “It is my hope that we continue, as people, to hunger for closeness and understanding. Let’s go beyond the horribly disfiguring headline news and enter an intimate and humane conversation. That would be the epitome of healing.”<sup>143</sup> Her brief, four-sentence-long prose poem, “At the Dome of the Rock” (2011) indeed creates an intimate and human conversation: a space for the reader to enter into the experience of the poem by imaginatively engaging with the atmosphere of Jerusalem.

Shehabi emphasizes the architectural aspects of the physical landscape—such as the stone arch and dome—along with the sensory elements of the environment. Her first sentence describes nature imagery, equating “Jerusalem in the afternoon” with “the bitterness of / two hundred winter-bare olive trees fallen / in the distance.” Amidst a geopolitical landscape filled with rancor, Shehabi invites the reader to engage with a woman who is “sitting at the edge of the Mosque.” As Shehabi writes in a direct address to the reader:

If you sit beside her under the stone arch  
facing the Old City, beneath the lacquered air that hooks  
into every crevice of skin, your blood will unleash  
with her dreams, the Dome will undulate gold, and her exhausted  
scars will gleam across her overly kissed forehead.

Shehabi facilitates the reader’s entry into the poem by connecting external and internal experiences: it is only by sitting beside the stone arch and breathing the “lacquered air” of the Old City that the reader experiences an internal transformation. Shehabi renders this transformation as connected to the process of respiration: the Old City’s air “hooks” into

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Deema Shehabi by Liz Castellano, <http://philipmetres.com/deema>. Accessed 31 May 2016.

“every crevice of skin,” suggesting that the experience of being in Jerusalem inhabits the reader’s entire body. Yet Shehabi does not portray the impact of being in the Old City as an individual experience; rather, she underscores the relationship between the reader and the woman. In addition to respiration, Shehabi invokes blood: “your blood,” she writes, addressing the reader, “will unleash with her dreams.” The reader’s blood and the woman’s dreams are inextricably linked, leading to changes in both the physical environment of Jerusalem (“the Dome will undulate gold”) and in the woman’s body (“her exhausted / scars will gleam across her overly kissed forehead.”) It is more than the reader’s attention—in fact, it is the reader’s blood—that facilitates the unleashing of the woman’s dreams, the undulating gold on the dome, and the gleaming of the woman’s scars. The reader not only sits beside the woman, but also uses his or her body to experience—and to facilitate the woman’s own experience—of her dreams, scars, and memories. To call Shehabi’s poem an articulation of empathy underestimates the level of involvement she establishes between the reader and the woman. Shehabi eliminates the distance between the reader and the woman, creating a relational identity in which the reader’s body serves as source that enables the woman’s expression of embodied affective responses.

Shehabi emphasizes a relational process in which two people gain control over negative affects through mutual affective experiences. Her poem traces a trajectory from the affect of “bitterness” to the dominion of love. At the beginning of the poem, Shehabi associates Jerusalem with negative affect: “Jerusalem in the afternoon is the bitterness of / two hundred winter-bare olive trees fallen / in the distance.” This description of the landscape stresses the affect of “bitterness,” which Shehabi transforms by facilitating a relationship between the reader and the woman at the mosque. Shehabi invites the reader into the poem,

enabling the reader to experience the internal biological processes of the woman, specifically respiration and circulation. The intimacy of this relational identity facilitates the readers' perception of changes in both the woman's body and in the physical environment of the city.

At the end of the poem, Shehabi has the woman ask the reader to come closer, which creates a deepening of the relationship: "She will ask you to come closer, and when you do, / she will lift the sea of her arms from the furls / of her chest and say: this is the dim sky I have / loved ever since I was a child." In these lines, Shehabi emphasizes how two people, in conjunction, can cultivate control over negative affects—in this context, bitterness—through a relational identity grounded in shared affect. Shehabi underscores a relational process in which two people cultivate control over affects through mutually experiencing the affect of love. Shehabi shows that it is only through the reader's body that the woman can share her love for the city of Jerusalem.

Shehabi's poem illustrates the formation of what Spinoza calls "common notions," which arise when "one body encounters another with which it is compatible and so experiences joy."<sup>144</sup> Common notions are not only crucial to individual preservation, but also to the formation of reasonable relations between individuals.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, the formation of common notions is the basis for what Spinoza calls "virtuous polities." Such polities are those which combine the powers of many harmoniously and so constitute a body politic capable of functioning as if it were "one mind and one body."<sup>146</sup> Shehabi's poem confirms Spinoza's

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<sup>144</sup> See Spinoza's *Ethics*, Part II.

<sup>145</sup> Gatens, Moira and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1999, pg. 104.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 113.



belief in the collective dimensions of individual selfhood, the fact that every person is embedded in wider social wholes in which the powers of bodies are strengthened or impeded. To be an individual self is to be inserted into economies of affect and imagination which bind us to others. As Gatens and Lloyd put it, “Imagination is a mimetic process, in which individuals associate joy or sadness with the images of other individuals, thus awakening feelings of hate and love towards them...Affects are continuously circulated between individuals, reinforced and intensified through communication.”<sup>147</sup> In essence, because of the continuous circulation of affects, individual selfhood is not possible in isolation.<sup>148</sup>

But how, exactly, are affects transmitted between two people? For explanatory accounts of affective transmission between individuals, it is necessary to turn to contemporary theorists. Teresa Brennan (2004) discusses at length the “transmission of affect,” a term that accounts for how affects not only arise within individuals but also come from interactions with other people and the environment. The transmission of affect means that the affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another. Affects therefore have a physiological impact.<sup>149</sup> Brennan argues that, throughout the course of the eighteenth century, physical interpretations of the transmission of affects between bodies became replaced by the conviction that affects emerge from the self. A physical interpretation of transmission therefore gave way to a psychic one. What we have lost, then, is an understanding of transmission as a physical process in which affects pass between bodies. In Brennan’s view, it is necessary to return to older accounts of affective

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., pg. 68.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pg. 73.

<sup>149</sup> Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2014, pg. 3.

transmission that posit a physical mechanism by which affects move. Brennan proposes, somewhat controversially, that affects are transmitted by smell, passing through the air from one body to another.<sup>150</sup>

Brennan, by engaging with neuroscience and psychology, aims to develop an explanatory mechanism for the complex processes by which affect is transmitted. In this regard her research parallels many scholars working in the field of affect theory. As Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard (2010) observe, literary and cultural theory has shifted from a concern with the social construction of identity categories to an assertion of the biological constitution of being, drawing in particular on non-linear biology, quantum physics, cognitive neuroscience, and developmental psychology, which can be problematic because “there is no unified or transparent trans-disciplinary metalanguage that can act as a conduit for concepts to travel between the humanities and the sciences.”<sup>151</sup> In addition to what some see as a problematic application of scientific knowledge in the humanities, Brennan’s commitment to a starkly physical account of affective transmission has been critiqued for reinforcing the traditional opposition between the psychological and the physical.<sup>152</sup>

With these critiques in mind, I depart from a focus on biological and psychological theory in the study of affect and make a case for the importance of the imagination in affective transmission. Although it appears that Shehabi’s work aligns with Brennan’s

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<sup>150</sup> In *The Transmission of Affect*, Brennan writes, “I suggest smell is critical in how we ‘feel the atmosphere’...It has been established now that the pheromone odors of the one may change the mood of the other...social interaction changes our biology,” pg. 9-10.

<sup>151</sup> Papoulias, Constantina and Felicity Callard. “Biology’s Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect.” *Body & Society*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2010, pp. 29-56.

<sup>152</sup> See Susan James’s contribution to “Perspectives on Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*.” *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2006, pp. 103-17. See pg. 106.

emphasis on the physical processes by which affects are transmitted, Shehabi does not exclusively provide a physical account of affective transmission, but rather demonstrates that affective transmission occurs through inextricably linked physical and imaginative processes. In a physical domain, Shehabi's work modifies Brennan's theory on the transmission of affects by focusing on blood, rather than on the sense of smell, as a mechanism for affective transition. In addition to physiological processes, Shehabi imagines psychological reactions, specifically, how affects are physically passed from one body to another, and how affective transmission facilitates imaginative processes. Shehabi demonstrates that affective transmission—which occurs through inextricably linked physical and imaginative processes—is fundamental to the formation of relational identity. By meditating on how the physical environment becomes inextricably linked to human flesh and blood, Shehabi depicts how the biological processes of one person enable cognitive processes of another.

While Shehabi involves the reader in the transmission of affect, Leila Halaby's poem "on going to the movies with a Jewish friend 1990" (2012) centers on a speaker—which she identifies with the first-person singular pronoun of "I"—and this speaker's experiences with affective transmission. Leila Halaby, born in Beirut to a Jordanian father and an American mother, grew up mostly in Arizona, but also lived in Jordan and Italy. Currently, she lives in Arizona. Her autobiographical collection *My Name on His Tongue* (2012) explores her feelings of exile, challenges of navigating two cultures, and struggles to shape her own creative identity. In this collection, Halaby's poem, "on going to the movies with a Jewish friend 1990," underscores the role of the imagination, and the body, in the transmission of affect between people. Halaby's brief poem, which is divided into three stanzas, begins by articulating the nature of a female speaker's friendship with an unnamed Jewish man during

an outing to a movie theater: “out of the bookstore / into a movie theater / with *the enemy* at my side / we were close / as we sat in darkness / our elbows touching / mine and *the enemy’s*.” Halaby italicizes the phrase “the enemy” twice to underscore the conventional understanding of relationships between Arabs and Jews as adversarial. However, Halaby quickly challenges this stereotype by representing a relationship of reciprocity: “we traded glasses / to see which frames / best suited our Semitic features / they were not dissimilar / our glasses / or our features.” Here, Halaby emphasizes the close connections between the speaker and her Jewish friend because of their similar features. By trading glasses, Halaby creates a relationship of reciprocity and empathy—of both literally and figuratively seeing the world through the eyes of the other.

Halaby then highlights the reactions of each party upon seeing through the other’s glasses: “they’re dusty / he whispered / as I put his frames / around my eyes in the safe darkness. / I winced / at the blurs on the screen / he turned away/ embarrassed.” In the feeling of safety created by the darkness of the movie theater, the speaker and her friend are able to whimsically trade visual experiences: seeing the same film simultaneously through the flawed vision of the other. The Jewish friend gives a piece of cautionary advice, almost apologetically, to the speaker, telling her that his glasses are dusty, which further accentuates the limits to his sight. The speaker’s vision is impeded by wearing his glasses, but she does not comment on the friend’s experience of wearing her glasses.

In the second stanza, Halaby moves from an American setting—“this smoky pool hall...the clamor of Springsteen”—to “the Palestinian shore,” where the speaker’s “bare feet / beat a memory into the earth.” She recalls the “mulberry tree / under which” she “wrote poetry / for that stolen shore.” Here Halaby takes an explicit position on the conflict, asserting

that the Palestinian shore has been “stolen.” She notes that the “poppy-dotted hillside / that taught” her “soul to breathe” is “unknown” to her “companion,” her Jewish friend. In the third and final stanza, Halaby asks a series of five hypothetical questions addressed to her Jewish friend, expressing an urgent need to experience a relationship with him. This relationship is one of imaginative affective transmission. In each of these hypothetical scenarios, Halaby imagines the speaker’s body engaged with her Jewish friend’s body, to different degrees. First, Halaby asks: “if I were heated wax / that covered your body / from the peak of your head / to the tips of your fingers / to the ends of your toes / then sealed / would you scream my truth?” Halaby presents the speaker’s body eclipsing her Jewish friend’s body, asking if he would “scream” her truth. This indicates a painful, forced imposition of her body onto her friend’s body: a parasitic relationship. The second question expands on the first scenario, but takes a different approach: “what if I melted again / poured myself into your cupped hands / like raindrops / would you drink me?” Here, Halaby seems to be imagining a more reciprocal relationship: rather than covering her friend’s body with wax, she imagines her body melting and poured into her friend’s cupped hands. She asks if her friend would drink her, indicating that the friend has the freedom to assess his level of engagement, rather than being overwhelmed and forced to answer the question of whether to scream, as in the first case.

In the third question, Halaby asks, “if my teardrops / filled a riverbed / became an ocean / would you swim with me?” Here Halaby imagines her body coexisting in a state of mutuality with her Jewish friend, although it is unclear whether what impact swimming in tears might have upon the friend. In the fourth question, Halaby returns to a more forceful approach: “if the kohl from my eyes / traced a line around you / trapping you / would you accept my heartbeat?” Here, Halaby invokes a trope of stereotypical Arab femininity: kohl-

ringed eyes. By reclaiming what is often an image of objectification into a mechanism for control, Halaby expresses her desire to have her Jewish friend understand and accept her experiences. Although her discussion of “trapping” her friend may seem to be a type of parasitic engagement, Halaby asks the friend if he would “accept” her heartbeat, which indicates reciprocity. In the final question, Halaby articulates mutual imbrications of herself and her friend: “if I offered you my tongue / to wrap around your own / would you speak my words?” This question, which has obvious sexual connotations, offers her friend the ability to speak her words, an action that elides the distinction between self and other.

Halaby, like Spinoza, is focused on how the imagination affects the interactions between bodies. As Gatens and Lloyd explain, Spinoza interrogates a complex array of interactions between bodies—some “relate to the impingement of other bodies here and now; others derive from past collisions and collusions of bodies. Some form the basis of collaborative relations between human individuals; others draw us into relations of conflict...human bodies are not born into a single community, but into complex, crisscrossing structures of reciprocal affinity.”<sup>153</sup> Halaby’s poem shows how external affections of the body are not separate from but, rather, are inextricably linked to the mind. In particular, Halaby ruminates on how bodily affects emerge from the mind and create a basis for relational identity. For example, Halaby illuminates external affections when she discusses the speaker’s “teardrops” filling a riverbed. This external manifestation of affections is important because it is only through the external affections of tears that the speaker communicates her affects to her Jewish friend. These affects emerge from the position of an Arab speaker who yearns for

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<sup>153</sup> Gatens, Moira and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1999, pg. 76-7.

the “stolen” Palestinian shore, for the “poppy-dotted hillside / that taught [her] soul to breathe,” which is “unknown to [her] companion,” the Jewish friend. It is only through bodily affections that the speaker expresses her yearning for the Palestinian shore, a process that facilitates relational identity.

Halaby’s interest in relational identity—and the affects entailed in creating and maintaining it—breaks down boundaries between self and other. Through mutual imbrications, the Jewish friend’s body is affected by an external body (the Arab speaker) and, through this process, the Arab speaker communicates to the Jewish friend. It is only through this process of relational identity—by imagining the Jewish friend as a captive audience to her affective responses—that the speaker of the poem gains control over her negative affects. Halaby’s work evinces what Teresa Brennan (2004) terms a “dyadic affective transfer” in which “one party benefits from the other’s energetic attention.”<sup>154</sup> In this case, the speaker of the poem benefits from imagining the Jewish friend’s energetic attention to a variety of embodied experiences the speaker creates in the poem. While Brennan maintains that appeals to the imagination cannot explain several well-attested phenomena, including the unconscious transmissions that constitute projection and introjection,<sup>155</sup> Halaby describes affective transmission exclusively through imaginative processes. Her poem emphasizes the importance of the imagination in theories of affective transmission. Writing from the position of a subject speaking to what she views as a member of an oppressive group, Halaby provides insights into the negative affect produced by one who sees oneself as a minority subject who

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<sup>154</sup> Brennan, Teresa. *Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2014, pg. 50.

<sup>155</sup> Brennan focuses on the embodied dimensions of affective transmission. For an analysis of the Brennan’s focus on embodiment, see Susan James’s contribution to “Perspectives on Teresa Brennan's The Transmission of Affect.” *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2006, pp. 103-17. See pg. 106.

has been disadvantaged by not having her affective responses considered. Halaby documents repressed affects that the speaker desires to express through imaginative acts of entanglement with the other. Halaby does not articulate a desire for aggression, but a yearning for understanding. Her imaginative responses create avenues for affects that have been repressed to be expressed—not in acts of violence—but through a dyadic affective transfer that connects the self and the other. Halaby’s poem, like Shehabi’s, breaks down boundaries between individual human subjects, depicting how relational identity is formed through affective transmission. Other poets, such as Etel Adnan, develop additional forms of relational identity. Adnan’s poetry meditates on entanglements between humans and the environment, a topic to which I will turn in the next section.

### **Relational Identity and the Beyond-Human World: Adnan’s Imaginative, Affective, and Spiritual Ethics**

Adnan’s complex identity seems, at least on the surface, to present an ideal subject for poetic explorations. Born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon (at that time under the French Mandate) to a Christian Greek mother and a Muslim Syrian father, Adnan lived in France before coming to the United States in 1955 to pursue graduate studies in philosophy at the University of California-Berkeley and at Harvard.<sup>156</sup> In 1972, Adnan returned to Lebanon and lived there during the civil war, working as a cultural editor for two daily newspapers. After seven years,

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<sup>156</sup> Ouyang, Wen-chin. “From Beirut to Beirut: Exile, Wandering and Homecoming in the Narratives of Etel Adnan.” *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, edited by Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2002, pg. 70.



she returned to the United States, where she began to write and publish poetry in both French and English from her home in California. Adnan's oeuvre—eighteen books encompassing the genres of journalism, creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry<sup>157</sup>—can be characterized as philosophical texts that develop metaphysical perspectives. In this chapter, I analyze poems from four of Adnan's collections—*There: In the Light of the Darkness of the Self and of the Other* (1997), *Seasons* (2008), *Sea and Fog* (2012), and *Premonition* (2014).

Given Adnan's transnational background, one might expect her poetry to focus on her identity, specifically on her intersectional standpoint as a woman of Lebanese descent and her experiences as a racialized subject in American society. Yet in her twelve books of poetry, Adnan rarely ponders her own identity. Instead, she interrogates the nature of identity itself, most prominently in her collections *There* (1997), *Seasons* (2008), *Sea and Fog* (2012), and *Premonition* (2014). In these works, Adnan does not explore how individuals are affected by the intersections of gender, race, and class, among other factors. Rather, Adnan's poetry articulates what Rosi Braidotti terms a "post-identitarian" view of the subject; Adnan does not often ruminate about how individual subjects are impacted by human power structures. Because Adnan concentrates on factors that unite all human beings, as opposed to analyzing the differences between them, her poetry has political implications. One of Adnan's most important contributions is her representations of interactions between humans and the nonhuman world.

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<sup>157</sup> Adnan's poetry collections include *Moonshoots* (1966) *Five Senses for One Death* (1971); *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989); *The Spring Flowers Own & Manifestations of the Voyage* (1990); *The Indian Never Had a Horse* (1995); *There: In the Light and the Darkness of the Self and of the Other* (1997); *In/Somnia* (2002); *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005); *Seasons* (2008); *Sea and Fog* (2012); and *Premonition* (2014). Her fiction includes *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) and *Paris, When It's Naked* (1993). Her nonfiction includes *The Ninth Page: Etel Adnan's Journalism 1972-74*; *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986); *Of Cities and Women* (1993); *Master of the Eclipse* (2009); and *On Love and the Cost We Are Not Willing to Pay Today* (2011).

Adnan engages in metaphysical inquiry, an attempt to present a coherent picture of reality, including a speculative account of the origin of things and of the place of human beings within this schema.<sup>158</sup> As Adnan writes, “Poetry is metaphysical. We’re searching for ways to see, to arrest, to tell, in the great passion for the eternal flow.”<sup>159</sup> She posits that there is a force outside of, and greater, than humans—what she terms “the eternal flow”—which she explores in her poetic visions. Adnan’s metaphysical perspectives notice the mind’s entanglements with, and ethical responses to, the nonhuman world. Throughout her poetry, Adnan does not depict the human mind as embodied, but rather as what I describe as networked, meaning that she explores how the mind is connected to, and affected by, nonhuman forces. I read in Adnan’s articulation of the networked mind an ethical framework for relational identity—grounded in human interactions with the beyond-human world—that is developed in three ways. First, Adnan creates imaginative descriptions of human interactions with the beyond-human world. Second, she represents humans’ affective responses to the beyond-human world. Third, Adnan illuminates spiritual relationships that connect human beings to the beyond-human world, which incorporate both imaginative and affective responses.

In her imaginative explorations of human interactions with the beyond-human world, specifically in *Sea and Fog* (2012), Adnan depicts the human mind as enmeshed with the natural world, and she describes nature as a mind. In her portrayals of the inextricably linked human mind and the natural world, Adnan associates the mind with the nonhuman,

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<sup>158</sup> See Stuart Hampshire’s introduction to Spinoza’s *Ethics*. New York: Penguin, 1994, pg. xv.

<sup>159</sup> *Sea and Fog*, pg. 88

specifically with the physical properties of the sea: “what if the mind were a well, deep but still with a firm base, though not a material limit? There would be water in there, real water, dark and oily, at turns slimy, that once in a while rebels, overflows; and isn’t that cataclysmic event what we name ‘sea?’”<sup>160</sup> Imagining the mind through a hypothetical scenario, Adnan describes the human mind as networked with the natural environment in ways that exceed embodiment. In another account of the networked mind that explores the inextricability of the human mind from nature, Adnan imbues the human mind with cosmological power—its “black holes,” she writes, “swallow tumultuous rivers, mountain ranges, galaxies, as well as toys, trees and memories.”<sup>161</sup> In this passage, Adnan reveals the mind in possession of black holes that interact with the physical geographical features of the world as well as with human constructs of toys and memories. This process of interacting with the world occurs through consumption: the mind consumes the world, making it part of the mind’s structural composition. These renderings are important because they articulate a view of identity that is not bounded to the embodied subject.

Many theorists have developed post-identitarian frameworks that underscore the relationships between human beings, animals, the environment, and natural processes (Plumwood 1993, 2002; Braidotti 1994; Oyama 2000; Alaimo 2000, 2010; Barad 2003, 2007). Indeed, the interdependence of human beings and the environment has long been an important topic for theorists interested in resolving ecological crises. In the era of the Anthropocene, in which resource depletions, species extinctions, and climate changes are

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<sup>160</sup> *Sea and Fog*. Callicoon, New York: Nightboat Books, 2012, pg. 57.

<sup>161</sup> *Sea and Fog*, pg. 88.

creating profoundly destructive consequences throughout the world, analytics that attend to only human relationships, without exploring human-environmental dynamics, have a limited purview. As J.K. Gibson-Graham contends, “responding to the challenges of the Anthropocene” requires that humans are “transformed by the world in which we find ourselves—or, to put this in more reciprocal terms, it is about the earth’s future being transformed through a living process of inter-being.”<sup>162</sup> Similar to this process of inter-being, Stacy Alaimo develops what she calls a “posthuman environmental ethics that denies to the ‘human’ the sense of separation from the interconnected, mutually constitutive actions of material reality.”<sup>163</sup> Both Alaimo and Gibson-Graham, like Adnan, attend to the complex interactions between humans, natural processes, and the environment.

In analyzing Adnan’s characterizations of human interactions with the beyond-human world, I read in Adnan’s work an advancement of Val Plumwood’s (1993) critique of Western rationality which, Plumwood argues, has been systematically unable to acknowledge dependency on nature. In her analysis, Plumwood criticizes the concept of dualism, a construction that not only demarcates separations (for example, between subject/object or human/nature), but also sets a higher value to one over the other. To solve this problem, Plumwood presents an alternative to dualistic thinking: a form of environmental ethics based on mutuality and care. She argues that a non-reductive resolution to dualisms requires that we

reconceive ourselves as more animal and embodied, more ‘natural,’ and that we reconceive nature as more mindlike than in the Cartesian conception. This is a

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<sup>162</sup> Gibson-Graham, J.K. “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene.” *Antipode*, vol. 41, 2009, pp. 320-46. See pg. 322.

<sup>163</sup> Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010, pg. 24.

condition for remaking our relations with nature, and beings in nature, on the basis of recognising them not as things but as creative self-directed originative others.<sup>164</sup>

Adnan's work accomplishes the reconceptualization that Plumwood calls for—reconceiving humans as close to nature—in her 2008 collection *Seasons*. This volume explores how “the weather keeps us conscious of our existence.”<sup>165</sup> Specifically, Adnan ponders the experience of being in “snow, melting rain, diffused, drifting, breaking down in moisture or smoke, diluting into near nothingness that's the mind's destination.”<sup>166</sup> Adnan positions human thought on the same level as natural formations and processes: “Drops of dew on a morning rose have as much being as a stack of accumulated thoughts.”<sup>167</sup> She views the human mind and body as inextricably connected and embedded within the environment. “Human heartbeats,” she writes, “are borrowed from the sun's pulse; along the riverbank some objects, impregnated with our thinking, soar.”<sup>168</sup> In these lines, Adnan writes that human life is “borrowed” from the sun, and that natural objects can become affected by human thinking. As Susan Oyama (2000) asserts, there are “a stunning array of processes, entities, and environments—chemical and mechanical, micro- and macroscopic, social and geological,” that shape and are shaped by social and biological constitution and

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<sup>164</sup> Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1993, pg. 124.

<sup>165</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 57.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 22.

behavior.”<sup>169</sup> Adnan’s perspectives on the networked mind delineate a relational identity that is not grounded in human embodiment but rather integrated with natural processes.

Environmental factors play a crucial role in Adnan’s description of relational identity. For example, in *There: In the Light of the Darkness of the Self and of the Other* (1997), Adnan portrays the body in water: “Currents meet in my body while it swims and I become water, part of water. The ‘you’ is always the ‘I’ so we inhabit each other.”<sup>170</sup> Just as the body fuses with water, the self also fuses with the other. In another passage from *There*, Adnan asks, “are you me, a self exploded and scattered, always kept aside, out of it, out of your sight, your purpose crossing mine; you’re maybe the hidden seed of the earth, and me, the moon.”<sup>171</sup> Here Adnan characterizes humans as imbued with the capacity to identify with others, and as inextricably connected to the environment. For Adnan, human bodily functions come from natural forces, human thought merges with the environment, and humans are “fused” with the weather.<sup>172</sup>

Adnan’s work also echoes Plumwood’s call to “reconceive nature as more mindlike than in the Cartesian conception.”<sup>173</sup> Throughout *Seasons*, Adnan imagines the networked mind by representing interactions between the mind and the world. She describes the world as a “mega-brain,” representing the universe as the highest form of intelligence and the human

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<sup>169</sup> Oyama, Susan. *Evolution’s Eye: A Systems View of the Biology-Culture Divide*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2000, pg. 3.

<sup>170</sup> *There: In the Light and the Darkness of the Self and of the Other*. Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 1997, pg. 27.

<sup>171</sup> *There*, pg. 34.

<sup>172</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 55.

<sup>173</sup> Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1993, pg. 124.

brain as a microcosm of that larger intelligence. As she writes, “When the world and the mind face each other, they cancel out. With its electrical system broken down, the body doesn’t qualify anymore for a name.”<sup>174</sup> Here, Adnan posits that the mutual interaction between the mind and the world “cancels” out both, breaking down the body’s “electrical system,” and, in the process, erasing the identity of the individual body. Throughout her work, Adnan calls attention to the instability of the individual subject. In *Seasons*, she writes, “The whole system named the ‘I’ is unreliable, unbalanced. When it goes astray it carries with it all the seasons.”<sup>175</sup> The unreliability and unbalanced nature of the individual subject has a tendency to go “astray” and to become enmeshed with the natural world. Her articulations of relational identity represent the merging of humans with the environment through energies, natural processes, and consciousness. Because Adnan’s poetry centers on the inextricability of humans and the beyond-human world—one of the important topics considered by new materialism—it is useful to explore how her work contributes to that field.

New materialism—a term coined by Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti in the second half of the 1990s— challenges the Cartesian account of matter as essentially inert and the historical materialist understanding of matter as transformed and given agency by humans’ labor and cultural practices.<sup>176</sup> Instead, new materialists, as Karen Barad writes, maintain that human beings “are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply

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<sup>174</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 9.

<sup>175</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 23.

<sup>176</sup> See Samantha Frost’s “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology.” *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, edited by H.E. Grasswick. Springer, 2011, pg. 71.

located at particular places in the world; rather...we are part of the nature we seek to understand.”<sup>177</sup> Because new materialists do not separate humans from the natural world, they contemplate “the forces, processes, capacities, and resiliencies” of bodies and organisms, exploring in particular “how the forces of matter and the processes of organic life contribute to the play of power or provide elements or modes of resistance to it.”<sup>178</sup> In new materialist accounts, the mind is always already material, matter is necessarily connected to the mind, and, as Donna Haraway puts it, nature and culture are “naturecultures.”<sup>179</sup> The complexity of causal processes emphasized by new materialists brings into focus innumerable interdependencies, a type of ecological thinking that is not as interested in individuals as it is in *networks* of relations in the context of ecosystems.<sup>180</sup>

New materialism, as defined by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2012), is a cultural theory that starts its analysis from how oppositions (between nature and culture, matter and mind, the human and the inhuman) are produced in action itself. New materialism has a profound investment in the morphology of change and gives special attention to matter (materiality and processes of materialization) as it has been much neglected by dualist thought.<sup>181</sup> Investigating networks of relations—and moving away from a conception of the

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<sup>177</sup> Barad, Karen. “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward and Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801-31. See pg. 828.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 70.

<sup>179</sup> From an interview with Karen Barad in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin’s *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.

<sup>180</sup> Lorraine Code, 2006, pg. 27, cited in Frost, pg. 78.

<sup>181</sup> See Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, “The Transversality of New Materialism,” in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Published by Open Humanities Press, 2012.



embodied human subject—is a crucial component of posthuman ethics. As Karen Barad puts it, ethics is

...not about right responses to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part. Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities...Responsibility, then, is a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self. This way of thinking ontology, epistemology, and ethics together makes for a world that is always already an ethical matter.<sup>182</sup>

Barad's thinking about ethics is predicated on the ability of human beings to interact with—to *respond* to—others who are not separate but entangled with the self. In a similar vein, Braidotti's work on post-humanism advances what she calls an “affirmative” politics based on a vision of life that she terms “*zoe*-life beyond the ego-bound human.”<sup>183</sup> This conception of *zoe*-life, which moves beyond embodied identity—what Braidotti calls “post-anthropocentrism”—addresses the question of how to sustainably live with the beyond-human world. Post-humanist and new materialist theories provide insights into human-environmental relationships; however, their emphasis on the inextricability of human beings and the beyond-human world does not, *in itself*, explain how humans' ethical commitments to the beyond-human world are formed, developed, and maintained.

Indeed, as Bonnie Washick and Elizabeth Wingrove (2015) observe, it is not clear whether new materialist and post-humanist figurations of the world “offer imaginative,

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<sup>182</sup> From an interview with Karen Barad in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin's *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Italics mine.

<sup>183</sup> See Braidotti's *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, g. 133.

affective, or strategic resources for political action.”<sup>184</sup> Washick and Wingrove draw our attention to three issues: that new materialists’ fixation on the mutual constitution of entangled agencies can make it difficult to identify the “continuities, disabilities, and often monotonous predictabilities that characterize systems of power asymmetry”;<sup>185</sup> that post-humanist ontology does not “illuminate any particular form of action that corresponds to the cooperative, conflictual, agonistic and/or deliberative relations variously associated with political engagement”;<sup>186</sup> and that this ontology “normalizes a vision of life forged through interdependence” which “occludes the struggle, compromise, and achievement that action-in-concert entails.”<sup>187</sup> Given these concerns, can new materialist and post-humanist ontologies provide a basis for formulating an ethics that is attentive to systemic power differentials, to forms of political action, and to the struggles inherent in collective action?

I argue that new materialism and post-humanist ontologies can indeed provide a basis for an ethics that highlights these issues. In thinking through how Adnan’s poetry articulates a post-humanist ethical framework, it is important to state at the outset that Adnan’s work does not directly address the issue of how human power systems create asymmetries that persevere through time. Rather, her poetry investigates a different aspect of power: how the affective force of love, as a form of power, moves individuals from an investment in embodied identity and into a relational identity. This relational identity can provide a basis for ameliorating the

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<sup>184</sup> Washick, Bonnie and Elizabeth Wingrove. “Politics that Matter: Thinking about power and justice with the new materialists.” *Contemporary Political Theory* 14.1 (2015): 63-89. See pg. 76.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 65.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 66.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

persistence of human power asymmetries. Adnan's attention to the affective dimensions of love addresses Washick and Wingrove's concerns that post-humanist ontology normalizes interdependence and occludes the struggles of collective action. Adnan does not occlude struggles; rather, she presents love itself as a struggle, as a power dynamic that breaks down the boundaries between self and other. For Adnan, love is a form of action in which the individual struggles between embodiment and relational identity.

In *There* (1997), Adnan asks, "What is love?" Although humans understand love on an experiential level—"We live it intimately"—people "ignore what it is." The familiarity of love, Adnan asserts, inhibits abstract contemplation about the nature of love, specifically its affective resonances. Adnan writes that love "resembles space and time, and like these two concepts, it is clear, functional, and practically nonexistent."<sup>188</sup> In Adnan's view, love is a foundational property of existence, a physical force, a fundamental law of the universe. Adnan also ponders a type of interpersonal romantic love in which self contemplates whether it loves the other "because of this proximity, this obsessive involvement," or because the other has "filled the space" of the self for "so long that the self is left with "signs" and "traces" of the other."<sup>189</sup> Adnan explores the nature of relationships grounded in love, emphasizing how these involvements affect the self physically—through "signs" and traces"—and still lead to a death of the self. The fusion of self and other through the affective bond of love leads to a type of death that occurs "many times," preparing the self for the ultimate experience of death: "We also did die many times, didn't we, of love and separation, so that when the end

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<sup>188</sup> *There*, pg. 51.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

will come it will be a comfortable, though perverse, homecoming. We did reach the absolute, didn't we, for a handful of hours, somewhere in between, in between 'you' and 'I.'"<sup>190</sup>

In these lines, Adnan portrays the space between self and other as “the absolute.” Love is a force that causes one to experience the “death” of self because of the desire to fuse with the other. In her work, the space between self and other is dissolved. She suggests that the force of love is what moves individuals from embodied identity to relational identity. Adnan renders love as a force that breaks down the boundaries between self and other. As she writes, “Love is subversion, you told me, adding that it tortures the body out of its limits.”<sup>191</sup> Here Adnan has the voice of the “other” associate love with a force of subversion that “tortures” the body; she associates love with violence, asserting that the affective power of love has the ability to violently wrest the individual body from its limits. The fusion of the self and the other, through the affective bond of love, leads to the death of the embodied self. An analysis of the affective response of love is important because it enables us to account for the ways in which affect is grounded in relationality and illuminates another way of seeing identity: as shaped by factors that both exceed and transcend embodiment.

Although at times Adnan concentrates on interpersonal or romantic love, she also considers the nature of affective bonds between the mind and the world. For example, in *Seasons* she writes, “The mind is in love with the world.”<sup>192</sup> This indicates that there is an affective dimension that leads the mind to both interact with, and to shape, the world. Adnan's

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<sup>190</sup> *There*, pg. 68.

<sup>191</sup> *There*, pg. 17.

<sup>192</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 65-6.

portrayal of the networked mind transcends the embodied subject, exploring the relationship between the mind and the world. Indeed, her reflections of humans' affective responses of love to the beyond-human world are a fundamental component of how she depicts relational identity as the basis for a post-humanist ethical framework. As Susan Oyama observes, if we investigate the "interdependence of organism and environment," then we can elucidate the ways in which organisms and their environments "can *affect* each other."<sup>193</sup> Adnan's poetry illuminates how the affective power of love is linked to action grounded in struggle and compromise—a type of politically engaged collective action. Her poetry concentrates on both the micro-level of two human beings engaged in the struggles entailed because of the affective bond of love, and on the macro-level of human beings as a species.

As an inextricable component of her interpretations of the affective response of love, Adnan's rendering of spirituality provides an ethical foundation for human and beyond-human interactions. Adnan's poetry elucidates how spirituality exceeds and transcends individual embodiment. Rather than ruminating on any recognizable religious traditions, Adnan creates a space for abstract deliberations about spirituality. In her exploration of identity, Adnan centers on spiritual dimensions, which she alternately refers to as God, the universe, spirits, and the immaterial. In *Seasons*, for example, Adnan notices the immaterial nature of the human mind. As she writes, "The mind doesn't take off from material objects but from immateriality."<sup>194</sup> Here Adnan emphasizes how forces that transcend and outlive human beings shape individual minds. These forces are spiritual in nature: "At the confluence

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<sup>193</sup> Oyama, Susan. *Evolution's Eye*, 2000, pg. 3 (emphasis mine).

<sup>194</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 32.

of spirit and matter, or mind and environment, there's a continuous spark."<sup>195</sup> This "continuous spark" is what exposes individuals to spiritual dimensions. As Adnan writes, "we live in many places, experience different telluric spirits. At the end, we'll live in all these various places simultaneously."<sup>196</sup> Adnan's attention to spirituality ruminates on the relationship between the human mind and the immaterial realm. She underscores that the mind is an intermediary between the material and the spiritual, thereby engaging in a poetic practice that does not center exclusively on human power structures.

Adnan stresses the spiritual purposes of human beings, not as individual subjects, but as entities that enable the governing intelligence of the universe to reflect on itself. In her poems, the self extends outside of its embodied status, and human beings exist as a medium to reflect the world to itself: "We are the world reflecting on itself, a medium, exalted, discarded."<sup>197</sup> The spiritual dimension of life, Adnan emphasizes, transcends individual human lives: "On a deathbed, the human spirit can cover the whole of the universe. It can figure out Being's auto-creation, its perpetual death-and-resurrection, experienced as a meteor. Then Nature swells and expands."<sup>198</sup> Adnan illuminates what she sees as the connections between the universe and the human spirit. In her poetry, human beings have the capacity—when they are near death—to encompass the entire universe, and to comprehend the nature of existence. In a poem reflecting on the nature of human identity, Adnan writes,

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<sup>195</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 37.

<sup>196</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 43.

<sup>197</sup> *Sea and Fog*, pg. 101.

<sup>198</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 46.

I am no object, no substance, no idea, no thought, but a white energy in the midst of the night that I am. I am a hole in the fabric of Being. But when you meet me in a café, or in the street, you give me a name and stop there. Names, numbers, bring you comfort. The same can be said for addresses, and other such stupidities. But one by one we shall disappear, make room for others. The universe, yes, will go on. It is expanding, but in what? In itself. It is the box and the package. We are in it. For ever. Ever.”<sup>199</sup>

In this passage, Adnan observes that human beings feel a need to place an identity on others by resorting to names and numbers. This seeking of identity stems from a desire for comfort. In contrast to an investment in embodied identity, Adnan describes her identity as a “white energy” and as a “hole in the fabric of Being.” Rather than conceptualizing identity as stable, she characterizes it as radically unstable and resisting coherence.

Adnan’s work does not attend to the identity of the individual, embodied subject, or on human power structures. Instead, Adnan centers on spirituality, rather than religion—a capacious perspective that moves the scope of her analysis beyond human power structures. Her interest in spirituality compels her to notice the macro-level forces that affect all human beings, rendering human power structures, as well as human identity formations, to be inconsequential. In this respect, her poetry accords with Jane Bennett’s (2015) position that new materialist and post-humanist ontologies indeed formulate a politics, but these ontologies “tend not to focus energy” on “structural constraints.” However, this does not mean that the underlying ontologies are apolitical.

Bennett makes the point that new materialism and post-humanism are inherently political because they enable us to see “the effects of the bio-assemblages in which we find

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<sup>199</sup> *Premonition*, pg. 13-14.

ourselves participating, and then to work experimentally—micro- and macro-politically—to alter or derail the machine so as to minimize its harms and distribute more equally its costs and benefits.”<sup>200</sup> Adnan’s descriptions of spirituality, which consider the interactions between the material and the immaterial, articulate a basis for building coalitions and solidarity. A lens that focuses on the spiritual enables us to see connections between all human beings—the commonalities we share—rather than the differences that emerge from other types of structural analysis. In contrast, an emphasis on identity partitions off the individual as an embodied subject and centers on that subject’s differences from others, which may lead to difficulties when seeking to form coalitions.

The networked mind, in Adnan’s perspective, serves as an “intermediary” between “matter and spirit.”<sup>201</sup> Adnan does not identify this “spirit” with any distinguishable religious tradition; there is a universality of “spirit” presented here. Instead, she highlights the process, or the network, of how this spirit is transmitted from the material world to the mind so that the spirit can be communicated to human beings. Yet the networked mind is not a neutral, emotionless intermediary. Adnan’s emphasis on spirituality is important because many contemporary theoretical accounts of identity often do not contemplate the spiritual beliefs held by many people. Numerous theorists have critiqued the relative absence of religion and spirituality within discussions of intersectionality. Indeed, religion has received relatively little attention within intersectionality as an axis of difference alongside gender, race, class,

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<sup>200</sup> Bennett, Jane. “Ontology, sensibility, and action.” *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2015, pp. 82-7. See pg. 85.

<sup>201</sup> *Seasons*, pg. 61.



ability, and nation, among other factors.<sup>202</sup> The “post-secular turn” within feminist thought ponders how the practices and agency of religious women challenges many assumptions of feminist theory and politics.<sup>203</sup> As Jakeet Singh (2015) observes, this literature explores what looks like a paradox to many feminists: that many women actively choose to comply with, embrace, uphold, and even spread religious traditions that appear to be conservative, traditional, or fundamentalist and that further women’s subordination, their ontological differences with men, and their strict social roles and duties.

Recent scholarship on religious women’s agency (Bracke 2003, Avishai 2006, Bilge 2010, Burke 2012) confronts and challenges the “false consciousness” thesis of many “second wave” and modern liberal-secular feminists that claims women who participate in patriarchal religious traditions are acting against their own objective interests, and are therefore simply the passive and brainwashed victims, dupes, or doormats of men and their patriarchal institutions. Under particular scrutiny in this literature is the implicit or explicit orientation in much of Euro-American feminist theory: a disdain for custom, tradition, and religion, and a teleological conception of progress tied to secularization and the ultimate demise (or at least privatization) of religion.<sup>204</sup>

If the secular, autonomous subject is no longer taken as given, then it becomes possible to consider multiple forms of identity and consciousness that entangle human beings in spiritual relationships.<sup>205</sup> As Rosi Braidotti contends, “the post-secular turn challenges

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<sup>202</sup> Jakeet Singh’s “Religious Agency and the Limits of Intersectionality.” *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2015, pp. 657-74.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 658.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

European political theory in general and feminism in particular because it makes manifest the notion that agency, or political identity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality.”<sup>206</sup> Indeed, post-secular theorists have displaced the definition of the subject from that of the secular, autonomous individual, thereby opening up the possibility for various forms of non-autonomous identity. Saba Mahmood (2005), for example, highlights previously unrecognized forms of action by religious women, enabling us to see more diverse forms of identity that foreground the interconnectedness or interdependency of human and nonhuman (divine or earthly) forms of life. New materialists have also engaged with the post-secular turn and the role of spirituality. As Braidotti puts it, conditions for political and ethical agency are not necessarily oppositional and thus not tied to the present by negation; instead they can be affirmative and geared to creating possible futures.”<sup>207</sup>

## Conclusion

While not all Arab American women poets articulate relational identity, I have found that several poets—especially Etel Adnan, Leila Halaby, and Deema Shehabi—portray an alternative to identity-based characterizations of individuals. Identity-based frameworks tend to emphasize the body in pain, suffering, and oppressed by an unjust society. While these

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<sup>206</sup> From an interview with Karen Barad in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin’s *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.

<sup>207</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. “In spite of the times: The postsecular turn in feminism.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2008, pp. 1-24. See pg. 15.

issues are important to explore in poetry, what is lost in this identity-based approach is an examination of commonality, relationality, and unity. By putting these poets into conversation with contemporary theorizing on identity, as well as with affect theory, I argued that Shehabi and Halaby develop visions of relational identity. Shehabi's poem imagines the formation of what Spinoza terms "common notions," which are the basis for what he calls "virtuous polities." Such polities are those which combine the powers of many harmoniously and so constitute a body politic capable of functioning as if it were "one mind and one body"<sup>208</sup> Shehabi's poetry confirms Spinoza's belief in the collective dimensions to individual selfhood, the idea that every person is embedded in wider social wholes in which the powers of bodies are strengthened or impeded. To be an individual is to be inserted into economies of affect and imagination which bind us to others. Shehabi's work demonstrates that affective transmission—which occurs through inextricably linked physical and imaginative processes—is fundamental to the formation of relational identity.

In a similar vein, Leila Halaby's poetry breaks down boundaries between individual human subjects, delineating how relational identity is formed through affective transmission. Through mutual imbrications, the Arab speaker communicates to her Jewish friend. It is through this process of relational identity—by imagining the Jewish friend as a captive audience to her affective responses—that the speaker of the poem gains control over her negative affects. Halaby stakes a claim for the importance of the imagination in theories of affective transmission. Her imaginative responses create avenues for affects that have been repressed to be expressed—not in acts of violence—but through a dyadic affective transfer

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., pg. 113.

that connects the self and the other.

In my readings of Etel Adnan, I underscored how her poetry about what I term the networked mind illuminates the importance of nonhuman factors in human consciousness. Adnan's poetry provides an ethical framework—grounded in affect—for exploring human-environmental interactions. Adnan's work shows how an emphasis on identity may be problematic if it advances an adversarial focus on how social structures negatively impact individuals. Her poetry contributes another way of seeing identity: as shaped by factors that exceed embodiment and establish grounds for relationships. Adnan's poetry reflects on the self as subject to larger spiritual forces that are beyond individual control. Her work implicitly poses the question: Is there not collective social benefit to be found in understanding the self as always subject to relationships, responsibilities, and ethical entanglements? The writings of these poets support the idea that intersectionality as an analytical framework would benefit from contemplating not only how individual subjects are shaped by structural inequalities, but also how subjects cultivate and maintain relationships.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Childhood Epistemologies:**

#### **Ethical Response to Violence in the Interstices of Arab-U.S. Boundaries**

##### **Introduction**

In “Arguments,” which ponders the United States and United Kingdom’s bombings of Iraq in December 1998, Lisa Suhair Majaj asks her readers to “consider the infinite fragility of an infant’s skull” in comparison to “a delicate porcelain bowl,” which “crushes under a single blow.” In these lines, Majaj establishes that the perspective of an infant’s fragility will serve as the foundation from which she will explore the impact of wars in Iraq. Majaj’s poem is just one of many poems about children by Arab American women. Although the presence of children in is a prevalent theme in Arab American women’s poetry, studies of Arab American literature have not engaged, thus far, in sustained inquiries about poetic representations of childhood in the context of violence. This chapter explores the significance of the recurring theme of childhood in this body of work.

The Iraq wars, along with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are frequent topics in Arab American women’s poetry, and many of these poems explore the nexus of violence and childhood. Several of these poets ruminate on the boundary between childhood and adulthood as a liminal space that facilitates insights from child’s perspectives to adult audiences. These

poets' interest in children serves a rhetorical purpose, as poets who discuss highly politicized conflicts—especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—are more likely to find receptive audiences if their work centers on children rather than on highly committed activists on either end of the political spectrum. In this chapter, I seek to understand how Arab American women's poetic portrayals of childhood provide insights into the problem of violence, both intra-regional violence and foreign interventions. The poets I analyze—Lisa Suhair Majaj, Elmaz Abinader, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Deema Shehabi—write about two major ongoing conflicts that have wracked the Arab region from the mid-twentieth century until the present: the Israel-Palestinian conflict and military interventions in Iraq, from the 1998 U.S. and U.K.-led invasion following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, to the 1991 Gulf War, which was followed by the 2003 American invasion and its aftermath. These conflicts caused extreme instability in the Arab region, leading to millions of people in diaspora becoming refugees. The Arab American Institute reports that the number of Americans who claim an Arab ancestry has more than doubled since the Census first measured ethnic origins in 1980 and is among the fastest growing Arab diaspora populations in the world.<sup>209</sup> Many Palestinians immigrated to the U.S. after the Six Day War in 1967, and Iraqi citizens came in large numbers to the U.S. between 1993 and the present.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> See the Arab American Institute Foundation's 2014 National Demographic Profile, which is based on the U.S. Census Bureau, Office of Immigration Statistics – American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2007-2011) and American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (2012).

<sup>210</sup> According to the 2000 United States Census, there were 72,112 people of Palestinian ancestry living in the United States, increasing to 85,186 by the 2009-2013 American Community Survey. Estimates of the number of Iraqi citizens vary—the Arab American Institute estimates that approximately 160,000 Iraqis came to the U.S. between 1993 and 2013, since the Gulf War of 1991, the Detroit area absorbed over 300,000 Iraqis a year. See Abraham, Nabeel, et al. *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2000.

How do Arab American women poets who have lived in the United States, often for most of their lives, represent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq wars? These poets have come to understand the history of violence in the region through multiple sources such as personal experiences, ancestral memories, historical accounts, and contemporary news media. In addition to these sources, these poets create child characters and write from their perspectives. The creation of child characters serves as a rhetorical strategy to freight empathy for people in the region. These poets depict childhood as a period in the lifecycle and as an epistemological space from which to articulate insights into the problem of violence in the Arab region.

The term “epistemology” refers to the study of knowledge and justified belief. As the study of knowledge, epistemology seeks to understand the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge—its sources, structure, and limits. In respect to the study of justified belief, epistemology aims to understand the concept of justification and the degree to which justification is subjective.<sup>211</sup> As Linda Alcoff (1996) puts it, epistemology spells out the grounds on which we can choose one account of a phenomena over another.<sup>212</sup> This chapter uses the term “epistemology” in a broad sense to understand how Arab American women poets disseminate knowledge about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq wars through the creation of child characters and viewpoints. Through child characters, these poets produce knowledge about ethical responses to violence for readers who are geographically distant from Arab regional violence. As Uma Narayan (1994) argues, “nonanalytic and ‘nonrational’

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<sup>211</sup> Steup, Matthias. “Epistemology.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/epistemology>.

<sup>212</sup> Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Real Knowing*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996.

forms of discourses, like fiction or poetry, may be better able to convey the complex life experiences of one group to members of another.”<sup>213</sup> While the chapter remains agnostic about the claim that poetry is *better* able to convey life experiences than other forms of discourse, I maintain that poetry is an important source of knowledge about life experiences. Specifically, I explore how Abinader, Majaj, Nye, and Shehabi create knowledge about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq wars for a primarily American audience; I also make claims about the significance of this knowledge. Moreover, throughout this chapter, I consider how these poets contribute to feminist standpoint theories.

As Mary Haweksworth (1989) explains, feminist standpoint theories argue that knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an individual’s position in a determinate sociopolitical formation at a specific point in history. Class, race, and gender, among other factors, necessarily structure the individual’s understanding of reality and hence inform all knowledge claims.<sup>214</sup> Donna Haraway uses the term “embodied vision” to indicate that knowledge is situated and partial.<sup>215</sup> Other feminist scholars, including Nancy Hartsock and Patricia Hill Collins, have investigated systematic biases toward the interests, experiences, and forms of subjectivity of the privileged.<sup>216</sup> As Uma Narayan writes, when reflecting on the production of knowledge, it is easier and more likely for the oppressed to

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<sup>213</sup> Narayan, Uma. “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist.” *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, edited by Alison M. Jaggar & Susan Bordo. Rutgers UP, 1989, pg. 264.

<sup>214</sup> Haweksworth, Mary E. “Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth.” *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1989, pp. 533-57.

<sup>215</sup> Haraway, Donna. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575-599.

<sup>216</sup> Sprague, Joey. *Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. See Chapter 2.



have critical insights into the conditions of their own oppression than it is for those who live outside these structures.<sup>217</sup> Standpoint theories, then, move beyond a descriptive situated-knowledge thesis; they contend that there are certain social positions from which it is possible to develop *better understandings*. Extending the Marxist view of the proletariat's epistemic status, standpoint theorists argue that marginalized social locations are epistemically *superior* in that they correct falsehoods and reveal previously suppressed truths.<sup>218</sup> As Sandra Harding puts it, "Standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemic, scientific and political advantage."<sup>219</sup>

Many scholars have critiqued the concept of "epistemic privilege" by interrogating the social constructionist framework on which standpoint theory is based. As David Detmer (2003) argues, social constructionism is "self-referentially inconsistent" because when it is judged "in the light of its own explicitly stated content, it seems to contradict itself. For if all truth is indeed to be regarded as socially constructed, rather than as reflecting accurately how things 'really are,' then surely this claim itself—that is, the theory of social constructionism—must also be viewed merely as a social construct and not merely as an accurate reflection of how things really are."<sup>220</sup> Detmer points out that someone who has been structured by

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<sup>217</sup> Narayan, Uma. "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist." *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, edited by Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo. Rutgers UP, 1989.

<sup>218</sup> Howell, T. "Feminist Standpoint Theory." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/femstan>.

<sup>219</sup> Sandra Harding, editor. *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004, pg. 7-8.

<sup>220</sup> Detmer, David. *Challenging Postmodernism: Philosophy and the Politics of Truth*. Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2003, pg. 38.

different combinations of race, class, and gender might have a perspective in which the possibility of advancing legitimate knowledge claims that *transcend* the boundaries of class, race, and gender would be affirmed.<sup>221</sup> In a social constructionist framework, where all knowledge is socially constructed and there is no objective referent, what are the grounds on which one can claim that one account of knowledge is *superior* to another? This is not to say that diverse perspectives are not important. Indeed, the increasingly inclusive trajectory of contemporary scholarship means that issues are being examined from a greater variety of perspectives—a vital enterprise that should be continued. Yet, the issue of whether a perspective has been marginalized is different from the issue of determining the truth or falsity of that perspective.<sup>222</sup>

I take critiques of social constructionism seriously, especially the concept of “epistemic privilege,” which I regard as problematic in a multicultural context because it is likely to provoke tensions between social groups who are viewed as epistemically privileged and those groups who are considered to lack epistemic privilege. If one rejects the concept of epistemic privilege, however, then how do marginalized voices assert their experiences to achieve inclusion and equality? How do disadvantaged groups relay their experiences without provoking antagonism and social conflict? I argue that poetry is a medium that facilitates nonviolent communication between differently situated social groups. In this chapter, I put several poems by Arab American women into conversation with feminist standpoint theory and its critiques. I explore how these poets’ work supports a critique of epistemic privilege

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., pg. 47.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., pg. 343.

because claims of epistemic privilege make it difficult to communicate across differences, specifically in the case of Arab poets speaking to American audiences. Instead of appealing to the notion of epistemic privilege, these poets, through child characters, appeal to the collective empathy of their American audience.

Throughout this chapter, I analyze how these poets create what I call childhood epistemologies, which I will describe in detail later. By creating childhood epistemologies, these poets do not claim that children's viewpoints have epistemic privilege, but rather that their perspectives are important to contemplate. Through children's perspectives, these poets articulate specific ethical positions on how to respond appropriately to acts of violence. Although these poets specifically address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq wars, their insights also have more general application because they establish ethical parameters for responding to violence. Through child characters and their vantage points, these poets respond to violence in ways that do not perpetuate violence.

In the first part of this chapter, I explore how Abinader, Majaj, and Nye develop childhood epistemologies that facilitate communication between America and the Arab region. Through the creation of childhood epistemologies, which emerge from domestic environments, specifically the private space of households, these poets open communication between Arabs and Americans. The second and final section explores how Nye and Shehabi, in poems about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, articulate childhood epistemologies in the context of the natural environment, by which I signify the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth. Specifically, I attend to how Nye and Shehabi's childhood epistemologies explore the interstices between trauma and healing—the process of developing what I call

intergenerational trauma resistance, which is based on insights that emerge from the natural environment.

### **Childhood Epistemologies in Domestic Spaces: Speaking in the Interstices Between the U.S. and the Arab Region**

Elmaz Abinader's poem, "This House, My Bones" (1999), was written in the aftermath of two military interventions in Iraq: the Gulf War (1990-91) led by the United States in response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait, and Operation Desert Fox (1998), a bombing of several Iraqi military installations in response to the country's continued flouting of the UN weapons ban and its repeated interference with the inspections.<sup>223</sup> Scholars have estimated that the number deaths of children under the age of five resulting from the Gulf War and its aftermath—including trade sanctions—was between 400,000 and 500,000.<sup>224</sup> In this context, Abinader emphasizes the impact of these military interventions on the life of an Iraqi child. Abinader creates a child character named Fuad and establishes the reader's relationship with Fuad in the domestic space. By using the second-person address, Abinader situates the reader beside Fuad and begins a rapport between them.

Abinader opens with a directive for readers to "enter the house" and to sit at a table

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<sup>223</sup> See the entry on "Iraq War." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iraq-War>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2016.

<sup>224</sup> Ali, Mohamed, John Blacker, and Gareth Jones. "Annual mortality rates and excess deaths of children under five in Iraq, 1991-98." *Population Studies: A Journal of Demography*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2003, pp. 217-226.

covered in a cloth embroidered for “the third child’s birth.” Inside this domestic environment, as the “youngest boy / Fuad, shows you a drawing,” Abinader puts the reader in the position of giving affection: “You touch his shoulder, stroke / his hair, he loves to talk to strangers / show them to his room filled with posters / Of extinct and mythical animals.” What is important in Abinader’s evocation of childhood is the relationship she establishes between the child, Fuad, and the reader—a relationship that serves as the basis for an epistemology that Abinader builds throughout the poem. The imaginative location of the domestic sphere, which facilitates closeness, enables readers to intimately engage with an Arab child’s perspective. Fuad, as Abinader emphasizes, “loves to talk to strangers,” which establishes a familiarity between readers and the child that would be difficult to achieve in other social locations (for example, in public spaces) or with people who inhabit other social and epistemological locations (for example, with adults who hold strong political beliefs). The fact that Fuad is a child is of crucial importance, not because of his age or because Abinader associates him with innocence, but because Fuad’s perspective, specifically his love of strangers, establishes an epistemological location from which readers—who may be geographically distant from Arab regional violence—can connect to the child and engage emotionally with him. This engagement serves as a foundation on which Abinader extrapolates, from Fuad’s point of view, insights into the nature of violence and ethical responses.

After situating the reader beside Fuad and establishing a rapport between them, Abinader makes an abrupt turn to the political: “You want to linger / In the music of his voice, afraid his disappearance / Is inscribed on shell cases stockpiling in the Gulf.” Scholars have long documented the impact of Gulf War military interventions on children, specifically aerial bombardment and artillery from helicopters. As Rosi Braidotti observes, contemporary

warfare is “high-tech, clean and efficient,” situated in opposition to “woman, the native, the dispossessed, the abused, the excluded.”<sup>225</sup> Abinader identifies Fuad as dispossessed, abused, and excluded by drawing an implicit connection between his life and the lives of extinct animals pictured on his bedroom posters. By locating the impact of Gulf War violence in the domestic space through the reader’s relationship with Fuad, Abinader contrasts the “music” of Fuad’s voice with a fear of his death by artillery fire. Moreover, by emphasizing the epistemological vantage point of the child, which emerges from the domestic space, Abinader elicits the reader’s concern for Fuad’s safety.

Abinader sets the temporal frame just before the beginning of the U.S.-led attack: “Someone asks, what should we do / while we wait for the bombs, promised / And prepared? How can we ready ourselves? [...] Do we dig / escape tunnels in case our village is invaded? / Do we send our children across the border / To live in refugee camps?” In these lines, Abinader constructs a collective narrative voice—those soon to be affected by military interventions in the Persian Gulf region—and asks a series of rhetorical questions concerned with issues of safety, geography, movement, cities, and public spaces. For families living in villages far from cities and lacking transportation, the only method of protection lies not in attempting to flee, but rather in hunkering down, even contemplating digging escape tunnels. Wealthier families with some mode of transportation, and families near cities, might seek safety by leaving the country, yet this option creates the risk of ending up in refugee camps. Abinader specifically emphasizes the impact of warfare on children. The potential consequences of the Gulf War on children are made more apparent because Abinader has

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<sup>225</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. “Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, no. 7-8, 2006, pg. 201.

previously established Fuad's perspective and created a relationship between him and the reader. It is only by returning to the home—to the relationships sustained in the private space—that Abinader can explore ethical response to violence in the Arab region.

Situated in the domestic space, Abinader reflects on the small, specific details of a home: “the tick on the wall marking / The children’s growth,” “the bare spot on the rug / Where Jidd put his feet when he read / The Friday paper,” “brass doorknobs, / Enamel trays, blue glasses made in Egypt, / Journals of poetry, scraps of newspapers, recipes / They meant to try.” These details aim to help readers to “Enter the heart” and to “Read the walls and all of its inscriptions, / The love of lovers, of children and spouses.” In the last line, Abinader depicts the heart as a home: “Hold the heart. Imagine it is yours.” Abinader builds a childhood epistemology in this poem by creating a relationship between Fuad and the reader—a strategy of asking an audience outside of the Arab world to contemplate the implications of violence in their own lives. By engaging with a child in the domestic space, readers from geographically distant locations can experience a close relationship with people in the Arab region, to see their commonalities, idiosyncrasies, nuances, and complexities. Abinader’s poem does not advance a concept of epistemic privilege; rather, she calls for dialogue in the interstices of U.S. and Iraqi regional boundaries.

Like Abinader, Lisa Suhair Majaj’s “Arguments” (1998) scrutinizes foreign interventions in Iraq. Majaj (b. 1960) is a Palestinian American poet and scholar. Born in Iowa, Majaj was raised in Jordan and educated in Beirut and in the United States. In 2001, she moved to Nicosia, Cyprus where she currently lives. In her poem, “Arguments”—originally titled “Arguments Against the Bombing”—Majaj takes as her subject the United States and United Kingdom’s four-day bombing of Iraq in December 1998. Bill Clinton argued that the

bombing was necessary because of Iraq's failure to comply with United Nations Security Council resolutions and its interference with United Nations Special Commission inspectors. The goal of the mission, he stated, was to "attack Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs and its military capacity to threaten its neighbors."<sup>226</sup> Majaj critiques the bombing by adopting a childhood epistemology. Majaj, like Abinader, addresses her poem to non-Arab audiences, specifically those in America and in the United Kingdom. Whereas Abinader develops a specific child character from the Arab region, Majaj concentrates on childhood in a comparative global context through the concept of "collateral damage."

Majaj domesticates the term collateral damage by encouraging readers to make connections between Iraqi children and their own children. Throughout the poem, Majaj asks readers to reflect on the impact of war by displacing the sufferings endured by Arab children onto readers' different geographical locations. She writes, "consider: beneath the din of explosions / no voice can be heard / no cry." The use of the word "cry" articulates a connection to the infant at the beginning of the poem. By situating readers in an Iraqi domestic sphere, Majaj emphasizes that the sound of explosions overpowers the entire aural field, making it impossible to hear any voice, especially an infant's cry.

Majaj then asks readers to contemplate on the implications of violence in their own lives and children: "consider your own sky on fire / your name erased / your children's lives 'a price worth paying' / consider the faces you do not see / the eyes you refuse to meet / 'collateral damage' / how in these words / the world / cracks open." In these lines, Majaj builds a childhood epistemology based on nonviolent responses to violence. These children's

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<sup>226</sup>Transcript: President Clinton explains Iraq strike. December 16, 1998.  
<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/stories/1998/12/16/transcripts/clinton.html>. Accessed 26 July 2016.



lives are viewed as “a price worth paying,” for they are seen by U.S. and U.K. political and military leaders as “collateral damage.” Frederick Rosén (2016) defines collateral damage as “the unintentional or incidental injury or damage to persons or objects that would not be lawful military targets in the circumstances ruling at the time. Such damage is not unlawful as long as it is not excessive in light of the overall military advantage anticipated from the attack.”<sup>227</sup> From a military perspective, then, collateral damage is a utilitarian assessment that justifies harm, including death, suffered by noncombatants during military action.

Majaj interrogates the impact of collateral damage by asking readers to meditate on how they would feel if the bombings occurred in their own geographical locations, specifically how they would feel if their children’s lives were considered “a price worth paying” by political and military leaders. Majaj also asks her audience to focus on Iraqi children—“the faces you do not see / the eyes you refuse to meet.” Her poem builds childhood epistemologies by starting with the hidden faces of Iraqi children, whom were not valued enough to avoid harming in military interventions. The eyes that the American and U.K. audience for this poem “refuse to meet” are the vantage point from which Majaj builds her “argument.” The “collateral damage” of the U.S. and U.K.’s invasion of Iraq—far from unimportant—is given precedence here. Majaj’s “argument” is that the designation of “collateral damage” is precisely what perpetuates violence and makes its impact worse. Children, Majaj argues, must be placed at the center of our consciousness. She does this by domesticating collateral damage in the space of the U.S. and the U.K. Majaj’s poem does not claim epistemic privilege for Iraqi children but creates a dialogue between non-Arab

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<sup>227</sup> Rosén, Frederick. *Collateral Damage: A Candid History of a Peculiar Form of Death*. London: Hurst, 2016.

audiences and Iraqi children so that readers are compelled to ponder the impact of the U.S. and U.K.-led bombings of Iraq.

Whereas Majaj and Abinader contemplate childhood in the context of Iraqi violence, Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "The Small Vases from Hebron" (1998) examines the violence associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nye was born in 1952 in St. Louis to an American mother and a Palestinian refugee father. In "The Small Vases from Hebron," Nye develops childhood epistemologies primarily through imagery. She opens the poem with the image of two vases, which "entrust the small life," positioned beside children who "open their gray copybooks." The image of the vases beside the children emphasizes the purpose of the domestic sphere: a space in which "small life" is protected. Nye shatters this idyllic domestic scene with the question, "And what do the headlines say?" In response, she writes, "Nothing of the small petal / perfectly arranged inside the larger petal." Here Nye highlights the divergence between political violence—which is deemed newsworthy—and the domestic space, which is signified by the small petal of the flower arranged inside the larger petal, which reflects the fetus' relationship to its mother. Importantly, as Nye points out, the headlines say "nothing" about this maternal relationship; the domestic space, she observes, is outside of the purview of what most people consider newsworthy. The implication here is that the knowledge produced by the domestic childhood epistemologies should be taken seriously and promoted in public forums, rather than perpetuating stories about ongoing violence. What would it mean, Nye's poem implicitly asks, if the headlines discussed "the small petal / perfectly arranged inside the larger petal?" Nye's image of flower petals can be read a metaphor for the protection of children by their parents. Through this image, Nye advocates for attention to the relationships created and maintained within domestic spaces as important

because the caring labor required to maintain domestic relationships provide insights into the labor necessary to solve the problem of violence.

Nye's poem operates by contrasting the safety of the domestic realm with violence in the city of Hebron. She builds a childhood epistemology from the image of "boys, praying when they died," who "fall out of their skins." This image is one of destruction, as boys attacked in war suffer wounds that cause them to "fall out of their skins," both literally and figuratively. At the end of the poem, Nye again contrasts an image of domestic safety with the violence of the city: "the child of Hebron sleeps / with the thud of her brothers falling / and the long sorrows of the color red." The narrative voice here adopts the viewpoint of an unnamed child from Hebron who endures the loss of her brothers. This expansive perspective moves from the domestic space to the public space—the site of political violence.

Nye establishes childhood epistemologies that emerge from images in the domestic sphere, juxtaposing the violence of Hebron with a safe domestic sphere. The types of knowledge produced in domestic spaces are not seen as "newsworthy," yet this knowledge—and the practices of care that connect parents to children—is of crucial importance. Moreover, Nye builds childhood epistemologies based on "the child of Hebron" who "sleeps / with the thud of her brothers falling / and the long sorrows of the color red." While the news media highlights incidents of violence, Nye emphasizes that the media never produces stories about the domestic sphere because they consider it outside the purview of the news. Yet, the domestic sphere is precisely the place where insights into ethical responses to violence—and the prevention of violence—often emerge. Nye begins and ends the poem with images of children: the children who "open their gray copybooks" and the child of Hebron who sleeps amidst ongoing violence. The vantage points of children who pay attention to the ongoing

practices of daily life underscores children's ability to remain stable even amidst the presence of violence. The children do not participate in, nor do they seem to become affected by, violence; Nye leaves to the reader to contemplate the impact of violence on children. The poem portrays the stoicism of children who do not become preoccupied with violence, but rather continue their engagement in life. Nye invokes childhood characters and perspectives in an appeal the empathy of her American audience. Her poem rests on the assumption that it is possible for those who do not have direct experience of the Israel-Palestinian conflict to understand experiences outside of their purview. Nye's work, along with that of Majaj and Abinader, develops childhood epistemologies which respond to violence in ways that do not perpetuate violence. Through the creation of childhood epistemologies, which emerge from domestic environments, these poets do not claim epistemic privilege but instead open communication between Arabs and Americans. In the next section, I turn to two poets who articulate childhood epistemologies in the context of nature and explore the significance of these epistemologies.

### **Childhood Epistemologies in Nature: Articulations of Intergenerational Trauma**

#### **Resistance**

Most Arab American women poets who address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict highlight several themes including trauma, exile, diaspora, maternal images of Palestine, the relationship between Palestine and America, interethnic and interfaith relationships, and

images of Palestine as a sexually violated woman.<sup>228</sup> Although both Shehabi and Nye’s poetry contemplates some of these themes—specifically trauma, Palestinian-American relations, and interethnic and interfaith relationships—Shehabi and Nye are unique for their portrayals of childhood and nature in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Shehabi and Nye develop childhood perspectives on violence from the vantage point of the natural environment. In doing so, both poets make important contributions to knowledge about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Deema Shehabi’s “Green Fruit” (2011) discusses the conflict through a Palestinian female child narrator’s point of view: “There are starving children, and homeless people / hovering in the polluted air that I hate. / There are malignant cysts / that should disappear from bodies and skin. / There are soldiers all over, and machine guns, and tear gas.” In these lines, Shehabi’s child narrator articulates what David Jones Marshall (2013) terms “trauma discourse.” Although literary depictions of Palestinian suffering do represent realities about people’s lives under occupation, attention to suffering alone, as Marshall states, “presents an impoverished assessment of life in Palestine.”<sup>229</sup> For this reason, it is important to attend to other types of discourses articulated by Palestinian children. Shehabi’s Palestinian child narrator asserts her desire to resist violence: “I don’t want to fall in a grave, / restless beneath the weight, / a martyr for nothing.” The child’s strategy for resisting violence is to examine how her identity is inextricably linked to the natural world. Rather than associating nature as a space free from violence and suffering, Shehabi demonstrates that the child desires to

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<sup>228</sup> See Appendix C for a detailed catalogue of themes in poems about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

<sup>229</sup> Marshall, David Jones. “‘All the Beautiful Things’: Trauma, Aesthetics and the Politics of Palestinian Childhood.” *Space and Polity*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2013, pp. 53-73. See pg. 55.

integrate the natural world into Israel and the Palestinian territories. As the child states, “I want to go on following the moon— / bright, silvery, secure with the light / casting jasmine into the / bloody streets of Jerusalem, / blossoming every day.” Shehabi emphasizes the child’s desire to follow the moon as a source of security and as a connection to the natural environment, which the child desires to incorporate into the city. The blossoming jasmine serves as a counterpoint to the bloody streets of Jerusalem—an attempt to find beauty in nature and to incorporate this beauty into the violent urban environment.

Considerations of beauty, as David Marshall (2013) argues, can play an important role in creating political subjectivities. Indeed, in his research with children in the Balata refugee camp near the northern West Bank city of Nablus, Marshall found that Palestinian children “frequently used the word beauty” as a way of “expressing religious and national imaginaries, describing and making judgments about everyday people, places, and behaviors, critiquing social and political and injustice, expressing hope for the future, and as aesthetic rupture to the dominant perceptual order of trauma and suffering.”<sup>230</sup> Shehabi’s narrator, like the children Marshall interviewed, engages in a search for beauty which serves as aesthetic rupture to discourses of trauma. However, Shehabi’s insights into the significance of Palestinian children’s search for beauty differ from Marshall’s—and this difference extends beyond the methodological divergences between Marshall’s ethnographies and Shehabi’s poetry. While Marshall ponders how children resist trauma discourses, and does not include analysis of children’s parents, Shehabi’s poem creates a child narrator who develops an idea of beauty,

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., pg. 61.

based on nature, which is inspired by her parents. While trauma discourses often discuss intergenerational trauma, Shehabi's work articulates intergenerational trauma resistance.

This intergenerational trauma resistance is developed from the child narrator's perspective. Through the child's relationship with her parents, Shehabi builds a childhood epistemology which integrates the natural world into the Palestinian territories. As the child remarks, "my mother when she greets me / with her outstretched arms gives me the moon, / and she runs through the arching streets of Gaza, / and stops to stare at the white minarets of the mosques, / planting seeds of green fruit." These lines reflect the child's imagination, her desire to possess the moon, and to see her mother integrating nature into an urban environment rife with overcrowding, poverty, and violence. The child desires the mother's freedom, her ability to inhabit the densely populated urban space of Gaza and transform this space into a garden. What is surprising is that one might expect Shehabi to associate the mother with domestic spaces, but this poem connects the mother to the urban environment, while it is the father who leads the child into the household. As the child writes, her father includes her in "debates about survival / into gatherings where friends speak of the good past / into houses that remind me of home / into a sunny shelter where doorsteps / are fragrant and windows rise to poplars." In these lines, the child explains how her connection to nature has been inspired by both of her parents. Images of violence and suffering are nowhere to be found. Instead, Shehabi's child narrator concentrates exclusively on her parents' resistance to trauma through their integration of nature into the Palestinian territories. The child's mother plants seeds of green fruit in Gaza, stopping occasionally to admire the architectural beauty. The child's father leads her into domestic gatherings of friends who recollect good memories, and these gatherings remind the child of her home.

Inspired by her parents' resistance to trauma, the child imitates their connections to the natural world: "I climb slowly with my moon, my roots, my dome, / remembering my parents, / I hike up through the sloping hills and green orchards / and gardens of olive trees smelling of jasmine / in which little white petals are growing." The child narrator reiterates her parents' resistance to trauma by seeking connections to the natural world—the moon, hills, orchards, and gardens. Shehabi has the child contemplate specific images from nature: olive trees, jasmine, and small white petals. The child's interest in colors—specifically green and white—evokes growth and purity. Shehabi's illumination of the beauty of her natural surroundings is significant because there has been destruction of both the built and natural environments by the Israeli military.

Throughout the poem, Shehabi uses a first-person voice to emphasize the Palestinian child's perspective. This perspective attends to issues of privilege and oppression by documenting how the conflict has had a strong negative impact on Palestinians. Yet, Shehabi's child narrator does not exclusively notice issues of privilege, and the narrative voice does not assert epistemic privilege. Shehabi also presents the child's desire to resist intergenerational trauma by underscoring images of nature. This emphasis on intergenerational trauma resistance is echoed in the work of Naomi Shihab Nye, who lived in Ramallah, Palestine, and the Old City in Jerusalem during her high school years. She later returned to the United States and currently lives in San Antonio, Texas.

Nye frequently discusses her father's Palestinian heritage and his influence on her life. In *Transfer* (2011), Nye comments on how her father, after having lost his Jerusalem home in 1948, traveled back and forth to the West Bank for many years to visit his mother. She



emphasizes how her father's lifelong hope was to see resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—a hope that Nye herself continues:

I carry his endless stubborn hope—someday there will be justice for Palestinians and Israelis living, somehow, together. Fighting is a waste of talent. Fighting is unproductive. The United States will realize how ridiculous it is to attempt to broker peace and donate weapons to one side, at the same time. Someday Arabs and Jews will live as the cousins, or brothers and sisters, they always were and still are.<sup>231</sup>

The influence of her Palestinian father's experiences can be seen in Nye's poetry, in particular "Jerusalem" (1994). In this poem, Nye opens with a bold declaration: "I'm not interested in / who suffered the most. / I'm interested in / people getting over it."<sup>232</sup> With this statement, Nye departs from most Palestinian American poetry, which documents Palestinian suffering.

Nye's poem does not claim that either side of the conflict has epistemic privilege; rather, she ponders the process of healing.

This poem relates an anecdote about her father as a child, in which she discusses how a stone hit him on the head and, as a result, hair would not grow on that spot. Nye describes how this incident led her to think about the nature of suffering:

Our fingers found the tender spot  
and its riddle: the boy who has fallen  
stands up. A bucket of pears  
in his mother's doorway welcomes him home.  
The pears are not crying.  
Later his friend who threw the stone  
says he was aiming at a bird.  
And my father starts growing wings.

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<sup>231</sup> *Transfer*, pg. 117-18.

<sup>232</sup> The poem is from Nye's collection *Red Suitcase* (1994). The poem begins with an epigraph of three lines from Tommy Olofsson: "*Let's be the same wound if we must bleed. / Let's fight side by side, even if the enemy / is ourselves: I am yours, you are mine.*"

At first, it is unclear why the stone hit her father, as Nye does not indicate until the end of the stanza that it was her father's friend who threw the stone. Nye pushes back against the standard narrative of suffering which identifies both the victim and the perpetrator. She ruminates only on what happened, using the passive construction: *a stone hit him*, rather than *his friend threw a stone*. By using the passive construction, Nye directs the poem toward a consideration, not of the nature of conflict, but rather of the nature of healing from suffering. Indeed, Nye emphasizes the "riddle" of her father's resilience—although he was hurt, he recovers and is welcomed back home to a pleasurable experience: a bucket of pears. Nye underscores the fact that the pears "are not crying," of course an obvious statement, but one that highlights that there are many ways of responding to suffering, including embracing a stoic perspective. What is perhaps most important about this stanza is the final three lines: when her father's friend reveals that he was aiming, not at her father, but at a bird, her father began to grow wings. There are at least two different types of interpretation here. One is that, when hearing his friend's intended target, Nye's father starts becoming that target—an embrace of the other, an eclipsing of the boundaries between self and other, boundaries that are at the root of acts of violence. The second is that the phrase "growing wings" symbolizes hope, a hope that was encouraged by the knowledge that his friend was not intending to hurt him.

In one of the few academic essays on Naomi Shihab Nye's work, Najmi Samina (2010) argues that Nye's "feminist 'aesthetic of smallness' counters the ideology that undergirds mainstream visual and verbal representations of war in the Middle East." This aesthetic of smallness—positioned against the aesthetic of the military sublime—"articulates

a countersublime of universal human connectivity for our times.”<sup>233</sup> Samina defines Nye’s aesthetic of smallness as “an artistic emphasis on small-scale objects and material realities, which include not only the ordinary, unadorned, and everyday, but also the personal and the particular.”<sup>234</sup> Nye’s poem certainly emphasizes small-scale objects: a bucket of pears, a bird’s wings, an olive tree. Her interest is also firmly in the personal, specifically the spot on her father’s head where hair will not grow—the result of an act of violence in his childhood. In her definition of the aesthetic of smallness, Samina focuses on children, stating that Nye’s “small-scale stories convey the vastness of war tragedy through the reimagined lives of individual women, children, and men.”<sup>235</sup> Samina comments one of Nye’s poems about the death of a Palestinian child—“For Mohammed Zeid of Gaza”—stating that the poem “leaves us with an image of innocence, of life in the moment of being savored.” While this may be true, Nye’s characterizations of children are more complex than associating children with innocence. Nye’s construction of her father’s childhood highlights a small incident and small objects: a stone, a spot on the head, a bucket of pears, a bird, wings. From these small, concrete objects, Nye establishes an aesthetics but also an *epistemology*—a creation of knowledge about violence, suffering, and healing that has larger implications.

Nye’s poem stresses that violence is a cognitive puzzle—“a riddle”—that her poem sets out to solve. In the first stanza, Nye extrapolates a larger perspective from her father’s childhood incident—a perspective that applies to all human beings. Just as the act of violence

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<sup>233</sup> Najmi, Samina. “Naomi Shihab Nye’s Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime.” *MELUS*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2010, pp. 151-71. See pg. 151.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 156.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 153.

in her father's childhood left him with an injury on his head, each person "carries a tender spot: / something our lives forgot to give us." In this space—the space of suffering, often caused by violence—humans have the choice of how to respond to what they lack. Nye concentrates on several options: two adults and one child. The first adult, a man, builds a house and says, 'I am native now.'" Although the man's statement is broad enough to encompass any person who settles into a new place and claims it as his or her own, it is more likely, given the context, that Nye is discussing an Israeli citizen. The second person, a woman, "speaks to a tree in place of her son. And olives come." This woman is likely a Palestinian who has lost her child and turns to nature, which provides consolation in the form of new life—not human life, but a sprouting olive tree. Whereas the Israeli man shows a response to loss by declaring ownership of land, the Palestinian woman, responding to the loss of her son, engages with nature.

The child responds to violence by writing a poem stating why he does not like wars: "they end up with monuments." The use of the word "monuments" signifies not just physical monuments, such as war memorials, but also the permanent impact that war has on human beings. The child's response to violence is through art—both poetry and painting—as the child paints "a bird with wings / wide enough to cover two roofs at once." The perspective of the artist, Nye is saying, is similar to the view of a child—they have the ability and position to investigate both sides of a conflict, at the same time—"covering two roofs at once." The child comments on both the Israeli man and the Palestinian woman's losses. As Nye observes about the child's statement, the wings are "wide enough to cover two roofs at once," meaning that his dislike for war is a hopeful statement that can unify and provide healing for both the Israeli man and the Palestinian woman.

Nye closes the poem by reflecting on her own response to the conflict:

There's a place in my brain  
where hate won't grow.  
I touch its riddle: wind, and seeds.  
Something pokes us as we sleep.

It's late but everything comes next.

Here Nye connects to the beginning of the poem: to her father's injury after the stone hit him, resulting in a place where hair would not grow. Nye turns her consideration from the outside of the head to the inside: a place where hate cannot grow. Just as in the first stanza, when Nye articulates a riddle about the "tender spot" on her father's head, she also muses on another riddle: Why won't hate grow? It is because, as Nye states, "Something pokes us as we sleep." It is unclear what this "something" is—perhaps Nye signifies dreams, the prick of conscience, or God as the "poke," or impetus, humans need to respond to violence without retaliating. Nye posits the space between the stimulus of violence and the response as a location in which healing must take place. She also emphasizes that the antidote to hate can be found in the natural world: in the wind, which knows no boundaries, and in seeds, which germinate into life. The final line of the poem indicates that it is "late"—meaning that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has extended for too long—"but everything comes next." The use of the conjunction "but" indicates that although it is late, better things are to come, ending on a note of hope.

While many Palestinian-American poets exclusively portray the suffering of Palestinian children, Nye's work is unique for her interest in the common humanity of Arab and Jewish children, both deserving—and yet deprived of—peace. For example, Nye's "Amir & Anna" (2011) is about two children, an Arab boy, Amir, and a Jewish girl, Anna. Like Amir, who "can't sleep" and "dives under his bed," Anna is "afraid of everything." Nye

further underscores the similarities between these children: “Their names begin with ‘A,’ / contain the same number of letters. / They live one mile apart. / No one has given them what they deserve.” After highlighting the similarities between Amir and Anna, Nye expands the focus outward, making general observations about the landscape: “Around both their houses, / all the Arab and Jewish houses, / red poppies sleep beneath / dirt and stones.” She looks to the poppies for answers: “What do they know? / In March green spokes / with fluttering heads / rise and rise on every side.” Here Nye moves from the human landscape to the natural world, emphasizing that nature eclipses divisions between Arab and Jewish homes. Her images of spring emphasize the bloom of the poppies, which is a hopeful perspective—a counterpoint to the fear-filled children at the beginning of the poem. Ultimately, Nye asserts that there is an epistemology to the natural world, a unifying force. Nye’s contemplation of nature provides a counterpoint to the inequalities and strife of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Her emphasis on parallels between the Arab and Jewish child does not make an equivalency argument by asserting that both Israeli and Palestinians have committed equal amounts of violence. Nor does she assert that Palestinians have epistemic privilege. Instead, Nye creates child characters to articulate the possibility for developing resistance to trauma—a process that is based on insights that emerge from the natural environment.

In “All Things Not Considered” (2002)—the title of which is a play on the title of the NPR show “All Things Considered”—Nye depicts nature as a space beyond the linguistic, political, religious, and identity barriers that have perpetuated the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The poem discusses the deaths of several children, both Jewish and Palestinian. Of significance is Asel Asleh, a seventeen-year-old Palestinian, who “believed in the field / beyond right and wrong, where people / come together / to talk.” Nye uses Asel Asleh’s belief

in a space where people come together to talk—beyond the categories of right and wrong—as a framework for how suffering can be translated between Israelis and Palestinians. Nature, for Nye, is a space in which people who often see themselves as incompatible can translate their differences to each other. In a 1996 interview in *Al Jadid* magazine, Nye discusses the importance of translation projects:

I think people who work on translation projects think that they're somehow peace negotiators because the belief is that we'll never stop killing one another until we understand and see one another as human beings. I think that's true. That's why it is very important to me to receive responses to poems...from Israeli or Jewish poets; they're even more important than responses from Arab poets. When I get responses from an Israeli Jewish poet saying, "I'm listening, I'm sorry, I don't like this either," that matters to me a lot.<sup>236</sup>

Nye's rumination on poetry as a form of translation in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is evident in "All Things Not Considered." This poem, written in four sections, begins with an image of a dead child. Nye uses a direct address to her readers: "You cannot stitch the breath / back into this boy." The next several lines discuss, in more detail, the deaths of several children, both Israeli and Palestinians: "a brother and sister" who "were playing with toys / when their room exploded"; Jewish boys who skipped school and, while having an adventure, were "killed in the cave"; "Mohammed al-Durra, who huddled against his father / in the street, terrified. The whole world saw him die"; an unnamed "4 month girl"; and the aforementioned Asel Asleh. Nye interrupts her reportage of these deaths with an italicized question: "*If this is holy, / could we have some new religions please?*" Here, Nye

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<sup>236</sup>Majaj, Lisa Suhair. "Talking with Poet Naomi Shihab Nye." *Al Jadid Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 13, 1996. <http://www.aljadid.com/content/talking-poet-naomi-shihab-nye>.

points to the perpetration of violence in the name of religion as the basis for the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the second section of the poem, Nye reflects on the deaths of these children and makes a general claim: “Most of us would take our children over land. / We would walk the fields forever homeless / with our children.” Yet Nye complicates this observation with the caveat: “This is what we say from a distance / because we can say whatever we want.” In the third section, Nye transcends discourses of blame, emphasizing the responsibility of all parties involved for perpetuating the conflict: “No one was right. / Everyone was wrong.” At this point, she interjects with an italicized section: “*What if they’d get together / and say that?*” This hypothetical scenario—both Israelis and Palestinians acknowledging blame—seems to hint at a possible resolution, yet Nye immediately follows this hypothetical scenario with the claim, “*At a certain point / the flawed narrator wins.*” Here, Nye emphasizes the importance of storytelling in the conflict; she states that it is *narrators*—specifically “flawed narrators”—who have the ability to “win” in dialogues about the conflict. Her intention in this stanza is not, however, to arrive at a “winner” but rather to underscore the culpability on *both* sides of the conflict:

People made mistakes for decades.  
Everyone hurt in similar ways  
at different times.  
Some picked up guns because guns were given.  
If they were holy it was okay to use guns.  
Some picked up stones because they had them.

In this stanza, Nye focuses on the historical nature of the conflict—that it has been perpetuated by the mistakes of ancestors and passed down to subsequent generations.



Regardless of individuals' identity—whether Jewish or Palestinian, rich or poor—everyone shares in the common experience of being hurt, and some choose to respond to this pain by engaging in acts of violence.

In the fourth section, Nye presents a series of seemingly unrelated images: “the curl of a baby’s graceful ear,” “the calm of a bucket / waiting for water,” “orchards of the old Arab men / who knew each tree,” Jewish and Arab women / standing quietly together. / Generations of black.” The images move from the innocent, to the peace of nature, to the sight of Arab men in orchards, to the unity of Jewish and Arab women who share in a common inheritance: generations of mourning. Nye ends the poem with a rhetorical question: “*Are people the only holy land?*” The infallibility of human beings, Nye seems to be saying, dismisses every person from claims of “holiness.” Nye is not making the case that the Palestinians and Israeli suffering is equivalent. Rather, she makes the case that it is only by emphasizing both Jewish and Arab people’s common mistakes, inheritances, pain, and acts of violence that one can arrive at an understanding of the nature of the conflict.

Nye’s “All Things Not Considered” articulates childhood epistemologies by examining what can be learned from the deaths of a several children, both Jewish and Palestinian, neither of which have epistemic privilege. In this poem, nature provides a space in which people who see themselves as irreconcilable can translate their differences to each other. A resistance to trauma emerges from nature—a space beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nye’s poem notices how intergenerational trauma resistance does not come from making an equivalence between the suffering of Palestinians and Israelis. Rather, Nye emphasizes that part of developing a resistance to trauma requires understanding both Jewish and Arab people’s violence, specifically the resulting deaths of children.

## Conclusion

Dominick LaCapra, an expert on trauma, writes that empathy “should be understood in terms of an affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other recognized and respected as other”<sup>237</sup> LaCapra’s observations about empathy are reflected in the poems analyzed here. Through the creation of childhood epistemologies, the poets establish affective relationships between people in the Arab region and an “other”—a primarily American audience. Childhood epistemologies facilitate communication in the interstices of boundaries between the Arab region and the U.S. By appealing to American audiences’ imagination and empathy, these poets rely on the assumption that it is possible for readers to understand experiences outside of their purview. Poetry provides a space in which experiences of violence and other complex social dynamics can be communicated across national boundaries in a manner that is not antagonistic and does not elevate conflict. These poets’ work is unique for showing how empathy can be developed not only in the social or political world, but also in domestic spaces and nature. These locations provide opportunities for readers to concentrate on the complex historical legacies of violence in a manner that eschews hostility and resentment. While these poets are attuned to issues of privilege, power, and injustice, they frame their poems as an invitation into a space of dialogue.

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<sup>237</sup> LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001, pg. 213.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Deterritorialized and Archival Poetic Imaginaries: Neoliberal Critique, Caring Labor, and the Boundaries of Gender Roles**

#### **Introduction**

In “Narguileh” (2013), Hedy Habra depicts a Lebanese man who attempts to reproduce his homeland in America. The man “waters his vegetables, / precious seeds / flown from far away, / curled cucumbers, / a special vine from Lebanon, / its silken leaves fit for stuffing.” Similar images of men’s engagements with nature can be found in the work of many Arab American women poets. These poets published in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century United States, a time of escalating American interventions in the Arab region amidst increasing fears about terrorism, particularly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. During this period, American mass media and cultural productions produced reassurance that racial sensitivity is the norm in U.S. society while simultaneously perpetuating the dominant perception of Arabs and Muslims as threats to U.S. national security (Alsultany 2012). In this context, the cultural productions of Arab American women poets humanize Arab men.

Yet the work of these poets has additional cultural implications. Many Arab American women poets represent caring labor, which involves connecting to other people and trying to

help them meet their needs, including, but not limited to, the work of caring for children, for the elderly, for sick people, and teaching.<sup>238</sup> In this chapter, I contemplate how several poets—Elmaz Abinader, Suheir Hammad, Hala Alyan, Hedy Habra, Marian Haddad, and Naomi Shihab Nye—represent the caring labor of Arab Americans, both men and women, in nature and domestic environments. I read these poetic accounts of caring labor as a collective body of knowledge and address the implications this knowledge might have for the body politic of American society.

Since the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twenty-first century, people of Arab descent have migrated to the United States to escape violence including imperial and neo-imperial interventions and domestic instability.<sup>239</sup> The forms of caring labor needed during, and in the aftermath, of this violence, transforms traditional gender roles—a transformation that persists even after the scene of violence. Although the field of Arab American literary studies in general has considered the confluence of violence and gender,<sup>240</sup> there has been little attention to these topics specifically in Arab American women’s poetry. A focus on this body of work is important because these poets explore how caring labor responds to the transnational and intergenerational effects of violence. Some Arab American women poets were born in the U.S. and write about their ancestors who left the Arab region in

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<sup>238</sup> This definition of caring labor comes from the economist Nancy Folbre.

<sup>239</sup> Whereas imperialism is typically characterized by conquest and rule, neoimperialism is domination and sometimes even hegemony over others primarily by way of formally free legal agreements, economic power, and cultural influence. Neoimperialism is of many designations for the form taken by U.S. political power and economic domination in the twentieth century, especially during and after World War II. See “Neoimperialism.” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. 470-472. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Accessed 1 Apr. 2016.

<sup>240</sup> See Darraj (2004), Golley (2007), Abdelrazek (2008), and Mehta (2014).

the late-nineteenth century during the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Others were born in the Arab region and later migrated to the U.S. amidst intense political instability as nation-states formed in the aftermath of European colonialism. One of the most striking facts about the poetry of women who trace their heritage to this region is that images and themes of caring labor occur very frequently alongside remembrances of war and other forms of violence.

How is caring labor affected by violence in the Arab region, by the attendant collective social trauma, and by transnational dislocation? For Arab women living in the United States, the domestic space is a complex environment: not always a source of oppression, but often a site of autonomy and empowerment although labor is frequently devalued and unaccounted for in this sphere.<sup>241</sup> These poets make philosophical observations based on the knowledge developed from their ancestral ties, and often their personal experiences, in the Arab region. These insights, because they concern the domestic sphere—along with subjectivity, family, and caring labor—may not be immediately perceived as political, especially since a great deal of Arab American poetry in the first decade of the twenty-first century explicitly engages with the U.S. “war on terror.”

Although Arab Americans live in a territory protected by the world’s military superpower and distant from the lived experiences of those in the Arab region, Arabs in America experience other forms of violence. While many scholars have drawn attention to the experiences of Arab Americans as racialized subjects in the U.S. (Abraham 2000, Majaj 2000, Salaita 2007, Jamal and Naber 2008, Gualtieri 2009, Alsultany 2012, Naber 2012, Fadda-

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<sup>241</sup> Nancy Fraser observes that the structure of modern capitalist economies is characterized by separation between the productive and the reproductive.

Conrey 2014), especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Arab American studies as a field has concentrated less on what Henry Giroux (2005) calls the “terror” of neoliberalism that has gained ascendancy in the United States, and indeed in a global context, for the past several decades. Neoliberalism can be succinctly defined as the belief that the market should be the organizing principle for all social, political, and economic decisions.<sup>242</sup> The Arab American women poets explored here advance a critique of neoliberalism through what I describe as deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries. By reflecting on experiences—from both the Arab region and America—in an imaginary space that is not linked to any specific geographical location, these poets make insights about kinship and caring labor that can facilitate a more inclusive social landscape. Rather than denigrating America and valorizing the Arab region, these poets denaturalize neoliberal social and economic structures and emphasize how caring labor is central to a post-neoliberal social order.

This chapter, which is divided into five sections, explores how Arab women’s deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries engage with the legacies of imperial and neo-imperial violence in the Arab region—and its impact on dislocated bodies in America—to make philosophical observations about caring labor that theorize post-neoliberal socioeconomic models in the United States. The first section briefly traces the genealogy of neoliberal economic thought and explores the impact of neoliberalism on gender roles. The second section explains how Arab American women poets collectively create what I describe

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<sup>242</sup> Giroux, Henry. “The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics.” *College Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1-19.

as deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries.<sup>243</sup> This section argues that the concept of deterritorialization is central to a critique of neoliberalism and articulates how Arab women's poetic imaginaries envision post-neoliberal relationships grounded in caring labor. The third section analyzes how the poetry of Elmaz Abinader, Suheir Hammad, and Hala Alyan envisions caring labor as an act of political resistance to imperial violence. The fourth section attends to how Hedy Habra and Marian Haddad's renderings of caring labor conceptualize a post-neoliberal social order. The final section explores how poems by Naomi Shihab Nye and Suheir Hammad imagine a post-neoliberal society by creating deterritorialized and archival imaginaries of affective cultural practices.

### **Neoliberalism and Gendered Labor**

David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”<sup>244</sup> Neoliberal theory advocates that the role of the state is to secure private property rights and to guarantee the functioning of markets. State interventions in markets must be kept to a minimum because, according to this theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals

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<sup>243</sup> The concept of deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries builds on the work of several theorists, including Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980); feminist critiques of Deleuze and Guattari (Braidotti 1994, Olkowski 1999); frameworks that conceptualize space, fluidity, temporality in a transnational context (Shakir 1997, Sandoval 2000, Shohat 2001, Mohanty 2003); and postcolonial and feminist theorizing on the nature of archives (Derrida 1995, Jimerson 2009).

<sup>244</sup> Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

(prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions, particularly in democracies, for their own benefit.<sup>245</sup> Many scholars have critiqued the negative consequences of extending economic rationality to cultural, social, and political spheres.<sup>246</sup> Neoliberal theory, which tends to conceptualize the individual not as a citizen but as an economic actor, has inspired policies that have drastically cut state-supported social services and programs.<sup>247</sup> This extension of market logic, critics of neoliberalism contend, has contributed to unparalleled economic inequality and the shifting of power from the state to multinational corporations and global financial institutions.<sup>248</sup> In spite of these problems, neoliberalism continues to influence political, economic, and social policies in the United States.

Neoliberalism is often discussed as a revitalization of classical liberal social contract theory, though some theorists perceive neoliberalism as a distinct ideology, descending from, but not identical to liberalism.<sup>249</sup> In classical liberal social contract theory, as Carole Pateman

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., pg. 2.

<sup>246</sup> See Joseph Stiglitz's *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2002); *Making Globalization Work* (2006); *Freefall: America, Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy* (2010); *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (2013); *Creating a Learning Society: A New Approach to Growth, Development, and Social Progress* (2014); *The Great Divide: Unequal Societies and What We Can Do About Them* (2015); *Rewriting the Rules of the American Economy* (2015). See also David M. Kotz's *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism* (2015).

<sup>247</sup> See Peters, John. "Neoliberal convergence in North America and Western Europe: Fiscal austerity, privatization, and public sector reform." *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012, pp. 208-35.

<sup>248</sup> Suzanne Bergeron (2001) observes that women's interventions to neoliberal structural adjustment politics do not necessarily make demands on the state, but often involve forms of resistance that spans multiple social levels, from community organizing, demonstrations, social movements, cross-border organizing, and survival strategies. See pg. 994.

<sup>249</sup> See Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie's essay, "What is Neoliberalism?" <http://folk.uio.no/daget/What%20is%20Neo-Liberalism%2010-11-06.pdf>. Accessed 9 Apr. 2016.



(1988, 1989) observes, the public, masculine sphere was conceptualized as opposed to the private, womanly sphere. Although women were completely excluded from the original social contract, they were later incorporated into the liberal social order. Classical social contract theories formed the basis for capitalist production, since the individual—both masculine and autonomous—was situated in the market and public spheres, represented as disconnected from nature and from social relations.<sup>250</sup> Pateman argues that the social contract is both a sexual contract and a slave contract; therefore, a free social order cannot be a contractual order.<sup>251</sup>

Scholars who built on Pateman's critique of liberal social contract theory argued that caring labor mostly performed by women in the domestic sphere is the foundation for capital accumulation (O'Brien 1981, Leghorn and Parker 1981, Delphy 1984, Mies 1986). Because this labor is devalued and usually unpaid, many have advocated for the economic valuing of the caring labor mostly performed by women based on the assertion that the affective work of this labor is exploitative of women (Okin 1989, Fraser 1997, Folbre 2012). Others point out that social class is also an important factor of analysis, as middle and upper-class women's economic privileges give them the ability to pay economically disadvantaged women to perform caretaking labor, and that middle and upper-class women have an interest in keeping wages as low as possible to keep the surplus for themselves (hooks 2000).

The reconfiguration of economic gender roles under neoliberal conditions has eroded

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<sup>250</sup> See Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford UP, 1988) and *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford UP, 1989). For a succinct overview of Pateman's ideas, see: Biescker, Adelheid and Uta von Winterfeld. "Regeneration in limbo: Ecofeminist perspectives on the multiple crisis and social contract." *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*, edited by Mary Phillips and Nick Rumens. London: Routledge, 2016, pg. 76- 94.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 85-7.

the male breadwinner model and women have increasingly entered the formal economic system. The feminization of labor force, however, has been characterized by a reduction of normal employment as evidenced by the increase in informal and non-permanent labor contracts.<sup>252</sup> Women everywhere have less access to political power and economic resources, as well as less control over processes that reproduce these systemic inequalities. Women complete more unpaid labor than men.<sup>253</sup> Moreover, in the U.S. context, there is a dearth of state-supported social services such as funding for maternity and paternal leave or subsidized childcare.<sup>254</sup> Caring labor—usually unpaid, devalued, and unaccounted for—provides the reproductive work necessary for the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist production because no human production process can occur without the previous productive input of nature or without prior processes of caring labor. Indeed, empirical studies have established that, in both rich and poor countries, 30 to 50 percent of economic activity is accounted for by unpaid household labor.<sup>255</sup> Capitalist production therefore is not possible without inputs from the environment and from caring labor—both of which are externalized from the formal economic system.<sup>256</sup> In sum, capitalism is based on externalization as a foundational principle

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., pg. 81.

<sup>253</sup> See V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan's *Global Gender Issues*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991. See pages 12, 62, and 80.

<sup>254</sup> As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild note in their introduction to *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (2004), "Unlike the rest of the industrialized world, the United States does not offer public child care for working mothers, nor does it ensure paid family and medical leave" (9).

<sup>255</sup> See Ironmonger, D. "Counting Outputs, Capital Inputs, and Caring Labor: Estimating Gross Household Output." *Feminist Economics*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1996, pp. 37-64, and Luxton, M. "The UN, Women, and Household Labour: Measuring and Valuing Unpaid Work." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1997, pp. 431-39.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

in which the market stands above the non-market sphere, and non-market labor requirements are mostly fulfilled by unpaid women. Because modern economies produce wealth and growth by systemically exploiting the basic living productivities upon which growth depends, these economies, with their narrow concept of paid work, have been criticized as unsustainable.<sup>257</sup>

Although these critiques emerged mostly in a Euro-American context, others scholars have examined how caring labor has been increasingly privatized and outsourced in a transnational context (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997, Parreñas 2001, Mohanty 2003, Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004). How have scholars accounted for the Arab region and its diaspora, particularly those who settled in the United States, in theorizing the role of caring labor in the context of neoliberalism? Any understanding of Arab American lives must consider the complex legacies of colonialism, colonial education, and neo-colonialism. In addition, the impact of nation-states, as Suad Joseph (2012) maintains, cannot be underestimated, as “nation-states catapult women as subjects into wars, violence, forced migration, and displacement.”<sup>258</sup> Joseph claims that, in the Arab context, “the body, the person, the site, may not be the most productive points of departure for locating the subject.” Instead, “the larger networked family and family-like relationships engage in the subject in a continual play of malleability.”<sup>259</sup> Joseph asserts that, when attempting to understand Arab women, it is crucial

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., pg. 79.

<sup>258</sup> Joseph, Suad. “Thinking Intentionality: Arab Women’s Subjectivity and Its Discontents.” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2012, pp. 1-25. See pg. 15.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., pg. 17.

to explore webs or networks of relationships.<sup>260</sup> Indeed, most Arab women do not conceptualize themselves as singular subjects but rather in a relational context of familial matrices that are crucial to Arab societies.<sup>261</sup>

Given the influence of neoliberal thought on economic, political, and social structures in the U.S., and in a global context, critiquing neoliberalism proposes a daunting challenge. However, as J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) observes, it is not necessary to develop a large-scale alternative to neoliberalism but, rather, to notice the “accretion and interaction of small changes” occurring in already existing, community-based economic practices that fall outside of neoliberal logic.<sup>262</sup> Following J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), I critique discursive constructs of “the economy” as a unified, stable, and self-reproducing structure, as a space of invariant logics and automatic unfolding that offers no field for intervention.<sup>263</sup> Gibson-Graham specifically highlights how caring labor can serve as a basis for a concept of work that advances a sustainable post-neoliberal social and economic order. As Adelheid Biescker and Uta von Winterfeld argue:

The idea of man and work has to be changed qualitatively if caring activities are central to a new concept of work. Caring means working in relationships to others and to nature...It means a caring concern not only for the present but also for the future...The experiences of every woman and man in all spheres of work are necessary for the further development of the reproductive processes. This also means

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., pg. 13

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., pg. 14.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., pg. 196

<sup>263</sup> See the introduction to J.K. Gibson-Graham’s *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, pg. xi.

to surrender the model of the human being as manlike, as egoistic and autonomous. Sustainable work is based on the concept of self in relationship.<sup>264</sup>

The concept of self in relationship is central to the work of the Arab American women poets explored here. These poets conceptualize the family as an inextricable part of the individual and portray how subjectivity is bound up with webs of kinship (Joseph 2009, 2012).

How do Arab American women poets imagine a post-neoliberal society? Scholarship in U.S. ethnic studies tends to investigate what David Eng (2010) has termed “neoliberal multiculturalism,” which is problematic because it “renders invisible new combinations of racial, sexual, and economic disparities, both national and global, through the language of individualism, personal merit, responsibility, and choice.”<sup>265</sup> Arab American women poets, however, do not engage in neoliberal multiculturalist discourses and resist what scholars have critiqued as the “additive” model of intersectionality.<sup>266</sup> These poets do not add “Arab” as another category in a neoliberal multiculturalist framework, nor do they compare the U.S. and the Arab region. Arab American women poets delineate diverse economic practices among Arabs in diaspora, contributing to what Gibson-Graham calls “a politics of economic possibility.”<sup>267</sup> These poets, when considered collectively, create what I describe as

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<sup>264</sup> Biescker, Adelheid and Uta von Winterfeld. “Regeneration in limbo: Ecofeminist perspectives on the multiple crisis and social contract.” *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*, edited by Mary Phillips and Nick Rumens. London: Routledge, 2016, pg. 89

<sup>265</sup> See the introduction to *The Feeling of Kinship*, pg. 8-9.

<sup>266</sup> In “Intersectionality as a Buzzword,” Kathy Davis highlights the problems of treating race, class, and gender as additive rather than integrative.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries, which are central to their implicit critiques of neoliberalism.<sup>268</sup>

### **Deterritorialized and Archival Poetic Imaginaries**

I use the term deterritorialized, following Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980), to describe the work of Arab American women poets because their poems are not set in the Arab region, or in the United States; rather, the poems create conceptual spaces that bring both regions into dialogue. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “the movement of deterritorialization can never be grasped in itself, one can only grasp its indices in relation to the territorial representations.”<sup>269</sup> These observations about deterritorialization are manifest in Arab American women’s poetry, where the focus is not on territorial representations of either the Arab region or America, but rather on the movements between these regions. Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual framework of deterritorialization is central to a critique of neoliberalism because deterritorialization provides an optic that is not bound to nation-states, nor is it limited to domestic or international markets. Instead, deterritorialization contemplates diverse movements in a transnational context. Connecting deterritorialization with the concept of the archive—which documents historical practices, some of which are economic practices—enables us to see the historic dimensions of economic practices that have guided caring labor in non-market domains. The combined optics of deterritorialization and archives can

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<sup>268</sup> My concept of deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries builds on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of “deterritorialization” from *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), which can describe any process that decontextualizes a set of relations, rendering them virtual and preparing them for more distant actualizations.

<sup>269</sup> *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), pg. 316.

illuminate heterodox economic practices.

The Arab American women poets I analyze in this chapter expand Carolyn Forché's concept of poetry as a "living archive." As she writes,

the poem makes present to us the experience of the other, the poem is the experience, rather than a symbolic representation. When we read the poem as witness, we are marked by it and become ourselves witnesses to what it has made present before us. Language incises the page, wounding it with testimonial presence, and the reader is marked by encounter with that presence. Witness begets witness. The text we read becomes a living archive.<sup>270</sup>

Forché emphasizes that it is not only the written language of poetry that produces an archive, but also the reader's *experience* of reading poetry that produces an archive—an embodied archive. The poets I analyze here extend Forché's concept of poetry as an archive by registering new understandings of archival practice that expand the definition of an archive beyond documents located in an institutional space. Specifically, these poets conceptualize sustainable agriculture and cultural practices as archival formations. The Arab American women poets I evaluate in this chapter create an archive through their poetry that documents the historical dimensions of caring labor that have guided behavior in non-market domains.

I read these poems through the framework of ecocriticism, focusing specifically on how these poets contribute to what Ariel Salleh (2009) terms "eco-sufficiency," a discourse that moves past, or at least modifies, the foundational principles of neoliberalism. As J.K. Gibson-Graham (2009) argues, the ecological crises of the neoliberal era require opening our economic thinking and enactments to encompass what Jean-Luc Nancy (2001) has called

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<sup>270</sup> See Carolyn Forché's essay "Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art."

“being-in-common.”<sup>271</sup> Gibson-Graham specifically explores the ethics of interdependence embodied in “community economies.” I explore how Arab American women’s poetry conceptualizes community economies. In addition, I attend to the structures and processes of caring labor articulated in this poetry, and I highlight how these poets produce a body of knowledge that denaturalizes neoliberal forms of social and economic organization.

By using deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries, these poets develop formations of caring labor that merge the natural and the human landscapes—a perspective that does not externalize the environment, but rather *integrates* the environment into production processes. These poets also explore how Arabs in diaspora restructure and reshape labor to meet human needs, not only the needs of capital. Moreover, by unfixing caring labor from its association with female gender, Arab American women poets portray men in a wide range of caregiving roles, including in the natural world, and these depictions highlight ecologically sustainable labor practices.<sup>272</sup> Through deterritorialized and archival poetic imaginaries, the Arab American women poets analyzed here articulate non-market spaces that provide alternatives to neoliberalism.

Finally, throughout this chapter, I extend Sara Ahmed’s (2004) concept of “affective economies,” which explores how emotions circulate and are distributed across social and psychic fields. Ahmed argues that “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but it is produced only as an effect of its circulation.”<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Gibson-Graham, J.K. “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene.” *Antipode*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2009, pp. 320-46. See pg. 322.

<sup>272</sup> Arab American women poets solve what many view as an “essentialist” problem in ecofeminism that identifies women with nature and promotes what Hardt calls “a celebration of maternal work” that reinforces an exploitative gendered division of labor.

<sup>273</sup> Ahmed, Sara. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117-39. See pg. 120.



Whereas Ahmed focuses on pain, hate, fear, disgust, shame, and love, I consider care, specifically how care is manifested in labor. Arab American women poets contribute philosophical insights about caring labor. These poets establish the individual as inextricably linked to the family, not to a specific configuration of family, such as the nuclear family, but to family more broadly defined as a web of kinship.

In an American context, as in the Arab region, feminist analysis has concentrated on the nuclear family as a site of patriarchal domination. Although Arab and Arab American scholars have documented patriarchal practices in the Arab region and within the Arab community residing in the United States,<sup>274</sup> Arab American women's poetry does not exclusively represent the family as a source of patriarchal oppression. Rather, Arab American women poets more frequently conceptualize the family as an inextricable part of the individual and show how subjectivity is connected to kinship (Joseph 2009, 2012). In the next section, I address how these poets imagine women's caring labor and interrogate how these images can be read as a critique of neoliberalism.

### **Women's Caring Labor, Violence, and Political Transformation**

Because caring labor picks up the slack of failed states, it is not surprising that the Arab American women poets who most frequently engage with the role of caring labor have

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<sup>274</sup> For example, Nadine Naber's *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism* (2012) develops what she terms a "diasporic Arab feminist critique" that focuses on "the power structures of patriarchy and homophobia that are internal to Arab families and communities, while illustrating that these power structures are shaped by a range of intersecting histories and power relations" (109).

familial ties to the Levantine region, which has experienced significant political upheaval. Because the Levantine region has historically experienced so many violent conflicts, the poetry of Levantine-descended women who live in the U.S. exhibits a perspective influenced by the complex interactions between the religions and cultures of several continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. Arab women who trace their heritage to the Levantine region have survived violence in unique ways, given their experiences in a part of the world that is strongly affected by religious and ethnic conflicts. In addition, these poets' experiences in America—the post-WWII global superpower and home to a large population of diasporic Arabs—provide insight into the complex relationship between the Levantine region and the United States.<sup>275</sup> Arab American women poets repeatedly demonstrate how caring labor is a form of resistance to an unjust social order. These poets emphasize that, during an incident of violence or in the context of war, labor breaks down the boundaries between traditional gender roles, and these changes persist in diaspora.

Elmaz Abinader makes observations about caring labor performed in the traumatic aftermath of violence in her 2014 poetry collection *This House, My Bones*. This work, as she states, “draws parallels between the changes of the earth through natural means to the changes in our bodies during unnatural traumas and how that trauma moves through generations.”<sup>276</sup> Abinader's contemplation of nature is consistent with many other Arab American women poets. As Ismet Bujupaj (2015) argues, in the work of these poets, “nature is neither simply an

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<sup>275</sup> The Arab American Institute Foundation's “Quick Facts About Arab Americans” states that most Arab Americans trace their heritage to Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. Lebanese Americans constitute a greater part of the total number of Arab Americans residing in most states, except New Jersey, where Egyptian Americans are the largest group.

<sup>276</sup> [www.elmazabinader.com](http://www.elmazabinader.com)

escape from cultural politics nor strictly a battleground for that politics; instead, nature adds a deeper dimension to experiences already shaped by political and cultural contestations.”<sup>277</sup>

Bujupaj poses two important questions: “What does nature mean when it appears within the transcultural flow portrayed in many Arab American writings, and what would an ecocritical approach to Arab American literature provide?”<sup>278</sup> In this section, I take Bujupaj’s questions as a point of departure in order to consider how Abinader explores the relationship between the domestic and natural environments.

In “Arsenal,” Abinader uses couplets to illuminate the experiences of women in warfare—not a specific war but, rather, war in an abstract sense—in which women are “armed with fists, conscience, rocks, history, and backs like hemp.” This image of women as “armed” positions them in an active, aggressive role. In the next couplet, Abinader underscores how warfare motivates women to take specific actions: “Warfare drives us into an insistent fog, cold and frequent, a churning in the belly— / drives us to link, chain a curtain, thatch a roof; braid vines into electrical cords.” The experience of warfare propels women into a specific emotional state, which Abinader describes as “a churning in the belly,” and this emotion is what “drives” women to protect and repair domestic spaces. Interestingly, Abinader describes a merger—what she calls a “link”—between domestic and natural environments through her image of women braiding vines “into electrical cords.” Women’s capacity for caring labor, as she renders it here, transforms natural materials into electrical

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<sup>277</sup> Bujupaj, Ismet. “Nature in Arab American Literature: Majaj, Nye, and Kahf.” *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015. Bujupaj looks specifically at the work of Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Mohja Kahf.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

cords that serve the human environment: the domestic space.

Abinader's merging of human and natural environments provides an understanding of how Arab women who have survived wars are driven to reproduce sustainable forms of caring labor by turning to domains outside of neoliberal economic structures. By connecting women's caring labor to nature, Abinader creates an imaginary space that shows how caring labor performed as an act of resistance to violence can serve as a sustainable economic practice. Indeed, Abinader's poem reiterates that humans are inextricably linked to nature: "It's nothing for women who cradle little ones between curtains of incursion— / we have birthed more than one dead son, brother, hostage, girl, flower, stone." Here, Abinader's image of women literally birthing humans—the casualties of warfare—along with figuratively "birthing" a flower and a stone demonstrates how women's maternal capacities in the context of warfare undergo changes that perpetuate the natural landscape. Abinader's poetic imaginary documents births and depicts a merging between women's labor in the human and natural worlds, yet she does not make an essentialist claim that women are more connected to nature than men.

What is perhaps most unique about this poem, however, is Abinader's conceptualization of caring labor as a violent act. Abinader's presentation of caring labor as violent may seem strange, even paradoxical. However, her descriptions are perfectly comprehensible when one recalls Abinader's heritage as a Lebanese American whose ancestors came to the United States during the collapse of the Ottoman empire. Whereas in Euro-American liberal social contract theory, the domestic sphere is viewed as a private, womanly space separate from the masculine public or civil domain which is the province of political and economic activity, for subjects of the Ottoman Empire the domestic realm was

intensely dangerous, unstable, and insecure—and not only because of domestic violence, which has been well documented in Euro-American feminist scholarship.<sup>279</sup> In the Ottoman context, imperial violence frequently interceded into the household, politicizing this space as a precarious environment subject to violent incursions from the state.<sup>280</sup>

This historical context clarifies why Abinader imagines women’s caring labor in war as a type of weapon. As she writes, “We are our own weapons: waiting hardens the calves, teaches us how to move— / phrases are formed and we mouth ancient stories but nothing / as remarkable as this preservation of life when death lurks.” Caring labor is figured here as a weapon—a weapon of survival—deployed in the service of preserving life. Yet women’s caring labor during warfare is not noticed: “These days are not remembered, no names are evoked; our shadows slide / down the wall unnoticed / We are seismic in our keening, this song, a story, told in whispers, starving / ourselves of breath.” Abinader reflects on the experience of war for women as a paradox. On the one hand, women are armed with anger, conscience, history, and strength; they are agents who protect and repair domestic spaces, preserving life amid death. On the other hand, women are not remembered for their efforts; they are unnoticed, lurking in the shadows, wailing in grief, telling their stories in whispers, barely able to speak. Although the experience of warfare develops physical strength in

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<sup>279</sup> See Kristin L. Anderson, “Gender, Status, and Domestic Violence: An Integration of Feminist and Family Violence Approaches.” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 59, no. 3, 1997, pp. 655-69.

<sup>280</sup> As Donald Quataert (2000) documents, the Ottoman Empire—one of the greatest, most extensive, and longest-lasting empires in the history of the world—included most of the territories of the eastern Roman Empire and portions of the northern Balkans and north Black Sea coast. Turkish nomadic incursions toppled local administrations and threw the prevailing political and economic order of Anatolia into confusion (18). Under the child levy system, called the *devsirme*, recruiting officials went to Christian villages in Anatolia and the Balkans, as well as to Muslim communities in Bosnia. Male recruits were then taken from their village homes to the Ottoman capital or other administrative centers where they were provided with educational and religious training; some became state elites, others entered the Janissary corps infantry (30-1).

women, it diminishes their voices. In fact, at the end of the poem, Abinader suggests that it is women themselves who are responsible for the erasure of their voices—these women, she writes, are “starving” themselves of breath.

The self-inflicted erasure of women’s voices inhibits the conventional archival documentation of their history; however, Abinader renders women’s caring labor as a type of archival practice. The women in Abinader’s poem have “birthed more than one dead son, brother, hostage, girl, flower, stone.” In this context, giving literal and metaphorical birth to humans and natural objects is a type of archival practice that documents the impact of violence and perpetuates the memory of those lost in warfare. Abinader underscores how political violence intercedes into the domestic environment, showing that the domestic sphere cannot be separated from the political sphere. Women’s caring labor—manifested in Abinader’s poem as an act of resistance to violence—embeds humans in the environment to ensure survival. Ultimately, Abinader shows how caring labor that imbricates humans in nature emerges because of violence. She also documents the legacy of this violence and explores how women create spaces for survival. Other Arab American poets, however, differ in their interpretations of caring labor, given their divergent ancestral legacies and experiences.

Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad, who was born in Jordan in 1973 to Palestinian refugee parents and who migrated with her family to the United States at the age of five, writes about caring labor from her position as a woman born to parents dispossessed from their native land. Her poem “our mothers and their lives of suffer” (1996), articulated from a collective subject position of Palestinian women, investigates how these women perceive their mothers’ caring labor. At the beginning of the poem, Hammad establishes a

collective Palestinian mother as the subject, setting the poem in a time—presumably before dispossession—when mothers performed caring labor in the domestic sphere. This collective Palestinian mother, as she writes, was “raised to fetch slippers and brew tea / kill chickens and roast lambs / you scrubbed floors raw / on knees bleeding exhaustion / fed babies and watered plants / you embroidered your dreams / into scarves and veils.” Unlike Abinader, who interprets caring labor as an act of resistance to imperial violence, Hammad develops a collective subject of Palestinian women by ruminating on how these women perceive caring labor as oppressive to their mothers.

The collective voice of the poem observes that caring labor has been taught to women since childhood, and that this labor takes the form of serving men, preparing food, and cleaning the household—all activities that the collective of Palestinian women’s voices perceive as enacting violence on their mothers. In addition to documenting their mothers’ domestic labor, the collective voice of Palestinian women articulates their mothers’ approaches to surviving the violence they experienced because of the conflict over land:

when your land is raped you  
thank god you still have husbands  
when your husbands are jailed  
you thank god for your sons  
when your sons are murdered    execution style  
you hide your daughters and  
when they are found and jailed  
you fast til they return  
and pray some more and  
when they are    as their land    raped  
you prepare bandages and some  
more prayer and when your family  
loses all faith you  
pray for their souls

In this passage, Hammad makes use of white space to emphasize acts of violence, from “execution style” murder to the rape of both land and women. This use of space visually represents the impact this violence had on mothers by indicating that the experience of trauma involves the failure of language. Hammad focuses on how Palestinian mothers find strength through religious practices. Regardless of how dire the situation, or how traumatic the circumstances, the mothers in this poem give thanks for what they have, despite what they have lost or endured. In this passage, Hammad conceptualizes caring labor as a behavioral and spiritual practice.

Whereas the first half of the poem creates a collective subject of mothers, in the second half, Hammad shifts to a different collective subject: daughters. She writes, “And when we your / daughters say we are / about more than chickens and tea / you ask who do / we think we are / we’re no better than you / and you are right.” Here Hammad shows how the daughters denigrate their mothers’ caring labor, asserting that they “are about more than” the work of survival. This assessment of their mothers’ caring labor emerges from a neoliberal evaluation that only attributes value to waged labor. In this paradigm, caring labor is seen as less valuable than other types of labor, specifically labor that functions in the public sphere. As the daughters assert, they are about “more than chickens and tea”—they perceive, and believe in, a hierarchal division of labor which views women’s work of caring labor as less valuable, and therefore less important, than labor practiced in the marketplace. Yet, as the poem progresses, Hammad shows how the daughters come to understand the erroneous nature of this assessment: “we mistake your strength / for acquiescence / cause it’s brown and quiet.” In these lines, Hammad articulates a collective voice of Palestinian women who progress toward a politicized analysis of their mothers’ caring labor as a source of strength that ensures



survival in both private and public spheres.

At the end of the poem, Hammad meditates on what the daughters take from their mothers, an influence that is depicted by violent images: “we take your smoldering strength and / maternal love to throw as / stones at mercenaries / use your patience as shields in the nights.” The mothers’ qualities—strength, love, and patience—that have been developed through spiritual and behavioral practice influence the daughters, who use these virtues, at first in a violent manner. The daughters use their mothers’ strength and love to throw stones at mercenaries—unnamed enemies abstracted from a specific historical and geographical context. However, the daughters later use their mothers’ patience as a nonviolent, protective force, as “shields in the nights,” against unnamed struggles. Hammad presents women’s caring labor as a politicized spiritual practice that facilitates survival. Indeed, as Hammad writes at the end of the poem, “we your daughters / and our men / honor our mothers / and the lives they survived.” This poem illuminates how the daughters initially devalue their mothers’ caring labor, yet eventually arrive at an understanding of the value of caring labor as a source of strength. Caring labor—far from a devalued resource—is now correctly understood as the foundational requirement of all labor, including political labor.

Like Hammad, Palestinian American poet Hala Alyan conceptualizes caring labor as an act of violent resistance to an unjust social order. However, whereas Hammad examines the legacies of imperial violence, specifically warfare, Alyan centers on the nature of misogynistic violence as part of the underlying structure of imperialism. Alyan has had a complex set of geographical experiences as a diasporic Palestinian: her parents were dispossessed Palestinians living in Kuwait when she was born in 1986, and the family remained there until the Iraqi invasion in 1990. After that, the family fled to the United States

for several years before returning to the Arab region. Alyan has lived in numerous cities in both the Arab region and in United States; currently she resides in Manhattan. In “Sahar & Her Sisters” from her collection *Atrium* (2012)—a two-stanza poem with a mythic tone—Alyan’s use of the female name “Sahar” gives the poem a geographical ambiguity, as the name is of Arabic or Persian origin and is also used in Jewish and Indian cultures. The name Sahar also infuses the poem with religious ambiguity, as the sisters could be from many religious backgrounds, including Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or Christianity, since the sisters call each other “Magda, short for Magdalene,” a reference to Mary Magdalene, one of the earliest followers of Christ.

Alyan’s poem articulates that gender is inextricably linked to violence; that the devaluing of female life, considered inferior to men, begins at birth; and that this devaluing is enacted through both physical and psychic forms of violence, perpetrated by men. Ultimately, the poem underscores a commonality to women’s oppression across time and space. Alyan’s poem is set in an abstract, mythical milieu that cannot be linked to any recognizable location or historical period. In the first stanza, Alyan establishes the misogynistic climate of the poem: the birth of four sisters who left their mother “gasping, mouth dry. Womb limp / as a starfish.” The father, angered by the birth of so many daughters, engages in acts of horrific violence. He sets “fire to the midwife after the / fourth, rammed into his wife bark etched with holy verses / to free her of the cancer that is girl.” Amidst these violently misogynistic acts—the second of which uses an unnamed religious text in an attempt to ensure that the mother bears no more daughters—Alyan depicts how the daughters survive: “Sahar and her sisters move like snakes through the seasons, cinder- / eyed, dizzy-hearted. They dig lungs in the soil. Elongated bones, / lurching on goat meat, they grow with the chaos of carnivores.”

Alyan connects the sisters with nature, associating their movements with snakes, positioning them as close to the soil, and likening their growth to carnivores. The daughters survive by becoming one with nature. In this location, situated in the context of nature, the sisters “call each / other Magda, short for Magdalene, short for the disaster of fetus.” Here Alyan references Mary Magdalene, who traveled with Jesus as one of his followers, and was said to have witnessed his crucifixion and resurrection. In these lines, Alyan associates the sisters with an early Christian woman, and indicates that they have internalized their father’s misogyny, viewing their conception and births as a “disaster.” The sister’s response to the misogynistic violence they have endured is to move into a natural environment.

The daughters build a house in nature as a space of safety. As Alyan describes this process, the sisters “apprentice within gynec hallways. Uterus as asylum to the / things they learn to erase. What does not wither will grow and / Sahar and her sisters build a hut at the river’s edge, charge / camel bones for their magic. The women arrive. Feather-spined, / earth-damned and tired, they come to be emptied. This is what / is meant by mercy.” Alyan’s sisters—conceived in a climate of violent misogyny, in which their father murdered the midwife who delivered them and who attempted to prevent his wife from bearing any more girls—grow up to perform abortions. Sahar and her sisters “train / their ovaries like a militia. Menstruate with the precision / of choir practice.” In these lines, Alyan portrays the sister’s perception of their female reproductive organs as an “asylum,” and describes the sisters’ menstruation as a trained and regulated military act. This is significant because it shows that the sisters have reacted to their father’s violence with a form of control of their own making. While they may not be able to change the misogynistic climate in which they were born, they can find—even amidst the “asylum” of their female-sexed bodies—a source of unity and

strength by regulating their menstruation, and by emptying the wombs of women who do not wish to bear children. Alyan abstracts the female reproductive organs from their purpose of conceiving and bearing children, concentrating instead on the acts of abortion, and menstruation, as a form of militarized solidarity between sisters.

While this might appear to be a type of incipient feminism, Alyan emphasizes that the misogynistic climate of their social location still limits the sisters' lives, especially when Alyan reveals the tragic end of the story: "It is foxes, / foxes that come / sniffing / the river's edge, foxes / that find / Sahar and her sisters, / ink-haired quartet, / hanging / like constellations / from the trees." Alyan intentionally leaves the tragic ending on an ambiguous tone: is it unclear whether the sisters were murdered, or if they committed suicide. Either option is possible, and it seems that if they were murdered, the perpetrator may be a man—possibly their own father, or another man in the village—given the violent policing of gender by men exhibited earlier in the poem. Alyan's poetry—set in an abstract, mythical space that cannot be linked to any recognizable location or historical period—can be considered deterritorialized. Her poetry establishes nature as a space in which women develop their ability to perform caring labor, ensuring the possibility for reproductive autonomy outside the domain of neoliberal structures. While Alyan's work—along with Hammad and Abinader's poems—highlights women's caring labor, other Arab American women poets represent men's caring labor, and it is to these poets that I turn in the final two sections.

## **Post-Neoliberalism, Caring Labor, and Sustainable Food Production**

In this section, I analyze how two Arab American women poets, Hedy Habra and Mariam Haddad, depict men's caring labor in ways that imagine possibilities for a post-neoliberal social order. By noticing men's caring labor, Habra and Haddad disconnect caring labor from its association with a female social role. In addition, these poets make visible an alternative to the nuclear family by representing family as a web of kinship in which multiple family members provide caring roles. As Suad Joseph (2012) observes, in the Arab region, caretakers are not exclusively women or mother figures. Rather, Arab families "are highly diverse and varied systems" consisting of "sets of relationships and dynamics that cannot be described or defined by monolithic models of gender relations." Arab American women poets who attend to men's caring labor envision spaces that provide alternatives to neoliberalism.

Hedy Habra's poem, "Narguileh" (2013) complicates the boundaries between male and female gender roles by depicting a man's caring labor. Born in Egypt to Lebanese parents, Habra lived in both countries, but left Lebanon during the civil war. After spending several months in Greece, and residing for six years in Belgium, she immigrated to the United States, where she currently lives. In "Narguileh" Habra shows how a man attempts to restructure the domestic sphere to reflect his homeland, rather than attempting to find a space in American economic, social, or political life. The man, "trapped in his backyard," thinks of memories from Lebanon as he "draws on his pipe...cafes, / backgammon games, dice thrown over inlaid wood." Habra's use of the word "trapped" indicates that the man does not feel free in his backyard, but rather longs for Lebanon. The pain of coping with dislocation from his homeland leads him to feel trapped in the domestic space of a garden in the United States. It is no accident that Habra concentrates on the domestic sphere, rather than on a public space, as

Lebanese political and civic arenas have been unstable from the state's inception.

After the defeat of the Ottomans during World War I, the League of Nations authorized the French mandate over Greater Syria (1920-1943), which included modern-day Lebanon. As Suad Joseph (2012) summarizes, in the seven decades after Lebanon's independence in 1926, instability has been constant.<sup>281</sup> Citizens perceived the Lebanese state as dangerously incapacitated, so Lebanese turned to their families for protection and resources. In Lebanon, the strength of kinship as an "ideology and as practical relations is linked to the widespread lack of faith and trust in the state to deliver protection or critical services."<sup>282</sup> Joseph (2012) develops the concept of "political familism," which she defines as the deployment of family institutions, ideologies, practices, and relationships by citizens to activate their needs and demands in relation to the state or polity. Political familism is also used by the state or state actors to mobilize practical and moral grounds for governance predicated on a civic myth of kinship and a public discourse that privileges family.

Political familism, as a set of concepts, does not assume an unchanging set of family relations or family practices. Rather, political familism is based on what Suad Joseph calls the "kin contract," which refers to formal and informal understandings that memberships in families precedes membership in the state, and that families legitimately can claim prior loyalty of their members (male and female) over and above the state's claims to loyalty.<sup>283</sup> In

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<sup>281</sup> Joseph discusses several factors of instability including, but not limited to, the 1948 influx of Palestinians into Lebanon; the 1956 Arab-Israeli war; the 1958 Chamoun Revolt with American military intervention; the 1967 Arab-Israeli war; the 1970 Black September in Jordan; the 1973 Arab-Israeli war; the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War; American military intervention in 1982; Israeli aggressions that displaced hundreds of thousands of Lebanese in 1978 to one million in 2006; and the Israeli occupation (1982-2000).

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., pg. 159

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., pg. 151-2.

Lebanon—as in most states in the Arab region—kin groups are recognized as legitimate political actors. The family, rather than the individual, is written into the Lebanese constitution as the basic unit of society, and the economy also relies on the structure and dynamics of familism. Most businesses are small, family-owned shops, and family is the ultimate economic safety net for Lebanese. It is important to note that, while the specific structures or relationships of family in Lebanon vary widely, in the absence of state stability, the concept of the family as a network of kin has carried the burden of the work of the state.

Joseph's concept of "political familism" is renegotiated in Habra's poem "Narguileh." Habra recalibrates political familism in the U.S. by representing a Lebanese man who performs caring labor in a domestic space to produce sustainable food for his family. Specifically, Habra describes the man's activities as he tends his backyard: "He breeds canaries / in a shed, feeds them egg / shells, slices of apples. / Each dawn, he hangs cages / on the trellis / overlooking the swing, / waters his vegetables, / precious seeds / flown from far away, / curled cucumbers, / a special vine from Lebanon, / its silken leaves fit for stuffing." The experience of being in diaspora creates an affective yearning for Lebanon, which inspires the man to engage in acts of caring labor: he cultivates a garden by attempting to transplant his homeland into the U.S. Although most caring labor is attributed to women, Habra presents an image of a man's caring labor as he relies on gardening to keep the memory of his homeland alive.

Habra's poetic reflections are consistent with scholarship on Lebanese men's relationship to land. As Akram Khater (2001) has observed, Lebanese men found in the land

“the source of their social identity and status.”<sup>284</sup> In Habra’s poem, the man’s yearning for his homeland is a motivating force—outside of wage labor—that produces sustainable outcomes in the form of produce for his family. Although the man in this poem performs caring labor that succeeds on a material level, his labor fails on an affective level. Political familism in a deterritorialized context takes the form of an affective tension between longing for the homeland and feeling trapped in a U.S. domestic space; this dynamism inspires caring labor, leading to sustainable outcomes for the family. Habra’s poem implies that this tension could continue the man’s labor indefinitely; he is not motivated by a wage or by status in the public sphere. Rather, he attempts to heal trauma through performing caring labor.

As Habra’s poem shows, the use of caring labor as a mechanism for attempting to resolve trauma can serve as a basis for sustainable practices of care. Poetry, as Mary Phillips (2016) writes, “offers a means to embrace multiplicity, emotion and corporeal responses to the worlds in which we live” and “can help us reflect on our organic embeddedness and materiality and develop a heightened engagement with nature” because “writing enables us to feel our embodied connections to the natural world and to respond with emotion; to open ourselves to care.”<sup>285</sup> In Habra’s poem, the affective dynamics of trauma provide an impetus for caring labor that occurs in a deterritorialized space because the man is not located in Lebanon or in the U.S. Rather, he is attempting to reproduce Lebanon in the physical landscape of the U.S. Yet the man is not grounded in the U.S., either, because he feels imprisoned in the memory of his homeland.

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<sup>284</sup> Khater, Akram. *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001, pg. 13.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.



Habra portrays the man's memory as a type of archive. For instance, as he gardens, the man recollects playing backgammon and the music of "Feyrous, / Sabah, Om / Kalsoum." In diaspora, the man performs his own type of archival practice through gardening. Habra shows how the man's imaginary of his homeland, and his attempt to reproduce his homeland, yields the produce of caring labor. The man's efforts in transporting the seeds and the special vine from Lebanon are a type of archival practice that expands the definition of an archive beyond documents located in an institutional space. The vine of grape leaves, transplanted from Lebanon to the U.S., serves as an archive of the homeland because it forms the basis of an Arabic meal—stuffed grape leaves—on American soil, where the man, "thanks the Lord / his grandchildren / will live free / in the New World."

In Habra's poem, the *narguileh* (pipe) also serves as a type of archive that evokes the memory of Lebanon and provides a space for the man to examine his affective relationship with his homeland. For example, in the last stanza, Habra captures the man's emotional state as he gazes at the *narguileh*: "Carefully kindling coals / with tongs, he watches / arabesques, swirls emerging / from underwater, imprisoned / in the blown glass, / bursting at the surface, / deafened words / of a drowned Phoenician sailor." In this stanza, Habra depicts the *narguileh* as a type of archive that the man accesses and interprets in the domestic space of his backyard. This archival practice—innovated by an Arab man in diaspora—does not involve the state or an institution and does not contain documents or records; rather it is grounded in history as perceived through a poetic imaginary based on affect. When Habra writes that the man feels "trapped" like the "imprisoned" drowned Phoenician sailor, she shows that he identifies with his Phoenician heritage—a heritage that has been affected by his experience of deterritorialization. This stanza represents how the man, like the drowned Phoenician sailor,

feels a type of death: the distance of his homeland. Throughout “Narguileh,” Habra renegotiates Joseph’s concept of “political familism” in an American context and, in the process, gestures toward a post-neoliberal social order. By contemplating a man’s sustainable caring labor in his garden, Habra de-essentializes the problematic in ecofeminism that connects women to nature and illuminates how a man copes with diasporic trauma in productive, rather than debilitating, ways.

Like Habra’s poem, Marian Haddad’s “Keeping the Bear Away” (2004) centers on a man’s caring labor in a garden. Haddad, born in El Paso to Syrian immigrant parents, interprets her father’s attempt to reproduce crops from Syria in the United States. The epigraph announces that the poem will be grounded in the poet’s Christian faith:

There is another door  
to enter by,  
an opening  
at the side  
like the spear  
wounded in the flesh  
of Christ  
another door  
to enter by.

Haddad uses the image of a door as both a literal and figurative point of entry into both Christ’s suffering and her father’s memories of his Syrian homeland as he approaches the end of his life. She invokes the image of “another door” (the spear wound rather than the crucifix) to indicate her desire to pursue an oblique path into the memory of Christ’s suffering. Haddad uses a similarly oblique point of entry into her father’s gardening. In the first stanza, for example, Haddad refers to “a white door” which “leads to the garden / he planted.” This door opens to an archive of images: the memory of her father’s labor in the garden where “he

planted / fig trees and patches of cherry / tomatoes, mint and herbs / that scented his garden.”

These crops are typical of the Arab region, suggesting that her father’s crops connect him to his Syrian homeland. At this point, Haddad transitions to another door: “This is / often the door he used to enter / his house after making his way / about his American field, out / back behind the kitchen, where / his wife cut the eggplant...” and “stirred the sauces, crushed garden / tomatoes in her hands, / mixed the potted blend.” In these lines, Haddad explains how her mother assists her father in establishing “his new kingdom” in the United States. The poet then mentions a third door “over whose step / his heel sprung back into his new / kingdom.” This third door shows how the father’s archival practice of planting crops from the Syrian homeland has implications for sustainable practices of caring labor in America. Healing from the trauma of displacement is not disempowering; rather, it is based on the claiming of personal agency.

Haddad, when exploring the intergenerational implications of her father’s caring labor, describes her father as “the one / who has / planted / me.” While mothers are typically associated with images of fecundity, Haddad characterizes her father as a maternal figure who has “planted” her. This is important because her rendering humanizes an Arab man and because Haddad portrays how Arab men have their own unique type of fecundity. Throughout the poem, she articulates a desire to integrate her life into the natural world as a way of perpetuating her father’s caring labor. For example, Haddad writes that she desires to “grow / ‘round about / his house / like a fir / tree, scenting / his many baskets / of plums / and apples, / vineyards / heavy with grapes.” In this poem, Haddad links two types of caring labor: sustainable agriculture and caring for children. The poet’s desire to integrate her life into the natural world is both a kinship model of caring labor and a sustainable practice, an example of

what Ariel Salleh (2009) terms “eco-sufficiency.”

Salleh argues that eco-sufficiency is necessary for moving past, or at least modifying, what she sees as the problematic foundational principles of neoliberalism. Eco-sufficiency calls for a change in perspective from that of the market and the abstract rational individual to the perspective of developing sustainable systems that care for the social reproduction of labor as well as the regeneration of resources.<sup>286</sup> Haddad’s poem explores the affective economy of eco-sufficiency. The father in this poem plants crops from the Arab region, particularly fig trees and mint, as an attempt to recreate his homeland in the United States. Haddad compares her father to a fir tree that desires to grow and nurture more crops; the father demonstrates a desire to establish sustainability in the domestic sphere. The poem shows how the kinship-based economy of caring labor is intrinsically sustainable: the daughter cares for her sick father, just as he cared for her. Haddad’s depiction of her father as “the one / who has / planted / me,” provides a vision of how a man’s caring labor performed for his daughter “plants” her in both a physical and an emotional sense, giving her a model of sustainable labor and enabling her to continue that labor. These acts of caring labor occur outside of neoliberal structures, and Haddad makes visible not just the product but the process of sustainable caring labor. Ecofeminist philosophers have discussed how caring labor can serve as a basis for a concept of work that moves to a sustainable post-neoliberal social and economic order. A post-neoliberal social order requires valuing the common good over private property, emphasizing cooperation instead of competition, and placing importance on caring for others

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<sup>286</sup> As summarized by Adelheid Biesker and Uta von Winterfeld in “Regeneration in limbo: Ecofeminist perspectives on the multiple crisis and social contract.” *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*, edited by Mary Phillips and Nick Rumens. London: Routledge, 2016, pg. 89.

and for nature instead of maximizing one's self-interested utility.<sup>287</sup>

Haddad's poem can also be read as an example of what Michael Hardt (1999) calls "biopower from below." Hardt contrasts biopower from below with Foucault's conceptualization of biopower, which comes from above as the prerogative of a sovereign power—from *patria potestas*, the right of the father over the life and death of his children and servants, and later from the emerging forces of governmentality to create, manage, and control populations.<sup>288</sup> In contrast, biopower from below underscores the labor required for biopolitical production; it works directly on affects; it produces subjectivity, society, and life.<sup>289</sup> Haddad's portrayal of an Arab man's caring labor is a manifestation of biopower from below because the man's labor emerges from affect, remains grounded in kinship networks, and provides a model of sustainable labor that gestures toward a post-neoliberal social order. In the next, and final, section, I turn to post-neoliberal insights in the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye and Suheir Hammad.

### **Post-Neoliberalism and Deterritorialized Archival Cultural Practices**

Ibis Gómez-Vega (2001, 2010) observes that Naomi Shihab Nye "writes ordinary poems in an accessible language."<sup>290</sup> Nye's oeuvre meditates on the impact of war in the

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., pg. 90.

<sup>288</sup> See Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Volume I, The Will to Knowledge* (1976).

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., pg. 98

<sup>290</sup> Gómez-Vega, Ibis. "An Essay Review: The Art of Telling Stories in the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye." *MELUS*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2001, pp. 245-52. See pg. 251.

Middle East, creating “a space for the forgotten,” for “people who daily suffer the not-so little indignities of attempting to live in a world at war.”<sup>291</sup> Samina (2010) defines Nye’s “aesthetic of smallness” as “an artistic emphasis on small-scale objects and material realities, which include not only the ordinary, unadorned, and everyday, but also the personal and the particular.”<sup>292</sup> Bujupaj (2015) extends Samina’s analysis, arguing that “Nye’s poetry develops not only an aesthetic of smallness...but an aesthetic of attentiveness to a multitude of connections between people and their environments.”<sup>293</sup> In this section, I consider how Nye’s aesthetic of attentiveness manifests in a man’s caring labor, and how her attentiveness to this labor contributes to a post-neoliberal imaginary.

In “Arabic Coffee” (2002), Nye observes her father’s attempt to reproduce the cultural practices of his Palestinian heritage in a U.S. domestic space. The poem begins with the voices of children asking their father to make coffee. Nye complicates the boundaries between gender roles by emphasizing her father’s nurturing capabilities. She also characterizes the process of making coffee as a space free from gender conflicts and divisions: “the place where men and women / break off from one another / was not present in that room.” After he prepares the coffee—a source of sustenance for the family—the father creates a space in which the family can share their experiences. In the domestic environment where the family gathers to drink their coffee, all the family’s “disappointments and dreams” are welcome:

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<sup>291</sup> Gómez-Vega, Ibis. “Extreme Realities: Naomi Shihab Nye’s Essays and Poems.” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, vol. 30, 2010, pp. 109-133. See pg. 109.

<sup>292</sup> Najmi, Samina. “Naomi Shihab Nye’s Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime.” *MELUS*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2010, pp. 151-71. See pg. 156.

<sup>293</sup> Bujupaj, Ismet. “Nature in Arab American Literature: Majaj, Nye, and Kahf.” *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015.

“none was more important than the others, / and all were guests.” The domestic sphere is a common theme in Nye’s work, and Nye concentrates on the small details of this environment:

the father brings the coffee tray into a room:  
high and balanced in his hands  
it was an offering to all of them  
stay, be seated, follow the talk  
wherever it goes.  
The coffee was the center of the flower.  
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.

Nye recalls her father’s attempts to recreate Arabic coffee as a social custom in an American context, yet the poem is not exclusively located in America. Instead, Nye articulates a deterritorialized space in which caring labor enables the family to process their affective experiences. This process is a sustainable one—as Nye writes, “There is this, and there is more”—which indicates that the process is continuous.

In this deterritorialized space, the father recreates the ritual of Arabic coffee from his memory, showing how caretaking labor is a type of archival practice. Nye renders sustainable practices of caring labor as a performance: the guests are invited to share their experiences on an affective level in a space that Nye describes as nurturing and sustainable. This space signals a post-neoliberal form of social organization and cultural practice. Nye’s reflection on Arabic coffee as a cultural ritual exists outside of market values, and it is primarily concerned with affective practices of caring labor in the context of kinship.

Similar to Nye’s work, Suheir Hammad’s “whole hands” (2005) characterizes a male figure with an unspecified, but presumably paternal, relationship to the speaker. Hammad emphasizes caring labor from her position as a woman born to parents dispossessed from their

native land. The poem does not take place either in the Arab region or in the United States, but rather documents deterritorialized flows that document the relationship between these locations. Hammad specifically concentrates on a domestic space. At the beginning of the poem, she ruminates on the man's hands which "have sheltered and / shaded reflected the / sun encompassed / the moon whole...his hands around / me been bread fed / me kept me / alive simple / warm whole." By highlighting a domestic environment, Hammad makes visible the father's acts of critically important care that have ensured the child's survival.

In addition to articulating how the father meets the child's physical needs of shelter, protection, and sustenance, the speaker emphasizes that the man's hands inspire the child through an act of artistic production: "his hands inside / me playing piano / with broken chords he / turned up turned / me out whole." As Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) observes, Hammad's poetry, along with that of many other Arab American writers, manifests "within the confines of domestic Arab American spaces," where the reproduction of an "Arab homeland occurs primarily through material fragments, including food, Arab text, photos, music, plants, and religious icons and scripture."<sup>294</sup> While Hammad's "whole hands" does indeed, as Fadda-Conrey writes, take place in a domestic space, Hammad's invocation of music does not reproduce the Arab homeland but rather elucidates the affective economy of artistic production as an act of caring labor.

Throughout the poem, Hammad depicts the man playing the piano as a form of caring labor. The man's caring labor is not cognitive, not visual, not aural, but experienced within

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<sup>294</sup> Fadda-Conrey, Carol. *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York: NYU Press, 2014, pg. 30.



the speaker's body: "his hands cupped / have caught me as / i fell drop by glisten / fingers coaxing / my arrival whole." In this image, which evokes birth, the speaker demonstrates how the man's caring labor facilitates her sense of being "whole." The poem does not present the self as autonomous but rather in relationship, particularly in relationship to a man's caring labor. The affective impact of caring labor makes the speaker feel "whole." What does "wholeness" mean in this context? Hammad emphasizes caring labor first, because it is foundational, and then considers other types of labor performed by the man. The hands that cared for the speaker also work in an artistic context, as Hammad describes the man playing the piano, an action that resonates with the speaker and facilitates a sense of wholeness.

Why does Hammad write about music? Artistic production and consumption is a process of circulating affective experiences. These affective experiences—which people often describe as feeling "moved"—impact emotional states. What does it mean to be "moved" by art? The word itself suggests an affective response: the movement of emotion. This indicates that emotion has a circulatory component; it moves through embodied subjects in spaces that can be termed deterritorialized because they are not bounded in time or space but can be reproduced and experienced in many different contexts.

Hammad's poem—which depicts music as an act of caring labor—articulates that artistic production, circulation, and consumption is as vital to human beings as survival. Art provides a model of caring and sustainable labor because the production of art both requires and produces affective engagement. In Hammad's poem, hands serve as an embodied instrument of caring labor—labor that ensures physical and emotional survival through artistic production. By physically connecting humans to each other, hands serve as a physical manifestation of care. Moreover, artistic production contributes to post-neoliberal principles

because artists are not motivated solely by the prospect of material gain. A post-neoliberal social order would likely position the arts as vitally important because artistic production, while of course having the potential to be motivated by monetary gain, also has non-market purposes and consequences.

### **Conclusion**

For decades, scholars have documented the increasingly apparent and seemingly insurmountable problems of neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology, including the dominance of market values in social and political decisions, the reduction of the state in regulating the economy, and decreased social protections to citizens. The discursive dominance of neoliberalism has led to widespread agreement between both opponents and advocates of this philosophy that communities must adjust to the demands of the global economic system or consign themselves to economic deprivation. Given the influence of neoliberal thought on economic, political, and social structures in a global context, critiquing neoliberalism proposes a daunting challenge. However, as Gibson-Graham (2009) asserts, it is not necessary to establish a large-scale alternative to neoliberalism but, rather, to underscore already existing, community-based economic practices that fall outside of neoliberal logic—an “accretion and interaction of small changes.” In this chapter, I attempted to interrupt the discursive dominance of neoliberalism by analyzing how Arab American women poets represent small changes, specifically an affective economy of care grounded in social concern and collectivity.

Abinader’s “Arsenal” (2014) imagines women’s caring labor—portrayed as an act of

resistance to imperial violence—as an embedding of humans in the environment, developing a post-neoliberal affective economy of sustainable labor. Whereas Abinader interrogates the complex legacy of imperial violence, Alyan conceptualizes misogynistic violence as part of the underlying architecture of imperialism. In “Sahar and Her Sisters” (2012), Alyan configures the natural environment as a space in which women generate alternative social structures of caring labor to create the conditions for reproductive autonomy. Hammad’s “our mothers and their lives of suffer” (2005) articulates the voices of young Palestinian women who denigrate their mothers’ caring labor—an assessment that emerges from a neoliberal evaluation of labor that only attributes value to waged labor. Hammad elucidates how Palestinian women arrive at an analysis of their mothers’ caring labor as a source of strength, and as a basis for political resistance in the public sphere. The poem ultimately revalues caring labor as the foundational requirement of all other forms of labor.

Habra and Haddad’s poems portray how Arab men who have been dislocated from the Arab region attempt to resolve their trauma by using caring labor to reproduce the environment of their homelands. The reliance on caring labor as a mechanism for attempting to resolve trauma, as this poetry reveals, functions as a sustainable practice. Nye and Hammad portray cultural practices in kinship-based economies of caring labor. Moreover, they articulate affective economies of artistic production as forms of caring labor. All the poets considered in this chapter contribute several ideas to post-neoliberal imaginaries: they establish caring labor as foundational; they detach caring labor from female gender by depicting men in caregiving roles; they portray nature as a space in which men develop sustainable structures for caring labor; they provide models for caring labor that do not externalize but rather integrate the environment; and they identify cultural practices as

avenues for caring labor. Moreover, by depicting non-market spaces—domains outside the purview of neoliberal theory—these poets characterize family as a web of kinship in which multiple family members provide caring roles. All these poetic articulations provide alternatives to neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology by gesturing toward economic practices that already exist in the Arab American community. As these poets' work reveals, generative critiques of neoliberalism can emerge from the utterances of poetry, an artistic production that is concerned with values outside of the marketplace.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **Conclusion**

Although several scholars have made important contributions to the field of Arab American literary studies (Salaita 2007, Feldman 2007, Abdelrazek 2008, Hassan 2011, Fadda-Conrey 2014), there has not yet been an in-depth study exclusively on Arab American women poets. This dissertation attempted to provide a first step toward this contribution. I argued that Arab American women poets are important because they illuminate experiences of displacement, a vitally important topic in an era of transnational migrations. I focused on Arab American women poets who published full-length collections beginning in the mid-1960s and continuing to 2016. This period included many significant events including the rapid integration of the world economy into a globalization paradigm, increasing migrations of Arabs into Western countries, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the subsequent war on terror, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the destabilization of Iraq, the Arab Spring movements, the removal of Gaddafi, and the internecine war in Syria, which began in 2011 and displaced an estimated five million people outside of the country.

Throughout this dissertation, I explored how Arab American women poets represent the complex dynamics of migrations from the Arab region to the Americas. In their work,

these poets provide insights into conflicts in the Arab region, and how those conflicts have led to political instability, various forms of violence, and migrations of people around the world. This dissertation analyzed how Arab American women's poetry reflects on the impact of Arab regional violence. I concentrated on three predominant forms of political violence that the poets discuss: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which precipitated Arab migrations from Greater Syria at the end of the nineteenth century; the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, which displaced approximately 711,000 Palestinians; and the U.S. wars in Iraq. I also noticed how the poets address forms of economic violence resulting from the penury that often accompanies diasporic populations. These poets help us to understand the human costs of political conflicts in the Arab region, including impacts on noncombatants, experiences of displacement, and movements across national boundaries.

These poets' contemplative relationship to boundaries does not lead to lawlessness or chaos but considers how to improve the conditions of life. Although they or their ancestors experienced or witnessed acts of violence, these poets do not view people who have experienced violence as victims, but as agents who can contribute insights that benefit both Arab Americans and a wider collective. These Arab American women poets conceptualize the writing of poetry as a process that, through engagement with readers, moves in the direction of healing from violence. Throughout this dissertation, I highlighted how these poets claim agency because of diasporic displacement, and how they respond to the aftermath of violent conflicts in ways that document a complication, negotiation, and reimagination of boundaries.

I drew on the theoretical frameworks of scholars who have meditated on how boundaries are not only coercive, but also provide opportunities for contemplation and insight. Specifically, I contemplated how Arab American women create poetic imaginaries

that are responsive to both historical circumstances and to their contemporaneous sociocultural and political contexts. I commented upon the broader significance of these poetic imaginaries, aiming to understand how these writers—when considered collectively—articulate a normative vision for the future of Arabs, both in America and in a transnational context. In my attempt to understand the role of boundaries in this poetry, I dialogued with a wide range of scholarship that addresses boundaries in the context of women’s diasporic experiences, identity, trauma and recovery, childhood, neoliberalism, and caring labor.

In Chapter 1, “Arab Diasporas and Poetic Negotiations of Spatiotemporal Boundaries,” I examined three Arab American women poets—Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, and Nathalie Handal. Specifically, I investigated how these poets illuminate the phenomenon of Arab migrations to Western countries. I analyzed the poets at the time of their production and in the context of their reception. Specifically, I asked how these poets implicitly dialogue with central ideas of the *Mahjar* literary tradition for late-twentieth and early twenty-first century audiences. The first two poets—Abinader and Kahf—develop an approach that I called “ancestralism.” As a family-focused endeavor, ancestralism does not attempt to change Western countries, but rather to create the conditions for Arab survival in those countries. In the second section, I argued that Handal’s poetry about transnational Palestinian exile extends the philosophical contributions of the central *Mahjar* writer Ameen Rihani. Specifically, I addressed how Handal articulates a cultural synthesis approach that attempts to integrate Arab identities in a Western context, not to Arabize the West, but to maintain the strongest elements of both cultures. In the final section of this chapter, I drew attention to Handal’s 2012 collection, *Poet in Andalucía*, to show that Said’s concept of contrapuntal analysis requires a revision. Said’s contrapuntal analysis ponders Western European powers’

relationships with geographically distant colonies; however, it is also important to analyze regions such as Andalucía where it is difficult to distinguish between colonizer and colonized because the region experienced alternating periods of Christian and Muslim control. I argued that Handal's stated intention is to reflect on the "possibility of human coexistence" between Christian and Muslim populations, and her poetry remains hopeful about the possibility of multiculturalism.

In the subsequent chapters, I turned to the third period of Arab migration, which began in 1968 when the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 went into effect and increased migration from the Arab region to the United States. These chapters examined how Arab American women poets who immigrated to the U.S. during this period address important social, political, and economic issues in the contemporary United States. In Chapter 2, "Rethinking Boundaries of the Human Subject: Relational Identity in a Post-Anthropocentric Era," I observed that Arab American women's poetry does not articulate a unified vision of the Arab American subject. Some Arab American women poets, in particular Suheir Hammad and Mohja Kahf, articulate an identity politics by politicizing their social locations. These poets document socioeconomic inequalities and make calls for redresses to these inequities. There are compelling reasons to embrace identity politics because it provides a way for people to claim a history and find a voice. In this chapter, however, I underscored critiques of identity politics that point out the limits of fixing a location in difference. Rather than focusing on how individual identity has been shaped by structural power inequalities, the poets studied in this chapter—Deema Shehabi, Leila Halaby, and Etel Adnan—respond to the conditions of diaspora by imagining identity as dynamic and by moving beyond politicized social locations. This conception of identity understands the sense of the individual's



coexistence with other people and the environment. I explored how these poets' depictions of identity resonates with feminists and post-humanists who are complicating the boundaries of the human subject.

Chapter 3, "Childhood Epistemologies: Ethical Response to Violence in the Interstices of Arab-U.S. Boundaries," considered how several poets—Elmaz Abinader, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Deema Shehabi—reimagine the boundaries and roles of the child. My interest here was not on the boundaries of childhood, per se, but on the creation of childhood as an epistemological space through which boundaries between America and the Arab region can be opened for understanding. The poets analyzed in this chapter do not render childhood as a period in the lifecycle but as an epistemological space from which to make insights into the problem of Arab regional violence. Through the perspectives of children, these poets establish specific ethical positions on how to respond appropriately to acts of violence. These poets overwhelmingly meditate on two primary domains: domestic spaces and the natural environment, and their work portrays how healing from violence in the Arab region can occur by integrating insights that emerge from both spaces. Although these poets specifically address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and wars in Iraq, their insights have more general application because they establish broad ethical parameters for responding to violence.

Chapter 4, "Deterritorialized and Archival Poetic Imaginaries: Neoliberal Critique, Caring Labor, and the Boundaries of Gender Roles," investigated how Elmaz Abinader, Suheir Hammad, Hala Alyan, Hedy Habra, Marian Haddad, and Naomi Shihab Nye reimagine boundaries of gender roles. These poets emphasize the importance of caring labor, which involves connecting to other people and trying to help them meet their needs. I

analyzed how these poets interpret caring labor as a response to violence in the Arab region and transnational dislocation. I also highlighted how these poets politicize the affective dimensions of caring labor as a collective body of knowledge and considered what implications this knowledge might have for the body politic of American society. These poets emphasize that, during an incident of violence or in the context of war, labor complicates the boundaries between traditional gender roles, and these changes persist in diaspora. These poets contemplate how caring labor, in the context of a web of kinship, becomes an act of political resistance to imperial violence. By unfixing caring labor from its association with female gender, Arab American women poets present men in a wide range of caregiving roles, including in the natural world, and these characterizations focus on ecologically sustainable labor practices. Moreover, Arab American women poets articulate formations of caring labor that merge the natural and the human landscapes—a perspective that does not externalize the environment, but rather integrates the environment into production processes. The use of caring labor as a mechanism for attempting to resolve trauma can serve as a basis for sustainable economic practices that might facilitate a more inclusive social landscape.

Overall, this dissertation attended to the most predominant themes in Arab American women's poetry. I took as a point of departure Steven Salaita's (2007) proposition that "it is possible to extract a sociological epistemology from literature without ignoring its aesthetic integrity."<sup>295</sup> However, I centered my arguments more on the socio-cultural and political aspects of this poetry than on its aesthetics. There are many potential areas for future inquiry into Arab American women's poetry, including the aesthetics of language. Etel Adnan, for

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<sup>295</sup> Salaita, Steven. *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics*. New York: Palgrave, 2007, pg. 52.

example, is unique for her postmodernist aesthetic that emphasizes fragmentation, rupture, fluidity, and disassociation. Because these poets live in the interstices between the Arab region and America, many of them document complex linguistic experiences, mainly the struggles of negotiating between Arabic and English. In addition to Arabic and English, some of these poets are also fluent in French and/or Spanish. Moreover, some poets combine multiple languages within the space of a single poem. A potential area for future analysis is the linguistic features of this poetry.

Another avenue for inquiry is how Arab American women poets create intertextual dialogues with other poets and poetic traditions. Several of these poets can be read in the context of the British Romantic poets and the American transcendentalists. Another area for research could be how these poets exhibit an awareness of poetry as a medium ideally suited for exploring, negotiating, and attempting to resolve conflicts that emerge from the condition of living as a minority in American society. Many of these poets engage in philosophical inquiries on this topic, especially Elmaz Abinader, Nathalie Handal, Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad, Leila Halaby, and Naomi Shihab Nye.

A fourth area of future inquiry might be the relationships between urbanity and nature in this body of work. Many Arab American women poets who have had direct or ancestral experiences of diaspora live in, and write about, urban spaces. Perhaps the most prolific poet on urban themes is D.H. Melhem (1972, 1976), who writes about New York City, a topic also taken up by Suheir Hammad (1996, 2005) and Hala Alyan (2012). Several poets concentrate on Arab cities: Hedy Habra (2013) discusses Beirut, Heliopolis, and Cairo; Pauline Kaldas (2006) also writes about Cairo; Deema Shehabi (2011) considers Jerusalem; Dunya Mikhail documents the impact of violence on Iraqi cities (2004); and Nathalie Handal (1999, 2005,

2012, 2015) discusses urban spaces in several countries: Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Spain, France, and the United States. More frequently than urban environments, nature figures prominently in poems by nearly all Arab American women.

Finally, future scholars might ponder the significance of religion in this poetry. It has been estimated that Arab Americans are Muslim and Christians in roughly equal numbers, though other faiths (and secular perspectives) are also represented. Some poets, such as Mohja Kahf, discuss the Islamic faith, while other Arab American women write poems inspired by the Christian faith, including Marian Haddad, Elmaz Abinader, Hedy Habra, Pauline Kaldas, and D.H. Melhem. Naomi Shihab Nye and Elmaz Abinader explore interfaith dialogues, emphasizing the connections between Islam and Christianity rather than differences. Etel Adnan meditates on spirituality in the abstract, without reference to any recognizable religious tradition.

This dissertation analyzed Arab American women's poetry published up until 2016, a year that marked a significant turning point in international politics, including the "Brexit" vote to leave the European Union, the elections of populist governments in several Western countries, and a rise in nationalist sentiments. The migration crisis in Europe has led to increasing public debates about the enforcement of national boundaries, once seen as relatively unimportant in a globalized world. There has been an expansion of nationalist views in Western countries, and an increase in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim prejudice. It remains to be seen for how long this period of discontentment with globalization will continue.

Perhaps we are at the beginning of a sustained political realignment that rejects globalization, international migration, and multiculturalism, a period that asserts the values of national sovereignty, border security, reduced immigration, and unified national cultures. If

this is the case, we might expect future Arab American women poets to concentrate on the struggles of Arabs and Muslims in American society, documenting a sense of alienation, estrangement, and frustration. We might expect more Arab American women poets to write about their status as minority subjects in America, recollecting incidents of discrimination and promoting what might be called ethnic pride.

In such a political climate, it can be expected that Arabs and Muslims will feel increasingly unwelcome in Western countries, and perhaps some will return to their homelands. Others will remain and assert their Arab American and/or Muslim American identities, aiming for an inclusive American society that values heterogeneity, diversity, and inclusion. These poets will probably continue to advocate for progressive political alliances with other minority groups in the U.S. Others might articulate Pan-Arabism—a multi-faith celebration of ethnic heritage that often excavates shared ancestral or archival memories.

Many poets may discuss feelings of conflict between their heritage in the Arab region and the homes they have made in the United States. As an attempt to resolve these conflicts, Arab American women poets might undertake journeys to the Arab region, not with the intention of permanent resettlement but, rather, with the goal of understanding the language and culture of their homeland to bring this understanding back to America. Other Arab American women poets might remain in the U.S. but frequently travel to the Arab region, and to other locations. Through travel, the condition of alterity might be lived as a foundational and guiding principle. In this way, some poets might embrace an estrangement from fixed conceptions of self, homeland, and country. Perpetual dislocation might be conceptualized as a lifestyle that becomes both an aesthetic and a politics—a way of understanding the condition of those who are refugees, migrants, dispossessed, or exiles. In addition to traveling,

many of these poets might notice how domestic spaces enable Arab Americans to connect with their heritage, often through the practice of preparing food from their home countries. Given the transnational experiences of these poets, some might appeal—as Naomi Shihab Nye does—to shared humanity vis-à-vis a comparative cultural analytic, a kind of “global village” approach.

If this period proves to be a temporary reaction against globalization and international migrations, perhaps in time citizens in America and other Western countries will move toward a paradigm of global integration and multiculturalism. If this is the case, we can expect Arab American women poets to respond to these changing socio-political circumstances. We might expect to see more poetry that celebrates the transnational community of Arabs and Muslims in diaspora, the importance of diversity, and the value of multiculturalism.

## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### Topics of Arab American Women's Poetry

The Arab American women poets analyzed in this dissertation examine dozens of topics. The twenty-five most common topics include: violence, maternity, love, memory, nature, death, ancestry, religion, urbanity, Palestine, language, childhood, traveling, history, poetry, arts/music, philosophy, food, identity, America, diaspora, intertextuality, women, exile, and sex. Many Arab American women poets write about their status as minority subjects in American society, recollecting incidents of discrimination and promoting what might be called ethnic pride (Abinader 1999, 2014; Halaby 2012; Hammad 1996, 2005; Kahf 2003; Kaldas 2006; Melhem 1972; Shehabi 2011). Several poets advocate for a progressive political alliance with other minority groups in the U.S. (Abinader 1999; Halaby 2012; Hammad 1996, 2005; Kahf 2003; Shehabi 2011). Others articulate Pan-Arabism—a multi-faith celebration of ethnic heritage that often excavates shared ancestral or archival memories (Abinader 1999, 2014; Halaby 2012; Hammad 1996, 2005; Handal 2005; Kahf 2003; Melhem 1972, 1975; Nye 2011). Most of these poets discuss feelings of conflict between their heritage in the Arab region and the homes they have made in the United States (Habra 2013; Haddad 2004; Halaby 2012; Hammad 2005, 2008; Handal 2004, 2010, 2012; Kahf 2003; Kaldas 2006; Melhem 1972, 1975, 1988, 1996; Shehabi 2011).

As an attempt to resolve these conflicts, several Arab American women poets discuss



their homeward journeys to the Arab region, usually not undertaken with the intention of permanent resettlement but, rather, with the goal of discovering and understanding the language and culture of the homeland to understand their heritage, enrich the self, and bring this understanding back to America to humanize Arabs to Americans (Abinader 1999, 2014; Halaby 2012; Handal 2012; Kahf 2003; Kaldas 2006; Nye 2011). One poet, Palestinian American Lisa Suhair Majaj, was born in America but moved to Cyprus in 2001 and became an ex-patriate voice critical of American foreign policy. More commonly, Arab American women poets remain in the U.S. but frequently travel to the Arab region, to Europe, and to Central and South America (Abinader 1999; Handal 2012, 2015; Melhem 1976; Nye 1980, 1982, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2011). Through travel, the condition of alterity is never resolved but, rather, lived as a guiding principle. In this way, the poets embrace an estrangement from fixed conceptions of self, homeland, and country. Perpetual dislocation is a lifestyle that becomes both an aesthetic and a politics, a way of understanding the condition of those who are refugees, migrants, dispossessed, or exiles. As an alternative to traveling, many of these poets notice how domestic spaces enable Arab Americans to connect with their heritage, often through the practice of preparing food from their home countries (Abinader 2014; Alyan 2012; Habra 2013; Hammad 2005; Handal 2005; Kahf 2003; Kaldas 2006; Melhem 1975; Nye 1986, 1988, 2002, 2005, 2011).

Because these poets live in the interstices between the Arab region and America, many of them document complex linguistic experiences, mainly the struggles of negotiating between Arabic and English (Abinader 1999, 2014; Adnan 1990, 2008, 2012; Habra 2013; Halaby 2012; Hammad 1996, 2005, 2008; Handal 1999, 2005, 2010, 2012; Kahf 2003; Kaldas 2006; Melhem 1972, 1975; Mikhail 2004; Majaj 2001; Nye 1980, 1986, 1998, 1994,

2001, 2002, 2011; Shehabi 2011). In addition to Arabic and English, some of these poets are also fluent in French and/or Spanish, such as Etel Adnan, Hedy Habra, and Nathalie Handal. Although most Arab American women's poetry is written in English, sometimes the writers produce poems in Arabic, French, and Spanish. Additionally, some poets combine multiple languages within the space of a single poem.

Given the international experiences of these poets, it is not surprising that some appeal—as Naomi Shihab Nye does—to shared humanity vis-à-vis a comparative cultural analytic, a kind of “global village” approach. Most of these poets produce affective imaginaries that attend to how emotions can unify human beings regardless of ethnic or racial identity. Several poets write in the nexus of several topics: ancestry, maternity, love, and memory (Adnan 2007; Hammad 2005, 2008; Kahf 2003; Melhem 1975, 1998; Nye 1994; Shehabi 2011). Often, poets working in this vein create a character—usually an Arab child—who is used to freight empathy for people in the Arab region (Habra 2013; Kahf 2003; Kaldas 2006; Mikhail 2004; Nye 1980, 1994, 1986, 1998, 2002, 2011; Shehabi 2011). Many Arab American women poets establish an intertextual dialogue with other poets and poetic traditions (Abinader 1999, 2014; Adnan 2012; Habra 2013; Haddad 2004; Halaby 2012; Handal 1999, 2010, 2012; Melhem 1972, 1976, 1998, 2002; Nye 1994, 1986, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2011; Shehabi 2011). Using intertextuality, these poets develop a meta-cognitive poetics that exhibits an awareness of poetry as a medium ideally suited for exploring, negotiating, and attempting to resolve conflicts that emerge from the conditions of alterity. Many of these poets engage in philosophical inquiry on a range of topics, especially Elmaz Abinader, Etel Adnan, Marian Haddad, Nathalie Handal, Mohja Kahf, Dunya Mikhail, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Etel Adnan is unique for her postmodernist aesthetic that emphasizes

fragmentation, rupture, fluidity, and disassociation.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict preoccupies Arab American women poets who personally, or whose families, experienced the ongoing conflict, including Naomi Shihab Nye, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Nathalie Handal, Deema Shehabi, Suheir Hammad, and Hala Alyan. Many Arab American poets who have had direct or ancestral experiences of diaspora, live in, and write about, urban spaces. Perhaps the most prolific poet on urban themes is D.H. Melhem (1972, 1976), who writes about New York City, a topic also taken up by Suheir Hammad (1996, 2005) and Hala Alyan (2012). Several poets are interested in Arab cities: Hedy Habra (2013) discusses Beirut, Heliopolis, and Cairo; Pauline Kaldas (2006) writes about Cairo; Deema Shehabi (2011) considers Jerusalem; Mikhail documents the impact of violence in Iraqi cities (2004); and Nathalie Handal (1999, 2005, 2012, 2015) represents urban spaces in several countries: Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Spain, France, and the United States.

More frequently than urban environments, nature figures prominently in poems by nearly all Arab American women, some of whom trace a genealogy to the British Romantic poets and to the American transcendentalists. Religion is an important topic in this body of work. It has been estimated that Arab Americans are Muslim and Christians in roughly equal numbers, though other faiths are also represented. Some poets, such as Mohja Kahf, discuss the Islamic faith, while other Arab American women write poems inspired by the Christian faith, including Marian Haddad, Elmaz Abinader, Hedy Habra, Pauline Kaldas, and D.H. Melhem. Naomi Shihab Nye and Elmaz Abinader meditate on interfaith dialogues, emphasizing the connections between Islam and Christianity rather than differences. Etel Adnan concentrates on spirituality in the abstract, without reference to any recognizable

religious tradition.

The single most prominent topic explored by these poets is violence. Arab American women poets address many dimensions of violence including interpersonal violence, American military interventions in Arab countries, and Arab regional violence, including internecine wars, domestic instability, foreign interventions, and occupations. All Arab American women poets investigate how to live with, and heal from, the traumatic experiences of wars, occupations, exile, and dispossession (Abinader 1999, 2014; Adnan 1989, 1990, 2007, 2012; Alyan 2012; Habra 2013; Haddad 2004; Halaby 2012; Hammad 1996, 2005, 2008; Handal 2005, 2012; Kahf 2003; Kaldas 2006; Melhem 1972, 1975, 1998; Mikhail 2004; Nye 1988, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2011; Shehabi 2011).

## APPENDIX B

### Arab American Women Poets and Relational Identity

Arab American women poets who articulate relational identity include D.H. Melhem, *Rest in Love* (1975) and “love notes” from *Children of the House Afire: More Notes on 94<sup>th</sup> Street* (1976); Naomi Shihab Nye, “Swimmer, Blessed Sea” from *Red Suitcase* (1994), “The Small Vases from Hebron” from *Fuel* (1998), and “From Earth” from *Mint Snowball* (2001); Suheir Hammad, “blood stitched time,” “argela remembrance,” and “we spent the fourth of july in bed” from *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996), “sister star” and “angels get no maps” from *ZaatarDiva* (2005), and *Breaking Poems* (2008); Elmaz Abinader, “Making it New” from *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999), “Lines of Demarcation,” “Ash Wednesday,” “A Tear in the Sky,” and “Forehead” from *This House, My Bones* (2014); Mohja Kahf, “From the Patios of Alhambra,” “Khidr’s Riddle,” “Fatima Migrates in October,” and “Jasmine Snowfall” from *E-mails From Scheherazad* (2003); Nathalie Handal, “Twelve Deaths at Noon,” “Strangers Inside Me,” and “Amrika” from *The Lives of Rain* (2005); Dunya Mikhail “Bag of Bones” and “The Theory of Absence” from *The War Works Hard* (2005), and “Other Pronouns” and “Larsa” from *The Iraqi Nights* (2013); Pauline Kaldas, “From a Distance Born” from *Egyptian Compass* (2006); Hedy Habra, “The Bullfrog” and “Raindrops” from

*Tea in Heliopolis* (2013), and “Drop by Drop,” “Unborn,” “Origin,” “A Triptych,” “Walking Around Bernini’s *Apollo & Daphne*,” “Lovers, in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*,” “Inside your Palm,” and “The Dance,” from *Under Brushstrokes* (2015).

## APPENDIX C

### Themes in Arab American Women's Poetry about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Most Arab American women poets who address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict write poems that can be categorized into one or more of five common themes: traumatic experiences of Palestinians including exile and diaspora; maternal representations of Palestine; connections between Palestine and America; interethnic and interfaith relationships; and depictions of Palestine as a sexually violated woman.

For poems that consider experiences of Palestinians including exile and diaspora, see: Elmaz Abinader, "Preparing for Occupation" (1999) and "Ascension" (2014); Marian Haddad, "For Naomi Shihab Nye" (2004); Leila Halaby, "Refugee" (2001) and "a call to Irbid" (2012); Suheir Hammad, "children of stone" (1996), "one stop (hebron revisited)" (1996), "gaza" (1996), "Jabaliya" (1996), "zeitoun" (1996), "Palestinian '98" (1996), "ramallah walk" (2005), "love poem" (2005), "rocks off" (2005), "the gift of memory" (2005), "mama sweet baklava" (2005), and "Breaking poems" (2008); Nathalie Handal, "The Neverfield Poem" (1999), "Detained" (2004), "The Conflict" (2004), "Even" (2005), "Ephratha" (2005), "Haifa, Haifa" (2005), "Bethlehem" (2005), "I Never Made it to Café Beirut; Nor, I Heard, Did You" (2005), "Jenin" (2005), "Amrika" (2005), "Baladna" (2005),

“Blue Hours (2005), “Conversations with a Soldier when no one is Around” (2005), “Orphans of Night” (2005), “Strangers Inside Me” (2005), “The Hanging Hours” (2005), “The Uncertainty of Fear” (2005), “Hayat” (2010), “Listen, Tonight” (2010), “The Unnatural Apologies of Shadows” (2010), and “The Thing about Feathers” (2012); Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Points of Departure” (2001); D.H. Melhem, “Shebab” (2003) and “For the Palestinian People” (2003); Naomi Shihab Nye, “Brushing Lives” (1994), “Lunch in Nablus City Park” (1988), “Blood” (2002), “Footfall” (2002), “Passing the Refugee Camp” (2002), “Praying for Wind” (2002), “Stone House” (2002), “The Palestinians Have Given Up Parties” (2002), “For Mohammed Zeid of Gaza, Age 15” (2005), “Everything in Our World Did Not Seem to Fit” (2011), “The Only Democracy in the Middle East” (2011), “Hello, Palestine” (2011), “Thirsty” (2011), “Tiny Cucumbers” (2011), “War” (2011), “Wavelength” (2011), “Savigny Platz” (2011), and “Scared, Scarred, Sacred” (2011); and Deema Shehabi, “The Glistening” (2011), “Lights Across the Dead Sea” (2011), “Blue” (2011), “The Narrative” (2011), “Qasida of Breath” (2011), “Portrait of Summer in Bossey, 15 Years Since Her Death” (2011), “Qasida of Breath” (2011), and “The Cemetery at Petit Saconnex” (2011).

A second common theme is maternal images of Palestine. Poems that use maternal images include: Hala Alyan, “Maktoub” (2012); Leila Halaby, “yesterday” (2012); Suheir Hammad, “our mothers and their lives of suffer” (1996), “dedication” (1996), “scarlet rain” (1996), “children of stone” (1996), “rafah” (1996), “the necklace” (1996), “love poem” (2005), “post Zionism (as it relates to me)” (2005), “mama sweet baklava” (2005), “Gaza City” (2005), “Twelve Deaths at Noon” (2005), and “War” (2005); Naomi Shihab Nye, “Her Way” (1986), “How Palestinians Keep Warm” (1994), “All Things Not Considered” (2002), “Things Don’t Stop” (2002), “Your Weight, at Birth” (2005), and “The Small Vases from



Hebron” (2008); Deema Shehabi, “Migrant Earth” (2011), “Requiem for Arrival” (2011), “Portrait of Summer in Bossey, 15 Years Since Her Death” (2011), “Of Harvest and Flight” (2011), “The Cemetery at Petit Saconnex” (2011), “The Emptying” (2011), and “Green Fruit” (2011).

A third common theme is the connections between Palestine and America—see Elmaz Abinader, “Climb Up and Over” (2014); Hala Alyan, “Palestinian-American” (2012); Leila Halaby, “freedom fighter” (2012); Suheir Hammad, “taxi” (1996), “argela remembrance” (1996), “blood stitched time” (1996), “scarlet rain” (1996), “Silence” (2008), and “Breaking poems” (2008); Nathalie Handal, “Amrika” (2005); Mohja Kahf, “Lateefa” (1990) and “Jasmine Snowfall” (1998); Naomi Shihab Nye, “Mr. Dajani, Calling from Jericho” (2000), “Praying for Wind” (2002), “The Many Hats of William Yale” (2002), “Renovation” (2005), “Your Weight, at Birth” (2005), “At the Block Island Ferry” (2011), “I Hate It, I Love It” (2011), “Knowing” (2011), “Wavelength” (2011), “We Can’t Lose” (2011), “We Did Not Have Drinking Water...” (2011), “My Life Before America Had No Toilet Tissue” (2011), and “Scared, Scarred, Sacred” (2011); Deema Shehabi, “Of Harvest and Flight” (2011), “The Cemetery at Petit Saconnex” (2011), and “Ghazal 4” (2011).

A fourth common theme is interethnic and interfaith relationships—see Leila Halaby, “on going to the movies with a Jewish friend 1990” (2012); Suheir Hammad, “Jerusalem Sunday” (2005), “mama sweet baklava” (2005), “land” (2005), “angels get no maps” (2005), “talisman” (2005), “What I Will” (2005), “the gift of memory” (2005), “rocks off,” (2005), and “post-zionism (as it relates to me)” (2005); Mohja Kahf, “Jasmine Snowfall” (1998) and “I Never Realized They Had Aspirations Like Ours...” (2005); Naomi Shihab Nye, “Jerusalem Headlines, 2000” (2002), “The Many Hats of William Yale” (2002), “Your

Weight, at Birth” (2005), “For Aziz, Who Loved Jerusalem” (2011), “Savigny Platz” (2011), and “Wavelength” (2011); Deema Shehabi, “Light in the Orchard” (2011), “At the Dome of the Rock” (2011), “The Cemetery at Petit Saconnex” (2011), and “Green Fruit” (2011).

A final, less common, theme is images of Palestine as a sexually violated woman. Suheir Hammad is the main poet who connects Palestine with sexual violence—see “dead woman” (1996), “tabla tears” (1996), “of woman torn” (2001), “Breaking poems” (2008), and “letter to Anthony (critical resistance)” (2005). Nathalie Handal’s “The Warrior” (2005) also considers this theme.

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