

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Rabab Abdulhadi
Interviewer: Nadine Naber**

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Rabab Abdulhadi was born and raised in Nablus, Palestine and is a long-time feminist activist and scholar who has made significant contributions to the struggle for Palestinian self-determination and the well-being of Palestinian women. She has participated in numerous organizations dedicated to fighting for the rights of Arab and Arab-American women. From 1982 to 1988, she was the Director of Political and International Relations at the Middle East Research Center in New York. Abdulhadi was instrumental in founding the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations in North America during the first Intifada, or Palestinian uprising, that grew to 2,000 members and 29 chapters in the United States and Canada. Abdulhadi is also involved in a variety of coalition-building projects that make links between diasporic communities living in the U.S., U.S. communities of color and women of color activists. She has published extensively for the academic and mainstream presses writing on issues of nationalism, terrorism, race, ethnicity and the experiences of the diasporic Arab communities. She is currently working on two books. Abdulhadi is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan at Dearborn.

Nadine Naber is Assistant Professor of American Culture and Women's Studies and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Anthropology. She received her Ph.D. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from the University of California, Davis. Her research and teaching focus on Arab American Studies; Women of Color and Transnational Feminisms; Race and Ethnicity; and Colonialism and Post-Colonial Theory. She is currently writing a book entitled, *De-Orientalizing Diaspora: Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity among Arab American Youth in San Francisco, California*. She is conducting new research on the ways that class, gender, sexuality, and religion have intersected within Arab American engagements with anti-Arab racism following September 11th. Nadine is a co-editor, with Rabab Abdulhadi and Evelyn Alsultany, of *Gender, Nation, and Belonging*, a special issue of the MIT On Line Journal of Middle East Studies on Arab American Feminisms. She is co-editing a forthcoming book with Amaney Jamal entitled *From Invisible Citizen to Visible Subject: Arab American Engagements with Race before and after September 11th*. She has published articles that situate Arab American Studies in the context of U.S. racial and ethnic studies, and women of color feminisms in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *the Journal of Ethnic Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. She is co-founder of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, North America (cyber AWSA); Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (AMWAJ) and Arab Women's Activist Network (AWAN) and a former board member of Incite! Women of Color against Violence; Racial Justice 9-11; and the Women of Color Resource Center.

Transcript of Rabab Abdulhadi

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes¹*

Nadine Naber: I'm Nadine Naber. We're here today with the Global Feminisms Project at the University of Michigan. We're here with Rabab Abdulhadi, Palestinian activist, visiting us from New York City. Welcome to Michigan, Rabab.

Rabab Abdulhadi: Thanks, Nadine. It's very...happy to be here.

Nadine: We're just going to begin by talking a bit about your personal history.

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: And then we'll get into a discussion about your activism, some of your thoughts and ideas about activism and feminism, and then we'll close with some discussion about your journey as a whole and how you see it, and how you see U.S. feminisms and global feminisms in general.

Rabab: Oh...

Nadine: Okay, sound good?

Rabab: ...that's good, yeah.

Nadine: All right. So tell us a bit about your personal history—Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Rabab: I was born in Nablus. It was...it's on the West Bank in Palestine. At the time it was under Jordanian rule. I grew up under first Jordanian rule of Palestinian areas², which happened in 1950 after Palestine was turned into Israel, as a result of the establishment of the settled Israel, and the disbursement of Palestinians. Two territories were left—the West Bank and Gaza, and the West Bank was annexed to Jordan by them, King Abdullah at the time, of Jordan. And Egypt...Egypt controlled Gaza Strip, and I was born in Nablus on the West Bank. In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, Sinai and East Jerusalem. And so I experienced also life under Israeli occupation. So that's where...

¹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

² From 1950-1967 the West Bank became officially under rule of Jordan. In 1967 Israel overtook Jordanian West Bank and became the ruling forces and Palestinians were forced off their land as refugees. There is a movement around the "Right to Return" which is a UN mandated right of refugees to return to their land. See <http://al-awda.org>.

Nadine: So...

Rabab: ...my life has been. Yeah.

Nadine: So while you were living there, were you involved in political activities? Were you...you know, what was it? I know that you're an activist, but I don't know much about what exactly it is you are doing, and when you started your involvement.

Rabab: Well, I was...I was pretty young when the occupation began, but I've...I've grown up in a fairly politicized family. My father was a founding member of the Arab National Movement³. My mother has...was involved in 1948 in...as a volunteer nurse in 1948 War⁴. She didn't have any training or...but she, but she did. And so I grew up always listening to political discussions and so on. And under Jordanian rule, I remember a couple of things very clearly. I remember that...we were not supposed to turn on the radio to "Sotel Arab"⁵, the Voice of the Arabs, which was the Egyptian radio station, because Jordanian Hashamite Monarchy⁶ was not fond, to say the least, of the Egyptian, rule of Jamal Abdel Nasser⁷, who was one of the giants of the N... movement at the time. So we would had to lower the radio whenever the Jordanian army patrols pass by, because some people were arrested and thrown into jail for that. And the second thing I remember, Jordanian soldiers actually coming to our house to search. And I didn't know—I was too little—but I didn't know why, but I knew there was something not altogether, and of course when I grew up I realize that my father was active in the Arab National Movement, and that must have been the reason why. And then the other thing that I remember, I think I was...I was in the fifth grade, which must have made me like 11 at the time. And there was this, some more incident in which Israel invaded a Palestinian village on the West Bank. That was before 1967⁸. And they've had attacked and I think they killed a few people and so on. And a lot of Palestinians and Arabs felt that the Jordanian government was not actually protecting the population well. And there were a lot of demonstrations, and, you know, I went out on a demonstration with my girlfriend from school and like 12 other girls, running in the street...

Nadine: And how old were you?

Rabab: Oh, I think we were like 11 or 10. I don't know. We were walking in the street. Nobody was paying attention to us. But we were very proud of ourselves. We were kind

³ The *Arab National Movement* was a movement in the 1950s in response to Western colonization and domination of Arab lands and peoples. A secular pan-Arab movement formed that sought to unite all Arab people in a struggle for Independence.

⁴ 1948 was the year that the state of Israel was created on Palestinian land and resulted in the colonization of Palestinian lands and peoples. Palestinians actively resisted the colonization of their land and are still resisting today.

⁵ This is the voice of the Arabs' radio program.

⁶ *Hashamite Monarchy* is the ruling monarchy of Jordan.

⁷ *Jamal Abdel Nasser* was the leader of the secular Arab National Movement of the 1950s.

⁸ 1967 was the year of the Six Day War.

of like solid activists. Nobody, you know...it's like little girls. Probably they were laughing at us or something. But, yeah, so this is...this is part of this, but it was, I mean, it was...part of it is funny because we were little, but a lot of it wasn't funny, because a lot of people were arrested, a lot of people spent time, were tortured in prison, Jordanian prisons. And as was the case in many other countries in the region. And so I've had this kind of like, you know, consciousness, I guess planted in my mind since I was very little. And then...and then I remember at the '67 things became much more like active, one...one Jordanian soldier went on the roof of our building and actually carried a battle with the Israeli soldiers' occupying army, which came from the eastern part of Jordan. The West Bank, if you come from the eastern part, you're...if it's Israelis, they're supposed to come from the western part, because Israel is to the west of the West Bank. If you come from the east part, you think it's Arab armies. So a lot of people were...got out of the windows to cheer Arab armies supposedly coming to liberate us. It turned out to be the Israeli military, the Arab...a lot of Arab governments had already pulled out their armies at the time. And this young man had carried the battle with the Jordan...with the Israelis and got killed, was martyred on the roof of our...our building. And I was...I was 12. I was asked to go up and remove the gun from his hand and like throw it in this big square, because the Israelis were coming to collect the weapons. By that time, it was already known that Israel has occupied and, no, you're not supposed to have weapons or anything. And...and that was my first time I actually saw somebody dead with blood on him, carrying like the gun, like this. And...and he was not Palestinian from Jordan. He was Jordanian, I think from a village around Sultorman, I'm not sure. I don't remember anymore. Because his father came few months after the occupation, and my parents had saved his ID and his military papers and his wallet, and my father and a couple of other people, men from the neighborhood, carried him and buried him, you know, in the cemetery so he would get dignified burial. So this are some of like the things I remember. And then I...I remember, this is kind of like when the women's activism become...began picking up again. I should back up a little bit because in 1965, there was this big meeting in Jerusalem with all delegates, Palestinian delegates coming from all over the world. And they established the Palestine National Council⁹. And among them, there were 139 women who formed the General Union of Palestinian Women¹⁰. And one of them was my aunt, who then became very active in the Palestinian Movement, and in 1996 she ran for the President of Palestine against Yasser Arafat¹¹.

Nadine: Hm.

⁹ *Palestine National Council* is the parliament in exile of the Palestinian people. The PNC elects an Executive Committee, which assumes leadership of the organization between its sessions. The Council usually meets every two years. Resolutions are passed by a simple majority with a quorum of two-thirds.

¹⁰ The *General Union of Palestinian Women* belonged to the larger "umbrella" group of the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations.

¹¹ In 1958, *Yasser Arafat* (1929-2004) helped found Al-Fatah which was an underground organization which advocated armed struggle against Israel. During the first Intifada (1987-1991) he played a key role in resistance against colonization and occupation. After Oslo he led the new Palestinian government (PNA) which some grassroots Palestinian activists today critique for their weak stance in resisting Israeli colonization and US support of Israel as well as compromising the Palestinians. He died of unknown causes, under much speculation.

Rabab: And she passed away in 1999. But, you know, so there were...there was all this kind of like environment around. I...and this is interesting because I grew up thinking that all Palestinians are politicized¹², because I was politicized. But I think a lot of Palestinians are politicized. The majority are, but not every single Palestinian is, because not everybody has been through that. But after '67, women were...there were a lot of friends of my mother who were school teachers. So they actually went on strike. They refused to teach because Israel was changing the curriculum. So they refused to participate in the teaching. And then, and there it was all these debates going back and forth. Do we teach? Do we not teach? If we don't teach the kids don't learn. If we teach, are we going to teach this curriculum. And within six months, or so, some people decided to go to teach and some people said we're not going to participate in that. And each one of them has a valid point of view. So I can never...you can never...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...which one is better. Each one decided differently. And then there were a lot of sit-ins. So, you know, like my mother and some of the neighbors will go and sit in the...in a mosque. The mo—the mosque was very close. One of the mosques was very close, never the cemetery, near our house. And that was the closest place. Because you'll have to go to a place which is supposed to have sacredness about it, to make sure that you don't get really attacked. But they'll have a sit-in, they'll have a hunger strike. Because for the prisoners or for all sorts of things. And, you know, we'll sit there and we won't eat. I mean, we'll go for hours and hours and hours, and then they'll force the little kids to start eating because we were too young. And there were also like women going around gathering petitions and they'll come and like in the evening and they'll knock at the door and...and everybody's hush-hush, you know, so like somebody's signing. And it sounds, today it sounds kind of, even for me to kind of retell the narrative, it sound ridiculous, because what's the big deal about signing a petition. But at the time, if your name was anywhere, if you were caught doing anything, you will be thrown immediately in prison. So it wasn't, it wasn't kind of a luxury activity, because like I think the temporality needs to be remembered here. So there was always this kind of stuff going on, and...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...you know, a lot of other things. We were always listening to the news, hearing what's going on. Everybody was discussing it. Many times the city will come under complete curfew. We would be walking to school and the Israeli soldiers would be parked in a patrol, and they'll, you know, they'll start kind of harassing us little girls going to school. And it's not that the Israeli soldiers harass us and the Palestinian guys didn't harass us. They harass us too. But with the Palestinian guy, I could just go tell, you know, my mom or my father that somebody is bothering me. And the next day my father will drive me to school and just likely stop and give the guy a dirty look. He's not there tomorrow. You couldn't do that with Israeli soldiers.

Nadine: Um-hum. Um-hum.

¹² *Politicized*: Being made political or being active politically.

Rabab: Because, you know, you just have to like make sure that you'll go to the other side of the street, you have to avoid them. So there was...and they will just like, you know, using curse words and all sorts of things...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...for little girls! It was...it was always this kind of fear, but at the same time come...like very strong dislike...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...and distaste. And, and I guess consciousness of what's going on, I think, after maybe if people weren't politicized by that time, people would become politicized, having experienced this. Because everybody has to go...walk to school, so...

Nadine: So you grew up. So by growing up under Israeli occupation, it's not a one-incident that leads you to become an activist...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...it's the ongoing situation of...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...your entire life growing up.

Rabab: Yeah, and it's...it's everyday life.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: I mean, it's everyday life here to, you know, if you're...if you're...if you're poor and you...every day you remember your parents or your mom or your father, if you have a single parent worrying about where the bring the food and so on, it's the same.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It's, I mean, it's a different...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...kind of like, um, oppressive situation. It's very much ingrained in your consciousness. It's...you can't...you can't imagine your life after a while, not...

Nadine: Different.

Rabab: ...having...yeah, this part of it. It's part of it. It's not that you like it.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It's not like...because you get used to it, you say, "Oh, I miss the occupation."

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: But it's not...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...it's very much of part of your...yeah, so you become political, you always have a viewpoint...

Nadine: So let's move into...

Rabab: ...about things, yeah. Hm.

Nadine: ...um, the turning point, or...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...the time that you started playing a more central role in political activism. Can you tell me about when you became involved kind of in a more formalized kind of way?

Rabab: I don't know. I mean, I think it's really hard to say...

Nadine: Or you could tell me the, you know...

Rabab: I think it's very hard. I was...I was...I went to Birzeit University¹³ one summer to...to improve my English. They had summer...summer classes and they allowed high school kids to go. And, you know, and there was all...people were getting arrested.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: I took class with, um, two professors. One was Palestinian from Israel, and was the first time I actually met a Palestinian from Israel who is actually politically involved. Because we had family...

Nadine: Can you tell me just very...

¹³ *Birzeit University* was first Arab university to be established in Palestine that is the center of Palestinian student politics. Birzeit students have a key role in the Palestinian student movement and have instigated many actions against the occupying forces. The University also has one of the only Women's Studies Institutes in the "Arab World."

Rabab: ...like what's...yeah.

Nadine: ...very, very briefly what you mean about a Palestinian from Israel?

Rabab: Well, in 1948, Israel was created. Nine hundred thousand Palestinians or so became refugees. They were expelled from their land. And they, they live in 59 refugee camps and throughout the Middle East in the West Bank, Gaza, in Jordan, in Lebanon. Couple in Syria, although the status is interesting and all that. And then there were, there were...was small number of Palestinians left in Palestine but now it's controlled by Israel, which becomes a state for the Jews, with a very, very small number of Palestinians, but it's dominated by...it's a Jewish state. Zionism call—defines Israel as a Jewish state. And so in 1967, in 19...1948, Palestinian population is split, right. There is people in refugee camps, there are people in the West Bank, there is people under Israeli law, and that is really marshal, throughout, until 1966, under military marshal law¹⁴. And so we don't interact at all.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Except for people who have relatives who lived in the West Bank, they would meet at Mandelbaum Gate in Jerusalem¹⁵, maybe once very two months or so for half an hour. And then one of the, the things that actually is very also part of the collective memory of the Palestinians, is the radio broadcast for relatives telling their relatives that they're alive.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: So it's very sad. There is a song by Fairuz¹⁶, I mean, the minute you hear it, it's sort of like immediately reminds you of this broadcast. So-and-so is saying, so-and-so so we are alive, we're okay. Your uncle so-and-so died, you know, this one graduated, this one had a child. And so...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...this is the only way people actually, when they grew up they didn't know each other. If they meet somewhere outside in the Middle East, they wouldn't recognize each other on the street.

Nadine: I appreciate the clarification.

¹⁴ *Marshal* is a term connoting militaries and law enforcement officers so to live under military marshal law would entail being under an active military.

¹⁵ There are seven gates into Jerusalem and in this case Rabab is most likely referring to a place where people could plan on meeting when they were in Jerusalem for prayers. Although Palestinians are not allowed to travel around their land although exceptions are sometimes made, particularly for prayers. Therefore, one could meet in Jerusalem at a particular gate to see loved ones.

¹⁶ *Fairuz* is a legend of Arab music from Lebanon who writes and sings in Arabic. She sings about social issues and inspires people's emotions about the struggles of the Palestinians and Arabs.

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: Can you go back to the...

Rabab: Yeah, so...yeah.

Nadine: ...so...I hate to have cut you off, but can you back to the...

Rabab: It's all right. But [inaudible] so in...in...So there were all these professors, and some were from the Communist Party and it was the Jordanian Communist Party. And they used all...all this activism going on. So you start participating. And the Palestinians in the West Bank are not allowed to sleep overnight in Israel. Were not allowed. We have to go and come back, if we are allowed to go, and...And the Israeli Communist Party every year did a camp...work camp in Nazareth, at which people will come from all over the world, and work. And I was dying to go, but I knew if I go, I'm not...I'm not supposed to go, and I knew my parents would not allow me, so I went without telling them. And I got involved with people, and I was just very close to what's going on. And I started becoming more and more and more active.

Nadine: I see.

Rabab: But my activism really became...I mean, in the sense of not taking a leading role rather than...

Nadine: Yeah, that's what I would like to hear about.

Rabab: ...rather than just participating in whatever people were...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...organizing and so on. What really took place in Madison, Wisconsin when I came to this country, I participated in the Union of Arab Students at the time, and I was elected president. It was my first year. And then and [inaudible].

Nadine: And when was that?

Rabab: This was in 1978.

Nadine: 1978.

Rabab: Yeah. And, and then the following year, the Palestinian students were becoming more active and we founded the Union of Palestine Students and it was becoming chapters all over the United States. And we would go to camps, you know, go on buses and meet and argue and debate. Even the smallest point, what kind of statement is it "the" or "a", you know, "the" peace process or "a" peace process.

Nadine: [laughs]

Rabab: I mean, it was important, was very important all of these debates that were going on. And the place, you know, made us like very conscious. And I think...so this was con—and there were a lot of activist organizations. U.S. Activist organizations on campus. I mean, Madison, Wisconsin has tons...tons of them. So little by little you start like learning. You know, you have the sense that there are injustices in the world. You know, like when I was little, I remember one, there was a newspaper at one point, and there the picture of Angela Davis¹⁷ on the front. And there was about her being arrested. And I remember my mother saying, “She’s friend, she’s friend.” And like...

Nadine: [laughs]

Rabab: ...I know somebody’s...I...I don’t remember who said, “Why would you say that? That’s...” “She’s black, she’s in U.S., she’s friend.” As in...you know, I mean, so there is all this kind of things that, that begin, and you start connecting things. Because in Palestine you’re not interacting with a whole lot of other people from other countries. Little by little you start connecting, and you start seeing the intersections...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...the similarities. And so there were a lot of coalitions going on, and you also see the differences, and the tensions, and what sort of programs the movements were having. There were a lot of women who were doing women’s history...International Women’s Day¹⁸ actually. So I would participate with them. And in 1982, I think the Israeli invasion of Lebanon¹⁹, and specifically the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, it’s kind of like did it for me.

Nadine: So that’s when the Israeli massacre...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...of Sabra—it was...it was an Israeli massacre. It was a massacre of Palestinian refugees in the Shatila Camp²⁰, in the area of Sabra²¹ and Shatila. Sabra is near Shatila.

¹⁷ *Angela Davis* is a radical Black American activist who worked with the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Movement. She is well known for her arrest as a conspirator in the prison break of George Jackson on August 7, 1970 and making it onto the FBI’s Most Wanted List. She is currently a professor in the University of California system although then-Governor Reagan had claimed she would never work in the system again after she had been fired for her openly communist views.

¹⁸ *International Women’s Day* is celebrated throughout the world on March 8 to recognize women and the struggles they face worldwide.

¹⁹ Approximately 100,000 Palestinian refugees lived in Lebanon. In 1982, spurred by the failed assassination attempt on the prime minister, Israeli forces entered Lebanon in search of members of the PLO. A tentative cease-fire was eventually agreed upon, although it was not upheld by Israeli. When international and U.S. peacekeeping forces left, agreements were further breached and attacks continued.

²⁰ The Red Cross founded *Shatila Camp*, a Beirut refugee camp, in 1949 to accommodate Palestinian refugees. It was decimated in the 1982 Israeli attack on Lebanon although Israel has denied involvement

Who were killed by Lebanese right wing militias who were aided in their massacre by the Israeli forces, led by the Israeli current prime minister, Ariel Sharon²², who actually turned on flood lights to facilitate the killing. Because they were usually using actually like...they weren't even using guns, they were using like knives and daggers and swords to kill people in silence, so through the night, so people wouldn't know. The killing actually began Wednesday night, September 17th and it did not stop until I think Friday September 30th. And by the time the UN workers and the Red Cross workers came in, a lot of the bodies had decomposed. I remember even on TV seeing like the flies. Some bodies, they couldn't know who they belonged to. Anyway, it was...you know, so that...before the massacre itself and on September, when Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, there was a lot of stuff going on. I began to realize...I began to realize...not decided actually not to realize, that I didn't want to be...to go to school. Education was a bourgeois thing. I wanted to...I just wanted to be an activist. And I was dying to go to Lebanon to volunteer. But like none of the Palestinian activists would send me. They said you have no skills, you're just going to be an obstacle. I was really offended, but they were right.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: And but there...but in lieu of that, we started organizing something called November 29th Coalition for Palestine²³, which has a group of many...a hundred I think organizations around the U.S. that organized the first huge march for Palestinian rights in 1981 at the United Nations, eight thousand...

Nadine: Wow.

Rabab: ...people. That was so big, eight thousand people at the time. And we took buses and we came and we met other people. And so immediately I started organizing with other people in Madison and Milwaukee²⁴, teach-ins, bringing speakers to come. One of the areas, because I remember Oscar Shapone a *compañero*²⁵ from El Salvador, who actually didn't speak...you know, his English wasn't that...that good. But we bumped into each other along the way...in India, of all places, we were at the World Social Forum²⁶. And they...we were just building...

with this specific incited. This camp is formally recognized by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. See <http://www.un.org/unrwa>

²¹ There was also a refugee camp in *Sabra*, a town near the Shatila refugee camp.

²² *Ariel Sharon* served as Israel's Minister of Defense from 1981-1983. He ordered the Israeli army to invade Lebanon in 1982. In 1983, Sharon was found indirectly responsible for the Lebanon massacre and was removed from office.

²³ In 1997, the United Nations designated *November 29* the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

²⁴ University of Wisconsin has 13 campuses including Madison and Milwaukee.

²⁵ *Compañero*: a Spanish word that means "companion" or "buddy."

²⁶ The first *World Social Forum* was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 as a response to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual meeting of the world's most powerful political and business leaders. According to its Charter of Principles, the World Social Forum is "an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...movements. And so then...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...I moved to New York and I became more active. And [inaudible]

Nadine: And is that when you were involved with the Women's Organization?

Rabab: In...yeah. In...

Nadine: Can you tell us about that?

Rabab: ...that's when...that's when we founded it. We...you know, I moved to New York and there was a whole bunch of us. And we were...the year before there was a decision to start a chapter for the General Union of Palestinian Women²⁷ in the United States. And the General Union of Palestinian Women, GUPW, is one of the mass institutions of the PLO²⁸. It was founded in 1965. And the...then somehow the Arafat and company decided that they didn't have a whole lot of women belonging to the main party of the PLO. So they banned, they stopped the decision, they froze. They didn't say, "We're not going to implement it," they said, "We need to defer," okay, hoping that they will recruit more people to have a union. And so...

Nadine: So that was...

Rabab: ...and many of us were...

Nadine: Who made the decision to freeze?

Rabab: Arafat...

Nadine: Arafat.

liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centered on the human person." The Forum has been held annually in Porto Alegre since 2001.

²⁷ "The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) was established in 1965 as a body within the Palestinian Liberation Organization and according is considered to be the official representative body for Palestinian women around the world. It is also the umbrella for all women's organizations in Palestine and in exile. The main goal of GUPW, since its establishment, has been to mobilize women within Palestinian communities to participate in various social, economic, and political processes, which contribute to their development." (Mission Statement from GUPW's website at <http://www.gupw.net>)

²⁸ The *Palestine Liberation Organization* (PLO) was established in 1964, bringing together groups working to free Palestine for Palestinians. After the defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War, Yasser Arafat's Fatah party emerged as the most powerful group in the PLO and took over the organization, making Arafat the chairman of the PLO executive committee. In 1988 the PLO reversed its position on "terrorism" and supported "the right of all parties concerned in the Middle East conflict to live in peace and security."

Rabab: ...and the party which is...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ...supposed, the status quo party, not the...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ...ruling party in Palestine, if there is a ruling party. And, and then we...we were...we didn't have any...anything to work under. We didn't have like a group to work with. And we were trying to participate in International Women's Day. Again, in 1983, I had to move to New York in November 1982, and there were other women who were doing it before that I can talk about the experience I participated in. And we would go to the all the organi—activities and nobody will...will let us participate. Everybody will say, "You don't represent anybody. And then others will say, "Well, are you a nationalist or a feminist?" "We don't know." "What you said, Palestinian are you...what are you going to do? Are you going to fight against your men?" And we're saying, "Yes, but we have to tell you about the occupation," and it wasn't going anywhere. So we didn't...you know, so we...I remember we sat around the table in Brooklyn, kitchen table, and we said, "We're going to find a Palestinian women's association."

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: We...we're getting invited to, you know, to set the record straight, we actually got invited to Medgar Evers College. At the time by Betty Shabbaz²⁹, Malcolm X's³⁰ widow and other women who were active there. We were invited to Harriet Tubman High School in Harlem³¹. There were a few places. El Centro, which is a Puerto Rican Center at Harlem, at Hunter College, operated by a number of Puerto Rican activists and feminists. But in terms of like the...what would be called the mainstream women's movement, we didn't have...And people were saying, "You...you should have your own organization too. And we started our own organization. And then we realized there were organizations flourishing all o over the country. Was one in San Francisco, there was one

²⁹ *Betty Shabbaz* is the widow of Civil Rights activist Malcolm X. She herself was an active advocate for the rights of African-Americans and fought against racial inequality. She was a professor of Health Education at Medgar Evers College at the City University of New York in Brooklyn.

³⁰ *Malcolm X* entered public life in 1953 as minister and national representative of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an Islamic Black separatist group that fought for a state apart from white people and taught that white society actively worked to keep African-Americans from empowering themselves and achieving political, economic and social success. His charisma, drive and conviction attracted an astounding number of new members, and X was largely credited with increasing membership in the NOI from 500 in 1952 to 30,000 in 1963. In 1964, X lost faith in the integrity of the NOI and broke with the group. From that point on, relations between X and NOI became increasingly sour. On February 21, 1965, X was assassinated by three NOI gunmen although it remains contested as to who really ordered the assassination—the U.S. government or the Nation of Islam.

³¹ *Harlem* is a neighborhood of New York that is mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities. El Barrio is a neighborhood of East Harlem and has many Spanish-speaking residents.

in Chicago, there was one in Los Angeles, in Houston, Texas. I think in Austin at UT there's some students forming it. So, you know, little by little, all these groups. That was 1983. In 1986 we founded...

Nadine: Women's groups.

Rabab: Women's groups. Yeah, yeah. All these women have already set up activities and associations in different places, and we called it Association, the same name that is used in Palestine for women's associations. So sort of like a broad umbrella that everybody can build.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: All Palestinian women, you know, can belong. And in 1986 we...we came together and we unified in the Union of Palestinian...That's why it's called Union of Palestinian Women's Association, not Union of Palestinian Women.

Nadine: Ah.

Rabab: Because the association's retained auto— you know, autonomy at the same time we were unified in this national program. And thus the revolution began for us. [laughter]

Nadine: I'm really interesting to know about the issues that the association tackled.

Rabab: It was very interesting in...In different places there were different issues. And I think it depended on who was part of what I know, um, for instance, when we would meet at the Union, the San Francisco women would come and we...they would say like, "Oh, you know, so-and-so is working in a liquor store." And the women who were devout Muslims in Brooklyn would say, "Liquor store? Palestinians owning liquor stores?" It was...it was sort of there were all the kind of like culture, you know, sensibilities and differences and so on, that, well, it didn't mean much at the time. I mean, people...part of the Palestinian movement is democratic secular Palestine, democratic secular state, as an antidote and a position, an opposition to Zionism, calling Israel a Jewish state. So that...Christian, Muslim, it...Atheist, what have you, it didn't really matter. And there wasn't that much [inaudible] at the time yet. But so we didn't...that, that wasn't kind of like a huge issue. One of the issues were, there was a very big tension from the beginning, and I'm kind of like, now that I'm beginning to kind...write about this subj—it's coming to me to...to realize what the tension was. But was a lot of tension around the whole discourse of modernity and modernization.

Nadine: Do you mind if I ask you, if we...if you tell us a little first for people who don't know much about the work...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...what were the issues that that association was tackling. Like can you tell us about some of the issues?

Rabab: Well, some of the stuff.

Nadine: Of that [inaudible]..

Rabab: One of the...one of the main...oh, oh.

Nadine: ...that drew your group together.

Rabab: ...okay. Let's see what...what we...We had a very minimal like points of unity to...

Nadine: What's the agenda or...?

Rabab: Yeah. The overall program let's say...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ..that we agreed upon...

Nadine: Great, great.

Rabab: ...because there were differences. The overall program we agreed on was the question of doing...being a Palestinian women's organization. What does that mean?

Nadine: So that's interesting.

Rabab: What does that mean? Is it a Palestinian organization made up of women, or is it the women's organization that happens to be Palestinian. And it was always this...the tension was always there so, because on one hand, we wanted to...to...we wanted to carve a place in the leadership of the Palestinian movement. So we used to get very upset when there are demonstrations, for instance at the Israeli mission, at the United Nations, when it's all these guys holding the microphone and chanting slogans. Or like making speeches, or organizing security for demonstration. We...we're there. More of...more of us are there than there are guys, so how come we're not making decisions in what's going on? And it wasn't really...it wasn't kind of like we sat around and we cooked it. We...it became little but little, the recognition of things that were happening and we would just negotiate, and we will say, "Okay," at...At some point, I remember we said, "You know what? You don't want us to make decisions, we're not coming." And they said, "Well, how could you not come? This is Palestine." We said, "We'll have our own demonstration for Palestine. We don't have to be part of this." And this was kind of part of the negotiations of how to make sure that we have some influence on the program, who gets to speak, who gets to participate, how do we take care of like...Because we're also...we brought a lot of children. Not that, I mean, I don't believe in a lot of [inaudible]

didn't believe that women necessarily have to be linked with children, but that was the reality. Okay, the women came with children. So we wanted...you know, we wanted the kids...when the boys get like very angry and they wanted to jump at the police and start fighting with them, kind of mixing up with the police in New York, "Is it the Israeli military occupation? Is this a demonstration against Israeli...protesting Israeli military, or protesting police brutality? What...what's the target. You know, kind of clarifying things and so on. We wanted to make sure that we're all protected. And then there was the whole other thing of whether you are a citizen or not. So if you're not a citizen, you can't actually afford to get caught up in civil disobedience action, because you could get deported. And if you get deported, where are you going to get deported? To Israeli occupation. Who's going to receive you?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Israeli military at the airport. So there were all these kind of like issues that coming up. But there was also a very serious thing that we specifically were concerned about, those of us who were more active than others and sort of the leadership of the Union, is to see what we can do within the community. This was a very big issue. And then defining what the committee is, is a whole other question. But how is it that we will provide space for women to be able to participate in things? Get together, argue with each other, organize themselves? How is it that we can provide space for the younger kids.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: So we started doing Saturday schools to teach Arabic, geography, history. We actually had like a whole group...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...that like for they were five years old, and then I think they got to be maybe twelve, thirteen. They dance the Depke³², perform in public places, they'll go into huge demonstrations on these days...

Nadine: And the Depke [inaudible] represents...

Rabab: ...which is the Palestinian folkloric dance, which is thumping³³. They...you wear boots and you stomp on the floor and so on and then the kids were learning, you know, Arabic and speaking about things, arguing about things. And it was...it...it really...it really was an amazing space. I'm...you know, even now as I...I kind of revised the narrative in my mind and I think about, you know, being self critical of myself and my other comrades and so on. Still it was an amazing space. It was...it...I mean, at one...at one association meeting, Union meeting, we had hundred women standing in line to argue about one clause. I don't remember what was, but everybody wanted to argue. They made the trip, thousands of miles away, nobody was going to take that...that, you know,

³² *Depke*: A Middle East folk dance.

³³ Palestinian dance where one wears boots and stomps on the floor.

that right away. She is standing in line, you know, waiting. And everybody like Arabic, English, the people, some...some young kids were speaking in English, some people were speaking in Arabic. Some women were wearing the tobe³⁴, the Palestinian traditional dress, you know, the embroidered one. Some women were wearing like pants and some women wear...wearing [inaudible], you have some women who were not. And there was this kind of...I don't know, and I still trying to figure out, what was it, that there was this kind of tolerance, and patience with each other. I mean, we would sit and we would argue till the morning and we'll vote.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: It wasn't...it wasn't the question of consensus. It was a question, we disagree, we vote. And, you know, if you know the vote, you'll just have to either...try to convince...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...me, or just live with it, okay.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: But, but there were...but it was...it was just...there was a lot of respect for each other.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It was...I...I miss...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...and a lot of us miss that. Then there was the whole question of our interaction with...with the U.S. women's movement and...

Nadine: Can I ask...

Rabab: ...yeah.

Nadine: ...you a question about, you talked a little bit about what the associations...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...kind of did around gender, having women make more decisions...

Rabab: Yeah.

³⁴ *Tobe*: Traditional embroidered Palestinian dress.

Nadine: ...in the movement at large, and then building kind of community based work.

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: Was there also a link between these issues and a larger movement for the liberation of Palestine?

Rabab: Yeah, definitely.

Nadine: Can you tell us about that?

Rabab: Definitely. And I...you know, this is...this is some of the stuff that was going on. That...this is where like a lot of tensions were going...on different levels. One of the things that kept...that was very interesting to me, and happened around the National March for Abortion Rights. It was called the National March for Reproductive Rights³⁵. But I really call it National March for Abortion Rights, because it was NARAL³⁶ and Planned Parenthood³⁷, and the whole...all the...most of the slogans were “Have mercy on Mother Earth, zero population growth,” you know, well, because the people of the Third World are going to grow so much, so take over the world, so we have to minimize the numbers. And at the same time, we were getting reports from Palestine, that Palestinian women who were marching in demonstrations were having a lot of miscarriages. At some point there were kind of like two thousand miscarriages within six months. And some women began theorizing that this has to do with tear gas, poisonous tear gas. The link was never established actually. Physicians [inaudible] tried to establish. But they said, something is going on, but we can’t we don’t have enough time to do the research and so on. And we were trying to figure out how to...how to articulate that. And on one hand, there is the whole question of...some of us we really wanted to talk about reproductive rights. To have or not to have children. Not for the U.S. women not to have children and Palestinian women to have children. And of course we’re talking about the U.S. women now, were thinking around the monolith of thinking about U.S. women as all white middle class, you know. But then as we were beginning to figure out like what to...what to write—we wanted to write a leaflet and talk about how—It was I think Reagan administration³⁸ at the time. They were, they were issuing all sorts of judgments against

³⁵ *National March for Reproductive Rights* was a march in 1992 which had the goal of raising awareness of abortion and issues of reproductive choice. Although the march helped white middle-class women realize their potential in advocating for reproductive choice, the groups who sponsored it—NARAL and Planned Parenthood—are critiqued for their lack of diversity or analysis of race and class implications of “choice.”

³⁶ The *National Abortion Rights Advocacy League*, NARAL Pro-Choice, is an organization which advocates and organizes for abortion rights. NARAL supports abortion providers as well as campaigns for governmental recognition of abortion rights.

³⁷ *Planned Parenthood* is a national organization of member clinics who provide a range of reproductive health services to women at low or not cost. They also provide abortions although, due to governmental regulations, these are not reduced in cost. Along with operating clinics there is also an advocacy and activist side to the organization as they work on state and federal levels to fight for “choice.”

³⁸ *Ronald Reagan* was the president of the United States from 1981-1989 and was a conservative Republican. He had a very hard line stance against Communist states (which he dubbed to be an “evil empire”) and was embroiled in many international scandals and conflicts.

women. They were like nasty and sexist. And at the same time they were also funding Israel to use weapons to kill us and to....

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...poison people and so on. And at the same...So we were trying to figure out what position, what do we do? Do we talk...talk about this? Do we not talk about this?

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: Some of the women in the Union were against abortion. They didn't think it was right, either on moral grounds or on religious grounds. Other women thought it's fine, you know, just go have the abortion and move on with your life. So there is disagreements, but worse...but it's one thing to have an individual disagreement. It's another thing to carve a position for the Union. I mean, this is our, the group that represents us, 2000 women, you know. And so what we...we...and then we actually, um, began having discussions with a whole bunch of groups in...among communities of color. The...the...I think it was the Coalition of Hundred Black Women³⁹, at the time, which came out with a statement around sterilization abuse⁴⁰ and on reproductive rights, and that. So sort of, you know, allowed us to be able to have this kind of information and how do we articulate the position. So that was con—that was something that was resolved in a way that wasn't too stressful. But the other thing that almost split us was the question of Norplant⁴¹. We were having a meeting for the newsletter of the Voice of Palestinian Women. This was our newsletter. We...I think we used to put every two months. At the time used to live in Detroit.

Nadine: **Hm.**

³⁹ The *National Coalition of 100 Black Women* (NCBW) was started as a non-profit organization in 1981 whose mission is to develop “socially conscious female leaders who are committed to furthering equity and empowerment for women of color in the society-at-large, improving the environment of their neighborhoods, rebuilding their communities and enhancing the quality of public and private resources for the growth and development of disadvantaged youths. NCBW is dedicated to community service, the creation of wealth for social change, the enhancement of career opportunities for women of color through networking and strategically designed programs and the empowerment of women of color to meet their diverse needs.”

⁴⁰ In the 1970s, it was discovered that many poor women, in particular women of color, were being *sterilized* illegally (without their consent, when they were too young, without having an interpreter, etc.). Although there were laws against this illegal sterilization, racist ideas of individual doctors as well as government officials made the problem continue. Even today, there are reported cases of the abuse of sterilization. Because poor women and women of color have been targeted for “birth reduction” programs they are often critical of the white middle-class arguments of “choice” as choice is often a questionable term.

⁴¹ *Norplant* is a form of hormonal birth control which is implanted under the skin of a woman's arm and remains there for five years. The desired effect is to make the woman unable to have children while it is inserted and the theory is that when she removes it she will be able to get pregnant. Norplant is very controversial though because it has very negative side effects (including death) in some women who have used it. Critics claim this has not stopped doctors and NGOs from providing it onto poor women and women of color in the US as well as women all over the world.

Rabab: Michigan. Julia Rahab. Professor. She was professor here, at one of the colleges. And so we...One woman came and she was from Chicago, active with a lot of groups of activists of...feminists of color, and she said, "We have to talk about this. This is...this is horrible. They're putting them in our communities. They're sending them, dumping it in the Third World. We have to say something." And the other women were saying, "No, we're not going to say anything about this, because if we say something about it, women who may want to have an abortion will stop having...will stop having birth control. So we're actually, you know, contributing to backwardness. I mean, this is...So it was, you know, back and forth. Back and forth, they would...but...and actually at the end, the vote was not to put it.

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: So we didn't write anything about it. So this wasn't something...this wasn't the resolution in a, you know, good way, the way I'm...according to my view. So there were all sorts of like ways to figure out how to do it. Another big issue was what to do with Hanan Ashrawi.

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: Because Hanan...

Nadine: **Known as...**

Rabab: ... Hanan Ashrawi is...was at the time the Dean of Arts and Science at Birzeit University. She has a Ph.D. from Columbia University. Was Edward Said's, the late Edward Said⁴², professor at Columbia University, the author of *Orientalism*⁴³, who coined the phrase.

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: A great intellectual. And...and so she was the dean and she became the spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation at the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991⁴⁴, which it was supposed to produce an international conference to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But then there was something going, cooking, secretly at Oslo, which became later the Oslo Accords⁴⁵, which basically destroyed the international process, the multilateral...

⁴² *Edward Said* (1935-2003) is a famous scholar who was considered one of Palestine's greatest advocates within the United States. *Orientalism* (1978) is considered by many to be his most influential book.

⁴³ *Orientalism* examines Western representations and stereotypes of the East. Said argued that Western perceptions of Eastern culture were often incorrect and misconstrued.

⁴⁴ The *Madrid Peace Conference* was jointly sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union where leaders from Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, as well as the Palestinians, met to negotiate peace issues.

⁴⁵ The *Oslo Accords* are also known as the "Declaration Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements." This document was signed on September 13, 1993 in Washington D.C. by representatives of the State of Israel and the PLO. Both parties agreed on specific rules regarding a five-year interim period of Palestinian self-rule; these principles are specifically defined in the Oslo Accords.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...negotiations. But she became very well know, because she was very articulate. There was another person. Heather Abdishefi, a doctor from Gaza, who was the spokesperson now who actually was very articulate. But someone, I don't know, the media picked up only because there is a woman and, of course, all Palestinian women are very backward. And there is the exceptionalism, Hanan Ashrawi. So the media picked on her and so on. And so after a while, Hanan became very well known. She became the spokesperson. She ended up joining the Oslo team and she was coming to Washington for negotiations. And Hannah...and so we, those of us in the U.S., wanted to bring Hanan to speak in the U.S. The Palestinian women with whom the grassroots activists⁴⁶, with whom we have contacts in Palestine, they didn't want us to bring Hanan in.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Because they kept saying, "Why she never threw a stone, she never went into demonstration. Why you bringing her?"

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: You know? "Why are you promoting her?" And we're trying to say, "Well, you know, she's really articulate. If she comes, she will be quoted if she doesn't come."

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: And so it was...it was, it was like really very tense, because...and it made it clear that, yes, we do have the same goal of freedom and liberation. However, we do have differences in how we perceive of it. And it was also the question for us is, why...how...not only why do we do what we do, but how do we do it? In the process of doing your activism, do you compromise? Because we did not have disagreements, that, you know, Hanan, yeah, she wasn't a grassroots activist. She did not get her authority or...or her legitimacy from the grassroots. Although her rise to fame was reflective of the cumulative struggle of the Palestinian people. But she wasn't accountable to the women.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: I mean, she wasn't. She became a minister. So was...she had, so he recommend. They're not accountable to the...to the women whose interests they're supposed to represent.

Nadine: Hm-hm.

⁴⁶ *Grassroots* is often used to refer to organizations based on community leadership, particularly poor and marginalized members of society. This is contrasted to large bureaucratic organizations.

Rabab: You know. So this is the...this was a very big dilemma that in the end we actually, we ended up bringing Hanan to the National Organization for Women⁴⁷. They had their 25th anniversary. And anyway, they would not have taken a grassroots activist. So we suggested Hanan, and Hanan was quoted in *The New York Times*, in the media and so on, made a lot of statements. But at the same time for our conventions, we did, we continued to bring the grassroots activists.

Nadine: Hm. Hm.

Rabab: Because for us...So I mean...they never forgave us.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: Every time, you know, I or other people bump into our comrades, they say, "You brought Hanan in." You know, it's the...I don't know. It's just...it...this is what happened. I don't know if we would have done it again had we been faced with the situation again. But I think this also shows the contradictions of...of activism, of movement building. The things are never clear cut. You can't just say, "Oh, this is good and this is bad."

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And so on. You can only say that if you don't do anything. You can pass all the judgment you want. You can...but if you're really involved, there...things are much more complicated than...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...you know, the simple way of dealing with it. So this was...yeah.

Nadine: Yeah. That's great.

Rabab: This was a very big issue. Yeah.

Nadine: Thanks.

Rabab: Yeah, yeah.

Nadine: I think what I'm going to do now is shift to some different historical moments...

Rabab: Hm.

⁴⁷ *National Organization for Women* (NOW) was founded 1966, with the goal of taking action to bring about equality for all women. NOW works to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women; and end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia; and promote equality and justice in our society. However, NOW has also been criticized for being focused on what is good for middle-class white heterosexual women.

Nadine: ...in your activism, so that we'll have time to talk a little bit about your views on some of the concepts—like feminism and transnationalism.

Rabab: Sure.

Nadine: And all that. So it seems that your work with the Association was during a certain historical moment.

Rabab: Right, right.

Nadine: And what I'm going to ask you is to tell a little bit about the historical shift when that organization's or that association's work faded out.

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: Um, so we could start with that. And then I'm going to ask you about, um, your more recent work and how your activism has shifted with new and different historical moments.

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: So can you tell me about how the...

Rabab: The...the Union...the Union continued being very strong and active, and conflicted over all sorts of things, you know, for membership.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Who are the members? Are the members Palestinians? Or Palestinian identified? And what is Palestinian identified?

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: You know. It's very loose thing. But what's Palestinian? Is Palestinian a Palestinian—a woman of Palestinian parents? Half? One parent Palestinian or not? Married to a Palestinian?

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: What do we do with the women who have Palestinian women partners? I mean, this...all these issues, right? So there was always this conflicts, back and forth, you know. We...we fought, we argued, we screamed at each other. They were that. The thing that really broke us was the Oslo Accords. The Oslo Accords in 1993, ah, really did the Union in and two years later we actually decided to fold. Part of the reason is a lot of our members went back.

Nadine: The Oslo Accords is...?

Rabab: ...to Palestine. the Oslo Accords, in 1993, this was...this was the secret deal that was being cooked in Oslo as the Madrid Peace Conference was being held for international negotiations. There was a group of the Palestinian...Palestinians led by Abu Mazen⁴⁸ who was elected prime minister and had to resign because he failed at his mission, you know. The U.S. and Israel basically appointed him, even though the Palestinians appointed him, he was their choice. And...and he wasn't, by the way, by himself acting. He was acting on behalf of Arafat and others. And the Israelis at the time, it was the Labor Party⁴⁹, Rabin and...Yitzak Rabin⁵⁰ who was later assassinated, who became very famous in the first Intifada, calling for the...the policy of might force and beatings, breaking the bones of young kids, you know, so they wouldn't throw stones, so they would be incapacitated for three months, while their arms heal. And there was this famous video, CBS, of two soldiers, you know, breaking...break...45 minutes, which was on TV. Anyway, he got the Nobel Prize.

Nadine: Peace Prize.

Rabab: Yeah. And so this, the Oslo Accords in 1993, they signed it, the Israelis and...and the...and the Palestinians on September 13th, 1993, at the lawn of the White House. Clinton was supposedly the neutral observer blessing the...the thing. And what happened...and it produced Palestinian self-rule arrangements on the West...parts of the West Bank and Gaza, divided the West Bank in Gaza, six...

Nadine: Palestinian self rule.

Rabab: Self rule meaning...meaning only Palestinians rule themselves. It's not...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...it's exactly what it is. It doesn't mean government, it doesn't mean independence, it doesn't mean...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...you know, Palestinian passport. It has...It's...actually what they did is they took the Israeli IDs that Palestinians had and they converted them in the Arabic, but the number is the same. I mean, it's exactly the same, and it has Hebrew in it, and it says that it is issued...

⁴⁸ *Abu Mazen* is also known as Mahamoud Abbas. For about six months in 2003, he was the first Prime Minister but resigned. In 2005, after Yasseer Arafat's death, he was elected president of the Palestinian National Authority.

⁴⁹ Founded in 1948, the *Labor Party* began as a socialist party. Over the years it has become more moderate, holding various seats in the government by aligning with other parties.

⁵⁰ *Yitzak Rabin* served as Israel's Prime Minister from 1974-1977 then again in 1992. He was assassinated in 1995 by a man who opposed his involvement in developing the Oslo Accords.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...with the permission...and...and approval, authority of the Israeli Civil Administration, supposedly. So, yeah...

Nadine: So I'm going to move you back, but in...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...in a nutshell, it's...

Rabab: It's an agreement that basically produced...legitimized the occupation...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ...of the West Bank and Gaza. But instead of having the Israelis policing the Palestinian cities and towns from which Israel withdrew, they have 13 Palestinian security agencies that police the Palestinians.

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: What this produced is that, on one hand, it produced Palestinian Israeli-free areas to which some Palestinians were living in the U.S., especially recent immigrants who came in since...since 1967, could actually go back.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Could go back to their homes and so on. And there's some families who did not want to bring up their kids American—your research. So they brought them, took them back to teach them Arabic, put them in schools and so on. And there were also some Palestinians who were so disgusted with the process that they...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...decided they didn't want to be involved anymore. Demoralized, a lot of people were demoralized—demoralized. There were some people who've wasted—who...well, not wasted I would say, but invested.

Nadine: Yeah, they felt that they...

Rabab: Most of their use, you know, in activism and so on, they kept to the point where they're middle aged...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...they have...they, they don't have jobs, they don't have anything. They don't have...they don't have anything for their retirement, you know. And so they tried...started to take care of their own affairs, because there was no more of this collectivity that stayed...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...that, to which they can turn for support.

Nadine: So what happened...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...to the organization?

Rabab: So the Union, the Union basically, it just...it's...it's all this kind of like this...the richness and the...it was incredible organizing during the Intifada. I mean, it was just incredible. People, everybody—well, not everybody...

Nadine: And that was during the time of the first...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...Palestinian uprising.

Rabab: This was Intifada, yeah. Which began in 1987. And 1993, five years later...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: This was Oslo, and this...and, you know, the Gulf War⁵¹ actually, even the first U.S...U.S. attack on Iraq when Iraq occupied Kuwait and the U.S....

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...supposedly went to liberate the democracy in Kuwait. They did not actually weaken the Union, but...but...

Nadine: It was Oslo.

Rabab: Oslo, really, yeah, did us in. And so we...we basically...they weren't that many people around.

Nadine: Hm.

⁵¹ *Persian Gulf War* began in August of 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. On January 12, 1991, U.S. Congress authorized "use of force" in Iraq. The war continued until June 1991 when the Iraqis were forced out of Kuwait.

Rabab: There were all sorts of, you know, thing...the...a lot of the people in the U.S. Peace Movement thought that it's finished.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: They said "Why are you still talking about this? We have peace, you have to..." And you start like telling them, you know, that...there is real—this is really horrible, and I remember, actually I had spoken in Ohio with an Israeli feminist at something called Mershon Center for Peace Studies⁵² at Ohio...Ohio State University. And I was criticizing, you know, how the Palestinians are going about the legislative council and so on. And the Israeli speaker jumps at me and she says, "Well, you know, but..." And I said, "Well, we deserve...we deserve democracy like everybody else." And she jumps at me and she says, "No, no. But you have to, you know, take your time. You have to be patient [inaudible] because I'm not used to this. You need to...you need...you need like baby steps, and so on, and people..."

Nadine: You're not used to democracy.

Rabab: We're not used to that. And people in the audience there agree, and I'm like, there's something wrong here. Yeah, so there was...there was all of this stuff that's...that was going. So it's basically...I mean, there was no support. We folded and a lot of people continued active on all sorts of issues.

Nadine: Hm. Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: On, on local.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: But there was this kind of thing that brought us all together...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...once a year, and we had all these committees we will meet in different places. I mean...

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: ...we would go to all these international conferences— 8, 9, 10, and we all had papers to present, and arguments, and we had banners and...I mean, we were...we were just...we were really...

Nadine: Wow.

⁵² The *Mershon Center for Peace Studies* aims to "advance the understanding of national security in a global context." See <http://www.merc.ohio-state.edu>

Rabab: ...It was a revolution. It was. But it's okay.

Nadine: It's a privilege to hear about it.

Rabab: The torch lasts. It continues (laughs).

Nadine: That's right.

Rabab: It doesn't go away.

Nadine: Well, I know that...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...since that time...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...you've continued your activism in all kinds of different ways.

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: And I'm actually going to jump us to some more recent historical moments that...you know, there was a...up until the second Palestinian uprising, which started in November of 2000...

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: ...um, can you tell me how your activism has been? And...and during that time you went to school, you...

Rabab: I went back to school, I got my Ph.D.

Nadine: You finished your Ph.D.

Rabab: I got my BA...well, first my BA and then the Ph.D.

Nadine: Your BA, okay.

Rabab: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Nadine: And, you know, I wish we could hear everything. But we're going to kind of...

Rabab: You do hear everything

Nadine: It would be interesting...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...to hear about that period, during the first Palestinian upri—not the first, but he big Palestinian uprising of...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...'87 till Oslo, and now if we could talk about the second Palestinian Intifada which was...

Rabab: Yes.

Nadine: ...more recent, November 2000, and then after that was September 11th.⁵³

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: So it would be interesting to hear about your activism in...in these times.

Rabab: Well, I was in different places. When I was a graduate student I...I worked on the Academic Freedom Campaign⁵⁴ for the Palestinians, because Israel was already instituting closures⁵⁵.

Nadine: And you went to graduate school at...

Rabab: At Yale University.

Nadine: At Yale University.

Rabab: And...and in...

Nadine: Sociology?

⁵³ On *September 11*, 2001 two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, New York. This spurred attacks on suspected terrorists in Afghanistan as well as spurred a war in Iraq. There were many ramifications of these attacks in the United States including increased racism and “security” as well as a burgeoning of patriotism and, some argue, a lessening of certain civil liberties through passage of the Uniting and Strengthening American by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 (also known as USA PATRIOT ACT or Patriot Act).

⁵⁴ The Academic Freedom Campaign is a campaign for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel. See <http://www.pacbi.org>

⁵⁵ *Closures* are periods during which Israeli forces take over a Palestinian town, including restrictions on residents’ movement and curfews. Restrictions can include prohibitions from using cars, traveling to other towns, or exchanging goods. See <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA>

Rabab: In Sociology, yeah. And the Israelis were putting closures, preventing students from getting to their universities. This was before September 2000. People think that all the closures began on Septem—This was right after Oslo.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: I mean, Jerusalem got closed up. Gaza became a big prison. Palestinian Gazans couldn't come and go. So there was a big campaign to allow students for instance from Gaza to reach Birzeit University so they could actually have classes. And if they're at Birzeit, they had to stay for five years until they graduate, not see their parents, because if they go back to Gaza, they may never get to go back to classes and so on.

Nadine: So they were illegal students.

Rabab: So there was a big...yeah. So there was a big campaign, and I was...I was one of the coordinators in the U.S. for that, and, you know, doing things, not as much as I was doing before, because I was a graduate student.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And I had all this requirements that I had to do.

Nadine: (laughs)

Rabab: And, but then I also went to Palestine and...and during my field research, I taught at Birzeit University Women's Studies. I got involved in all sorts of activism as usual. And, and then...and then in September 2000, I was actually at the American University in Cairo. I had graduated, I was teaching at American University in Cairo. And, you know, little by little I started getting involved, which was really weird, because I'm a Palestinian with U.S. citizenship, in Cairo. This is the first time that I'm in a position of power. I'm not the student who is asking everybody to go on strike. I'm actually the power. But at the same time, if I mobilize my students, the administration may think that I'm the one who's mobilizing them, troublemaker professor. And so it was, it was very interesting place to find myself in. I mean, I was active. I was...kept going back and forth to Palestine interviewing people, coming back, speaking about it, coming to the U.S. a few times, speaking about this. Organizing my students I...to go to a trip on...during a class to a Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, getting to know, you know, the students and so on. And when I came back to the U.S. a year after, of course, you know, lo and behold, September 11th is the first day of my first lecture, an Introduction to Gender and Sexuality at NYU. And, yeah, so it was...it was very interesting. The whole...the whole environment. It hasn't...it has changed, but it hasn't changed drastically in the sense that everything was wonderful before and everything became horrible after. It just...a whole lot of things that were hiding, that were below the surface, came to the surface. So the...so people were actually, the U.S. dominant discourses could now practice discrimination and racism against Arabs without license. They...you know, now they can, they can go,

get away with it and they could say it, and actually not only it wouldn't be reprimanded, but they will actually be hailed as the great patriots, you know...

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...for doing something that's their nationalist duties. So it...it's...it was completely different ways in which we had to respond differently. So, you know, a whole number of people, you included, me and a lot of people, we...we had to jump in and we had to, you know, be speaking and explaining what's going on, and making the linkages and at the same time, you know, not...not necessarily as we...as we talk against anti-Arab discrimination and Islamophobia and all the things that were happening after 9/11, at the same time clarifying that we're not actually defending the...the oppressive regimes in the Arab world. We've been against them all along, way before the United States remembered to come up with the it's own project of remaking the Middle East.

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: We've, all along we've...we were against this. So there were a lot of activ—activists...activist activities going on— conferences, demonstrations.

Nadine: **Hm-hm-hm.**

Rabab: And so, yeah.

Nadine: **And where is the kind of gender component come into this recent wave of your activism, kind of a post-2000 activism of Rabab Abdulhadi? [laughs]**

Rabab: I don't know. I think it's just kind of like, you know, you keep reinventing yourself in all sorts of ways. And I think...I mean, one of the things that...that was always, you know, kind of like nagging in the back of your mind, and I know talking to a lot of activists, it's the same thing, that on one hand, you want to talk about women's liberation, you want to talk about women's feminism and so on. At the same time, you know that if...if you are part of an oppressed community, it's not only women who are oppressed. They...and...So how do you articulate that? It's very difficult to come up with that, especially when you are dealing in a context which likes to...which likes to organize everything in neat boxes. So have to be either women or a Palestinian. And you...you get into this schizophrenic, you know, act that I actually accommodated, because you can't be. What you are is you're informed, your actions are informed by *everything* that you are. It's not by one thing...

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: ...as opposed to the other. Something that Kimberle Crenshaw⁵⁶ talks...talks about how she went as a...as a black legal feminist lesbian scholar, when she goes to...when she goes to different spaces, she's expected to shake off part of her identity at the door, as she checks out her coat. You can't do that. It doesn't work. But one of the things that has troubled me, especially since 9/11, is this extreme attack against men, Arab and Muslim men, specifically targeted.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And the need to actually articulate a gender analysis that addresses this victimization and targeting of Arab and Muslim men. And at the same time also acknowledges, recognizes and theorizes and comes up with agendas for women's liberation.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Because it doesn't disappear. Women's...women's oppression doesn't...not disappear, let's say. I don't want to say it doesn't, because it becomes ahistorical. It does not disappear with the targeting of men. But we need to kind of like think about beyond essentialism. But it's one thing to say beyond essentialism, it's another thing to actually do it.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: It's much easier to theorize and say "Well, this is how things appear, you know?"

Nadine: (laughs)

Rabab: Critique them, right? Very smart piece and move on. But how do you, how do you actually, how do you do that? And I think it's...it's a very, very tricky game. Because on one hand, you have...we see how it is that the U.S. and especially...I mean, and I'm not...I'm not...I don't even...I'm not even talking about the U.S. government. I'm talking about U.S. supposedly feminist organizations who...whose main thing is gender apartheid in Afghanistan. Okay? And, and I'm very, very troubled by these slogans. You know, it's...a) it's just...even the use of the word "apartheid" in this particular context, what does this mean? But, and the way in which they jump on the bandwagon, and it's always like saving brown women from brown men, and...and kind of like never being self-reflexive about what's going on here, and as if, you know, thank God, we're in the United States because women have arrived. And they are not only equal, they're actually better of their men. Everything is wonderful. You know. So this kind of like completely lack of consciousness and extreme racism, to...to keep constructing women and that. And then being troubled every time another woman comes forward that actually...that under...under...undermines this model, that says, "Well, this is not right." And then this,

⁵⁶ *Kimberle Crenshaw* is one of the leading theorists on the concept of "intersectionality" which considers how experiences of women of color are affected not just by gender, as is theorized in mainstream feminist thought, but also race.

“She’s an exception.” Hanan Ashrawi, because she’s Christian. Of course she will be a feminist, you know.

Nadine: And she’s not Muslim.

Rabab: Yeah. There is always one reason or another why is it.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It is...it’s like there’s no accounting for there are patterns of...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: So this is...there is this question about...this whole question of what I call Imperial feminisms, okay. And then...and then there is the whole business of targeting men, and being between, in between to actually try to be able to carve a vision for liberation and...and action for liberation, and at the same time be able to say that, look, this is what’s being...women...Arab women and Muslim women are constructed as supposedly the antidote for moderation and Westernization and modernization in the region against these backward Arabs and Muslims uncivilized and so on. And I think...And it’s really troubling to actually to deal with it here. It’s very difficult. You know, Spivak⁵⁷ keeps saying, “Can the subaltern speak?” Okay? And...and then question is, maybe the subaltern is speaking but no one is listening. And it’s...it’s...it is so much easier and I know it’s very difficult to live under occupation, but it’s so much easier to have these conversations within specific communities. Not...I’m not talk about safe spaces. But it’s so much easier. Because the way in which it’s articulated, when you say women are...are...the Taliban⁵⁸ are...and it’s all about men and women. It’s like all men are oppressing all women, except for certain women who are our women, the exceptions.

Nadine: So you’re talking about..

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...like in dominant U.S....

Rabab: Yeah, yeah. In dominant U.S. feminism, and I would say like the feminism that is representative of the interest of white middle class heterosexual Anglo English-speaking...

Nadine: Um-hum.

⁵⁷ *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* is a theorist whose article “Can the Subaltern Speak” is a critical text in post-colonial and feminist scholarship.

⁵⁸ The *Taliban* was the regime put in charge of Afghanistan after the United States tried to get the Soviet Union out and then was consequently chased out of Afghanistan as a terrorist and oppressing regime. There were known for their extremely poor treatment of women, but also for their disregard for all human rights.

Rabab: ...white, yeah.

Nadine: So with all that as your back...

Rabab: Like Eleanor Smeal⁵⁹ and National Organization for Women.

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: Okay.

Nadine: With all that as a backdrop, you've given me this, you know, backdrop to ask you questions about whether you identify as a feminist.

Rabab: Yes, reluctantly. [laughter]

Nadine: And actually, what would be interesting is to know with your work, with the Union...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...would you consider the work of the Union, kind of, would you consider the Union a feminist organization or association, what you call your Union?

Rabab: I...I, yeah, I do. I consider it a feminist organization. The problem is that we always have to qualify which feminism. Because I don't think feminism has got the point where it's actually...when you say feminism, we...even though we mean a transformative vision, a comprehensive agenda that talks about the liberation of people, including women. Not just women who are women. Even we still...it's still...feminism is still used mostly to connote a specific kind of feminin—So every time we want to talk about what we...what we might call fem—transnational feminism, or comprehensive feminist agenda and so on, you have to qualify it. You have to explain what...and I think...and so...But I think in that sense, yes. I think the Union was feminist. Because who's going to define feminism? Why is it that feminism gets defined...and as I say, why is it that feminism gets defined. I know why it is that...

I Um-hum.

Rabab: ...because it has all to do with the production and reproduction of knowledge, and who has monopoly on that, you know, who actually gets to say, this is what it is. Not who gets to say...a lot of people get to say, we all get to say. But who gets heard?

⁵⁹ *Eleanor Smeal* was president of the National Organization for Women and later founded the Feminist Majority Foundation. FMF focuses on women's equality and reproductive rights and has among its projects Afghan Women. The FMF site credits Smeal with leading the first national abortion rights march in 1986.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: And who's words gets validated, and how does that shift? I mean, unless there is kind of like social change, unless there is resistance, unless there is subversion, these words will continue being fraught with this kind of meanings.

Nadine: Hm. Um-hum.

Rabab: So I think in the sense of was the Union an example of...of...of women's liberation? Yes! It was an example of women's liberation. And...and it was a space in which women felt that they could come together, they could argue, they could do all sorts of things. They could...they could start gaining some economic independence, those who are not...and not all of us were dependent on the man, the fathers, the brothers, the husband, what have you, the son of the family. Not everybody was. And not...and not...and I'm not talking that everybody was. I'm not talking those of us where who were independent, not necessarily are the ones who are English speaking, who go to the universities, who are academics. It is not that neatly organized, okay. But...but, yes, I think it was a great feminist space. And I think it was one of the best feminist spaces, that makes it...that makes it so possible for you to actually talk with other people, because if you...if there is...if there is...if there is this attack against the community, and there is this attack against Palestine, and there is this attack against women and so on, you cannot afford not to be tolerant. You cannot afford to monopolize the truth. You cannot. You have to be able to talk with other people and accept what they're saying, and say...and, and expect them to also hear you out. Because that's the only thing that you have.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: And that's the only way you can move. But you have to start thinking, shifting your thinking of...of according to whom you're defining your agenda, whose measure, whose standard. What is it, how is that we can say this space is feminist or not? By the extent of women who is not wearing the hijab⁶⁰? Is that...?

Nadine: The hijab meaning the...

Rabab: Yeah, the...the headscarf that...that women wear, that could be a sign of Islam, a sign of cultural expression, whatever, yeah.

Nadine: So you're kind of getting into a discussion about, you know, your vision for, you know, for feminist practice and for maybe Arab and Arab-American feminism in some ways?

Rabab: Yes. And I think we have different feminisms also. Be—I think, I mean, but I think...and...and the bottom line is we really have to have a comprehensive agenda. I think it's impossible...

⁶⁰ *Hijab*: Veil or headscarf worn by some women as a sign of belief in Islam or of cultural identity.

Nadine: What do you mean by that?

Rabab: A comprehensive agenda, I think you cannot have gender liberation when you have...when you continue to have class oppression, when you con—when you have racial oppression, when you have sexual oppression. When you have all these systems of domination that exist.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: So, you know, you may be able there...Some women are liberated in some aspect over another. But for those of us who are actually at the intersection of these different systems of domination, you know...So, okay, so I may be...I may be, when I walk down the street, I may be thought of as...I could pass. Let's say not pass, but I could pass for not being Palestinian, until people see my ID and the "abdul" comes out. Then people say, "Abdul"—they don't even say the whole name right. And that's when like certain things start happening that may not happen...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...to another women who may...who may be brown like me, in a specific context.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And so, you know, this...the...But I think unless we understand that, we understand the connections between them, and we understand that it is not really about *all* women's liberation—that it is about a notion of eliminating gender, hierarchy. But that's a long process, a), and 2) it shifts, gender hierarchy shifts in different contexts. It means different things, and it's always mediated and it's always structured by class, by race, by sexuality, by age, by ability.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Immigration status, what have you. So I think this is the way I...to me, this is what it means.

Nadine: Yeah, right.

Rabab: I don't think I will ever be free if Palestine continues to be occupied.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: I will never, I will never, I will...Because I'll never be able as...just to talk as a woman. I'm not just a woman.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: There is so many more things to me that it is just one part of who I am.

Nadine: And how would you link that kind of vision or...or how do you link your work? Or do you link your work with other women's organizations or other feminisms in the U.S.?

Rabab: Well, I'm...I'm...I...I would...I would...I link my work with those people who share the same kind of agenda. And I think...and, and I don't think it's an accident. I don't want to say "it just so happened." It's not an accident that our strongest alliances are with feminists of color, and feminists of...in the global south, as broadly defined. I don't think that's an accident.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: Because there is this kind of consciousness and awareness, that you...you cannot just say that, you know, I'm a feminist, I'm all for women's liberation, and I support what Israel is doing.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Because...and I don't know if I can...There's this whole thing with these fashion models...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...at the apartheid wall that are supposed to make a statement...

Nadine: So the apartheid wall is...

Rabab: Apartheid wall is a wall that Israel is building. First they claim that it was...Israeli's was building between the West Bank and Israel to prevent Palestinians from going into Israel to carry out suicide bombing. And of cour—this is a big huge problematic thing about the security argument that security doesn't come from without. As long as you keep oppressing people, somebody's going to try to attack you. And so the best security of Israel is to stop, withdraw, end the occupation, stop being an oppressive state. But at the same time...so this...so but what the wall is doing actually, in actuality, is taking, stealing Palestinian land, cutting olive trees, pulling them from the roots, destroying vineyards, separating families from each other, locking communities inside with a gate at which an Israeli soldier stands. Sometimes he's around, sometimes he's not around, to let a woman maybe go see her children, or a man get to his field, or what have you. So the apartheid wall, an Israeli designer, by the name of Goldfiner, gets very disturbed, that this is a really a bad thing, and she has a fashion house called Comme il Faut...and Comme il Faut. And then so she goes and she brings these models and she puts them against the wall to protest, and she bumps actually with a Palestinian woman, Omil Hamad, who is not convinced that this is a good sign of protest. And they have an expression. Omil Hamad says to the Israeli designer, she says, "Well, why don't

you...why don't you come sit with me at the sit-in, if you want to protest, come join me at the sit-in." And the designer says to her, says to the people after the woman passes, "Do you want...does she want her picture taken?" And I think it's...it shows sort of, encapsulates the...the...this...I mean, this is...there is the whole struggle for life and death, by a woman. Omil Hamad, who is supposed to be insignificant, and she would be probably constructed as, by imperial feminism, as non-feminist. And there is the avowed feminist, the designer, who is actually trying to protest, doesn't get it!

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Doesn't get what the struggle is all about. Ends up having the last word, talk about listening to women's voices, right? Certain women's voices.

Nadine: And she gets represented in the media.

Rabab: And, and she gets represented in the media and it's like all this...this advertisement for her models and for her clothes and so on. And it's all about...it's all about the comodification...comodification of...of oppression...

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: ...and the aesthetics of violence. That's exactly what's going on, and she's making money out of it. And...and so I think this is...there are all these troubling things...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...that really, they need to be exposed, and...And I think if you say that, and I think I...it's...it's not an accident that people who understand, relate to what we're talking about...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...of people who are subjected to all of these kind of...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...oppressive mechanisms, yeah.

Nadine: Yeah. Well, I have two more questions for you. One it has to do with a lot of your work kind of is framed these days around the rubric of transnational feminisms, Diaspora and exile. Can you tell us, kind of, what you mean by transnational feminism...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...and how you envision alliances between women in the U.S and women in the global south?

Rabab: I think, I mean, transnational I think of it as something that will...I began to apply it in my work as thinking about how Palestinian women who are living the Diaspora, in exile, in the U.S., people like me and others, have the transnational networks and connections and belongings and identifications with a place called Palestine that is always transnationally imagined. That is...

Nadine: Meaning that it's always...

Rabab: ...imagined, that is...I mean, there is a physical...it's not not physical. It's not just, not contextual, it's grounded. It is physical. There is a place...

Nadine: Like a physical place.

Rabab: ...called Palestine...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...geography. At the same time, people are not there, but there is this kind of connection that has...that shapes the identity, the thinking, the psyche, every-day life of your existence, and a lot of the women I would call, they have these transnational relations and networks and so on, are not living actually here and there. They're living here and there. It's always here and here. It's...you could be physically here or you could be physically there, but there is this kind of...And it's not...I don't want to call it divided loyalty.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: I think there is kind of connection, and I think it is transnational. When we apply it to Palestine, it is not just national. And it cannot...it can't...national can never apply to Palestine anywhere, because we're scattered all over the world. And so there is this...But I think transnational feminism, sometimes it's not...I think it's not used in the...in the way it's supposed to be used when people call...transnational just to say that there is organizations here, here, NGOs⁶¹ and so on. But I think it's as the women who actually, the feminists who recognize that there are alliances to be made, that there are commonalities, that there are differences.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: And there are commonalit—and possibilities to build alliances across borders without erasing the borders, while acknowledging that there are physical borders.

Nadine: Hm.

⁶¹ An *NGO* is a Non-Governmental Organization.

Rabab: That if you cross the borders virtually, it doesn't mean that they're gone. They're there. The wall is there. It doesn't go away, okay? So, but can you envision that there are possibilities, imagine a different world. And if you imagine a different one, can you build alliances on that basis? Can you think about that? While always acknowledging the specificity of each group and...and the context in which particular forms come up, without thinking that one form should dominate another. And I think this is...this is...and when we think about that, then it becomes really when we say "global south" I would say, well, "global south" is right there in New York City— in the Bronx and in Harlem and in El Barrio, and in Brooklyn, and right there in the streets of NYU, which is supposed to be very fancy, but...You know, so it's...it's everywhere, always when we think...if we think about south and north, we don't think about them as like, um, forcefully divided geographically and...and distinct and discrete...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...units, that there is all...a lot of fluidity in them, but we recognize how they are structured...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...in terms of oppression. That's...that's what I would...I would think about trans—And I think, I think it's very helpful framework because it doesn't then lock us only within the borders of the United States, and then it's...we start like having arguments about, the U.S. or outside of the U.S., and so on. But the U.S. is everywhere. I mean, the United States dominating the whole world. And there are people oppressed in the United States itself, as the United States government and the United States empire is dominating the world, people in the United States are oppressed as there are people around the world that are oppressed differently, depending on...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...their places vis-à-vis the social structures.

Nadine: So on the same topic...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...of transnational feminism, can you tell me about some transnational feminist alliances that you're...you participate in, or work that you've done with women from other communities, transnationally?

Rabab: Yeah, um, well, one...one of the things that, that I would say, I would consider it transnational, even though it is Arab and Arab-American...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...is the...is this thing we're trying to put together for next year -- an Arab women's gathering at which Arab...Arab and Arab-American women...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...come together to think about various ways in which we can think about our liberation and carve visions, and come up with strategies and actions for our liberation, within and without our communities, and as broadly defined. There is...we have a whole bunch of alliances that actually crystallize at the World Social Forum in India, and it was very interesting how...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...people sort of configure themselves and ally themselves. We...we have...

Nadine: Well, this is...

Rabab: ...yeah.

Nadine: ...really interesting...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...this idea of Arab and Arab-American women's gathering, since it's a different historical moment than your previous work.

Rabab: Right.

Nadine: And it's an Arab, an Arab-American woman...

Rabab: Where they can consciously...yeah.

Nadine: ...consciously context. Can you tell us about some of the issues that would be tackled in such a gathering?

Rabab: Yes. I mean, it's very interesting because there have been a lot of debates around how do we carve certain visions? What do we think...how do we think about questions of sexuality? for instance. How...how...how big of a space do they occupy in our imagining and our struggles and our daily interactions with each other? How do they configure vis-à-vis questions of what...when we say politics? And people think politics, big politics, not everyday politics also. The U...

Nadine: Like war...

Rabab: ...the war and empire and the oppression, special registration⁶² and the FBI and the Homeland Security⁶³ and Patriot I⁶⁴ and Patriot II⁶⁵ and the war against Iraq⁶⁶ and the destruction of Palestine. How do we...? How do...how...how...where do these things...how do these things fit together? And how it is that we can actually carve a vision that does allow...

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...us to think about our liberation without silencing some of our concerns? And...and we come from different backgrounds. Some of us have really serious...serious...the biggest fight and the memory, the memory of oppression and the memory of liberation is all taking place within the community. The Palestinian or the Arab-American community, right? Somebody like me, I have never felt that I was oppressed by the Arab-American community. I always felt that the Arab-American people was the safe space. That was home for me. Whenever I feel like really troubled by Zionism or by racism, that's what I run to. That's home. But there are women who grew up here in the United States -- for them Arab-American women, this...

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...is very oppressive. While the bigger space outside of the community represents liberation and resistance. So it's...I think we had...

Nadine: **Hm.**

⁶² “This new material is to notify the public of an amendment to existing regulations by suspending the 30-day and annual re-registration requirements for aliens who are subject to the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) Registration. Instead of requiring all aliens subject to NSEERS to appear for 30-day and/or annual re-registration interviews, the DHS will utilize a more tailored system in which it will notify individual aliens of future registration requirements. Additionally, this rule clarifies how nonimmigrant aliens may apply for relief from special registration requirements and clarifies that certain alien crewmen are not subject to the departure requirements.” From the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement website at www.ice.gov.

⁶³ “We will lead the unified national effort to secure America. We will prevent and deter terrorist attacks and protect against and respond to threats and hazards to the nation. We will ensure safe and secure borders, welcome lawful immigrants and visitors, and promote the free-flow of commerce.” (Department of Homeland Security’s Mission Statement from the DHS’s website at www.dhs.gov)

⁶⁴ Passed after the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the stated purpose of the Patriot Act (H.R. 3162) is “to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes.” The Act provides for enhanced domestic security against terrorism, enhanced surveillance procedures, stricter border controls, stronger criminal laws against terrorism, and increased information-sharing among the branches of the intelligence department, among other things. The Patriot Act has been criticized for removing checks on law enforcement and threatening the civil rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens and non-citizens alike.

⁶⁵ Formally known as the Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003. A draft copy of the proposed legislation was leaked and public outcry ensued.

⁶⁶ The United States invaded Iraq in March 2003 claiming to be searching for weapons of mass destruction. Although none were found, a democracy is in the process of being established in Iraq and Iraqis have elected their first president. U.S. troops currently remain in Iraq.

Rabab: ...we have different experience and we're negotiating. How do we...how do we...how do we...how do we come up with some common basis without invalidating each other's...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...concerns and demands. I think...I think...I think we're going to have a great gathering and I think it's not going to be not painful. It will be painful, and will be...but that's the way the struggle is. It's never...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...it's never easy.

Nadine: Yeah. Thanks.

Rabab: Thank you.

Nadine: Now, finally, last topic we're going to cover has to do with, ah, you know, you've built yourself in so many different ways on so many fronts. And one of them is an academic front, kind of, history of activism and then becoming a Ph.D., and coming soon next fall an associate professor and director of a center for Arab-American studies and, you know, you've two books coming out and a number of journal ar—academic journal articles. And today you've made a lot of references to academic scholars in talking about your vision of activism. So I wanted to ask you about how you see the relationship between activism and scholarship. And in particular, in terms of kind of since you do identify as a feminist...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...your feminist politics and scholarship.

Rabab: I don't think they can be separated. I...I'm...and I think, and sometimes I actually get like...keep wondering why is it that we...we even *think* that they could be separated? Why, and where is it that we think they could be separated. And I think it comes up a lot in the U.S. academy. It probably comes up in other academies of privilege, but I'm not as familiar with them as I am with the U.S. academy. Because if you are...when, you know, I was...I was...when I was a student at Birzeit University, when I taught at Birzeit University, when I've been back there for conferences and so on, it...the question never comes up. Nobody ever says, "Am I an activist? Am I a feminist? Am I an academic?" You know, there's that schizophrenic...because it's your daily life necessitates that you cannot be one without the other. And even if you think that you are just an acti—an academic, not a feminist, what are you doing every day in the classroom? You're active on...whether you acknowledge it or not, you always have a point of view, no matter how much you claim neutrality, you always have a point of view that is informing what kind of views you're...you're putting forward either in the classroom or in your scholarship

everywhere. So I think...I think this...it's...academia is a site, is definitely a site of activism. I am not going to get into the hierarchy what's more liberating, the street or the academy, you know, because for whom the street and for whom the academy, it all depends on the context on the history.

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: On the particular group we're talking about. So, you know, in the United States, the street, you can get a permit⁶⁷ and...and then any...any professor who signs a statement for divestment from Israel⁶⁸ who is not tenured, at the U.S. academy, at which there is Zionist influence in some places, that professor may not last for a very long time. I mean, so sometimes walking in a march is not really more costly than doing this particular act. Sometimes walking in a march may get you killed.

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: And it happens in the United States, happens elsewhere in the world. So think...but I think that all our actions have a component that would impact what sort of things happen in life. We impact our...our own lives, our colleagues lives and our students' lives. So what sort of...so I'm going to be the Director of the Center for Arab-Americans, so am I going to forget about the question of gender and so and so, like over all Arabs, and in our Arab-ness there are no differences. We're all equal, we're all, you know, that sort of an imagined community of equal comrades, horizontal membership that...as Anderson calls it. But there are differences, of course there are going to be differences between, you know, on average women and men, as structured by the gender system, that we need to take...acknowledge it, take account of it and think about where do these women and men are situated in different systems. And, I mean, I know like...and I'm...an immigrant man has it worse off to start with than a woman who is a citizen, who has a citizenship. Because...

Nadine: **Yeah.**

Rabab: ...today immigrant, as I said, immigrant men, Arab Muslims and Arabs are targeted.

Nadine: **Hm-hm-hm.**

Rabab: So I think we need to be aware of that, and at the same time push for activism. I mean, I would encourage my students to go and join the Arab woman's gathering. I would encourage my students...

Nadine: **Hm-hm-hm.**

⁶⁷ A *permit* allows you to engage in some sort of activity. For example, you must plan a protest and get a permit from the appropriate local officials before you are allowed to have one—or risk being arrested.

⁶⁸ A person who signs a *divestment statement* believes that universities should not support companies that aid Israel.

Rabab: ...to be active. And some of the programs that I'm actually hoping to institute in the program is to actually get students to require for the major to have a portion of community service—that nobody's going to graduate, even if they have 4.0, without having served the community. It's not going to work. And I'm talking about the community as broadly defined.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: That you have to do community service. You have to go, you can't just like spend all your time in the books, be bookish and then expect that you're going to graduate and go to college and then become the authority...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...on knowledge to decide and theorize about the people's lives who did not serve in the first place. It's not going to happen.

Nadine: H m.

Rabab: May happen elsewhere, but not at this center.

Nadine: And so vice versa, your...your academic work also informs your scholarship.

Rabab: Yes. My activist, you mean.

Nadine: Your...

Rabab: Oh...yeah.

Nadine: ...pardon me, your...your academic work also informs and shapes your political work.

Rabab: Yeah, definitely, definitely. Because I...

Nadine: I'm a feminist.

Rabab: I think...I think...I mean, I think theory is really important. I...I think that if we think about activism as just doing without thinking, because we're always thinking. We're just...we're just claiming that we're not thinking. I think it's really important to learn together. I think it's important to...to read together. I think it's important to figure out what we're doing and what each action entails. What does each action cost us? What are the results? What does it mean for us? What sort of people does it make us when we choose to do this or choose to do that, and so on. And so I think they're very much linked

together. And I...I mean, the...the...what Gramsci⁶⁹, the organic intellectual, I think this is...this is a responsibility that we have in the academy. We are in a place where we can actually...we have the luxury to...to make certain things accessible and to also act on behalf of our beliefs and...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...the people with whom we identify.

Nadine: Hm. So in wrapping it up...

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: ...um, I wanted to ask you, you know, when you think about what brought you here today, um, can you depict...how would you depict the journey that kind of brought you to the point that you are today?

Rabab: I keep thinking about my activism actually. And I keep thinking about...I was having a conversation with another long-time activist three nights ago—Hannan [inaudible] of ACCESS⁷⁰ in Detroit. And we both agreed that we do not regret. We have no regrets, because we would have never gotten where we are now had we not done what we did before. This is kind of being involved, and...and really believing, and we still believe, and, you know, this another thing is just like people say, “You have to grow up, and you stop,” and I...and I just, I don’t, I don’t...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: I don’t think it’s about growing, but actually believing in justice. And if you believe in justice, it doesn’t stop at a certain again, you graduate from believing in justice, and then you say, “I grow up, I’m retiring.” You can’t. This is a belief that you have to continue. If you believe in it, you have to do something about it. And so, I...this is what...what...what brings me here. These...this...my, my activism, my involvement, which I have the honor to be part of, is...is what makes me who I am today. And I owe a big great deal to all those people who taught me...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...these kinds of activism.

⁶⁹ Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian theorist who supported socialism and whose writings have been highly influential in social theory. He argued that each class produced intellectuals, not necessarily formally educated people, who could articulate the feelings of the people.

⁷⁰ The *Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services* is located in Dearborn, Michigan which has second largest Arab American population in the US. See <http://www.accesscommunity.org>

Nadine: Well, I'm extremely moved, and I've just learned so much. I'm speechless, so speechless that we're going to wrap it up (laughter). Thank you so very much for joining us today and being part of this project and your participation has been invaluable.

Rabab: Thank for all the amazing questions you raised, and the comments.

Nadine: Thank you Rabab, thank you very much.

The End