

# **“Ambiguous State of Being”: Identity Construction in Contemporary Arab-American (post-9/11) Poetry**

Thesis submitted for the award of PhD

by

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## **Declaration**

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

For my Mother and Father,  
*Leila and Sleiman Baz Radwan*

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## Abstract

Omar Baz Radwan

### “Ambiguous State of Being”: Identity Construction in Contemporary Arab-American (post-9/11) Poetry

This study examines poetry written by Americans of Arab descent and the manifold ways in which “national” identity construction and belonging in terms of Race, Cultural Politics, and Feminism are portrayed in the discourse of various prominent, contemporary Arab-American poets. Using literary imagology as a methodological tool, the study investigates the various representations of identity/alterity expressed in these works. As such, the primary focus of the study is on the image of the Arab community in post-9/11 America, and the various cultural concerns of the *spectated* community as portrayed in the literature (i.e. from an aesthetic, subjective perspective). Moreover, this study addresses the subsequent tensions and “exilic” notions encountered in contemporary Arab-American poetic discourse in its attempt to redefine and invalidate the image of being Arab, and by extrapolation, Muslim, in America after the incidents of the 9/11 attacks. This research focuses on socio-political readings of Anglophone Arab poetry in America in light of pertinent concerns of cultural and national identification patterns which, as this research attempts to show, form the essence of these works.

The study addresses textual representations of identity and “Self-image” as well as alterity and “Difference” expressed in the poetic discourse in relation to cultural and ethnic stereotypes evident in post-9/11 American portrayal of Arab identity. Arab-American poetry in general alludes to the ethnic profiling of Arabs exploring various facets of the Arab-American experience, including displacement, adaptation, ethnic profiling, and stereotyping. The discourse on Arab-American marginalization and stigmatization in a post-9/11, American context is avid in scholarly/theoretical output on pan-ethnic Arab-American identity. Post-9/11 Arab-American poetic discourse (the *spectant*) attempts to confirm American national belonging, loyalty and affinity to both an Arab descent and American heritage. This study provides a thorough analysis of the images and attitudes of ethnic and cultural affinities presented in a representative sample of contemporary Arab-American poetry. The main aim is to inquire about the relevance of identity construction and its negotiation through literature in light of America’s “War on Terror” and inclusion/exclusion of American citizens of Arab descent.

## INTRODUCTION

A nation, according to Ernest Renan, is a “spiritual principle” constituted both by the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories from past experiences and the desire to live together (cited in Bhabha 1990: 19). It is “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form, in a present-day consent” (ibid.). Arabs and Muslims in America<sup>1</sup> fit uneasily into the “spiritual principle” of a nation that identifies with Christian, European, Western and white identities. The many studies before and after 9/11 on Arab-American<sup>2</sup> national inclusion and ethno-racial formation(s) show that Arab-Americans have been affiliated with an alien, threatening culture and with a racially inferior status within a highly racialized American national hierarchy, especially during times of crisis.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly evident in a post-9/11 national context. Louis Cainkar’s (2009) study, for example, *Homeland insecurity: the Arab American and Muslim American [sic] experience after 9/11*, based on data collected from a two-year period interviews (2003-2005) with Arab-/Muslim-Americans after the 9/11 attacks, sheds light on the alienation or “Othering” of the Arab-American community at large. According to Cainkar, “long before 9/11 [Arabs/Muslims] were widely represented in American culture not only as an inherently volatile group that threatened American global allies and interests but also as a group that threatened American [national] culture itself” (2). Therefore, after the 9/11 attacks took place, Arab- and Muslim-Americans were well positioned in the government “group-think” and in the mind of the public to be held innately capable for the attacks (ibid.).

If the nation is an “imagined community” *par excellence* as Benedict Anderson theoretically asserts in his study, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (1991), then it is evident that Americans of Arab descent have been

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term inclusively throughout the thesis to relate to the United States of America, its people, language and culture.

<sup>2</sup> I use the appellation ‘Arab-American’ in this study to highlight the hyphenated status of Americans of Arab descent in an American national context.

<sup>3</sup> See also Said E. 1981. *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*; Ghareeb, E. 1983. *Split vision: the portrayal of Arabs in the American media*; McCarus, E. (ed.) 1994. *The development of Arab-American identity*; Mamdani, M. 2004. *Good Muslim, bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the roots of terror*; Salaita, S. 2006. *Anti-Arab racism in the USA: where it comes from and what it means for politics today*; Jamal, A. and Naber, N. (eds.) 2008. *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: from invisible citizens to visible subjects*; Detroit Arab American Study (DAAS) 2009. *Citizenship and crisis: Arab Detroit after 9/11*; Haddad, Y.Y. 2011. *Becoming American? The forging of Arab and Muslim identity in pluralist America*; Majid, A. 2012. *Islam and America: building a future without prejudice*; Naber, N. 2012. *Arab America: gender, cultural politics, and activism*.

socially constructed in an American national context before and after 9/11 as the “Other” within the boundaries of the American nation-state. According to Anderson (1991), the nation is able to be imagined

because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members [...]. Yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion [...] imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (4, 7; emphasis in original)

As American citizens, Arab-Americans after 9/11 found themselves excluded from this concept of “deep horizontal comradeship” of national belonging because of their affiliation to a culturally and racially hostile and inferior status.<sup>4</sup> Arab-American literary productions which started in the late 1800s with the establishment of *Al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyyah* (the Pen League Association) in 1920 New York continue to negotiate and mirror the historical patterns of Arab-American identity construction within an American national context.<sup>5</sup> According to Arab-American literary critic Lisa S. Majaj (2008), early Arab-American literature up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century often reflected a strong need to prove oneself worthy in the American context so as to assimilate into the American national culture. This anxiety was most apparent in the autobiographies and novels of the period. These writers stressed their Christian identity, their geographical origin in the Holy Land, and their spirituality, employing biblical rhetoric and religious parallels in their attempt to engage American readers and “familiarize the exotic” (ibid: 2). However, this was not the case for later Arab-American identity construction portrayed in the more recent literature. In a more contemporary context, Majaj contends, young Arab-American writers were able to take for granted the existence of a community, both ethnic and literary, even while “the forces which situated Arab-Americans as anomalies in the U.S. context and which made it difficult for Arab-American writers to engage with their identity with comfort and directness are still at play” (3). Contemporary Arab-American writers, notes Majaj, grapple with these

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term citizenship, in line with Fadda-Conrey (2014), in its legal and cultural dimensions. Legal citizenship involves “the construction of the citizen-subject through the acquisition of legal and civic rights as well as the performance of civic duties and obligations”. Cultural citizenship “goes beyond legal structures to evoke a type of citizenship that is shaped by connections to and participation in the US social and cultural landscapes” (4).

<sup>5</sup> Scholars have traditionally identified Arab immigration to America within three distinct phases: first wave immigrants (1880-1924), second wave immigrants (1945-1967), and third wave immigrants (1967-present). See Naff (1998); Suleiman (1999); Ludescher (2006); Orfalea (2006).

exclusionary forces even as they explore both ethnic affirmation and diasporan sensibilities. Arab-American literature began thriving again in the 1980s, engendered by the rise of American multiculturalism and ethnic awareness, starting in the 1960s and 1970s (the Civil Rights Era). It gained unprecedented recognition in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. This literature was in high demand after the attacks as it seemed to meet “the needs of a readership eager to learn about Arab culture and intellectual make-up in a language accessible to them” (Al Maleh 2009a: 1). Moreover, Arab-American literature produced since its onset in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century more poetry than prose (ibid.). Writing in English and publishing in literary journals, these writers drew on American literary traditions, especially free verse and the lyric poem. Arab-American poets began to publish poetry that touched, sometimes glancingly, sometimes directly, on Arab identity and probed what had been lost during the generations of assimilation.

One of the most important issues facing Arab-American writers today has to do with the question of what constitutes Arab-American ethnic identity. The Arab community in America is noted for its diversity, which is evident in its ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, sectarian, tribal, and national identities (Haddad 2011). Arab-Americans as a group include third- and fourth-generation Americans, recent immigrants, people from different countries and religious backgrounds, and Arabic and non-Arabic speakers. According to poet Hayan Charara (2008), for more than a century, Arab-American writers have not only struggled to claim agency for creating the Arab-American image, “but in doing so they have helped to turn this image on its head” (xvii). Charara asserts that in America “whether in literature, art, television, film, scholarship, or journalism, Arabs and Arab culture are depicted mostly as violent, intolerant, backward, and misogynistic” (ibid.). Moreover, 9/11 witnessed the proliferation and conflation of anti-Arab/Muslim stereotypes as well as government “national security” measures which targeted Middle Eastern as well as “Muslim-looking” people. Racial profiling which, according to David Harris, author of *Profiles in injustice* (2003), uses “race or ethnic appearance as a broad predictor of who is involved in a crime or terrorism” (139), became a *de facto* policy which gave rise to the tendency in post-9/11 America to confuse and collapse Arabs and Muslims into one category. In the case of Arabs in post-9/11 America, racial profiling is premised on equating Arab culture with Islam with terrorism (Hassan 2002).

This thesis looks into the literary representations of Arab-American identity construction in a post-9/11 American context. Admittedly, the term “Arab” is contested, usually used among scholars as a cultural and linguistic term that includes persons from

countries where the primary language is Arabic. Another definition, influenced by Arab nationalist movements that emerged in opposition to Ottoman and European colonial rule, assumes that Arab is also a national identity and that “Arabs share a language and a common cultural and imagined national community” (Naber 2008: 5). The term “Arab” throughout this thesis represents Arabic language, culture, and history, as well as the broad geo-political region that includes North Africa, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabic-speaking group that flocked to North America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century constituted the nucleus of an ethnic community which today is referred to in the American multicultural paradigm as Arab-Americans. However, to a great degree these early arrivals lacked the essential concept and binding force of communal cohesion (Abu-Laban and Suleiman 1989). Post-World War II Arab immigrants to America came with a larger understanding of nationalism and nationality and with much stronger commitment to a collective identity, especially to the notion of Arabism and an Arab nation. At the height of the tide of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s in the old homeland, many new arrivals felt a strong sense of identity as “Arabs”. This coincided with the same feelings experienced by many third-generation members of the older well-established Arab community in America. The consequence was a stronger ethnic, and specifically Arab ethnic, bond. One element that has helped forge this bond is the bias and hostility that Arabs as a group have encountered in North America (ibid.). In a more contemporary context, Arab identity in America became “symptomatic of a divisive rhetoric that quickly dominated post-9/11 national discourse. This rhetoric separates the American from the un-American, the patriotic from the unpatriotic, with Arabs and Muslims being squarely cast in the latter category” (Fadda-Conrey 2011: 532-33).

This thesis focuses on Arab-American fictional texts and cultural representations that respond to the post-9/11 political and social terrain in America by capturing and challenging homogenized depictions of Arab-Americans, forging in the process revisionary spaces that stand against and redefine exclusionary conceptualizations of American citizenship and national identity. Images of the Arab “Other” which existed long before 9/11 proliferated after the attacks. Malevolent public, media and government stereotypes equating Islam and Arabs with violence came to the foreground. Arabs/Muslims became so demonized in a post-9/11 American national context that they were perceived only as the enemy, as terrorists, as a perpetual “Other” (Shaheen 2008). Although Arabs and other people from the Middle East are classified racially as white according to U.S. Census and most affirmative action forms, prior to 9/11, the U.S. government has unofficially constituted them as a distinct racial group

by associating Arabs with terrorism and threats to national security. Moreover, 9/11 consolidated the conflation of the categories “Arab”, “Middle Eastern”, and “Muslim” and the notion of an “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” enemy of the nation (Volpp 2003 cited by Naber 2008: 38). While racial hierarchies in America function according to phenotypical features, social practices, and/or cultural markers (Omi and Winant 1994), the “social conflicts” and “interests” associated with Arabs/Muslims in America are located not only in bodily markers beyond individual control but “in a realm of conscious ideology, in specific cultural content, in particular national and religious backgrounds, in precisely the terrain pan-ethnic and racial labels in the United States function to homogenize or obscure” (Shryock 2008: 98). As a “moral analogy”, racialization captures the marginalization of Americans of Arab descent and gives new meanings to processes of stigmatization for which Arabs in America have suffered long before the tragic event of 9/11 (ibid.). Concepts of American “racial formation” in this thesis take into account Critical Race Theory perspectives whereby the specificity of American racial hierarchies are highlighted as an autonomous field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural ideological meaning (Omi and Winant 1994). In terms of ethnicity and ethnic identity addressed in this study, the terrain of “racial formation” is that of the “*dynamics of incorporation* of minority groups into the dominant society” (ibid: 48; emphasis in original). Notions of ethnicity relevant to this study are therefore primarily concerned with questions of group identity; with the resolution of tensions between the twin pressures of assimilation and cultural pluralism; and with the prospects for political integration via normal political channels. Guided by notions of American “racial formations” as well as transnational affiliations between America and the Middle East/Arab World, this thesis focuses on the major shift in Arab-American cultural representations, which literary scholars label as a shift from assimilationist tendencies to hybrid-ethnic sensibilities evident in contemporary Arab-American literature (Salaita 2007; Majaj 2008; Al Maleh 2009; Fadda-Conrey 2014).

Imagologically, cultural self-representations of Arab-American authors, the *auto-* and *hetero-images* analysed in the relevant texts, are contextualized within related paradigms of American “racial formations” which in turn inform cultural politics and the feminist discourse addressed in the study. The literary genre in this study is strictly poetical. Contemporary Arab-American identity discourse will be deduced from the representative literature. Five (post-9/11) representative poems in total from various contemporary Arab-American authors make up for the representation of the ensuing discourse in each chapter of thesis. The poetic discourse chosen throughout the study negotiates a complex double-

consciousness that translates and troubles both the “American” and the “Arab”, from cultural traditions to political ideologies. Moreover, the poems are placed under rubrics of the political. As such, the discourse presented throughout the thesis speaks to political issues, consciously engaging in socio-political conditions. The framework for reading political poems adapted in this thesis is in line with Dowdy’s (2007) seminal study on American political poetry. Along with Dowdy, this thesis presents an agential engagement with the relevant poetic discourse, one that works “to negotiate the individual agent’s ability to act according to [her/his] purposes in relation to the determining material, political, and social forces that constrain action” (ibid: 21). According to Dowdy, agency provides two frameworks for understanding political poetry. First, the subjects of poems – speakers, characters, the witnessed – “can be seen as agents acting in response to various other agents, material constraints, and the social fields in which they are embedded” (ibid: 22), and second, agency provides a way to generate categories of political poetry through a formulation of the various types of agency (which will be addressed in chapter one of thesis) represented in poets’ strategies, specifically in their voices (ibid.). A framework of agency further assists in elucidating poems as objects in the mix of social and political space, as contestation points between actors, structures, and material realities. It helps to “illustrate”, according to Dowdy, “the ways in which poems display the constraints limiting agents’ actions and the way that social and political forces shape action and individual and collective agency and identity” (23). In order to highlight the agential position of the poetic voices represented in the ensuing discourse as speakers on behalf of the community, this study uses the term “speaker-poet” throughout the analysis of relevant texts in order to highlight what Dowdy labels as “strategies of engagement” and agency which political poets use in their rhetoric to engage the political (19).

As the critical overview of Arab-American literary identification patterns presented in chapter one makes clear, cultural representations of Arab ethnicity and national inclusion in America drastically shifted over time. In the course of a century of Anglophone Arab writing in America, three trends can be identified: the cultural conciliation methods of the *Mahjar* (*émigré*) writers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the assimilationist trends of the mid-1950s; and the more recent hybrid, hyphenated, transcultural, exilic/diasporic writers (Al Maleh 2009a). The third group of writers addressed in the study is engendered by the rise of multiculturalism and ethnic awareness. These writers strongly identify with their ethnic group and cultural heritage, and they encourage ethnic affiliation along the lines of the similarly hyphenated (ibid.). This literature also addresses the political events in the Arab

world which have contributed to raising the political consciousness of the Arab-American community and solidifying transnational ties with the old country of origin. It also has much to do with the collective efforts against denigration of Arab culture, particularly in the media, as well as an attempt by these writers to project a more positive image of themselves and of their community as trustworthy citizens (ibid.). In chapters two, three, and four of this thesis Arab-American poetic discourse will be examined in light of the stereotypes against which this group worked and how their poetic discourse challenges ill-informed perceptions of Arab culture as well as anti-Arab/Muslim hostility evident in post-9/11 America. Chapter two of this thesis will highlight the concept of Arab-American racialization and the artistic and creative connections drawn in the relevant literary texts between Arab-Americans and other “communities of color”. Being marked as different, alien, and generally understood as non-white or outside the mainstream in America has prompted many Arab-Americans to seek out and build links to other groups of colour, including African Americans (Hartman 2006). The chapter will focus on the changing views Americans of Arab descent have of themselves regarding their ethnic positioning. The chapter focuses on the growing awareness amongst contemporary Arab-American writers of themselves as a minority of colour in solidarity and coalition with other ethnic minorities in America in the face of increasing discrimination and abuse, particularly in a post-9/11 context. Chapter three looks into the hybrid, third space whereby cultural negotiation emerges from a dialogical site – a moment of enunciation, identification, negotiation – whereby Arab-American poetic discourse is located within asymmetrical and unequal engagement of forces (Bhabha 1994). Based on theoretical notions presented in Bhabha’s (1994) *The location of culture*, the chapter conceives the encounter of two social groups (Arab and American) with different cultural traditions and potentials of power as a special kind of negotiation or translation that takes place in a Third Space of enunciation. This negotiation, as the chapter makes clear, is not only expected to produce a dissemination of both cultural traditions that leads to a displacement of the members of both groups from their origins. It is also supposed to bring about a common identity, one that is new in its hybridity; it is thus neither the one nor the other. Chapter four looks into the split vision and double marginalisation evident in contemporary Arab-American feminist discourse. Contemporary Arab-American writers emphasize hybridity and diaspora, rather than roots, as a primary means of resisting essentialized identity politics. Their works, as the chapter elucidates, shift away from narrow identity politics determined by static notions of race and gender toward a rearticulated politics of difference as doubly marginalised citizens.

The main research question guiding this study is twofold: how is national identity in its racial, cultural and gender paradigms<sup>6</sup> represented in Arab-American discourse, and how is this discourse constructed in contemporary, post-9/11 Arab-American poetry within an American national context?

Answering the question above will lead me to address the following issues on the imagological approach to contemporary Arab-American poetic discourse:

A. *(Questions relevant to) Imagological studies:*

1. How is “national” identity constructed in post-9/11 Arab-American poetry?
2. What role does this identity have in the relevant literature?
3. How are identity/alterity in terms of national inclusion negotiated in post-9/11 Arab-American poetic discourse?
4. How is Arab-American ethnicity represented in this discourse?
5. How is this representation constructed (i.e. from racial, cultural, religious and socio-political perspectives)?

B. *Socio-cultural perspective:*

1. How does the relevant literature depict and negotiate American stereotypical images of Arabs (from a post-9/11 perspective)?
2. What role do these stereotypes have in this literature?
3. How does the literature in question define its hyphenated identity (i.e. Arab, American or both)?
4. What is the concept of the “Other” and “Self” for people with a “hyphenated” identity, according to the literature in question?
5. How are racial/ethnic, cultural and gender paradigms constructed in the observed texts?

C. *Literary Focus:*

1. How is Arab ethnicity established (as a trope) in the relevant texts?
2. To which extent are *auto-images* and *hetero-images* of Arab ethnicity echoed or reinforced, varied upon, and/or negated by the relevant texts?
3. Which genre conventions are at work within the poetic output?
4. What is the status, the prominence and the function of the national trope within these parameters?

Arab-American poetic discourse responds to the post-9/11 social and political terrains in an American national context by constructing a new, hybrid identity as a result of their

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<sup>6</sup> The three paradigms (Race/Cultural Politics/Feminist Discourse) addressed in this study reflect the precarious position of Arab-Americans in the U.S. nation-state after 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror. Such precariousness firmly brands Arab-Americans as the racial, religious, political, and national “Other” of a hegemonic American national identity “that has increasingly become more uniform and insular in nature [after the attacks]” (Fadda-Conrey 2014: 1-2).

ethnic marginalisation and homogenisation. This thesis will explore how Arab-American poetic discourse attempts to challenge the homogenisation of Arab-American citizenship and anti-Arab stereotypes, rewrite Orientalist narratives, engage in modes of political and aesthetic resistance, and question ethnic connection and complicity with the nation in a post-9/11 context. Anti-Arab stereotypes will inform the main cultural context in which the poetic discourse is embedded. Examination of group stereotypes and identity constructs will be mainly based on close textual readings of literary works, though the historical, political and sociological contexts surrounding the literature will also be considered as the cultural context which the literature embodies and responds to.

**Chapter One:** “Emerging Identity (-ies): Contextualizing Arab-American Poetry after 9/11”

*Right now,  
the face of terror  
mostly  
looks  
like  
me.*

- Richard Montoya, “Anthems” (2002)<sup>7</sup>

**1.1 Methodology**

- 1.1.1 Imagology

The imagological model adapted to this study is one of ethnic stereotypes (sp. Arab-American ethnicity) within the American multicultural paradigm in a post-9/11 context. Inter/intra-ethnic negotiations within the multi-ethnic borders and across majority-minority discourse within the American nation-state (post-9/11) will be taken into primary consideration. Transnational perspectives linking the Arab-American community to Middle East/Arab World, which directly inform and define Arab-American (dis-)location in America (Fadda-Conrey 2014), will also be considered in the study. Ethnic literary scholars face tasks similar to those that faced feminists – the constitution of a history or tradition and the examination, using the best methodological tools available, of the works of writers operating within the cultural framework of an ethnic group whose existence is defined by internal exclusion (Rivkin and Ryan 2004). In line with that, ethnic writers tend to focus on questions of identity and of representation. What does it mean to hold national citizenship and to belong to an ethnic group whose features and whose culture exist to one side of a mainstream that seems unaware of its own hegemony? How can anyone person represent “their” ethnic culture? What is the identity of a culture torn between traditional values and contemporary changes that could be represented? And for whom and for what reason does such representation, generally in the mainstream culture, occur? As the size of non-Anglo ethnic populations in America grows and as the culture becomes less hegemonically white and Anglo, an appropriate methodology must deal with the discursive manifestation of cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in El Said, M. (2003: 200) in “The face of the Enemy”. *Studies in the Humanities* [Online], 30(1/2).

difference and national identification patterns in literature. Imagology as a methodological tool is capable of incorporating the literary expression of ethnic identity construction within the confines of the nation-state.

The ultimate perspective of imagology is a theory of cultural or national stereotypes and textual identity construction. In Beller and Leerssen's (eds.) *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters, a critical survey* (2007), imagology is defined as the critical analysis of national stereotypes in literature and in other forms of cultural representation. As a branch of comparative literature, imagology has its own methodological approach based on the principles of a specific supranatural cultural neutrality (Dyserinck 2003). The term, according to Beller and Leerssen, is a "technical neologism" which "applies to research in the field of our mental images of the 'Other' and of ourselves" (2007: xiii). Imagology is not a form of sociology, "even though it is situated in the broader interdisciplinary field of the human, cultural and social sciences" (ibid.). Imagology aims at analysing commonplace/hearsay, subjective and imagined representations of national stereotypes and images rather than presenting "empirical observations or statements of fact" (ibid.). It is therefore not a study of a society or a specific nation, but rather a critical analysis of "literary and cultural representation (and construction) of purported national characters" (Beller and Leerssen 2007: xiii). Moreover, "ethnotypes", defined by Beller and Leerssen as "stereotypical characterizations attributed to ethnicities or nationalities, national images, or common places, are representative of literary and discursive conventions" (ibid: xiv), not of social realities. These characterizations are "imagined to the extent that they lie outside the area of testable reports or statements of fact" (ibid.). They are literary discourses which describe a given nationality, country or society while relying on imputations of national, ethnic and/or cultural character. Accordingly, imagined literary discourse offers characterological explanations, commonplace subjective images of cultural differences, and aims at an analysis of identity constructs in literary representations which are silhouetted in the perspectival (subjective) context of the representing text. For this reason, imagological studies must take into consideration the "dynamics between those images which characterize the "Other" (*hetero-images*) and those which characterize one's own domestic identity (self-images or *auto-images*)" (ibid.).

Textually codified information is initiated from preconceived value judgements and represents "the whole through partial representation" (Beller 2007: 5). All human cultures articulate and/or situate themselves (i.e. identity) by categorizing the world and distinguishing between that which is allowed into the sphere of culture, and that which is

excluded. The “circumscription of cultural identity proceeds by silhouetting it against a contrastive background of Otherness” (i.e. alterity) (Corbey and Leerssen 1991: vi). Comparatist literary imagology studies the origin and function of characteristics and images of the “Self/Other”, “as expressed textually, particularly in the way which they are presented in works of literature, plays, poems, travel books and essays” (Beller 2007: 7). This notion of representation of the “Self/Other” in literature is a historical phenomenon which dates back to the “late classical topical technique of legal reasoning” (ibid.) in which a tradition of *topoi* has developed concerning the characteristics of various peoples and places ever since the Enlightenment in Europe.

Imagology, in comparative literary studies, resulted from a growing awareness that the cultural units between which literary traffic took place, “were not so much pre-given eternal categories, self-sufficient and discrete national ‘identities’, but rather literary constructs in themselves, results of confrontation, projection and the articulation of cultural differentiation and discontinuity” (Corbey and Leerssen 1991: x). In other words, “identity” and “alterity” pertain to concrete historical situations and to the preoccupations relevant to each of those historical situations. As such, “identity” and “alterity” are constructs rather than preconditions or ontological categories (Van Alphen 1991). In line with that, Zacharasiewicz (2010) reminds us that:

Dozens of studies have related the use of specific ethnic stereotypes in literary texts to social facts like the common tendency to generalize from isolated incidents or to draw inferences from information long since outdated, and to structure vague impressions by falling back on preconceived notions and firm expectations. (21)

Imagology has gone beyond this mere inventory of stereotypes and has articulated the artistic and social function in the interaction between auto- and heterostereotypes in literary texts. Autostereotypes refer to a characterological reputation current within or shared by a group, and heterostereotypes refer to the opinions that others have about a group’s purported character. Thus, imagology deals with attitudes and judgements between cultures, nations, and/or ethnicities as fixed in texts; comparative study offers the impression of a rhetorical game with an invariant array of binary-opposed character traits by which writers negotiate identity/alterity (Chew III 2006). Such negotiations result in the production or dispersion of literary images, whereby an image is defined as “[t]he mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity, or ‘nation’” (Leerssen 2007b: 342).

The image of the relations between self and other, between inside and outside of a group, “represents a cultural confrontation through which the individual subject or subject-group reveal their own ideological horizon” (Pageaux 1981 cited by Beller 2007: 8-9). An image signals an intercultural confrontation, one that is strictly textual, in that it stays within the textual confines of perception and representation (Leerssen 1991). According to Leerssen (2007a), imagology, “working as it does primarily on literary representations, furnishes continuous proof that it is in the field of imaginary and poetical literature that [images] are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated” (26). Group cultural representations are “placed alongside the historical record of social action and political decision-making” (ibid.). Moreover, an *imageme*, a term used within imagological studies to describe the polarities contained within a given image, “include[s] a compound layering of different, contradictory counter-images, with (in any given textual expression) some aspects activated and dominant, but the remaining counterparts all latently, tacitly, subliminally present. As a result, most images of national character will boil down to a characteristic, or quasi-characterological, polarity [...] The ultimate →cliché about any nation is that it’s ‘a nation of contrasts’” (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 343-44). Cultural imagery, addressed in this study, can be gradually defined as a group (not as an ordered system) of characteristic *imagemes* of an individual culture in a specific historical period. As an individual culture every community that can be observed is unified according to some integrative criterion that its members accept as an essential component of self-determination. This integrative criterion can be supranational, national, ethnic, confessional, social, gendered, and ideological. Moreover, the period whose cultural imagery is being analyzed/reconstructed has the status of a synchronic cross-section, a relatively static time unit. However, *imagemes* are the result of a historical process: they are historically condensed images. The cultural imagery is an ideal construct that does not exist as a whole in any individual consciousness; it is simply a group of relevant imaginational possibilities of a culture at some time period. The individual imagery, (e.g. the imagery constructed from the opus of some writer), relates to the corresponding cultural imagery. The context in which the individual *imageme* of Arab-American cultural imagery in a post-9/11 American setting considered in this study is other surrounding *imagemes* and corresponding stereotypes of the culture to which the observed *imageme* belongs.

Arab-American ethnicity (the *spected*) represented in this study is placed within notions of race, cultural politics and feminist discourse, relevant to an American multicultural context (the *spectant*). The spectant, or “the perceived context of the represented text or

discourse” (Leerssen 2007 cited in O’Sullivan 2009: 344), within conceptualisations of American “racial formation” perspectives (Omi and Winant 1994), captures what Arab-American literary and ethnic scholars identify as “the essentialization or frequent misrepresentation of Arabism by Americana” (Salaita 2006: 247). Corbey and Leerssen (1991) argue that the construction of this Othering (for example, as expressed in the literary productions of the Arab-American community even before 9/11), “can be detected at the root of much injustice and suffering” (xvii). Such an approach intends to highlight how American racial structures (or hierarchies), with their multiple socio-historical connotations, influence Arab-American group studies and the development of an Arab-American critical analysis. According to Leerssen (2007b), the image of the “Arab” in the European imagination:

was never sharply distinguished from the Islamic religion (which is centered on the Arabian holy places of Mecca and Medina, and whose holy book, the Qur’an, is in the Arabic language). Most characteristics attributed to Arabs therefore are part of the more general discourse of European [...] Orientalism. (94)

European Orientalist discourse has made its way into American representations of Arabs, Islam and the East in general. However, in America, Orientalism has been thoroughly racialized, “something that was central to the early Arab immigrant experience since the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, when race had cultural, political, and legal implications” (Hassan 2011: 15). Consequently, anti-Arab racism, in the various forms and intensities it has assumed since the beginning of Arab immigration to America up until the post-9/11 period, has always been wedded to American Orientalism (ibid.). This is discernible in xenophobic attitudes dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as, more recently, in Islamophobia and what has been called “political racism”, all of which served to differentiate Americans from supposedly inferior races (ibid.). Moreover, anti-Arab racism is fundamental to American race relations. Prior to 9/11, scholars have surveyed archetypes of the Arab image in American cultural productions and the media and concluded that “an exceptional proportion of all hostile or derogatory images targeted Arabs are derived from or are parallel to classical images of Blacks and Jews, modified to fit contemporary circumstances” (Stockton 1994 cited in Salaita 2006: 250-1). Based on that, this study conceptualizes Arab-American identity discourse within a heterogeneous and multitemporal complex of historical factors, making it clear that 9/11 only stratified pre-existing attitudes about Arabs, transforming Arab-Americans into discursive tropes. The ensuing chapters in this study are guided by cultural examples of hetero-images

of the group in each chapter, followed by analyses of group auto-images evident in the relevant literature, and an Imagological discussion.

- 1.1.2 Alterity/Identity/Stereotype

Beller (2007) assumes that national identities are a “political-intellectual projection” (12), a state of mind, subjectively imbued, rather than an objective set of conditions or essential facts. It is the aim of imagology to “describe the origin, process and function of national prejudices and stereotypes, to bring them to the surface, analyse them and make people rationally aware of them” (ibid: 11-12). Imagologists must start with the subjectivity of images and “must try to analyse motivation and function [of literary images] by concentrating on this very subjectivity” (ibid: 12). Moreover, although textual and literary sources are of primary importance, imagology owes many of the most important concepts in its “scientific study” of the origin and function of the images of a foreign identity (or one’s own) to sociological, ethnological, socio-psychological, political science and historical studies relevant to the evoked image and the literary representation of identity/alterity or the self/the other (ibid: 13).

In imagology, alterity can be broadly defined as discourse on the otherness of people, particularly people outside one’s domestic ken. Identity is the affirmation of who we are by contrasting nearly every element of our way of life with that of others (Voestermans 1991). This self-other dialectic is the core of imagological discourse on alterity/identity: the way they invest each other with meaning via literary productions. Usually the opposition is between cultures, or the way distinct groups of people comprehend each other. This implies that literary images (whether gender, sexual, national, ethnic, cultural and/or religious, etc.) are to be studied as part of a textual tradition. The imagologist studies the textual expression of an image, and the historical context of its textual expression, rather than its pretended reference to empirical reality. The imagologist need not be concerned with the referential claim of a given image. The imagologist studies the image’s development as a discursive topos in a textual tradition, the permutations it underwent in relation to its typological forerunners or successors, the relation in which it stood to political thought and/or literary practice, and so on (Leerssen 1986). The term *imagotype* was originally coined by Hugo Dyserinck (1982) as a term analogous to “stereotype”, but preferable to this latter term since it does not labour under the connotations of changelessness and stability implied in “stereotype” (cited in Leerssen 1986: 457). Imagotypes, or discursive images or cultural

representations that are changeable and mobile over time (Leerssen 2007), thus belong at the same time to political and/or literary practice, and to abstract cognition; they can be regarded as an abstract idea or as the concrete expression of that idea in literature. An idea that exists only in as much as it is expressed in literary discourse. In line with that, imagologists deal with imagotypes as textual expressions of a “discursive formation”, or as a community of attitudes in which a given tradition of writers shares (Leerssen 1986: 4).

In his definition of stereotypes, Beller (2007) refers to various definitions and methods of application of stereotypes in social psychology and imagological studies. He quotes Lippmann’s (1922) definition of “stereotypes” which refers to the “fixed pictures in our heads” (ibid: 429). Throughout history, according to Beller, people have had the tendency to fixate their “estimate of [other cultures/peoples] in terms of a limited number of foregrounded [salient] attributes, while reciprocally reserving for one’s self the contrary (usually superior) characteristics” (ibid.). Social psychologists differentiate between prejudice, affective and cognitive components when referring to stereotypes, such that a stereotype becomes “a generalization about a group of people in which incidental characteristics are assigned to virtually all members of the group, regardless of actual variation among members, and once formed, stereotypes are resistant to change on the basis of new information” (ibid.). Stereotyping involves judging people as category members rather than individuals. According to Hinton (2000), “[i]n many of our everyday encounters with people we learn very little about them, but what we do learn is often information that can be used to categorize them” (5). There is general agreement in psychology as to the key features of a stereotype. Even though there are differences in the explanation of how and why stereotyping takes place, a stereotype has three important components. These are (1) a group of people are identified by a specific characteristic (this can be anything from a nationality, to a religious belief, ethnicity, gender, age, occupation, hair colour and/or sexuality); (2) a set of “additional characteristics” is attributed to a group as a whole (personality or physical characteristics); (3) a person is identified as having the “identifying meaningful characteristic” of the whole group (ibid: 7-8). Moreover, according to Cinnirella (1997), people can come to form stereotypes about groups whose members they have never met face to face. The advanced mass media communication has helped in diffusing and disseminating stereotypes to a large variety of people. Through the mass media, individuals can form stereotypes about group members which they have never met in their lives, and if they do not share these ideas and beliefs with peers, they might rely solely on the stereotypes disseminated by the media in their formation of beliefs about “foreign” group members.

Even when we interact with, for example, members of a particular nationality, media is still powerful enough to set a context, according to Cinnirella, for our own stereotypical beliefs and those of the group to which we belong. The concept of stereotypes, therefore, is a socio-psychological one whereby the formation of stereotypes are strictly mental/cognitive processes. Stereotypes are best studied historically and philologically in depicting the origin and rhetorical/discursive function of the stereotype.

The textual codification of stereotypes leads into the field of literature where the term “stereotype” is often used for the “pictorial or verbal representation of prejudice” (Pätzold & Marhoff 1998 cited by Beller 2007: 429). In literary analysis, “the preoccupation with stereotypes is implicitly concerned with demonstrating their lack of trustworthiness and to defuse their pernicious social effect” (ibid: 430). Imagological methods of literary studies take into account typological patterns of peoples as a predominantly literary discourse of national/cultural/ethnic characterization, which owes more to fictional conventions than to empirical observation (Zacharasiewicz 1982; Barfoot 1997; Beller and Leerssen 2007). Accordingly, literary imagotypes are “the verbal expression of an opinion concerning social groups or concerning individuals as representatives of such groups” (Karolak 1986 cited in Beller 2007: 431). Social and ideological prejudices become literary imagotypes in the process of verbal articulation and can become topics of textual analysis in their verbal expression. In this semantic approach, the concepts of “national character” and/or “national prejudice” occupy a prominent position as national imagotypical systems (Smith and Bond 1993). Such systems (of national character and prejudices in literature) are based on historical, philological and textual discursive analysis. The aim is to describe and analyze the complex of literary imagotypes of a society at a given period. The function of imagotypes in literary texts is tantamount to the text’s general ideological and social ambience in the extra- as well as intra-textual spheres, as they are deployed to aesthetic and rhetorical effects. Imagotypes must therefore be applied to a specific literary corpus “limited in space and time” (Beller 2007: 431). It must be considered, moreover, in the analysis of literary texts whether the author goes along with the expectations of the imagotypes, whether he/she contradicts them or mocks them.

Arab-Americans, as a highly politicised and “racialized minority”, are socially constructed as essentially different from the Western, from the American, especially in times

of crisis (Cainkar 2009: 65). The nature of the contact throughout history between the West and the Arab World has frequently been confrontational. Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>8</sup> amongst others argues that the West has long held a complex body of prejudicial stereotypes about Muslims and Arabs, who are seen as interchangeable and not as distinct entities. Religious and cultural differences further exacerbate such constructions. Consequently, Western literature, folklore, academic writing, political discourse, and the media – films, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and popular writing – have long reflected largely negative attitudes toward the Middle East and Islam. For example, in his study, *Mistaken identity: Arab stereotypes in popular writing*, Terry, as early as 1985, points out that:

Over the centuries, numerous negative stereotypes of the Middle East, in particular of Arabs and Muslims, have been endlessly reinforced in the West. The very experts who have allegedly sought to “explain” the Middle East have contributed to perpetuating and legitimizing these stereotypes. (8-9)

In light of such representations and oversimplifications, especially after the attacks of 9/11, stereotypes of the Arab “Other” have become the rule rather than the exception. Moreover, stereotypes against Muslims and Arabs are very identical and these stereotypes as well as the racial formation process of Arab/Muslim Americans are identical to those experienced by other subordinate groups in America, where multiple social institutions engage in imprinting selected traits – portrayed as inherent and unchangeable – on all group members. In line with that, Cainkar (2009) argues that:

Arab Americans had been racialized long before the 9/11 attacks as a unique set of persons from a specific place of origin who share a cluster of negative traits that promote violence and hatred. This racialization was mobilized by a range of parties to produce the social understanding after the attacks that Arab Americans [*sic*] were somehow culpable for them. (72)

Consequently, Arabs are socially constructed in the American psyche as submissive to Islam, to religious fanaticism, to tribalism, to patriarchs and familism, to autocrats and dictatorships, and to reliving history perpetually. Conflations that underpin these representations: “Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim” on the one hand, and a conflation of these categories with

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<sup>8</sup> Said, E. 1979. *Orientalism*. 2003 ed. New York: Pantheon Books.

representations of Americans of Arab descent permeate the national discourse on Arab-American ethnic proclivities (Naber 2008a).

Arab-American literature defines the spaces of Arab-American ethnic identity and situates anti-Arab stereotypes within its discursive underpinnings. For example, in his introduction to the Arab-American poetry anthology, *Inclined to speak*, editor Hayan Charara (2008) observes that in literature, identity “only further complicates the matter” and for Arab-American literature this “complicated” matter of identity “also happens to be the sphere towards which most discussions gravitate and the traps from which most Arab American [writers] work ceaselessly to break free” (Introduction: xiii). Each poem in the anthology, Charara contends, disrupts the notions and expectations that most people have of Arab-Americans, “while simultaneously working together, as a body of literature, to express something that is undeniably Arab American [*sic*]”, even if this collectivity is constantly under construction (ibid.). Moreover, Arab-American writers today, like their predecessors, inhabit multiple cultures and write for multiple audiences: American, Arab, and Arab-American. For example, Majaj (1999) points out that:

While the details of our [Arab-American] personal experiences differ, for many of us this negotiation of cultures results in a form of split vision: even as we turn one eye to our American context, the other eye is always turned toward the Middle East. (67)

This split vision is expressed in Arab-American literature through a tilt toward either Arab or American identification. By mid-century, Majaj argues, the focus on Americanisation led to second-generation writing exhibiting a “deep-seated ambivalence toward Arab ethnicity” (ibid: 68). The late 1960s and 1970s, however, saw the rise of Arab American literature, primarily poetry, which engaged and affirmed an Arab ethnicity, and that paralleled the emergence of a pan-ethnic Arab-American identity bridging the different national and religious identities of immigrants and ethnics of Arabic-speaking backgrounds. Situating and initiating both this Arab-American literature and this pan-ethnic identification, according to Majaj (1999), were two cultural currents: first, the ethnic roots phenomenon which gained ground in the 1970s, providing the foundation for the current celebration of multiculturalism in America; and second, the growing politicization of the Arab-American community under the influence of new Arab immigrants to America. This politicization came as a result of wars and other political events in the Middle East.

The poets surveyed in this study represent a generation of writers that emerged in the 1990s and the cusp of the new millennium. These third- and fourth-generation Arab-American writers form a representative sample of emerging and well-established American poets of Arab descent from different backgrounds, Arab countries and religious affiliations. Moreover, the poets surveyed in this study identify with their Arab ethnicity and culture while contributing to the rich mosaic of American society and literary culture. Poets such as Suheir Hammad (Palestinian-American), Andrea Assaf (Lebanese-American), Laila Halaby (Lebanese-born Jordanian-American), Lawrence Joseph (Lebanese-American), Angele Ellis (Lebanese-American), Mohja Kahf (Syrian-American), Zaid Shlah (Iraqi-American), Hayan Charara (Lebanese-American), Rafeef Ziadeh (Palestinian-American), Khaled Mattawa (Libyan-American), Naomi Shihab Nye (Palestinian-American), and Lisa Suheir Majaj (Palestinian-American) provide a representative sample of the imagological discourse on identity construction of Arab/American/Arab-American identity after 9/11. The poems chosen for analysis in the study specifically focus on political discourse and the deconstruction of anti-Arab stereotypes, while maintaining a subjective outlook on identity construction in a post-9/11 American setting. The imagological discourse pursued in this study focuses on the movement of ideas and attitudes, images and perceptions within the cultural sphere of Arab ethnicity in post-9/11 America as portrayed in the selected literary texts. Poetry as a genre, in turn, presents a rich array of images through figurative language and allows for identity construction through performativity<sup>9</sup> as will be discussed later in the works of performance poets such as Suheir Hammad and Andrea Assaf. One of the great pleasures of poetry is discovering a particularly powerful image; the Imagists of the early-20th century, for example, felt it was the most important aspect, so were devoted to finding strong images and presenting them in the clearest language possible. Of course, not every poem is an Imagist poem, but making images is something that nearly every poem in the archive does. Arab-American poetry moreover has been established in America ever since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been anthologized in more than one literary compilation, from *Wrapping the grape leaves: a sheaf of contemporary Arab-American poets* (1982) edited by Gregory Orfalea; *Grape leaves: a century of Arab American [sic] poetry* (1988) edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa; *Food for our grandmothers: writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists* (1994) edited by Joana Kadi; *Post-Gibran:*

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<sup>9</sup> The term is used here in line with performance study scholars who define performativity as the discursive process of how an identity comes into being. See Diamond, E. 1996. *Performance and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge.

*anthology of new Arab American [sic] writing* (1999) edited by Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash; to the most recent *Inclined to speak: an anthology of contemporary Arab American poetry* (2008), edited by Hayan Charara.

Finally, this study does not claim empirical anthropological data on Arab-American ethnicity. The main paradigms addressed in the study, namely Race (Chapter 2), Cultural Politics (Chapter 3) and Arab-American Feminist Discourse (Chapter 4), are thus to be considered as interpretive frames of analysis which feed into each other. Racial formations of Arab-Americans in a post-9/11 American national context inform the cultural politics of the community which in turn provide feminist discourse with some vocabulary and symbolism for articulating the questions pertaining to ethnicity and race. These paradigms are not mutually exclusive, nor are they the sole demarcations of “national” identity as various other interrelated components such as class-consciousness, gender and sexuality studies for example, which pertain to national identity construction, are not addressed in the study. The paradigms addressed therefore do not cover the entirety of Arab-American national identity, nor does this study claim totalising generalizations on the community in terms of race, cultural politics and Arab-American feminist discourse, as the Arab community in America is a largely variegated and demographically diverse community with inter-generational as well as religious, political, social, economic and ideological discrepancies. Nor does the study claim a comprehensive discussion of Arab-American poetry, which covers an array of diverse American as well as Arabic genres and idioms, prosodic conventions, and thematic diversity. Moreover, in a pragmatic imagological sense, this study does not regard literature as an autonomous phenomenon but as part of a complex social, political, and cultural system of values pertaining to Arab-American ethnicity.

## **1.2 Cultural Context**

- 1.2.1 Arab-Americans: U.S. Historical and National Context

### *1.2.1.1 A Politicised Immigrant Community*

As aforementioned, Arab-American literature mirrors the patterns of Arab-American history, which scholars have traditionally divided into three phases, based on the three distinct waves of Arab immigrants who came to America. The first wave (1890-1924) of immigrants, the pioneers, came from Mount Lebanon and the surrounding provinces of the by then Ottoman Empire, referred to as the Greater Syria region (a term encompassing the

present-day countries and peoples of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan). This first wave of immigrants, comprising mainly of Greek Orthodox, Maronite, and Melchite Christians, were classified with other Ottoman subjects as Greeks, Turks, or Syrians (Stephan 2009). Most of the pioneer immigrants or first-wave immigrants in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century came to America in pursuit of trade and also to escape the politico-religious tensions in the provinces back home. Working mainly as peddlers with the sole purpose of surviving in the New World and sending money back home, this early group of Arab immigrants thought of themselves as temporary sojourners, as people who were in, but not part of, American society (Harik 1987; Suleiman 1999). These early immigrants came from poor, uneducated backgrounds and identified strongly with members of family, village of origin, or sectarian and regional communities back home.

The second wave of immigration began in the decades following World War II (1948-1967). Unlike the first wave, which was predominantly Christian from Mount Lebanon, the new wave contained a significant number of Muslims from various Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa. This second wave consisted of more educated, skilled immigrants, who were more likely to be familiar with the nationalist ideologies that permeated the Arab World at the time. Unlike the earlier pioneers, this group identified themselves as Arabs (Ludescher 2006). After the loss of Palestine in 1948 and the consequent Arab-Israeli conflicts which ensued in the aftermath of the Palestine debacle, Arab-Americans became a politicised community whose smooth assimilation in America proved difficult. Another major turning point for the community came in 1967. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which ended with a prompt and explicit defeat of the Arab nations, came as a shock to both the Arab World and to diaspora Arabs. The Arab-American community since then suffered the consequences of defeat and the shock of American foreign policy in the Middle East, which proved to be pro-Israeli. Suleiman (1999) contends that as World War I had marked a watershed for the early Arab immigrants, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war did for the entire community. The older and newer Arab-American communities were shocked and traumatized by the war. In particular, they were dismayed and extremely disappointed to see how greatly one-sided and pro-Israeli the American communications media were in reporting on the Middle East. The war galvanized Arabs to organize in America to fend off discriminatory representations of themselves and their homelands. The notion of pan-Arab solidarity and the appellation “Arab-American” took hold only after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Moreover, a third major wave of immigration (1967-1990) further accelerated the ethnopolitical orientation of the Arab-American community. In 1965, new liberalized

immigration laws abolished the long-standing Quota system. Large numbers of politicized Arab immigrants “[i]mbued with anti-colonial sentiment and Arab nationalist ideas” joined the Arab-American community (Ludescher 2006: 94). As a result, Arab American organisations were formed to defend the Arab point of view and to combat negative stereotypes of Arabs in mainstream American discourse, American foreign policy in the Middle East, popular culture, and the media.<sup>10</sup>

Political turmoil in the Middle East and American intervention in the region, usually explicitly pro-Israeli in nature, had direct and significant consequences on the Arab community in America. Helen Hatab Samhan (1987), the former Executive Director of the Arab American Institute (AAI), evaluates anti-Arab discrimination in post-1967 America as a form of what she labels as “political racism” (16). According to Samhan, “the Arab-Israeli conflict [had] been, in fact, the common denominator in most cases of anti-Arab discrimination since the 1960s” (ibid.). In line with that, Lisa Suheir Majaj (1999) identifies anti-Arab “political racism” in America in the context of Arab-oriented political activity. She states that:

Post-WWII [*sic*] political events – the 1948 creation of the state of Israel, the corresponding dispossession of the Palestinians and the military response of Arab States, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the oil boycott of the 1970s, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the 1990-91 Gulf crisis, and incidents of violence, whether or not carried out by Arabs (e.g. the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma Federal building, perpetrated by a white European-American but initially attributed to Arabs) – have resulted in a climate of hostility toward Arab Americans [*sic*] in general and politically active individuals in particular. (325-6)

It is therefore evident that Arab-American critics attribute anti-Arab sentiments in America to intrinsic notions in mainstream discourses and U.S. government politics. Steven Salaita (2006), for example, explains the politicization of Arab-Americans from a historical and explicit American context. According to Salaita (2006), there is something uniquely American about anti-Arab racism. By “uniquely American”, Salaita means that contemporary anti-Arab racism is organized within specific historical forces that originally produced it. According to Salaita, “both Arabs and Muslims inherited a history when they travelled to the United States and that it would be [insufficient] to examine the present condition of anti-

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<sup>10</sup> The Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG, 1967); The National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA, 1972); The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC, 1980); The Arab American Institute (AAI, 1985) . Cited in Suleiman (1999).

Arab racism without assessing that history” (12).<sup>11</sup> Salaita points out that anti-Arab racism in America engages in a constant dialectic with other types of racism (both American and European) as well as neo-colonialism, capitalism, nationalism, exceptionalism, xenophobia, and religious fundamentalism.

Moreover, Salaita explains the politically-motivated racism towards Arabs in America from a pro-Israeli American foreign policy arising from far right-wing neoconservative progenitors. According to Salaita, no issue has generated more politicized anti-Arab racism and exclusion from the public arena than the Arab-Israeli conflict. He asserts that “Zionists (Christians and Jews) in the United States are the biggest progenitors of anti-Arab racism today” (36). In order to entice derogatory mainstream attitudes towards Arabs in general and to exclude Arab political activity in American media, representations and mainstream political American discourse project images of Arabs as innately evil. Salaita contends that such representations are all inclusive, homogenising an entire ethnic community within their boundaries. Such representations render Arabs as evil, “not the majority of Arabs. Not some Arabs. Not a minority of Arabs. All Arabs are evil” (39). Such constructions, according to Salaita, are predicated largely on the recapitulation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century European colonialism. This sort of narrative has been expressed vigorously by American leaders, homogenising the entire Arab World and by substitution the Arab-American community under neo-colonial discursive terms such as “evil” and “terrorists”. From this perspective, Salaita further argues that:

anything Arab or Islamic is worthy of subordination to Western liberal values, or worthy of being replaced by them. Arab-as evil formulation also has many historical antecedents: While we do well to recognize that American racism is complex and continually evolving, a common expression of American racism is to designate an entire group as “evil”. (42)

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<sup>11</sup> Salaita (2006) extensively uses the term “anti-Arab racism” generally to mean “[...] acts of violence against Arabs based not on chance but largely (or exclusively) [*sic*] on the ethnicity of the victim; moments of ethnic discrimination in schools, civil institutions, and the workplace; the Othering of Arabs based on essentialized or biologically determined ideology; the totalization and dehumanization of Arabs by continually referring to them as terrorists; the marginalization of Arabs as it is informed by exclusionary conceptions of Americanness; the taunting of Arabs with [racist] epithets such as *sand nigger*, *dune coon*, *camel jockey*, *towelhead*, and *raghead*; the profiling of Arabs based on name, religion, or country of origin; and the elimination of civil liberties based on distrust of the entire group rather than on the individuals within that group who may merit suspicion” (12-13; emphasis in original).

Therefore, politicized anti-Arab racism is not simply evident in neoconservative thought nor is it a post-9/11 phenomenon. It has historical precedents and it is central to American foreign policy and economic interests in the Middle East.

Arabs in America also fit uneasily into a racial schema that identifies individuals and groups as either “black” or “white”. The many studies on Arab-American ethnicity, culture and racial formation show that historically Arab-Americans were first considered “not white”, then “not quite white”, then later legally “became white” (Hartman 2006: 145).<sup>12</sup> Arab immigrants to America from the very start discovered the hardships of integration into American citizenry and the need to defend themselves from charges of inferiority based on race. According to Suleiman (1999), Arabic-speaking individuals from Geographic Syria began to be challenged in their citizenship petitions as early as 1909. For example, in 1911 the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization ordered court clerks to “reject applications for first papers from ‘aliens who were neither white persons nor persons of African descent’” (Naff 1998: 253). Arab-Americans historically became white by litigating their right to claim this status. A series of court cases ensued, known as the “prerequisite cases”, in which petitions for naturalization were challenged and in some instances denied on the basis of whether or not the petitioners qualified as “white”. In 1914, George Dow, a Syrian immigrant, was denied a petition to become an American citizen<sup>13</sup> because, as a “Syrian of Asiatic birth [...] he was not a “free white” person within the meaning of the 1790 U.S. statute”.<sup>14</sup> Although the George Dow case is indicative of the exclusionary practices toward non-European immigrants of that period, the anecdote also captures a recurrent dilemma of immigrants of Arab origin. The arguments presented as rationale for challenging the right of Arabic-speaking applicants to naturalization included dark skin colour, origin on the continent of Asia, distance (literal and metaphorical) from European culture, and cultural and geographical proximity to Islam (Majaj 2000). During World War II and after, the status of Arabs remained unclear in America. Arabic-speaking persons had to figure out what identity best fit their indeterminate status. This shows that America has continually struggled with reconciling its northern European settler identity with new groups whose culture, language, or religion have not conformed to their Anglo-centric concepts of American identity.

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<sup>12</sup> See also Naff (1998); Suleiman (1999); Majaj (2000); Orfalea (2006).

<sup>13</sup> The Naturalization Act of 1790 had granted the right of citizenship to what it termed “free white persons”. Cited by Lisa Suhair Majaj 2000.

<sup>14</sup> *Ex Parte Dow*, 211 F. 486 (E.D. South Carolina 1914) cited in Suleiman (1999: 7).

By the late 1960s, government programs and other structural interventions that developed in the Civil Rights Era around racial integration and affirmative action contributed to corresponding awareness and societal attitudes of tolerance of diversity in America. An important convergence occurred that affected ethnic identity, including that of Arab-Americans: a developing national awareness driven by federal guidelines and the institutionalization of equal opportunity, with a cultural awakening in which black and other “Third World” heritages were studied, celebrated, and politicized. Into this external arena of expanded ethnic attention and opportunity, the Arab community’s internal generational transformation, diversification, and politicization found enough common ground to grow a new branch of Arab ethnicity in America (Samhan 1999). Contrasting with the highly assimilated, Christian majority of the earlier Arab-American community, this era of multiculturalism and minority rights forged a new paradigm for Arab (and later Muslim) culture and politics more squarely outside the white majority context. This position, however, rendered the Arab-American community “invisible”<sup>15</sup> isolated by an “honorary white”<sup>16</sup> status from both, the hegemonic white Anglo-Saxon majority and other ethnic minority groups in an American national context.

Today, the question of race and location within American national diversity takes on an increasing significance for the Arab-American community, especially after the events of 9/11. Although classified as “white” by current government definitions, the community is conspicuously marginalised by mainstream discourse and popular representations in the media and political arena especially in times of crisis. Majaj (2000) points out that the question of race is currently taking on an increasingly significant position for Arab-Americans as they debate whether to lobby for a categorization as “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” or to continue to “struggle for inclusion as white Americans on other than merely “honorary” grounds” (320).<sup>17</sup> Such liminality has profound implications for Arab-Americans as they attempt to assert a public identity, claim a voice within the American multicultural, and take collective action on issues of common concern. Although the official classification of Arabic-speaking immigrants as “white” seemed ensured as early as the 1920 census, which identified “Syrians” under the

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<sup>15</sup> Arab-American literary critic Joana Kadi describes Arab-Americans as “the most invisible of the invisibles”. Kadi, J.1994. Introduction, in Kadi, J. (ed.) *Food for our grandmothers: writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*, Boston: South End P, pp.xiii-xx.

<sup>16</sup> The term “honorary whites” was coined by Joseph Massad in “Palestinians and the limits of racialized discourse” (1993) and Soheir Morsy in “Beyond the honorary ‘white’ classification of Egyptians: societal identity in historical context” (1994).

<sup>17</sup> For more details on this debate initiated by the Arab American Institute (AAI), see Samhan, H.H. 1999. “Not quite white: race classification and the Arab-American experience”. (Op. cit.).

category “Foreign-born white population” (ibid: 323), the implicit link between western, European, Christian identity and “whiteness”, and the importance of this link in defining American identity, rendered Arab-Americans as a marginalised, and Orientalised other. Majaj argues that informing legal debates on race and inclusion both in the early period and at the present are historical discourses of Orientalism and heathenism that situate Arab-Americans (along with other non-Europeans and non-whites) as uncivilized and inferior to white, Christian Europeans. Moreover, Islam, which is conspicuously conflated with Arab identity in America, is orientalised historically as a “menace to the west and to Christianity, [...] more recently [...] caricatured [in popular American media and political discourse] as the epitome of barbarism, repression and irrational political violence, supplanting communism as the new enemy of the “civilised” west” (ibid: 324-5). Majaj attributes Orientalised portrayals of Arabs in America to a racially inflected “civilised/heathen” schism that “historically opposed white American colonists to native peoples, immigrants and enslaved Africans” (325). Islam in America became racialized and came to imply a distinct ethnic group, specifically Middle Eastern, Arab. Nothing has been more critical to the racialization of Arab-Americans than Islam, and nothing correspondingly, has more ability to preclude Arab-Americans from total assimilation. For example, Salaita (2007) asserts that:

Islam, [...], retains discreteness in both a theological and ethnic context, and as long as Arab Americans [*sic*] include Muslims [...], [they] will be perceived as a minority group, [...], because in the United States Christianity often is a prerequisite of assimilation. This sensibility, with its corresponding tendency to appropriate Islam as a metonym of Southern/Third World barbarity, likewise ensures that Arab Americans [*sic*] will never achieve the status of being White (a desire long ago abandoned by most Christian and Muslim Arab Americans [*sic*]). (8)

Therefore, the mere presence of Arabs in America today symbolises an Islamic presence that generates an ambiguous state of being. Arab-American scholars assign a number of roles to this ambiguous state of being, namely the U.S. racial national system<sup>18</sup>, demographic trends, discriminatory legislation, corporate avarice, religious fundamentalism, American foreign

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<sup>18</sup> Anti-Arab racism is widely referred to by Arab-American critics in their attempt to highlight the positioning of Arabs within a mainstream American discourse. Steven Salaita (2006), for example, attributes U.S. foreign policy, imperialism, “New World Settlement” (6), xenophobia, religious bias, and immigration to the creation and sustainability of “anti-Arab racism” (ibid.) in America today.

policy, as well as other specific phenomena related to Arab-Americans. Salaita goes even further by announcing that in post-9/11 America, Arab-Americans have become “marginalised *sand niggers* [*sic*] whose social and judicial troubles are derivative in a majoritarian, White and racialized legal/political system” (19). He contends that:

*Sand nigger* is not only an epithet increasingly common among American purveyors of anti-Arab racism, but also a signifier of the alienation of minorities wrought by the majoritarian notion of American exceptionalism. It is a new word ensconced in centuries-old ideas [...] that reveal the hierarchized organization of American ethnic communities. (2007:19)

It is evident that the biggest issues facing Arab-Americans today are these multifarious problems of inclusion in American mainstream society. These problems speak to the composition of an Arab-American group Studies as much as the positioning of Arab-Americans of all nationalities in America.

#### 1.2.1.2 Post-9/11 Context

The attacks of 9/11 brought Arab-/Muslim-Americans into the spotlight as fifth column citizens and a racially and culturally inferior collectivity with a natural proclivity to acts of terrorism and barbarity threatening American values of democracy and freedom. The negative treatment of Arabs and Muslims in America after 9/11 was caused not by the 9/11 attacks themselves, but by pre-existing social constructions that configured them as people who would readily conduct and approve of such attacks. As previously mentioned, for decades prior to the 9/11 attacks, Arabs and Muslims were portrayed in American culture as “having an inherent proclivity to violence, with a pathological culture and a morally deviant religion that sanctions killing” (Cainkar 2009:2). They were socially constructed in American mainstream discourse as “others”, as people not like “us” - an interpretation shown to be widely accepted in public opinion polls long before 9/11 (*ibid.*).

After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government’s anti-terror tactics were innumerable. These included mass arrests, preventive detentions, FBI interviews, registration and fingerprinting of tens of thousands of male foreign nationals, widespread wiretapping, secret hearings, closures of charities, criminal indictments, and reviews of private internet, telecommunication and financial records (Hassan 2002). These measures “were directed almost solely against persons of Arab ethnicity or the Muslim faith” (*ibid.*: 17). Scholars have

referred to these government tactics in post-9/11 America by the Bush Jr. administration as the “most aggressive national campaign of ethnic profiling [in America] since WWII [*sic*] against the Japanese-American community after the bombing of Pearl Harbour” (Cole 2006 cited by Cainkar 2009: 112). The government’s actions stoked fear amongst citizens and legalized discrimination against Arab-/Muslim-Americans (who were viewed homogeneously) and thus encouraged violence and discrimination against Arabs by the American public. Moreover, government policies and security measures were led by stereotypes, rather than concrete knowledge. Arabs and Muslims were stereotyped and placed in a homogeneous category, especially since Arabs and Muslims both, inside America and internationally, criticized American foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> According to Cainkar (2009), by commission and omission, “interested parties”, the mainstream media, and government officials helped to produce a common American understanding that Arabs, and later Muslims, were mostly, and almost innately, about violence and hatred of Americans.

The post-9/11 experience for Arab-/Muslim-Americans reveals a paradoxical period in the history of these communities. Arabness as an essence had been put forth as a collectively shared cultural system that stood in opposition to American values and interests, nearly genetic in its individual insurmountability. They witnessed institutional discrimination, government targeting (especially focused on men), and public attacks (especially on women with hijab, and on Islamic institutions), however, they (Arab-/Muslim-Americans) have also experienced enhanced civil inclusion more than any time in the history of Arabs and Muslims in America. This period required from Islamic institutions and communities to step up and vociferously defend their right to live in America, and therefore they integrated more into American society in order to become more included in the fabric of this society. However, defamatory messages by anti-Arab/Muslim groups are still evident and well equipped and financed and these groups have stepped up their efforts and discourses against Arabs/Muslims in America. The structural barriers which Arabs/Muslims face today, other than race, culture and religion, are tied to domestic and global political interests, and therefore the road ahead won’t be easy.

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<sup>19</sup> The Arab-American community, though popularly homogenised and conflated with Islam in American discourse and media, is a highly diverse community comprising of Muslims and Christians at nearly equal numbers (Salaita 2007).

### 1.3 Theoretical Implications

- 1.3.1 The Ethnic Canon/Emergent Literature

The canonical texts of the Western literary tradition have been defined as a more or less closed set of works that speak to/respond to the human condition and to each other in formal patterns of repetition or revision. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1986) contends that in America:

The question of the place of texts written by the Other (be that odd metaphorical negation of the European defined as African, Arabic, Chinese, Latin American, Yiddish, or female authors) in the proper study of “literature”, “Western literature”, or “comparative literature” has, until recently, remained an unasked question, suspended or silenced by a discourse in which the canonical and noncanonical stand as the ultimate opposition. (2)

Even though this observation is outdated in terms of contemporary literary traditions with the rise of ethnic literatures, feminist literary theories and postcolonial literatures, it is evident that in much of the thinking about the proper study of literature in the past few decades, emergent literature has been an almost invisible quantity, “a persistent yet implicit presence” (ibid.).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1975) define “minor” literature as a “collective” or even “revolutionary” enunciation (17). According to Deleuze and Guattari, a “minor” literature does not come from a minor language, “it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (ibid: 16). For Deleuze and Guattari, a “minor” literature consists of three main characteristics: high deterritorialization of language; political immediacy; and thirdly, collective assemblage.<sup>20</sup> According to this model:

It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margin or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (ibid: 17)

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed analysis of the minority literature model, see Chapter 3: “What is a Minor Literature?” in Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (1975) *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit; trans. by Dana Polan (1986) as *Kafka: toward a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

In line with this speculation, only the possibility of setting up a minor practice within a major language from within can literature really become a “collective machine of expression” (ibid: 19). Arab-American literature fits squarely within Deleuze and Guattari’s model. Read alongside Orientalism, Deleuze and Guattari’s articulation of “minor literature” is a particularly useful lens through which to examine Arab-American poetry. In Deleuze and Guattari’s model of minor literature, “the cramped space [of the writer’s subjectivity] forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (ibid: 17). Arab-American poetry compels a slight reordering, which emphasizes the problematics of reception and the politics of representation “that complicate and often threaten to silence or domesticate Arab American [*sic*] subjectivity” (Metres 2013: par. 8). First and foremost, there is the politicization of all things Arab in America. This politicization is inextricably connected to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and Arab World. Second, Orientalism, or the repertory of ready-made stereotypes of the Arab “Other” “continue to haunt the U.S. imagination of Arabs” (ibid: par. 9).

Arab-American poetry moreover is understood in its American context within the model of the American Ethnic Canon.<sup>21</sup> This model stretches temporally, marked in fictional, textual, and pop culture representations, from the rise of cultural nationalism of the civil rights era to the most recent trend in American studies, the transnational paradigm (Šesnić 2007). According to Šesnić (2007):

Self-conscious interest in ethnicity as a methodological approach to the study of American literature makes its entrance only in the 1970’s [*sic*]; MELUS, the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, was founded in 1973 with the specific goal of integrating so-called “ethnic” works into the literary-historical discourse delimiting American literature. (10)

In line with this observation, the shifting/co-optational terms and conditions of becoming American have changed in the post-1965 American social scape. Ethnic representational mechanisms traversed the ground from “presumed” to “constructed” objects (ibid: 11). In other words, the idea of ethnic/cultural “presencing” or negotiation requires that we examine what new kinds of subjects are involved, and demands that we heed the language in which

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<sup>21</sup> Representative model of the Ethnic American Canon is based on Jelena Šesnić’s study, *From shadow to presence: representations of ethnicity in contemporary American literature* (2007), Vol. 1. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

they articulate their own emergence, “fully cognizant of the fact that these new [or emergent] identities and their representations have set down new terms of discussion within the canon of US literature as well as in American, ethnic [...] studies” (ibid: 20). Šesnić moreover, basis her model on four major socio-historical shifts in the American ethnic canon: cultural nationalism of the 1960s and early 1970s; ethnic feminism of the 1970s and early 1980s; borderlands/contact zones of the 1980s and early 1990s; and the most recent post-national identity paradigm of diasporic writing and transnationalism.<sup>22</sup> Šesnić points out that:

Within each of these matrices of representing, conceptualizing, and showcasing the plurality of ethnic concerns in contemporary US literature and culture, there are fault lines that create and sustain constant interrogations and disruptions as to the viability of a seemingly monolithic and single minded project. (13)

These “fault lines” are read as race, ethnicity/culture, and gender (ibid.). This study situates Arab-American poetry within these specific national and literary “fault lines”. However, rather than locating Arab-American poetry within temporal/historical matrices of ethnic paradigms in America, this study takes into primary consideration the imagological/subjective nuances present within contemporary post-9/11 Arab-American poetry, while placing this poetry within its ethnic American matrix.

- 1.3.2 U.S. Ethnic Poetic Landscapes

The positioning of the study of ethnic literature has become a crucial question today for both American literary studies and for the reading of ethnicity in America (Palumbo-Liu 1995). According to Palumbo-Liu (1995), “once visible as a represented and representative object, [minority discourse] can indeed be stabilized and forced into a particular relationship with the hegemonic” (17). As an idiom – a linguistic code that circulates within the private confines of a community, constructed via an appropriation and reconfiguration of the “grammatically proper” common language – minority discourse functions autonomously from the hegemonic ideology, and can thus comment upon the hegemonic (Palumbo-Liu 1995: 17).

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<sup>22</sup> For a detailed study on transnationalism/post-nationalism in American literature, see also Millner, M. 2005. “Post post-identity”, *American Quarterly* [Online], 57(2).

Moreover, ethnic poetry and ethnic literature in general in America since its inception in the early-20th century through the post-World War II and civil rights eras to the present can be aligned with the political.<sup>23</sup> This is not to claim that mainstream American poetry or the various avant-garde movements are apolitical, but to highlight what Werner Sollors (2002) depicts as the “difficulties ethnic writers faced [that] affected their literary productions in the American landscape” (42). Sollors, commenting on American ethnoautobiographic literature in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claims that:

Legislative changes [during this era] were accompanied by an intense debate about the future of the country and the nature of various ethnic groups. In such contexts, ethnoautobiographic literature was an eminently political genre, as it seemed to provide information for the general reading about the “desirability”, potential “assimilability”, or “compatibility” of whole groups of people. (42)

This shows that while American (i.e. Anglo-Saxon, white) authors who were not “ethnically marked” often lauded a priori individualism, ethnic writers “operated under a system that has been called “compulsive representation”,’ for they were often read as “informants” of their communities (ibid.). The rise of cultural nationalism and the black movement in the 1960s and 1970s further politicized the paradigm of minority self-representation. This hallmark historical era in ethnic writing saw an exchange between the eminently non-aesthetic (i.e. political) and the literary/aesthetic. According to Šesnić (2007):

The appropriation of cultural nationalist signifiers on the part of ethnic writers enables ethnic literatures to do their cultural work, which among other things consists of closing the gap between the literary and the political. (30)

Historically, it was African Americans, classified as a “denigrated group on the basis of some salient factors (“race”, phenotype) that have appropriated this ascribed status [“foreign”, ethnic, racialized masculinity]” (Šesnić 2007: 33).<sup>24</sup> Minority groups have been racially marked by the cultural image of themselves as “forever foreign” (Parikh 2009). According to Parikh, “[t]he nation systematically denies [such groups] the trust, rights, and protection it purports to extend to all its subjects” (16). These minority groups (or communities of colour)

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<sup>23</sup> See Sollors, W. (ed.) 2002. *Ethnic Modernism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>24</sup> According to Šesnić (2007) the legal and political language during the civil rights era “couched” the relation of identity in the space between citizenship and manhood, “silently sidestepping women-as-potential citizens” (33).

have been plagued by images of “alienness, treason, and duplicity” (ibid.). African Americans turned this status into political capital and an aesthetic performativity<sup>25</sup> with the rise of the Black Arts Movement (BAM)<sup>26</sup> and provided a model of cultural revivalism. Black cultural nationalism, mostly projected and practiced in the Black Arts Movement, with leading writers and ideologues like Imamu Amiri Baraka (then, LeRoi Jones), Maulana Ron Karenga, Murray Jackson, and later Gwendolyn Brooks and others, “adopted an eclectic array of African signifiers and symbolism from assuming new names, taking up new rituals [...], donning African styles of apparel, and incorporating African interpretations in artistic forms” (Ho 2006: 149). This model rapidly struck a chord with other national minorities in America.<sup>27</sup>

The growing scholarly interest in the poetry of social and political protest especially that created in the civil rights era “designates an important site of opposition in American poetry between [...] the conception of poetry as an object of aesthetic contemplation and the idea of poetry as a vehicle of social change” (Gwiazda 2004: 462). Blasing (1995) commenting on politics and form in postmodern American poetry points out that:

If poetry has a generic and general political function, it may be to show us *how* it constructs itself as a discourse that in turn constructs a meaningful world, nature, and self. (19; emphasis in original)

Therefore, the function of political poetry is to develop rhetoric as a political, persuasive figuration of a material code into meaning. Poetry, in this sense, is “no more reducible to any given set of formal practices than to meanings” (ibid: 21). Poetic rhetoric, as such, becomes “figuration and persuasion at once” (ibid.). Postmodern, post-9/11 poetry produced in America fits squarely within these discursive political spaces of poetic figuration. The discursive rhetoric of poetic meaning in a contemporary American setting finds its inspiration in the growing influence of Black hip-hop arts movements and performance and the post-9/11 “rhetoric of loss and violation” (DeRosa 2011: 68). In his seminal study, *American political poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, Michael Dowdy (2007) informs us that in the

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<sup>25</sup> On the “signifying” element of Black performance art, see Walker and Kuykendall (2005); Ho (2006); Wheeler (2008); Somers-Willett (2009).

<sup>26</sup> On a detailed study of the Black Arts Movement, see Smethurst, J. E. 2005. *The black arts movement: literary nationalism in the 1960's and 1970's*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>27</sup> National minority groups that joined the black movement during this period include Asian -, Native American, and Latinos. Gendered (male) subjects were cast as more representative in the “economy of national subject formation” during this period (Šesnić 2007: 33).

aftermath of 9/11 and the events that have followed, the role of poets “has rekindled some of the public spirit of 1960’s [*sic*] poets” (8). Dowdy appropriates political poetry’s engagement with the social and political spheres (i.e., poetry as action) to that of the burgeoning influence of African-American hip-hop. Like hip-hop, Dowdy contends, poetry as action can be both creative and referential, calling future action into existence. In this sense, political poems make conceivable in language what is difficult to achieve in the “real” world (ibid.). Moreover, Dowdy posits that:

Contemporary American poetry understood as political by poets, critics, and theorists tends toward consciously issue-engaged, lyric-narrative poetry of personal experience; that is the poem’s political content must be transparent to be designated “political” – some clear issue such as the outrage of war, racism, or oppression must be readily apparent. (11)

The signifying effect of political poetry or agency provides the strategies for engagement. Agency provides a way to generate categories of political poetry through a formulation of the various types of agency (or action) represented in a poet’s strategies, specifically in the poetic voice. Dowdy provides four major types of agency in his model for contemporary political poetry in America: Embodied Agency (both, *experiential* and *authoritative*); Equivocal Agency; Migratory Agency; and Contestatory Urban Agency. He groups poems that utilize personal experience as a poetic strategy under embodied agency. Poems of embodied agency (both, *experiential* and *authoritative*) rely on the speaker-poets’ lived experiences demonstrable through the human body and memory. According to this model, poems of Embodied *experiential* agency often foreground both personal experience and the perception, retelling, and aestheticizing of personal experience, thereby preemptively acknowledging concerns based on past events that are memory-driven (ibid.). Embodied *authoritative* poems have the same function, only “[t]hese poems draw on the Whitmanian tradition in embracing the poet’s assumed cultural role as a people’s representative” (ibid: 26). The speaker-poets of Embodied authoritative agency insist on their role of commanding action and representing the conditions of others (ibid.). Poems of Equivocal agency, on the other hand, are often influenced by surrealism, magic realism, and Native American traditions while maintaining a strategic political engagement, “showing that political poetry need not rely exclusively on referentiality or experience” (27). According to Dowdy, poems of Equivocal agency “suggest that persuasion and the representation of realistic lived experience are unnecessary for political poetry, while their eerie, parodic, and prophetic

voices are able to make more global claims than poems of experience can” (ibid.) Thirdly, poems of Migratory agency make use of the multilingual and multicultural voice “and the ways that it crosses a variety of borders between nations and between cultures” (28). Dowdy asserts that bilingual poems that switch between languages and cultural codes demonstrate the agency of the linguistic and transnational migrant necessary for Migratory agency. Finally, hip-hop and performativity, according to Dowdy, exemplify political poetry of Contestatory Urban agency. Dowdy argues that hip-hop, “especially when performed live at small clubs, has the most political power of any contemporary poetry because it can activate a powerful collective agency and a participatory political experience” (29). These strategies foreground various kinds of poetic agency that have distinct ways of signifying political experiences.

This study places contemporary post-9/11 Arab-American poetic discourse squarely within these formations of politico-poetic agency. Analysis of the ethnic voice within the subjective representations in the works under consideration will allow for the contingencies of identity positions and socio-political concerns relative to this study.

#### 1.4 Arab-American Literary Representations: Critical Overview

- 1.4.1 The *Mahjar* Poets and their legacy

Anglophone Arab literature dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America with the writings of Gibran Khalil Gibran and his contemporaries, which came to be known as the *Mahjar* (Arabic for “place of immigration”) movement.<sup>28</sup> By 1920, the *Mahjar* (Emigrant) poets had begun *Al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyyah* (the Pen League Bond) and the first Arab-American literary/political journal, *The Syrian World*, in New York City. The league included poets and writers such as Nasib Arida, Mikha’il Naimy, Elia Abu Madi, Rashid Ayyub, and Amine Rihani. The Arab World gained fresh recognition after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire post-World War I. In North America, the league of *Mahjar* poets, with Gibran in the lead, initially turned their attention to the homeland, Lebanon.<sup>29</sup> They

<sup>28</sup> According to Layla Al Maleh (2009), the description implied by the term “Anglophone” provides both a “linguistic shelter” and an umbrella of themes and concerns shared by early Arab writers in English. (Preface: x).

<sup>29</sup> As previously mentioned, these writers composed the first wave of Arab immigrants to North America and were made up mainly of Greek Orthodox, Maronite, and Melchite Christians from Mount Lebanon and the surrounding Syrian and Palestinian provinces (a region referred to under the Ottoman Empire as Greater Syria) (Ludescher 2006).

directed their literary and theoretical productions against outworn social customs and religious tyranny, while supporting independence from decadent Ottoman rule. Influenced by European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, they contended for the modernization of Arabic poetry and the total rejection of outmoded literary modes and values back in Lebanon and the wider Arab World (Salem, 2003).

Through their literature, writers of the Pen League Bond, situated in New York, attempted to bridge the “gap” between East and West. They viewed themselves as “the first real cultural mediators” (Al Maleh 2009a: 4). According to Al Maleh (2009a), in America, the *Mahjar* poets found themselves:

in the conciliatory position of being able, through the medium of English, to dispel misgivings about each culture and establish genuine intellectual rapprochement between the two traditions. (4)

The *Mahjar* writers originally used Arabic as a literary medium, but gradually, especially through the works of prominent figures such as Rihani, Gibran and Naimy, turned their attention to an American (Western) audience as well. Amine Rihani produced an English translation of *The quatrains of Abu'l-Ala* (1903); a book of poetry called *Myrtle and myrrh* (1905); a novel, *The book of Khalid* (1911); a book of political essays, *The descent of Bolshevism* (1920); a collection of contemplative essays, *The path of vision* (1921); a collection of mystical poetry in the Sufi tradition titled *A chant of mystics* (1921); and three travelogues in English. Gibran published several spiritual works in English, most notably *The prophet* (1923). Amongst his other Anglophone works are *The madman* (1918); *The forerunner: his parables and poems* (1920); *The earth gods* (1923); and *The wanderer* (1932). Mikhail Naimy wrote one work in English, *The book of Mirdad* (1948) and translated three of his Arabic works to English: *Kahlil Gibran: a biography* (1950); *Memoirs of a vagrant soul* (1952); and a collection of his short stories, *Till we meet* (1957).<sup>30</sup>

These early Arab-American poets were more optimistic in their work, reconciling religions in their country of origin (especially Islam and Christianity), modernizing Arabic poetry based on the European Romantic model, and assuming the role of poet-prophet (in the Romantic sense of the term). Al Maleh (2009a) points out that in the works of the *Mahjar* poets:

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<sup>30</sup> Cited in Ludescher (2006: 96). (Op. cit.).

one cannot fail to detect a note of jubilation, a certain delight in being able to negotiate boundaries beyond the spaces of their birth-place, an in-dwelling contentment quite unlike the expressions of pain and agonizing dislocation that characterize postcolonial hybridity of late. (4)

However, Al Maleh points out that in their quest for a place in mainstream American literary circles, the question asked is whether these writers explicitly ‘orientalised’ themselves, an accusation highly detected by scholars and critics, in order to gain acceptance by casting themselves in the image of charismatic genius and exotic mediators. Gibran’s phenomenal popularity, for example, is in large part based on his aura as spiritual guru or Oriental wise man, “bolstered by his self-styled prophetic posture, his use of biblical idiom, his universalist, didactic and often aphoristic writings, and his paradoxical blend of the Romantic visionary, Nietzschean idealist, Eastern mystic, and Christian evangelist” (Hassan 2009: 65). According to Hassan (2009), the importance of Gibran (and the *Mahjar* group) to the study of Arab-American literature is not in the works themselves but in the conditions of possibility of the “Gibran phenomenon” (67) – its rise, continuing success, and enduring significance for Arab-American literature. Hassan articulates that this “phenomenon is rooted in the contradictions of Arab presence in a country where the popular imagination at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now, remains steeped in Orientalism” (67). According to Hassan, there is no escaping the legacy of Orientalism for an Anglophone Arab minority writer, “the personal is the political and the individual meshes with the collective” (70). Hassan points out that:

Since the minority’s status is ever determined with reference to the identitarian discourse of the majority, the minority writer can either accept the premises of the reigning discourse or mobilize its representations, or s/he can question some or all of those premises and write against the grain. (70)

As a ‘cultural mediator’ Gibran was able to deterritorialize<sup>31</sup> literary Arabic and revolutionize it in the way Deleuze and Guattari (1986) describe when they emphasize that “minor” includes “the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (Deleuze & Guattari cited by Hassan 2009: 69). However, Gibran’s individualistic preaching threatens to weaken a community in dire need of solidarity, especially in its contemporary, post-Gibran location in American mainstream discourse.

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<sup>31</sup> Term based on study by Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1986 ed.), *Kafka: toward a minor literature*, tr. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.

Hassan (2009) argues that the repression of politics and the disavowal of collectivity in the works of the *Mahjar* writers (especially Gibran's) were an "equivocal attempt to transcend the social and political pressures on Arab-Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century" (68). Gibran's cultural negotiations as an 'exotic mystic' placed him and by affiliation, his community, squarely inside the marginalized, perceived public image of the Orientalised other. The *Mahjar* poets' insistence on stressing their "orientalised" disposition in the American landscape deprived Arab-American literary production today the intrinsically developmental, creative, and self-positioning dimensions of processes of subjectification. Therefore, Gibran's 'humanistic' and latently implicit political project (if it could be called so) is flawed "insofar as [it] accepted the dualistic logic of racist discourse, which constructs European identity and its extension in North America in oppositional terms vis-à-vis Africa and the Orient" (Hassan 2009: 84). Gibran and his contemporaries did not write about the Arab (or at the time, 'Syrian') component in them so much as about the global citizen who refused national or ethnic labelling (Al Maleh 2009a). The *Mahjar* poets occupied relatively unproblematic, un-inhibiting spaces within their diasporic location in North America. It was such disavowal of collectivity or subjectification which punctuated the unfolding collective historicity of an Arab-American proclivity that post-Gibran Arab-American writers came to reject. Gibran's ability to transcend his Arab heritage by dissolving his ethnicity into an image much more palatable to an American public further complicated "counterpublic narratives"<sup>32</sup> which later Arab-American writers found necessary as a demonized ethnicity. The links between western, European, Christian identity, "whiteness" and American identity persisted, placing Arab-Americans (especially at times of crisis) outside the socio-political spaces Gibran and his contemporaries wished to evoke, consciously or otherwise, through their literatures. For example, Mattawa and Akash (1999) write in their *Post-Gibran* anthology:

As members of a demonized minority, Arab-American writers in the United States have, of necessity, tended to address communal concerns more than individual ones. We could not write without somehow addressing the influence of [Arab culture] and the subsequent tensions we encounter with the dominant American one. (Introduction: xii)

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<sup>32</sup> "Counterpublic narratives make possible a critique of mainstream values through channels of mainstream discourse" (Muñoz 1999 cited in Hishmeh 2009: 97).

Therefore, Arab-American poets, especially after the 1967 Arab defeat against Israel and the politicization of Arab-American ethnicity in America, needed to negotiate and shift their identities from “Romantic Mystics to Hyphenated Ethnics [*sic*]” (Al Maleh 2009b: 423).

After the death of Gibran in 1931 and the events of two World Wars, Arab-American literature entered a period of complete assimilation and quiescence. As previously mentioned, during this period (roughly, post-Gibran up to the 1960s), strict immigration quotas, absence of ongoing contact with the home culture, and an increased sense of isolation heightened the need for communal unity and solidarity for Arab-Americans and the need to assimilate into mainstream American society (Naff 1998; Suleiman 1999; Ludescher 2006; Majaj 2008; Abdulrahim 2008). The community went so far in the assimilation process despite racial accusations of inferiority that some historians and critics have described them as being in danger of assimilating themselves out of existence (Kadi 1994; Naff 1998; Suleiman 1999; Majaj 1999). The literature of this period reflected the community’s heightened sense of assimilation and urge to belong to a “Christian”, “white” American mainstream society, while at the same time seeking to distance themselves from Islam (Majaj 2000).<sup>33</sup> Arab-American writers of this era tended to stress aspects of their culture that were acceptable to Americans, while downplaying those aspects that Americans might find unfamiliar or alien. Examples of this literary orientation can be found in the works of Lebanese-American Protestant minister Abraham Rihbany and in various Arab-American writings of the time such as in Vance Bourjaily’s *Confessions of a spent youth* (1960), William Peter Blatty’s *Which way to Mecca, Jack?* (1960), and Eugene Paul Nassar’s *Wind of the land: two prose poems* (1979), amongst others (cited in Majaj 2000). For example, Rihbany (1914) writes in his autobiography:

It was in that little town [Elmore, Ohio] that I first heard "America" sung. The line "Land where my fathers died" stuck in my throat. [...]. At last I was led to realize that the fathers of my new and higher self did live and die in America. I was born in Syria as a child, but I was born in America as a man. (285-86)

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<sup>33</sup> Early Arab-American authors emphasized “white”, Christian aspects of their identity in order to gain acceptance in American society, what Arab-American critic, Lisa Suheir Majaj, labeled as “Strategic representation” (2000: 328). Typical examples of such representation are evident in works such as Rihbany’s semi-autobiographical novel, *A far journey* (1914); *The Syrian Christ* (1916); *Militant America and Jesus Christ* (1917); *America save the Near East* (1918); and *Wise men from the East and from the West* (1922).

This illustrates that, like the *Mahjar* writers before them, yet with a less cosmic view of themselves, these writers sought to make the point that ‘Syrian’ immigrants belonged to America and had something of great value to offer to their new country: an ancient spiritual heritage. Evelyn Shakir, a major Arab-American critic of this period, notes that:

The first generation of Arab-American writers [...] dressed carefully for their encounter with the American public, putting on the guise of prophet, preacher, or man of letters. [...]. Their American born children – those who came of age in the 1930’s, 1940’s and 1950’s – costumed themselves as “regular Americans” and hoped to pass, which may be why they produced so little literature. (1997: 6)

This is sufficient evidence that, though scarce, the major Arab-American literary productions (mostly poetry, novels and short autobiographies) at the time stressed the community’s belonging to mainstream society, and the major writers of this period saw themselves as mainstream writers and did not identify as Arab.

After the 1960s, however, things began to change drastically for the community and its literature. Conflicts in the Arab World, the birth of the State of Israel on disputed Palestinian territory, and American foreign policy towards the Middle East combined to raise political consciousness and solidarity within the Arab-American community. Suleiman (1999) points out that:

By 1967, members of the third generation of the early Arab immigrants had started to awaken to their own identity and to see that identity as Arab, [...]. Elements of this third generation combined with politically sophisticated immigrants to work for their ethnic community and the causes of their people in the old homelands. (10-11)

The war became an epiphany for many Arab-American writers, whose works were conspicuously becoming more and more politicized. The image of the Arabs was slowly being distorted and denigrated, their very position in American society coming under suspicion. The result was the establishment of Arab-American literary organisations such as the Radius of Arab American Writers Inc. (RAWI). Moreover, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and the publication of works by other ethnic minorities such as African Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans, and Chicano/a literature, as well as the celebration of a multicultural society in America at the time, opened new spaces for immigrant and ethnic voices more generally (Majaj 2008). Layla Al Maleh (2009a) notes that

Arab-Americans were beginning to develop a kind of ethnicity binding them in the face of external abuse. While they had considered themselves at least potential assimilates, the valency of the hyphen shifted, tilting towards the Arab. “Arab-American writers were displaying solidarity with the community and with the Old Country. The Arab inside them was stirring more and more strongly” (ibid: 435). For example, major Arab-American poets of this period such as Naomi Shehab Nye *Different ways to pray: poems* (1980), Sam Hazo *Dying with the wrong name* (1980), Lawrence Joseph *Shouting at no one: poetry* (1983) and *Curriculum vitae* (1988), Etel Adnan *The Arab apocalypse* (1989), and Elmaz Abi Nader *In the country of my dreams* (1999), amongst others, addressed issues pertaining to their experiences of hybridity and acculturation as Arab-Americans and expressed strong Arab connections.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the generation of writers that was emerging in the decades after the Civil Rights Movement and multiculturalism, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, was clearly more mindful of ethnic labelling than its predecessors. Identifying with an ethnic group and a cultural heritage was no longer shunned but, rather, welcomed and encouraged along the lines of the similarly hyphenated (Al Maleh 2009a). Moreover, writers celebrated their ethnic community and Arab culture and provided incisive self-critique. Deftly avoiding nostalgia, the literature of this period provides a poignant criticism of immigrant experiences while providing negotiations of Arab values between newer generations and older generations of Arab-Americans and offer strong critiques of the Arab World, while providing a space for Arab-American expression within the American literary community. Arab-American writers found that they, too, could contribute to American literary culture, “ending a far from self-imposed invisibility; they even found ‘home’ and acceptance in ethnicity” (Al Maleh 2009a: 24). Arab-American writers were forced to grapple with their identity and with the “write or be written imperative: Define yourself or others will define you” (Majaj 2008: page not given).

- 1.4.2 Post-9/11Context

The attacks of 9/11 horrified America and the wider international community. For the Arab-American community, shock was compounded by the realisation that the attacks would present a major impediment to their hopes of integrating into American/Western society.

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<sup>34</sup> Cited in Ludescher (2006). (Op. cit.).

Arab-Americans became at once visible, needing to defend themselves and seeking to assert an identity and express solidarity more so than ever in America (Al Maleh 2009a). In line with that, Ludescher (2006) notes that one of the most painful issues that confronts Arab-American writers today is how to react to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In an article published shortly after 9/11, editor Elie Chalala expressed the shock and horror that many Arab-American writers and intellectuals felt: “in one fell swoop, the terrorists destroyed the very thing that [Arabs in America] had spent years trying to correct: anti-Arab stereotyping in American society” (2002 cited in Ludescher 2006: 107). However, the negative post-9/11 experiences of Arab-/Muslim-Americans were not a result of the attacks alone. Americans readily accepted anti-Arab allegations on the basis of pre-existing social constructions that were in place well before the attacks.

Moreover, since 9/11 Arab-Americans have evolved into a homogenised (usually conflated with Islam and terrorism) community that “either directly or indirectly affects America’s so-called culture wars, foreign policy, presidential elections and legislative tradition” (Salaita 2007: 110). Salaita points out that:

Although diverse religiously, culturally, geographically, economically, and politically, Arab Americans generally have been homogenised in various American discourses as unstable Southern/Third World, that is, foreign presence. [...]. In turn, most Americans who would consider themselves patriotic formulate the mores of their national self-identification in opposition to the sanctified mirage of Arab barbarity. (110)

This is evidence that the attacks challenged Arab-American identity and constructed a higher wall that separates the American “Self” from the Arab “Other”. This division was enforced by the simplistic view expressed by U.S. foreign policy, where the world is divided into “good” and “evil”, “with us” or “against us”. In the midst of this new schism, Arab-American writers became trapped in an attempt to redefine their identity, and reconstruct a hybridity that seems impossible in a world divided into simplistic binaries of “good” and “evil” (El Said 2003). Many scholars stress that the attacks of 9/11 are in fact a recent installment and turning point rather than a starting point for anti-Arab sentiments in America (Naber 2008; Cainkar 2009; Fadda-Conrey 2011). Transnational crisis and American intervention in the Middle East place this ethnic community in contested spaces in American national discourse.

All ethnic literatures arise from communities that imagine themselves to be distinct in some way. Arab-American poetry (as well as other Arab-American literary and cultural

productions) today grapples with the spaces allotted to the community. Arab-American poetry since 9/11 increasingly seeks to challenge established politico-religious, cultural, gendered and racial boundaries that have re-emerged with increased strength since 9/11. Arab-American writers, in general, strive to assert their identity on their own terms, and grapple more directly with the racialization and politicization of Arab-American experience and to negotiate that identity without apology (Salaita 2011). Arab-American literature thus negotiates antiessentialist spaces whilst asserting its plurality as a diverse and cohesive community within the American multicultural makeup. In line with that, Fadda-Conrey (2011) argues that 9/11 has generated a “formative moment in the production of urgent self-iterations (literary and otherwise) that insist on portraying Arab Americans [*sic*] through an antihomogeneous lens” (534). She points out that a persistent and insidious aspect of the “us/them binary prevalent after 9/11 is an acknowledgment of the porous and fluid nature of transnational identities” (2011: 534), by which the Arab/Muslim Other, as conceived and constructed by so called patriotic agendas, is no longer exclusively located outside the realm of the nation-state. Instead, the difference allocated to a “them”, who are positioned as backward and uncivil Arabs over there in the Arab/Muslim World, is simultaneously inscribed on the racialized bodies of Arab-Americans over here in America (ibid.). Thus, Arab-American writing today negotiates spaces of identity within racialized, politicized, gendered and “demonized” spaces as the “Other”, the un-American, despite the ethnic community’s long history of immigration in America. Much of the Arab-American fiction written after 9/11, despite its discursive insistence on destabilizing homogenized conceptualisations, “still points to the limits of enacting such diverse identities in the context of the Islamophobia and Arabophobia currently sweeping over the country” (Fadda-Conrey 2011: 539). They do so mainly by recognizing the power of alliances that cut across racial, ethnic, religious, and even national boundaries in constructions of solid yet complex types of American citizenships in the aftermath of national trauma instigated by the 9/11 attacks (ibid.). What is clear is the emergence of an ethnic ethos which solicits defending group turf and emerging more adamant about challenging public and political discourse demonizing and “Othering” Arab-Americans within American national paradigms (Al Maleh 2009a). Contemporary Arab-American poets carve new spaces for Arab-American identity, spaces shared with other ethnic groups, choosing colour and celebrating their Arab ethnicity within a multicultural American flavour.

## **Chapter Two: Race and Post-9/11 Arab-American Poetic Identity**

*[O]utside the house my practice  
is not to respond to remarks  
about my nose or the color of my skin.  
"Sand nigger", I'm called,  
and the name fits: I am  
the light-skinned nigger  
with black eyes and the look  
difficult to figure--a look  
of indifference, a look to kill--  
a Levantine nigger.*

- Lawrence Joseph, "Sand Nigger" (1988)

*"We are so racially profiled now, as a group, that I heard a correspondent on CNN not too long ago say the expression, 'Arabs are the new blacks.' That Arabs are the new Blacks."*

- Dean Obeidallah, *Axis of Evil: Comedy Tour* (2009)

Before 9/11, Arab-American scholars and writers used the trope of "invisibility" to refer to the place of their pan-ethnic community within American discourses on race and ethnicity. 9/11 consolidated the racialization of the category "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" as a signifier of non-white Otherness (Salaita 2005; Maira and Shihade 2006; Naber 2008a). The immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon brought about unrelenting, multivalent assaults on the bodies, psyches, and rights of Arab, Muslim, and even South-Asian immigrants as well as American citizens pertaining to these categories. Muneer Ahmad (2011), in his study, "Homeland insecurities: racial violence the day after September 11", contends that:

Restrictions on immigration of young men from Muslim countries, racial profiling and detention of "Muslim-looking" individuals, and an epidemic of hate violence against Arab, Muslim and South Asian communities in the wake of September 11 recall the long history of racialized U.S. immigration and immigrant policy. (338)

This observation is evident in the national security measures undertaken by the U.S. Justice Department during the first months after the attacks. The State security apparatus targeted almost exclusively people from the Middle East and South Asia, and led to the incarceration,

deportation and interrogation of numerous individuals from the above mentioned categories. Arabs and Muslims who are citizens have also been affected, albeit indirectly, by these anti-terrorism measures. Although Arabs and other people from the Middle East are classified racially as white by the U.S. Census and most affirmative action forms, the American government has unofficially constituted them as a distinct racial group by associating Arabs with terrorism and threats to national security (Hassan 2002). This study uses Critical Race Theory<sup>35</sup> in its imagological analysis of racial paradigms evident in the relevant literary texts. Critical Race Theory embraces a movement of left scholars situated in law schools, whose works challenge “the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture” (Crenshaw *et al.* 1995: xiii). The term “race” is used in this study in line with Omi and Winant’s (1994) definition as an “unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (55). Furthermore, race “is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (*ibid.*). The term “racism” is used here broadly to mean an irrational attitude of hostility (i.e. prejudice) directed against racial, ethnic, and national groups or their supposed characteristics, suggesting a denial of human worth as well as human civil rights (Abraham 1994).

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<sup>35</sup> For a detailed introduction on Critical Race Theory in the United States, see Delgado, R. and Stefancic, J. 2001. *Critical race theory: an Introduction*. New York and London: New York University Press.

## 2.1 Race and Arab-American Literature: “Arab” as racialized minority

Arab-American literature both reflects and is situated within a historical context of contested racial, cultural, and political categories (Majaj 2000; Salaita 2001; Shalal-Esa 2003; Ludescher 2006; Hartman 2006; Fadda-Conrey 2007; Al Maleh 2009a). As previously mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, the literary texts produced by Americans of Arab descent from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century make clear the anxieties of early Arab immigrants as they struggled for inclusion as “white” Americans. Aware of their contested racial status in the American context, early Arab-American authors tended to emphasize those aspects of their identities more likely to gain acceptance by white America (Majaj 2000). But while the definition of Arab immigrants as “non-white” in the early period reflected a politics of exclusion, the contemporary location of Americans of Arab descent as a “white” racial category is felt by Arab-Americans to obscure their realities (ibid.). The inadequacy of the category “white” to account for Arab-American experience in light of the political and cultural clashes with American foreign policy in the Middle East as well as issues of representation and inclusion into the mainstream at home in America underlies the growing search among contemporary Arab-American writers for categories of identification able to account for their realities.

In this context, the assimilationist impulse of early Arab writers in America is largely absent in contemporary writing. Contemporary writers challenge the Othering process that the American nation subjects them to, but they are not willing to submerge their identity in order to claim inclusion or American identity. The forces which situate Arab-Americans as anomalies in the American context make it difficult for Arab-American writers to avoid political tension and collective identity. Both, pre- and post-9/11 Arab-American literature confronted a cultural, political, and social context fraught with tension. As part of this literature, poetry produced by Arab-Americans reflected this sensibility. Although Arab-American poetry has been in existence in America for over a century, it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America (Majaj 2008; Al Maleh 2009a). According to poet Angele Ellis, Arab-American poetry today still is a racialized “ethnic” literature, just beginning to emerge from its chrysalis (or *hijab*) to spread its wings for scholars and serious readers and critics, much less for the general reading public

(Appendix A.1: Q1).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, while some point to Gibran and the *Mahjar* poets as the earliest Arab-American writers, Hayan Charara claims:

I don't believe this is quite right, in great part because those writers mostly thought of themselves as Arabs writing in America (some did not write in English, in fact). Whereas Arab American poets and writers think of themselves, primarily, as Arab American (not just Arab) and they practice their writing in English; and, [...], many think of themselves, culturally, socially, politically, artistically, as belonging to an American literary heritage in addition to (if not more so, or even exclusively) an Arab one. All this is to say that, really, Arab American writing is much younger than those who date it back to Gibran et al. [*sic*]. More accurately, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is a better date to look to, and we can see, from then on, a consistent and steady growth of the number of poets (and writers) who identify as Arab American [*sic*] or whose writings associate them with this group. (Appendix A.2: Q7)<sup>37</sup>

The burgeoning of this literary orientation reflects in part the historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression. In a more contemporary context, then, Arab-American poets found themselves engaged with elements of Arab-American identity that have historically been silenced, especially that of race.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Majaj (2008) contends:

After the early tensions around race had subsided, the settled Arab-American community largely attempted to pass for “white”. But in recent decades, with the politicization of Arab identity to the extent that even non-Arabs fall afoul of anti-Arab racism, “passing” has proved impossible. [...]. During crises, Arabs [in the United States] can be reassured we exist as a distinct racial group. (para. 23)

This shows that perceptions of race shape contemporary Arab-American poetry and vice versa, whether directly or indirectly. Realizing that “American” meant Christian, European, western, and white, contemporary Arab-American poets increasingly interrogate and challenge American racial formations. Thus, the poetry of Arab-Americans proclaims a revision of nationalism based on the redefinition of the national/racial/ethnic Self which became necessary for these poets after 9/11. A general need to define boundaries has risen. In line with that, Charara (2008) claims that the idea of a single Arab-American poetry is

<sup>36</sup> See results of Survey (Appendix A.1, p.291).

<sup>37</sup> See results of Survey (Appendix A.2, p.299).

<sup>38</sup> For references to the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century “prerequisite cases” of Arab immigrant identity – see chapter one of thesis for detailed analysis.

exploded through with varied and complicated engagements with language, style, form, meaning, tradition, class, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, history, ideology, and of course the self. According to this postulation, the reconstruction of the image of the community has been a primary objective for contemporary Arab-American writers in general, and poets in specific. Writing as an Arab-American becomes defined as accountability to boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. These authors interrogate the grounds of their cultural location, their relationship to intersecting contexts, and the ways in which the process of transiting boundaries yields possibilities for agency and activism. Moreover, as aforementioned, 9/11 consolidated the racialization of the category “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” as a signifier of non-white Otherness. This has been an on-going issue for Arab-American writers. According to poet Pauline Kaldas, although Arab-Americans are treated as minorities and experience discrimination, they are not legally defined as a minority group within America. People from the Middle East and the Arab World are still classified as white. Arab-American literature constantly highlights that “otherness” as it reveals how Arab-Americans are pushed to the edges of mainstream culture (Appendix A.3: Q6).<sup>39</sup> In this study, Arab-American poetry is situated within shifting and on-going negotiations of racial/ethnic representations within American racial formations.

### *2.1.1 Racial Hetero-images:*

An Arab-American racial formation in a post-9/11 American national context is dealt with by way of critical analysis of representative literary texts (Section 2.3). The authors (i.e. poets) are situated on the intersection of poetical (i.e., formal-literary) and ideological (i.e., historical-theoretical) tensions. The fundamental method applied is that of imagology, specifically designed to address the discursive manifestation of cultural difference and national identification patterns (Leerssen 1997). From an imagological point of view, Leerssen contends that it would be “misleading” to isolate literature, “by virtue of its artistic nature and regulated formal conventions”, from related intellectual and socio-political discourse relevant to the ideological context of the literary sources under study (2). According to Leerssen:

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<sup>39</sup> See results of Survey (Appendix A.3, p.301).

Literary texts float like icebergs in a sea of discourse, are nine-tenths submerged in a larger discursive environment which is chemically (if not physically) identical to their substance, out of which they have crystallized and into which they melt back. (ibid.)

This study places anti-Arab racism within American race relations which are located in “a heterogeneous and multi-temporal complex of [politico-]historical factors” rather than a byproduct of the 9/11 attacks (Salaita 2007: 110). The focus, moreover, is on anti-Arab racism in America from a subjective perspectival context of the representative texts in shaping discussions of Arab-American national belonging and citizenship in post-9/11 America. The ensuing analysis will draw on the dynamics between images from the textual discourse which characterize the Other (hetero-images) and those which characterize one’s own domestic identity (self-images or auto-images). The restricted imagological representations that ensue will be utilized to reach initial theorizations of racial images of the ethnicity (the spected) under study within the larger scope of American racial formations.

Prior to 9/11, in her poetry collection *Born Palestinian, born Black* (1996), Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad breaks new ground by introducing to Arab-American poetic discourse techniques associated with hip-hop, a form of cultural expression rooted in the African-American community. In *Born Palestinian, born Black* Hammad reiterates the marginalization of Arab-Americans and specifically Palestinians by merging Arab-Americans with African-American voices of dissent. Using hip-hop techniques, Hammad creates a simultaneity between past and present, i.e. traces the present condition Palestinians find themselves in to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and to the occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1967 – just like black rappers have traced the precarious position many African Americans find themselves in to the traumatic origin of their community: slavery (Motyl 2013). Other writers also highlight the racialized status of Arab-Americans prior to 9/11. In his poetry and prose, Lebanese-American poet Lawrence Joseph simultaneously claims and critiques Arab identity as he makes clear that the Arab-American experience must be situated within a broader American context of black-white racial tensions (Majaj 2000). As early as 1988, Joseph’s poem “Sand Nigger” from *Curriculum vitae* (quoted as an introductory epithet to the Chapter), for example, probes the racial and cultural boundaries that delineate, situate and inform Arab-American identity discourse within racialized American minority rubrics. Egyptian-American, Pauline Kaldas’ poem “Exotic” (1990), on the other hand, explores the ways in which “[Arab-American] women are excluded from

“white” American identity, yet simultaneously recuperated into its domain through a neocolonial gesture of possession” (Majaj 2000: 331). These textual references evoke the racial classification tensions experienced by Arab-Americans. Arab identity in these cultural productions challenges the boundaries of available “Arab” racial and ethnic classification as “white”, portraying images of an Arab-American identity contained only by exclusion (ibid.).

Contemporary Arab-American writing overcomes the marginality and oppression imposed upon the community by challenging Arab-American racial classification as “whites”, demystifying in the process hetero-images of the Arab “Other” and creating auto-images achieved in forging new representations of Arab-American identity. According to Majaj (2000):

while the definition of individual Arabs as “non-white” in the early period reflected a politics of exclusion, the contemporary location of “Arab” in the square of “white” is felt by many Arab-Americans to obscure Arab-American realities, silencing them through a strategy of containment and rendering them invisible. (331)

While early Arab-American cultural production sought to claim a space within white American culture through strategies of assimilation and strategic deployment of exoticism, contemporary Arab-American writers seek to affirm their identities without minimizing complexity, and to claim a classification adequate to their experience (ibid.).

## **2.2 Cultural Context: Arab-Americans and U.S. Racial Formations<sup>40</sup>**

### **2.2.1 U.S. Racial Formations:**

A brief glance at American history reveals that far from being colour-blind, “the United States has been an extremely “color-conscious” society” (Omi and Winant 1994: 1). According to Omi and Winant, “[f]rom the very inception of the Republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and indeed one’s “identity”” (1). Moreover, a cursory overview of racial

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<sup>40</sup> Title adopted from: Naber, N. 2008a. Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. racial formations *IN*: Jamal, A. and Naber, N. (eds.) *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: from invisible citizens to visible subjects*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

categorization in America shows that white racial identity is commonly portrayed as a default racial category, “an invisible yet privileged identity formed by centuries of oppression of non-white groups” (McDermott and Samson 2005: 245). The first Congress convened under the U.S. Constitution in 1790 required “free white persons” to be eligible to citizenship and naturalization. The imprecision of the term left the courts with impossible problems of interpretation that stretched well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Roediger 2002).

Efforts aimed at racial classification that were based upon scientific racism emerged in America since its inception. During this period, attempts to categorize humans into different schema developed in the context of the rise of European biological, sociological and anthropological forms of classification: late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup>-century European “Enlightenment” concepts of observation, classification, progress, and romanticism; European expansion and colonialism in the Western hemisphere; and the rise of capitalism (Sanjek 1994; Baker 1998; Rodriguez 2000; Naber 2008a). Within this context, race became a central framework for locating immigrants to America along a continuum from black to white and thereby determining the degree to which they deserved or did not deserve citizenship (Ong 2003 cited by Naber 2008a). With the influx of immigrants to the New World in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, anxieties over America’s “foreign element” intensified, and nativists sharpened their rhetoric with demands for restriction on immigration (Gualtieri 2001: 32). By the 1920’s, Naber (2008a) observes, “eugenics consolidated the process by which questions about immigration and citizenship became questions about biology and solidified the notion that real Americans were white and real whites came from northwest Europe” (17). In line with that, Naber (2008a) asserts that:

“race” has operated as an unquestionable facet of virtually all immigrant histories in the United States and that “race” [in the United States] operates according to multiple, shifting logics depending on the context. (20)

It was in this context of heightened nativism and of bureaucratic and legal reform that immigrants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggled to enter into the New World.

Contemporary race theories unanimously assert the fact that race is a social construction and has no validation in human biology or eugenics. Nevertheless, the sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term “race” has both described and inscribed differences between cultural groups. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1986) contends that “[r]ace has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or

adherents of specific belief systems” (5). In America, the upsurge of racially based movements which began in the 1950s and 1960s during the Civil Rights Era was a contest over the social meaning of race. It was this process which created “the great transformation” of racial awareness, racial meaning, and racial subjectivity (Omi and Winant 1994: 96).<sup>41</sup> The racial minority movements of the period were the first new social movements – the first to incorporate the concerns of politics to the social, to the terrain of everyday life. Racial minority movements challenged established racial practices simultaneously through direct action, penetration of the political arena, community organisation, and through political tactics, developing resistance cultures and taking moral initiative (ibid.). According to Omi and Winant (1994), the unifying element in this opposition was at first the burgeoning collective subjectivity of blacks – and later that of other minorities – “which connected demands for access to the state with more radical demands for freedom, “self-determination”, cultural and organizational autonomy, “community control”, and a host of other issues” (106).<sup>42</sup> Three broad political movements can be recognized within the racial minority movements of this era, namely electoral/institutional “entrism”, socialism, and nationalism.<sup>43</sup> Electoral/institutional advocates argued for greater participation in political organizations and processes, such as party politics, local government agencies, and welfare state and poverty programs. A second tendency was the socialist tradition. Marxist/Leninist and internal colonialist perspectives were the main proponents of this current.<sup>44</sup> Advocates of this tradition highlighted the class dimensions of antiracist struggles and “argued that racism is an indispensable support to advanced capitalism” (Omi and Winant 1994: 107). The third movement, nationalism, was manifested in cultural expressions and its main strategic unity lay in rejection of assimilationist and integrationist tendencies. Proponents of cultural nationalism found expression in every minority community. The rise of cultural nationalism at the time was an explicit critique of the dominant Eurocentric (i.e., white) culture, understood to pervade everyday life and “high culture”. Cultural nationalists sought to

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<sup>41</sup> The term is used by Omi and Winant (1994) to indicate the epochal character of the shift to a socially based politics in contemporary America.

<sup>42</sup> The most salient opposition to racial discrimination in America came with the onslaught of the black rights movement in the 1960s. The modern civil rights movement sought to overthrow racial oppression altogether. The “culture resistance” which came out of this movement moved from an emphasis on individual survival against racial oppression to one of collective action (ibid: 100-1).

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Omi and Winant (1994: 107).

<sup>44</sup> The internal colonialism perspective in the U.S. as defined by Omi and Winant achieved great significance in the late 1960s and early 1970s when various writers employed the term to account for the upsurge in racial minority militancy and radical nationalist movements in black, Chicano, Native American, Puerto Rican, and Asian American communities at this time.

redefine and recapture the specificity of their minority cultures, an objective which they identified as “nationalist” (ibid: 109).

In a more contemporary context, racial theory is shaped by existing race relations in any given historical period (ibid.). Omi and Winant argue that:

Within any given historical period, a particular racial theory is dominant – despite often high levels of contestation. The dominant racial theory provides society with “common sense” about race, and with categories for the identification of individuals and groups in racial terms. (11)

Racial paradigms are therefore not constant and are historically shifting. Recent racial theory in America according to Omi and Winant is encompassed by three paradigmatic approaches to race and race relations. These approaches are based on the categories of ethnicity, class, and nation. The paradigms are treated as ideal types. They represent distillations for the purpose of analysis and do not encompass all the racial theories generated on contemporary race discourse in the “racial state”.<sup>45</sup> For the purpose of this study, focus is turned to what Omi and Winant define as “racial formation” (54). According to their definition, “racial formation” is a sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. “Racial formation” in a contemporary American context is determined by historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized, and is linked to the “evolution of hegemony, in the way a society is classified and ruled” (ibid: 55-6). From a “racial formation” perspective then, race is a matter of both social and cultural representation.

### 2.2.2 Race and Arab-Americans:

Nabeel Abraham (1994) argues that in contemporary America, anti-Arab discrimination and hate crimes are rooted in three sources: traditional racism, politically-motivated racism, and jingoistic racism. The first of these, arising when Arabs are ethnically visible, is evident throughout the history of Arabs in America. The second, linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict, is ideologically motivated and targets individuals who support

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<sup>45</sup> According to Omi and Winant “[s]ince the earliest days of colonialism in North America, an identifiable racial order has linked the system of political rule to the racial classification of individuals and groups. The major institutions and social relationships of U.S. society - law, political organization, economic relationships, religion, cultural life [...] - have been structured from the beginning by the racial order” (1994: 79).

Palestinian and other Arab causes. The third arises in the context of international unrest such as hijackings and military conflict, and involves a knee-jerk lashing out at “the enemy” (ibid: 180). Anti-Arab racism in its contemporary American racial formation is perhaps most clearly identified as a political and ideological paradigm entrenched in Middle East politics. Arab-American and ethnic scholars link Arab-American studies to those of empire and imperial power struggles, specifically in relation to International Zionism and the Israeli State (Shain 1996; Maira and Shihade 2006; Salaita 2006; Aboul-Ela 2006). Within this transnational trajectory “[i]mperial power operates by obscuring the links between homeland projects of racial subordination and minority co-optation and overseas strategies of economic restructuring and political domination” (Maira and Shihade 2006: 118). How to intellectually encounter imperial, not just national or ethnic politics, has been the challenge for ethnic scholars in America, which have often remained confined within a national framework. For example, Asian American studies is built on a tradition of anti-imperial critique which grew out of a civil rights and anti-colonial movement in the 1960s and 1970s that attempted to link civil rights struggles against racism locally to overseas conflicts in the “Third World”, particularly, in this case, the Vietnam War (ibid.). In the case of Arab-Americans, Maira and Shihade (2006) point out that:

An analysis of imperial policies needs to connect the American occupation of Iraq and support for client states such as Israel [...] to the repression of civil rights, Palestine justice, and anti-war movements in the United States. (120)

In line with that, the history of Arab-Americans, as a political pan-ethnic entity, illuminates how the domestic profiling and surveillance of Arabs in America that began well before 9/11 has always been linked to American interests in the Middle East and to the American-backed Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. For example, Nadine Naber (2008a) argues that:

Anti-Arab racism represents a recurring process of the construction of the Other within U.S. liberal politics in which long-term trends of racial exclusion become intensified within moments of crisis in the body politic and the aftermath of September 11, 2001. (31)

Therefore, anti-Arab/Arab-American racism emerges in a context of American military, political, cultural and economic expansion in the Middle East and globally. Moreover, anti-Arab media representations and the institutionalization of government policies which specifically target Arabs and Arab-Americans proliferated in America after World War II,

specifically after the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict. American depictions of Arabs and Arab-Americans as “non-white Others” coincided with American imperial expansion after World War II and the era of globalization and neo-imperialist expansion (ibid: 31).

In this context, Arab-American identity might be differentiated historically from other ethnic or “hyphenated” American identities. A dissident relationship to American foreign policy in the Middle East became foundational to the experience of many Arab-Americans and to a potential sense of Arab-American community (Aboul-Ela 2006). Thus, American foreign policy in the Middle East has played the role for Arab-Americans that a long history of concrete and codified legal discrimination has played for other ethnic and diasporic groups in America, mainly, African Americans, Latinos/as, Asian Americans, and Mexican Americans. For a community that has been in America for over a century, having to prove its loyalty time and again is evidence of the shifting nature of racial inclusion within America’s national imagination.

### 2.2.3 The Aftermath of September 11, 2001:

The events of 9/11 had reverberating implications for American race relations, in particular “the relative hierarchy of differing racial and ethnic groups” (Domke *et al.* 2003: 606). The race or ethnicity of the individuals apparently involved in the attacks (Middle Eastern/Muslim) on New York City and Washington, DC, and the subsequent concerns among many Americans of future attacks spurred public discussion about the concept of “racial profiling” and “perhaps permanently altered the societal conversation about this practice to include both alleged policing actions and terrorism concerns” (ibid.).<sup>46</sup> Domke *et al.*’s (2003) study on racial profiling in several American news outlets for the five months prior to September 11 and for the five months afterward highlights two main points of concern here, pertinent for the understanding of both, American racial formations (pre- and post-9/11) and the position of the Arab-American community within these formations. According to Domke *et al.*:

1. the press’s selection and framing of language, news, opinion, and perceptions convey and abet a social reality that legitimates the practices and ideas of the dominant social class, in this case the White majority. (608)

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<sup>46</sup> “Racial profiling” is used in this study to mean the use of race or ethnicity as a factor in demarcating people for differential treatment or close scrutiny (Domke *et al.* 2003: 606).

And, according to this view:

2. certain racial ideologies embedded in media representations, descriptions, explanations, and frames are presented as common sense; that is, they are unchallenged, appearing as natural or “grounded in everyday reality,” thereby encouraging their acceptance by audience members. (608)<sup>47</sup>

In particular, news coverage is thought to be instrumental in the construction and reinforcement of a racial hierarchy in American society by arranging racial and ethnic groups in terms of their value, their attractiveness, the legitimacy of their claims, and other attributes (Gandy 1998 cited by Domke *et al.* 2003).<sup>48</sup> These claims resonate in the context of contemporary (post-9/11) American debates about terrorism, race and ethnicity, and governmental authority. Arabs and Muslims who, in reality, are two overlapping categories have entered the American imagination with full force after 9/11 as a homogenised and racialized community (Salaita 2006; Cainkar 2009; Bayoumi 2010). Such representations depict “all Arabs in the US (whether they are recent immigrants, second-, third-, or fourth-generation Arab Americans [*sic*], residents, or students and regardless of their varying political and religious beliefs) as the enemy or at least as a potential enemy” (Fadda-Conrey 2014: 149). For example, in his review of race and representation in contemporary American popular culture, Bayoumi (2010) posits that “in the domestic arrangement of race and difference, Arabs and Muslims in the United States have been pushed from the shadows into the spotlight” (11), and the associations they carry can be patrolled with profiling.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, post-9/11 hate violence and governmental profiling regimes have helped to create a new racial construct of “Muslim-looking” people (Ahmad 2004: 1261).<sup>50</sup> The physical violence exercised upon the bodies of Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians has been accompanied by a legal and political violence toward these communities.<sup>51</sup> According to Ahmad, in the first two years after 9/11, the American government had developed a corpus of immigration law and law enforcement policy “that by design or effect applies almost

<sup>47</sup> Meyers (1994: 48) cited by Domke *et al.* (2003: 608).

<sup>48</sup> On this point, see also Hall (1982) and Entman & Rojecki (2000).

<sup>49</sup> Bayoumi (2010) focuses his review on two contemporary popular blockbusters, pre-9/11, *The siege* (1998); and post-9/11, *The kingdom* (2007).

<sup>50</sup> On detailed discussions of U.S. government racial profiling regimes in a post-9/11 context, see Hassan (2002); Naber (2002); Salaita (2005); Cainkar (2009); Ahmad (2004 and 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Because this new racial construct is informed by various characteristics, both real and perceived, such as religious, ideological and phenotypic appearance (i.e., name, national origin, dress, language, and skin colour), it encompasses a broad range of racial and ethnic groups and communities. See Ahmad (2004).

exclusively to Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians” (1262). These laws operate in tandem with the individual acts of violence that have been carried out against these communities, thereby aiding and abetting hate violence (ibid.). In addition, aberrant physical and verbal abuse directed at Arabs/Muslims should not be understood as a passing, or past phenomenon. Such an assumption ignores the steady stream of violence directed against these communities long after 9/11. Ahmad argues that “events such as these suggest that, rather than an isolated phenomenon, the racialization of Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians after September 11 is ongoing” (1263). The very persistence of this violence suggests that underlying biases toward “Muslim-looking” people have been normalized. Mahmood Mamdani (2004) reiterates the significance of this racial formation in his study *Good Muslim, bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the roots of terror*. According to Mamdani (2004), after 9/11, President Bush moved to distinguish between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims” (15). From this point of view, “bad Muslims” were clearly responsible for terrorism, while “good Muslims” were struggling to clear their names and “consciousness” of this horrible crime “and would undoubtedly support “us” in a war against “them”” (ibid.). Mamdani places this assertion by the President and the discourse on political Islam after 9/11 within a Cold War context. According to Mamdani:

This moment in history after the Cold War is referred to as the era of globalization and is marked by the ascendancy and rapid politicization of a single term: culture. [...]. Culture Talk [*sic*] after 9/11, [...], qualified and explained the practice of “terrorism” as “Islamic”. “Islamic terrorism” is thus offered as both a description and explanation of the events of 9/11. (17-18)

The central message of such discourse puts all Muslims in a post-9/11 American national context under the obligation to prove their credentials by joining in a war against “bad Muslims”. The contemporary convergence of these narratives – exclusion and racial profiling – highlights the extent to which immigration, naturalization, and citizenship in the post-9/11 national landscape have become bound within a “framework of subordination”.<sup>52</sup> As such, the recent phenomenon of hate violence and racial profiling aimed at Arabs and Muslims is situated within the multiple histories of racial oppression in America.

Moreover, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks consolidated the conflation of the categories “Arab”, “Middle Eastern”, and “Muslim” and brought these conflated categories

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<sup>52</sup> Ahmad (2011: 338).

into the spotlight. Nadine Naber (2008a) observes that Right-wing, neoconservative think tanks coupled with American government policy makers “have covered up historical and political realities such as the United States’ imperial ambitions in the Middle East by constructing the “war on terror” as a “clash of civilizations”” (38). According to such discourse, as Americans, “Good Arabs/Muslims” are constructed to be on the side of good and persons perceived to be “Bad Arabs/Muslims” are comprehended to be on the side of evil. Naber (2008a) reminds us that, although the Bush administration has lost much of its credibility in the context of the disastrous wars in the Middle East under the setting of “war on terror”, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim racism and acts of violence continue to expand. Moreover, shifting racial formations in this context, apparent in post-9/11 government policies, media outlets, and pop culture representations, have redistributed American racial hierarchies from black/white divisions to those of “good” versus “evil”.

## 2.3 From invisibility to darkness: Marginalization as presence<sup>53</sup>

### 2.3.1 Suheir Hammad: *first writing since*

Performance poet, Suheir Hammad’s piece “first writing since”<sup>54</sup> from her collection *ZaatarDiva* (2005)<sup>55</sup>, written shortly after the events of 9/11, won her popular acclaim on the hip-hop/spoken word poetry scene in Russell Simmons’s *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*<sup>56</sup>. The daughter of 1948 Palestinians, Hammad was born in a refugee camp in Amman, Jordan in 1973. Her family moved to Beirut before settling in Brooklyn, New York in 1978. Hammad’s upbringing on the rhythms of Qur’anic poetry at home and Arabic songs from Abdel Halim Hafez to Oum Kalthoum<sup>57</sup> and Black cultural and socio-political music in her

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<sup>53</sup> Imagological analysis of primary material.

<sup>54</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.1.

<sup>55</sup> Suheir Hammad is also the author of several works of performance/political poetry selections in *Drops of this story* (1996); *Born Palestinian, born Black* (1996); and *Breaking poems* (2008). Focus here is on her post-9/11-related work, “first writing since”, from *ZaatarDiva* (2005: 98-102).

<sup>56</sup> *Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry* (2005) has been aired on HBO numerous since its inception. Produced by Russell Simmons and Stan Lathan *Def Poetry* (2005) continues to present both established and emerging spoken word poets to a wide television audience across the United States. Cited in *Russell Simmons biography* [Online]. Available from <http://www.biography.com/people/russell-simmons-307186>.

<sup>57</sup> Abdel Halim Hafez (1929-1977) and Oum Kalthoum (circa 1904-1975) were Egyptian singers whose music, characterized by romance, patriotic passion and Arab Nationalism, inspired a whole generation of listeners in the Arab world. Cited in Danielson, L. (1991).

immediate Brooklyn neighbourhood from hip-hop, r&b, and rap to Sam Cooke shaped her aesthetics and inspired her poetic voice (Knopf-Newman 2005).

Hammad's voice and rhetorical strategies in "first writing since" (2005) encompass "the sounding spaces of opposition" (Baker 1993: 96)<sup>58</sup> evident in African-American hip-hop, especially through her articulation of imaginary visions of racial injustice which permeate mainstream post-9/11 anti-Arab discourses. She does so through what Dowdy (2007) emphasizes as the "necessary conditions" for hip-hop's contestatory urban agency, namely, call for action, vigilance, protest, and a contestatory agency within the constraining contexts of racism, economic, and power inequalities (158). In order to fully grasp Hammad's contestatory urban poignancy, a brief theoretical overview of the contemporary spoken word/performance poetry "Slam" scene in America must be provided. Slam poetry, initially launched in the late 1980s by Marc Smith, a white Chicago construction worker turned poet, quickly gained loyal followings across the nation (Somers-Willett 2009). Slam poetry venues are composed of performance poetry within a competitive format. Slam poets perform in the presence of judges from the audience. In national team competitions, scores are decided in bouts where teams of poets are pitted against each other tournament style via a random draw (Somers-Willett 2009). Poems performed at the bout are scored by five members of the audience, and scores range from 0.0 to 10.0. Judges are selected by the slam host or event staff from audience volunteers (*ibid.*). In 1990, the first National Poetry Slam (NPS) was created from poets across America. Today, the National Poetry Slam (NPS) hosts international competitions and a Poetry Slam, Incorporated (PSI) staff has been formed to oversee the competitions and enforce the rules. A "revolutionary" movement in poetic performance, poetry slams' strictly non-academic venues "fostered a countercultural atmosphere" and adopted an "open-door policy" where anyone can sign up to perform and anyone in the audience is qualified to judge (Somers-Willett 2009: 5).

More relevantly, performance poetry is immersed in Black hip-hop and rap music culture. Commenting on slam poetry venues, Somers-Willett contends that contemporary American performance poetry uses the "cultural rubrics of race and identity" to gain authenticity and repertoire with the audience (10). Somers-Willett points out that:

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<sup>58</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr. (1993) argues in Black studies, rap, and academy that performance poetry, like rap, is intended to be "disruptive performance [...] as an audible or sounding space of opposition" (96).

The popularity of hip-hop music and culture has helped funnel poets and audiences into the slam, and this may be one reason why African American identity is so often articulated and rewarded on the national slam scene. (12)

The reception of African-American slam poets and the ideas of “blackness” and “authenticity” that circulate in performance poetry reflect the growing attention that marginalized identity in general and racial difference in particular are given in slam circles. According to Somers-Willett, “[a]lthough slam poetry is open to and includes people of all cultural orientations and persuasions, the focus is often on poets of color, working-class poets, women, and other culturally marginalized groups” (11). African-American hip-hop is an important influence on the performance poetry scene, especially as the two “intersect with African-American cultural production and address a call to “realness”” (ibid: 12). Hip-hop’s contestatory urban agency is derived from its rhetorical strategies. According to Dowdy (2007), “the tension between acting according to one’s purpose and negotiating the constraints of racism and socioeconomic inequality frames many conceptions of agency in hip-hop” (155). Moreover, African-American orality designated by *Nommo*, “the generative power of the word” is a significant aspect of agency in performance poetry and hip-hop (Walker and Kuykendall 2005: 229). *Nommo* is uniquely manifested in African-American communication patterns and includes rhythm, “soundin’ out”, repetition, “stylin”, lyrical quality, historical perspective, indirection, call and response, protests against the White establishment, and mythication (Cummings and Roy 2002 cited by Walker and Kuykendall 2005: 230). In its temporal locus, hip-hop is wedded to Black nationalism and cultural politics. The hip-hop “nation” promoted a “myth of action” whereby Black socio-political responsibility, knowledge, culture, and activity was “garnered by proclamation and not by demonstration” (Henderson 1996: 308). The signifying aspect of hip-hop and performance poetry is thus a call to future action and people-oriented politics.

Hammad’s vibrant contestatory urban agency in “first writing since” articulates Arab-American identity within the marginal spaces of minority discourse articulated via rubrics of race and identity reflected through performance poetry. The poem, composed of seven parts (numbered, 1-7) and written to be performed on stage, opens with a solemn tone, ominously situating the speaker-poet in a grim post-9/11 urban setting:

1. there have been no words.  
i have not written one word.  
no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.

no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.  
not one word.

today is a week, and seven is of heavens, gods, science.  
evident out of my kitchen window is an abstract reality.  
sky where once was steel.  
smoke where once was flesh. (“first writing since”: 98)

These opening stanzas articulate political agency, situating the poem outside of language within the scope of action. “Words”, the speaker-poet seems to hint, are no longer sufficient or capable of vividly expressing the burden of the situation, an “abstract reality” evidently immersed in violence and discrimination. Later on, in stanza 3 of part 1, the situation is personalized suggesting a shift from the general “American” to the private “ethnic” space: “fire in the city air and i feared for my sister’s life in a way never / before. and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us” (“first writing since”: 98). The personal pronoun “us” separates those whom the speaker-poet “fear[s] for” from the rest of society. The significance of the personal pronoun “us” becomes clearer in the ensuing stanzas from part 1. Directly alluding to the events of the 9/11 attacks, the speaker-poet points out an ethnic, specifically Middle Eastern, racial category through the use of phenotypical and national signifiers:

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot’s heart failed,  
the plane’s engine died.  
then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.  
please god, after the second plane, please, don’t let it be anyone  
who looks like my brothers.

And,

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill.  
i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger  
i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen.  
not really.  
even as a woman, as a palestinian, as a broken human being.  
never this broken. (“first writing since”: 98)

Here, two images are juxtaposed. The first image is that of those who “look” like the speaker-poet’s brothers and the sister, whose life the speaker-poet fears for. This image is a clear evocation of Arab/Middle Eastern ethnicity based on national (Palestine) and phenotypical features (family, looks). This auto-image diversifies the narrative of fear propagated by the attacks extending it to Americans of Arab descent whom the speaker-poet identifies with, and separates the speaker-poet and the community she represents from the

acts of non-representative individuals responsible for such horrific actions. The second image which the speaker-poet adopts into the category, “us”, is that of the culturally marginalized, women and the “broken”, thus aligning herself and her ethnicity within rubrics of subjugation. The auto-image, the “us”, is clearly drawn out in the aforementioned opening stanzas of part 1, setting “us” against them. The speaker-poet fears for the “us” connoting that “they” are the ones in control, perhaps the power brokers, the majority. The speaker-poet identifies with a marginalized ethnic auto-image, setting that image within a contested/ambiguous location designated by fear, perhaps of the racialized image of the Arab “Other” readily used by mainstream American society. Moreover, the signifiers, “woman”, “Palestinian”, and “broken human being” highlight the material actuality of subordination within an American national culture historically embodied in the particulars of a hegemonic white, European morphology. The speaker-poet from the beginning aligns herself and those she represents within the socio-political conditions by which minority subjects come into being in an American national landscape and with the possibilities for agency and transformation available to the minority subject (in this case Arabs, women, the poor) once it has come into being. This is further elaborated in the last stanza of part 1 in the poem:

more than ever, i believe there is no difference.  
 the most privileged nation, most americans do not know  
 the difference between indians, afghanis, syrians, muslims, sikhs, hindus.  
 more than ever, there is no difference. (“first writing since”: 98)

The speaker-poet’s “fears” are clearly elucidated in the above lines. The conflation of different national/religious groups into one category foregrounds racialized national attitudes that conflate disparate identities within the rubric of non-white Other. The images alluded to here reinvigorate the immediate public backlashes following the attacks as well as government tactics (i.e., incarceration and surveillance) and racial profiling of “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” looking people, placing this category in a distinct racial formation; that of the minority subject, the “enemy within”. The racialized auto-image constructed in Hammad’s opening stanzas designates Arab ethnicity within racialized categories. This binary logic accentuates the racial hierarchies underlying the American national order and creates cross-ethnic reference to the histories of other racialized minority groups in America, specifically non-white immigrant groups that have been historically excluded on the basis of race. By so doing, Hammad situates Arab alterity and alienation within the confines of hegemonic conceptualisations of American citizenship and belonging, distancing herself and

her ethnic community from a mainstream American mindset steeped in suspicion and xenophobia. A mindset that uses religious and racial markers as yardsticks for determining the “American” from the “un-American”. Hammad constructs an imagined identity in opposition to the coercive white hegemony that forms American citizenship and national belonging. She assertively appropriates anti-Arab racism in America to the reality of other non-white groups that have been similarly subjugated by an American racial hierarchy.

Next, engaging her audience with rhythmic cadence and political currency specific to spoken word performance, Hammad points out the fact that Arabs/Muslims in America are also American citizens who paid with their lives as a consequence of the attacks. This is elucidated in the following stanzas in part 3 of the poem:

3. the dead are called lost and their families hold up shaky  
printouts in front of us through screens smoked up.  
we are looking for iris, mother of three. please call with any  
information. we are searching for priti, last seen on the 103<sup>rd</sup>  
floor. she was talking to her husband on the phone and the line  
went. please help us find george, also known as adel. his family is  
waiting for him with his favorite meal. i am looking for my son, who  
was delivering coffee. i am looking for my sister girl,  
she started her job on monday. (“first writing since”: 99)

Hammad identifies with the loss of lives and the tragic outcomes of the attacks by situating Arab identity within the immediate outcomes of the tragedy. Using indirection, she conflates the personal identifiers of American “self” and Arab “other” in an attempt to erase the spaces in between these categories in an effort to assert Arab-American inclusion. George, “also known as [A]del”, a widely used Arabic name, signifies the integration of Arabs in American society ever since the first immigrants landed on Ellis Island at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and replaced their Arab names with Anglo-American ones. The third person pronoun, “us”, is obfuscated, demarcating Arab-American inclusion within the confines of the nation, blurring the divisive rhetoric which sets “us” against “them”. Further on, Hammad assumes the position of spokesperson of the community. She aligns herself, and by extrapolation, her ethnic belonging, within an American sensibility that rejects the aggression of the perpetrators and affirms life:

i am looking for peace. i am looking for mercy. i am looking for  
evidence of compassion. any evidence of life. i am looking for life.  
 (“first writing since”: 99)

In these lines, the speaker-poet clearly affirms her position. As an American of Arab descent, she too rejects the atrocities committed against innocent civilians and the American nation. She too belongs to the rhetoric (international and national) which rejects violence.

However, the next stanzas from part 4 of the poem complicate this position, situating the discourse of identity construction in what Crystal Parikh in *An ethics of betrayal: the politics of otherness in emergent U.S. literatures and culture* (2009) identifies as “an ethics of betrayal” manifest in minority discourse. Hammad continues:

4. ricardo on the radio said in his accent thick as yuca, “i will feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there. and my friends feel the same way.”  
on my block, a woman was crying in a car parked and stranded in hurt.  
i offered comfort, extended a hand and she did not see before she said,  
“we’re gonna burn them so bad, i swear, so bad.” my hand went to my head and my head went to the numbers within it of the dead iraqi children, the dead in nicaragua. the dead in rwanda who had to vie with fake sport wrestling for america’s attention.

yet when people sent emails saying, this was bound to happen, lets not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second i felt resentful.  
hold up with that, cause i live here, these are my friends and fam,  
and it could have been me in those buildings, and we’re not bad people, do not support america’s bullying.  
can i just have a half second to feel bad?

if i can find through this exhaust people who were left behind to mourn and to resist mass murder, i might be alright. (“first writing since”: 99-100)

Reinforcing Arab-American inclusion, Hammad’s speaker-poet refutes assimilatory discourse which Parikh (2009) identifies as a discourse which betrays self and others in an attempt to assimilate to the nation. “[R]icardo”, whose accent is “thick as yuca” personifies an ethnic signifier, perhaps South American. Ricardo’s public announcement encouraging violence “over there” (perhaps in the Arab World?) as an immediate backlash to the attacks manifests what Parikh identifies as “assimilatory betrayals” embedded in model minority discourse (22). Investigating the structures of knowledge and feeling upon which ethnic assimilation in the American context is constructed, Parikh defines “betrayals” as manifest “performances of certain kinds of difference attributed to an alien, unidentified and perpetual Other” (11). Within such formations, the racialized subject is engaged in politics which “blame the victim” in order to belong (ibid: 13). Racialization, embedded within such

politics, thus inherently questions the national allegiances of “alien citizens”, rendering them always as potential threats and “traitors who must prove their loyalty to the U.S. by being assimilated to the nation” (ibid.). Ricardo affirms his belonging to the nation by announcing his allegiance to a rhetoric which instigates violence against the Other, thus proving his allegiance to the American Self. Ricardo assumes a “model minority” (Cheng 2001) position of one who has not only assimilated but also euphorically sings the praises of the American way. The “model minority” position and ethnic assimilation in America (ibid.) will be developed and discussed further in Laila Halaby’s “the journey”, in this chapter. Such discourse of American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism and inclusion force a misremembering of a history of American institutionalized exclusions. Such discourse erases repressed histories and identities in America (Eng and Han 2003). Hammad refutes this kind of assimilatory, if not apologetic, position by pointing out that her loyalty to the nation lies in refusing violence and mass murder, regardless of its source. She aligns herself both with the innocent victims of international American transgressions (the children of Iraq, the dead in Rwanda and Nicaragua) as well as a minority coalition pitted against racialized mainstream subjection towards various minority groups in America. The speaker-poet readily constructs an auto-image whereby marginalized subjectivities in the American national landscape, the “us”, are pitted against both the dominant White discourse and the terrorist Other, while at the same time, distancing herself from state-backed aggression and discourses that legitimate retaliation.

This stance is further elucidated in the final stanza from part 4 of the poem:

thank you to the woman who saw me brinking my cool and blinking back  
tears. She opened her arms before she asked “do you want a hug?” a  
big white woman, and her embrace was the kind only people with the  
warmth of flesh can offer. i wasn’t about to say no to any comfort.  
“my brother’s in the navy,” i said, “and we are arabs”.  
“wow, you got double trouble.” word. (“first writing since”: 100)

The image of the “big white woman” whose “embrace was the kind only people with the warmth of flesh can offer”, accentuates American racial formations within the white/black colour line. Hammad’s speaker-poet is engaged in what Omi and Winant (1994) define as “war of maneuver” within structures of racial formation whereby subordinate groups seek to preserve and extend a definite territory, to ward off violent assault, and to develop an internal society as an alternative to the repressive social system they confront. The image of “whiteness” directly alluded to here calls forth vigilance to the subtle racial undertones that

pervade American national structures within the confines of American racial formations. Arab-Americans became “visible” subjects after 9/11 through a process of “racial exclusion”. Racial exclusion in America is not exclusive to an Arab-American experience as a minority group, but should rather be understood within the context of national histories of immigrant exclusion (e.g., the history of Asian exclusion, anti-Mexican racism, and Japanese internment, for example) in which the racialization of particular immigrants as different than and inferior to whites has relied upon culturalist and nationalist logics that assume that “they” are intrinsically unassimilable and threatening to national security. By stressing that her brother is both in the navy and is Arab (“double trouble”), Hammad contests essentialist/racist representations of the Arab/Muslim Other. By mobilising the image of the patriotic-Muslim brother who serves in the American navy, Hammad constructs alternative spaces of inclusion, spaces that incorporate both, Arab ethnicity and Islam, into the nation and distances these categories from accusations of Otherness. She destabilizes the “us/them” binary defining limited forms of national belonging, while at the same time refuting pervasive post-9/11 stereotypical representations of Arab alterity. She stresses the potency of the “word” in speaking truth to power, in dismissing mainstream discourse which demonizes and totalizes Arab ethnicity and renders it alien to national belonging. “[W]ord” here signifies the generative power of the word which Hammad constructs within her poetic discourse, one which refutes exclusion and the racial undertones that foster it, while pronouncing dissent in the face of domicile citizenship dictated by assimilative American racial politics. Moreover, the colloquial expression “word”, which basically means “truth”, or “to speak the truth” (Urban Dictionary 2003), connotes Hammad’s use of “hip slang” (Adams 2009) in her appropriation of Black aesthetics, precisely hip-hop.

This stance is further elucidated in part 5 of the poem. With heightened tone and charged language, substantial to hip-hop’s spoken potency and ethics of resistance, Hammad continues:

5. one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.  
 one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.  
 one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed.  
 one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people.  
 or that a people represent an evil.  
 or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page.

we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma.  
 america did not give out his family’s addresses or where he went to  
 church. or blame the bible or pat robertson.

and when the networks air footage of palestinians dancing in the street, there is no apology that hungry children are bribed with sweets that turn their teeth brown. that correspondents edit images. that archives are there to facilitate lazy and inaccurate journalism.

and when we talk about holy books and hooded men and death, why do we never mention the kkk?

if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip. (100)

What these lines suggest is that by essentializing all Arabs as “evil”, major post-9/11 mainstream media, public, and government discourses are engaging in a “racist project”. One that essentializes and demonizes a whole people based on a specific event: here, the attacks of 9/11. Through her references to Timothy McVeigh, Pat Robertson and the KKK, Hammad explicitly conjures various facets of historically grounded structures of white (i.e. dominant) racial ideologies which pervade American society and which presume in the present, though in a more subtle nuanced manner. In other words, Hammad constructs an auto-image of Arab-American ethnicity in contrast to racist notions of the Other. Notions of exclusion rooted in historical ethnic-mainstream conflict perpetuated by Euro-American White patrimony spurred by colonialism, capitalism, and exceptionalism. In the case of Arabs/Arab-Americans, such dehumanizing enterprises are evident in neo-colonial discourses initiated by American foreign interest in resources from the Middle East as well as American support for Israel’s presence in Palestine. Vilifying Arabs, according to this discourse, facilitates American military intervention in the region and justifies Israeli violence in Palestine. Removing the distinction between “Arabs” and “terrorism” is central to this philosophy of American foreign policy in the Middle East. By instigating America’s racial history, Hammad aligns Arab-American ethnicity with other minority/immigrant groups who have been historically racially subjugated and excluded from the confines of national belonging. She deconstructs post-9/11 mainstream discourse which vilifies Arabs as the “evil” Other, detriment to American democratic ideals. By constructing a common denominator between the suffering in Palestine, specifically the West Bank and Gaza strip, and the suffering in New York, Hammad highlights anti-Arab propaganda initiated by pro-Israeli/neo-imperialist politics in America. Because Israel is a staunch ally of the United

States and is the subject of much media coverage, Palestinians are represented overwhelmingly in American media. These representations, which often marginalize Palestinians by privileging Israeli narratives of suffering and American-style pioneering, produce a rhetorical framework in which anti-Arab racism flourishes.

Moreover, racial discrimination and American foreign interventions are the “terrain of relation” through which Hammad builds coalition with other minority groups, especially African Americans, and inscribes an Arab-American auto-image within the confines of American racial hierarchies.<sup>59</sup> She does so primarily through the invocation of white supremacy ordeals which historically originated against blacks in America. By so doing, Hammad deftly engages the aesthetics of hip-hop performance poetry and “blackness” to register affective, material and geo-political linkages between Brooklyn and Palestine, between the racialization of “blackness” and the facts and fates of Arab-Americans. As such, the juxtaposition of Gaza and Brooklyn solidifies coalition building and animates a submerged relation to hegemonic conceptions of citizenship and belonging through transnational modes of identification. Thus, so far, by refuting the “model minority” assimilatory position, and by contrapuntally appropriating the suffering in countries that have historically witnessed American neo-imperial transgressions (Iraq, Rwanda, Nicaragua) to the suffering of Americans in the midst of 9/11, Hammad forges alliances with people of colour minorities and constructs an Arab-American identity within contestatory, counter-hegemonic spaces. She does so by centralizing racial justice as a basis for mobilizing minority constituents against the war on terror on third world nations and communities of colour at home.<sup>60</sup> Hammad thus constructs an authentic American identity based on the appropriation of minority coalitions.

This stance is developed even further in the following stanzas from part 6 of the poem:

6. today it is ten days. last night bush waged war on a man once  
openly funded by the cia. i do not know who is responsible. read too many  
books, know too many people to believe what i am told. i don't give a fuck  
about bin laden. his vision of the world does not include me or those  
i love. and petitions have been going around for years trying to get  
the u.s. sponsored taliban out of power. shit is complicated,

<sup>59</sup> In his study, “Contrapuntalism and rupture”, Feldman (2011) defines terrain of relation as the relational Afro-Arab poetics which link the United States and the Middle East through politico-racial historiographies.

<sup>60</sup> For a detailed analysis of coalitions led by people of colour minorities in America post-9/11, see Naber (2002), “So our history doesn't become your future”. *Journal of Asian American Studies* [Online], 5(3).

and i don't know what to think.

but i know for sure who will pay.

in the world, it will be women, mostly colored and poor. women will  
 have to bury children, and support themselves through grief.  
 "either you are with us, or with the terrorists"  
 meaning keep your people under control and your resistance censored.  
 meaning we got the loot  
 and the nukes.

in america, it will be those amongst us who refuse blanket attacks  
 on the shivering. those of us who work toward social justice, in  
 support of civil liberties, in opposition to hateful foreign policies.

i have never felt less american and more new yorker – particularly  
 brooklyn, than these past days. the stars and stripes on all these  
 cars and apartment windows represent the dead as citizens first,  
 not family members, not lovers.

i feel like my skin is real thin, and that my eyes are only going to  
 get darker. the future holds little light.

[...]

over there is over here. ("first writing since": 101-102)

The speaker-poet clearly announces American-backed terrorism in an attempt to distance herself and her community from allegiance to Bin Laden's terrorist agenda and the stereotypical depictions that appropriate Arabs/Muslims to Islamic fundamentalism. She reminds the audience of American foreign meddling in international politics and the formation of CIA-backed *Mujahidin* camps in Afghanistan during the Cold War years in the 1980s (Centre for Research on Globalization 2012). Moreover, she draws clear political connections and creates modes of identification rooted in transnational identifications: "over there is over here". Because identity is an effect of performance in the world, just as it is in a poetry slam, what is authentic about identity is the repetition and reception of certain behaviours and characteristics over time. That is, what is often deemed authentic by an audience is actually a norm of tried identity behaviour (Somers-Willet 2009). By reconceptualising Bush's post-9/11 "War against Terror" within the spaces of historical American political transgression abroad, Hammad performs an identity based on an authentic minority coalition against America's "hateful foreign policies". This calls to mind the politics of the 1960s Civil Rights Era. The transnational norm of identification alluded to here relegates the background conditions encountered by the civil rights movement in the late

1960s when the movement attained its greatest success in mobilizing minority coalitions against American hegemonic power structures, both nationally and internationally (specifically the Vietnam War at the time). Such coalitions are especially expressed within the radical egalitarian views propagated at the time. For example, in “The world is a ghetto: race and democracy since World War II”, Howard Winant (2001) reminds us that civil rights movement activists and sympathizers “were working to extend the movement agenda, especially toward recognition of the links between U.S. racism and interventionism in the Third World” (165). The later years of the civil rights struggle witnessed a number of attempts to transform the movement from “a largely anti-racist, domestically focused initiative to a broader egalitarian current with international as well as U.S.-based objectives” advocating anti-war and anti-imperialist nationalist positions (ibid.). By bridging the gap between American transgressions internationally and racial hegemony at home through images of “social justice” and by identifying with Black America, specifically Brooklyn<sup>61</sup>, Hammad builds authenticity and reciprocity with her audience and constructs an authentic identity based on the relational aspect of (a)historical anti-imperialist movements embodied in Black nationalist politics which counter an exclusionary American citizenship.

The comparative racialization process evident in this discourse grants agency to the speaker-poet, and by extrapolation, her ethnic identity, through coalition building with minorities of colour. Hammad’s auto-images can thus be better understood as acts of resistance by an ethnic minority besieged by a dominant “white” American culture. Such expressions of anti-white racial formations expressed in Hammad’s construction of an “authentic” American identity within marginalized spaces are in line with the cultural politics of performing identity explicit in slam poetry venues as well as black cultural productions. Hammad’s proclamations of marginalized identity on the slam stage are articulations of diversity of ethnic minorities performed in resistance to the dominant culture.

The poem ends on a positive note insisting on the triumph of life over violence:

7. [...]

i have not cried at all while writing this. i cried when i saw those  
buildings collapse on themselves like a broken heart. i have never  
owned pain that needs to spread like that. and i cry daily that my  
brothers return to our mother safe and whole.

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<sup>61</sup> The largest most concentrated Black population in America consists of more than 900,000 African Americans living in a 4 mile square area in the New York Borough of Brooklyn. Source: [www.blackdemographics.com](http://www.blackdemographics.com).

there is no poetry in this. there are causes and effects. there are  
 symbols and ideologies. mad conspiracy here, and information we will  
 never know. there is death here, and there are promises of more.

there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting,  
 but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will  
 shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the  
 rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen.

affirm life.

affirm life.

we got to carry each other now.

you are either with life, or against it.

affirm life. (“first writing since”: 102)

The dialectical tension between life and death, continuity and rupture, designated throughout the poem through transnational modes of identification between Palestine/“third world” and Black America, are reconceptualised through the affirmation of life against all violence: state violence as well as fanaticism.

Hammad’s contestatory urban agency in “first writing since” (2005) makes larger connections about poetry, hip-hop culture, the black Arts Movement, and current global, political issues. Against a backdrop of transnational modes of identification, relating Palestine and the developing world’s condition to domestic American racial formations and state abandonment of Blacks and the poor and subjugated, Hammad’s discourse animates the discursive tension between individual agency (as an Arab/Muslim/Palestinian-American) and structural oppression (American racial hierarchies) embodied in Black cultural productions and hip-hop. Hammad’s contestatory urban agency speaks truth to power by relating a history of displacement and political as well as humanitarian crises around the world to domestic American racial formations. In her discourse, racial expression set the parameters of American nationhood and inclusion set against a dominant white culture.

Andrea Assaf’s contestatory urban agency in “Quadroon” (2011)<sup>62</sup> in the next section examines the ideological content of American racial categories. Similar to Hammad’s

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<sup>62</sup> The poem used for analysis in this section, “Quadroon/*Shatti Ya Dunya*” is transcribed by myself (with the permission/revision of author) from Assaf, A. 2011. *Eleven reflections on September* [CD-ROM]. New York: Art2Action. The original text was written for performance on September 11, 2003, six months after the American invasion of Iraq. See Appendix B.2 for full transcription.

discourse, Assaf engages with American racial classification schemes in her attempt to highlight anti-Arab/Arab-American racism. Assaf's "Quadroon" (2011) makes use of American racial classification schemes of hypodescent whereby "any person with a known trace of African ancestry is black, notwithstanding that person's visual appearance" (Gotanda 1995: 258). The *rule of descent* quoted here and the *rule of recognition* whereby "any person whose black-African ancestry is visible is black" Gotanda (1995: 258) are formal rules of American racial classification schemes of hypodescent, a concept developed shortly in light of Andrea Assaf's discourse. In metaphorically claiming ¼ Black ancestry (a quadroon) as an Arab, Assaf uses contestatory urban agency in revealing and refuting an "honorary white status" relegated to Arab-Americans and the lack of representation of the Arab-American community within post-9/11 American racial hierarchies.

### 2.3.2 Andrea Assaf: *September Arabesque*

Andrea Assaf is a spoken word poet, performer, and cultural organizer. A co-founder and artistic director of Art2Action, a theatre work and interdisciplinary performance arts platform based in New York City, Assaf's performance work ranges from solo collaborative productions, to spoken word and community-based arts. Her poem, analyzed in this section, titled "Quadroon/Shatti Ya Dunya", is from her latest performance poetry series, *Eleven reflections on September* (2011). *Eleven reflections* (2011) is poetry/spoken word-based, multimedia performance on Arab-American experience, wars on/of terror, and life in general in a post-9/11 American setting. This multi-disciplinary project includes performances with interactive media and live music created and designed by Salah Abdel Fattah, Tim O'Keefe, and Aida Shahghasemi. The feature also includes community dialogues, a visual arts exhibit, open mics, panels, and collaborative works through partnerships with peace organizations such as the "Iraq Veterans Against the War" (IVAW).<sup>63</sup> Assaf has performed her latest works in various venues from the Centro Cultural Tijuana (Mexico, 2010), the RAWI conference for Arab-American writers (Dearborn, MI, 2010), the Zero Budget Festival in Wroclaw, Poland (Grotowski Institute, 2009), to the Bowery Poetry Club (New York City, 2007) and the Augusta Savage Gallery (University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2007).

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<sup>63</sup> "Iraq Veterans Against the War" (IVAW) was founded by Iraq war veterans in July 2004 at the annual convention of Veterans for Peace (VFP) in Boston. Cited in IVAW [Online] Available from: <http://www.ivaw.org>.

Similar to Suheir Hammad's "first writing since", "Quadroon", written to be performed, takes on the political form of contestatory urban agency. The opening lines of the poem allude with an aural chill to American racial classifications:<sup>64</sup>

Every fourth drop is from there...  
if blood can be calibrated.

Every fourth drop  
carries the desert,  
drips from the cedar,  
stains a small rock on the shore.

Every fourth drop  
knows the intimacy of sirens,  
the smoky trail of hookah,  
and wrinkled hands hard as olives, freshly picked.  
If blood, indeed, can carry such things ... ("Quadroon" 2011)

The images here function on more than one level. On a legal, constitutional level, the auto-images constructed here point toward the underlying structure of race relations in America. The racial image, "Every fourth drop", foregrounds the constitutional and legal practice of using "race" as a commonly recognized social divider in contemporary American society, as we saw earlier. In his legal commentary, "A critique of "Our Constitution is Color-Blind", Critical Race Theory and legal scholar, Neil Gotanda (1995), posits that while the social content of race has varied throughout American history, "the practice of using race as a commonly recognized social divider has remained almost constant" (258). Within American black-white racial categories, blood-lines and ancestral descent are of significant social and legal value. According to Gotanda, the American racial classification practice has included a particular rule for defining the racial categories black and white. That rule, which has been termed "hypodescent",<sup>65</sup> imposes "racial subordination" through an implied substantiation of "white racial purity" through blood-relations (ibid: 259). The rule of hypodescent holds both, that any person whose Black-African ancestry is visible *is* black (recognition), and that any person with a known trace of African ancestry *is* black (descent), notwithstanding that person's physical appearance. The metaphor is one of purity and contamination: white is

<sup>64</sup> The term "racial classifications/categories" is used by Gotanda (1995) to refer to the "distinct, consistent practice [in American society] of classifying people in a socially determined and a socially determinative way" (258).

<sup>65</sup> Term coined by anthropologist, Marvin Harris, in order to identify and name the American system of social reproduction. Cited in Gotanda (1995).

unblemished and pure, so one drop of ancestral black blood renders one black (Gotanda 1995). Under hypodescent, then, the moment of racial recognition is the moment in which is reproduced the “inherent asymmetry of the metaphor of racial contamination and the implicit impossibility of racial equality” pertaining to white-black relationships of subordination (ibid.). Thus, under this system of racial classification, claiming a white racial identity is a “declaration of racial purity and an implicit assertion of racial domination” (ibid: 295). Within such relations, a quadroon, expressed in the title and underlying structure of the poem, is an example of historically documented nonbinary schemes to categorize mixed-race offspring. Falling under the category “Named fractions”, a quadroon is one-fourth black and three-fourths white (ibid.).

On a more specific racial, ethnic level, the images presented in the opening stanzas of the poem shed light on the specific racialization of Arabs in America in a post-9/11 setting. While clearly distinguishing an Eastern, Arab, geographical/natural landscape: the desert; the cedar; the olive tree, and an Arab ethnic signifier: the hookah, the images evident in the opening lines of the poem are constructed in line with metaphorical American racial categorization schemes. By aligning Arab ethnicity in America within a “contaminated” mixed racial category, a quadroon, the speaker-poet highlights the “honorary white” status of Arab-Americans. Though legally constituted as “white” citizens, Americans of Arab descent (citizens or otherwise) occupy a contested and unclear space within American racial and cultural discourse. This provisional nature of American belonging for Arab-Americans is designated through a long history of national and international crises and conflicts that have repeatedly and consistently underlined the racialization of Arab-Americans. Moreover, even though the 9/11 attacks do not mark the first or single event of anti-Arab discrimination in America, the event has highlighted the contested nature of Arab-American national belonging and citizenship status. For example, commenting on the reductive and exclusionary conceptualizations of post-9/11 Arab-American citizenship, Fadda-Conrey (2011) asserts that “the difference allocated to a “them”, who are positioned as backward and uncivil Arabs over there in the Arab/Muslim world, is simultaneously inscribed on the racialized bodies of Arab Americans [*sic*] over here in the US” (534-5). In line with this assertion, Assaf’s discourse relates the “honorary white” status of Arab-Americans to political racism within transnational spaces. The constructed ethnic/racial auto-image perceived in the opening lines of the poem both confirms this argument and grants agency to the collective identity, Arab-American, by relegating the “honorary” whiteness of Arabs in America in favour of a coalition with black America. Assaf declares that, as an American of

Arab descent, she is  $\frac{1}{4}$  Black, a quadroon. By appropriating “Arabness” to blackness, Assaf negotiates a type of Arab-American citizenship and belonging that transnationally bridges the gap between the American transgression in the Arab world and racial injustice in America. In addressing such connections, Assaf complicates the post-9/11 construction of “national [U.S.] identity through discourses of political freedoms and liberties” (Grewal 2005 cited by Fadda-Conrey 2014: 156) and engages with a form of American citizenship that demands a critique of the racist and imperialist agendas imposed by the state.

This stance is further elucidated in the following stanzas in the poem:

And they say it can:

those same who lift our arms and pass radar through our bodies at the gate,  
 those same who swear they will never forget and daily do,  
 those same who point flags like arthritic fingers, gnarled and tight.

They search my face for it.  
 They count every fourth drop.  
 They believe in the calibration,  
 the undeniable evidence  
 that I am,  
 one fourth,  
*from there* (“Quadroon” 2011)

Through the use of the third person, “they”/“those”, the speaker-poet directly refers to post-9/11 government initiatives targeting American Arabs/Muslims, and these include mass arrests and profiling; airport security measures; roundup and detention; track down and deport; and special registration programs. The auto-images constructed here directly allude to the racialization of Arab-American ethnicity, while denoting historical corporeal and state-organized racial discrimination at large. By so doing, the speaker-poet both destabilizes post-9/11 official rhetoric which situates “Arabs/Middle Easterners/Muslims” as “the enemy within”, as a backward essentialized and perpetual Other to the American nation, while at the same time, grants agency through the black/white racial metaphor which pervades American society. The “honorary white” status of Arab-Americans is blemished. The “fourth drop” seems to surface in times of tension regardless of the official “white” status of Arab-Americans in the U.S. national Census. The fourth drop of blood is “from there”, the speaker-poet wryly announces. Instead of denouncing her Arab ethnicity/roots, the speaker-poet constructs an imagined identity within racialized spaces of “contamination”. Agency

is granted through the negotiation and contestation of state-induced racism which pervades American society.

Based on essentialist stereotypes of Arab ethnic archetypes in America, the construction of a racialized Arab-American auto-image presented in Assaf's poem is an attempt to reveal racist undertones pervading discriminatory official, media and mainstream discourse against Arab-Americans.<sup>66</sup> The extension of eligibility to all racial groups in America has been a historically slow process in a racial state wherein racial categorization is prevalent (Omi and Winant 1994). By referring to "those same who lift our arms and pass radar through our bodies at the gate", as well as those who "search my face for it" and who "count every fourth drop", the speaker-poet deliberately recalls racist attitudes that historically haunt American society. She shifts the ontological structure of Arab-American exclusion from a purely political/cultural axis to a racialized one, in opposition to whiteness. Accordingly, the binary logic shaped by post-9/11's "citizen-patriot" dictum whereby national belonging is induced through vigilant citizenship and the Othering of Arabs/Muslims, is reverted into black/white racial distinctions in Assaf's discourse. Situating Arab-American ethnicity within racialized rubrics, the speaker-poet sheds light on the discrimination practiced against this community in post-9/11 America and reconfigures hegemonic American citizenship. As such, Arab-American ethnicity is no longer a cultural, political and epistemological antithesis to American citizenship, but another minority group that suffers from a racialized "structure of feeling" within the confines of the racial state. Situating Arab-American identity within a racialized rubric of blackness/"contamination", the constructed images of the national/racial Self in Assaf's poetic agency overpower the sense of isolation and scrutiny (i.e. Othering) imposed by the state/dominant white culture on Arab-Americans in a post-9/11 national context.<sup>67</sup>

However, a brief transmutation in the tone of the poem resituates the constructed national/racial images from that of separation to that of unity and integration. Assaf continues:

Wherever *there is*, this September.

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<sup>66</sup> For a detailed study of anti-Arab stereotypes, see Stockton, R. 1994. Ethnic archetypes and the Arab image *IN*: McCarus, E. (ed.) *The development of Arab-American identity*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, pp.119-154.

<sup>67</sup> Shryock (2008) attributes anti-Arab racism in America to a sense of marginality and ambivalence about inclusion/exclusion from the cultural mainstream, desires for greater political influence, the fear of being scrutinized, spied on, and judged a threat to national security.

And every fourth drop  
 boils this time of year,  
 leaping in alarm and rage,  
 screaming past sinews  
 to insist on mingling with the other three,  
 to insist in its cellular universe  
 that there is no detectable difference.

*I cannot be separated, each says,  
 I am of you ...*

*I refuse the calibration,  
 I run through you, as you do me ...  
 but you waste my blood as yours,  
 as if I were yours to waste!  
 I am dripping from the cedar tree,  
 dripping from the cloudless sky,  
 staining these rocks, this shore  
 spilling you all over me,  
 as if you were mine to spill.  
 I am boiling against your cold,  
 I am cutting the sky with my scream  
 I carry the sound of the air raid  
 through veins ...  
 embedded with shrapnel. ("Quadroon" 2011)*

Here, the speaker-poet's insistence on transcending racial categorization and recognition, "screaming past sinews", perhaps metaphorical impediments of racial stereotypes/ethnic archetypes, is a call for both, oneness among Americans of all (racial) backgrounds and a clear reconfiguration of Arab-American citizenship and national belonging. The speaker-poet refuses racial "calibration" and "separation" at home as well as military intervention, "the sound of the air raid", overseas, probably in Iraq and Afghanistan in this context. The clear invocation of American military violence abroad (over there) informs a critical and transformative response to Arab identities as lived in America and the Arab world. The speaker-poet refuses racial calibration, implying racial undertones that inform and promote an antagonistic U.S. foreign policy. In a post-civil rights, post-Cold War and post-racial stage in American history in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, racial calibration and separation has yet to be surpassed, the speaker-poet seems to imply. The fundamental problems of racial injustice and inequality, of white supremacy, moderated perhaps, but hardly resolved in contemporary America elaborated in the poem define its strategies of engagement and contestatory agency. The speaker-poet seems to imply that the meaning of race in America, and the ongoing significance of race for American identities, still remains at large. Assaf's speaker-poet

asserts political agency through incorporating post-9/11 anti-Arab discrimination to racial inequity pervasive in contemporary America. The significance of race, the interpretation of racial equality, the institutionalization of racial justice, and the various categories employed to classify racial groups in America, become rhetorical strategies of political agency in the poem. Taking on a non-white racial stance, the speaker-poet “insist[s] on mingling with the other three” racial categories, perhaps white, yellow and red: “I cannot be separated, each says, / I am of you”. The speaker-poet decenters hegemonic racial hierarchies and appropriates the disparate American racial categories into unison.

Moreover, such insinuations may be directed towards white audience members to re-investigate their own cultural/racial privilege. Commenting on the reception of contemporary performance poetry in America, specifically the national slam poetry scene, Somers-Willett (2005) claims that such art may in part be appreciated and rewarded for the cultural positions of power that it confirms and denies, or it may serve as an affirmation of the need for cultural redress (63).<sup>68</sup> Although this does not directly apply to the specific context of performance poetry presented in this analysis, Andrea Assaf has not performed this piece in national slam poetry competitions, it does relatively relate to the political agency called for in the poem. Reading the poem as a display of contestatory agency, the poem becomes a vehicle or mode for participating in and engaging with the public. According to Andrea Assaf herself:

I am accustomed to always think about the question of audience. In the case of *Eleven Reflections on September*, and other war-themed work I have done in recent years, I have multiple audiences in mind: [...]. Through performance, I try to bring people into a room together who may never otherwise encounter each other in the same physical space; and further, bring them into a shared experience together, and into dialogue. (Appendix A.4: Q3)<sup>69</sup>

Similar to other forms of contestatory political urban agency, such as hip-hop, rap and other African-American cultural forms, “Quadroon” displays a powerful type of community-based agency via the spoken word. This in turn enables a space of interactive engagement, where dominant cultural values are contested and collective agency is created.

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<sup>68</sup> According to Somers-Willett (2009), demographics of the national slam audience have consistently shown that “the audience for slam poetry on a national level has been and continues to be predominantly white, liberal, and middle class” (78).

<sup>69</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.4, pp.304).

The poem concludes as it began, reaffirming a “contaminated” racial category as an American of Arab descent, claiming that:

I am the fourth drop:  
 every fourth drop,  
 ringing through the desert,  
 not knowing how anyone will ever hear ...

So I count  
 each drop of blood  
 that falls, and ask:  
 If every fourth drop ran together  
 and infused the other three,  
 until all were four, and one were one ...  
*Would I be a different person?*  
*In a different world?*  
*Would it have been a different day?*  
*Or would I be ...*

*September?* (Assaf 2011)

By choosing “the fourth drop”, i.e. blackness, as a symbol of racial/ethnic identity, the speaker-poet deliberately constructs an Arab-American auto-image pitted against American racial hierarches situated within black/white paradigms. Using contestatory agency, Assaf responds to the post-9/11 political and racial terrain in America by challenging racial stereotyping of Arab-Americans and redefining exclusionary conceptualization of American citizenship. Positioning Arab-American racial/national identity within the confines of blackness, the poem contests limited forms of national belonging based on racial subordination.

In Laila Halaby’s “the journey” (2012) in the upcoming section, personal experience in growing up culturally and racially mixed is expressed via an embodied experiential approach. Halaby grants agency to her opted Arab identity via personal memory rejecting assimilation into a white dominant American culture. Halaby situates her Arab-American belonging within rubrics of American racial melancholia whereby the minority subject becomes an object of racial exclusion, “an injunctive ideal which can be self-affirming or sustaining [whereby] a painful negotiation must be undertaken, at some point if not continually, with the demands of [social ideality and an] always-insisted-on difference”

(Cheng 2001: 7).<sup>70</sup> Halaby's experiential approach grants agency to an Arab-American community via a personal response to constraining agents of national/racial inclusion.

### 2.3.3 *Laila Halaby: Away from the main-line mold*<sup>71</sup>

Laila Halaby's third book, *my name on his tongue* (Syracuse University Press, 2012), is her first poetry compilation following her two acclaimed novels, *West of the Jordan* (Beacon Press, 2003), an award-winning narrative about Arab-American lives and identities, and *Once in a Promised Land* (Beacon Press, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2007). In a review of Halaby's recent poetry selection, Tori Grant-Welhouse (2012) observes that in *my name on his tongue* (2012), Halaby "campaign[s] for more tolerance, a better America, and an end to the War on Iraq" (para. 10). Born in Lebanon to a Jordanian father and an American mother, Halaby grew up mostly in Tucson, Arizona. She has also travelled to and lived briefly for some time in New Jersey, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Italy, and Jordan.

*[M]y name on his tongue* (2012) is divided into four main sections revealing ethnic, specifically Arab, sensibilities, titled: *you can be a tourist at home; no matter how much zaatar*<sup>72</sup>*you eat you still gotta work to be an Arab/writer/woman; là où Dieu nous plante il faut savoir fleurir*; and *my grandma and your grandma were sittin' by the fire* (Halaby 2012: Contents). Each of the sections includes a series of poems relating to a specific sub-theme relevant to that section. All four sections relate to Arab-American ethnic realities in a contemporary post-9/11 American setting. Commenting on Halaby's poetic output, Lauren Alwan (2012) points out that Halaby's collection "each mines [the poet's] concerns from different vantage points: as a tourist, a child, an exile, and an opponent to the wars in the Mideast and Palestine" (para. 4). Growing up within a mixed cultural background, both Arab and American, Halaby's poetry "charts the contradictions and ambiguity of growing up culturally and racially mixed" (ibid: para. 6).

"[T]he journey", analyzed here, is the first poem of section two, *no matter*. The poem is divided into five interrelated parts and reads like an autobiographic map charting snippets from the speaker's, evidently Halaby's, life from the moment of birth "out of place / a single mother's only child / fatherless / blanketed in foreignness" ("the journey": 9) to the moment

<sup>70</sup> For a detailed analysis of racial melancholia and psychoanalysis, see Cheng 2001, *The melancholy of race: psychoanalysis, assimilation, and hidden grief*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>71</sup> Title of section: "away from the main-line mold" is a line excerpted from Halaby's poem, "the journey" (2012: 9-17). For full text, see Appendix B.3.

<sup>72</sup> Arabic word for thyme and sesame mix.

of publication of her poetry collection *my name* (2012). The poem's voice articulates what Dowdy (2007) terms as embodied experiential agency. Within the rubric of political poetry, experiential agency relates to poems which "keep in touch" with real-life experiences through which poets, via embodied strategies, "figuratively enact the exchange – and thereby the transformation – of experience with readers" (ibid: 36/37). In this view, according to Dowdy, "the role of the referential world of social and political events, conditions, and observable realities is paramount in the writing process, even if the poet chooses to evade that world" (37). Halaby's voice, embedded in the interstitial space of growing up between cultures, articulates moments of Otherness within the socio-political realities of post-9/11 America. Halaby's self-reflexive narrator offers an understanding of the need to belong to and identify with a national identity, community, and culture. In an article entitled "Dare I Ask?" (2008) published by Beacon Broadside, the online project of independent publisher Beacon Press, Halaby posits that:

Personal decisions often carried larger social or political reverberations; and you are always an ambassador for your culture. [...]. I am always happy to offer any understanding I can to offset American "jahiliyya," or generalized ignorance of other cultures. (para. 4-5)

In self-affirming an Arab ethnic identity, Halaby undertakes the painful negotiation attributed to such an identity in an American (post-9/11) national setting. As a spokesperson on behalf of her opted community, Halaby's personal experience in "the journey" sheds light on the nuances of being both Arab and American. Her personal approach embedded in experiential agency reveals an ethical relation to her ethnic reality. A bond is created between the speaking self and readers in that the speaking "I" can "implicitly claim that his/her experience is representative of others' experiences" (Altieri 1984: 22 cited by Dowdy 2007: 41).

Part 1 of "the journey" sets the political undertones of the poem and opens up the stage for the embodied strategies which ensue as the speaker figuratively enacts the possibility of experiences of an ethnic community via a personal perspective. The poem opens with a coming of age motif which unfolds gradually, tracing the speaker's struggles growing up "fatherless" ("the journey": 9), ceaselessly searching for a sense of belonging within a culturally and racially mixed space:

my mother ran  
from one desert to another  
until she found home

alone  
 we were opposites in a small house  
 me, loud and moving  
 wild with a longing  
 I didn't speak fluently  
 she, quiet and still  
 stashing her multilingual sorrows  
 in the tool shed out back

she tried to teach me in American  
 how to be an Arab  
 but didn't get it quite right  
 left stuff out  
 left me uncomfortable  
 in my shoes always searching  
 for the right pair ("the journey": 9)

Growing up between places and cultures results in a sense of absence of a true home, of belonging, for the speaker-poet. This is gradually resolved however in the ensuing stanzas as the speaker-poet, with clear political intonations, opts for the Arab side of her identity:

I found them in high school  
 all by myself  
 no flour-white godmother to guide me  
 no handsome dark prince to slide them  
 on my delicate size five feet  
 these shoes were  
 all me  
 all mine  
 white leather  
 size eight  
 with a star and crescent carved out  
 etched in silver  
 they curved up at the toes  
 genie shoes  
 I could disappear if I wanted to  
 and I did

away from the main-line mold  
 of A-line skirts  
 preppy shirts  
 making out after football games  
 I spat all of America out  
 like a giant wad of chewing tobacco  
 begged my shoes to carry me home  
 I spoke with an accent  
 played my born-in-Lebanon trump card  
 sailed on the fact that my father

and six half-brothers and sisters  
were still There

my life became rich  
with the world's tragedies  
(Palestine and South Africa)  
while my American connections frayed  
and I finished them off  
with my massive superior dagger  
one by one  
until they were gone ("the journey": 10-11)

The images evoked both set Arab ethnicity, specifically here, Lebanese, against the "flour-white" racial formation of the American "main-line mold" and relocate the speaker-poet's identification within an international scope "with the world's tragedies" in "Palestine and South Africa". Several images intertwine in the construction of a racial/national auto-image as the boundaries between the self and the Other become increasingly complex. Here, the self-conscious first-person speaker, as it is for poems of embodied experiential agency, is the key-component of analysis. The "self-conscious" first-person speaker in poems of embodied agency "seeks not to report events, but a way to accentuate *current* struggle to verbalize the experience appropriately" (Dowdy 2007: 39). Halaby's opting for an Arab, i.e. racialized, rather than an American, i.e. white, identity, keeping in mind that her American mother could have been a more immediate choice (i.e. rather than a Jordanian-Lebanese father who seems to be absent from the family's life), as both a political and anti-racist stance.

The speaker, in "finishing off" her American connections, deliberately replaces her Americanness with an ethnic Arab stance (i.e. that of the Other) as a sense of self-identification, developing a "psychical alterity" (Cheng 2001) pertaining to her sense of racial/cultural dislocation from mainstream "white" America.<sup>73</sup> In so doing, the speaker-poet negotiates her identity within psychical formations (ibid.). Building on Freud's 1917 observations on grief/melancholy in "Mourning and Melancholia", Cheng (2001) attributes the melancholic feeling of perpetual loss proposed by Freud to a sense of exclusion experienced by the racially subjugated minority subject within the national landscape of inclusion/exclusion. According to this observation, dominant white identity in America operates melancholically, as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social

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<sup>73</sup> Several Asian-American scholars use psychoanalytical approaches to racial inclusion/exclusion within specific Asian-American ethnic spaces in America. I focus here on Cheng, A.A. (2001). Other studies for reference include Lee (1999); Palumbo-Liu (1999); Leiwei Li (2001); Eng (2001); Eng and Han (2003).

consumption-and-denial (ibid.). In “the journey”, Halaby situates herself and the ethnic community she represents, Arab-Americans, within such rubrics of “melancholic retention/formation” as racialized subjects. Even though Halaby’s speaker-poet may easily pass as white, she opts for an Arab (i.e. racialized) identity. From a psycho-affective viewpoint, the self and the other are no longer counterparts. The other becomes part of the self. From this perspective, the “uncanny” other is a creation, the result of repression. This repression is motivated by the ‘need’ to defend the coherence of the self and to conserve its fragile unity and integrity (Cheng op. cit.). The other who arouses uncanny feelings is then in fact a return of that which has been repressed. By opting for an Arab identity (America’s alterity), Halaby accentuates America’s racial history/ideology (i.e. identity) to the extent that ideals of whiteness remain unattainable to people of colour. She develops other relations to the ruling episteme of whiteness by opting for a racialized Arab identity.

She continues:

first Sara  
 the Jewish girl  
 once my best friend  
 who told me that Arabs were barbarians  
 called me fat-Arab-slime girl

chop

then Shawna  
 (we used to bake  
 chocolate chip cookies together)

chop

even Nina  
 (she taught me dancing)

chop

I kept Kaiser  
 (he was Chinese  
 after all)

and Annie  
 (she was half Mexican  
 we had grown up together  
 were like sisters on good days)  
 I added Jommana

and Rula  
 Murad  
 then Hania  
 Mona  
 Marwan  
 and Saeed  
 Anoushka  
 Azzam  
 and Marcelino  
 Elias  
 Fethi  
 Resat  
 and Nora  
 Katia  
 Hassan  
 and Ala

I taught my tongue to dance  
 in Spanish  
 Italian  
 French  
 and Arabic  
 with snatches of Turkish  
 Greek  
 and Persian  
 unaccented and sloppy in each (“the journey”: 11-12)

The speaker-poet “chop[s]” away her American connections, Sara, Shawna and Nina. She keeps her friends, Kaiser, who is Chinese, and Annie, a Mexican-American, and adds a list of friends, all of whom have Arab names, except for Anoushka, Marcelino and Resat, who clearly belong to other minority ethnic groups. She also acquires foreign, non-English languages, amongst them Arabic. By so doing, the speaker-poet grants agency to her ethnic community within “melancholic racial formations” (Cheng 2001) via the social relations and circumstances through which an identity can stake and secure its very claims. Although the historical presence of Arab America as a communal geopolitical space and Arab-Americans as people can be traced back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in America, and although officially, Arab-Americans are designated a “white” racial identity in the U.S. Census, their explicit categorical emergence after 9/11 mark them as a racialized Other. This gap between a material actuality and its discursive absence betrays the contradiction between the universal and the particular in the formation of an American national culture, which is historically embodied in a European [white] morphology, whether it is in the form of the national image, its proper genealogy, or institutional and cultural legitimacy. This formation of a dominant,

white, Eurocentric national culture posits minority groups as both objects and subjects of “racial grief” within American national racial formations (ibid.). In other words, assimilation into mainstream American culture for people of colour still means adopting a set of dominant norms and ideals – whiteness, heterosexuality, middle class family values – often foreclosed to them (Eng and Han 2003). To the extent that ideals of whiteness for people of colour remain unattainable, processes of assimilation are suspended, conflicted, and unresolved. The politics in Halaby’s first-person narrative emerges from her identification with Arab ethnicity/minority position. She continues:

I cremated my Americanness  
 flung it from the top of the castle in Ajlun  
 tossed it into the Dead Sea  
 drowned it off a boat in Aqaba  
 buried it near the ruins in Um Qais (“the journey”: 13)

National signifiers (“Ajlun”, “Aqaba”, “Um Qais”) pertaining to the Old Home, specifically here, Jordan, further elucidate the speaker-poet’s opting for an Arab national/cultural setting in her sense of belonging or inclusion, distancing herself further from the racial state and its dominant white identity. Moreover, reference to the Middle East here does not merely reverberate with feelings of nostalgia, it is a statement of belonging - a national/racial auto-image deliberately constructed against the hetero-image of “melancholic” American racial formations. In order to regain lost sovereignty, win political rights, gain national representation, the conditions of economic wellbeing, and a sense of cultural belonging, the (ethnic) speaker in Halaby’s poem inaugurates an intimate relation between the suppressed origin of its subjectivity, here a cultural choice of Arab friends, an Arabic language, as well as a transnational affiliation with the Old Home, Jordan, and the offended, conflicted self of racial melancholia offered by her American reality. Where this form of subjectivity has been turned into an enigma, as in the case of a post-9/11 Arab-American identity, “the subject as ethnic other is compelled to ponder over his or her origin in order to carve out familiar meanings of belonging. In this sense, the speaker in Halaby’s poem retains agency for herself and her community within “psychical melancholic negotiations” of sustaining the self “through the ghostly emptiness of a lost other” (Cheng 2001: 10), in this case, Arab ethnic markers. The speaker-poet finds political representation and agency in transnational spaces and ethnic signifiers, on an individual, social, and national level.

This stance is elaborated in the following stanzas from part 2 of the poem:

I wrote  
in a windy city in the north of Jordan

collected stories  
memories  
histories  
got adopted by a ‘real’ family  
visited villages  
schools  
refugee camps

[...]

I vomited labels  
(not one agreed with me)  
devoured rich and fatty stories  
(this kept my weight balanced)

suitcases heavy with zaatar and coffee  
I returned to the States  
wrote  
went to school  
kept writing  
dipped my bread in olive oil  
wrote more  
kept studying  
boiled my coffee three times  
got married  
had babies  
continued writing  
demanded validation  
as a woman  
as an Arab  
as a writer (“the journey”: 13-14)

Here, transnational affiliations with the Arab world play an important role in resolution of melancholic assimilation into American mainstream culture. The speaker-poet gains agency as a minority subject and negotiates an identity construction, one that is “‘real’” and untainted by labels, through her identification with the past – memories, stories, histories, food and places which belong to transnational affiliations with the Old Home and an Arab culture. Cheng (1997) reminds us that the minority subject in America presents “a haunted subject” (52), a ghostly presence. The minority identity reveals an inscription marking the remembrance of absence. Denigration has conditioned its formation and resuscitation. According to Cheng, “not merely the object of dominant melancholia, the minority subject is also a melancholic subject, except that what she renounces is herself” (ibid: 52-3). Halaby

renounces America and melancholic locations within American culture through memory. Jordan, the Old Home, becomes a place of strategic negotiation and a mode of agency via memory. Jordan allows the speaker-poet to belong to “a ‘real’ family”, rid herself of labels, and “[devour] rich and fatty stories”. Arabness functions on both a cultural and a personal level to establish narratives of origin and belonging; myths of peoplehood which situate the subject and make agency possible. In a post-9/11 setting in which Arab-American ethnicity is rendered alien to the nation and excluded from American national belonging as a perpetual Other, transnational affiliations with the Old Home grounds the speaker-poet’s identity and grants her agency and belonging. Halaby’s speaker-poet acquires redemptive power from her present life in America which acquires meaning only through disconnections that repeatedly define her ethnic/racialized national belonging through stereotypes and erasures. Transnational engagement holds out the hope of escaping the alienation of American life.

This stance, however, is further complicated in part 3 of the poem where:

one sweet, quiet morning  
 curled up asleep with my younger child  
 the world imploded

people shrouded in religion  
 and stuffed in planes  
 took away our collective human breath

some people got theirs back faster than others

our grief  
 got cut short  
 by stares  
 over-zealous security guards  
 by silence  
 followed by hatred  
 the same kind that fuels people  
 to get on planes and fly into buildings

I unfolded my familial pledge of normalcy  
 and not-devoting-hours-to-imaginary-people  
 studied it  
 smoothed out the wrinkles  
 pressed it between the covers of a book  
 not the Bible  
 or the Quran  
 I stashed my promise between the pages  
 of *Cry the Beloved Country*  
 the book that taught me the power of words (“the journey”: 15-16)

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 accentuate melancholic formations of national inclusion even further. The speaker-poet distances herself and her ethnic community from the “hatred” of both, American “over-zealousness” prompted by the attacks, and religious fanaticism responsible for the atrocities, “people shrouded in religion / and stuffed in planes”. By repudiating religious authority (both the bible and the Quran), the speaker-poet constructs a secular cultural/racial auto-image further bridging the gap between herself, her Arab-American ethnicity, and other people of colour signified through the direct allusion to Paton’s (1948) anti-apartheid novel, *Cry the beloved country*. She does so specifically within what Lipsitz (1994) identifies as a transnational/diasporic solidarity all around the globe.<sup>74</sup> As such, national minorities become global majorities against injustice.

The speaker-poet positions her (personal/ethnic) identity against a backdrop of national/global racial injustice. The speaker-poet negotiates the sense of “loss”/“grief” of national identity under the hegemonic racial constructions of the racial state (both nationally and internationally) and regains agency by bridging the gap through transnational affinities based on historical racist apartheid in South Africa. This transformation of grief and silence to grievance and sounding out, from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury, exemplifies psychic strategies in response to rejection and discrimination. By aligning herself and her ethnic community with racialized subjects in a global setting, Halaby constructs an auto-image in opposition to national as well as international histories of racial injustice. In this context, white injustice in racist South Africa embodied through allusions to Paton’s (1948) novel indirectly reflects the return of the repressed: white injustice in America against blacks and by extrapolation, other minority subjects of colour. Within this white/black racial divide, Paton’s novel presents a depiction and analysis of South African social and political conditions on the eve of the advent of apartheid. Paton’s liberal philosophy in *Cry the beloved country* and his rejection of injustice wrought about by whites in South African society at the time depicts social and political concern with racial injustice in America. According to Andrew Foley (1998), in his study, “‘Considered as a social record’: a reassessment of ‘Cry, the Beloved Country’”, the novel is fundamentally the product of Paton’s urgent need to utter a cry of protest against the injustices of his own country and a global racial system of dominance and eradication of entire communities. It was, indeed, part of Paton’s express intention, in writing the novel, to “stab South Africa in the conscience”

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<sup>74</sup> According to Lipsitz (1994), among diasporic communities, traditional aesthetic, philosophical, moral, and political principles serve as resources in struggles against centralized systems of power (34).

(Callan 1982: 29 cited by Foley 1998: 66). Even though *Cry, the beloved country* actually appeared before racial segregation in South Africa reached its absolute worst stages in the 1950s through the 1980s, Paton's passionate discussion of prejudice has made his novel consistently relevant throughout South Africa's later anti-racist political struggles, and has given it international acclaim as a mouthpiece against racial injustice (ibid.). In 1948, the same year that Paton first published *Cry, the beloved country*, the Afrikaner National Party came up with the term apartheid to describe its new, stricter set of policies intended to enforce white legal domination over the black people of South Africa. Many of the white people who believed in apartheid felt that it was actually the divine purpose of the Afrikaner people to maintain the racial superiority of whites over black people in South Africa (Watson 1982).

In a more relevant context, the social consequences of the destruction of the local Black tribal system by the whites and the general disintegration, both moral and otherwise, which characterized South African society under apartheid, could be translated into the historical racial injustice brought forth by whites on African American and other minority groups in an American national setting. The speaker in Halaby's embodied experiential discourse "unfold[s] [her] familial pledge of normalcy" and "stashes [her] promise between the pages" of Paton's anti-racist liberal, moral novel, "the book that taught [her] the power of words". She grants agency to her opted ethnic (Arab-) American community via indirectly articulating the grievances and discrimination brought forth by racial hierarchies and attributes such injustice to the construction of the Arab-American community as the perpetual Other within an American national context. By so doing, the speaker-poet refutes and challenges essentialized portrayals of Arab ethnicity. She responds to racial grief and melancholia through positioning herself and her ethnicity within the rubrics of an anti-racist and liberal America, rather than incorporating the norms of an American racial system merged in historical and shifting racial melancholic apprehensions.

However, the poem ends in a dismaying note on the "invisibility" or lack of agency of the ethnic subject. Halaby concludes in the final two sections of the poem:

4

this time

everything worked out nicely  
 my book looked great in print  
 my contract for a second book was generous

requests came in from all over the world  
to hear what I had to say

but really  
nothing changed (“the journey”: 16)

5

being  
published  
did not make me a writer  
eating zaatar  
did not make me an Arab  
getting married and having children  
did not make me a woman

I have been  
all of those things  
the whole time I’ve been sitting here  
at the back of the stinky city bus  
(by choice, in spite of the fumes)

back here  
you get to see

everything (“the journey”: 17)

Despite her invisibility and lack of agency, both as an American national and an Arab ethnic subject, as well as a writer and a woman, the speaker-poet grants agency to herself, and her ethnic proclivity via “choice”. She chooses her position as an invisible ethnic subject “sitting here / at the back of the stinky city bus / (by choice, in spite of the fumes)”. This direct reference to Jim Crow era discrimination against African Americans creates solid alliances with the historical reality of other minorities of colour in America. In other words, the speaker-poet claims a choice and this choice is the “ghostly morphology” (Cheng 2001: 14) of the invisible racial minority subject which the nation rejects-yet-retains in its midst. The melancholic, racialized subject is made into an “object”, a “loss”, an “invisibility”, or a phantom (ibid.). The racial other thus constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious – naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space. In an Arab-American context, the “invisibility” of the racialized, melancholic speaker-poet in Halaby’s encounter depicts precisely the exclusion-yet-retention of the minority ethnic subject within American racial and national paradigms. The speaker-poet finally accepts her invisibility (and perhaps opts to live in the scope of her memories). This internalization of

racial grief/ghostliness, far from denoting a condition of surrender, embodies a set of negotiations of an ethnic auto-image that express agency as well as abjection.

Lawrence Joseph's embodied experiential political agency in the next section places Arab-American ethnicity within the confines of power structures of domination/subordination. In the selected poem, "Why Not Say What Happens?" (2005)<sup>75</sup>, Joseph speaks to the local condition of post-9/11 America while at the same time depicting the lack of agency of subjugated peoples under dominant hegemonic constructs of power structures both, in America and globally. Living blocks away from Ground Zero, Joseph recounts the morning of 9/11 in the poem: a man tripping, his glasses flying off his face; a father getting up in the morning; capitalism performing; walking back across the Brooklyn Bridge; Sam Cooke playing on the jukebox (op. cit.). All of these actions continuously pull the reader into the experience of the event. The poem situates the violence and destruction of 9/11 within a comparative framework of traumatic experiences where 9/11 is not perceived as a singular event, but as a plurality of experiences that has been perceived quite differently by its survivors. The poem is informed by a moral and political vision which addresses the dehumanizing conditions of a "post-modern", globalized capitalist society.

#### 2.3.4 Lawrence Joseph: *A Chronicle of Chaos*

In a subtle, sombre and ominous tone reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland", Lawrence Joseph chronicles the traumatic events of 9/11 in his fourth book of poetry, *Into it* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). In the poem discussed here "Why Not Say What Happens?" (24-32) from the selection, Joseph presents unsentimental images of a grim post-9/11 urban setting. Joseph transgresses ethnic insularity to give voice to the extremes of American reality within the scope of embodied experiential agency. The poet Lawrence Joseph is also a lawyer and a legal scholar who lives across from Ground Zero. The grandson of Catholic Lebanese immigrants, he grew up in Detroit. Since 1981, Joseph has made lower Manhattan his home. The events of 9/11, where, according to Joseph (2005), "everything [is] immense and out of context" ("Why Not Say What Happens?": 20), set the tone for the poems in *Into it*.

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<sup>75</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.4.

Joseph's experiential agency and rhetorical strategies in the ensuing poetic discourse are located within the confines of testimonial writing, that is, writing which promotes expression of personal experience through a "collective experience of struggle against oppression" (Yúdice 1996: 54 cited in Dowdy 2007: 24). The speaker-poet challenges his readers through narration that is both a subjective "mixing" of emotional perceptions and intra- as well as inter-textual digressions, and a more objective "transparent eye" (Lowney 2009: 843). Joseph's modernist "I" is both immersed in and detached from the harsh social realities and devastating personal and historical events he chronicles in his poetry.<sup>76</sup> Joseph's narrating voice and experiential agency moreover derive from his urban experience of violence, racism, poverty, and political upheavals in his upbringing in Detroit during the 1950s recession, the Civil Rights Era, and the Detroit riots of 1967 which led to the stabbing of the poet's uncle and the looting and burning of his family-owned grocery venue on the corner of John R and Hendrie Street. Later on in 1970, the poet's father was stabbed to death in an armed robbery in the same location. "Bound by a transcendent necessity",<sup>77</sup> Joseph's narrative stance in "Why Not Say What Happens?" (2005) articulates the shifting and transformative dynamics embodied in the narration of experiential political agency. In so doing, Joseph's impersonal narrator insists on keeping in touch with real life experiences, this time in Lower Manhattan, in the aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers. The speaker-poet engages with lived experiences, his own and that of other people and the community to which he belongs. Joseph's embodied experiential agency is narrated through a double movement of personal-public/national-international myths and locales, both spatially and temporally. With the objective stance of an observer, he zooms in and out of context and focus to return with a more insightful and precise rendition of the invisible but felt experience of the contemporary condition (Upton 2009). Experience alone, however, is not the sole claim to legitimation in poems of experiential agency. Imagination and narration are crucial in such poems, especially in Lawrence Joseph's works. The two epigraphs at the beginning of *Into it* are a dedication from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* whereby Joseph, via Ovid, asks his Muse to "give me the voice / To tell the shifting story...".<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Joseph's speaker-poet/narrator tells the "shifting" story of post-9/11 American reality, in order to

<sup>76</sup> In this context, I situate Joseph's modernist stance along with Arthur Rimbaud's "I as another". For further analysis on Rimbaud and modernity, see also Bernard, O. (ed.) 1962. *Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891): collected poems*. New York: Penguin Classic.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph, L. 2005. "Metamorphoses (After Ovid)" IN: Joseph, L. *Into it*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p.52.

<sup>78</sup> Joseph, L. 2005. *Into it*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, dedication page.

capture, transform and transgress the immensity of the events and their aftermath. He then offers an epigraph from Wallace Stevens quoting Henry James that “to get into it and stay in it” is to live in the world of imaginative creation (ibid.). Stevens’ lectures on poetry and politics, alluded to here, suggest the early modernist’s estimation of the poet’s “zero-sum game”. According to Stevens, when the “pressure of reality” is great, such as it was throughout Europe during the period of the two World Wars, the poet must turn either to “resistance” or “evasion”.<sup>79</sup> Joseph’s poems in *Into it* neither resist nor evade reality; they are ethnically, legally and aesthetically immersed in it. In John Lowney’s words, Joseph’s poetry is notable for the “critical lens through which he views the contemporary world, a critical lens that is as directed toward his own subjective vision – as well as to his professional vision as a lawyer – as toward the external world”.<sup>80</sup>

Divided into 12 Sections (I-XII), the poem opens with reference to biblical allusions situating the speaker-poet in a Christian background and affirming the apocalyptic perception resonating throughout the work:

**I**  
 Of icons. Of divination. Of Gods. Repetitions  
 without end. I have it in my notes,  
 a translation from the Latin, a commentary  
 on the Book of Revelation – “the greater  
 the concentration of power on earth,  
 the more truth is stripped of its power,  
 the holiest innocent, in eternity,  
 is ‘as though slain . . .’”  
 It has nothing to do with the apocalyptic,  
 The seven-headed beast from the sea,  
 the two-horned beast from the earth, have always –  
 I know, I’ve studied it – been with us.  
 Me? I’m only an accessory to particular images. (“Why Not Say What  
 Happens?”: 24)

Despite the specifically biblical resonance, delimiting the religious positioning in these lines, the identity of the subject referred to by the use of personal pronouns, “I/Me”, is left to the imagination; the ethnicity of the speaker is unspecified and left to resonate. The image most evident here is that of power, “outstripped from truth” pitted against “the innocent”, who,

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Des Pres, T. 1988. *Praises and dispraises: poetry and politics, the 20th century*. New York: Viking Penguin.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Lowney, J. 2009. “Why not say what happens?”: modernism, traumatic memory, and Lawrence Joseph’s *Into it*. *University of Cincinnati Law Review* [Online], 77(3).

according to the message from the Book of Revelation, is “slain throughout eternity”. In a post-9/11 national context, the images in this opening stanza signify the hegemonic power structures of the State that pervade and silence those who, like the speaker-poet, are only “accessories to particular images”. This “power/innocence” dichotomy brings to mind Foucault’s panoptical dystopia in *Discipline and punish*.<sup>81</sup> Considering the genealogies of disciplinary society that we find in Foucault’s seminal text, it is difficult to dismiss Foucault’s insistence on the “intentionality of power” (Heller 1996). The exercise of power for Foucault is both dispersed and tactical (*ibid.*). In his “Two lectures on power”, Foucault writes that power:

is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a community or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. (1980: 98)<sup>82</sup>

For Foucault, therefore, power comes from a “net-like organization”. In his essay, “The subject and power”, Foucault elucidates the structural function of such an organization. He tells us that the “net-like organization” that makes possible the exercise of power consists of:

The system of differentiations which permits one to act upon the actions of others: differentiations determined by the law or by traditions of status and privilege; economic differences in the appropriation of riches and goods; shifts in the process of production; linguistic or cultural differences; differences in know-how and competence; and so forth. (1982: 792)

Similarly, in “The question of power”, Foucault concludes that:

[p]ower, [...], is something like the stratification, the institutionalization, the definition of tactics, of implements, and arms which are useful in all these clashes. (1989: 188)

Power, for Foucault then, is transformative capacity<sup>83</sup>, the ability of an individual to influence and modify the actions of other individuals in order to realize certain tactical goals. Returning to *Discipline and punish*, Foucault’s analysis of power-structures of the State, beginning as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, whereby power is exercised by “marking, analysing and

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<sup>81</sup> Foucault, M. 1979. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>82</sup> Cited in Gordon, C. (1980). (*Op. cit.*).

<sup>83</sup> The term is cited by Heller, K. J. (1996: 83) in “Power, subjectification and resistance in Foucault”. *SubStance* [Online], 25(1).

distributing” (1979: 198) plague-stricken victims and lepers within the “political dream” of a “pure” and “disciplined” (ibid.) society could be translated into the hegemonic balance of power within the confines of the modern nation-state. For example, and more relevant here, Gavrilos (2002), in her post-9/11 study “Arab Americans [*sic*] in a nation’s imagined community”, identifies American government and media constructions of Arab-American citizenship during the first Persian Gulf War, as “unequal social relations of power” (427). Quoting Gramsci’s (1971) key concept of hegemony, Gavrilos (2002) explains the relationship between socially constructed representations and social relations of power within the confines of the multi-ethnic nation-state as hegemonic constructions. According to Gavrilos:

Since no nation-state is inherently culturally homogeneous, there is an ongoing struggle to define the nation and its cultural and political values. It is a process that involves a struggle to produce a sense of loyalty to certain nation-state values or interests that are made to seem fixed, natural, and universal, even as they do not represent everyone’s interest. (429)

Most societies with complex social structures achieve their ‘unity’ via the relations of domination/subordination between culturally different and class differential strata (Hall 1977). According to Gavrilos, in an American context, racial and ethnic identities are inseparable from this proposed hegemonic construction of national identity. In line with that, in an interview with Charles Graeber, Lawrence Joseph comments on this reality. He admits that the poems in *Into it* have a “definite moral slant, or bias, which, in some poems, takes the expression of a voice that speaks against power structures that are violent and create violence”.<sup>84</sup>

The images proposed in the first stanza of the poem ultimately highlight and reinforce hegemonic constructions which situate the speaker-poet in a sort of incapacitated position as “an accessory to particular images” of power relations. Within such “net-like” relations, the speaker-poet aligns himself with the subordinate, signifying a subjugated minority identity both abducted and defined by forces of “domination”. In other words, the identity under question lacks agency within the ongoing struggle and negotiation between cultural meanings and power which sustain such relations. Within the “power/innocence” dichotomy proposed in the first stanza of the poem, the construction of the Self can only be realized then through

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<sup>84</sup> Graeber, C. 2005. “Pulling the words from the ruins: an interview with Lawrence Joseph”, *downtown express*, 18(25).

a realization of the “net-like organization[s]” of power within the hegemonic construction of the nation-state. This position is further elucidated in the following stanzas in parts II and III of the poem:

## II

According to the translation of the police transcript,  
 the sheikh – the arrested head  
 of the cell mockingly said – in a plot  
 involving chemical attack,  
 needs, simply,  
 two or three young men with brains and training  
 with nothing to gain or lose,  
 not an army.  
 It doesn't take much these days to be a prophet.  
 Do you know how much poison can be put  
 in a ten-liter barrel?  
 You pour it and spread it, then you leave.  
 The web is, prosecutors believe,  
 so intricate, the detainee,  
 they think, may also be a member  
 of cells in Barcelona and Frankfurt.

## III

Yet another latest version of another  
 ancient practice – mercenaries, as they were once known,  
 are thriving, only this time  
 they're called “private military contractors.”  
 During the last few years their employees  
 have been sent to Bosnia, Nigeria, Colombia, and of course,  
 most recently, Iraq. No one knows  
 how extensive the industry is, but some military experts  
 estimate a market of tens of billions of dollars. (“Why Not Say What  
 Happens?": 24-25)

Subtle nuances to power structures are evident here, specifically within the context of America's post-9/11 “war on terrorism”. The resonating images mirror each other, aligning evidently, Islamic fanaticism in part II of the poem with State-backed terrorism in part III. By providing a glimpse of American transgressions in an international context through the image of “private military contractors”, the speaker-poet sarcastically presents the facts of State-backed terrorism separating himself, as a subjugated minority, from this reality in an attempt to negotiate his personal identity. The images plainly reveal the violent power structure, “the net-like organization”, setting America's “billions of dollars” weapons market against the image of Islamic fanaticism. The hetero-image of the “terrorist” Other becomes an auto-

image of the American Self through the destructive capabilities and inclinations of State-backed atrocities of war. In other words, both images, “Muslim fanaticism” and “American State terrorism”, become one and the same, a flip side of the same coin, with the speaker-poet distancing himself from and rejecting both. The speaker-poet expresses his incapacity in the face of “power structures” even further in the following lines in parts IV and V of the poem:

#### IV

Autumn turned to winter and the site  
 began to clear. The limits of my language  
 are the limits of my world, said Wittgenstein.  
 The realization – the state of the physical world  
 depends on shifts in the delusional thinking  
 of very small groups. One of Garfinkle’s patients  
 tripped over a severed foot while evacuating  
 the Stock Exchange. Several others saw  
 the first plane pass right next to the almost  
 floor-length windows of their conference room.  
 “When I’m not working, the last thing I want to do  
 is talk about it,” said one policeman, who,  
 like many of the city’s uniformed officers,  
 is still working a schedule of twelve hours on,  
 twelve hours off ... Shoes, books, wallets, jewelry,  
 watches, some of them still keeping time ...  
 [...].

#### V

That period of ten or eleven years –  
 concerning it I can express myself briefly.  
 At some point, in collective time, electronic space  
 tuned into time. The miraculous  
 multiplication of loaves were restricted to the rentiers.  
 A grappa in a black, pyramid-shaped bottle  
 was taken cognizance of,  
 and, with no resistance,  
 for the most part, no guarantees  
 were made for the slow, the meek, or the poor of spirit,  
 who, for reasons unexplained,  
 allowed themselves to disappear  
 into the long, red evenings, night’s early gray-blues. (“Why Not Say What  
 Happens?”: 25-28)

With a calm, objective and detached perspective, almost like viewing the events through the lens of a camera, the speaker-poet chronicles the destruction caused by the attacks on the Twin Towers. Shifting here to a 9/11 specific historical/geographical context, we are

reminded of the limits of language, through intertextual allusions to the Austrian-British philosopher, Wittgenstein, to express such atrocities, while at the same time asserting the lack of agency of the people read again as “innocence”, or “the delusional thinking of very small groups”, in the face of such atrocities. In digressing from the private, individualistic and subjective perspective of the traumatic events, the speaker-poet diverts the personal/private weight of the incident to a more public domain. Through a dialogic narrative structure<sup>85</sup>, the voices of those who survived the attacks (as well as those who did not) are juxtaposed with the private space of the perspectival voice of the speaker-poet thus signifying a more objective, collective conscience in the face of the destructive capabilities of “power” in all its forms. These lines suggest at once a representative figure of loss and a more public grief shared by various other narrative voices in the poem. This scene also suggests the unexpected – and belated – manifestation of trauma within the dramatic structure and temporality of the poem. Joseph’s speaker-poet enacts the “unsettlement” of traumatic experience emphatically in his insistence on listening to – as well as seeing – individual responses to traumatic experience. Writing as a witness to the aftermath of the attacks in lower Manhattan, the speaker-poet grants agency to those voices otherwise unheard/silenced by hegemonic power structures by chronicling their experience and validating it through poetic narrative. The speaker-poet’s personal experience becomes a documentary of disparate voices sharing one common aspect, lack of agency within hegemonic constructions of dominant socio-political power brokers, a reality where “for the most part, no guarantees / were made for the slow, the meek, or the poor of spirit”. The speaker-poet enacts through his subjectivity what Dowdy (2007) commenting on poems of embodied experiential agency describes as “the greeting that extends outward into the world of complicated socioeconomic and political conditions” (40). The speaker-poet’s experience of trauma thus becomes part of a larger collectivity, a metonym for a larger group of other people’s experiences, those subjugated by the intricacies of hegemonic power relations.

Indirect references to ethnicity are revealed in sections VII and VIII of the poem. Here, the speaker-poet is first visited by the rather ghostly past:

## VII

Have I mentioned my grandmother,  
my father’s mother, who died long ago

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<sup>85</sup> Holquist, M. (ed.) 1981. *The dialogic imagination: four essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.

but who visits me in dreams?  
 It is to her, mostly, I owe  
 the feeling that, in cases of need,  
 those transfigured in eternal love help us  
 certainly with eternal,  
 and, perhaps, also, with temporal gifts;  
 that, in eternal love, all is gratis –  
 all that comes from eternal love  
 is gratis.

### VIII

My father? – my father was a worker. I can still hear him  
 getting up in the morning to go to work.  
 Sadness, too, has to be learned,  
 and it took my father time to learn it,  
 but he did, though when he did  
 his tears were never chronic.  
 As for the economies on which my parents' lives depended,  
 they won't be found  
 in any book. ("Why Not Say What Happens?": 29)

The speaker-poet takes refuge from the events surrounding him "in dreams", his sole refuge from the anarchy and subjugation that evidently permeate the speaker-poet's world. Arab heritage is indirectly alluded to through the presence of the speaker-poet's grandmother and father. In his aforementioned 2005 interview with Graeber, Joseph insists that his Lebanese and Syrian Catholic heritage come from his grandparents, who were immigrants. According to Joseph "My grandparents read and wrote and spoke Arabic, and considered themselves Arab-Americans" ("Pulling the words from the ruins", 2005). The images invoked in stanzas VII and VIII above digress from the present state of events reminding the reader of first- and second-generation Lebanese/Syrian immigrants who came to America searching for work and an escape from civil strife and religious tensions back home. Aspiring to live the American dream like others in America and become part of American society, the early immigrants worked hard and for long hours to attain businesses and afford a better life for themselves and their children. This part of history, the speaker-poet seems to imply, which reflects the reality of hardworking Arabs of the earlier generations, has been wiped out completely from the memory of the nation in light of the traumatic events of 9/11 and the pervasiveness of the Arab "terrorist" trope which proliferated after the attacks. By reminding the reader of this history, the speaker-poet consecutively grants agency to the voiceless ("innocent") trapped within overarching hegemonic power structures, and situates Arab ethnic identity within the confines of benign citizenship, whom like any other normal

American citizen have worked hard for generations and have no control over or direct affiliation with terrorism and violence. By so doing, the speaker-poet constructs an ethnic auto-image in appropriation with other Americans identified pejoratively by race, ethnicity, religion, or historical realities. Lawrence's imaginative construction or incorporation of ethnic tradition redefines the boundaries of Arab-American ethnicity within racialized, subordinate and silenced minority spaces. This auto-image, which by now has been identified with Arab heritage, yields meaning through its identification with the subordinate, those whose histories "won't be found in any book". This confrontation with the legacy of grief and silencing is presented as facilitating both community and agency for disadvantaged groups.

In stanza XI of the poem, the silence of aggrieved minorities is briefly intermitted by the African-American voice of music idol Sam Cooke:

## XI

[...]

Sam Cooke on the jukebox, lines

From an obscure tune from the box set,

"even my voice belongs to you,

I use my voice to sing, to sing, to sing to you..."

The lives of the two or three others who pass through  
as close to you as the weather.

Walking back, the dotted lines

of the lights on the Bridge, the sun

blotted out by a burst of vermilion. ("Why Not Say What Happens?": 31)

The significance of African-American r&b and soul music, evinced through the direct allusion to Sam Cooke, lies in its expression of the human experience. According to Moffett (date not included), "although the different styles vary widely in their tone, topic and tools used to produce them; [African-American music] has the ability to cross all colors and culture lines".<sup>86</sup> African-American popular music, ranging from 'rhythm and blues' to hip-hop "is understood to consist of explicit or implicit descriptions or assessments of the social, economic, and political conditions of people of African descent, as well as the forces creating these conditions" (Stewart 2005: 196). The allusion to Sam Cooke becomes a cultural and transformative expression, signifying sound as a tool in struggles over space, including

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<sup>86</sup> Moffett, T. (no date) 'The history of African American music' [Online]. Available from: [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_5212464\\_history-african\\_american-music.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_5212464_history-african_american-music.html).

spaces that symbolize the nation. Joseph's experiential agency engages with the silencing power of racism, the state, and institutions that represent national/global hegemonic power-structures. The upbeat of Sam Cooke's r&b and its symbolic ramifications in Lawrence's discourse become agential figures of relief for subordinate/racialized minorities in the face of a destructive and chaotic post-modern, post-9/11 reality, granting voice to the otherwise voiceless. As such, Cooke's music becomes a metonym for agency/political recognition for disadvantaged/deviant minorities.

In the next and final discourse in this section, Angele Ellis's authoritative voice in her prose poem "Arab on Radar" (2007)<sup>87</sup> challenges homogenised and essentialized depictions of Arab ethnicity in post-9/11 America. Ellis's experience is visualised through Orientalised and racialized depictions of the Arab Other.

### 2.3.5 Angele Ellis: Arab as Orientalised Other

In Angele Ellis's "Arab on Radar" (2007: 9), the title work of her book of poetry, *Arab on Radar* (Six Gallery Press, 2007), the term Arab-American becomes "a declaration of secret identity" ("Arab on Radar": 9). Ellis's prose poem, described in a review by Brian O'Driscoll (2008) as "a second-generation American's lament about the conflict between ethnic pride and fitting in",<sup>88</sup> is replete with racist undertones and Orientalist depictions of Arab-Americans. Angele Ellis is a second-generation Arab-American of Lebanese immigrant ancestry. *Arab on radar* (2007), which earned Ellis a 2008 Individual Artist Fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, revolves around Arab ethnic sensibilities within a post-9/11 American national landscape. The collection of poems in *Arab on radar* (2007) is "a reclamation and reaffirmation of [...] Arab-American identity in a post-9/11 world" (Warecki 2013).<sup>89</sup> The panethnic signifier, Arab-American, in Ellis's work, signifies a racialized minority identity within the rubric of American racial formations. In an online interview with Rachael Warecki of *Spry* literary journal entitled "Behind the words: Angele Ellis" (2013:

<sup>87</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.5.

<sup>88</sup> Cited in O'Driscoll, B. 2008. "Area poet Angele Ellis explores ethnic identity and more in *Arab on radar*" [Online]. Available from <http://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/area-poet-angele-ellis-explores-ethnic-identity-and-more-in-arab-on-radar/Content?oid=1339733>.

<sup>89</sup> Cited in Warecki, R. 2013. "Behind the Words: Angele Ellis" [Online]. Available from: <http://www.sprylit.com/behind-the-words-angele-ellis/>.

page not given), Ellis advocates “[t]reating writers of color not as exotics, but rather as voices from the great mainstream”.

“Arab on Radar” articulates what Dowdy (2007) labels as embodied authoritative agency. Political poems of authoritative agency, according to Dowdy’s (2007) model, are usually confrontational and didactic; they are insistent, demanding, and unrelenting. Frequently grounded in their speaker’s experiences, poems of embodied authoritative agency often claim a more encompassing sense of authority from experience, challenge their audiences, and often condemn the social and political conditions that make such poems necessary actions in the documentation of and resistance to those conditions (ibid.). Ellis’s “Arab on Radar” mainly foregrounds collective agency in the service of people of colour activism against racial/cultural prejudice in a post-9/11 American setting.

“Arab on Radar”, begins with stark Orientalist depictions of Arab-American ethnicity:

the band poster said, an accusation, a declaration of secret  
identity. *Ayhrr-ub*, I hear in my grandfather’s voice, then  
*Ahab the Ay-rab*, that novelty song of the sixties where the  
girlfriend whinnies like a camel – very funny – by the guy  
who later sang that everyone is beautiful but I guess he made  
a few exceptions. (“Arab on Radar”: 9)

Ray Stevens’s “Ahab the Arab”, recorded in 1962, evokes condescending, Orientalist images of Arabs exemplary of mainstream American media representations and national discourses of Arab culture in America abundant in both a pre- and post-9/11 context (See Ghareeb 1983; Terry 1985; Stockton 1994; Semmerling 2006; Shaheen 2008; Alsultany 2012). These archetypal images include alleged violence, sexual depravity, “racial simian analogies”, uncivilized psychological and physiological traits, “savage leadership”, darkness/demonization, deceit, excessive wealth (i.e. rich oil sheiks), moral weakness, and a deep-seated hatred of Israel, as well as innate terrorist inclinations (Stockton 1994: 130-147). The song alluded to in the opening lines of the poem is representative of such popular, derogatory depictions of Arabs in America. Ray Steven’s (1962) song opens with the following lines:

Let me tell you ‘bout Ahab the Arab  
The Sheikh of the burning sand  
He had emeralds and rubies just dripping off ‘a him  
And a ring on every finger of his hands

He wore a big ol' turban wrapped around his head  
 And a scimitar by his side  
 And every evening about midnight  
 He'd jump on his camel named Clyde...and ride.

Silently through the night to the sultan's tent  
 where he would secretly meet up with Fatima  
 of the Seven Veils, swingiest grade "A" number  
 one U.S. choice dancer in the Sultan's whole harem,  
 'cause, heh, him and her had a thing going. You know,  
 and they'd been carrying on for some time now behind  
 the Sultan's back and you could hear him talk to his camel  
 as he rode out across the dunes, his voice would cut  
 through the still night desert air and he'd say  
 (imitate Arabian speech)  
 which is Arabic for, "stop, Clyde!" and Clyde would say,  
 (imitate camel voice).  
 Which is camel for, "What the heck did he say anyway?"  
 Well....<sup>90</sup>

The Orientalised images of the Arab Other in Ray Stevens's lyrics alluded to by Ellis crystallize the pre-existing sentiments towards Arabs embedded in the conscience of mainstream American representations. Such Orientalist depictions of the Arab Other cast Arab-Americans in a subaltern and racialized status within an American national context, what Edward Said (1979) refers to in *Orientalism* as "dogmatic views of 'the oriental' as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction shot through with western superiority, various kinds of racism, and imperialism" (2003 edition: 8). Ellis's allusion to these hegemonic hetero-images of Arab ethnic positioning evident in Ray Stevens's lyrics highlights the subaltern, orientalist and racialized spaces which Arab-Americans occupy within the American national imaginary. Arabs and Muslims have been racialized in American society mainly through media representations and popular culture. Long before 9/11, Arab culture, and by extrapolation Arab-Americans as an ethnic proclivity, were socially constructed as groups of people who are different from mainstream American society, and those differences are attached to culture and place of origin and understood by many as racially identifiable. Arab-Americans inherit a homogenised "undifferentiated" collectivity which Fadda-Conrey (2011) refers to in a contemporary post-9/11 context as "racialized [...] bodies [...] inevitably flag[ged] as chronic Others" (542). In an American context, Orientalist images of Arabs as backward entities, antithetical to America, re-emerged in dominant post-9/11 discourses

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<sup>90</sup> Ray Stevens lyrics 1962. *Ahab the Arab*, Lyrics Box [Online]. Available from: <http://www.lyricsbox.com>.

negating Arab-American citizenship and belonging. Such essentialized homogenizations referred to in Ellis's discourse deprived Arab-Americans of their right to belong in America, thus stripping them of their legal/cultural right to full inclusion in an American national landscape.

Ellis next turns to a Lebanese/Phoenician identity in an attempt to evade the derogatory label, "Arab", in a post-9/11 context, to no avail. She continues:

We usually said Lebanese, a measure  
of blamelessness until Beirut became a synonym for Hell.  
Some preferred Phoenician, ancients in merchant ships with  
purple sails, anything to erase the hated word that brought  
us from whiteness to darkness. It was all about whiteness. ("Arab on Radar":  
9)

"The hated word that brought / us from whiteness to darkness", signifies the racialized depiction of the "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" conflation pervasive in post-9/11 American national discourse. Reference to Black America, "darkness" or blackness as opposed to "whiteness", draws attention to the subaltern, racialized status of Americans of Arab descent, regardless of official census categorizations. The homogenised and racist depictions of Arabs indirectly alluded to in Ellis's discourse echoes dominant American post-9/11 rhetoric of Arab as terrorist/enemy, and the hetero-image of Arab as non-citizen, Oriental outsider resulting from such rhetoric. In this context, "from whiteness to darkness" in Ellis's poem, signifies, with an ominous undertone, both, the historical racial discrimination against Blacks in America, and the ambiguity of an Arab-American future in a post-9/11 America. American racism entrenched in essentialized depictions of Arab "backwardness" becomes an inescapable reality. In line with that, the poem's authoritative voice becomes a primary product of how the poem values inclusion and an anti-racist stance against Arab-American nationality, as well as that of other minority groups in America. Ellis's authoritative speaker protests white racism depicted in the assertion: "it was all about whiteness", and the institutional structures that support it. The speaker-poet seems to imply that no matter how hard Arabs tried to engage with whiteness or stress the heterogeneity of Arab ethnicity in America, through national signifiers, "Lebanese, a measure / of blamelessness", or historical cultural achievements, "Phoenician, ancients in merchant ships with purple sails", whiteness seemed an unattainable and shifting American prerogative. Ellis contextualizes anti-Arab racism in a post-9/11 context within the overpowering sense of isolation triggered by relentless, state-imposed scrutiny of Arab-Americans as well as popular anti-Arab

representations in America. Moreover, she aligns Arab-American ethnicity with blackness. By so doing, the speaker-poet creates an urge to distance herself from mainstream white America, situating her national belonging, and by proxy, Arab-American ethnic inclusion, within racial or racialized minority rubrics. This is elucidated in the ensuing lines from the poem:

Trying to ignore the cartoon sheiks with their huge noses  
while we measured ours, praying they wouldn't get bigger.  
*You're not Lebanese?* said the bookstore clerk who recognized  
the golden cedar of Lebanon around my neck. Yes, I  
am. *But you're so pale!* he cried. ("Arab on Radar": 9)

Despite the fact that the Arab-American community is a highly variegated community in terms of culture, religion, race, politics, and demographics, Oriental stereotypes, incorporated in public, mainstream as well as government discourses, deem Arab-Americans a homogenized and essentialized community. Recognizing this, Arab-Americans, like other groups have increasingly turned to panethnic delineation to confront their identity in a political environment of heightened racial consciousness and mobilization. By foregrounding American mainstream Orientalist and racist depictions of Arab-American ethnicity within a post-9/11 setting, the speaker-poet in Ellis's discourse, claims a space within racialized minority paradigms in her attempt to challenge the "color-evasiveness" and "power-evasiveness" of paradigms of assimilation and race-neutrality. In defying the space of ambiguity of Arab-American racial inclusion-yet-exclusion from mainstream white America, Ellis's authoritative speaker-poet constructs an Arab-American ethnic identity within rubrics of blackness. While such panethnic categorization blurs distinctions between groups, African-American racialization and slave history differs profoundly from the politicized racialization of Arab-Americans, it also helps minority groups find a third space between specific ethnic identification and the binary opposition of black/white relations.

This stance is further elaborated in the following lines from the poem, with a direct reference to the 1960s Black American rights activist and prominent figure in the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm X:

Malcolm X had a vision of  
universal brotherhood if not sisterhood on his pilgrimage to  
Mecca, *hajjis*<sup>91</sup> in every shade from ivory to sable, [...]. ("Arab on Radar": 9)

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<sup>91</sup>*Haji* or *Hajji* (noun): One who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca – often used as a title.

The allusion to Malcolm X's political, anti-racist vision of "universal brotherhood if not sisterhood on his pilgrimage to / Mecca" commemorates and instigates the profound shifts which occurred in black cultural politics during the later stages of the civil rights era in the 1960s and 1970s, personified here in the figure of Malcolm X. During that era in American history, the locus of African-American critique shifted from targeting "a few isolated bigots standing in the way of inevitable progress to characterizing the entire dominant culture as institutionally racist" (Terrill 2001: 25). Many African-American activists at the time, including Malcolm X, began to abandon the dream of a "color blind" nation for a more assertive stance of "pride, strength and black power" (ibid.). More specifically, Malcolm X's rhetoric while he was an NOI minister is exemplary of what Terrill (2001) labels as "prophetic discourse" which has dominated African-American protest for centuries (27). By alluding to Malcolm X, as a "visionary" calling for "universal brotherhood", the speaker-poet in Ellis's poem reifies assertive "rituals of self-identification and self-naming" prominent in the rhetoric of African-American cultural politics during the civil rights era (McAlister 1999: 623). According to McAlister (1999), such rhetoric "point[s] toward an often-neglected genealogy of black political and cultural affiliation: an African-American imagined community in which the Arab Middle East is central" (623). By creating such transnational affinities with Islam and the Middle East, African-American civil rights era political rhetoric, alluded to by Ellis in the figure of Malcolm X, envisions an alternative to, and in some sense a fundamental critique, of hegemonic conceptions of American citizenships demarcated by racial hierarchies and exclusiveness. Subsequently, Islam, at the time, offered an alternative "moral geography" to both the racial state and the violence committed against blacks by white Christians (ibid: 624). By alluding to Malcolm X's "prophetic discourse" and to black transnational "moral geographies", prominent at the time, Ellis constructs an auto-image wherein Islam, and by extrapolation, Arabs/Arab-Americans, are aligned with Black "universal brotherhood". She grants agency/recognition to her panethnic community within rubrics of black protest rhetoric which defies racial subjugation pervasive throughout modern American history..

However, this image is further complicated in the same stanza of the poem by sarcastically referring to a Christian religious affinity and a passing mention of Semitic features relevant to Middle Eastern phenotypes:

[...], but we were

Christians so that left us out. Sometimes we were taken for Jews – ironic recognition, Semite to Semite, or just another tired form of bigotry. (“Arab on Radar”: 9)

Arab identity thus becomes increasingly elusive in this context. Ellis’s reference to the ambiguous racial status of Arabs in America by referring to the conflation of Arabs (a race/culture) with Islam (a religion) and, in this case also Judaism, further illustrates the Orientalized, homogeneous conflation of Arab (and by extrapolation, Arab-American) ethnicity/culture in America. This construct relies upon a reductive equation of certain phenotypical features equated with cultural alterity. In other words, despite its expression in religious terms and its purported concern with violent activity, the “Muslim-looking” construct is neither religion- nor conduct-based. Rather, the profile has considerable, if not predominant, racial content and is preoccupied with phenotype rather than faith or action. The racial dimension of this construct allows it to incorporate, not only Arab Muslims, but also Arab Christians and Muslim non-Arabs, depending on how closely they approach the phenotypic stereotype of the un-American/Other. Ellis’s constructs of national (dis)belonging highlights Orientalised/homogenised tropes of Arab-American ethnicity as the perpetual Other within a post-9/11 socio-political landscape, while consecutively, aligning such affinities with other racialized minority groups, specifically, African Americans.

She ends the poem with the following grim interjection:

My grandfather, slowly dying, speaking  
to me in Arabic from his hospital bed. My aunt saying,  
*Bayee*<sup>92</sup>, you know she doesn’t understand. Your father should have taught  
you, he replied in English as heavy as a punishment. *But your  
father said to me, What do I need it for?* What do I need it for  
now except that the pain of denial persists like a blip on the  
screen of consciousness in every war, declared or silent. (“Arab on Radar”: 9)

Her grandfather, perhaps the only aspect left of a tangible identity, “slowly dying, speaking / [...] in Arabic from his hospital bed” symbolizes a sense of alienation based on cultural/phenotypical features. Even though the speaker-poet, as a white (“pale”) Christian who doesn’t even understand Arabic, is ethnically unrecognizable, she warns against total assimilation into a culture designated by racial hierarchies: “*Your father should have taught / you, he replied in English as heavy as a punishment*”. Consequently, Arab cultural belonging

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<sup>92</sup> Arabic for “my father”.

becomes a purely metaphorical, symbolic entity, rather than a lived reality; a metaphor which rises in times of national crisis.

## 2.4 Racialized minority: Imagological Discussion

In order to make a coherent construct out of the texts chosen as discursive representations of Arab-American identity (the expected) within post-9/11 American national/racial paradigms, what is needed is a “syntax”, what Leerssen (1986) describes as “a mode of defining the interrelations between the different constituent units” (215). Imagologically, textual/discursive expressions of the Self (auto-images) and the Other/foreign (hetero-images) result in a “community of attitudes” in which a given tradition of writers shares (ibid.). Shared (inter-)textual “attitudes” result in an overarching image/imagotype which may, like other literary or discursive topoi, enter a textual tradition and become “common-place” textual expressions of identity (ibid.). Similar to Eliot’s concept of the “objective correlative”,<sup>93</sup> the imagotypical characterization of a certain group may often be found to serve as the defining criterion of the membership in that group. In the context of race and post-9/11 Arab-American ethnic identity, the main discursive imagotype evident in the five poems analysed in Section 2.3 of the chapter, should be understood within both ethnic and racial American paradigms, with specific politico-historical focus on Arab-American sensibilities. Moreover, the events of 9/11 place the historical contextualization of the relative imagotypes within focus.

The recurring discursive trope/imagotype – racialized identity – is evident in the analyses of the texts and sets the syntax for discussion. The imagotype of the Arab Self negotiated in the texts within the syntax of racialized minority identity is that of the Other/foreign within an American nation-space. In the case of Arab-American ethnicity in a post-9/11 context, this Otherness is “marked” by dominant post-9/11 public, media, and governmental discourse which designate an Arab ethnic proclivity as “the enemy within” (Jamal and Naber 2008), an enemy which is excluded from the national imagination on the basis of political, cultural and racial ramifications. The dominant imagotypical

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<sup>93</sup> I use Eliot’s concept of “objective correlative” here to express what Eliot demonstrates to be “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked”. See Eliot, T.S. 1969. *The sacred wood: essays on poetry and criticism*. Rome and London: Butler and Tanner, Ltd.

characterization (imagotype) presented in the representative texts situates Arab-American ethnicity within marginalized spaces of national affiliation. The various poetical constructs of national/racial auto-images presented in the texts each defies dominant post-9/11 anti-Arab discourses and attribute such discourses to the ideological construction of the racial state. The texts, each in turn, signifies an authentic belonging to the American nation by strategically aligning Arab-American ethnicity within what Naber (2002) identifies as “coalitions of people of color”, i.e., every other non-European national origin group. The discourse of representation presented in the texts revolves around notions of American racial formations. In other words, the dominant anti-Arab post-9/11 discourse, whether official, media oriented, or public, becomes a bridge between Arab-American ethnicity and other minority groups in negotiating national inclusion. I argue that, despite the official classification of Arab-Americans as “white”, the subjective textual constructions presented in the discourse identify Arab-American ethnicity and national belonging with that of other racialized minority groups by situating Arab-American identity outside the spaces of the dominant white majority. They do so through a strategy of identity building which affiliates and aligns Arab-American ethnicity with other minorities of colour, specifically African Americans/Blackness.

The artistic and creative connections drawn in these literary texts between Arab-American ethnicity as a pan-ethnic minority group and other minority groups in America, and the mainstream white majority, must be understood in the context of the complex relationships between these groups. Being marked as different, “alien”, (Hartman 2006: 146) and generally understood as non-white, “white but not quite” (Samhan 1987) or outside the mainstream has prompted many Arab-Americans to seek out and build links to other groups of colour in order to promote and demand national inclusion and representation. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001) one of the more contentious issues in American racial thought today is the black-white binary paradigm. That paradigm “effectively dictates that nonblack minority groups must compare their treatment to that of African Americans to gain redress” (ibid: 67). Delgado and Stefancic point out that:

[this unstated binary paradigm] holds that one group, blacks, constitutes the prototypical minority group. “Race” means, quintessentially, African American. Other groups, such as Asians, Indians, and Latinos/as, are minorities only in so far as their experience and treatment can be analogized to that of blacks. (67-8)

The ways in which racially-identified groups in America identify and affiliate with or dissociate and distance themselves from African Americans is significant to staking their claims to a place in American society/nation.

Up until the attacks of 9/11, Arab-American literature was concerned with the “invisibility” of the Arab-American constituency within dominant American socio-political discourses on race and ethnicity. The main concern or recurrent motif pertaining to race evident in that literature was that while Arab-Americans are officially classified in the U.S. Census as “white”, popular discourses tend to represent Arab-Americans differently or as “inferior to whites” (Naber 2008a: 1). Moreover, the 9/11 attacks and its immediate backlash in media, public and official discourse consolidated the category “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” as a signifier of non-white Otherness, or that a “racialization of Islam” has underlain the post-9/11 official and public attitude towards persons perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, or “Muslim-looking” (Ahmad 2004; Naber 2008a). Accordingly, the multiple, and contradictory lenses through which Arabs and Arab-Americans have been regarded in America before and after 9/11 have sparked significant debate about the importance of race to Arab-American studies and the place of Arab-Americans within racial justice movements. In this context, the literature produced by Arab-Americans can be organized along three main socio-historical proclivities based on attitudes toward assimilation, as well as a more contemporary racial, ethnic, and cultural self-identification: the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century *Mahjar* movement’s prophetic mysticism and exoticism, the post-World War II assimilationist trends of writers who distanced themselves from Arab culture and belonging in their attempt to pass as “white” American citizens, and the more recent, post-civil rights era politically inclined literature delineated by political panethnic belonging and group agency as well as transnational, diasporic and inter-ethnic affiliations. Today, the constituency known as Arab-American is situated at an intersecting social crossroads, where issues of minority and majority affiliation present serious ramifications on the community and its socio-political inclusion, representation, and recognition in the American nation. Moreover, this analysis takes into account of internal rifts in the community over racial formations and Census classifications. Although some Arab-Americans do not identify as white, many do. Factors such as immigrant status, national origin, religious affiliation and perceived Arab-Americanness all contribute to how this group chooses to self-identify (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007). In light of that and within rubrics of American racial hierarchies, the texts discussed in this section highlight the on-going concerns about group agency and recognition. The texts do not represent the entirety of Arab-American self-identification

within rubrics of national inclusion and racial identity, as much as they represent group agency and literary (aesthetic) negotiations of a post-9/11 Arab-American attempt at self-representation.

Suheir Hammad's and Andrea Assaf's countercultural performances in "first writing since" (2005) and "Quadroon" (2011) respectively are statements of defiance/protest against the racial order of the State which structures and maintains the major institutions and social relationships of American society. Both poems articulate contestatory urban agency via the aesthetics of performance poetry. Suheir Hammad's countercultural performance in "first writing since" (2005), immersed in Black hip-hop and rap music culture, incorporates an Afrocentric rhetorical approach in its manifestation of identity formation, particularly in relation to race and racial hierarchies. She does so through the "sounding spaces of opposition" (Baker 1993) attributed to black cultural productions. She bridges the gap between Gaza and Brooklyn, creating in the process antihegemonic and a "transnational type of political citizenship" (Fadda-Conrey 2014: 157) which counters America's "war on terror" in the Middle East and assumes a minority coalition between Arabness and Blackness. Andrea Assaf's "Quadroon" (2011), on the other hand, opts for an identity construction built on the subjugation of minority groups within domestic American racial categorization schemes. By affiliating Arab-American identity with a "contaminated" (i.e. impure/non-white) racial category (quadroon), Assaf aligns Arab-American national/racial identity with that of black ancestry through structures of "hypodescent" (Gotanda 1995). By so doing, Assaf reiterates the historical-race usage of "black" as the reification of subordination and racial contamination. By incorporating a "contaminated" racial identity, a quadroon or ¼ black descent, Assaf rejects notions of racial purity and aligns Arab-American identity within racialized minority formations, especially that of blackness. Both, Hammad and Assaf, strategically construct coalition with blackness/African-American racial schemes through spaces of contestatory urban agency. Such spaces offer "alternative visions of the world" (Dowdy 2007: 153). By appropriating African-American sensibilities by both distancing Arab-American identity from the mainstream and by emulating African-American rhetorical manifestations evident in such performances, Hammad and Assaf both construct an ethnic auto-image which gains authenticity through the performativity of a racialized identity.

Laila Halaby's "the journey" (2012) and Lawrence Joseph's "Why Not Say What Happens?" (2005) both embody subtle experiential political agency within rubrics of racial, social and cultural subordination. In self-affirming an Arab racial identity, Halaby

strategically constructs coalition with other minority groups in “the journey” (2012) through what Cheng (2001) labels as “melancholic formations” invoked by American values “which tend to acquire their sharpest outline *through*, not in spite of, the nexus of investment and anxiety provoked by racial formations and other institutions of discrimination” (Cheng 2001: 12). The speaker-poet in Halaby’s “journey” negotiates a racial and in this case, national, identity based on transnational/diasporic sensibilities in her reference to anti-apartheid and social justice movements in Palestine and South Africa. Halaby thus opts for an Arab ethnic belonging and situates this belonging against the white racial image of an American “flour-white godmother” (“the journey”: 10). Moreover, Halaby counters post-9/11 anti-Arab discrimination through her allusion to and affiliation with Paton’s (1948) anti-apartheid novel, *Cry the beloved country*. By adopting Paton’s liberal and anti-apartheid initiatives against South Africa’s ruling white racist regime at the time, Halaby forges new alliances which require transgressing ahistorical notions of common experience. Such formations/alliances are built on multi-racial, anti-war coalitions post 9/11. By aligning her personal and by extrapolation ethnic belonging within racialized spaces of coalition, Halaby constructs an auto-image of Arab-American identity within anti-racist, anti-war positions both internationally and at home. Lawrence Joseph, on the other hand, documents the grim realities of a postmodern world devoid of human warmth embodied in the atrocities of the 9/11 attacks in his residential area of lower Manhattan. Joseph transcends specific ethnic affiliations to arrive at an understanding of shared humanity beyond “us” and “them”. He does so by addressing the dehumanizing violence which translates into the horrendous events of 9/11 and other conflicts/atrocities worldwide. This is read as a dichotomy of “power” versus “innocence” in Joseph’s subtle political experiential agency delivered in the poem. Though “Why Not Say What Happens?” elegizes a sad national event (the 9/11 attacks), it also indicts and exorcises the “net-like organization” (Foucault 1982) of power manifested in economic, military and ideological power structures both domestically and globally. Joseph does not take a specific ethnic stance. He is more concerned with a more universal postmodern dehumanizing reality that silences the weak and subjugated peoples in America and around the globe. The source of “power”, whether Islamic terrorism or international, State-backed wars by proxy, is one and the same in this discourse. Joseph distances himself and the auto-image he constructs in the poem from that of “power” and violence. Accordingly, the poem enacts the unsettlement of traumatic experience through its disruptive narration and other formal devices of defamiliarization. It does so emphatically in its insistence on listening to – as well as seeing – individual responses to traumatic experience,

not only in New York, but in contemporary locations around the world as well. Moreover, Joseph does not realize the violence and destruction of 9/11 as a singular event, but within a comparative framework of historically disenfranchising power-laden economic and military structures. For example, he asserts in stanza X of the poem:

Capital? Careful! Capital capitalizes,  
 assimilates, makes  
 its own substance, revitalizing  
 its being, a vast metabolism absorbing even  
 the most ancient exchanges, running away,  
 as the cyberneticians put it,  
 performing, as it does, its own  
 anthropomorphosis, its triumph  
 the triumph of meditation –  
 and, let's not forget,  
 it organizes, capital organizes, capital is  
 “an organizing,”  
 organizing  
 social forms. (“Why Not Say What Happens?": 30-31)

Within the scope of embodied experiential agency, Joseph's sense of “relatedness” to the disenfranchised could be translated into a national political context through relations of power structures between “competing ideologies” within the scope of the imagined nation-state. Joseph's “us” becomes the subordinate “innocent” minority subjects pitted against a dominant ideology of “power”, the “them”. He places his ethnic belonging within rubrics of subordination in the face of over sweeping generalization instigated by silencing, hegemonic power structures. Moreover, Sam Cooke's music, alluded to in the poem, which is affiliated with Black protest movements and justice, becomes a source of agency for the marginalized and disenfranchised. A ghostly presence from the past that transcends the ethnic/racial divide and defies power structures which destroy and alienate without discrimination.

Finally, in “Arab on Radar” (2007), Ellis exposes anti-Arab racism through Oriental tropes and stock images of the Arab Other widespread in popular American culture and media long before 9/11. In America, essentialist stereotypes of the Arab Other are primarily derivative, rooted in a core of hostile archetypes that American culture applies to those with whom it clashes (Stockton 1994: 120). Such derogatory archetypes/images were inherited from earlier European notions of the Orient (Said 1979), and originally targeted non-European (i.e. non-white) minority groups such as Africans and Jews, and are subject to a

process of transference “in which themes that originate with one group can be shifted to a completely different target” (Allport 1958 cited by Stockton 1994: 120-1). In a more contemporary American setting, Arabs are portrayed as a homogenised simple, emotional, volatile, backward people. These images, which could be traced back to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, seemed to resurface after the attacks of 9/11. Following the attacks, American national identification and patriotism became the negation of the Other, Arab/Islamic terrorism. Ellis’s authoritative political agency in “Arab on Radar” exposes such manifestations which transgress mere Orientalist tropes and Islamophobia and are to be understood as a form of racism which informs and inspires American anti-Arab/Arab-American discourse prior to 9/11. Ellis’s authoritative strategy articulates the political ramifications of Arab-American exclusion from the American national imagination. Orientalist tropes designated against Arabs in America are politically and culturally oriented. They revolve around Cold War politics (Mamdani 2004), America’s stake in Middle East oil, as well as the making of a special relationship between America and Israel (Little 2002). Ellis challenges orientalist hetero-images of the Arab Other, and situates anti-Arab discourse within explicit American racial politics. She comments on anti-Arab racism through allusions to civil rights era politics. By incorporating the political strategies of 1960s Black cultural politics, personified in the poem through the figure of the prominent civil rights movement leader, Malcolm X, Ellis draws parallels between the racialized Othering of Arab-Americans and the plight of African Americans and other racial subjects in America. By drawing such parallels, Ellis embodies a collective identity which contests the dominant concepts and world-views of American mainstream society and frames a common identity with other minority subjects in response to state-based and mainstream American racial initiatives. In her response to a survey questionnaire carried out in the course of this study on the role of the contemporary Arab-American poet, Angele Ellis asserts that:

My career as an Arab American poet and sometime critic – and emergent fiction writer and novelist – has been spurred not only by the events surrounding 9/11, but by my upbringing in the 1960’s and 1970’s [*sic*], whose racist media caricatures of Arabs left invisible scars. [...]. I see my role as an Arab American [*sic*] artist as that of both educator and instigator, even provocateur. (Appendix A.1: Q2)<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.1, pp.291-2).

Ellis complicates the post-9/11 “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” trifecta evident in post-9/11 official, media, and mainstream rhetoric. Through allusions to Malcolm X’s evocations of Islam’s “color-blind” ideology and “universal brotherhood”, she refutes dominant post-9/11 rhetoric which conflates Islam with terrorism and violence. However, she also exposes American Orientalist homogenizations of Arabness through her Christianity. Ellis’s Christian background allows her to enjoy “white privilege”. However, she seems to imply, that being of Arab ethnic origin overarches and contests her inclusion into the nation, regardless of her religious affiliation. By so doing, Ellis’s speaker-poet subsumes Orientalism and Islamophobia into rubrics of American racial hierarchies. She thus authoritatively refutes a longstanding phenomenon, anti-Arab racism, based on American racial exclusion of Arabness as antithetical to American national/cultural values. In other words, Arab-Americans of all religious, national and cultural backgrounds, Ellis seems to imply, are a homogenised proclivity subject to anti-Arab racism in America, especially in times of crisis.

The images presented in the texts display Arab-American identity within an ambiguous state of racial belonging to the nation. This ambiguity is certainly addressed in subtle underpinnings of a racialized and subaltern Arab-American reality within a post-9/11 context. Homogenised depictions of Americans of Arab descent under an alien cultural premise and politicised discourse simplify the complex racialized reality of this category and place it outside the boundaries of the concept of the American nation, though it exists under the assumption of legal citizenship. Arab-Americans find themselves negotiating their identity within rubrics of people of colour coalitions. The texts reveal strategic shifts within racial/national identity constructions that could be summarized as a shift from assimilation into white, Eurocentric America to resistance associated with racialized minority groups.

Chapter three will now focus on political constructions of cultural authenticity related to Arab-American national identity. The chapter traces notions of Arab cultural descent within Arab-American ethnic sensibilities. Cultural representations will be addressed within post-colonial theories of “hybridity” and “in-betweenness” (Bhabha 1994) located at the centre of Arab-American realities in America, rather than American multicultural spaces of cultural diversity. The chapter will focus as well on notions of Islamophobia and Arab stereotyping within a post-9/11 American context. Cultural loci of religion, politics, “customs”, and political identification pertaining to Arab-American national identity will be located within American ethnic paradigmatic notions of cultural pluralism and assimilation.

### **Chapter Three: “Spaces of Enunciation: Negotiation of Cultural Politics”**

*wait, isn't that where you're from?*  
 let's bomb them back to the stone age  
 those arabs  
 never should have let them into our country  
 those arabs

- Dima Hilal, “America” (2001)

*i am an arab,*  
*alienated from american,*  
*sitting on the other side of that hyphen*

- Laila Shereen, “On Becoming Arab” (2004)<sup>95</sup>

The social movements of the 1960s, the influx of new immigrants from the Arab world, especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and the expansion of Arab-American community institutions played a major role in asserting an Arab cultural identity in America. However, global events, the relationship of the U.S. government to them, and accompanying media depictions were more important predictors of the Arab-American experience than were the viewpoints or customs of new Arab immigrants or post-civil rights American institutional changes, which found Arabs largely excluded from both mainstream organizations and mobilizations of people of colour (Cainkar 2008). American media portrayals that have persisted since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War depicting Arabs, and especially Palestinians at the time, as inherently savage, and the subsequent institutional silencing of Arab-American voices, whether Christian or Muslim, are socio-political and cultural projects that have fostered the institutional exclusion of Arab-Americans and heightened their sense of Otherness. Orientalist thought as well as postcolonial American intervention in the Middle East after World War II played a major role in conflating Arab culture with Islam and depicting Arab tradition as existing outside of history and incompatible with civilization (Shohat and Stam 1994; Majid 2000; Moallem 2005). This form of American Orientalism relies on representations of culture (Arab) and religion (Islam) as a justification for post-Cold

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<sup>95</sup> Cited in Al Maleh (2009b: 423).

War imperial expansion in the Middle East and American alliance with Israel.<sup>96</sup> In a more contemporary context, it includes the targeting of people perceived as fitting the racial profile of a potential terrorist living in America, that is people perceived to be Arabs, Middle Easterners, and/or Muslims (Naber 2012). According to Naber, in her introduction to *Arab America: gender, cultural politics, and activism* (2012):

New Orientalist discourses have birthed a variety of widely accepted ideas: of Arab and Muslim queers oppressed by a homophobic culture and religion; of hyper-oppressed, shrouded Arab and Muslim women who need to be saved by American heroes; of a culture of Arab Muslim sexual savagery that needs to be disciplined – and in the process, modernized – through U.S. military violence. (4)

The attacks of 9/11 by Arab Muslim men on America strengthened such discourse and once again brought the negative Arab stereotype to the foreground. Contemporary, post-9/11 Arab-American cultural politics are thus situated in a larger debate about the meaning and usefulness of the term “Arab-American” and how this community should be represented in social, political and aesthetic forms (Wathington 2007). Such discourse is situated in “key conditions” which delineate the borders in which Arab-American cultural enunciation is located: mainly (1) the continuing elusiveness of the term “Arab” as a definitive category; (2) the specific history of categorization that Arab-Americans have undergone in America; (3) the assimilationist legacy of the first wave of Arab (mostly Christian, “Syrian” immigrants) and the rejection of this attitude by later immigrant waves of more diverse and politicized Arab origins; (4) the prevalence of orientalist and neo-orientalist representations of Arabs and Arab-Americans in Western print and non-print media; (5) the alienating policies the Bush administration enacted towards Arabs domestically and abroad as part of its “War on Terror”, and finally (6) the spot-light that American media has turned on Arab-Americans before and after 9/11 (ibid: 2). This discourse is situated in essentialist representations of Arab culture in the American mainstream and media after 9/11.

This study situates post-9/11 Arab-American cultural politics within Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space” in its imagological analysis of cultural paradigms evident in the

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<sup>96</sup> The term “American Orientalism” is borrowed from Edward Said’s “The Latest Phase” in *Orientalism* (1978). The term is used in this study to symbolize what Edward Said (1979) defines as the “[...] major change in the international configuration of forces [after World War II]”. According to Said (1979), after World War II, with the demise of the French and British powers, “[a] vast web of interests [...] links all parts of the former colonial world to the United States” (2003 ed.: 285).

relevant literary texts. Cultural politics in turn is relevant to American paradigms of assimilation and cultural pluralism. Central to this concept is ethnic assertion or “the politics of recognition” – i.e. “the quest for public affirmation of group identity for the purpose of cultural survival” (Taylor 1994 cited by Majaj 1999: 320). In *The location of culture* (1994), Bhabha stresses the notion of “cultural difference” rather than “cultural diversity” in his elaboration on the “Third Space of Enunciation”, mainly the notion of cultural translation as “third space which enables other positions to emerge and which displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, [and] new political initiatives” (Rutherford 1990: 211).

### 3.1 Cultural Politics and Arab-American Literature: “Third Space of Enunciation”

In *The location of culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha defines the notion of culture as a strategy of survival, not as an ordered and uniform practice by homogenous and unified groups. Bhabha stresses the idea of “cultural difference” as “a process of signification through which statements of culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity” (2006: 155; emphasis in original). From this perspective, the notion of culture becomes a political struggle in which “the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha 1994: 2). This in turn gives rise to Bhabha’s notion of the “hybrid moment of political change” where “the transformational value of change lies in the articulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* [...] *nor the Other* [...] *but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both” (Bhabha 1994: 28; emphasis in original). As such, agency is perceived as an in-between/liminal space of enunciation, or a “third space”, whereby:

The analytic of cultural difference intervenes to transform the scenario of articulation – not simply to disclose the rationale of political discrimination. It changes the position of enunciation and the relations of address within it; not only what is said but where it is said; not simply the logic of articulation but the *topos* of enunciation. (162; emphasis in original)

The aim of cultural difference then, according to Bhabha (1994), is a form of agency, which allows the minority subject to assume a “signifying position” that “resists totalization” (ibid.). From a postcolonial perspective, the “Third Space of Enunciation” bears witness to the “unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order” (ibid: 171). Cultural articulation in the “third space” requires “a radical revision of the social temporality of representation in which emergent histories may be written, the rearticulation of the ‘sign’ in which cultural identities may be inscribed” (ibid.).

This mode of address attempts to open up an intervening space, a space of translation-as-transformation, whereby relations between different cultures transcend the idea of unique, essential cultural identities and communities originating in these identities (Buden 2006).

This “liminality of migrant experience” (Bhabha 1994: 224) is a transitional form of subjectivity/act of signification which allows the negotiation and translation of cultures which are otherwise antagonistic or even incommensurable. By disrupting the concept of original and homogenous culture, Bhabha’s theory of “third space” unsettles a pattern of meaning “constituted in serial time and challenges the articulation of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force authenticated by the originary past and kept alive in the national tradition of the people” (Khan 1998: 464). Bhabha points out that minority subjects (as well as postcolonial migrants and exiles) construct their culture from national as well as religious texts and often transform them into Western symbols, signifiers of technology, language, or dress (ibid.). The “third space” becomes a space of contradiction, repetition, ambiguity, and disavowal of hegemonic authority that does not allow for original (i.e. essential) signifiers and symbols in oppositional polarities. Instead, these signs are appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and reinterpreted. Such discursive conditions of enunciation and cultural translation allow for possibilities of supplementary sites of resistance and negotiation.

Even though “neo-Orientalist” discourse is particularly noteworthy as it dominates the representational space of Arab-American literature (Wathington 2007), 9/11 was a turning point in that representations of “terrorism” and “Islamic fundamentalism” have increasingly replaced other representations and have become more fervently deployed in anti-Arab state policies, everyday patterns of engagement, as well as pervasive media representations and anti-Arab stereotypes (Naber 2008a: 4). Functioning between the transnational and the ethnic, Arab-American literature is embedded in “diasporic conjunctures” which “invite a reconception – both theoretical and political – of familiar notions of ethnicity and identity” (Clifford 1997: 36). According to Clifford:

Unresolved historical dialogues between continuity and disruption, essence and positionality, homogeneity and difference (cross-cutting “us” and “them”) characterize diasporic articulations. Such cultures of displacement and transplantation are inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic, political, and cultural interaction [...]. (36)

Situated in a Du Boisian “double consciousness”,<sup>97</sup> post-9/11 Arab-American writers claimed solidarity with fellow Arab-Americans and with those struggles against oppression and

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<sup>97</sup> Cited by Allen Jr., E. 2002. Du Boisian double consciousness: the unsustainable argument. *The Massachusetts Review* [Online], 31(4).

injustice throughout the Arab world (Metres 2013). Arab-American writers have found themselves expected to interpret Arab culture for their readers. For example, In his study, *Immigrant narratives: Orientalism and cultural translation in Arab American [sic] and Arab British literature* (2011), Wail S. Hassan, focuses on Arab immigrant writers who write in both Arabic and English and assume a “privileged position” insofar as it affords these writers “a unique insider’s perspective not only on the Arab world, but also on their adoptive country” (29). According to Hassan (2011), these writers are “Orientalist translators” that have “positioned themselves not only as interpreters of “Orient” to “Occident”, but also as interpreters of the “Occident” both to itself and to the “Orient” – that is to say as two-way [cultural] translators” (ibid.). He situates contemporary Arab-American literary cultural translation within an “Orientalist prism” whereby translation as an interpretive process “attempt[s] to negotiate the complex critical, institutional, and commercial grids that govern the selection, translation, publication, and marketing of Arabic texts in Britain and the U.S.” (33). He thus develops a theory of translation which grapples with the politics, ethics, and epistemology of cultural-linguistic transfer in ways that “help illuminate the subject of immigrant Arab American and Arab British literature [sic]” (29).

However, as an ethnic paradigm situated within American multicultural politics as well as American anti-Arab racism, xenophobia, and marginalization, Arab-American discourse in this study is situated within Homi Bhabha’s concept of cultural translation in the “third space”. Cultural translation provides “the alternative to the agonistic ‘clash of civilizations’ view [...] rooted in the preservation of alterity as a potential for a full specter of hybrid cultural practices” (Longinovic 2002: 8). The “horizon of translatability” becomes a form of resistance which promises an identity that has the possibility to displace the “sacrificial understanding of its own origins” (ibid: 9). Accordingly, Arab-American poetic discourse is located within Bhabha’s poststructuralist/postcolonial approach to the concept of culture as a form of hybridity which results from the continual process of translation internal to any culture, and which in turn “stems from an apprehension of cultural difference” (Byrne 2009: 33).

There is a historical conjunction between the turn toward poststructuralist theory in the early 1970s in the American academy and the demands of traditionally marginalized cultures to be heard, made visible, and represented in the canon, the curriculum, and American literary, social, and cultural history (Erkkila 1995: 565). According to Erkkila:

although the work of minority cultures is not usually represented as “grand theory,” it was the assault on the American academy and the canon by women, blacks, and other marginalized groups that helped to prepare for the reception of deconstruction, Derrida, and other poststructuralist theorists by calling into question the hegemony of the white masculine subject and traditional constructions of western, and specifically “American,” history and literary [theory]. (565)

This split was more specifically a political project of ethnic, gay, and women’s studies in America which came as a challenge to white, male, heterosexist, and Eurocentric terms during the Civil Rights Movement decades. Moreover, the early 1990s witnessed the beginning of a vigorous debate about the inclusion of American postcolonial studies (Schueller 2004). The major components of this debate are “the applicability of the term *postcolonial* to the US, the suitability of the internal colonization model to describe US postcoloniality as well as ethnic studies in general, and more recently, the questioning of center-periphery models in view of globalization and transnational capitalism” (Schueller 2004: 163; emphasis in original). Studies addressing issues of race, ethnicity, and empire in American culture have provided some of the most pertinent contributions to recent scholarship on American postcoloniality (Singh and Schmidt 2000). Postcolonial theory thus provides a significant approach to American ethnic literatures and of those postcolonial regions “significantly influenced by U.S. political or cultural imperialism” (Madsen 2003: 1). From an Arab perspective, America’s cultural dissemination and direct political interference in the Arab world shifted its location to a new Imperial force inherited from previous European colonial states (Kaplan 2002). This assumes that America and the old colonialist states of Europe share interests and capitalist power. Despite this interpolation, this study does not intend to locate Arab-American literature within the premises of postcolonial Anglophone/Arabic literature produced in the “Third World”. For example, poet Pauline Kaldas, in her response to the cultural location of Arab-American poetic discourse, contends that:

The Arab culture that exists in the U.S. is an Arab American culture, which is different from the Arab culture that exists in the Arab world. The poetry that came out in response to 9/11 was therefore an Arab American [*sic*] poetry, written out of the identity and experience of being an Arab living in America. (Appendix A.3: Q1)<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> See results of Survey (Appendix A.3, p.302).

In line with that, I do not intend an approach which locates this literature within historical postcolonial economies, histories, or politics. Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridity, cultural translation and "third space of enunciation" is located in this study within American national confines. The focus of this study is thus "postcoloniality as a cultural allegory" (Radhakrishnan 1993: 751). As such, "[c]ulture is set up as a non-organic, free floating ambience that frees intellectuals and theorists from their solidarities to their regional modes of being" (ibid.). It is within this transcendent space that postcoloniality is actively cultivated as the "cutting edge of cultural theory" (ibid.).

Moreover, America is considered as a location of hybridities rather than one of competing American and other cultures (Maeda 2000). Enclosed notions of sweeping multiculturalism, however, ignore that America has been constructed in part by that which it has sought to exclude. Evidently, the trace of Arab difference remains pertinent in discourses on Arab-American inclusion/exclusion from the American national imaginary. The modernist, liberal approach to difference repeated in American legal, political and social discourses on the cultural defence attends to the value of tolerance while marking some cultural practices as simply wrong in the American context. In other words, this contradiction indicates an ambivalence in originary and legitimating notions of America as a site of "neutral justice" and "reveals the assumed but unnamed superiority of American culture that objectively measures higher than other cultures, especially Eastern ones" (ibid: 98). Moreover, Arab-American poetic discourse and cultural politics are located in this study within the confines of the "internal colonialism" thesis - that communities of colour should be understood as colonies internal to the United States. Rabab Abdulhadi (2011), commenting on Arab-American feminist discourse, contends that:

the fact that our diasporic communities [in America] reproduce the sexism, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Orientalism, and even the Zionism (due to internalized colonialism) of the larger society in which we live is a no-brainer. How could we not internalize colonial trappings when we are interacting with, and our existence is saturated by, colonialism day in and day out both in our homeland, [...], and here in the US, a country that has perfected settler colonialism and its audacious claims of exceptionality? (318)

This discourse is in line with Nadine Naber's post-9/11 conception of Arab-American "internment of the psyche" in which "U.S. imperial structures took on local form in U.S. government practices and media discourses" as a form of "disciplinary mechanism of generalized surveillance that brings the effects of power to the psyche" (2012: 41). Such

Foucauldian discourse analysis implied in Naber's (2012) concept expresses post-9/11 Arab-American political understanding that the policies of the U.S. government positioned Arab diasporas as potential enemies of the nation. Thus, Arab-American post-9/11 poetic discourse attempts to rewrite the Orientalist narrative of Arab life, engage in modes of political and aesthetic resistance, and "worry their connection to and complicity with the nation" (Metres 2013: par. 4).

### *3.1.1 Cultural Hetero-images:*

The imagological analysis of primary material (Section 3.3) is located within notions of the "third space" of cultural translation. The imagological study of national/cultural (auto-/hetero-) images will focus on the contradictory and ambivalent space of cultural negotiations within post-9/11 Arab-American poetic discourse. As a minority discourse, Arab-American poetry is situated within an American multicultural context, i.e. within the tenuous location of Arab-Americans in post-9/11 American political and cultural frameworks of inclusion/exclusion, as well as pervasive anti-Arab stereotypes and Orientalist media and mainstream depictions of Arabs in America. Moreover, the dialogical site or moment of enunciation and identification of cultural translation evident in the literary texts are hybrid locations whereby the negotiation of cultural traditions/potentials of power between "Arab" and/or "American":

[are] not only expected to produce a dissemination of both cultural traditions that leads to a displacement of both groups from their origins. It is also supposed to bring about a common identity, one that is new in its hybridity; it is thus neither the one nor the other. (Ikas and Wagner 2009: 2)

In line with that, the ensuing poetic discourse is exemplar of postcolonial modes of representation whereby the term "postcolonial" is critically interpreted as the "form of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once-colonized Third World comes to be framed in the West" (Bhabha 1998 cited in Mongia 2003: 1). From this perspective, the issues and nuances of the very designation Arab-American, as well as that of Arab-American poetry, become a complex interlacing of the forces of identity and the forces of art. Arab-American poetry compels a slight reordering of "the purity or hierarchy of cultures" (ibid.), while maintaining both its Arab and its American identities, without sacrificing one or the other.

The post-9/11 intensification of racism against Muslim and Arab-Americans reflects “the protean forms and shifts in focus and locus of racism from ethnic and color lines to religious and cultural affiliations or differentials” (Gana 2008: 1573). Acting as a fully political apparatus, racism against Muslim and Arab-Americans serves not only the rationalizing claims of the post-9/11 clampdown on civil liberties but also the derealizing aims of the global war on terror (ibid.). The hetero-image of the “Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim” terrorist trope addressed in this chapter is challenged by Arab-American cultural productions from a hybrid third space of cultural translation. Racism against Muslims and Arabs serves the dual function of (1) rationalizing the suspension of their civil rights in America and (2) derealizing the lethal violence inflicted on their brethren in the Muslim and Arab world (ibid.). Writers such as Libyan-American Khaled Mattawa, Syrian-American Mohja Kahf, Sufi convert Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, and Lebanese-American Philip Metres, amongst others, reach out to non-Muslim American audiences in their attempt to challenge misconceptions about Islam and Arab culture. They call for solidarity central to Muslim and Arab-American inclusion into the American nation as they persistently seek to activate the empathic imagination of their readers and audiences so that they may come to reckon with the unspeakable atrocities of war and violence in the post-9/11 global dispensation.

American cultural representations of Muslims and Arabs prior to 9/11 are replete with anti-Arab stereotypes and Orientalist images conflating Islam with Arabness and depicting both as a threat to American/Western democracy (see Ghareeb 1983; Semmerling 2006; Shaheen 2008; Alsultany 2012). The immigration lawmaking trajectory described in Chapter One of thesis, underlaid as it is by the geo-politics of suspicion between America and the Middle East and the post-9/11 war on terror, produced the conditions of possibility of racing Islam and “*Islamplifying*” race while politicizing Muslims and Arabs alike, conferring on them, by virtue of their religious and cultural affiliations or differentials, a capacious political significance where the stakes are high (Gana 2008: 1577). So high are the stakes that Arab-American scholar Nouri Gana asserts: “comic book heroes such as Captain America now battle it out with Islamic terrorists who are depicted as assaulting Christian-American values in imaginary towns such as Centerville” (ibid.). According to Gana (2008):

not only comic books but also reality shows, sitcoms, musical videos, and above all the Hollywood film industry joined forces with mercenary intellectuals and corporate media neocons to paint American identity politics

in radical opposition to Islam, Arabs, and the Muslim-Arab Middle East even before the attacks of 9/11. (ibid.)

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), and, more recently, Jack Shaheen's (2008) post-9/11 study on Arab representations in American media, *Guilty: Hollywood's verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, amongst others, have both shown the central role that the media and popular culture play in pitting Islam against the West and staging the disposability of Muslim and Arab lives on screen, preparatory to making unreal the human toll of the war on terror and of every other war that preceded it, including the Gulf War of 1990-91. Similarly, recent studies have convincingly demonstrated the everyday reach of anti-Arab racism in America (see Akram and Johnson 2002; Salaita 2006; Jamal and Naber 2008). Perhaps what is so depressingly unfortunate about the Muslim and Arab American cultural scene, at least since its post-9/11 mapping into prominence, according to Gana (2008) "is that it was distorted at the outset by the ensuing backlash, the fanaticisms of the moment of exception, and the vengeful exigencies of the nationwide work of mourning" (1577). As a result, Muslim and Arab-American literary and cultural productions have been remarkably counter-narrative, reactionary, and corrective in their overall propensity. The subject matter of these products has been charted not only by sanctioned racism and licensed visual and cultural vilification of Muslims and Arabs but also by a residual neo-orientalist political economy of publishing and reception that conceives of Muslim women's or men's writings almost exclusively along the lines of what Mohja Kahf suggestively calls victim or escapee narratives. The works or oral diatribes of self-professed secular Muslims such as Ibn Warraq, Irshad Manji, Wafa Sultan, Nonie Darwish, and Hirsi Ali have become hot commodities in mainstream media (ibid.). They cast a picture of Islam as patriarchal and tyrannical and of Muslim women as submissive victims or rebellious escapees; they also have undermined the credibility of the decolonial Muslim and Arab voice in the West. Perhaps Norma Khouri's tailor-made memoir victim-cum-escapee narrative, *Honor Lost* (2003), for example, is most expressive of the complicity among the self-serving bashers of Islam, the publishing industry, and the largely neo-conservative readership they have produced, catered for, and expanded (Gana op. cit.). Hollywood also has a long history of stereotyping the Arab "Other". For example, depictions of Arab men are figured as the religious fundamentalist prototype who sees in terrorism the only way to spread Islam over the entire globe (Banerjee 2008). Hollywood depictions of Arab culture is distorted, portraying gender relations, for example, only in terms of misogyny. Also, terrorism and backwardness have become synonymous with Arab culture.

Arab-/Muslim-American writers try to portray religious cultural practice as cultural translation, challenging in the process the negative hetero-images of Arab culture prevalent in American cultural productions. In *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), the poems of Mohja Kahf are primarily concerned with demystifying Muslim lives and practices in America and in altering misconceptions about Muslim women. These aims fall in line with Kahf's scholarly work, specifically her book *Western representations of the Muslim woman: from Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), and her fiction, most recently the novel *Girl in a tangerine scarf* (2006). Aiming to educate non-Muslim/Arab audiences and to empower fellow Arabs/Muslims in America, contemporary Arab-American poems challenge the hetero-images of the terrorist Muslim/Arab "Other" trope.

### 3.2 Cultural Context: Arab-Americans and U.S. Cultural Politics

#### 3.2.1 American – Middle Eastern Cultural Locations:

Recent events of violence, war, and terrorism, culminating in the attacks of 9/11, have dictated the parameters of American-Middle Eastern socio-political and cultural relations. The Middle East has played a major role in American foreign policy and cultural production, from movies to talk shows to literature. Melani McAlister, in her *Epic encounters: culture, media, and U.S. interests in the Middle East since 1945* (2005) situates American-Middle East relations in overarching paradigms that have helped to shape American involvements in the region. These are mainly: (1) "military and strategic": official American policy toward the Middle East has generally focused on material advantage and political alliances articulated in Cold War tactics; (2) "U.S. support for Israel": American policymakers have consistently indicated both strong support for the existence of Israel and a commitment to a multifaceted alliance with Israel; and (3) "U.S. policy [...] focus on oil": access to that oil, at favourable prices, became a preeminent postwar foreign policy goal (ibid: 32-3). Consequently, American – Middle Eastern cultural locations are entrenched in a politico-economic mindset.

Moreover, an Orientalist ideology inherited from Europe dispersed itself in American representations of Arabs/Muslims and in American academia which "divides (yet connects) all the former philological and European-based disciplines" of Orientalist thought (Said 1979: 285; 2003 ed.). This "Latest Phase" of Orientalism, according to Said, manifests itself in America through popular images and social science representations of the Arab Other,

cultural relations with the East, representations of Islam, and American foreign policy. Even though American Orientalism differs both in scope and outlook than its European predecessor, a differentiation Edward Said makes clear in his argument, “the ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’” and “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” still prevails in American relations with the Middle East (1979: 2-3; 2003 ed.). Political and cultural conditions in America produced what McAlister (2005) calls “a post-Orientalist model” of representing the Middle East for American audiences (40). This rhetoric of American national expansionism worked to establish America as different from the old colonial powers. Such representations were among the many reasons why so many Americans supported U.S. military intervention in the Middle East even before 9/11, and why so many Americans, both liberals and conservatives, expressed so little concern over the impact of American-led war on Arab and Muslim life (Naber 2012).

From an Arab perspective, America shifted from a potential political ally against the Ottoman occupation and European colonial hegemony at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a neo-colonial, imperial force which threatens Arab/Islamic identity. Various trends in postcolonial<sup>99</sup> Arab thought, from the secular nationalist stance to Marxists and Islamists, hoping to wrestle power away from European countries, anticipated that America would utilize its political power in a constructive manner in the region and push towards independent Arab national sovereignty (Bernhardsson 2007). In the interwar years, however, America started to make its presence in the region known culturally, politically, and economically. America also became more directly involved in Middle East oil. The U.S. government and corporations “aggressively sought to maximize American entrance to Middle Eastern oil fields, hardly acting in the spirit of disinterested benevolence as in previous years but guided by the spirit of interested capitalism” (ibid: 4). American intervention in the region, which gained greater momentum after World War II, functioned on many fronts: Cold War political tactics, support for despotic Arab governments, the Iranian hostage situation in the 1970s, military involvement in Lebanon which led to the U.S. embassy attack in Beirut in 1982, and unprecedented political, military and economic support for Israel, to name a few. This involvement has engendered “considerable resentment among the people of the

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<sup>99</sup> I use the term postcolonial in this study in line with Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab’s (2010) definition of the term, i.e. “the time following the end of official colonialism and formal independence” in the Arab world (5). (Op. cit.).

[region]” (ibid: 5). America was perceived in the region to behave hypocritically and in a manner similar to former imperial powers.

As an ethnic group with deep diasporic affiliations, Americans of Arab descent felt the full force of these transnational developments in the “homeland” as well as American foreign policy toward the Middle East/Arab world. Global events in the decades following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and growing tensions between the Palestinians and Israelis as well as unpopular media, academic, and mainstream American representations of Islam had great repercussions on the Arab-American community, both on assimilated first- and second-generation Arab-Americans as well as on the diverse new immigrant wave from the Arab world after the immigration reform Act of 1965. Mainly, Americans of Arab descent wishing to downplay their ancestral roots have found assimilation in America to be firmly within reach. Yet, Arab-Americans who have ventured to stand out ethnically or religiously have faced difficult times finding their way in America’s multicultural society (Shain 1996). In the decades following the two major Arab-Israeli Wars as well as the oil boycotts of the 1970s, Arab-Americans faced “rising forces of hostility, violence, and discrimination” (Majaj 1999: 321). The diverse population of Arab-Americans today often finds itself still negotiating a socio-political context that demonizes Arab and Muslim culture while implicitly excluding Arab-Americans from perceptions of American identity (ibid.).

### 3.2.2 Anti-Arab Stereotypes in America:

In “The Latest Phase” of *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said tells us that “[s]ince World War II, and more noticeably after each of the Arab-Israeli wars, the Arab Muslim has become a figure in American popular culture, even as in the academic world, in the policy planner’s world, and in the world of business” (285; 2003 ed.). A study carried out in 1981 documents such representations of the Arab in America.<sup>100</sup> A large portion of respondents in the study held Arabs to be “‘barbaric, cruel’ (44%), ‘treacherous, cunning’ (49%), ‘mistreat women’ (51%), ‘warlike, bloodthirsty’ (50%); similarly, respondents viewed ‘most’ or ‘all’ Arabs [to be] ‘anti-Christian’ (40%) [and/or] ‘anti-Semitic’ (40%)” (cited in Majaj 1999: 321). A brief overview of the literature review of Arab/Muslim representations in American media and popular culture long before 9/11 and after delineates anti-Arab/Muslim stereotypes

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<sup>100</sup> Shelly, S. 1981. The image of the Arab in America: analysis of a poll on American attitudes. *Middle East Journal*, 35(2), pp. 143-62. Cited in Majaj (1999: 321).

entrenched in Orientalist depictions of the Arab/Muslim Other, a culture almost antithetical to an American, Eurocentric national culture (Ghareeb 1983; Terry 1985; Semmerling 2006; Rugh 2006; Shaheen 2008; Alsultany 2012). In line with that, McAlister (2005) argues that Americans' association of the Middle East shifted to "a place of Muslim terror through news reporting on the Munich Olympics (1972), the Arab oil embargo (1973), the Iran hostage crisis (1979-80), and airplane hijackings in the 1970's and 1980's [*sic*]" (200). Moreover, these significant shifts toward portraying Arabs and/or Muslims as terrorists since the 1970s are, according to Alsultany (2012), evident not only in Hollywood filmmaking but also in American corporate news media and foreign policy incentives. Alsultany asserts that "[t]he news media came to play a crucial role in making the Middle East, and Islam in particular, meaningful to Americans as a place that breeds terrorism" (9). Media representations of Arabs/Middle Easterners as Muslim terrorists, all of which terms came to be used interchangeably, enabled "a particular racial [and cultural] Othering that would not operate in the same way through another conflation, such as , for example, Arab/Christian, Arab/Jew, or Indonesian/Muslim" (ibid.). According to Alsultany:

This recurring conflation, advanced by U.S. government and media discourses [...], serves a larger narrative about an evil Other that can be powerfully and easily mobilized during times of war. (9)

Such representations draw on Orientalist narratives of patriarchal societies and oppressed women, of Muslim fundamentalism and anti-Semitism, of irrational violence and suicide bombings. Moreover, with this conflation established, "it is easy to conceptualize the United States as the inverse of everything that is "Arab/Muslim": the United States is thus a land of equality and democracy, culturally diverse and civilized, a land of progressive men and liberated women" (ibid.).

In his review of Hollywood depictions of Arabs in film and American popular culture, "*Evil*" Arabs in American popular film: *Orientalist fear* (2006), Tim J. Semmerling places emphasis on cultural and ideological prejudice underlying the use of anti-Arab stereotypes in major media representations of the Arab Other. According to Semmerling (2006), Orientalist stereotypes depicted in American media representations of the Arab Other function as "part of the exercise of power over those foreign peoples and objects that they confront" (6). Moreover, such stereotypes, according to Semmerling, arise from an ideological fear of an alien culture, and have become "common and intriguing entertainment themes in [American] cinematic portrayals of "evil" Arabs from the 1970s on into the present and, as such, have

added to [...] socially allowable phobia toward the Arabs” (7). Such images carry reverberating effects on the Arab-American community today. As a practical condition for citizenship in America’s multicultural society, Arab-Americans are “expected to assure their fellow nationals that they belong, that they are loyal, that they are not a threat to national security, and so on” (Baker and Shryock 2009: 14). American anti-Arab stereotypes and political caricatures provided convenient shorthand in the identification of Arab-American ethnicity (Ghareeb 1983). Blacks, women and each of the immigrant groups have been stereotyped in the American media, and the attitudes created toward these groups have not been completely erased (ibid.). However, while the media have, through an “evolutionary process”, sought to discontinue pejorative characterization of ethnic groups, Arabs, and as a result Arab-Americans, still suffer from malevolent and inaccurate characterization (ibid: xv). Arabs and Muslims are thus associated with danger, and their hold on American cultural citizenship<sup>101</sup> and its legal protections is jeopardized. Likewise, their normative status as Americans is vulnerable to critique (Baker and Shryock 2009).

### 3.2.3 The Aftermath of September 11, 2001:

The shape of American responses to 9/11, according to McAlister (2005), “emerged not only from rational debates about policy but also through the cultural work done by media accounts, popular culture, and television images” (268). The Bush administration’s characterization of terrorists at the time as those who “hate freedom”, and certain nation-states as part of an “Axis of Evil”, was “fundamentally aligned with [a] kind of morals-based vision of international politics” which pitted “American Democracy” versus “Arab/Islamic terrorism” (McAlister 2005: 289). Post-9/11 representations of the Arab/Muslim Other is consistent with Mahmoud Mamdani’s claim that public and political discourse since the 9/11 attacks have involved an ideological mindset entrenched in Cold War tactics which distinguishes between “good” and “bad” Muslims (Mamdani 2004). Such discourse arrogated that “all Muslims are assumed to be bad until they perform and prove their allegiance to the U.S. nation” (Alsultany 2012: 15). For example, post-9/11 representations of Arabs in

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<sup>101</sup> Cultural citizenship is used here in accordance with recent scholarship that defines the term to accommodate expanded, multicultural conceptions of political belonging. As such, cultural citizenship “allows minority groups to establish special communities in which they feel safe and at home, while still situating themselves in the broad context of continental American society” (Flores and Benmayor 1997: 13 cited by Baker and Shryock 2009: 11).

American media includes recurring Orientalist depictions of “villains and terrorists”, “Sheikhs and Harems” (Semmerling 2006; Shaheen 2008), as well as more recent “simplified complex” representations of Arab/Muslim terrorism (Alsultany 2012). According to Alsultany, post-9/11 media representations of the Arab Other:

attempt to make representations complex, yet do so in a simplified way; they are predictable strategies that can be relied on if the plot involves an Arab or Muslim terrorist but are a new standard alternative to [...] the stock ethnic villains of the past. (28)

As such “bad” Arabs and Muslims are the terrorists, and their “good” counterparts are those who adhere to an American definition of Arabness/Islam, i.e. “those who help the U.S. government fight terrorism” (ibid.). Moreover, according to Alsultany, post-9/11 “strategic representations” of Arabs are the representational mode of the “so-called post-race era, signifying a new era of racial representation” (21). That is, these representations appear at face value to challenge or complicate former ready-made derogatory stereotypes and contribute to an American multicultural or “post-race illusion” (ibid.). Such representational strategies include: “Inserting Patriotic Arab or Muslim Americans [*sic*]”, “Sympathizing with the Plight of Arab or Muslim Americans after 9/11”, “Challenging the Arab/Muslim Conflation with Diverse Muslim Identities”, “Flipping the Enemy”, “Humanizing the Terrorist”, “Projecting a Multicultural U.S. Society”, and “Fictionalizing the Middle Eastern or Muslim Country” (ibid.). Most of these representations are embedded in an ideological mindset that deliberately portrays the “civilised” Arab (i.e. the “good” Arab who complies with American, western definitions of civility) as opposed to the terrorist, backward Arab over there, beyond civilization.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Arab- and Muslim-Americans have been compelled, time and again, to apologize for acts they did not commit, to condemn acts they never condoned, and to openly profess loyalties that, for most American citizens, are merely assumed (Howell and Shryock 2003). Arabs in America have been forced to distance themselves from Arab political movements, ideologies, causes, religious organizations, and points of view that are currently at odds with U.S. policy. According to Howell and Shryock (2003), in a post-9/11 American national context:

Perhaps the greatest changes, [...], are occurring in realms of political and personal identification, where Arab and Muslim Americans must re-imagine

their communities in order to locate them securely in (national) space and represent them effectively to others. (455)

In line with that, the Arab-American community as well as major Arab-American social, political, and cultural organizations are eager to assert a sense of national belonging that is demanded of them. However, “every attempt to assert American identity must involve a simultaneous stigmatization of any sense of Arab identity that includes a strong identification with religious beliefs, political ideologies, or cultural practices that are genuinely alternative to those prevalent in America today” (ibid: 456). Thus, to reassert their status as “good” and “loyal” American citizens, Arab-Americans must distance themselves not only from negative stereotypes but from a culture perceived in the American mindset as backward and threatening.

Post-9/11 American representations of Arabs and political discourse on Arab/Muslim terrorism are not a historical anomaly. Such discourses represent what Nadine Naber (2006) identifies as a recurring process of the construction of the “Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim” Other as embodying a culture and/or religion “that is inherently different and inferior to ‘American’ ‘culture’ and/or ‘religion’” (236). This view of Arabness/Islam as the “antithesis of the American way of life” that spread after 9/11 is pervasive in a white, European Christian American culture (Majid 2012: 96). Even though President Bush and the American government made countless efforts to calm public anger and discourage retribution against Arabs or Muslims after the attacks, phrases such as “the Muslim rage”, “the threat of Islam”, “what is inside the Muslim fundamentalist mind”, and numerous others used in mainstream scholarly and journalistic writings reveal “Orientalist and racist depictions of Islam and Muslims” (Moallem 2005: 8). According to Moallem, “words such as *jihad*, *fatwa*, *faghih*, *imam*, *ayatollah*, *chador*, *shahid*, and *sharia* are frequently (mis)used [in America] to refer to Islam as a world of religious fixities, rigidities, and barbaric traditions that is tyrannical, violent, patriarchal, and antimodern by nature” (8; emphasis in original). According to this viewpoint, Islamic fundamentalism has become a generic signifier in America used “relentlessly to single out the Muslim other in its irrational, morally inferior, and barbaric masculinity and its passive, victimized, and submissive femininity” (ibid.).

### 3.3 Simultaneity and juxtaposition: Hybrid identities<sup>102</sup>

#### 3.3.1 *Mohja Kahf: E-mails from Scheherazad*

Mohja Kahf, born in Damascus in 1967, is a Syrian-American poet and novelist. She moved with her family to America in 1971 and grew up in the Midwest. Currently associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas, Kahf is an activist involved in the tragic events of the current Syrian War as well as Arab- and Islamic-American communities.<sup>103</sup> Her own conception of Islamic feminism<sup>104</sup> influences the themes of her poetry and writing as do other issues facing American Arabs/Muslims. She explores both important historical female figures in Islam as well as contemporary Muslim women. Historical figures prominent in Kahf's poetry include *Hagar*, the wife of the prophet Abraham, *Khadija* and *Aisha*, wives of the prophet Muhammad, and *Fatima*, daughter of the prophet Muhammad, as well as mythological figures from Arabian legends such as *Scheherazade* from the *1001 Nights* (Macfarquhar 2007; The Poetry Foundation 2011). Kahf is the author of the poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003) and the novel *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006). Her nonfiction work includes *Western representation of the Muslim woman: from Termagant to Odalisque* (1999).<sup>105</sup>

The poem analyzed in this section, "Little Mosque Poems",<sup>106</sup> first published in 2003 on the online forum and magazine, *Muslim Wake Up*, is from the anthology *Shattering stereotypes: Muslim women speak out* (2005: 116-123) edited by Fawzia Afzal-Khan and introduced by Nawal El Saadawi. Set in a post-9/11 American context, the poem takes the form of embodied authoritative agency (Dowdy 2007). The poem's confrontational tone reflects the experience of a practicing Arab/Muslim-American woman and the authority borne of that experience. By speaking out against hegemonic practices prevalent in Arab/Islamic culture(s), Kahf's speaker-poet unsettles American stereotypes of the victimized

<sup>102</sup> Imagological Analysis of Primary Material.

<sup>103</sup> The mass protests which began against the government in 2011 in Syria have developed into a full scale Civil War in that country. The Syrian conflict has been growing in intensity and scope since then, with the United Nations estimating more than 100,000 dead and millions displaced. BBC News Middle East 2014. *Syria Profile* [Online].

<sup>104</sup> The term Muslim feminism/Islamic feminism is used here in its hybrid form as a feminist location which "brings together two epithets whose juxtaposition describes the emergence of a new, complex self-positioning that celebrates multiple belongings" (Cooke 2000: 93). This location "confirms belonging in a religious community while allowing for activism on behalf of and with other women" (ibid.). As such, Islamic feminism does not describe a fixed identity but creates a new, contingent subject position.

<sup>105</sup> Arab-American/Muslim-American feminist discourse is the focus of chapter four of thesis.

<sup>106</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.6.

and passively obedient Muslim woman “who is brutalized by a patriarchal culture and needs to be saved” (Alsultany 2012: 71). The poem’s negotiation of a subjective religious identity and autonomy opens up the space for cultural translation in its hybrid form. Recognized as both a creative and destructive process, the cultural translation evident in the poem exists in the form of tension between forces of abrogation and appropriation of the old and new simultaneously. Located between the regulating discourses of Islam and post-9/11 Islamophobia (among others) in America, the third space of enunciation in Kahf’s discourse is situated within a Muslim feminist critique of an androcentric and exclusionary cultural praxis:

In my little mosque  
 there is no room for me  
 to pray. I am  
 turned away faithfully  
 five  
 times a day.  
 My little mosque:  
 so meager  
 in resources, yet  
 so eager  
 to turn away  
 a woman  
 or a stranger.  
 My little mosque  
 is penniless, behind on rent.  
 Yet it is rich in anger –  
 every Friday, coins of fear and hate  
 are generously spent.  
 My little mosque is poor yet  
 every week we mosque-goers donate  
 to buy another curtain  
 to partition off the women,  
 or to pave another parking space. (“Little Mosque Poems”: 116-117)

The authoritative voice in the opening stanza sets the tone of Kahf’s discourse, manifested in mocking the underlying structures within Islam that reproduce gender inequality and exclusion. Kahf speaks back to an overzealous strand of thinking in Islamic culture<sup>107</sup> that instigates “fear and hate”. These attributes are designated in the poem as “little”, in order to

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<sup>107</sup> Islamic culture used here refers to “the practices, customs, and symbolic systems that have developed since the religion was founded, many of which are often accessed by individuals who do not practice Islam formally, [...]”. Definition cited in Rega (2014: 290).

accentuate the narrow-mindedness/rigidity that govern such practices. Her critique of the holy space of the mosque as symbol of dominance allows for a relocation and reinscription of cultural norms in order to uncover the oppressive elements in Islamic culture which are responsible for Islam's notorious reputation in the West, simultaneously allowing for cultural translation and decentralization of authority. While preserving her position as a practicing Muslim, the speaker-poet unravels the exorbitant objects of discrimination which undermine Islam as spirituality and allow for vehement criticism of the faith by outsiders:

I go to the Mosque of the Righteous  
 I have been going there all my life.  
 I have been the Cheerleader of the Righteous Team.  
 I have mocked the visiting teams cruelly.  
 I am the worst of those I complain about:  
 I am a former Miss Mosque Banality.  
 I would like to build  
 a little mosque  
 without a dome  
 or minaret.  
 I'd hang a sign  
 over the door:  
 Bad Muslims  
 welcome here.  
 Come in, listen  
 to some music,  
 sharpen  
 the soul's longing,  
 have a cigarette. ("Little Mosque Poems": 117)

Kahf clearly denounces the hierarchical system evident in an Islamic mindset which claims superiority over other cultures/religions/peoples and which leads in turn to fundamentalism as well as ostracization and oppression of women and those who are deemed as infidels, apostates or non-practicing Muslims, for example. The speaking "I" shifts from a position of conformity to a position of dissent which allows for cultural translation in an American liberal setting. By disrupting her former allegiance to confining cultural structures within Islam, she allows for a new Muslim space to emerge, one that is progressive, inclusive and embedded in emancipatory locations. In Bhabha's terms, Kahf's discursive position of enunciation becomes a space of contradiction, ambiguity, and disavowal of cultural authority, allowing in the process possibilities of supplementary sites of resistance and negotiation. She rejects her former understanding of Islam as a "banality" and she admits being once indoctrinated and confined by such exclusionary and constricting propagations. Instead, Kahf

creates an imagined “little mosque without a dome or minaret” in contradistinction to the hegemonic space attributed to a patriarchal cultural system, implementing an emancipatory Arab/Islamic auto-image in the process, an auto-image of Islamic practice which is inclusive and democratic in its practice. While working from within Islam, the speaker-poet asserts a semiotic perspective that opposes former “monologic”<sup>108</sup> policies which deny the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities towards “the soul’s longing”. By so doing, she denounces a finite, bounded notion of Muslimness, and opens up a space where Islam is all encompassing and inclusive.

This is elucidated further in the poem:

I went to the mosque  
 when no one was there  
 and startled two angels  
 coming out of a broom closet.  
 "Are they gone now?" one said.  
 They looked relieved.  
 My great big mosque  
 has a chandelier  
 big as a Christmas tree  
 and a jealously guarded  
 lock and key.  
 I wonder why  
 everyone in it  
 looks just like me.  
 My little mosque  
 has a bouncer at the door.  
 You have to look pious  
 to get in.  
 My little mosque  
 has a big sense of humor.  
 Not.  
 I went to the mosque  
 when no one was there.  
 The prayer space was soft and serene.  
 I heard a sound like lonely singing  
 or quiet sobbing. I heard a leafy rustling.  
 I looked around.  
 A little Qur'an  
 on a low shelf  
 was reciting itself. (“Little Mosque Poems”: 117-118)

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<sup>108</sup> Term borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) theory of the carnivalesque and the dialogic imagination in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics*. Cited in Aschkenasy, N. 2007. Ruth and Bakhtin’s theory of carnival. *Journal of Biblical Literature* [Online], 126(3).

Generally speaking, the cultural location of Islam-*as-faith*, or private belief/spirituality in contradistinction with Islam as “political practice”<sup>109</sup>, constructed in Kahf’s poetic discourse can be classified as distinguishing between a private and public sphere. The private sphere covers personal belief which is not mediated by political ideology or external compulsion. On the other hand, the public sphere is not so much about religious belief but about rules and regulations at the expense of personal freedom and it is based on coercion. The latter (public) sphere can be governed by elected officials/religious scholars. The former (private) sphere cannot be regulated as faith is personal, and no one has a right to dictate creed. Kahf implies a distinction between the “divine discourse” presented in the Qur’an and the ways by which Islam has been socially and culturally applied and regulated (by a “jealously guarded lock and key”). This formulation of the tension between the “ideal” and the “real” contains the essence of Kahf’s hybrid discourse within the confines of cultural translation. She rejects piety dictated by patriarchal subordination and allows for a reinterpretation of religious text based on spirituality and human rights away from confounding structures of subjugation and alienation. In line with that, the holy Qur’an and, consequently, Islam, as a faith, affirm and support human rights. For example, Islam recognizes all the religions that preceded Islam, the final revealed religion. It also respects the faithful followers of those preceding religions, and “grants them all human rights as long as they themselves respect Islam and do not fight against its followers or ally themselves with its enemies” (Abu Zayd 2006: 131-2). The speaker-poet in “Little Mosque Poems” does not condemn Islam as faith, but offers a reinterpretation of religious spaces/texts which transgress the political/official ascription of Islam, providing release from oppressive etiquette. It is through their interpretation of Islam that many Muslims are boxing themselves and their religion in. The effectiveness of Kahf’s cultural translation as such depends upon a rewriting which exposes coercive practices in Islamic culture in her attempt to translate this culture to a Western, multicultural society and to create a more balanced, progressive auto-image of Islam.

She continues:

[...]  
 My little mosque used to be democratic  
 with a rotating imam

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<sup>109</sup> The term “political Islam” is used here as a scholarly definition which has been adopted by many scholars in order to “identify this seemingly unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics and thus to distinguish these practices from the forms of personal piety, belief and ritual conventionally subsumed in Western scholarship under the unmarked category “Islam” (Hirschkind 1997: 12).

we chose from among us every month.  
 Now my little mosque has an appointed imam  
 with a classical training from abroad.  
 No one can dispute his superior knowledge.  
 We used to use our minds  
 to understand Qur'an.  
 My little mosque discourages  
 that sort of thing these days.  
 We have official salaried translators  
 for God.  
 [...]

Once God applied  
 for a janitor position at our mosque,  
 but the board turned him down  
 because he wasn't a practicing  
 Muslim.  
 [...]

Once an ignorant Bedouin  
 got up and started to pee against a wall  
 in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.  
 The pious protective Companions leapt  
 to beat him.  
 The Prophet bade them stop.  
 A man is entitled to finish a piss  
 even if he is an uncouth idiot,  
 and there are things  
 more important in a mosque than ritual purity. ("Little Mosque Poems": 118-  
 120)

In her attempt to open up ("translate") Islam-*as-faith*, Kahf exposes the false consciousness evident in a restrictive Islamic culture which constricts democracy and critical thinking, and associates such conduct with the old culture, perhaps the form of Islam practiced in the Arab world: "Now my little mosque has an appointed imam / with a classical training from abroad". Kahf's hybrid discourse, a democratic, multicultural re-assessment of Islamic culture, reformulates the religion and promotes a moderate Islam, one that can fit into a liberal, modern worldview. This discourse is also reminiscent of progressive yet marginalised Arab debates about the problem of heritage/tradition (*turath*) in Arab/Islamic culture pervasive in Arab secular as well as feminist critiques (Kassab 2010). Such debates, poised between spurious dualities such as modernity vs. tradition, rationality vs. faith, technology vs. culture, and Islam vs. secularity, highlight the "static" or unchanging nature of Islamic culture practiced in the Arab world at large. For example, in his study, *The constant and the*

*changing: a study in conformist and innovative [trends] by the Arabs* (vol. 1, “The Foundations”)<sup>110</sup> (1986), Syrian-Lebanese Arabic literary scholar and poet Ali Ahmed Said (Adonis) identifies two currents in Islamic-Arab traditions: the “Constant” (*al-thabit*) and the “Changing” (*al-mutahawwil*). The “Constant”, according to Adonis, is a current based on revelation, i.e. the literal interpretation of Qur’anic verse, and provides the foundation of Arabic civilisation/culture (*thaqafa*). It also ascribes to itself a priority of claim to authority (*aḥaqqiyya*) based on its own interpretation of the past, and rejects every other reading that does not conform to it. The “Changing”, on the other hand, is a current that refuses to accept the claim to authority (*aḥaqqiyya*) of the “Constant”, and relies on its own differing interpretation of that same past. In this, the processes that characterise the “Changing” are those particular to a current that operates outside the ‘Islamic’ establishment (Adonis 1986 cited in Lahoud 2005: 8). Adonis believes that this dynamic has been at work throughout Islamic history. However, a combination of factors, including the political theology, tribal affiliations and political circumstances in which the “Constant” has been enmeshed, has resulted in it having a position of dominance (Lahoud 2005). As an American, Kahf has more freedom to refute uncritical conformity to the “Constant” prevalent in the old culture. Speaking from within an Arab/Islamic location, she transgresses the “Constant” (i.e. “essential”) practices in the culture which have become the pervasive image of Islam in the West as well as a scapegoat for affiliating Arab/Islamic culture with terrorism and backwardness. Her hybrid American reinterpretation presents a more democratic, personal approach to Islam, one that is not antithetical to Western norms. Kahf’s translation opens up a space of discursive contestation that places the authority of Islam within a perspective of cultural relativism. In other words, Kahf’s advocacy of a democratic and critical approach to religion transplants the cultural incubation of Islam nurtured overseas.

Moreover, the human, liberal dimension of (Islamic) faith is clearly separated in the poem from its “ritual purity”, characterized by traditional religious, hegemonic practices which have led to unprecedented levels of ignorance and intolerance in much of the Muslim world as well as pervasive, monolithic (mis-)representations of Islam in the West, especially after the events of 9/11. The separation of religion from politics, “faith” from subjugation, is precisely where the problem lies according to Kahf’s discourse. In other words, there must be

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<sup>110</sup> Adonis 1986. *Al-Thabit wa al-Mutahawwil: Baath fi al-Ittibā’ wa al-Ibdā’ ‘indā’ al-‘Arab (I) – al-Uṣūl* (The constant and the changing: a study in conformist and innovative [trends] by the Arabs (vol. 1) – “The foundations”), cited by Lahoud, N. 2005. *Political thought in Islam: a study in intellectual boundaries*. New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon.

a clear separation between religion as faith and religion as law in order for religion to blossom and progress. In the absence of this, creed becomes a religious and political weapon of persecution. *Shari'a* law (i.e. divine law) is human law and there is nothing divine about it. Islamic clerics (“official salaried translators”) seek to foist *Shari'a* law on everyone, so much so that a fissure has been created within the societies of the Muslim world itself, to the extent that this ideology is no longer commensurate with the needs of the people and has to be imposed by force. Kahf’s discourse is thus not an anomaly in Arab culture. Its hybrid position in a liberal American (Western) context gives it the freedom to be made public without persecution. Also relevant here is the fact that many Evangelist and conservative responses to the 9/11 attacks blamed Islam itself for the attacks and for the outpouring of conflict between the Muslim-majority world and the West. Such discourses have presented Islam as a theologically autocratic religion immersed in violence. Kahf’s discourse is manifested within the confines of cultural translation as it overcomes the pervasive negative image of Islam (in specific) and Arab culture (in general) in Western representations and opens up the culture to more progressive interpretations, separating Islam-*as-faith* from the way it is practiced:

My little mosque thinks  
the story I just narrated  
cannot possibly be true  
and a poet like me cannot possibly  
have studied Sahih al-Bukhari  
My little mosque  
thinks a poem like this must be  
written by the Devil  
in cahoots with the Zionists,  
NATO, and the current U.S. administration,  
as part of the Worldwide Orientalist Plot  
to Discredit Islam.  
Don't they know  
at my little mosque  
that this is a poem  
written in the mirror  
by a lover?  
My little mosque  
is fearful to protect itself  
from the bricks of bigots  
through its window.  
Doesn't my little mosque know  
the way to protect its windows  
is to open its doors?  
I love my little mosque,  
ego-ridden, cracked and flawed

as it is,  
 and I know  
 the bricks of bigots  
 are real.  
 I wish I could protect my little mosque  
 by hiding it behind my body  
 My little mosque loves Arab men  
 with pure accents and beards.  
 Everyone else is welcome  
 as long as  
 they understand that real Islam  
 has to come from an Arab man. ("Little Mosque Poems": 120-121)

Kahf here is engaged in what Miriam Cooke (2000) defines as a "multiple critique", a multilayered discourse that allows Muslim women to "engage with and criticize the various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them while making sure they are not caught in their own rhetoric" (100).<sup>111</sup> Kahf's speaker-poet constructs an emancipatory third space, one based on a liberal ontology which repudiates constricting patriarchal cultural norms affiliated with an Arabo-Muslim culture, asserting that openness to change is necessary for cultural as well as personal survival and progress. As an American-Muslim, Kahf is aware of the pervasive, post-9/11 stereotypes that so often imprison Arab/Muslims behind walls of misperception. She implies that it is not Islam as a religion that is coercive but the way it is implemented in the culture. However, she does so at the risk of being reprimanded by her own (Arab/Muslim) community and deemed inauthentic/heretical, an anti-Muslim bigot conspiring against the faith. Her hybrid positioning places her in a dubious location in the eyes of fellow Muslims as an outsider who "cannot possibly / have studied *Sahih Al-Bukhari*". For those who staunchly practice the prophetic traditions (*hadith*) of Islam dictated in holy scriptures such as the aforementioned *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, one of the six major books of prophetic traditions in Sunni Islam, which has been handed down through generations by Muslim scholars<sup>112</sup>, Kahf's auto-criticism and hybrid location could be anticipated by her own community as "part of the World Wide Orientalist Plot / to Discredit Islam". Situated at the nexus of religion, place, hybridity and feminist practice, Kahf's speaker-poet transcends the "dialectic polarities" of both, Western representations of Islam as well as confining communal practices. She asserts and balances multiple overlapping and

<sup>111</sup> See Cooke, M. 2000. Multiple critique: Islamic feminist rhetorical strategies. *Nepantla* [Online], 1(1).

<sup>112</sup> Al-Almany, M. 2009. *Translation of Sahih Al Bukhari*, translated by Khan, M.M. [Online]. Available from: : [https://archive.org/stream/TranslationOfSahihAlBukhari/IslamicEnglishBook.pdf\\_509/TranslationOfSahihAlBukhari-IslamicEnglishBook#page/n3/mode/2up](https://archive.org/stream/TranslationOfSahihAlBukhari/IslamicEnglishBook.pdf_509/TranslationOfSahihAlBukhari-IslamicEnglishBook#page/n3/mode/2up).

often contradictory allegiances in order to speak effectively to, with, and against several audiences in her attempt to translate Islam to the Western Other. She rejects silence, while holding tight to her Muslim identity. She challenges and deconstructs traditional, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic culture that have served to construct norms that exclude her as a woman, as she simultaneously defends her ethnic and religious communities against detractors. In other words, by liberating Muslim women, she attempts to liberate Islam from misconceptions and derogations in a post-9/11 American context. These moments of rupture and decentering allow for new configurations of Islam and Muslim women which disturb the calculations of power and knowledge. Kahf's hybrid position thus refutes anti-Muslim bigotry in post-9/11 America as well as the state of fear/infantilism that pervades the Muslim mind. Her heightened, parodic exposure of hegemonic Arab/Islamic cultural practice as such troubles existing categories between the American "Self" and Muslim/Arab "Other". She forces a reinterpretation of Islam-*as-faith*, "written in the mirror / by a lover", challenging an American conflation/(mis-)representation of Islam with terrorism and at the same time exposing backward practices that subsume Islamic culture(s). In the process, Kahf subverts homogenising stereotypes of the subaltern Muslim woman brutalized by an inherently violent faith. She creates, aesthetically at least, a third location that registers Western progressive, liberal thought and cultural codes unto an imagined/decentered Islamic space. This is precisely the liminal space ("third space") of enunciation which gives rise to a hybrid negotiation of culture evident in Kahf's discourse. Kahf asks, "Doesn't my little mosque know / the way to protect its windows / is to open its doors?"

She concludes:

My little mosque is as decrepit  
 as my little heart. Its narrowness  
 is the narrowness in me. Its windows  
 are boarded up like the part of me that prays.  
 I went to the mosque  
 when no one was there.  
 No One was sweeping up.  
 She said: This place is just a place.  
 Light is everywhere. Go, live in it.  
 The Mosque is under your feet,  
 wherever you walk each day. ("Little Mosque Poems": 123)

Clearly, what matters for Kahf is linking the Arab/Muslim Other to the American Self in a creative space of humanitarian, liberal discourse that can mediate the ground and bring the

two cultures together under the banner of human rights. By denouncing old “decrepit” practices and opening up the space for a more tolerant, hybrid Islamic space, she exposes hegemonic practices in Islamic culture in her attempt to liberate it from the shackles of patriarchal coercion. Kahf’s discourse opens up a third space of enunciation through its critique of “monologic” interpretations which insist on the observance of rituals and tradition which work against a culture of criticism and freedom: “She ([an angel perhaps?]) said: This place is just a place. / Light is everywhere. Go, live in it.” Kahf’s staunch critique of cultural stagnation and its grasp over religion speaks to a multicultural American audience. Her notion of spiritual transparency and autonomy in practicing her faith suggests a liberal, progressive inscription that overwrites earlier codes of authority. This is part of the enunciative process that redefines and liberates the subordinate positioning of Islam-as-faith as well as Muslim women, while refuting pervasive (mis-)representations of Islam in general in post-9/11 America.

Daniel Moore’s “Fable” from *House of war* (2003)<sup>113</sup> next negotiates an American-Muslim space, one that is appropriated to Western secularism in its celebration of the imagination and insight. He does so from a Sufi mystical perspective that asserts an unmediated apprehension of divinity. In Moore’s poetic discourse, the grounding or nativizing of the American-Muslim experience takes place by erasing the boundaries between spirituality and institutionalized religion as well as East-West cultural binaries and the ensuing hostilities that such dualities provoke. Moore’s hybrid literary enunciation translates Islamic theosophy to a Western audience through Sufi mysticism.

### 3.3.2 Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore: *Love in the House of War*

Daniel Moore, born July 30, 1940 in Oakland, California, is an American poet, essayist and librettist. He converted to Sufi Islam in 1970 and took the name Abdal-Hayy. Moore’s first two books of poems, *Dawn visions* (1964) and *Burnt heart: ode to the war dead* (1972), were published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Light Books. After renouncing written poetry and travelling extensively for ten years in Europe and North Africa, Moore published three books of poetry in Santa Barbara, California in the 1980s, *The desert is the only way out* (1985), *The chronicles of Akhira* (1986), and *Halley’s comet*

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<sup>113</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.7.

(1986). He also organized poetry readings for the Santa Barbara Arts Festivals and wrote the libretto for a commissioned oratorio by American composer, Henry Brant, entitled *Rainforest*, which had its world premiere at the Arts Festival there on April 21, 1989 (Musaji 2012). He currently has more than fifty volumes of poetry under his name, the latest being *The music space* (2007). Moore is known for his prolific engagement in American-Muslim literary and social activism. He is quoted for asking in his brief “American Muslim Statement of Poetics” (1994) where the American-Muslim poets are: “[p]erhaps, and it may be in its embryonic stage, a vigorous, risk taking and contemplative poetry is already being written, and its practitioners are shyly holding on to it, or it has only to come out from behind a kind of puritanical embarrassment in order to be revealed” (cited by Rega 2014: 290-91). Moore thus sees a poetics in the American/Western idiom, multiple as that is, capable of “embodying the heart of Islam and the winds of change and the soul’s transformation” (ibid.). The poems analyzed in this section are from “Fable”, which is from the collection *House of war* (2003)<sup>114</sup>, a book of poems written during the entirety of the first Gulf War (January 15, 1991 – February 28, 1991). The book was not completed and published however until March 2003, at the brink of the second Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq, and the ousting of Saddam Hussein’s regime.

*House of war* (2003) is structurally divided into three main parts with the first section “War”, composed of fifteen poems, the second section “Fable”, consisting of thirteen poems, and the last section “Heaven”, consisting of ten poems.<sup>115</sup> The poems in “Fable”, relevant here, take on the form of on-going, diary-like entries. Located in an American-Muslim discursive space, Moore’s discourse opens up a hybrid form of enunciation whereby Islamic mysticism is translated to an American audience epistemologically via a Western mode of secular spirituality<sup>116</sup>. The poems foreground particular equivocal agency, in the sense that they do not focus on the first-person experience of an event or on retelling or memory of an experience (Dowdy 2007). Poems of equivocal agency “center on a speakerless scene, create a fantastic picture, or imagine a world that may or may not exist referentially. They exaggerate, stretch, invent, and play with the world as it is in order to create worlds as they

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<sup>114</sup> Full text available online from The American Muslim (TAM) 2003. *Poetry special: House of War by Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore* [Online].

<sup>115</sup> I focus here on relevant poems from “Fable” (2003: 17-26) in line with the Cultural Politics argument in this chapter.

<sup>116</sup> The term “secular spirituality” is meant to convey the philosophical phenomenon of spirituality as experienced in different spheres not associated with structured, institutionalised religion. See du Toit, C. 2006. Secular spirituality versus secular dualism: towards postsecular holism as a model for a natural theology. *HTS* [Online], 62(4).

may be in the future or as they *seem* in the present” (ibid: 77; emphasis in original). Poems of equivocal agency, moreover, usually speak to public issues that do not need direct reference in the poem. The issues are either urgent or the historical moment makes the context demonstrable (ibid.). The imaginative, almost surreal images in “Fable” are themselves political in that they challenge American representations of Islamic/Arab culture as an inherently violent and backward religion/culture. Moore’s poetical discourse, in its hybrid American-Muslim form, is incorporated here since it contributes to the discourse on Arab-American ethnic identity in affiliation with American conflation of Arab culture with Islam as well as pervasive post-9/11 anti-Arab/Islamic stereotypes. This is in line with Steven Salaita’s (2000) implication that a non-Arab who contributes positively to the Arab-American community is accepted by this community. In such a situation, ethnography must be put aside, for content and the philosophical reasons for that content can be more important than ethnicity (ibid.). Moore is prolifically engaged with the Arab- and Muslim-American communities in coalition with RAWI (Radius of Arab-American Writers, Inc.) as well as the New York-based activist platform, 99.5 FM Radio-Tahrir, founded by Arab-American anthropologist and journalist, Barbra Nimri Aziz. In order to tease out Moore’s hybrid third space of enunciation in an American-Islamic post-9/11 context, this analysis focuses on excerpts from four consecutive poems in the selection: Poem 10, “The Leader’s Ghost” (2003: 23-24); Poem 11, “The Messenger” (2003: 24); Poem 12, “Punctuation” (2003: 24-25); and Poem 13: “The World in a Grain of Sand” (2003: 25-26).

“The Leader’s Ghost” (2003: 23-24) contextualizes the sequence of events of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ousting of Saddam Hussein’s autocratic regime from power. The poem also predicts the death of the tyrant that came three years later in December 2006. It opens with spectral images of a leader, alluding to a tyrannical regime, the Iraqi Baath party under Saddam Hussein, who came into power through a military coup in 1963 backed up by U.S. Intelligence at the time (Global Policy Forum 2005):

#### 10/ THE LEADER’S GHOST

Some claim they have  
 seen his ghost haunting the  
     armaments depot, standing behind the  
 governor’s chair when the  
     senate is in session, suspending a huge

ripe watermelon in stasis above the governor's  
 head during long debates. Believers in  
 reincarnation say he is only  
 one man, from the  
 beginning of the world, Cain perhaps,  
 citizen of the most  
 basic human betrayal, unthinkable but  
 fact, eon after eon, in garbage-lined alleyways or behind  
 glass-topped corporate desks in glossy offices.

[...]. As the  
 world of humankind stands stunned at the  
 apparent latitude given to  
 tyrants, aided by  
 humanitarian governments,  
 accompanied by mass choirs of their  
 mewling subjects  
 (like King Farouq, these tyrants grow fat and parade immodestly  
 by the sides of Swiss swimming pools), those who have  
 seen his ghost marvel at its  
 survival, its uncanny knack for  
 indomitable survival. (from "The Leader's Ghost" 2003: 23-24)

When Americans refer to the Muslim World, they reproduce, amend, and complicate Colonial Europe's moral geography of the Orient as an exotic and inferior culture. Often Americans mistakenly use the terms "the Muslim World" and "the Middle East" interchangeably. Both terms refer to sweeping groupings of peoples and lands defined by narrow American political and cultural interests in these geographies over time (Grewal 2014). In "The Leader's Ghost", Moore presents a subtle contradistinction between the reality of autocratic regimes led by power hungry tyrants "aided by humanitarian governments" and widespread derogatory representations of Arab/Islamic culture/religion. In his prefatory note to *House of war* (2003) Moore claims that "[a]s a Muslim American I found myself hating Hussein [...], but hating Bush's no-budge attitude and obvious determination to go to war from the start even more" (ibid: 3). Commenting on the war in Iraq, Moore contends that "[Muslim/Arab] hope of possible salvation from Hussein's tyranny from the western nations was dashed when, instead of saving them, the west bombed them "back to the Middle Ages"" (4).

This discourse responds to the American-led confrontation, invasion, and occupation of Iraq during which the Pentagon and the White House controlled information dissemination with respect to the invasion. For example, during the U.S. coverage of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was demonized and his name repeatedly used in media coverage. Hussein became a convenient outlet for releasing racial prejudices and a media scapegoat onto which Americans projected all kinds of deformations against Arabs and Muslims (Al-Rawi 2015). Newscasters let puzzlement of Iraq's political intransigence and initial lack of military response dovetail into inferences about Hussein's irrationality, playing to Western stereotypes of Arab fanaticism (ibid.). The war rhetoric, which came as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks, depicted Arabs/Iraqis and Muslims in general as barbaric, irrational, and worthy of repeated condemnation and eradication. Even though Bush maintained a strict separation between terrorists and Islam, the latter being, as he once said, a religion of peace, the undiplomatic rhetoric was left to evangelists like Pat Robertson, Franklin Graham, and Jerry Falwell, amongst many others (Salaita 2006; Majid 2012). For example, while the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops counseled "deeper understanding and engagement with Islam", conservative rhetoric refused this discourse and restated the old view that Islam itself is inherently violent, with a "demon-possessed pedophile" as a prophet (Majid 2012: 35).

Moore's poetic interjection in "The Leader's Ghost" presents a humanitarian perspective whereby he implies a clear analogy amongst dictators of all sorts throughout history and Cain, "citizen of the most basic human betrayal". Moore's political voice is on full display. Though not directly confrontational, the poem's staged, sardonic and disembodied speaker indirectly challenges the official bureaucratic propaganda of U.S. military assault on Iraq and the media coverage of the war. Moore's burlesque portrayal of a ghost-like tyrant who transgresses the specificity of time and space becomes a universal figure of corruption and brutality, rather than a signifier of a certain culture/religion. The images are horridly dreamlike and intentionally unspecific, depicting a phantasmal persona whose atrocities could be detected in numerous dictators throughout history addressing "their mewing subjects". The ghost-like persona becomes a metonym for a universal despotic figure, from Hitler to Stalin to King Farouq of Egypt to Hussein, and more so, to capitalist bureaucrats in "glass-topped corporate desks in glossy offices". Moore's equivocal agency objectifies the image of the Arab dictator, aligning him with universal figures that have been a part of both Western and Eastern political geographies. Moore's images are not given to overt political statements or representations of the "real" world. Instead of speaking of specific empires, despots, military conquests, and atrocities of war, he creates a visionary

personification that makes this universal reality more omnipresent and disturbing. Saddam Hussein is thus no longer exclusively an Arab/Islamic phenomenon, but a peg in a universal machinery of violence and political hegemony. The poem's subversive tone and black humour, moreover, flout the half-truths that come with over-sweeping generalizations and stereotypical depictions of other peoples/cultures. There is no melody or rhythm or rage. Moore's parodic voice in a rather detached and emotionless manner highlights the absurdity of this reality. His passive incantations reflect the world's silence at the "apparent latitude given to tyrants" and imply a universal responsibility toward this recurring absurdity rather than a specific cultural attribute.

As a Muslim-American of the Sufi order, Moore shifts his focus next to a Sufi mystical representation of Islamic culture which opposes the atrocities of war/despotic regimes and delineates universal love. What emerges is an intercultural dialogue based on secular interpretations of Islamic theosophy evident in Sufi mysticism that aspires toward a universal kindness to all creatures beyond the requirements of Islamic law. Moore's hybridity emerges from an adaptation of Islam to a Western secular space by rejecting presumed cultural authenticity, suggesting the existence of a multiplicity of "Islams" and the desirability of a version tailored to the sensibilities of American/Western culture. This is evident in the next two poems from the selection, "The Messenger" (2003: 24) and "Punctuation" (2003: 24-25).

"The Messenger" sets the tone for a mystically-inclined imagery, one that appropriates Islamic mysticism to Western secularism:

#### 11/ THE MESSENGER

The Messenger revealed himself to the  
leaves of trees and the  
trees bore fruit, both  
edible and mysterious. [...].

The mysterious fruit burst like lightning above  
nomadic herdsmen, nervous travelers, inspired  
explorers and the  
long silent, suddenly  
whisking away filagreed screens of self-  
satisfied distraction onto an  
open abyss of dark emerald crags and steep  
ravines, chasms down which you can glimpse

a starry sky so bright blue it seems like  
 day down there. Star-twinkle roars up its  
 colossal light. Beams of it  
 shoot straight up sheer sides to blind our  
 entire faces as we peer over with such intellectually  
 justified hesitation, and makes us  
 see right through eyelids made suddenly transparent, through the  
 actions of tyrants and their victims: The victims who raise up  
 tyrants on sticks in the  
 dualistic cosmic Bar-B-Que; and  
 the tyrants who melt down like  
 common candle-wax after their  
 tremendous passion has been spent. (from "The Messenger": 24)

Moore presents aesthetic images which open up the third space of enunciation. "The Messenger" sets the corporeal against the spiritual, revealed through nature. It presents a Sufi mystical approach to Islam, which is at once, incorporated in the Qur'an, and liberal in the fact that for Sufis, the way to salvation could not be dictated by strict *ulama* (clergymen), whose teachings could be inefficiently summarized in religious jurisprudence (Mannani 2010). Moore's negotiation of Islam through Sufi mysticism/aestheticism as such opens up Islamic culture to more fluid, permeable, and (re-)negotiable constructions of meanings and signification. Moore suggests this in his justification for writing poetry, "[w]e have to overcome our own qualms about creativity, the critical and supercilious brow beatings from Muslims who fear it and misinterpret *hadith* and Qur'an to quell it" (1994 cited in Omidvar and Richards 2014: 291). In the hands of Moore, the messenger is no longer strictly the Prophet Mohammad, and the message is no longer the holy Qur'an and its interpretation by religious *ulama*. The messenger and the message both become part and parcel of the human imagination manifested in nature: "The messenger revealed himself to the / leaves of trees and the / trees bore fruit, both / edible and mysterious". The focus is thus not on morality and reason, but on overcoming dualities and losing oneself in the divine, the Sufi concept of the annihilation of the ego (*nafs*) through '*ishq* (i.e. divine love). This love, which is central to all classical Sufi texts operates on two levels, the literal and the figurative. In the Sufi vision, appropriated in Moore's aestheticism, the Absolute (God, Being) manifests in two ways: the apparent and the concealed (the inner and outer, the conscious and unconscious). The apparent is clear, rational. The concealed is hidden, heartfelt. The Absolute in its concealed form is unknown and not known, a continuous mystery. In its apparent form, it is known and

embraces all things (Adonis 2005).<sup>117</sup>To Sufis then, an encounter with the divine is the precondition of divine love. Without an encounter with the divine, there can be no divine love. According to Sufi mystical teachings, implied in Moore's poetic discourse, one cannot engage and participate in divine love through descriptions of the divine alone: "Beams of it shoot straight up sheer sides to blind our entire faces". Such an encounter is not an event that happens outside this world or beyond our space-time continuum. This is because each object in this world manifests the divine and therefore an individual may encounter the divine in anything, anywhere and at any time. But once it happens, we come to realize that the divine permeates everything (Nurbakhsh 2011). Thus, one way of defining divine love, as it is manifested in Moore's Sufi discourse, would be a personalized, all-inclusive Love which transgresses geo-political/cultural boundaries.

Moore rejects the actuality of traditional theological consciousness in favour of Islamic mysticism found in/through nature, "a typical approach of American-Muslim writers for whom Islamic civilization is more a question of aesthetics and [...] religion-free [...] spirituality than a possible politics" (Omidvar and Richards 2014: 293). Accordingly, cultural translation in Moore's discourse appropriates Sufi Islamic mysticism to Western concepts of secular spirituality and the divine imagination especially evident in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic literary and philosophical movement, specifically that of William Blake. In his poem, "A Visit With Mr. Blake", Moore acknowledges that:

William Blake across from me sits here / [...] / I nod and he sings in a soft  
falsetto of things so / elementally near they become distant as if in a / play  
within a play in the mind / of the Divine / [...] / an ultimate rectification  
against all forms of / injustice including tyrannies theological. (2004)<sup>118</sup>

On his poetry blog, "Ecstatic Exchange", Moore claims, in line with Blakean prophetic visions, that "[f]or me the province of poetry is a private ecstasy made public, and the social role of the poet is to display moments of shared universal epiphanies capable of healing our sense of mortal estrangement".<sup>119</sup> "Nature" for the Romantics meant many things. It was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination, in emblematic language. While particular perspectives with regard to nature varied considerably, nature

<sup>117</sup> For further readings on Sufi mysticism and the personal approach to the divine or spiritual secularism, see also Adonis 2005. *Sufism and Surrealism*, translated by Cumberbatch, J. London and Beirut: Saqi Books.

<sup>118</sup> Cited in the Ecstatic Exchange [Online] Available from: <http://www.danielmoorepoetry.com> [Accessed 26 March 2014].

<sup>119</sup> Cited in The Ecstatic Exchange / Poetry of Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore [Online] Available from: <http://ecstaticexchange.com/> [Accessed 26 March 2014].

presented itself to Romantic thinkers as a healing power, as a source of subject and image, as a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language. “Nature”, as viewed by the Romantics, was “organic”, rather than, as in the scientific or rationalist view of the universe as a machine (e.g. the deistic image of a clock evoked in the teachings of the Enlightenment) with the analogue of an “organic” image, a living tree or mankind itself.<sup>120</sup> According to Bowra, in his study *The Romantic imagination* (1976), the Romantics believed that when the imagination is at work it sees things to which the ordinary intelligence is blind and that it is intimately connected with a special insight or perception or intuition. Insight both awakes the imagination to work and is in turn sharpened by it when it is at work. In line with that, the Sufi mystical concept of *‘ishq* (the Sufi concept of Divine Love) serves to defamiliarize blindly accepted ethical points and religious obligations, and in Moore’s discourse, it manifests itself in nature.

In “The Messenger”, Moore appropriates Sufi mysticism and *‘ishq* to the Romantic concept of “organic” nature and insight which in turn incorporate the divine. He claims that: “The Messenger revealed himself to the leaves of trees and the / trees bore fruit, both / edible and mysterious”. There is no temporal disjunction between the internal and the external, between the Absolute and its revelations. There is no disjunction between the divine and its creation, and knowledge begins with God (the Absolute) and it is everlasting and infinite. However, as Moore indirectly implies, this knowledge cannot be achieved while the knower is conscious of his ego and his I-ness (the false Self), dimmed by “intellectually justified hesitation”. In fact, to Sufis, the ego entrenched in the material world is an obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge because its individuality is a wall that divides the knower from the known (Adonis 2005). Thus, Moore suggests that overcoming such dualities (in this sense, cultural, religious, national) allows for true dialogue and knowledge, that of inclusiveness, which “makes us / see right through eyelids made suddenly transparent, through the / actions of tyrants and their victims”.

This is further elucidated in Moore’s “Punctuation”, whereby, “God himself” is the message and the messenger is “God’s punctuation”:

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<sup>120</sup> Adapted from “A guide to the study of Literature 2012”. *Romanticism* [Online]. Available from: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/rom.html>.

## 12 / PUNCTUATION

God Himself is the message:  
 The Messenger is God's punctuation: To  
 question, pause, stop. Then  
 to exclaim. And the  
 exclamation point is the shout of an  
 existence that precedes our individual  
 births and surges from so  
 deep within us and rises with such force that  
 factory windows a thousand miles away  
 shatter into star fragments, deserts become  
 even more humbled in their dips and flats by the  
 sheer weight of it, an  
 obliterating exclamation of Godhood that  
 blots the sun and makes the moon, for a moment,  
 fertile. [...]. (from "Punctuation": 24-5)

The energy of the divine is presented in Moore's mystical discourse as "an / obliterating exclamation of Godhood that / blots the sun and makes the moon, for a moment, / fertile". The intention is to confirm that an interior world exists, which is invisible, unknown and inaccessible by logical or rational means. This divine energy moreover is accessible to everyone and anyone who is capable of its interception: "The human tribe dances on its / heels and toes in a great swirling circle at the / echo of that exclamation". Moore abandons prevailing doctrines and orthodox interpretations in particular (both Eastern and Western). His mystical incantations are linked to the transcendental, in that the goal of spirituality is to go beyond the prepared system [i.e. religion as *shari'a* law and rationalism] that has gone before and to create a new world or higher reality or discover systematically the deepest essence. In Moore's aesthetics, the human being becomes aware that truth does not come from books or revelation or laws or ideas or science but from an interior world, from living experience, from love and from the continuing vital interconnection between things and the universe. As a Sufi, Moore understands that. As an American-Muslim, Moore creates a third space of enunciation, whereby he bridges the gap between civilizations through secular mysticism and philosophical interpretations. In Moore's poetic discourse, the third space of enunciation is achieved by recovering "pure" Islam, symbolized by Sufism which he appropriates to Western Romanticism.

This is further elucidated in the next and final poem of the selection:

## 13 / THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND

Gusts of green wind blow across dunes at high speed  
 sweeping some dunes away, revealing  
 dunes that slope and float across  
 sand. Light falls straight down in dry  
 pools between smooth breasts of sand. Wind  
 blows its purse-lipped breath across angular  
 divine particles, each one containing  
 a world. Rearranges them in carpet  
 patterns woven on the warp and woof of pure materiality.

[...]

as I lean over your body gazing down into your  
 eyes blowing green  
 breath across your breasts against a  
 backdrop of all the swirling  
 worlds in the world, all the

sloping grains of indistinguishable sands of the  
 shifting dunes of you  
 at rest. (from “The World in a Grain of Sand”: 25-26)

The title and philosophy alluded to in this final poem from the selection directly point out to William Blake’s “Prophetic Visions”.<sup>121</sup> A brief outline of Blake’s spiritual philosophy/antinomianism<sup>122</sup> needs clarification here before we proceed. To Blake, “All Religions are One” / “There Is No Natural Religion” (Blake 1788 cited in Johnson and Grant 2008: 3-6). According to Blake, the perceived forms of the eternal world are those which are constantly perceived in this one, and it is not in the grandiose or exceptional experience that “Eternity” is to be found (Frye 1990; 10th edition). Blake is merely extending this principle when he says in “Auguries of Innocence”, where Moore’s title comes from, that:

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<sup>121</sup> Blake’s “Prophetic Visions” are “an endless commentary on his spiritual and physical life. The subject is the distortion of man by the rigid frame of law and society and the conventional systems; and the triumph is always the liberation of man by his own energies”. Definition from NEOENGLISH 2010. *The Prophetic Works of William Blake* [Online]. Available from: <https://neoenglish.wordpress.com/2010/12/12/the-prophetic-books-of-william-blake/>.

<sup>122</sup> Antinomian/Antinomianism is used here in line with Blakean philosophy presented in his “Prophecies” which imply the transcendence of law, convention, and even culture. William Blake “affiliated himself, [...], with the Protestant Reformation, which had said No to theological orthodoxies and elaborate mythologies and to the seemingly stable ritual and iconographic traditions of Christianity”. Kripal, J.J. 2007. Reality against society: William Blake, antinomianism, and the American counterculture. *Common Knowledge* [Online], 13(1).

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
 And Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
 And Eternity in an hour.<sup>123</sup>

Such perception, as the title of the Blakean poem indicates, is an “augury” of the paradisaical unfallen state. The last two lines from the excerpt bring us to the conclusion that those who accept the mental nature of reality, know that we perceive a thing at a definite moment, and “that there is thus a quality of time inherent in all perception; and, on the other hand, that existence is in a body, which has a spatial extension” (Frye 1990: 45-46). In Blakean philosophy then, eternity is not endless time, nor infinity endless space: they are the entirely different mental categories through which we perceive the unfallen world (ibid.). According to Blakean antinomianism expressed in his “Augury”, it is the cleansing of perception of the senses, “the chief inlets of Soul in this age” (Blake c.1790 cited in Johnson and Grant 2008: 70) that allows a person to perceive the Whole, the inclusiveness of existence: “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (ibid: 71). This is further analysed in Frye’s (1990) “Beyond Good and Evil” from *Fearful symmetry: a study of William Blake* whereby Frye clarifies Blake’s concept of the “cleansing of perception” expressed in Blake’s major “Prophetic” works. Frye notes that according to Blakean antinomianism:

As an individual ego reflecting on his sensations of an outer space-world while existing in time, the natural man is a dying man; and like most chronic invalids the ego is fretful, irascible, cruel, bothered by trifles, jealous and inordinately vain. [...]. The destruction of the appearance of this world must precede the vision of the same world purified, and, subject and object being inseparable, the Selfhood must be annihilated before the true self can appear. (10<sup>th</sup> ed.: 58-59)

This brings us back full circle to the Sufi indoctrination discussed earlier in the analysis, that of the annihilation of the ego (*nafs*), whereby the true Self can only be perceived after the annihilation by the individual of the false self or ego.

In Moore’s American-Muslim discourse, presented aesthetically in the excerpts above, the metaphorical concept of *‘ishq* or Divine Love thus blurs the spaces between the

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<sup>123</sup> “The “Auguries” (Pickering) Manuscript” of William Blake (c. 1805): “Auguries of Innocence” *IN* Johnson, M.L. and Grant, J.E. (eds.) (2008: 403-405).

American Self and the Muslim/Arab Other. Absolute Love, which cannot be defined but only understood through experience, (in line with Blake's assertion in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" that "Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ'd.") (Blake op. cit.), will fulfill the desire to unite with the Whole (Absolute Being) and its creation (East/West). Moore expresses this notion of inclusiveness metaphorically through an invocation of oneness. His third space of enunciation aesthetically appropriates Eastern theology to Western philosophy. He does not reject his American identity, nor does he pit Americanness against Islam, or vice versa. He transcends both through *'ishq* (Divine Love), whereby Love is no longer merely an expression of gratitude for the blessings of God; it is no longer content with rigorous asceticism and meticulous ritual observance. It becomes an absolute necessity, entailing neither enjoyment nor alleviation, but intensifying as the reciprocity of the lover and the loved comes into effect. In line with Blake's "prophetic antinomianism",<sup>124</sup> Moore transcends both conventional Christian and Islamic theological orthodoxies as well as American and Arab/Islamic political ideologies/geo-political landscapes expressed in post-9/11 war rhetoric in favour of a constructed vision of inclusiveness, which in Moore's poetry is translated into a universal spiritual holism.

In the next poem, "Thirty-Three Beads on a String" (2006)<sup>125</sup> by Zaid Shlah, the third space of enunciation shifts from the religious to the cultural and becomes an assertion of Arab culture antithetical to provocative post-9/11 anti-Arab representations in mainstream American media and political discourse. Shlah counters stereotypes through a presentation of Arab cultural heritage. For Bhabha (1994), the significant way in which all forms of culture are related to one another is not through familiarity or similarity of contents, but "because all cultures are symbol forming and subject-constituting interpellative practices" (209). Shlah opens up Arab culture to an American audience by focusing on the energy evoked through its aesthetics and antiquity. In fact, the poem documents a form of "Arabness" that is not monolithic nor Islamic in nature, a conflation pervasive in America today. Furthermore, he contrasts the vibrancy of ancient Arab civilization with the

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<sup>124</sup> This is in line with E.P. Thompson's (1994) argument that the deep structure of Blake's art and thought is fundamentally antinomian, literally against (anti-) the law (*nomos*). According to Thompson (1994), Blake was charged with sedition and put on trial in a series of events that terrified him, though the threat he posed and still poses is not antinomianism in a simply legal or criminal sense. Blake was a prophetic antinomian. See Thompson, E.P. 1994. *Witness against the beast: William Blake and the moral law*. New York and London: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>125</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.8.

destruction of modern American “democracy” through images of America’s military assault on Iraq.

### 3.3.3 Zaid Shlah: *Creative force in the face of tyranny*

Zaid Shlah, Iraqi by origin, now resides in California, with his wife, where he lectures at New College of California. He obtained his MA in English from San Francisco State University. His poetry has appeared in literary magazines and journals in both Canada and America. He was recently awarded the American Academy of Poets Award for his 2006 poetry collection *Taqsim*. A *taqsim* is an improvisational Middle Eastern medley in which the musician moves between formal musical structure and free-flowing improvisation. In *Taqsim* (2006) Zaid Shlah writes within the formal structure of the lyric, but incorporates an innovative lyricism that oscillates between his Arabic and Anglophone heritage: a history of music, food, war and love in a transnational aesthetic space. As much at home with the expansive Arabic *Qasida*<sup>126</sup> tradition as with the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Derek Walcott, amongst other American modernists, Zaid Shlah’s poems blend contemporary voices with the ancient traditions of Iraqi Arabic poetry (Charara 2008). Shlah also participated in the 2012 coalition project *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*, where poets and writers responded to the 2007 bombing of Baghdad’s “Street of the Booksellers”.<sup>127</sup> The coalition project, *Mutanabbi Street*, issued a call to book artists and writers in America to re-assemble some of the inventory of the lost reading material and honour its memory.<sup>128</sup> The poem, analyzed in this section, “Thirty-Three Beads on a String” (2006), is from *Inclined to speak: an anthology of contemporary Arab American poetry* (2008: 297-303).

The poem takes the form of a prayer, with each stanza corresponding to a bead on a rosary (*misbaha*). In Islamic culture, the word *tesbih* means to recite the glories of God (*Allah*) using prayer beads. In Islam, *tesbih* with 99 beads symbolize the 99 names of God. Sometimes 33 beads are used, in this case *tesbih* would be cycled three times to reach 99. The main phrase repeated through the first thirty three beads is “*Sūphanallah*” which means “Praise be to God”, for the next thirty three beads, “Glory be to God”, or “*Elhumdūlillah*”,

<sup>126</sup> The *Qasida* is an Arabic term for the conventional form of the classical ode with its mono rhyme, two-hemistich symmetrical structure.

<sup>127</sup> See also Beausoleil, B. and Shehabi, D. 2012. *Al-Mutanabbi street starts here*. Dexter, MI: PM Press.

<sup>128</sup> Beausoleil B. 2011. *Al-Mutanabbi street starts here: a response to violence in Iraq from the Letterpress and Book Arts Community* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.al-mutanabbistreetstartshere-boston.com>.

and for the final thirty three beads, “*Allahuekber*”, which means “God is most Great”, is repeated. After these repetitions a final prayer is said, bringing the total number of prayers, as dictated by the Qur’an, to one-hundred (Wiley and Shannon 2007). However, in Shlah’s discourse, the prayer is emptied from its religious connotation. Instead, Shlah’s speaker-poet recites the glories of Iraq’s rich Arab heritage, a civilization completely overlooked in American media representation and destroyed by American military occupation. The poem is set in a transnational context, focusing on the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. It takes on the form of embodied experiential agency (Dowdy 2007), portraying the lived experiences and historical actors of the referential world of social and political events. The poem begins with an allusion to heavy airstrikes (perhaps the bombing of Baghdad), depicting the colours, smells and sounds of a city torn apart by violence:

**1**  
I woke from the nightmare  
of a gutted *maqam*.

**2**  
Not because I have  
not yet bled my life

in yellow, but because  
minarets sky downwards,  
looking for purple births.

**3**  
One burly buffalo  
shrouded in hooves  
and hot breath.

**4**  
Because the skin  
is not yet numb,  
and the lights  
are not flickering,

I will continue to sip  
at my hot tea, and stare  
at the dust coloured noon.

**5**  
One white *dishdadha* screams  
with the brilliance of red.

## 6

Can you hear them –  
 the melodious intent, the  
 glimmering oud in their eyes? (“Thirty-Three Beads”: 297-298)

At close inspection, it is evident that the poem uses Arab, rather than Islamic, cultural signifiers. A *maqām* in Arabic is a holy place/shrine whereas *masjid* is mosque. In Arabic music, moreover, a *maqām* is a set of notes with traditions that define relationships between them, habitual patterns, and their melodic development. *Maqām* is best defined and understood in the context of the rich Arabic music repertoire. The nearest equivalent in Western classical music would be a mode, e.g. Major, Minor, etc. (Marcus 2008). *Dishdadha* (also spelled *dishdasha*) or *thawb* is a long ankle-length, collarless robe, usually white, with long sleeves, worn by men from the Arabian Peninsula; *oud* is Arabian scented wood or oil-base perfume created from essence extracts from different flowers such as jasmine, rose and saffron. *Oud* or *ud* is also an Arabian musical instrument. The cultural sign is removed from its conventional Islamic context in the poem and placed within a broader Arab cultural connotation.

Set in a transnational perspective, Shlah’s narrative immediately brings to the foreground the atrocities evinced during the bombing of Baghdad, the “burly buffalo / shrouded in hooves and hot breath” implying American bombers which raked the city 24-hours for days “looking for purple births”. Painting stark images in red (perhaps signifying blood) and yellow (cowardice?), the speaker-poet portrays the annihilation of a civilization in the name of democracy. He asks whether “you can hear them”, probably addressing humanity or the policy-makers and adherents of war in charge of the sweeping attacks. Moreover, he assertively addresses Iraqis as individuals of “melodious intent” with “glimmering oud in their eyes”, rather than statistical figures of collateral damage. As such, Shlah’s discourse speaks back to American democracy by focusing on the atrocities committed by America’s military assault on innocent civilians during the invasion of Iraq. Arabs have been so demonized that it has become impossible for some world citizens to believe they are real people; “they are perceived only as the enemy, as terrorists, as the “other”” (Shaheen 2008: xii). Shlah’s counter-narrative contests such pervasive representations by presenting a cultural/aesthetic Arab reality and contrasting it with American barbarity. The third space of enunciation emerges via a translation of this reality to the American Other.

He continues:

7

Faith, stitch by seam,  
a garment I have sewn  
to my skin.

8

Whatever remains of Al-Gubbenchi's  
1932 Cairo studio recording, lives  
between the old cobble-stoned quarter,  
and my still-warm mahogany ear.

9

I should've gotten  
up to shake his hand,

this uncomfortable tension  
between me and God.

10

*Medina*, its streets adorned  
with smells from the bazaar, yet  
I have chosen to adorn myself  
in the still concrete of columns.

11

I'm for the transcription  
of the Arabic – sweet spread  
over toast, a dark syrup from  
dates.

12

Last night Al-Gubbenchi  
dreamt of his father's fallen  
tooth.

13

In the morning he howled  
a song in the name of his father;  
Iraq's new fathers weep at  
the birth of their sons.

14

Do not cry for Leila or for Hind,  
but drink the red wine, and grow  
your love doubly, one for the ruby  
in the cup, the other for its rouge  
upon your cheek. ("Thirty-Three Beads": 298-299)

Shlah adheres to a personal approach to faith which veers away from religious signifiers, celebrating instead Iraq's Arab aesthetic/cultural revival. He holds on to this "faith", a private, secular sort of faith emanating from the essence of an ancient and rich culture, with vigour like "a garment I have sewn / to my skin". The images foreground aesthetic and secular signifiers of Arab civilization through the *maqam* tradition. The speaker-poet celebrates "whatever remains of Al-Gubbenchi's" musical repertoire, bringing to mind the glorious days of the urban Arabic musical/poetic revival in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus. Mohammad Qubanchi (or al-Gubbenchi, 1901-1989) was one of the most celebrated reciters of the Iraqi *maqam* who performed at the renowned 1932 Cairo Congress. The *maqam*, along with its neighbouring *Mashriqi* tradition (i.e. the *Hijaz*, *Kar*, *Kurd*, and *Nahawand* of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine), uses either classical or colloquial Arabic poetic texts for specific modes. The texts of a *maqām* are mainly derived from Arabic poetry in either the classical or modern tradition. The selection may vary, for instance, from the satire combined with sensuality in the literary works of Abu Nuwas (eighth century), the panegyric energy in the poetic philosophy of al-Mutanabbi (tenth century), to the rebelliousness and black pessimism in the poetry of Mohammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (twentieth century) (van der Linden 2001). In a more contemporary socio-cultural context, the *maqam* tradition signifies the vibrant urban revival in the Arab world in the early and mid-decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Coffeeshouses in Baghdad and in other major Arab cities specialized in *maqam* at the time. These places functioned as performance spaces as well as institutions where culture was transmitted (ibid.). Shlah's discourse highlights this reality. Referring to Al-Gubbenchi, the speaker-poet asserts that "I should've gotten / up to shake his hand", thus exalting the reciter to an elevated level of cultural authority, while at the same time admitting that there is an "uncomfortable tension / between me and God". We learn a stanza later (bead #10) that in *Medina*, the "Holy City of the Prophet", the speaker-poet chose "to adorn [himself] / in the still concrete of columns" away from the mainstream bazaar. He daringly confesses his tension with religious authority, thus separating himself and the constructed auto-image from an Islamic/religious signification. Furthermore, the speaker-poet admits that he is "for the transcription / of the Arabic" which he identifies metaphorically as "sweet spread / over toast, a dark syrup from / dates". He alludes to the famous pre-Islamic lament tradition in Arabic poetry (*atlal*), "Do not cry for Leila or for Hind, but drink the red wine, and grow / your love doubly, one for the ruby / in the cup, the other for its rouge / upon your cheek". Shlah affirms and gives voice to Arab culture and tradition while at the same time making space for change. He delineates Arab cultural signifiers in a deeply humanistic

fashion. His auto-images in a hybrid location emerge from a third space whereby Arab heritage is translated to the West via its aesthetic achievements in an attempt to confront oversimplified/violent depictions of Arabs in American media, especially after 9/11. Shlah creates a space in which Arab culture is articulated not as nostalgia/fossilization, but as agency. His experiential narrative draws the reader into a heritage that is either generally overlooked/ignored or conflated with religious intolerance. In contradistinction to that reality, Shlah highlights Arab values, knowledge and modes of self-expression that are primarily secular/aesthetic in nature. Shlah's transnational, experiential enunciation is neither confrontational nor assimilatory to American representations of the Arab Other. Shlah's hybridity opens Arab culture to more complex interpretations. The third space, neither politico-religious nor hostile in spirit, becomes the interstitial passage which transgresses notions of fixed identities and their inherent hierarchies, especially Arab/Arab-American identity in a post-9/11 setting. It contradicts homogenous depictions and pervasive confluations evident in the "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim-terrorist" trifecta, at the same time, situating "the consensual or contiguous transmission [of an Arab-Islamic tradition] in a profound process of redefinition" (Bhabha 1994: 5). By presenting an aesthetic picture of a complex, rich and multi-faceted Arab auto-image, Shlah subverts dominant (American) post-9/11 discourse and situates that rhetoric in contradistinction to the inherent destruction brought forth by an unrelenting American military machine, "Last night Al-Gubbenchi / dreamt of his father's fallen / tooth" as "Iraq's new fathers weep at / the birth of their sons". These images are further elaborated in the ensuing stanzas from the poem:

**15**

Bombs raked the eyes of the  
sleeping Assyrian gods.

**16**

As if it were only a sandbox,  
a few worthless grains of sand.

**17**

I'll cut for you the last swath  
of blue from the sky, sever my  
hand if you'll let me

but for five minutes more,  
leave me to sleep without the  
knowledge of war. ("Thirty-Three Beads": 300)

Shlah reminds the reader of Iraq's ancient civilization by alluding to its Mesopotamian legacy, bringing to mind a civilization that dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE. Iraqis are transformed into sleeping Assyrian gods raked by American bombs. These images deliberately highlight American ignorance of the region's rich historical significance and ancient civilization: "As if it were only a sandbox / a few worthless grains of sand". Shlah reverts the image of Arab backwardness by highlighting America's military barbarity. The poem becomes a mouthpiece for a misrepresented culture and the majority of Arab people who pay the price of violence at home, as well as the Arab-American community that finds itself constantly in need of expressing its belonging to humanity.

Next, the speaker-poet asserts the ingenuity and integrity of an ancient Arabic cultural proximity that has been suppressed and highly misrepresented over time:

**18**  
A quanoun weeps  
near the funeral of music.

**19**  
Having been occupied,  
noted mourn for the  
loss of their song.

**20**  
I'm for a concert of horses;  
the origin of gazelles leapt up  
from the heart of Al-Gubbenchi.

**21**  
Had you made small steps into  
the desert inside us, or listened  
for the guttural lodged deep within  
our throats, you would have come  
bearing gifts.

**22**  
I have nothing in red  
that I would not abide  
in green.

**23**  
Al-Mutanabbi wrote the  
heart of our silken *tarab*;  
what need have we for you?

24

No poem is ever enough red –  
but that its blood might river  
through the life of its people.

25

Beneath the desert-sun,  
a cage in Abu Ghraib,  
one man by one man by one man,  
breathe six.

26

Thousands of tons rung  
sonorous from the sky. (“Thirty-Three Beads”: 300-301)

There are subtle undertones of cultural redefinition, a new space of cognition which arises from an agential nuance present in Shlah’s defiant assertion “what need have we for you?”. By alluding to al-Mutanabbi, Shlah insinuates a double movement. He celebrates an energy evident in classical Arab aesthetics, a culture which predates both, the advent of Islam to the Arabian Peninsula and the settlement of America. Al-Mutanabbi, the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Arab poet from Iraq, was a revolutionary at heart and often imprisoned or forced into exile throughout his tumultuous life (Larkin 2008). Al-Mutanabbi’s poetry, most relevant here, is renowned for its celebration of thought and search for knowledge (Adonis 1990; Larkin 2008; Al-Mallah 2012). Al-Mutanabbi, along with other poets of his time (deemed by the advent of Islam as *Jāhiliyya* poets, i.e. poets of the Age of Ignorance), such as Abu Nuwas, Abū’l-‘Alaa’ al-Ma’arri, Al-Niffarī, and Abu Tammam amongst others, celebrated a dynamic Arab culture and advocated the freedom of Arab culture from the fetters of religious and moral repression and restrictions (Adonis 1990). Shlah’s allusion to Al-Mutanabbi and his assertion that this poet has written the “heart of our silken *tarab*”<sup>129</sup> is a celebration of this energy and the ingenuity evident in classical Arab poetics, which is modernist in its ancient inclination towards thought and reason. It is a history and heritage both overlooked by the West and repressed by conventional Islam. To further clarify this point, a brief interjection on the account of the epistemological and philosophical system of pre-Islamic poetry is necessary.

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<sup>129</sup> *Tarab* was a widely used concept within medieval Arabic writings on music and musicians. It is still in use today in Arab culture within artistic and musical contexts. *Tarab* has been defined by various ethnomusicologists, with the terms ecstasy and trance often being used as synonyms. Cited in Lueg, M. 2007. *Ecstasy and trance in Tarab performance* [Online]. Available from: <http://arabicmusicband.com/articles/tarab>.

In his study, *An introduction to Arab poetics* (1990; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Adonis explains the liberating aspects of pre-Islamic Arab poetics. He asserts that:

The poetical element [in the works of *Jāhiliyya* poets] is to be found in the exploration of human potential and frustrated human desires, and in the unleashing of these desires in such a way that the gap separating emotion and action, desire and ability, is eliminated. [...]. [In this poetry] there is a flame which devours every obstacle, be it social or religious. (60)

From this we can deduce the modernity provoked by the works of classical Arab poetic genius. A modernity which under the influence of Islamic culture was repressed. Poetry under Islam was not to go beyond the first stages of knowledge, a function accorded to sensation. What goes beyond sensation is religion, and “it was on the basis of this idea that poetry came to be widely seen as by definition incapable of presenting knowledge or revealing truth” (ibid: 58). Adonis (1990) argues that this criticism “perverted the research into poetics [in Arabic culture] at a fundamental level” (58). Poets such as al-Mutanabbi and others, according to Adonis, transcended these epistemological systems and their theories. These poets achieved in their works “an organic relationship between poetry and thought, and [...] open[ed] up [...] a new aesthetic horizon, and also a new horizon of thought” (59). A horizon which was suppressed in modern Arab history, the advent of colonialism and, in a more contemporary context, the pervasiveness of derogatory Western representations.

9/11 began a new era of fear of the “evil” Arabs, the fears of the 1970s and the 1980s of Middle Eastern violence coming to America had finally been realized (Semmerling 2006: 23). In the new era of “evil” Arabs, the most bizarre, yet real, images of destruction are thus made rational in the contextualisation of narratives in which the “backward” and violent Arabs threaten American ideological and mythic structures of freedom and democracy (ibid.). Such discourse led to the invasion and occupation of Iraq as well as the atrocities against detainees committed by the U.S. Army and Central Intelligence Agency in the Abu Ghraib prison camps in Al Anbar, south of Baghdad, alluded to in the poem. Shlah’s third space of enunciation, through his portrayal of a liminal Arab culture, becomes a kind of displacement of such discourse resulting in the “slippage of signification that is celebrated in the articulation of difference” (Bhabha 2004: 235 cited in Kalua 2009: 24). Shlah’s liminality, a cultural/aesthetic rather than a religious signification of Arab culture belies any attempts at settled assumptions about its identity. He claims earlier in stanza/bead # 21 that “[h]ad you made small steps into / the desert inside us, or listened for the guttural lodged deep within /

our throats, you would have come / bearing gifts” and that “I have nothing in red / that I would not abide / in green”. The colour green here is in line with its Arabic cultural connotations which refer to positive and favourable meanings signifying life, youth, energy, generosity and growth (Hasan *et al.* 2011). Shlah attributes this energy to the rich heritage of Arab civilization. He celebrates the essence of Arabness and opens up its cultural signification to a nuanced, complex and unconventional counterpoint to pervasive anti-Arab stereotypes. The energy of horses, the warmth of the desert, the ancient tradition of a civilization that significantly predates the discovery of America by white settlers become witnesses to American savagery.

From a Western multicultural, liberal perspective, Shlah’s form of articulation opens up the credibility in the search for knowledge prevalent in an ancient Arabic cultural horizon. He separates Arabness from Islam by locating it within an aesthetic/civilizational perspective. Speaking from a Western hybrid location, Shlah celebrates the ingenuity present in the culture and transcends derogatory attitudes attributed to monolithic representations of Arabness as well as connotations of Arab culture with Islam. Like Al-Gubbenchi, Al-Mutanabbi becomes a patron saint of Arab culture through Shlah’s agential exposition. Shlah reveals the true colours of American democracy by contrasting it with the energy of Arab civilization. He rejects a democracy which was brought about by force through fire, gunpowder and prison camps.

Shlah concludes with an affirmation of the richness of Arabic civilization with allusion to the cradle of civilization, the “Fertile Crescent”, born on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq:

[...]

**30**

I’m for the transcription  
of the Arabic – *za ’tar zate*  
over fire-baked bread.

**31**

The twin rivers have already  
carved for us a history, our poets  
have already explained to us  
the desert; by what right have  
you come?

[...]

33

Thirty-three beads on a string,  
 why pretend to know beyond  
 the presence of a click. (“Thirty-Three Beads”: 302-303)

Shlah’s hybridity, as I have tried to show throughout this analysis, questions and disrupts authority, in terms of both, Islamic hegemony on Arab culture and monolithic American representations of Arab “backwardness”, in an attempt to subvert dominant post-9/11 discourse and put into practice social justice. “The twin rivers”, i.e. the Tigris and the Euphrates, which cradled the seeds of modern civilization, “have already carved for us a history”, Shlah asserts and questions the advent of tyranny: “by what right have you come?”. Shlah’s poetic discourse in “Thirty-Three Beads” negotiates a fluid and “interstitial passage” of cultural difference whereby Arab culture is located in an uncertain, unstable border zone of enunciation, one that grants agency and cultural re-interpretation in a multicultural American setting. He does so by speaking back to American post-9/11 stereotypical representations which depict Arabness as antithetical to America and to civilization.

Hayan Charara’s prose-poem next, “Usage” (2008),<sup>130</sup> parodies America’s language of violence in an attempt to reveal and counter post-9/11 Arab-American exclusion. The poem, written in the form of a journalistic article, takes the voice of embodied experiential agency in its discussion of the speaker-poet’s experience as an American-born Arab. Contextualizing post-9/11 discourse within American- and Israeli-led wars on/in the Middle East, Charara’s discourse documents transnational formations of Arab-American identities. The poem deconstructs post-9/11 rhetoric, revealing the “democratic” culture that this language reflects.

### 3.3.4 Hayan Charara: *Inclined to Speak*

Hayan Charara, born in Detroit Michigan in 1972 to Lebanese immigrant parents, is author of two books of poems, *The alchemist’s diary* (2001) and *The sadness of others* (2006). He is also the editor of the annual literary anthology, “Graffiti Rag”, and a compilation of contemporary Arab-American verse, *Inclined to speak: an anthology of contemporary Arab American poetry* (2008). Charara has received a National Endowment for

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<sup>130</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.9.

the Arts literature fellowship in 2009. He earned a BA in English from Wayne State University, an MA in Humanities from New York University, and a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Houston (Poetry Foundation 2014). Charara's prose poem, "Usage" (*Inclined to speak* 2008: 76-83), analyzed in this section, first appeared in *Literary imagination*, an online literary forum affiliated with Oxford Journals. "Usage", in the form of a journalistic report, is an anti-war prose poem which focuses on the language of violence used during times of crisis (Clark 2005). The poem reflects the general attitude towards the Middle East focusing on the U.S. government's "War on Terror" and the impact of these wars and of 9/11 in general on Arabs/Arab-Americans.

The poem opens with "a pejorative", contextualizing Arab culture outside the confines of American traditions embedded in a language that has an adverse impact on the inclusion of Arab-American citizenship:

*An assumption, a pejorative, an honest language, an honorable death. In grade school, I refused to accept the mayor's handshake; he smiled at everyone except people with names like mine. I was born here. I didn't have to adopt America, but I adapted to it. You understand: a man must be averse to opinions that have adverse impacts on whether he lives or dies. "Before taking any advice, know the language of those who seek to advise you." Certain words affected me. Sand nigger, I was called. Camel jockey. What was the effect? While I already muttered under my breath, I did so even more. I am not altogether sure we can all together come. Everything was not all right. Everything is not all right. Imagine poetry without allusions to Shakespeare, Greek mythology, the Bible; or allusions without the adjectives "fanatical," "extremist," "Islamic," "right," "left," "Christian," "conservative," "liberal." / Language written or translated into a single tongue gives the illusion of tradition. A lot of people murder language—a lot fully aware. Among all the dead, choose between "us" and "them." Among all the names for the dead—mother, father, brother, sister, husband, wife, child, friend, colleague, neighbor, teacher, student, stranger—choose between "citizen" and "terrorist." / And poet? Immoral, yes, but never amoral? Large amounts, the number between 75 and 90 percent of the estimated 150 million to 1 billion—civilians—killed during wars, over all of recorded human history. Anxious is "worried" or "apprehensive." /*

American poetry, Americans. Young, I learned *anyone*  
 born here could become President. Older, I can point to  
*any one* of a hundred reasons why this is a lie. (“Usage”: 76;  
 emphasis in original)

An underlying theme throughout the poem, introduced in the opening section above, is that the concepts of language and culture as they have evolved in relation to the ideologies of American multiculturalism are not neutral but contested concepts which need understanding and critical analysis. Proposing the motion that language is the essence of culture, anthropologists argue for a discourse-centred approach, collapsing the distinction between language and culture, considered as separate systems, and instead bringing both under the rubric of ‘communication’.<sup>131</sup> Accordingly, language has to be treated as both verbal and non-verbal, and the two are always in tension. An examination of this tension leads to a consideration of language in relation to contest and power (Parkin 1991 cited in Magne 1992). Distinguishing between ‘power in culture’, a verbally negotiated construct, and ‘power in society’, a construct of force and domination, anthropologist David Parkin (1991) suggests that the verbal is ultimately the final arbiter in contests of what is acceptable and what is not. ‘Power in culture’ hinges on language, or more specifically on acts of verbal persuasion and rhetoric (cited in Magne 1992: 17). The speaker-poet in “Usage” does not “adopt” the racial language of America, he “adapts” to a conflicting culture that produces this language. By refusing to accommodate such derogatory language of exclusion (“Sand nigger” and “Camel jockey”) pervasive against Arabs in America (both pre- and post-9/11), the speaker-poet opens up a translational space of negotiation through the process of “divergence or displacement of the path of power through an act of signification that emphasizes [...] the arbitrariness of the sign” (Bhabha 2009: xi). According to Bhabha (2009) the cipher of meaning – the virtuality and arbitrariness of the sign – is itself a value-system capable of being used, not perhaps to speak truth to power, but to pit an alternative ethical and political authority against the dogmatism of prevailing power. The “sign” as a repertoire and reservoir of meaning in Charara’s poetic discourse becomes a metaphorical allusion to the language of cultural conflict used in post-9/11 government rhetoric in its “War on Terror”, as well as an American culture which reflects this language, setting Arabness outside of/opposite to the confines of the American. This racialized language of exclusion and the reality of it in times

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<sup>131</sup> Fourth Annual Debate on Language and Culture, Manchester (1991): Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT), cited in Magne, F. 1992. Language and culture debate. *Anthropology today* [Online], 8(4).

of crisis is the focal point in Charara's discourse, whereby the victims of American-led wars in the Middle East become mere statistical figures of collateral damage. This language, "written or translated into a single tongue", reflects an American culture of war.<sup>132</sup> The third space of enunciation which emerges in the poem is thus neither that of confrontation to nor that of appropriation of such rhetoric. Charara's discourse is an act of signification whereby America's univocal post-9/11 rhetoric of violence is exposed and rejected altogether in favour of a more complex representation of the ("Middle Eastern/Muslim/Arab") Other as well as the (American) Self.

Charara's speaker-poet in "Usage" implies that the transformation of the American practice of war, and as a consequence, language of American politics, has a direct impact on the practice of citizenship. He claims that "[l]anguage written or translated into a single tongue gives / the illusion of tradition". Located in a divisive post-9/11 discourse which sets citizens as either "with" or "against" America's war on terror, Charara's discourse proposes a third perspective, one that negotiates his belonging as an Arab in America. He responds to the post-9/11 political and social terrain by exposing the racial undertones which lie behind the structural mindset of American policy towards the Arab Other. Charara's narrative equips Arab-Americans with a revisionary perspective that opposes an uncritical and unquestioned attachment to the nation. He defiantly asserts: "I refused to accept the mayor's handshake; he smiled at everyone *except* people with names like mine". The speaker-poet implies that, as an Arab in America, he is a priori rejected by a hegemonic official discourse that instigates exclusionary conceptualizations of American citizenship. This construct places Arab-Americans at a crossroad, having to choose between their allegiance to such discourse and their immediate concern about friends and family in countries which America is at war with: "[a]mong all the dead, choose between "us" and "them". Among all the names for the dead – mother, father, brother, sister, husband, wife, child, friend, colleague, neighbor, teacher, student, stranger – choose *between* citizen and terrorist". Charara challenges this rhetoric of exclusionary citizenship and opens up a third space of dissent which rejects the ultimatum delivered by the "citizen-terrorist/either-or" discourse and appropriates such discourse to racist/xenophobic undertones which alienate American citizens of Arab descent. For example, in his study "Ethnic identity and imperative patriotism", Steven Salaita (2005) asserts that imperative patriotism accentuated by post-9/11 government war rhetoric in the

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<sup>132</sup> For a detailed reading on America's "culture of war" since World War II, see Lewis, A. 2012. *The American culture of war: the history of U.S. military force from World War II to Operation Enduring Freedom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York and London: Routledge.

Middle East “assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory. It is drawn from a longstanding sensibility that nonconformity to whatever at the time is considered to be “the national interest” is unpatriotic” (154). In line with that, Charara’s speaker-poet implies that such master narratives are rooted in a stable fixed cultural hegemonic identity. He asserts: “[y]oung, I learned *anyone* born here could become President. Older, I can point to *any one* of a hundred reasons why this is a lie”. He thus opens up American citizenship to more complex interpretations by problematizing the divisive rhetoric insinuated by such discourse.

Next, the speaker-poet contrapuntally appropriates America’s war in the Middle East to the facts and fates of American citizens of Arab descent. Charara’s discourse shifts to a transnational perspective which reveals American transgressions in the Arab world:

[...]. He said, “I turned the car around *because* it began raining bombs.” There’s no chance of ambiguity—an *as* here could mean “because” or “when”; it makes no difference—he saw the sky, felt the ground, knew what would come next; it matters little when the heart rate jumps from 70 to 200 beats per minute in less than a second. What they did to my grandfather was *awful*—its wretchedness, awe-inspiring; its cruelty, terrible; it was *awfully* hard to forget. Just after 8:46 A.M., I wondered *awhile* what would happen next. At 9:03 A.M., I knew there was going to be trouble for *a while* to come.

[...]

Any disagreements, *censored*; those making them—poets, dissenters, activists—*censured*. The aftermath, approximately 655,000 people killed./“The Human Cost of War in Iraq: A Morality Study, 2002-2006,” Bloomsburg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, Maryland); School of Medicine, Al Mustansiriya University (Baghdad, Iraq); in cooperation with the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, Massachusetts). The figure just *cited*—655,000 dead—resulted from a household survey conducted at actual *sites*, in Iraq, not the Pentagon, or White House, or a newsroom [...]. (“Usage”: 77; emphasis in original)

The focus here shifts to transnational repercussions of the “War on Terror” in the Middle East. The speaker-poet’s grandfather, amongst the dead cited, becomes a figure of the “innocent civilian” who has to pay the price of America’s violent, sweeping retaliation. The speaker-poet replaces mainstream/official rhetoric by reporting in detail the repercussions of the war on Arab lives, a reality completely overlooked by American mainstream media. Through his grandfather’s narrative and by detailed exhibition of the “Human Cost of War in Iraq”, Charara substitutes the language of retaliation with the facts and fates of innocent civilians showing in the process the other side of the story. In so doing the poem shifts the location of post-9/11 retaliatory discourse. The location/axis of the “sign” is shifted from an American rhetoric of retaliation and demonization of the Arab Other, a language that “censors any disagreements” and “censures those making them”, to an American culture of war that has unambiguous, devastating and uncompromising consequences on the lives of others. The discourse presented in the poem is neither “assimilationist” nor “antagonistic”, but rather a discourse emanating from interstitiality and unhomeliness, creating a cultural hybridity interrupting the progressive linear discourse of post-9/11 rhetoric of retaliation. While preserving his alterity, the speaker-poet delineates American violence resonating from a culture of war to a third space of enunciation whereby the sign is shifted to a hybrid location that refutes irrational violence and instigates dissent against such violence committed under the name of the American people. The “problem of equivalence” between opposing perspectives evident in this shift of focus presented in Charara’s discourse carries within itself a form of identity that each particular act of translation assumes in order to promote understanding between the mutually “foreign” cultural contexts. This shift in perspective moreover resists the search for equivalence by performing different rites around its identity. As an American citizen, the speaker-poet interferes by reporting on actual events and providing accurate statistics of the casualties of America’s war in the Middle East, thus debunking dominant representations of the events of 9/11 as an inexplicable attack on America’s freedom. This metaphorical displacement of post-9/11 rhetoric foregrounds an identity-in-difference produced by the bridging act of translation which is often experienced as a form of violence upon a particular linguistic, artistic, cultural, and ultimately national form of being and belonging. Charara’s speaker-poet provides an alternative ethical and political authority against the dogmatism of prevailing power. The openness of the signifier of American post-9/11 language of hostility to alternative realities (such as those reported by the speaker-poet from the Middle East: “The figure just *cited*—655,000 dead—resulted from a household survey conducted at actual *sites*”) drains the charge of power embedded in such

rhetoric and marks the emergence of a dialogical site – a moment of negotiation – that is suddenly divested of its mastery (i.e. the dominant language of an American culture of war) in the midst of a markedly asymmetrical and unequal engagement of forces.

This is further elucidated in the discourse. Charara continues:

[...]. Of *course*, language has been corrupted. Look, the President, who speaks *coarsely*, says, “We must stay the *course*.” The problem with “Let your *conscience* be your guide” is you must first be aware, *conscious*, of the fact that a moral principle is a subjective thing. I wonder: when one “smokes ’em out of a hole,” if the person doing the smoking is *conscious* of his *conscience* at work. /Am I fully *conscious* of how I arrived at this? The *continual* dissemination of similar images and ideas. / The *continual* aired footage of planes striking the towers, the towers crumbling to the streets, dust, screams, a *continuous* reel of destruction, fear, as if the attacks were happening twenty-four hours a day, every day, any time. (“Usage”: 78; emphasis in original)

The rhetoric of war presented by the Bush administration after 9/11 as well as continuous media representations echoing such rhetoric is refuted along with an American language/culture that simplistically/homogeneously defiles whole cultures and communities deeming them worthy of unremitting violence. Charara defiantly asserts his rejection of such language, “[o]f *course*, language has been corrupted”. His poetic discourse in turn emerges from a third space of enunciation characterized by a rejection of an assimilation that intimidates the Other with a loss of identity and annihilation. This is a major shift in post-9/11 Arab-American literary discourse. This is the space of enunciation whereby dissident articulations born as mobile/diasporic entities have the potential to voice a different way of being and belonging to the American nation. These articulations emerge from local and global traumas to modify the narratives about their own collective identity within new contexts of semiotic emergence. Such articulations delineate the shift in Arab-American literary/discursive perspectives from an assimilationist trend which previously distanced itself from Islamic/Arab culture to an increasing ethno-political awareness and mounting preoccupation with issues particularly relevant to both Arab and American sensibilities, from a language of appropriation to a language of critical opposition. Charara’s counter-narrative through exposition of the atrocities committed against civilians back home in the Arab World

renders the American retaliation an act of murder devoid of consciousness, rather than a justified war against terror.

By exposing the language of war and placing it in a more realistic perspective, Charara's speaker-poet balances off the recurring images of 9/11 attacks in American media outlets ("as if the attacks were happening twenty-four hours a day") with a more complete picture of American violence abroad. The critical hybrid form of enunciation in the poem aims precisely at changing the environment in which it is conducted, through exposing it to new and potentially transformative ideas imported from elsewhere. It is an intercultural site of enunciation, at the intersection of "different languages" jousting for authority, a translational space of negotiation which opens up through the process of dialogue (Bhabha 2009: x). The transnational and translocal site of Charara's discourse shifts the focus of attention to alternative forms of subjectivity whereby the Other (the diasporic, the ethnic minority, for example) becomes a critical, dialectical participant interfering in the political forms, language and culture of the nation, within the terrain of representative democracy. The cultural/linguistic "sign" is thus opened up to alternative perspectives which may permit the emergence of alternative identities, narratives and practices.

Charara continues:

[...]. For a while, I *couldn't care less* about war. / Then I saw corpses, of boys, who looked just like me. This was 1982, at age ten. Ever since, I *couldn't care less* why anyone would want it. In 1982, any one of those boys *could have* been me. Now, it's any one of those dead men could be me. The Secretary of State offered such *counsel* to the ambassadors of the world that the United Nations Security *Council* nodded in favor of war. *Criterion* easily becomes *criteria*. Even easier: to no longer require either. The *data* turned out false. / The doctrine of preemption ultimately negated its need. While we both speak English, our languages are so *different from* each other, yours might as well be Greek to me. When the black man in the park asked, "Are you Mexican, Puerto Rican, or are you Pakistani?" and I said, "I'm Arab," and he replied, "Damn. Someone *don't* like you very much," I understood perfectly what he meant. The President alluded to the Crusades because of (not *due to*) a lack of knowledge. / Later, he retracted the statement, worried it might offend the Middle East; it never occurred the offense taken was *due to* the bombs shredding them [...]. "You are *either* with us or with the terrorists" (September 20, 2001). "You're *either* with us or against us" (November 6, 2001). The day after, the disc jockey advocated, on air, a thirty-three cent solution (the cost of a bullet)

to the problem of terrorists in our midst—he meant in New York;  
 also, by terrorists, I wonder, did he know he meant cab drivers,  
 hot dog vendors, students, bankers, neighbors, passers-by,  
 New Yorkers, Americans; did he know he also meant Sikhs,  
 Hindus, Iranians, Africans, Asians; did he know, too,  
 he meant Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Atheists; did he realize  
 he was *eliciting* a violent response, on the radio, in the afternoon? /  
 [...]. I heard *enthusiastic* speeches. They hate  
 our freedoms, our way of life, our this, that, and the other,  
*and so on* (not *etc.*). Not *everyone* agreed *every one* not  
 “with us” was “against us.” (“Usage”: 78-9; emphasis in original)

Focusing on foreign transgressions in the Middle East which date back to the 1982 American-backed Israeli occupation of Lebanon, Charara further retaliates against America’s post-9/11 war rhetoric, reminding Americans of their short-term memory in terms of foreign aggression. He rejects this side of American politics and relocates official post-9/11 rhetoric of retaliation in the name of justice in a wider perspective, one which reveals the true hegemonic nature of such rhetoric. In other words, Charara reveals America’s recurring military transgression and aggressive foreign policies towards other people, deliberately exposing an American culture of war which predates 9/11. The language of American culture is thus clearly relocated in the poetic discourse to the confines of postcolonial hybridity pitted within an American diasporic, minority discourse. Charara’s discourse and awareness of socio-political context, instead of being mutually exclusive, can be mutually supplementing, even corrective. It opens up American national belonging to more encompassing multicultural boundaries.

Moreover, the asymmetries of imperialism and American expansionism in the Middle East, reflected in government foreign and local policies as well as media representations, are part and parcel of Charara’s hybrid discourse. He opens up the language of American culture to a wider perspective which incorporates the historical and political inequities that have resulted from an American “culture of war” in the Arab world. He points out President Bush’s “Crusade” against the region and aligns it with longstanding hostile American intervention in the Arab World. This perspective permits us to theorize about the role that ethnic immigrant groups play in the making and unmaking of American culture – and how such discourse challenges the existing structure of power and the existing hegemony. The central premise of this perspective is to center cultural differences as the root of culturally insensitive practices. This rhetoric, pervasive after 9/11, reflects what Edward Said in *Culture and imperialism* (1993) identifies as the “ascendency of American imperialism” (Chapter 4,

“Freedom of Domination in the Future”: 282-336). According to Said the twinning of power and legitimacy, one force obtaining in the world of direct domination, the other in the cultural sphere, is a characteristic of classical imperial hegemony. Where it differs in the American century, according to Said, is the quantum leap in the reach of cultural authority due to unprecedented growth in the apparatus for the diffusion and control of information. Historically the American media, as Said implies, has been a sensory extension of the main cultural context. In line with that proposition, the recurring images of the attacks aired on CNN and major news broadcasts like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as well as various entertainment venues created an “atrocious aesthetic” whereby Arab/Islamic culture was represented in “interpretive frameworks” which pitted the Arab Other as antithetical to American “freedom”. Such representations, alluded to in the poem, had direct repercussions on Arabs/Arab-Americans, Middle Easterners and Muslims, as well as indirect repercussions on those deemed Arab/Muslim. Representations which constructed the racial category “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” came to signify not only a moral, cultural, and civilizational threat to the ‘American’ nation, but also a security threat. The poem appropriates this discourse to a racial mindset invested in White cultural hegemony: “I said, ‘I’m Arab’, and he replied, ‘Damn. Someone *don’t* like you very much’”. Charara refutes American discourse which claims that going to war ‘over there’ and enacting racism and immigrant exclusion ‘over here’ are essential components to the project of protecting national security and American democracy. Charara’s discourse clarifies the logic of Arab/Muslim exclusion at the heart of American constructions of citizenship and nation. He clearly attempts to show that being “of colour” (i.e. non-White European American) is not antithetical to being American: “I wonder, did he know he meant cab drivers, hot dog vendors, students, bankers, neighbors, passers-by, New Yorkers, Americans”. Furthermore, what these affiliations assert, according to Charara’s counter-narrative, is that one can be grounded in an American space without having to give up emotional and material allegiances to another homeland, religion, ethnicity, or creed.

Charara displaces the sign of post-9/11 war rhetoric by appropriating such language to racial exclusion underlying the ideological structure of white American culture. The language of American democracy is exposed. It does not reflect the intensity of the violence perpetrated in the Arab world, it does not tell the whole story. The intervention of Charara’s discourse in the “third space” makes the structure of meaning and reference of “American Democracy” an ambivalent process while questioning the “sign” through which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, and expanding code of national

belonging. Charara reassesses the language of democracy, shifting the location of American belonging to a hybrid perspective embedded in an ethnic/diasporic context which instigates cultural difference and diversity.

While Charara in “Usage” interprets the American language of democracy and multiculturalism whose justification of political claims of culture rests on racial premises, Rafeef Ziadeh’s poetic discourse next counters Western representations of the “helpless” Arab/Eastern woman who needs to be saved by the West. The third space of enunciation in Ziadeh’s rhetoric challenges Orientalist notions of the Arab woman in America and speaks to Palestinian suffering under the occupation of America’s staunch ally in the region, Israel. Ziadeh depicts American-backed Israeli violence in Palestine in an attempt to counter American representations of an inherently violent Arab/Islamic culture.

### 3.3.5 Rafeef Ziadeh: *Shattering the Stereotype*

Rafeef Ziadeh is a Canadian-Palestinian spoken word performance poet and peace activist. She is a member of the steering committee of the “Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel” (PACBI)<sup>133</sup>, also a founding member of the “Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid” (CAIA)<sup>134</sup> promoting the “Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions” (BDS)<sup>135</sup> campaign in America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Her debut CD *Hadeel* (2009)<sup>136</sup> is dedicated to Palestinian youth. She has also collaborated with the non-profit organization, the Arab-American Institute (AAI), which supports programs that promote greater awareness of Arab-Americans. In 2010, she performed some of her works in the Arab-American cultural festival at Garden Grove’s Village Green Park in California. Her performance poem, “Shades of Anger” (2004)<sup>137</sup>, analyzed in this section, was her first public

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<sup>133</sup> The “Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel” (PACBI) was launched in Ramallah in April 2004 by a group of Palestinian academics and intellectuals to join the growing international boycott movement. PACBI 2008. *History* [Online]. Available from: <http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=868> [Accessed 28 July 2014].

<sup>134</sup> The “Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid” (CAIA) was formed in January 2006 as part of a growing, global movement against Israeli apartheid. Information available on the organization website, Available from: <http://www.caiaweb.org/> [Accessed 28 July 2014].

<sup>135</sup> The “Campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” (BDS) resulted in the Palestinian call for sanctions against Israel that was launched in July 2005 with the initial endorsement of over 170 Palestinian organizations. Information available on the organization website, Available from: <http://www.bdsmovement.net> [Accessed 28 July 2014].

<sup>136</sup> Ziadeh, R. 2009. *Hadeel* [CD-ROM].

<sup>137</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.10.

performance while studying at York University, Toronto, in reaction to a violent incident during a creative action pro-Palestinian demonstration at the university. The poem takes on the form of contestatory urban agency (Dowdy 2007), whereby the Palestinian cause is the main source of political agency. The poem embodies diaspora Palestinian activism within the West. It speaks to a Western audience and responds to post-9/11 media representations of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict as well as post-9/11 anti-Arab/Palestinian racism in America. The third space of enunciation evident in the poem arises from an intersection between the gendered racialization of Arab women<sup>138</sup> in post-9/11 discourse and an Orientalist American mind-set, coupled with a Judeo-Christian normative outlook, which also intersects with xenophobia and an imperialist foreign policy. Ziadeh elaborates this situation in the poem:

Allow me to speak my Arab tongue  
 before they occupy my language as well.  
 Allow me to speak my mother tongue  
 before they colonize her memory as well.  
 I am an Arab woman of color  
 and we come in all shades of anger.  
 All my grandfather ever wanted to do  
 was wake up at dawn and watch my grandmother kneel and pray  
 in a village hidden between *Jaffa* and *Haifa*  
 my mother was born under an olive tree  
 on a soil they say is no longer mine  
 but I will cross their barriers, their check points  
 their damn apartheid walls and return to my homeland  
 I am an Arab woman of color and we come in all shades of anger.  
 And did you hear my sister screaming yesterday  
 as she gave birth at a check point  
 with Israeli soldiers looking between her legs  
 for their next demographic threat  
 called her baby girl "Janeen".  
 And did you hear Amni Mona screaming  
 behind their prison bars as they teargased her cell  
 "We're returning to Palestine!"

The relational appropriation of transnational politics in Palestine to minority coalition in America sets the tone of agency and opens up the liminal space of enunciation in the poem.

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<sup>138</sup> The term "gendered racialization" is used here to mean post-9/11 stereotypes which take "women's oppression" out of context and reinforce imperialist discourses justifying anti-Arab and anti-Muslim violence at home, and occupation in Arab/Muslim homelands. The term and its definition are borrowed from Abdulhady, R. Alsultany, E. and Naber, N. 2011. *Arab and Arab American feminisms: gender, violence, and belonging*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Ziadeh's discourse challenges binary constructs pitting the American self against the Arab Other. Her reconfiguration of Palestinian suffering into an ethnic American landscape within the racial politics of people of colour minorities opens up the "sign" of American citizenship and belonging, challenging the idea that assimilating into dominant cultural frameworks in America is necessary for national inclusion. This alliance constructs Arab citizenship within an ethnically marginalized national space. Ziadeh negotiates citizenship and belonging within a minority of colour consciousness, implying in the process that American racial/ideological hierarchies as well as the centrality of Israel to American foreign policy, reflected in an American-Israeli strategic government alliance coupled with the powerful role of the Israeli lobby in Washington, exacerbate the location/racialization of the Arab/Palestinian or Muslim in dominant American discourse. For example, in his article "Christian Zionism and its impact on U.S. foreign policy", Davidson (2007) contends that in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, America's "War against Terrorism" became a holy mission for George Bush and his administration. It was a "war to save civilization itself" (ibid: 198-9). And, almost automatically, Israel became a key player in the president's "anti-terror front" (ibid.). He would have a hard time seeing Israel's possession of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as illegitimate (ibid.). In line with that, Ziadeh delineates the fact that in a post-9/11 American setting, Arabs/Palestinians, like other non-white minority groups in America, are made to feel foreign at home because of an American racial (and in this case, pro-Israeli ideological) mindset, not despite of it. Ziadeh's third space of enunciation thus centralizes racial justice as a basis for mobilizing against the impact of the war on terror on "Third World" nations (specifically here, Palestine) and communities of colour at home. Beneath the façade of liberal advocacy of multiculturalism lies an ethnocentric America that continues, according to Ziadeh, to deny the Palestinian people their right of return to Palestine as well as their national inclusion into the American nation-space. Ziadeh's contestatory agential discourse within the third space of enunciation forges new critical American citizenships that break through the insularity of dominant national perspectives by privileging a transnational outlook which tackles Orientalist and neoimperialist outsets informing dominant opinions about Arabs in general, bridging the gap between such discourse and domestic racial exclusion of people of colour at home. This consciousness is formed through an appropriation of Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation over there to minority struggle against racism over here in America.

Ziadeh elaborates further:

I am an Arab woman of color and we come in all shades of anger.  
     But you tell me, this womb inside me  
     will only bring you your next terrorist  
     beard wearing, gun waving, towelhead, sand nigger  
     You tell me, I send my children out to die  
     but those are your copters, your F16's in our sky  
 And let's talk about this terrorism business for a second  
     Wasn't it the CIA that killed Allende and Lumumba  
     and who trained Osama in the first place  
     My grandparents didn't run around like clowns  
 with the white capes and the white hoods on their heads lynching black people  
 I am an Arab woman of color and we come in all shades of anger.  
     “So who is that brown woman screaming in the demonstration?”  
     Sorry, should I not scream?  
     I forgot to be your every orientalist dream  
*Jinnee* in a bottle, belly dancer, harem girl, soft spoken Arab woman  
     Yes master, no master.  
     Thank you for the peanut butter sandwiches  
     raining down on us from your F16's master  
     Yes my liberators are here to kill my children  
     and call them “collateral damage”

The poem accentuates transnational solidarity within people of colour coalitions, as well as third-world solidarity movements, in its condemnation of an American imperialist model. It does so by exposing America's unwavering support for Israeli violence in Palestine as well as State-backed terrorism in a global/historical setting, such as the CIA-backed assassinations of the Congolese Independence leader, Patrice Lumumba in 1961, and the democratically-elected Chilean president, Salvador Allende in 1973, as well as the training and armament of Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan during the Cold War through references to Osama Bin Laden. She further appropriates an Arab/Palestinian transnational location within American minority politics through direct allusions to American white extremist groups such as the KKK, accentuating the racial ideology underlying American national structures. Here, however, the focus shifts to an articulation of a distinct narrative representing the Arab/Muslim woman which forms the essence of anti-Arab/Muslim stereotypes in America. This narrative (i.e. “gendered racialization”) has formed a central part of Western/American discourse on Islam/Arab culture, especially after the events of 9/11. The expository tenets of the narrative are “that Islam [and by extrapolation, Arab culture, is] innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic/Arab societies” (Ahmed 1992: 152). In America, this narrative is so ubiquitous as to

be invisible, except when crises cause it to be deployed in a direct fashion, as during Operation Desert Storm for example, when the narrative of the Muslim woman was activated to round out the story of the need for a civilizing American mission in the Arab world (Kahf 1999). The Bush administration used the stigma of the “oppressed Muslim woman” to redeem its interference in the Arab world, as a civilizing mission, as well as to condemn Islam/Arabs as backward villains who deserve America’s military might and disciplining. The widely circulated narrative of the oppressed Arab/Muslim woman has an important affective dimension. It is powerful because of the argument it seeks to make about civilization and barbarism, wherein America represents civilization and Islam, and by affiliation Arab culture, represent an inherently barbaric religion and culture in conflict with American values. For example, by painting the picture of beaten, covered, and silenced women in Afghanistan (of course ignorantly conflating Afghani culture with Arab culture), post-9/11 American media and government rhetoric intensified its civilizing discourse, setting up a “colonialist feminist model” (Abdelrazek 2007: 7) for Arab women said to suffer from an oppressive and misogynistic religious and patriarchal social system, thus legitimating their military assault on/in the Middle East. Ziadeh’s hybrid position as an Arab/Palestinian woman speaking to an American audience allows her to empower historically disempowered social groups using the language of Western liberal discourse to reveal the shortcomings of Western democracy. Ziadeh grants agency to the otherwise “veiled and silenced” Muslim/Arab woman. This agency arises from the counterhegemonic narrative expressed in Ziadeh’s discourse. She resists the pervasive view of Arab women as the domesticated and subjugated other in need of American emancipation. She does so by exposing the violence of American foreign policy, its meddling in the Arab world, specifically Palestine, and its historical connection with Zionism. Ziadeh turns this discourse around by exposing what she posits as America’s true agenda in the region. Rather than civilizing the “backward” Arabs, America’s dispensationalist agenda, carried out by the Bush administration after 9/11, does not see the legitimacy of Arab culture, nor does it seek to save the “oppressed”. It simply carries out a prophetic revelation which sees Israel as the final homeland for the Jews (Davidson 2007). By exposing American political racism in Palestine/globally, Ziadeh counters American colonialist feminism which was used to justify post-9/11 “War on Terror” rhetoric and military intervention in the Middle East and Arab World, claiming that Arab women’s “liberators” are their essential murderers.

She concludes with a warning, accentuating the position of gendered/racialized minority voices:

I am an Arab woman of color and we come in all shades of anger.  
 So let me just tell you this womb inside me  
 will only bring you your next rebel  
 She will have a rock in one hand and a Palestinian flag in the other  
 I am an Arab woman of color  
 Beware! Beware my anger.

Ziadeh's contestatory agency emphasizes that a desire to improve women's circumstances, in America or abroad, has never characterized the Bush administration, and is in fact at odds with its Christian fundamentalist ideology. Nevertheless, "women's liberation" proved a convenient excuse to attack countries with which the American government was already intent on going to war. In Ziadeh's discourse these Muslim/Arab women's true oppression originates from a racist, exclusionary, and often violent dominant ideology translated into American foreign policy, rather than from their Arab/Muslim male relatives. Ziadeh thus highlights the fact that Palestinian women's freedom of movement, their freedom to vote, to obtain an education and access to health care, and the basic right to have a roof over their heads in their own historic homeland, is denied them not by Arab men, but by the brutal Israeli occupier, very generously backed by American tax dollars. This is not only the case of Palestinian women. Most Americans are reluctant to acknowledge that Iraqi women's circumstances, for example, once among the most enviable in the Arab world, deteriorated very significantly when the United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Iraq, leading to extreme poverty among the civilians, while Saddam and his cronies lived in obscene luxury. Additionally, one could argue that the Arab regimes most oppressive of women, such as in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, would not stay in power were it not for their close ties with the American government. And while Arab men must certainly be held accountable for their treatment of Arab women, one must also keep in mind that Arab women are ultimately victimized by America and Israel that have very real adverse effects on their everyday lives, and that Arab women's liberation (from Arab patriarchy) would be moot in the political context of an ongoing brutal occupation or tyranny kept in place by the West.

### **3.4 Double consciousness: Imagological Discussion**

In the context of cultural politics in the poetic discourse of post-9/11 Arab-American ethnic identity, the imagotypes presented in the five poems, analysed in Section 3.3 of the

chapter, should be understood within notions of anti-Arab stereotypes in post-9/11 America as well as the conflation of Arabness with Islam with terrorism. The concept of hybridity has become more accentuated in contemporary Arab-American poetry, whereby poets self-reflexively discuss in their poems the writing and interpretation of cultural identity in a process that makes the poetic experience a liminal space between artistic creation and political enunciation in the third space. The various discourses evident in the representative texts all treat cultural contacts between Arabness and Americana not necessarily as alienation or conflict, but as sites of social renewal, in which they reach out to communities beyond the ethno-racial and national divide. The discourse in the poetic texts each mends the hyphen by creating a third space of appropriation and dialogue. A dialogue whose goal is the definition of a national identity and narration. In doing so, they develop the hybridity employed by earlier Arab-American poets, but depart from the tradition by being more pointed towards criticizing both certain Arab/Islamic cultural practices as well as sweeping generalizations/homogenisation of that culture in post-9/11 American rhetoric. I argue that their rejection of an essentialized identity, in favour of protean hybrid forms and themes, should be read not as a capitulation to foreignness, but as an articulation of the desire for freedom and democracy, an articulation that earlier (i.e. pre-9/11) Arab-American poetry may have expressed, but not with such poignancy and force. Moreover, even though the texts necessitate a rethinking of otherness, they all certainly express an anti-imperialist, postcolonial rhetoric and ideology within an American multicultural space.

In Bhabha's (1994) revision of the notion of postcolonial hybridity, we move from the oppositional and hierarchical model of the self-Other relation to one that is reciprocal and mutually constituting through the function of cultural translation in the third space. This notion of "in-between" changes the focus of postcolonial theory from some positivist, essentialist definition of the Other in terms of attributes or traditions to the way relation is plagued by uncertainty and recurring negotiation of national inclusion. Bhabha situates the Other in the self, contaminating the pure colonizer with the subordinate native. This formulation allows him a powerful critique of hegemonic relations while avoiding a cultural essentialism. In an Arab-American ethnic context, the concept of hybridity evident in the texts, despite their various modes of enunciation, presents yet another way to resist "internal colonization" (Naber 2008b) and essentialized identity politics. They do so by refusing to accept an anti-Arab/Muslim position, breaking down the self/Other dichotomy, and opening up spaces between the center and the margins. Whereas earlier Arab-American poets tried to claim a space within a white/Christian American culture using various strategies of

assimilation, which often involved a breaking away from their traditions and homelands, the discourse presented in the texts resist hegemonic assimilation. More specifically, they resist both, the East with its fundamental regimes of power/culture, and the West with its monolithic, essentialized view of Arab culture. Instead, they call for embracing difference in diversity.

Mohja Kahf and Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore in “Little Mosque Poems” (2003) and “Fable” (2003) respectively encounter dominant post-9/11 American discourses on “terrorism” and “Islamic fundamentalism”, and open up Islam to a more multicultural, progressive interpretation. The speaker-poet in Kahf’s “Little Mosque Poems” erases any claims for inherent cultural purity and inhabits the realm of an in-between reality marked by a rigorous critique of exclusionary practices in Arab/Islamic culture(s), while at the same time, granting agency to Arab- and Muslim-American spaces in the face of pervasive post-9/11 American stereotypes. Kahf decenters the locus of Arab/Islamic culture as a means to differentiate between Islam as faith and Islam as political practice and hegemonic patriarchy. The speaker-poet in Kahf’s discourse aspires not only to find herself, define herself, and name her own experiences (as a Muslim/American/woman), but also to reach out to others, building bridges between the American and the Arab worlds. By so doing, Kahf challenges, remaps and negotiates the boundaries of knowledge which claim the status of master post-9/11 narratives of inherent Islamic terrorism. She argues for a more tolerant Arab/Islamic cultural space from an American liberal, multicultural perspective, while holding on to her religious identity. However, she rejects living in an environment (post-9/11 America) which demonizes and dehumanizes her because of religious prejudices. The third space which results from such discourse oscillates between the Arab and American Self(-ves). While the speaker-poet longs to embrace her faith, she cannot identify with certain hegemonic, patriarchal practices in Islamic/Arab culture. On the other hand, she cannot fully belong to an American culture which excludes her based on cultural and religious differences. Her discourse aims at reducing cultural conflict and enhancing dialogue and reconciliation by opening up a third space of enunciation whereby she presents a more tolerant and inclusive Islamic practice in an attempt to breakdown conventional discursive dichotomies between the American Self and the Arab/Muslim Other. In the process, she uncovers and critiques constricting/static cultural practices in the Arab/Islamic world that are unacceptable by any modern standards, and that give both Arabness and Islam a negative connotation. Daniel Abdel-Hayy Moore’s discourse in the equivocal poems from “Fable”, on the other hand,

acknowledges that American-Muslims belong to a global community of Muslims, the *ummah*, a spiritual birthright for Muslims who choose to receive it. However, Moore's Sufi mystical interpretation of the faith highlights the necessity for a subjective, personal approach to Islam immersed in *Tariqa* (method) rather than *Shari'a* (law/religious jurisprudence). The Sufi Islamic mystical message presented in Moore's discourse highlights peace, nonviolence, compassion, patience, and dialogue which has resonated strongly in America during the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Anadolu-Okur 2014). Moore's mysticism transcends linguistic, religious and geographical borders. He aligns Sufi mystical teachings of the annihilation of the ego with Blakean antinomianism in an attempt, I have argued, to open up a third space of enunciation whereby Islamic culture (affiliated with Arabness) and Western progressive liberal thought are no longer antithetical entities. Through his appropriation of Sufi mysticism to Western philosophy, Moore distinguishes between both corporeal political ambitions manifested in American military conquest abroad and in exclusionary Islamic practices dictated by strict religious jurisprudence through the transcendental dimensions of Divine Love. William Blake philosophically expressed his belief in the importance of the imagination by attacking what he called the "mind-forg'd manacles" (Whitney 2012). Unimaginative thought according to Blake imposes shackles on the human spirit. Blake believed that the outside, sensory world has no inherent meaning, but becomes meaningful through contributions of the human imagination, thus his stance that reality is a construction of the human mind whereby humans bring meaning to nature in the form of imaginative thought. Sufism, as emphasized in Moore's discourse, also recognizes the limitations that humans often place on themselves, limitations that are inflicted by material reasoning (Adonis 2005). As such, both Blake and the Sufis refute the idea of an outward experience of truth. They point at the inward perception of truth gained through imagination and insight. Moore grasps that concept and sees it in Sufi mystical orders that preach the annihilation of the "false" Self in order to perceive things as they really are, instead of the distortions created by the ego (*nafs*). He thus translates Islamic (and by affiliation Arab/Eastern) culture(s) to an American Western readership through the appropriation of Sufi Islamic theology to Western secular spirituality incorporated in the Romantic antinomianism of William Blake. By so doing, Moore associates "terror" neither to Islamic culture nor Arab civilization solely, but to political ambitions and hatred which, according to Moore's Sufi discourse, is the work of the "false" Self, whether American or Other.

Shlah, on the other hand, speaks back to a Western, American civilization with a rich, ancient heritage of his own, that of Arab culture. The discursive negotiation of transnational connections to an Arab homeland, in this case, Iraq, in “Thirty-Three Beads on a String” has an integral role in creating a third space for reformulating hegemonic and univocal understandings of American citizenship and belonging. Shlah’s reformulation of Arab culture in his poetic discourse encounters pervasive stereotypes in post-9/11 America that demonize and distance Arab culture as a brutal and backward monolithic entity devoid of civilization. The ways in which Arab civilization, and its concomitant cultural and aesthetic byproducts, is imagined, replicated, portrayed, and relived by Shlah in “Thirty-Three Beads” invites new engagements with American citizenship and belonging that are repositioned outside the frameworks of Orientalism and neoimperialism. America’s “War on Terror” which was translated into a full military occupation of Iraq in 2003 came as a disciplining crusade on the part of the American government. Arabs were portrayed as “backward” terrorists worthy of disciplining through military force. Shlah’s discourse counters such derogatory representations. He highlights a vibrant and ancient Arab civilization in an attempt to counter anti-Arab stereotypes and translate Arab culture as it truly is to the American other. In the process, Shlah’s transnational articulation challenges anti-Arab stereotypes as they are applied to the Arab-American community within the American nation. In this way, Shlah counters post-9/11 derogatory stereotypes and bridges the gap between the Arab self and American other. In Shlah’s discourse, Arab culture is no longer antithetical to American “civilization”. Shlah’s third space counters anti-Arab stereotypes through depictions of American military brutality in Iraq and its concomitant ignorance towards the essence of an ancient Arab heritage. He thus overturns exclusionary belongings dictated by post-9/11 representations of Arab backwardness by exposing American barbarity as a product of violent transgressions in the Middle East.

The final two poems in the selection, “Usage” (2008) and “Shades of Anger” (2004), by Hayan Charara and Rafeef Ziadeh respectively, shift the focus of the discussion from the theological/cultural to the political. Within the confines of embodied experiential agency, Charara uses transnational and local events to open up the sign of American language of “democracy” and multiculturalism to critical translation. His poetic discourse asserts that at the root of Arab/Arab-American exclusion is a systematic and structural political racism that occurs in the areas of civil rights, American foreign policy in the Middle East/Arab World, access to full American citizenship and belonging, as well as inclusion in public policy.

Beneath the language of American multicultural inclusion and diversity, Charara insists, lies civil rights abuses of Arab-Americans. This pretext for civil rights abuses – alleged connection to terrorism – is used to promote anti-Arab prejudice and exclusion in the realm of public information and foreign policy. It is on this level that so many other forms of racism originate, and it is on this level that Arab-Americans find themselves on a collision course with the state. Charara’s discourse exposes the xenophobic/racist ideologies underlying notions of “imperative patriotism” which came into being as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks. By reporting on American transgressions in the Middle East which predate 9/11, Charara delineates an American culture of war which views Arabness initially as an incommensurate Other. Charara’s experiential agency depicting American transgressions in the Arab World points to the political uncertainties and the racialized treatment that continue to plague Arabs, both nationally and transnationally. Rafeef Ziadeh’s contestatory urban agency and political feminism in her performance piece “Shades of Anger” (2004) goes even further and links American foreign policy in the Middle East, specifically Palestine, and anti-Arab prejudice to a staunch American-Israeli alliance. She presents an isolationist<sup>139</sup> stance whereby she associates anti-Arab prejudice to American politics. Ziadeh translates the causes and effects of such prejudice to an American audience from an Arab/Palestinian woman’s perspective. She does so via images of American/Israeli State terrorism. Those who wield power, she seems to imply, are in fact the oppressors who always need ideologies and rationalizations to differentiate themselves from the merely criminal. Behind this mentality, Ziadeh insists, is a bipolar perception of the world, the assertion of imperialist altruism, and the fact of a strong American foreign policy alliance with Israel. Ziadeh’s third space of enunciation involves a simultaneous sense of dispossession and empowerment. Palestine becomes a technique and metaphor for anti-Arab prejudice entrenched in hostile American foreign politics. She speaks back to power using its own discourse of freedom and liberation, asserting that instead of liberating the women of the Middle East and Arab world, America and its allies have destroyed them economically, culturally and physically.

The images presented in the texts display Arab identity within an ambiguous state of hybrid belonging to the American nation. This ambiguity is certainly addressed in subtle underpinnings of a racialized and subaltern Arab-American reality within a post-9/11

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<sup>139</sup> For further readings on Arab-American isolationist and integrationist politics, see also Shain, Y. (1996). Arab-Americans at a crossroads. *Journal of Palestine studies* [Online], 25(3).

context. Chapter four of the thesis next will focus on Arab-American feminist discourse in relation to an ethno-national identity. The chapter will trace notions of “Women of Color” coalitions within Arab-American ethnic sensibilities. Arab feminist discourse will be addressed within a post-9/11 imagological perspective emerging from a selection of poems by Arab-American women writers.

**Chapter Four:** “Feminism, Identity and the Poetry of Arab-American Women”

*I am neither a victim  
nor an anachronism.*

- Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Claims”<sup>140</sup>

*[W]e as ethnic women, as women, as feminists, we who have histories rooted in occupation, oppression, alienation – must continue remembering, acting, speaking, and writing.*

- Nathalie Handal, “Shades of a Bridge’s Breath” (2002)

Arab cultural identity in Orientalist and Arab nationalist discourses has been intrinsically linked to women and the treatment of women, and the woman’s body as marker of tradition has long been appropriated for political gain. In the first discourse, the veiled woman’s body signifies the physical and mental imprisonment of the Arab woman, silenced by a backward Arab patriarchy; in the second discourse, the refutation of Western imperialism and ideology has prioritized traditional values in the body of the pure and virtuous Arab woman whose sexuality must be regulated to maintain a civilized society. Resistance to the appropriation of Arab women’s bodies and cultural roles has been a cornerstone of Arab-American feminisms over the last three decades. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the need to “write or be written”<sup>141</sup> has assumed a greater urgency, with the rise of anti-Arab bigotry, the sweeping deployment of neo-Orientalist narratives of Arabs and Muslims in the service of U.S. foreign policy, and the sanctioning of racial and religious profiling vis-à-vis the Patriot Act. The poet Nathalie Handal writes, “Who are you, if you answer and *others* still find it necessary to redefine your identity without your permission? [...] How do you define yourself when you’re hyphenated, or maybe even bi-hyphenated, when you exist in the incessantness of in-betweenesses?” (2002: 158). Opening up this line of questioning, who are you in a post-9/11 world where to be a “real” American is to be without

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<sup>140</sup> “Claims” was originally published in the 1994 anthology *Food for our grandmothers* and is included in Majaj’s 2007 poetry collection, *Geographies of light*.

<sup>141</sup> “Write or be written” forms one of the guiding principles of the Italian American Writers Association, as Barbara Nimri Aziz notes in the foreword to *Scheherazade’s legacy: Arab and Arab American women on writing* (2004). It is a principle, Aziz argues, that has informed the proliferation of new works by Arab-American writers (xii).

hyphens, where loyalty is to be “with us or against us in the fight against terror”?<sup>142</sup> How does an Arab-American woman bridge her “Arab” and “American” identities when the “fight against terror” is sold as the liberation of her Arab and Muslim sisters? How does she negotiate her “in-betweenness” when the upholding of Arab values is so often inscribed in *her* actions and deeds? Where does resistance start?

Arab-American women speaking out, writing, and mobilizing in resistance to hegemonic cultural and political discourses, whether they are neo-colonialist, nationalist, heteropatriarchal, or indeed, feminist, is not a recent phenomenon, a flowering in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.<sup>143</sup> Arab-American feminists have long understood that gender oppression cannot be divorced from other forms of oppression or, more pointedly, that “an oppressive gender system *cannot* work without the collaboration of other systems of power and oppression” (Aanerud 2002: 70; emphasis in original). The need to identify and investigate intersecting oppressions has also been at the heart of women of colour feminism and many Arab-American feminists have claimed feminism of colour as their political and spiritual home.<sup>144</sup> When U.S. governments use the “plight” of Arab and Muslim women to generate support for war, when Arab nationalist leaders revoke women’s freedoms in the name of “cultural authenticity”<sup>145</sup>, when the mainstream women’s movement takes it upon itself to voice the struggles of their Arab sisters, the boundness of gender struggle with racial, colonial, and national oppressions is clear. Strategies of resistance, then, for Arab-American feminists over the last two decades have predominantly been articulated within intersectional and transnational feminist frameworks<sup>146</sup>:

We imagine a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and transgender people “over here” and “over there.” This transnational feminist vision inspires us to imagine a world without

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<sup>142</sup> This now infamous declaration by former U.S. President George W. Bush took place at a press conference in November 2001 (CNN.com).

<sup>143</sup> As Amira Jarmakani notes, “Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, Arab American [*sic*] feminism has been portrayed and perceived, from a mainstream perspective, as suddenly relevant or newly forming” (2011: 231).

<sup>144</sup> The relationship between Arab-American and women of colour feminisms will be analyzed later in the chapter.

<sup>145</sup> On women as markers of “cultural authenticity” within Arab anti-colonialist ideology, see Naber (2012: 64, 72-75). The rise of Islamism in the Arab world, as Leila Ahmed has detailed, similarly “traps the issue of women with the struggle over culture – just as the initiating colonial discourse had done” (1992: 236).

<sup>146</sup> Prominent Arab-American feminists adopting transnational feminist frameworks include Nadine Naber, Ella Shohat, Joe Kadi and Amira Jarmakani.

oppression and think about alternatives to exclusionary heteromasculinist and xenophobic politics. (Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber 2011: xxxv)

A transnational feminist vision prioritizes heterogeneous voices and experiences and the “hybrid culture of all communities”.<sup>147</sup> This chapter will examine how Arab-American feminists have sought to re-envision Arab-American identity through intersectional and transnational feminist frameworks and will explore some of the struggles encountered in trying to move away from identity politics to a conception of identity as hybrid, plural, shifting, and continually negotiated. This analysis will then inform an imagological reading of post-9/11 identity construction in the selected literary texts by Arab-American women poets.

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<sup>147</sup> Ella Shohat in an interview with Evelyn Alsultany (2011a: 56).

#### 4.1 Feminism and the Poetry of Arab-American Women: Double Marginalization

The terrorist attacks of September 11 and the ramifications for Arab-Americans on a discursive, experiential and psychic level, had an immediate and far-reaching impact on the cultural production of Arab-American women's poetry. The writing of personal and cultural identities for Arab-American poets has always been "inextricably shaped by politics" (Majaj, Survey Appendix A.5: Q13)<sup>148</sup>. According to Hayan Charara, "engagement with the political, especially in terms of U.S. policy in the Middle East, seems to bring Arab Americans [*sic*] together more than any other experience" (2008: xxiv). Imagologist Joep Leerssen defines collective identities as "the awareness of a shared past [...]. Historical awareness is at the very root of group identity" (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 336). The shared historical awareness of the role of U.S. foreign policy in fomenting crises in the Middle East and representing the Arab peoples as an alien Other to further political ends has been deeply felt in the poetry of Arab-American women; indeed, the political nature of identity has been a recurring theme since the emergence of Anglophone poetry by women poets in the 1960s.<sup>149</sup> The events of 9/11 brought home a culture of mistrust, intimidation and prejudice against Arabs and Muslims on a scale never before witnessed in American society, spurring Arab-American women poets to "become more daring and more direct" (Ellis, Survey Appendix A.1: Q12)<sup>150</sup> in resisting through the written and spoken word.

Contextualizing the multiple griefs engendered by 9/11 and problematizing mainstream wartime narratives that seek to enforce binaries of "Arab" and "American" have been persistent themes in the poetry. In chapter two, I argued that Suheir Hammad's poem "first writing since" asserts Arab-American inclusion in the tragic events of 9/11 by positing Arab-American identity within the immediate outcomes of the tragedy and conflating the personal identifiers of American "self" and Arab "other". The grief experienced at the loss of lives becomes for Hammad a bridge to Palestinian grief and to the suffering of Iraqis, Rwandans and Nicaraguans at the service of U.S. foreign policy, a form of what Sirène Harb

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<sup>148</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.5, p.307).

<sup>149</sup> The first recorded Anglophone poetry collection by an Arab-American woman poet is Etel Adnan's *Moonshots* (1966) though this collection was published in Beirut (Handal 2001: 42, Majaj and Amireh 2002: 16). Adnan's first English-language poem was the anti-war "The Ballad of the Lonely Knight in Present-Day America", inspired by the Vietnam War (Majaj and Amireh op. cit. 16). Adnan and D.H. Melhem were at the vanguard of Arab-American women's poetry in the 1970s but it was not until the 1980s that a surge of publications by women poets began (Handal op. cit.).

<sup>150</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.1, p.296).

has termed “associative remembering” whereby Arab-American women poets “reconfigur[e] the trauma of September 11 across multiple spaces of memory” (2012: 15).

Situating solidarity and relatedness in an American and transnational framework exposes the fault line of an American identity bound to unilateral patriotism and enables resistance to un-American inscriptions. The poetry of Arab-American women is often explicit in calling attention to the hypocrisy at the heart of the U.S. neo-colonial project: “Dear Sharif, Violence is wrong / unless we are using it, / why doesn’t that make sense ...” (Naomi Shihab Nye, “Letters My Prez is Not Sending”, 2008a: 90). Poet Andrea Assaf notes the “outrageous contradictions, this ‘double consciousness’” of being a citizen of a society waging a war against Arab peoples: “I must write to survive it” (Assaf, Survey Appendix A.4: Q2)<sup>151</sup>. Foregrounding narratives of collective and relational loss becomes a way of re-imagining American identity in opposition to essentialist, exclusionary definitions: “[Arab-American women poets] both insist on difference and insist on redefining American identity to include this difference [...]. Post-9/11, if the boundaries of American identity are more rigidly drawn, the limitations of those boundaries are more obvious” (Majaj, Survey Appendix A.5: Q11)<sup>152</sup>. Some poets have questioned the limits of solidarity in a society that prides itself on multiculturalism. In Laila Halaby’s “rage”, for example, which will be one of the poems examined, the liberal American mother’s opposition to the Iraq War is unmasked as a superficial connectedness to those “over there”; her solidarity does not lead her to a deeper questioning of American values or to even consider how she herself is complicit in the war narrative she denounces. The concern of these poets in calling attention to decolonization and self-determination in the homeland and hostland invites a reading of the poetry as a transnationalist feminist critique.

Challenging stereotypes of Arab women and men in American cultural and political discourse and highlighting the interconnectedness of sexism and racism that inform them has been another central preoccupation of Arab-American women poets. The poetry both deconstructs and transforms cultural representations of the Arab community through diverse stratagems, so that resisting is never simply a defensive or defiant stance but an opportunity to reclaim agency through asking larger questions of American society and ethnic identity. Personal experience of anti-Arab racism and memories of childhood exclusion – the growing awareness that one did not quite belong – permeate the poetry. The need to find a space of

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<sup>151</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.4, pp.303-4).

<sup>152</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.5, p.307).

belonging in a culture that marginalizes you or seeks to assimilate you has seen Arab-American women poets chart a history of rebellions and accommodations vis-à-vis American and Arab culture. An over-looked aspect of this work is the humour, sarcasm, and irony commonly employed to ridicule mainstream visions of Arab women and men. Mohja Kahf's poem "*Hijab Scene #2*" turns the marker of the veiled woman as a victim of gender oppression on its head through juxtaposing the "freedom" of the archetypal "pink-collar" American woman with the bondage of *her* clothing and limited career prospects in the market economy: "'You people have such restrictive dress for women,' / she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose / to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day" (*E-mails from Scheherazad* 42).

Nathalie Handal has noted that the emergence of Muslim-American women poets is changing the landscape of the poetry which has hitherto been dominated by writers from the *Mashriq* (2001: 42-43). Kahf identifies as both Arab-American and Muslim-American (ibid: 43) and her deeply-held religious beliefs have led her to critique patriarchal authoritarianism in the practice of Islam, most notably in "Little Mosque Poems", analyzed in chapter three, a lament for the mosque she attends which "used to be democratic" but now segregates and dehumanizes women: "Everyone is welcome / as long as / they understand that Real Islam / has to come from an Arab man" (2005: 116-123). Where Handal has seen an increased willingness for self-criticism and the broaching of "taboo" subjects in the community (2001: 47), other commentators have argued that concerns about reinforcing neo-colonialist stereotypes of Arab culture continue to inhibit the ability of Arab-American women poets to freely express intra-communal tensions.<sup>153</sup> Indeed, Barbara Nimri Aziz, writing in 2004, charged that "we [Arab-American writers] expose little of the real conflicts we face [...] I doubt if we can really advance without openly confronting the ills that afflict us, the barriers that confront us, internal and external. We are the opposite of the angry young artist at this point in our journey" (xv). While it remains true that Arab-American women poets, as *citizens* of the United States, have emphasized external prejudices and injustice in their work over exploration of intra-communal matters, a number of contemporary poets are challenging essentializing definitions of Arab womanhood and Arab masculinity emanating from both private (intra-communal) and public (Islamist-nationalist) discourses, often contextualizing these discourses through a relational examination of neo-colonial and neo-Orientalist

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<sup>153</sup> See Abdelrazek (2007: 2). Majaj notes that "[c]hallenging discursive frameworks to subvert traditional gender roles is particularly difficult when these roles are heavily invested with ethnic or national significance" (1996: 276).

discourses.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, the poems analyzed in this chapter and throughout the study as a whole illustrate that Arab-American women poets are closer to the “angry young artist” than Aziz would have us believe.

Feminism of colour intersectional theory becomes instructive for the reading of Arab-American women’s poetry precisely because resistance to oppression is on multiple fronts, an oppositional stance which defies attempts to posit a unique Arab or Arab-American identity and argues for a multiplicity of readings:

Rejecting any essentialist, monolithic, and static notion of culture, Arab American women writers warn of the dangers of making civilisations and identities into what they are not: opposing entities that share only a history of religious wars and imperial conquest rather than one of exchange and cross-fertilization. These Arab American [*sic*] women writers not only use their writings as a form of resistance to Orientalist and Arab fundamental regimes and constructions of identities but also as a means to explore and express their feelings about their hyphenated identities, exile, doubleness, and difference. (Abdelrazek 2007: 3-4)

While Arab-American women poets are deeply invested in their originary culture and in claiming an Arab identity, most are mindful of promulgating an exilic nostalgia that mythologizes or romanticizes homeland, or engaging in what Lalya Al Maleh has termed “root-oriented identity politics” (2009: x). Family and the role that family plays in staying connected to the homeland assume a central role in the delineation of identity. Poet Marian Haddad contends that there is a “maternal instinct” at play in “wanting to identify and defend the goodness of our people” (Survey Appendix A.6: Q11)<sup>155</sup>. Many poets struggle in overcoming their homesickness and sense of alienation; for others, the borderlands struggle is further complicated by journeying home and finding that their country of origin also marks them as foreign. Etel Adnan and Naomi Shihab Nye, the best-known contemporary Arab-American women poets, would also appear to be the most comfortable in their hyphenated skin. The inter-ethnic affiliation with other women of colour that often comes through in the

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<sup>154</sup> Kahf’s “Little Mosque Poems” is illuminating in this regard: “I love my little mosque, / ego-ridden, cracked and flawed / as it is, / and I know / the bricks of bigots / are real” (121). Suheir Hammad’s 1996 poetry collection *Born Palestinian, born Black* contains a series of poems which tackle misogyny and sexism in the Arab world and the West, arguing for an understanding of female subjugation as both universal and culturally specific. *Atrium* (2012), the debut collection of the young poet Hala Alyan, features the poem “Sahar and her Sisters” (27- 28), a harrowing critique of misogynistic, homophobic familial violence in Arab society. The collection is also replete with barbed missives at American conceptions of beauty and sexuality, with the mariticial “Barbie” (43- 44) a particularly piquant example.

<sup>155</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.6, pp.309-10).

poetry is borne out of a shared sense of doubleness: “[This bond] is a way of reassuring themselves that they are not alone, a way of understanding themselves better by observing others having the same experiences, and a way of stating that America is also about *this diversity*” (Handal 2001: 44; emphasis in original). These poets find common cause in resisting assimilationist strategies and insisting that America make room for the Arab *and* American within them.

#### 4.1.1 Gender Hetero-images:

The five poems chosen (Section 4.3) employ imagery that destabilizes “Arab” *and* “American” identity formations within intersectional and transnational feminist frameworks. Some of the poems foreground gender-specific imagery; for example, the tropes of motherhood in Angele Ellis’s “The Blue State Ghazals”, posit alternative identity formations outside of ethnic allegiance, engaging with “[i]mages of nations and cultures [...] constructed in metaphors that situate women in marking the identity of the nation” (Volpp 2001: 1198). The destabilization of the categories “Arab” and “American” in these texts, whereby imagotypes are identified and deconstructed “to subvert the notion of ‘national characters’” (Florack 2001 cited in Beller and Leerssen 2007: 433), asks pertinent questions of how the relationship between the spected “Arab”/“American”/“Arab-American” is transformed in the process. What are the levels of alterity at work? Does positive self-valorization of Arab ethnicity lead to hybrid identifications or a polarizing identity politics? Will the deconstruction of neo-Orientalist and nationalist imagotypes open up the “borders” to transnational affiliations *across* ethnicities or situate feminist solidarity outside the spaces of the dominant white majority? The recent attention to audience within imagological research opens up a further line of enquiry: to whom is the text addressed and “[h]ow is its rhetoric and deployment of national tropes geared to this target-audience?” (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 28).

It should be noted that the strategies of resistance to gender, racial and colonial oppressions by the Arab-American women poets under study are plural and mobile, sometimes shifting from poem to poem as well from collection to collection. Therefore, the adoption of a hybrid voice, or ethnic affiliation with other minorities of colour, or the prioritising of one identificatory position (Arab, American, nation of origin) within the text should be read as one possible means of engagement with “Arab-American” identity.

Hetero-images of the exotic Arab/Muslim woman in American culture include representations of the veiled, oppressed, and silenced victim of a patriarchal and backward Arab culture. The predominant images of Arab women in American culture lie between images of the erotic, romanticized, magical, and sexualized harem and the helpless, silent, and dominated victim of an excessive Arab patriarchy (Jarmakani 2008). These representations are reflected in the cultural productions of Arab-/Muslim-American women prior to 9/11. For example, in her poem “Exotic” from *Born Palestinian, born Black* (1996), Suheir Hammad expresses this reality. She claims:

don't wanna be your exotic  
                   some delicate fragile colorful bird  
                   imprisoned caged  
                   in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings

[...]

don't wanna  
                   don't seduce yourself with  
                   my otherness my hair  
                   wasn't put on top my head to entice  
                   you into some mysterious black vodou  
                   the beat of my lashes against each other  
                   ain't some dark desert beat  
                   it's just a blink  
                   get over it (69)

Images such as these expressed in Suheir Hammad's poem “Exotic” reflect a distinct narrative of the highly erotic, exotic, and doubly marginalised Arab/Muslim woman in America prior to 9/11. This narrative, according to Kahf (1999), has formed a central part of Western discourse on Arab culture and Islam ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The expository tenets of this narrative are “that [Arab culture] is innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of [Arab/Islamic] societies” (Ahmed 1992 cited in Kahf 1999: 1). In *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003), for example, the poems of Mohja Kahf are primarily concerned with demystifying Arab/Muslim lives and practices in America and in altering misconceptions about Arab/Muslim women. Aiming to “educate” non-Muslim audiences and to empower fellow Arab/Muslim women, Kahf's poetry, reflects the Othering of Arab/Muslim women in American culture (Mattawa

2008). For example, in “Hijab Scene”, poems 1 and 2 (2003), a Muslim woman wearing a hijab is confronted by a pierced, blue-haired punk teenager and a heavily made-up, skimpily dressed woman. Who is weirder, who is more conformist, Kahf’s poem seems to ask. If the American woman is acquiescing to a condescending form of male taste, and the punk teenager is conforming to a fad, why is the hijab-wearing woman not their equal, and why is she not equally tolerated?

Moreover, media representations of the victimized Arab/Muslim woman create a monolithic portrait of Islam and Arab culture “that is then easily mobilized by the government to justify U.S. intervention in Arab and Muslim countries” (Alsultany 2014: 73). Stories of oppression and violence, according to Alsultany (2014), within Arab culture are repeated to the point that the most brutal acts define that culture. Given that cultural mythologies operate as meaning makers, it follows that they play a pernicious role in shaping popular perceptions about the conglomeration of cultures, ethnicities, and religions which they supposedly represent (ibid.). These ossified static images of Arab culture “perpetuate the notion that Arabs and Muslims (and all those people perceived to be Arab and Muslim) are one monolithic mass” (Jarmakani 2008: 9-10). The idea that this sort of fabrication is knowledge about the Middle East in America, according to Jarmakani (2008), produces simplistic categories through which to discipline the Arab and Muslim worlds and to “save” Arab/Muslim women from the backwardness of Arab patriarchy. In a post-9/11 setting, the logics of the “War on Terror” are not possible without these derogatory hetero-images. The widely circulated narrative of the oppressed Arab/Muslim Woman, according to Alsultany (2014), moreover, has an important “affective dimension” (74). During the “War on Terror”, these representations are powerful because of the argument they seek to make about civilization and barbarism, wherein America represents civilization and Islam represents an inherently “barbaric” culture and religion in opposition to American cultural norms and values (ibid.).

## 4.2 Cultural Context: Arab-American Feminisms

### 4.2.1 The U.S. hegemonic feminist model and “women of color” consciousness:

In *Food for our grandmothers*, a pioneering anthology of essays and literature by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists, Joanna Kadi<sup>156</sup> argued that Arabs are distinguishable by their *absence* in the American popular consciousness except in times of crisis when “Arabs can be reassured we exist as a distinct racial group” (1994: xvi). Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Orientalist mythos of Muslim and Arab women as subjugated, helpless victims of brutalizing patriarchies would once again become part of a gendered war narrative with the symbol of the veil as the most cogent signifier of a backwards Islamic culture requiring civilization through heroic Western masculinist intervention (Jarmakani 2008). Far from speaking out against the misrepresentations of their Arab and Muslim sisters, the rhetoric of American mainstream feminist movements reflected the political discourse:

during both the 1991 Gulf War and the 2001 military action against Afghanistan, mainstream U.S. feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Feminist Majority offered arguments about the oppression of Arab/Muslim women that ultimately buttressed the hegemonic project of U.S. imperialism. (ibid: 160)

NOW and the Feminist Majority did not engage in meaningful dialogue with Kuwaiti, Saudi and Afghani women to learn of their concerns, so that the very act of making visible the oppression of Arab and Muslim women rendered them doubly invisible in the process (Saliba 1994: 155; Jarmakani 2011). At the 1983 National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) conference, Azizah al-Hibri gave a speech entitled “Unveiling the Hidden Face of Racism: The Plight of Arab American [*sic*] Women.” She argued that the mainstream women’s movement relegated Arab women to an “inferior other” by “tak[ing] upon itself to tell *us* Arab women what are the most serious issues for us – over our objections” (1983: 10, 1994: 162-163; emphasis in original). The previous year, al-Hibri’s attempt to pass a resolution at the conference condemning the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was upheld by the Third World Caucus but rejected by the majority white delegates (1994: 163). The women’s movement was keen to denounce veiling and clitoridectomy, argued al-Hibri, but refused to denounce

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<sup>156</sup> Joanna Kadi now lives as a transgender man and goes by the name of Joe Kadi.

the suffering and deaths of Arab women and children (1983: 10). Al-Hibri invoked the movement's "moral duty" to act: "I have always understood sisterhood to be strong enough to withstand patriarchal pressures in times of great turmoil" (ibid: 11). However, the intervening years have only reinforced the extent to which the rhetoric of prominent American feminist organizations legitimizes U.S. neo-colonialist war efforts and the ways in which the dissenting voices of Arab and Arab-American women have been marginalized in the process.

At feminist and academic conferences, Arab-American speakers have found their contributions pigeonholed by the continual insistence on addressing the subjugating role of women in oppressive Islamic regimes and the frames of reference - veiling, female genital mutilation, honour killings - in which this subjugation is understood (Zaatari 2011; Jarmakani 2011; Elia 2011; Abdulhadi *et al.*, 2011). A concomitant stifling of debate on issues of primary importance to Arab-American feminists, particularly the "taboo" subject of Palestinian self-determination, underscores their acute sense of alienation from the mainstream women's movement.<sup>157</sup> As African-American feminist bell hooks writes:

We fear those who speak about us, who do not speak to us and with us. We know what it is like to be silenced. We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain. (1990: 152)

Hegemonic feminism, in advocating for the global emancipation of women in universalizing gender-specific terms that underscore liberation as a Western referent, belies the ability of the movement to shake off its white, middle-class roots of resistance. The various iterations through which the mainstream movement has tried to reconcile sexual politics with firstly class and then racial differences have not succeeded in shifting the narrative away from white culture and white values as the "norm".<sup>158</sup> The need to set forth alternative strategies of

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<sup>157</sup> See Zaatari 2011 and Elia 2011. Edward Said called the Israeli occupation of Palestine the "last taboo" in U.S. public discourse (quoted in Orfalea 2006: 322). At the 1985 UN International Conference on Women in Nairobi, Betty Friedan made the following request to Egyptian feminist Nawal el Saadawi: "Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech. This is a women's conference, not a political conference" (quoted in Elia op. cit. 141).

It is important to note that not all Arab-American feminists feel alienated from mainstream feminism. Indeed, Joe Kadi cautions against the view of a monolithic white women's movement that is inherently racist: "I have experienced great support and inclusion from different white women and different women of color, and I have experienced disrespectful and painful dismissal by different white women and different women of color" (2011: 245-246).

<sup>158</sup> See Sandoval (1991: 7-9) on the successive iterations of mainstream feminism.

resistance that would give voice to racial, class, colonial and other forms of oppression and their interconnectedness with gender oppression was first articulated by American third world and women of colour feminists during second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s:

During the 1970s, U.S. feminists of color identified common grounds upon which they made coalitions across profound cultural, racial, class, and gender differences. The insights perceived during this period reinforced the common culture across difference comprised of the skills, values, and ethics generated by subordinated citizenry compelled to live within similar realms of marginality. (Sandoval 1991: 10)

From the beginnings of women of colour feminism, the quest for subjectivity in opposition to the dominant social order carried the risk that in eschewing the essentialism of gender identity, an essentializing wholeness under the rubrics of race and culture would be asserted instead. As bell hooks articulates, “There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black ‘essence’ and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle” (1990: 29). A recognition of the centrality of identity politics for oppressed people in naming themselves, their culture, their struggle and the limitations of this politics in interpreting the multivalent experiences of oppressed women and men have led feminists of colour to theorize new spaces that open up subject formation to a multiplicity of consciousness. A key question for women of colour has been how to enact plural identities affirmatively when plurality can so easily be “disabling”, bringing increased alienation and fragmentation to the individual’s sense of self (Espinoza 1998).

Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of *la conciencia de la mestiza* (“mestiza consciousness”) in the 1987 publication *Borderlands/La Frontera* has proved influential for Arab-American feminists and scholars trying to grapple with lives lived in *los intersticios*, “the spaces between the different worlds [they inhabit]” (ibid. 2012: 42).<sup>159</sup> For Anzaldúa, the pain of the mother culture being misunderstood and rejected by the dominant white culture ignites a dualistic mode of individual and collective thinking, forever pitting the values of one culture in opposition to the other. This dualism, with its concomitant

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<sup>159</sup> In “Los Intersticios: Recasting Moving Selves”, Evelyn Alsultany configures her experience of multi-ethnic identity as one of being “marked” by all: “Those who otherize me fail to see a shared humanity and those who identify with me fail to see difference: my Arab or Muslim identity negates my Cuban heritage” (2002: 107). Amal Talaat Abdelrazek draws on Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory in *Contemporary Arab American women writers* (2007) and scholars such as Nathalie Handal (2002) and Joe Kadi (2011) have noted the influence of Anzaldúa on their work.

enactment of rigid boundaries and exclusionary practices, ultimately keeps the *mestiza* a prisoner of her psyche. As there is no escaping the “straddling” of dual or multiple cultures for borderlands people (ibid: 102), transcending the impasse of binaries necessitates the adoption of a “plural personality” to navigate border identities and break free from an oppressor / oppressed mentality:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. [...] She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (ibid: 101)

The ability to “juggle cultures” and “turn the ambivalence into something else” goes to the heart of the current struggle in Arab-American feminist thinking.

#### 4.2.2 Arab-American Feminisms: Resistance on multiple fronts:

Arab-American feminists predominantly identify as women of colour racially and psychically, though this identification has not been without its own contestations and negotiations. Poet and academic Lisa Suhair Majaj, born to a Palestinian father and an American mother of German descent, writes of how her early self-identification as white was fostered by her lighter skin, English-speaking upbringing and middle-class background (1994). However, in the act of explaining her name, history and “olive-tinged skin”, she experienced the familiar hostility towards and stereotyping of Arabs that led her to try and silence her Arabness “as a tool of survival”: “What I did not realize then was that silence, with time, atrophies the voice – a loss with such grave consequences that it is a form of dispossession” (ibid: 80).

Coalition building with women of colour movements has been hindered by what many Arab-American feminists perceive as the outsider status thrust upon them, not quite brown enough in constitution *or struggle* to qualify as women of colour. In *this bridge we call home* (2002; emphasis in original), the follow-up collection to *This bridge called my back* (1981), a seminal anthology of women-of-colour writing edited by Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, Palestinian-American activist Nada Elia noted that Arab-American voices have often been excluded from multi-ethnic anthologies and courses on American Ethnic Literature (223-

227).<sup>160</sup> The original *Bridge* anthology had paved the way for new thinking on difference within feminist movements and, according to Evelyn Alsultany, “revolutionized how [Arab-American women] saw ourselves as women of colour. Our experiences – unacknowledged by the dominant culture and by feminist, ethnic, and/or queer movements – were finally named” (*this bridge* 2002: 108). However, the absence of any Arab-American women’s voices in the original anthology was seen by Elia as indicative of a larger-scale propensity within women of colour movements to disavow Arab-American women as “the white sheep of the family” and, in line with hegemonic discourse, to view their struggle as one against Islam rather than in the communal realm of racial oppression (*ibid*: 226, 229).

Anzaldúa explicitly aimed to include previously underrepresented (or non-existent) voices in the new anthology as well as the essays of whites and “feminist-oriented” men to open up the borders and initiate a more inclusive dialogue “reflect[ing] the hybrid qualities of our lives and identities” (2002: 3). Elia, underscoring the tensions of negotiating an oppositional identity, argued in a 2011 essay that the anthology “diluted” the intentions of its predecessor (154). Furthermore, according to Elia, Arab-American feminists experienced a backlash from some contributors during the anthology’s development when they spoke out on the oppression of the Palestinians (*ibid*: 151-155).<sup>161</sup> The issue of Palestinian self-determination is central to Arab-American feminist activism: “Arab and Muslim feminists have identified Zionism as an important determinant of the forms of oppression we struggle against in the United States and beyond” (Zaatari 2011: 73). The location of Israeli occupation in both hegemonic and much of women of colour discourse as that oppression which shall not be named, or, which is named *obversely* as anti-Semitism, has led some Arab-American feminists to question whether organizing from the site of feminism of colour will help the cause of Arab-American women or further obscure it (Elia 2011; Zaatari 2011). However, even amongst these feminists, there is recognition that an isolationist stance risks both the visibility of Arab-American women’s voices and the building of alliances in “the only likely space where we could perhaps feel at home” (Zaatari 2001:74; Elia 2011). Women of colour theorizing, with its emphasis on bridging solidarity across difference and opening up identity

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<sup>160</sup> This has begun to change in the post-9/11 reception environment though Amira Jarmakani argues that the new interest in Arab voices is also problematic: “The assumption that my work was now suddenly interesting or useful in a way that it had not previously been participates in the construction of 9/11 as the origin story for perceptions and representations of Arab women, and, in so doing, ignores the history of representations of Arab womanhood in the United States” (2011: 238).

<sup>161</sup> This hostility between contributors came to light during the Second *Intifada* when one contributor proposed issuing a collective statement condemning Israeli violence (Elia 2011: 152).

formation to pluralistic modes, has had an enormous impact on Arab-American feminisms, even if on an experiential level solidarity has not always been forthcoming. Arab-American feminists have learned that changing dominant perceptions of Arab-American women means organizing from spaces that can be confrontational or contradictory, that in operating only from safe spaces of consensus “we may never experience any revolutionary change, any transformation, individually or collectively” (hooks 1997: 410).

The struggle for Arab-American feminists can be seen at the most basic level of educating people that such a thing as “Arab feminism” exists and indeed has existed since women in Egypt began advocating for change in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. The seeming incongruence of Arab and Arab-American feminisms in the popular American consciousness is intimately tied to Orientalist beliefs in the enforced silencing of Arab women at the behest of androcentric religious orthodoxy.<sup>162</sup> Almost a hundred years before the trope of the hidden, voiceless Arab woman was used to bolster public support for the “War on Terror”, journalist Afifa Karam was making her mark at *Al-Huda*, the leading Arabic newspaper in America at that time, denouncing sexism within the community and championing women’s higher education (Shakir 1997: 55-56).<sup>163</sup> Arab-American women may only have begun organizing collectively as feminists since the 1980s – spurred on by frustrations with the mainstream liberal feminist movement<sup>164</sup> – but previous generations of Arab-American women have played an active role in their communities, with the Syrian Ladies’ Aid Society, founded in 1907, a notable example of an early non-sectarian club providing “financial, medical, and moral aid” to women immigrants from Greater Syria (ibid: 61). When American women of colour feminists were mobilizing in the 1970s against multiple oppressions, Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi was also highlighting the links between gender liberation, colonialism and capitalist exploitation though her subsequent rise to fame with the English-language

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<sup>162</sup> Arab-American scholars have recounted personal experiences of the skepticism that greets their feminist identities (Majaj 1994; Jarmakani 2011). For Evelyn Alsultany, the incredulity of white acquaintances was based on the perceived paradox of being a Muslim feminist (2011b: 310-311). On the beginnings of feminism in Egypt see Ahmed (1992: 169-188).

<sup>163</sup> In addition to writing for *Al-Huda*, Karam founded the magazine *The Syrian Woman* (later *The New World for Women*) in 1911 (Shakir: 55). Karam frequently spoke out on the intra-communal oppression of Arab women though Shakir advises that Karam’s “inflammatory rhetoric” should not be taken “as an accurate depiction of prevailing custom among *Syrians*. There is too much evidence to the contrary. But it can be assumed that the cruelties she pointed to were real, even if not as widespread as she seems to imply” (ibid: 207, fn. 7).

<sup>164</sup> The now-defunct Feminist Arab-American Network (FAN), founded in 1983 by Carol Haddad, was the first organization of its kind and its establishment was directly influenced by the alienation Arab-American feminists experienced at the 1982 National Women’s Studies Association conference (Haddad 1994: 220-221).

publication of *al-Wajh al-'ari lil-mar'a al-'arabiyyah* in 1980 saw her marketed by the West as a critic of Arab culture.<sup>165</sup>

Arab-American feminists have diverse preoccupations and their activism may, for example, be informed by the struggles of their country of origin, particularly in the case of Palestinian-American feminists, or their religious affiliation. In *Arab America: gender, cultural politics, and activism* (2012), an ethnographic study of young middle-class Arab-Americans living in the Bay Area of San Francisco, Nadine Naber found that some Arab-Muslim women activists identify as “Muslim First, Arab Second”, advocating an Islamic feminist politics that confronts prejudices towards Muslim women both within and outside of the Muslim community (124-129). As the title of the recent anthology *Arab and Arab American feminisms* (2011) makes clear, “despite the many points of unity that bring us together, there is no single site of Arab and Arab American [*sic*] feminist struggle” (xxix). One of the most contentious issues within Arab-American feminist thinking is the extent to which the discrimination and stereotyping of Arab and Muslim Americans in American society should be prioritized over and above sex-based discrimination within Arab-American communities. This issue will be examined in the context of the post-9/11 reception environment.

#### 4.2.3 The Aftermath of September 11, 2001: To *be* in a time of war<sup>166</sup>:

In the aftermath of 9/11, poet Naomi Shihab Nye penned an open letter “To Any Would-Be Terrorists”, which was read on National Public Radio, in which she spoke of her fury and devastation at the loss of innocent lives as someone “a little closer to you than many Americans”. She recounted how hard her Palestinian father and American mother had worked to convince people that the stereotypes of the peoples of the Middle East as terrorists were wrong:

[My mother] always told them, there is a much larger story. If you knew the story, you would not jump to conclusions from what you see in the news. But now look at the news. What a mess has been made. Sometimes I wish everyone could have parents from different countries or ethnic groups so they would be forced to cross boundaries, to believe in mixtures, every day of their

<sup>165</sup> On the West’s marketing of Nawal El Saadawi, see Amireh (2002) and Amireh and Majaj (2000: 7).

<sup>166</sup> “To Be in a Time of War” is a prose poem on the Iraq War by Etel Adnan (2005: 99-116).

lives. Because this is what the world calls us to do. (cited in Orfalea 2006: 302)<sup>167</sup>

Navigating an Arab-American identity in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century played out against a U.S. imperialist narrative of the Middle East as the new threat to world peace and an awareness that Arabs were now viewed as a “problem minority” (Naber 2012: 25). Two variants of Orientalist tropes would acquire a particular potency in the post-9/11 reception environment for Arab women who did not fit the victim stereotype: The Arab woman as “escapee” who manages to break free from her oppressive culture – memoirs of “escapees” who explicitly denounce Islam have become especially popular – and the “fanatical” Arab woman (terrorist-in-the-making) who is a “pawn of Arab male power” (Kahf 2000: 148-151). As Evelyn Shakir has pointed out, Orientalist tropes of Arab womanhood always have one thing in common, that Arab women are slaves to Arab men (1988: 49). The presence of Arab and Muslim women becomes in American popular discourse one marked by and simultaneously outside of difference, where ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, sexuality, class and history are subsumed in a monolithic, non-progressive culture.<sup>168</sup> Arab-American feminists may conceive of “home” as “exist[ing] on a continuum of ‘here’ and ‘there’ and consider both as the ‘here’ of their/our belonging” but negotiating an identity in the post-9/11 environment has meant that many feminists “do not comfortably identify as ‘American’” (Abdulhadi *et al.*, 2011: xxiv).

Amira Jarmakani has examined the ways in which the “politics of invisibility” that governs cultural representations of Arab women has impacted on Arab-American feminists:

Invisibility here is meant to signify both the ways that Arab and Muslim women are silenced and the ways they are hypervisible, paradoxically, as markers of invisibility, exoticism, or oppression. [...] Because these images are so pervasive, Arab American feminist thought is often overlooked or not heard unless it engages the dominant myths and categories through which Arab womanhood has been filtered in the United States. The continuous need to identify and deconstruct stereotypical images of Arab womanhood functions as a double silencing of Arab American feminists whose energy could be better spent theorizing new spaces of possibility for Arab American

<sup>167</sup> For the background to Nye’s open letter see Orfalea (2006: 302).

<sup>168</sup> According to Sunaina Maira: “By definition, “good” Muslims are public Muslims who can offer first-person testimonials, in the mode of the native informant, about the oppression of women in Islam, the ‘freedoms ... in the West,’ as [“good” Muslim feminist Irshad] Manji describes them, and the hatred, racism, and anti-Semitism of Arabs and Muslims. These Muslim spokes-persons are the darlings of the Right-wing and mainstream media, publish widely distributed books, and have slick websites” (635).

[sic] women rather than responding to the misinformation promulgated by the dominant discourse. (2011: 234)

As strategies of resistance for Arab-American feminists have been foregrounded defensively, a central struggle has been how to explore the multifaceted concerns of Arab-American womanhood without reinforcing neo-Orientalist stereotypes. In *Arab America* (2012), Naber argues that the fear of “reify[ing] Arab-bashing, Orientalism, or Islamophobia” has meant that Arab-American feminists are often silent on “intra-communal matters” (248). Naber contends that the advancement of a cultural identity for the Arab-American community has engendered the construction of essentializing definitions of family, sexuality, gender and religion, whereby the ideal of an ahistorical, static Arab culture in contradistinction to American culture is upheld. “Cultural authenticity” in this formulation displays the characteristics of a reverse Orientalism; the moral superiority of Arab culture, with its insistence on virginity until marriage and compulsory heterosexuality, pitted against a morally degenerate, sexually corrupted American society. As “cultural authenticity” is promoted through gender and sexual politics, the Arab-American woman is held up as the cultural bearer of this authenticity; it is through her actions that moral superiority is most often inscribed.

The cultural marginality that Arab-American women experience in trying to conform to a code of Arab womanhood within their community and negotiating an American culture that prioritizes individualism over communal identification has been a recurring theme in the autobiographical writings of Arab-American feminists.<sup>169</sup> Solidarity in the post-9/11 environment places the imagined Arab community firmly within the realm of the political: fighting back against discriminatory practices and prejudices in larger American society. Addressing heterosexism within the community carries both external risks – the potential buttressing of anti-Arab sexism in the dominant discourse – and internal risks – speaking out may not only feel like a betrayal; it may also lead to alienation from one’s very community.<sup>170</sup> Arab-American feminists have recognized that silence leads to limited self and communal definitions and have looked to theoretical spaces that can engage multiple forms of resistance. The experiential essay, the writing of one’s own story as a foundation for theorizing on Arab-American womanhood, has been a lynchpin of Arab-American feminisms since the

<sup>169</sup> See for example Majaj (1994); Shakir (1997); Naber (2002); Darraj (2011).

<sup>170</sup> The poet Nathalie Handal writes: “As someone who respects the Arab culture, I used to feel that saying anything negative about it was a betrayal” (2002: 163). Angele Ellis relates how Palestinian-American novelist Randa Jarrar was ostracized by her father when she drew attention to patriarchal dominance within the Arab family unit in her 2008 debut novel, *A Map of Home* (Survey, Appendix A.1).

publication of *Food for our grandmothers* in 1994, the first anthology of Arab women's writing in the North American diaspora. The nuances, subtleties and contradictions inherent in writing the self can help to resist appropriation by anti-Arab discourse on the one hand and contextualize intra-communal tensions on the other. In the post-9/11 reception environment, the experiential essay has become a "weapon of choice" for Arab-American women writers in the struggle against different forms of oppression (Harb 2012: 14 after Mittlefehldt).

Naber (2012) has identified feminist ethnography, women of colour theorizing on intersectionality and transnational feminism as techniques under a "diasporic feminist critique" that can further help to address the tensions faced by Arab-American feminists in rethinking Arab-American identity (249-253). Rigid definitions of Arab identity perpetuate the binary mentality of "us" and "them", "our culture" and "your culture", a form of oppositional consciousness that limits spaces for belonging. Deconstructing essentialist definitions of Arab-American womanhood requires an opening up of cultural identity to more plural formations, a strategy of affirmative resistance that has been a bedrock of feminism of colour: "an intersectional anti-imperialist feminist critique transcends the idea of an internally coherent Arab identity, culture, or nation, without giving up on the commitment to liberation" (ibid: 229, after Shohat). A central question for Arab-American feminists has been how to embrace plural identity formations without also falling prey to a fragmented, dislocated sense of self: "Does cultural multiplicity condemn us to complicated, unsettling identities or does it liberate us from set cultural definitions that too often confine us and elevate us to a place of never-ending possibilities?" (Handal 2002: 158). Conceiving of plural identities necessitates the ability to "tolerate" the contradictions in juggling cultures (Anzaldúa 2012: 101) and to "claim the identity 'Arab-American' not as a heritage passed from generation to generation, but rather as an on-going negotiation of difference" (Majaj 1994: 83-84).

Solidarity efforts in the name of "global sisterhood" undertaken by hegemonic feminist movements have been met with suspicion by Arab-American feminists who have noted the inherent ethnocentrism in Western identification with the "plight" of the Arab woman, an identification which merely serves to affirm preconceptions of Arab culture. In the introduction to *Arab and Arab American feminisms* (2011), Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber stress the importance of a transnational feminist framework for engagement with oppressed peoples on an egalitarian footing. As Ella Shohat asserted in an interview with Alsultany: "We should worry about activism in the West that fights to rescue Arab and African women, but does so in a way that reproduces Eurocentric discourse about the Middle East and Africa. The work of transnational feminists on the subject is therefore really crucial" (ibid: 58).

Transnational feminism enables alliance building across difference and calls on individuals to “cross boundaries [and] believe in mixtures”, as Nye’s letter in the aftermath of 9/11 made clear individuals must do if they are to begin to learn to understand one another. Feminist exploration of transnationalism and intersectionality in the negotiation of identity reverberates in the work of Arab-American women poets, some of whom are academics in their own right.<sup>171</sup> Recurring themes include an identification with multiple oppressions “over here” and “over there” and the envisioning of a solidarity that is transnational and relational; the challenging of essentialist definitions of Arab-American womanhood *and* manhood through intersectional frameworks and the opening up of ethnic identity to a plurality of meaning; and the writing of the self - the experiential mode - to complicate the portrait of Arab-American womanhood. The next section will explore how central concerns of Arab-American feminists have found a home in the poetry of Arab-American women.

### 4.3 Women of colour consciousness: “write or be written”<sup>172</sup>

#### 4.3.1 Laila Halaby: *rage*

In chapter two, the speaker-poet in Laila Halaby’s poem “the journey” disavows her Americanness and self-identifies as an ethnic Arab to underscore her racial and cultural dislocation from mainstream “white” America. Halaby’s poem “rage”<sup>173</sup> which is also from her poetry collection *my name on his tongue* (2012), provides a counterpoint to “the journey” in its gendered approach to this dislocation. Here, assimilationist strategies – the means to becoming invisible – are voiced by the “liberal mother” but signified through the speaker poet’s hetero-image of this (implied) white middle-class American woman. The liberal mother accosts the speaker-poet outside the pre-school their children attend to proclaim her solidarity in opposition to the Iraq War. By collapsing the discourse of war into an apolitical reading that privileges Western understanding, the liberal mother assimilates the differences between herself and the speaker-poet and lays bare the schisms of feminist solidarity in a neo-liberal multicultural society. The “rage” of the speaker-poet redirects from the war itself to the ethnocentrism of the liberal mother’s anti-war agenda. For Halaby, Arab-American

<sup>171</sup> Of the poets analyzed in this chapter, Mohja Kahf and Lisa Suhair Majaj are prominent academics, Kahf writing predominantly on Muslim womanhood and Majaj active in the field of Arab-American literary criticism.

<sup>172</sup> Imagological Analysis of Primary Material.

<sup>173</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.11.

non-belonging is not experienced solely through hostile actors whose Othering is concretized – represented here by the specter of the conservative parent – but also through benevolent actors whose denial of difference ultimately serves to legitimize hegemonic interests.

In “rage”, Halaby emphasizes the outsider status of the Arab-American in mainstream American society through an unflinching dissection of liberal multiculturalism. The speaker-poet projects a particular feminist reading of liberal multiculturalism<sup>174</sup> onto the white middle-class mother, which is underpinned by the logic of obliviousness. According to Gordon and Newfield (1996), an “oblivious to racism” reading of multiculturalism embraces cultural diversity while avoiding the subject of race:

It was ambiguous about the inheritance and the ongoing presence of histories of oppression. [...] It was propelled by culture’s traditional belief in its ability to transcend social forces such as racial discrimination or class antagonism. [...] In an era in which the evasion of civil rights proceeded by asserting the already existing equality of all individuals and groups under law, multiculturalism chimed in with a similarly idealized equality, an equality among multiple cultures. (3-4)

The liberal mother’s perceived non-racist credentials are rooted in a belief that racism is an individual rather than a systemic problem in American society.<sup>175</sup> A mainstream feminist understanding of a unitary female subject has frequently elided differences of race and class in the name of gender solidarity; it is enough, therefore, for the liberal mother to think that the anti-war sentiments she shares with the speaker-poet are borne out of a unified empathetic logic of womanhood and motherhood. The grounding of empathy within a cosseted middle-class setting allows for diversity to be embraced so as long as the status quo in terms of economic and political power is preserved, the status quo that made the Iraq war possible in the first place.

While the thematic scope and various poetic voices found in Halaby’s debut collection, together with her frequent recourse to homeland nostalgia, belie attempts to situate

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<sup>174</sup> The term “multiculturalism” carries contested and contradictory meanings; for an overview of the varied iterations of the term see Gordon and Newfield’s introduction to *Mapping multiculturalism* (1996: 1-10).

<sup>175</sup> Audre Lorde has argued that “[i]nstitutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy that needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences among us with fear and loathing and to handle these differences in one of three ways: (1) ignore them; (2) if that is not possible, copy the attributes of those who are dominant; or (3) destroy the attitudes of those who are subordinate” (1997: 374; emphasis in original).

her as a protest poet in the vein of African-American feminists Audre Lorde and June Jordan, her condemnation of U.S.-led wars in the Middle East and the Israeli occupation of Palestine are commonly infused with the palpable anger and call to action of black protest poetry. “[R]age” employs a first-person embodied experiential approach (Dowdy 2007) in the unfolding of the exchange between the speaker-poet and the liberal mother; yet, there is a concomitant strain of embodied authoritative agency in the strategy of resistance the poem undertakes, so that the text can be understood as a confrontational poem “challeng[ing] [...] readers to act and to redefine their consciousnesses” (Dowdy 2007: 27). I will argue that this challenge is directed at white liberal female readers, calling on them to recognize that their efforts at multicultural solidarity are embedded within an ethnocentric mind-set.

Arab-American identity is primarily affirmed through negation, of *what one is not*: the hetero-image of the liberal American mother whose culture and values are white. bell hooks has argued that whiteness as an ethnicity has not been prioritized in academic and cultural production: “In far too much contemporary writing [...] race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white” (1990: 54). Halaby’s resistance turns the mirror onto white women through what Renae Moore Bredin has termed “guerrilla ethnography”:

Guerrilla ethnography, as I construct it, overturns prototypical ethnography by operating behind the “enemy lines” of ethnographic discourses, writing an informal, nonhierarchical representation of culture, instigating a reversal of ideology. So we need a Western represented and a non-Western representer to commit guerrilla ethnography, a serious fictional portrait of Western (white) cultural practice, a written account of the lives of “white” people, a picture of what it means to be culturally white by one who is not. (1998: 229)

Halaby delegitimizes the “white” concerns of the liberal mother’s anti-war position by situating them within the hierarchies of power which inform them. A guerrilla ethnographic portrait of the liberal mother is consolidated through her own speech, which lays bare her true misgivings about the war, and through the speaker-poet’s construction of her whiteness in the accretion of imagotypes.

“[R]age” is sub-titled: “the Iraq war, day 6”, immediately contextualizing the rage within the post-9/11 Arab-American experience. The inclusion of “day 6”, a war in its infancy, speaks to all the horror that is still to come and marks this day as being of particular significance in the speaker-poet’s relational experience of the war. “[R]age” opens with the speaking “I” denouncing the war and registering her own powerlessness to affect change:

I am angry  
 at everyone  
 for not doing enough  
 to stop this

I am numb  
 with fear and sadness  
 for everyone involved (97)

The speaker-poet inculpates Western society as a whole for its failings “to stop this” and her empathy crosses cultural and psychic borders; the repetition of “everyone” would appear to signal that her “fear and sadness” is directed both at the Iraqi people and the American soldiers compelled to perform their duty.

mostly I am impotent

which is why this safe school  
 for little children  
 is a blessing

where people say  
*how are you?*  
 and mostly mean it

the Brazilian teacher  
 leans outside, smiles  
*you guys okay?*

my rage quiets  
 throughout the sweet morning  
 filled with giggles

digging and singing  
 crackers and popsicles  
 stories and cuddles (97-98)

The public realm of “school” is domesticated in its signification as a “safe” space, a “blessing”, where the speaker poet’s impotence, her knowledge that there is nothing one can meaningfully do in the face of war, is assuaged by the innocence and simplicity of childhood, “digging and singing / crackers and popsicles / stories and cuddles”. The speaker-poet infers that children and the spaces in which they reside bring out the best in people, or their best *faces*, “where people say / *how are you?* / and mostly mean it”. The polite greeting “*how are you?*” goes beyond a surface reading to a “mostly” sympathetic recognition of the speaker

poet's Arab ethnicity and hence, engagement with the war, which is reflected in the Brazilian teacher's "*you guys okay?*" It is significant that the one unquestioned act of solidarity in the poem comes from a fellow person of colour. As my analysis of "the journey" showed, for Halaby, genuine inclusion and communion for Arab-Americans is embodied in transnational affiliations understood in the shared struggle of racial injustice by global racialized subjects. It is "the sweet morning / filled with giggles" that helps the narrator's anger to subside but it is the plight of children "over there" that makes the narrator finally snap and direct her feelings of impotence at a tangible target. The sanctuary of children's spaces wherein war "is all but forgotten" (98) is shattered when the political infiltrates the domestic sphere:

we are headed to the car  
and I am ambushed  
not by a right-wing  
pro-war  
evangelical Christian parent  
who questions my nationality  
worries about  
our connections

but by a well-traveled  
liberal mother who stops me  
puts her hand on my arm

as you would  
to someone who is grieving  
and quivers  
*I'm outraged* (98)

The interplay of hetero-images at work here posits a binary demarcation of white America along socio-political lines, the conservative mind-set with its externalized prejudices and fears of a multicultural society and a liberal anti-war anti-racist consciousness, righteous in its pro-multicultural enlightenment. The succession of tropes in the creation of the conservative parent imago ("right-wing", "pro-war", "evangelical Christian") is mirrored in the imagined profiling of the speaker poet, whose "nationality" and "connections" speak to a neo-Orientalist portrait of the anti-American, Muslim/Arab fanatic, an ethnotype that reached new levels of hysteria after 9/11. The imagined conservative parent performs a surface alterity: Muslim/Arab culture as inimical to the democratic values of Christian America begets an inability to recognize the speaker-poet as a fellow American. While the conservative parent cannot see past difference, the liberal mother refuses to acknowledge

difference at all. The trope of the “well-traveled / liberal mother” connotes a middle-class status and feminist areas of concern related to this status, in this instance, freedom of movement. The liberal mother’s conspicuous solidarity is imbued with theatricality and *self-aggrandizement* (“puts her hand on my arm / as you would / to someone who is grieving / and quivers”) in contrast to the Brazilian teacher’s easy exchange of sympathy (“*you guys okay?*”), a disparity further emphasized in the liberal mother’s self-focused opening salvo: “*I’m outraged*”. The liberal mother never asks the speaker-poet how she is feeling; she presumes their narratives are one and the same because of their shared opposition to the war:

then tells me  
about the gourmet dinners  
she arranges  
with fellow liberals  
to discuss her disgust

*I need like-minded people  
what an awful,  
sickening, grotesque display ...*

though I see her anger is genuine  
perhaps a reflection of my own  
her designer words  
make me want to spit (98-99)

The imagotype of the middle-class liberal American mother is consolidated through the tropes of “gourmet dinners” and “designer words”. Her utter failure to comprehend the realities of war – starvation, homelessness, displacement, death – render her oblivious to the “*sickening, grotesque display*” of discussing “her disgust” with “fellow liberals” at the dinner parties she organizes. The inclusion of “grotesque” is significant here as it connotes an image of the liberal mother as wearing a mask of solidarity that is comically misshapen, a guerrilla ethnographic caricature holding a mirror to the ugly façade of white liberal empathy. The liberal mother assimilates the speaker-poet within this dinner party grotesquerie when she says “*I need like-minded people*”, eschewing racial differences in favour of class solidarity. The speaker-poet recognizes that the liberal mother’s anger at the Iraq War is “genuine / perhaps a reflection of my own” but it is the incongruity of her “designer words” that “makes me want to spit”. However, the perception that their anger may come from the same place is quickly dispelled in the ensuing stanzas:

bundles of toddlers

climb the wooden equipment  
in front of us

she points and shakes righteously  
*these children* she says  
and you can see she is struggling  
with her own fury

*these children will  
not be able to travel*

her words have found the keyhole  
to my locked-up anger  
which is purple in color

red in volume

*children just like these  
won't be able to live!*  
shouts my voice in puce (99)

The unmasking of the liberal mother's true concerns about the war speaks to the consumerist drive at the heart of a neo-liberal society and of the attendant divide between the preoccupations of first world and third world feminists. The individualist ethos underpinning the auto-image of American identity prioritizes choice, the agency one has over one's property and capital. For liberal feminists, this choice manifests in the pre-eminence of agency over one's body. The universalizing principles of mainstream liberal feminism are enacted from a place of privilege: resistance conforms to the priorities and interests of the white middle-class woman, an ethnocentric ideology that ultimately supports the social order.<sup>176</sup> According to Leti Volpp, the motivations behind Western women's focus on specific gender-oppressive practices in the Third World may be ultimately self-directed, a projection of "what one fears for oneself"<sup>177</sup>:

The issues affecting immigrant or Third World women that receive the greatest attention are those that appear most easily identifiable as concerns to relatively

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<sup>176</sup> In "U.S. Third World feminism: the theory and method of oppositional consciousness in the postmodern world" (1991), Chela Sandoval applied Althusser's theory of ideology to posit a new theory of oppositional consciousness to the hegemonic social order for women of colour. Under Althusser's framework, mainstream liberal feminism adheres to "the principles by which humans are called into being as citizen/subjects who act – even when in resistance – in order to sustain and reinforce the dominant social order" (ibid: 2).

<sup>177</sup> It is important to note that the iteration of "multiculturalism" in Volpp's argument is understood in terms of the binary of feminism versus multiculturalism, wherein "[f]eminism is presumed not to value the rights of minority cultures [and] multiculturalism is presumed not to value the rights of women" (1203).

privileged women in the West. These concerns include violations that threaten the freedom of movement, freedom of dress, freedom of bodily integrity, and freedom of control over one's sexuality, rather than violations of the right to shelter or basic sustenance. (2001: 1210)

In this instance, the “well-traveled” liberal mother’s “fury” about the war does not even stretch to women or children “over there”; her fury chiefly relates to the acquisitive (object-oriented) effects it will have on middle-class Americans (“*these children will / not be able to travel*”). It is this willfully self-serving reading of the war that finally ignites the speaker poet’s “locked-up anger”. The liberal mother’s gravest transgression is to make middle-class American children the victims of war. She subsumes the speaker poet within this class-based consciousness of war (“*these children*”), absorbing ethnic differences in the service of Western consumerist interests. The speaker-poet who, up until this point, has been denied an opportunity to enter the dialogue, breaks the semblance of a maternal class-based solidarity by re-orienting the narrative back to those children who are actually suffering, assimilating the differences between “our children” and “theirs”: “*children just like these / won’t be able to live!*” Young children make sense of the world and explore their surroundings through play (“bundles of toddlers / climb the wooden equipment / in front of us”), a commonality of innocence that transcends boundaries of class, race or nationality. The rage in this poem is compelled by a transnational maternal gaze that comprehends war as both the literal destruction of children and the decimation of childhood innocence.

The speaker-poet is denied agency by the liberal mother (she is never once asked about her views on the war) because of the liberal mother’s assumption that their anti-war consciousness is emanating from the same *white middle-class* consciousness. The liberal mother “points and shakes righteously”, adding another layer to the guerrilla ethnographic portrait: the preachy middle-class feminist loud in her denunciation of U.S. foreign policy, deaf to the voices of Others. The assimilatory principle of a multicultural logic whereby a celebration of difference elides the systemic inequalities that continue to oppress the Other comes to the fore in this poem and points to the way in which the silencing of Arab and Arab-American voices can operate on multiple levels. The speaker poet reaffirms her agency by decentering the liberal mother’s narrative, transforming it from a middle-class consumerist consciousness to a transnational, Other-directed consciousness. The final stanzas consolidate the hypocrisy at work in the liberal mother’s anti-war stance:

decorum broken

I carry my three-year-old  
to safety

away from my unfolded fury

away from abstract  
visions of war  
and destruction

away from liberal mothers  
and their intellectual  
outrage financed by

working husbands  
American dollars  
and discussed over

white china plates  
of marinated kebab (99-100)

The once “safe school / for little children” is no longer a “blessing”, a maternal-domestic sphere in which rage is dissipated by “giggles” (“rage” 97). The liberal mother’s cognitive dissonance towards Other children who have no safe havens has disrupted any tranquility that childhood spaces can bring to the speaker-poet and so “[she carries] her three-year-old / to safety”, away from this now-politicized space, “away from [her] unfolded fury”. The code of polite middle-class society – conforming to the status quo – has also been shattered (“decorum broken”). Halaby turns the tables on the dominant culture by creating a portrait of the middle-class liberal mother that renders her both hypervisible and invisible (objectified through a series of hetero-images: “well-traveled”, “gourmet dinners”, “designer words”, “intellectual outrage”, “working husbands”, “American dollars”, “white china plates / of marinated kebab”). Liberal multiculturalism for Halaby becomes a vehicle through which white people can feel better about themselves and their actions in the world. The embracing of ethnic food, gentrified communities, “intellectual outrage” towards the war, and solidarity with those affected, engenders a smug superiority, acting as a foil for the imperialist intent behind the invasion of a country “financed by / working husbands / American dollars”. The potential for a multiplicity of identifications with the Iraq War are erased in an act of Western appropriation, what the speaker-poet identifies as “abstract / visions of war / and destruction”. However, the speaker-poet’s agency will not be erased; she refuses to buy into the logic of multicultural harmony and affirms her place of belonging is with the ethnic Other and “away from liberal mothers”.

The speaker-poet uses the language of the oppressor culture to operate in the service of the oppressed; the liberal mother's own words indict her and, together with the accretion of hetero-images put forward by the speaker-poet, hold up a scathing mirror to a white liberal female audience:

[One] can only say no, speak the voice of resistance, because there exists a counter-language. While it may resemble the colonizer's tongue, it has undergone a transformation, it has been irrevocably changed. (hooks 1990: 150)

Only when people recognize their language and behaviour in the mirror can change become possible.<sup>178</sup> The poem, an interrogation of whiteness by one who is half-white, acts as both a shaming of liberal feminist attitudes and an appeal for these attitudes to be recognized. The implicit question posed in "rage" is whether this act of shaming will lead the liberal mother to address her hegemonic mind-set or whether she will turn away from the mirror. Indeed, women of colour feminists have queried the extent to which anger can be mobilized as a resistance strategy:

acknowledging and articulating anger in and of itself is a step toward solidarity and survival. But poets and critics of many origins remind us that voicing anger can only be a step, if the aim is to empower the dispossessed and change the world. (Fast 1998: 145)

Anzaldúa is even more forthright on the limitations of an oppositional consciousness built on condemnation: "To rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves" (*Borderlands*: 110). Halaby's wounded mother contrasts sharply with the maternal identity of Angele Ellis's speaker-poet in "The Blue State Ghazals"<sup>179</sup> analyzed in the upcoming section; where Halaby's mother figure finds only falsehood in the outreach of liberal feminism, Ellis's activist mother sees the potential for feminist solidarity across the divide. In the former, Arab-American identity is affirmed through negation – the repudiation of a white cultural identity; in the latter, plural spaces of belonging open up as anger is mobilized in the service of a cross-cultural "politicized maternity"<sup>180</sup>.

<sup>178</sup> Undergirding hooks' thesis is the threat to one's language when one moves from an African-American working-class milieu to a middle-class (here academic) environment. Though the speaker-poet is of the middle class, I would argue that the appropriation of the dominant language in the service of an oppositional voice still remains a valid tool for ethnic communities, regardless of class, in resisting assimilation into a white middle-class multiculturalism that prizes equality while negating difference.

<sup>179</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.12.

<sup>180</sup> The term "politicized maternity" comes from Ann Marie Nicolosi (2013).

### 4.3.2 Angele Ellis: “The Blue State Ghazals”

“The Blue State Ghazals” from Angele Ellis’s first book of poetry, *Arab on radar* (2007), draws on socio-political affiliations in contemporary American society to articulate a gendered re-imagining of national identity. The blue states refer to Democratic Party strongholds and the espousal of a liberal political ethos which supports federal intervention in civil rights legislation and which has, since the 1960s, consistently drawn on the support of minority voting blocs across race, gender and class lines.<sup>181</sup> The red states, Republican Party strongholds in the South and Mid-West, are seen to adhere to a conservative political philosophy of free-market economics and limited government which originally appealed to white voters who opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The red state mentality has become synonymous with neo-colonialist white Christian values.<sup>182</sup> The blue and red states, then, are symbolic of dueling visions of America’s cultural identity and national character.

“The Blue State Ghazals” plays out against a timeline of three key dates in August 2005 when demonstrators against the Iraq war found a renewed sense of vigour through the figure of Cindy Sheehan, a white mother whose son Casey had been killed on active duty during the war. Sheehan set up a month-long camp outside President George W. Bush’s Texas ranch to protest the ongoing invasion: “You tell me the truth. You tell me that my son died for oil [...] You tell me my son died to spread the cancer of pax Americana, imperialism in the Middle East. You tell me that, you don’t tell me my son died for ‘freedom and democracy.’”<sup>183</sup> The attacks on Sheehan’s character (the liberal “blue” mother) from conservative media outlets<sup>184</sup> fed into a larger narrative of the anti-war protestor as inherently unpatriotic and, therefore, not possessing an authentic American identity in contrast to the sacrificing “red mother” whose son would give his life nobly in the service of his country.<sup>185</sup> However, by 2005, anti-war sentiment had spread to the American mainstream and “The Blue State Ghazals” complicates the image of an America divided neatly along blue and red lines.

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<sup>181</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that up until the 2004 presidential election the Arab-American community favoured Republican candidates, albeit by small margins. See Orfalea (2006: 328-329).

<sup>182</sup> Nancy MacLean’s chapter in *Debating the American conservative movement* follows the ascendancy of American conservatism from its fringe appeal in the 1950s to its current mainstream positioning in Republican Party politics (Critchlow and MacLean 2009: 123-176).

<sup>183</sup> Excerpt from Cindy Sheehan’s speech at The Veterans for Peace national convention on 5 August 2005, quoted in Zinn (2007: 27-29). The following day Sheehan set up her makeshift camp outside the Bush ranch in Texas.

<sup>184</sup> See Rich, “The swift boating of Cindy Sheehan”, *The New York Times*, 21 August 2005 [Online].

<sup>185</sup> The conservative narrative is problematized by liberal discourses critical of Sheehan’s actions. See, for example, Houppert (2006).

Ellis's poem is both a state of the nation lament and an affirmation of communities of solidarity beyond tribal identifications of nation, ethnicity, race, class, or politics as the opening quote from Cindy Sheehan makes clear: "*I'm crying for all the other mothers*" (26). It is significant, therefore, that Ellis chooses the form of the ghazal, a love poetry whose origins can be traced back to pre-Islamic Arabian verse, to bear witness to the fallout from the Iraq War.<sup>186</sup> A preoccupation with an unobtainable love interest, which grew from the ghazal of the Bedouin 'Udhri school in the Umayyad era and is exemplified in the poetry of 7<sup>th</sup>-century poet Jamil and his lifelong devotion to his beloved Buthayna, has come to define the ghazal in the popular imagination.<sup>187</sup> Ellis's overtures to the traditional ghazal are on the level of theme rather than form, most clearly delineated in the idea of love as unconditional and unceasing. Ellis recasts the central themes of romantic love and loss in terms of the love between mother and child, that love shared by mothers "over here" and "over there". The formal properties of the ghazal – the meter, the refrain introduced in the first couplet and repeated at the end of the second line in each succeeding couplet, the internal rhyme preceding the refrain, and inclusion of the poet's name or pseudonym in the final couplet – are dispensed with in Ellis's free verse interpretation of fifteen unrhymed couplets.<sup>188</sup>

"The Blue State Ghazals", thematically and structurally, pays homage to Adrienne Rich's 1968 poem "The Blue Ghazals"<sup>189</sup> and, more broadly, the American free verse reworking of the form. However, the break with formal structure is not exclusively an American "aberration".<sup>190</sup> Contemporary Arab women poets have sought their own deconstructions of classical Arabic poetry, sometimes mocking the ghazal's androcentrism, as evidenced in the following lines from Kuwaiti poet Su'ad al-Sabāh: "I'm fed up with the *ghazal* of the dead [...] / Please try to deviate a bit from the text, / try to invent me".<sup>191</sup> If Ellis similarly subverts the androcentric love theme, her "American" free verse interpretation also echoes a concern running throughout her work: the promulgation of hybrid identities and communities as a means to bridging difference in contemporary society. Rich's poetry of resistance has clear affinities for Ellis in this regard: "Rich's cagey, anguished poems searchingly investigate America's difficult racial politics, seeking to forge a cross-cultural

<sup>186</sup> On the ghazal's origins and thematics see Ali (2000), Allen (2000), Farrin (2011).

<sup>187</sup> See Allen (105) and Farrin (96- 111).

<sup>188</sup> See Ali (2000), Ward (2013), Goodyear and Raza (2008) on the ghazal's formal properties.

<sup>189</sup> Published in *Collected early poems, 1950-1970* (1993: 368- 372).

<sup>190</sup> Agha Shahid Ali's Introduction to *Ravishing disunities* (2000) decries the American interpretation of the ghazal as inauthentic in its lack of formal compliance to rhyme and meter.

<sup>191</sup> Quoted in Allen (110- 111).

poetry of witness, a poetry of reconciliation and cross-racial identification” (Caplan 2005: 44).

Rich wrote two ghazal sequences in 1968, a year marked by protests and civil disturbances as public sentiment turned against the Vietnam War, riots followed Martin Luther King’s assassination and Black Power movements regained momentum. A poem within “The Blue Ghazals” is dedicated to African-American poet LeRoi Jones (then going by the name of Amiri Baraka), and charts Rich’s despair as “he forcefully turned from white readers such as herself, regardless of their seemingly radical political commitments” (Caplan 2005: 48). In the figure of Jones/Baraka, Rich underscores the potential of identity politics to unravel the civil rights movement from within: “Who doesn’t speak to me, who speaks to me more and more, / but from a face turned off, turned away, a light shut out” (370). Ellis draws clear parallels with the activism and identity politics of 1968, the dismantling of civil liberties and waging of imperialist wars once again awakening a sense of urgency and outrage in the liberal American populace of the mid-2000s. Rich’s activist poetry is largely of embodied authoritative agency; drawing on the poet’s lived experiences to “insist on [the speaker-poet’s] abilities to know the conditions of others, and [commanding] the corresponding right to inscribe a type of enjoining authoritative voice that demands action from readers” (Dowdy 26). If Ellis’s “Blue State Ghazals” is more properly a work of experiential agency - the speaker-poet self-reflexively locating herself within a community of resistance, mimetic fragments of events interwoven with an “I” at one remove from the “we” gathered in protest - the poem also carries the imprimatur of the authoritative poetic-political strain, “demand[ing] action, and insist[ing] that readers use their *own* experiences to create change” (ibid: 26).

“The Blue State Ghazals” opens with the following quote:

*I’m crying for all the other mothers.* – Cindy Sheehan  
(26)

The import of this quote for Ellis must be understood in the context of Sheehan’s stated solidarity with the Iraqi peoples, so that “*all the other mothers*” can be read as grieving mothers “over here” and “over there”; maternal solidarity enacting a bridge to transnational relationality.<sup>192</sup> Sheehan has become the most prominent figure in the anti-war movement, speaking out first and foremost as a “peace mom”,<sup>193</sup> and, thereby, following in a long

<sup>192</sup> Sheehan went so far as to declare Iraqi insurgents “freedom fighters” (qtd. in Managhan: 449).

<sup>193</sup> *Peace mom* became the title of Sheehan’s (2006) memoir.

tradition of women's activism which invokes what Ann Marie Nicolosi has called the "cultural currency of motherhood" (2013 para.1). Nicolosi argues that this currency has provided a framework for the media and public to interpret women's activism in terms that reinforce accepted gender roles (ibid: para. 1):

The same maternal discourse that allows motherhood an area to protest also constructs motherhood as an irrational force (female) that must be tempered by the rationality of the father (male). In this respect, the father (the state) allows for the remonstrations of motherhood and the acknowledgement of its sacrifices, but can dismiss mothers' protests as merely emotional and hysterical. (para. 8)

Ellis does not choose to problematize the trope of the activist mother, nor indeed to investigate politicized maternity carried out in the service of the state,<sup>194</sup> as her overriding concern is with how communities of difference can unite in common cause: to act in recognition of *other mothers* has the potential for alliance building outside of closed ethnic and national identifications. Yet it is these closed identifications which legitimized Sheehan's mainstream anti-war mother persona in the first place; if Sheehan was non-white, the intersection of gendered and raced attacks on her character would have blunted the populist appeal of her anti-imperialist stance.<sup>195</sup> Ellis describes herself as a "peace activist and seven-time civil disobedient" (Survey Appendix A.1: Q15)<sup>196</sup> and "The Blue State Ghazals" can be read as a work of "spiritual activism" in Gloria Anzaldúa's and Analouise Keating's sense of the term:

spiritual activism begins with the personal yet moves outward, acknowledging our radical interconnectedness. This is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation. What a contrast: while identity politics requires holding onto specific categories of identity, spiritual activism demands that we let them go. (Keating 2002a: 18)

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<sup>194</sup> Nicolosi notes: "Throughout the century, there is this reoccurring ideological battleground between the sacrificing mother who gives her children for the polity and the protecting mother who wishes to shield her children from becoming cannon fodder. On either side, it is the practice of politicized maternity" (para. 14).

<sup>195</sup> As Tina Managhan points out: "It is the unmarked (and un-remarked) character of [Sheehan's] whiteness that enabled this particular grieving mother to occupy the space of and symbolically become *the grieving mother in all of "us"* (a symbolic mother to the nation) – constituting a particular "us" and nation in turn" (446- 447).

<sup>196</sup> See results of Survey (Appendix A.1, p. 297).

The inherent contradictions in both recognizing difference and striving to break with identity politics (ibid: 18-19) are brought to the fore in “The Blues State Ghazals”, where the implications of Sheehan’s race in the mainstreaming of the anti-war movement are subsumed within the commonality of the mother figure. For the speaker-poet, it is more important that we recognize grief and, by extension love, across the divide – “*all the other mothers*” – for to do so implicitly calls into question an American patriotism that commemorates the American war dead and not those Iraqi civilians for whom, in one foreign policy narrative, the war was fought. The opening sequence of couplets most keenly delineates the protesting voice in the language of motherhood:

*8/17/05*

Humble-hearted mother, war is unkind.  
Weep *on the bright splendid shroud of your son.*

I cry for the kids playing tag on the grass.  
They still believe that we are free and brave.

Would thirty flickering candles make a target?  
We cup our flames as tenderly as babies’ heads.

Say fifteen hundred, fifteen thousand, a quarter million.  
We toll the deaths and those come to mourn them.

Unity is fragile as a child’s paper chain.  
Doing a small thing, then dispersing into darkness. (26)

The date “8/17/05” refers to the candlelight vigils which took place across America in support of Sheehan, the speaker-poet in attendance at one such vigil. Ellis employs literary antecedents to critique the masculinist auto-image of the “exceptional” American nation at the vanguard of democracy, waging just wars. The sacrificing American mother as a symbol of national pride is negated in the first couplet, a reworking of the final stanza from Stephen Crane’s ironical anti-war poem, “Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind”, first published in 1899: “Mother whose heart hung humble as a button / On the bright splendid shroud of your son, / Do not weep. / War is kind”.<sup>197</sup> In “The Blue State Ghazals”, the patronizing tone of Crane’s speaker-poet is echoed in the government bureaucrat of today who may acknowledge that “war is unkind” and exhort the “humble-hearted mother” to “weep” but who, in

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<sup>197</sup> See Katz, J. (ed.) 1972. *The complete poems of Stephen Crane*. New York: Cornell University Press, p. 81.

reminding the bereaved mother that her son's shroud is "*splendid*", engages with the time-honoured war rhetoric of dying for a noble cause. The speaker-poet will "cry" instead for those American "kids" who are brought up to believe in the mythology of the "free" and "brave" American nation, tropes that draw on the refrain of "The Star-Spangled Banner", the national anthem of the United States: "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave".

The third couplet further subverts America's valiant national character by positioning the peaceful anti-war protestors holding "flickering candles" as a "target" and imbuing this target with an auto-image of nurturing motherhood: "We cup our flames as tenderly as babies' heads". The iconography of childhood vulnerability and innocence – "kids playing tag on the grass", "tenderly as babies' heads", "fragile as a child's paper chain", "a small thing" – reclaims the war narrative from the fault line of patriotic duty. The protective instincts of motherhood, this iconography implies, can create cohesion and community in a way that appeals to national sacrifice never can: "It is one thing to protest war as a political stand, quite another to protest war as the antithesis of everything that motherhood symbolizes" (Nicolosi para. 9). However, the communal "we" that can put aside political, class and ethnic differences to "toll the deaths" is a fleeting "we", broken as easily as a "child's paper chain". The collective act of "Doing a small thing" is tinged with melancholy as the crowd then "dispers[es] into darkness".

There is a marked change of tone in the second sequence of couplets. Communal grief has been replaced by righteous anger and the voice of the citizen-mother has been reconfigured as an eyewitness activist, reporting the gratuitous response of state-affiliated actors to an anti-war demonstration:

*8/20/05*

At war's doorway, a man places a makeshift sign.  
*No Lies Told Today, Recruitment Center Has Been Shut Down.*

The Fox cameraman betrays his politics, screaming:  
Arrest them, they assaulted my camera.

A police dog bites the leg of a grandmother, retreating.  
Pepper spray spatters a woman's glasses as she is Tasered.

Again, the air stings with outrage and involuntary tears.  
Handcuffs appear, with no magician's spell to spring them.

Crimes against property will always be punished.  
The invisible ink on the Bill of Rights, appearing under fire.  
(26)

The shift in tone is emphasized from the outset as protestors congregate at a military recruitment station, “war’s doorway”. The speaker-poet posits an alternative American identity that refuses the auto-image of the special character of the American nation as a morally superior power preordained to spread democracy, a legacy of the Manifest Destiny doctrine that legitimized the genocide of Native Americans. This auto-image of the American nation enables neo-imperialist aspirations to be sold as benevolent nation-building and resistance to this state-sanctioned narrative is met with a “police dog”, “pepper spray”, “Tasered” bodies, “handcuffs”, tropes that have come to define contemporary American officialdom’s answer to dissent. Acquiescence to the American identity of officialdom can never be an option for Ellis, as acquiescence is never simply assimilation; it is the wholesale belief in America’s right to perpetrate violence against the Other. Steven Salaita (2005) has examined how “imperative patriotism” has impacted on Arab-American identity in the post-9/11 era:

Imperative patriotism assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory [...] Imperative patriotism is most likely to arise in settler societies, which usually need to create a juridical mentality that professes some sort of divine mandate to legitimize their presence on indigenous land [...] Politicians frequently speak about the need to occupy Arab countries and “civilize” them by introducing the natives to “democracy.” (Like the colonial discourse before it, this one rarely mentions the actual motivation for intervention: The plunder of resources, in this case oil.) Americans today hear so much about the need for their government’s “leadership” in all areas of the world that most, like the Europeans before them, automatically equate colonization with generosity and moral strength. (154-155)

If a candlelight vigil with the nurturing Main Street mom as figurehead is a problematic “target” for police brutality, no such sensitivity is countenanced towards the political grievances of perceived blue state malcontents who are routinely dismissed in mainstream discourse as fringe leftists and radicals, i.e. as outside of a collective “American” identity. The gendered gaze of the first sequence of couplets returns as the speaker-poet focuses on the “grandmother” bitten by a police dog and “a woman’s glasses” spattered with “pepper spray” “as she is Tasered.” Where the state apparatus sees subversives, the speaker-poet sees ordinary American women united against an unjust war and shedding “involuntary tears” as they are brutalized for exercising their rights. For Ellis, there are spaces to belong amidst *and* outside of the fraught in-betweeness of multi-racial identity; plural anti-imperialist spaces that proclaim an alternative American identity. Ellis can be situated, therefore, as an Arab-

American writer who “challenge[s] homogenized depictions of Arab-Americans, forging in the process what can be identified as revisionary or counterhegemonic spaces that redefine exclusionary conceptualizations of US citizenship and belonging” (Fadda-Conrey 2014: 139-140).

“The Fox cameraman” is the archetypal reactionary red state actor who professes allegiance to the Constitution whilst simultaneously championing the dismantling of the Bill of Rights in the post-9/11 era: “Arrest them, they assaulted my camera” (26). At the center of the Fox News apparatus is the need to discredit liberal concepts of identity as contrary to the American tradition. The Fox ideologue “betrays his politics” by prioritizing “Crimes against property” above the First Amendment rights to freedom of assembly. The specter of Adrienne Rich’s “The Blue Ghazals” looms large here as property rights were a key component in the conservative movement’s fight against civil rights legislation in the 1960s, the freedom to discriminate trumping racial equality as a basic tenet of individual liberty.<sup>198</sup> However, as Ellis makes clear in her concluding sequence of couplets, the red/blue political and cultural divide is a “distortion” on many levels, not least on the level of officialdom, where the erosion of civil liberties post-9/11, most egregiously through The Patriot Act – “The invisible ink on the Bill of Rights, appearing under fire” (26) – was sanctioned by an overwhelming majority of Congress under the Bush presidency.

In the concluding sequence, the speaker-poet, removed from on-the-ground events, assumes an authoritative voice to lament the mistrust, prejudice and alienation in American society engendered by security measures taken after 9/11:

*8/22/05*

I ignore alerts as the sky changes color:  
Yellow dawns, pollution-orange sunsets, bloody nights.

Is memory more than cards of identity?  
Enemies are faceless, fear the mirror of the soul.

Any eye might be a lens, any vagrant a terrorist.  
Safety demands we swallow everything whole.

Territories bear prints of the powerful and dying.  
I want to wash all the flags instead of burning them.

Every map they show is distorted:

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<sup>198</sup> For an overview of the property rights argument see MacLean’s chapter in Critchlow and MacLean: 123-176.

Our souls are gerrymandered, whorls of red and blue. (27)

The date “8/22/05” corresponds to the arrival of “Camp Reality” outside Bush’s Texas compound, a group of pro-war and pro-Bush supporters who set up home opposite Cindy Sheehan’s “Camp Casey”. The first couplet is an allegory of the general populace’s heightened fear of the terrorist Other in the post-9/11 imaginary. The “alerts” which the speaker poet chooses to “ignore” have their referent in the colour-coded terror alert scale initiated by the newly formed Department of Homeland Security after 9/11 where “yellow” carries an elevated risk of a terrorist attack, “orange” a high risk, and “red” (“bloody nights”) a severe risk (Schwartz 2010). Every “dawn” brings with it an elevated threat of a terrorist atrocity because “yellow” was the baseline level used.<sup>199</sup> There is a parallel referent here, as those members of the populace who refuse to be cowed by the constant threat of terror and speak out against U.S. foreign policy are met with intimidation tactics and state brutality (“bloody nights”). The auto-image of the hyper-vigilant state is further informed by “cards of identity”, with the allusions to racial and religious profiling vis-à-vis the Patriot Act and the REAL ID Act of 2005. The oppressive tendencies of identity politics, wherein “memory” is reduced to physical attributes of race, religion, or class in the social consciousness, ultimately never benefit the state as “Enemies are faceless”; what people should fear, the speaker-poet intones, is not the bogus coda that signifies a potential terrorist but their own prejudices: “the mirror of the soul”. The speaker poet, in affirming a plural identity, does not single out Arab- and Muslim-Americans or even the collective brown as victims of discriminatory practices but charges that “any vagrant” might be “a terrorist” and, in a society increasingly nourished on the suspicion of one’s fellow man, “any eye might be a lens”. By honing in on class-based aspects of oppression through the disenfranchised community of the homeless, the speaker-poet remains aware that it is the marginalized in society who will bear the brunt of the national terror alert system. The insistent rhetoric of imminent attacks fed to a scared populace legitimizes the war agenda and fear of the Other as “Safety demands we swallow everything whole.”

By invoking the term “Territories”, with their boundaries of mine and yours, the speaker-poet once again harks back to the historicized auto-image of Manifest Destiny and its neo-colonialist manifestations. The relocation of Native Americans to Indian Territories in America and 19<sup>th</sup>-century expansionism in the Caribbean and the Philippines mirror latter-

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<sup>199</sup> See the Department of Homeland Security website: <http://www.dhs.gov/homeland-security-advisory-system>.

day imperialist interventions in the Middle East, all of which “bear prints of the powerful and dying” (27). The speaker-poet’s wish “to wash all the flags instead of burning them” affirms politicized maternity as a spiritual alternative to destructive anti-nationalist identities, as the impetus to burn flags to protest injustice further cements a deeply divided society. It can also be argued that Ellis, in prioritizing the plural “flags”, is making a transnational appeal to her Arab brothers and sisters “over there” whose desecration of the American flag (a ubiquitous image in mainstream media) also feeds off a unitary neo-colonialist understanding of American identity.

Orfalea and Elmusa contend that the “primacy of family” in Arab-American poetry also “extends to embrace the human family, empathize with the underdog, and stand firmly against injustice [...] many of the writers seek to bypass nationalism to ferret out the element that unites all humanity – whether it be greed, hope, hatred, or love” (2007: xix, xx). For Ellis, love is that which unites, a love symbolized in the nurturing mother, who shows another way of *being* American outside of the “imperative patriotism” of flag-waving or negation through flag-burning. The speaker-poet recognizes that “every map they show is distorted” as the galvanizing of “imperative patriotism” crosses socio-political red/blue lines, inscribed in legislature, disseminated through the mainstream media, and subscribed to by a majority. Yet the Main Street mother who resists on behalf of “*all the other mothers*” also crosses neat binaries of political and cultural affiliation. The speaker-poet again uses a political analogy to lament the deep divisions that stop people seeing themselves in the other. Gerrymandering, the manipulation of the boundaries of U.S. electoral districts, has been used both to disenfranchise racial minorities and conversely to ensure that minority groups receive more equitable representation. Gerrymandering is hence an allegory for a “map” of a split American identity, red and blue forever locked in an ideological battle, a “distortion” that prohibits us from understanding that we are all interconnected and part of the human family: “Our souls are gerrymandered, whorls of red and blue.” If humans could see the mother and by extension the father/sister/brother/daughter/son in the suffering of others, the speaker-poet implies, we would recognize the pain of those both “over here” and “over there”.

At the heart of Ellis’s poem is a recognition that Arab-Americans will only feel part of a national American identity if the parameters of that identity move away from heteromasculinist, neo-colonialist definitions to more inclusive spaces of belonging for *all* Americans. The poet Naomi Shihab Nye is also concerned with how official discourses of “Americanness” foment an exclusionary identity politics. However, where Ellis re-imagines nationhood in the realm of gendered citizenship and activist spaces, Nye counters the war

ideology integral to state-sanctioned narratives of America with a feminist “aesthetic of smallness”.<sup>200</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Naomi Shihab Nye: *Hibernate*

Naomi Shihab Nye is the best-known Arab-American poet writing today and, alongside her poetry, has published fiction and children’s literature and edited two poetry volumes. Born to a Palestinian father and an American mother of German and Swiss descent, Nye spent her formative years growing up on a farm in St. Louis, Missouri, before moving in her adolescence to San Antonio, Texas, where she still resides today. Nye’s biculturalism, her year spent living in East Jerusalem with her family as a teenager, peregrinations in the Americas, Asia and the Middle East, and affinity for the Mexican-American neighbourhood she has made her home, has imbued her poetry with a “cultural identity [...] negotiated not within but across boundaries of inclusion and exclusion” (Majaj 1996: 280). Nye herself has attested to the ways in which poetry can enact a bridging of difference: “It seems all writers are engaged in the building of bridges [...] Maybe bicultural writers who are actively conscious of or interested in heritage build another kind of bridge as well, this one between worlds. But it’s not like a bridge, really – it’s closer, like a pulse” (Orfalea and Elmusa 266).<sup>201</sup> This “pulse” in Nye’s work is often felt through the everyday encounter, small moments of human interaction which emphasize the absurdity of the barriers we erect in our relation with others. Samina Najmi is the first theorist to undertake a feminist analysis of Nye’s poetry of the small and intimate as a political response in the post-9/11 era. Najmi’s 2010 essay “Naomi Shihab Nye’s Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime” will inform my reading of Nye’s poem “Hibernate”<sup>202</sup> from her 2008 collection, *Honeybee*:

Articulating her political vision through a feminist "aesthetic of smallness" that positions itself against the aesthetic of the sublime, Nye counters the ideology that undergirds mainstream visual and verbal representations of war in the Middle East. The paradox is that in deploying an aesthetic of smallness to counter the military sublime, Nye's poetry articulates a countersublime of universal human connectivity for our times. (Najmi: 151)

<sup>200</sup> Nye’s “aesthetic of smallness” is drawn from Samira Najmi’s 2010 essay.

<sup>201</sup> The bridge metaphor recurs throughout Nye’s poetry: “A grace note and someone to sing it / ‘I’ll be nicer to you than you are to me’ / Everything we worked for / Every ethical tradition / Every bridge / More time to ease things out than to break them” (“Missing Thomas Jefferson”, *Honeybee*, 43).

<sup>202</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.13.

Robert Bonazzi contends that Nye “never intended to be a ‘political poet’ and has never slipped into ideology” (2008: 16). However, one can argue that it is precisely Nye’s refusal to engage in dogma, to instead counter the “military sublime” and masculinist concepts of nationhood with other (small) ways of being and knowing, that give her political poetry its potency. Poetry is no less political for engaging with counter-hegemonic narratives beyond the avowedly oppositional; the embodied experiential agency (Dowdy 2007) with which Nye’s poetry is typically infused is one that speaks more often *for* than it does *against*.<sup>203</sup> The minutiae of familial memories that resist Arab stereotypes in their very ordinariness, the quotidian joys of Palestinian children cut short by occupation and war, the encounters with bewildered Americans for whom their wars make no sense either; these small moments in Nye’s poetry defy the grand narratives of war and by extension the officially sanctioned auto-image of nationhood as inherently male, where nation equates to masculine concepts of might, power, dominance:

[Nye’s] use of an aesthetic of smallness to underscore human connectivity makes her poetics distinctly feminist, confronting and challenging the traditionally masculine turfs of politics and war in a strategy that takes aim at the seductiveness of the sublime in representations of war. Alerting us to our vulnerability to the sublime, Nye juxtaposes dramatic, large-scale spectacles of war and their accompanying inflated rhetoric with images of small, personal, particularized devastations. In so doing, her poetry exposes and deconstructs the military sublime as a gendered aesthetic. (Najmi: 152)

Theories of the sublime under Burke and Kant cast smallness and beauty as feminized attributes in contradistinction to the sublime which “affirms and reasserts the power of masculinized reason” (ibid: 153). War is sold to the public as a rational, logical and courageous enterprise; what is at stake is a masculinist definition of national pride. A nation resistant to the military sublime is one that has succumbed to weakness and effeminacy, to the feminine impulse. In Nye’s poem “Hibernate” war is transformed into an irrational enterprise, a spectacle of the ridiculous rather than the sublime, and Nye does so through small moments of what can be termed “Othered absurdity”. We cross borders, enter into the empathetic, when we recognize that our treatment of others *as* Others is not only inhumane but illogical. In “Hibernate”, war is not the battlefield but the battlefield’s reverberations in

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<sup>203</sup> As Dowdy contends: “Political poems [...] do not have to be explicitly oppositional [...] it seems likely that most poems, even those that are primarily personal and introspective, speak for, against, and sometimes in the same poem, for and against something or somethings” (11).

the lived experiences of Arab-Americans: it is aluminum-wrapped trays of *tabouleh* that panic Homeland Security; it is the everyday encounter with a man who has learned that hatred of Arabs is acceptable. When the war narrative is reduced to the everyday absurd, heroism and logicity belong to those who resist the official dogma and gendered definitions of reason are upended. In this way, ideas of national identity lose their potency as humans connect on a more intimate level.

Nye's aesthetic of smallness does not rely on the didactic identification and deconstruction of hetero-images of Arab manhood and womanhood, as my reading of "Hibernate" will make clear. As Amira Jarmakani has argued, "counternarratives run the risk of legitimating the problematic assumptions of the very discourse they resist" (2011: 240). Jarmakani's call for "a fruitful fluidity" to "[contextualize] the complex realities of Arab and Arab American [*sic*] women's lives" (ibid.) is echoed in Nye's intimate journeys through Arab and American homelands, particularized moments of human interaction bridging those "over here" and "over there". For Nye, recognition of our interconnectedness is fundamental to how an Israeli girl escapes death through the organs of a murdered Palestinian boy,<sup>204</sup> to how the Arab-American finds a more easy accommodation with her twoness, to how we move past hate and heal ourselves, and has resulted in a poetry "that has no trace of rancor or bitterness" (Al Maleh 2009: 26). The warm-hearted, often gentle tone, accessible free verse and refusal of dogma have the power to make encounters with bigotry in her poetry all the more discomfiting.<sup>205</sup> However, the international sense of place in Nye's poetry (Charara 2008: xxiii) and feting of Nye as a writer not only comfortable with but celebratory of her hybridity, carries the danger of reading into her work what Ella Shohat identifies as "the politics of ordinary belonging", whereby an anti-essentialist stance falls prey to "a diffuse all-embracing cosmopolitan internationalism 'which speaks for all of us'" (1998: 8). If Nye's vision for humanity is one in which individuals are attuned to and mindful of our interconnectedness, the tensions, complexities and anguish of crossing boundaries remain present throughout the work and Nye herself never relinquishes the "specificity of culturally rooted lives" (Majaj 1996: 282).

<sup>204</sup> From the poem "Parents of Murdered Palestinian Boy Donate His Organs to Israelis" (*Honeybee* 140).

<sup>205</sup> Wafa A. Alkhadra's reading of Nye's celebration of hybridity is problematic in its insistence that the challenges of dual- or multi-hyphenated identity have become less pressing since the emergence of postmodernist thought (2013). There is no contextualization of 9/11 and its repercussions on Nye's poetry which enables Alkhadra to claim that bicultural tensions are mainly present in her earlier work; indeed, that at present we live in a world where "[r]ather than stigma, roots have become largely an asset" (ibid: 186).

An aesthetic of smallness pervades Nye's 2008 poetry collection, *Honeybee*, where our inability to take care of each other is reflected in our treatment of the planet, the depleting honeybee population emblematic of the disharmony within human society and individually lived lives. For Nye, masculinist ideals of progress, whether conquest of the physical environment or of peoples, carry devastating consequences for our capacity to relate as human beings. The "need to justify suffering with larger-than-life concepts" links the sublime to "the fearsome power of [the] masculine divine", the sanctioning of violence as God's will informing American actions in Iraq as it informed the jihadist attacks of 9/11 (Najmi: 155-156). Nye pursues an anti-essentialist framework in "Hibernate" from the first stanza, honing in on the tendency of identity politics to beget entrenched ideologies and countering the concept of a divinely sanctioned military sublime:

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My father's friend Farouk  
 Has a dream:  
 God resigned.  
 And all the people took better care of one another  
 And got together then  
 because, well, they had to.  
 Things grew really smooth.  
 There was no one to blame or impress.  
 (125)

The hetero-image of the fanatical Arab male (always a priori a Muslim) hell bent on a unilateral reading of God's purpose is playfully upended in Farouk's dream: "God resigned." The appropriation of God to sanctify bloodshed across the religious spectrum – the protestation that one is doing God's bidding – foments the politics of "us" and "them". When there is no God to account for atrocities, "to blame or impress", people have no justification not to take "better care of one another". The hatred and conflict seeded from ideology, particularly religious ideology, are recurring themes in Nye's poetry. Farouk's desire for the peaceful co-existence of peoples acknowledges the suffering caused by religious fundamentalism of *all* persuasions – the imbrication of "over here" and "over there" – and in this way the speaker-poet resists neo-Orientalist stereotypes without concretizing Islamophobia or Arab manhood.

The omnipotent God that fuels the military sublime is negated by the speaker-poet, humanized in the quiet action of resigning. Secular concepts of "freedom" and "democracy"

are made sacred in gendered discourses of war (Najmi: 156) but the idea of people taking “better care of one another” (“Hibernate”: 125) is discredited as a feminized approach to thinking about war. Articulating an aesthetic of smallness, Nye re-imagines God on a human scale, a gender-neutral figure fed up with violence being justified in the name of the divine and, in doing so, draws attention to the androcentrism propelling war narratives. In the second stanza, attention turns to the commodification of religion as a “plastic” *curandero* or medicine man in the speaker-poet’s Mexican-American neighbourhood appropriates local beliefs for the pursuit of profit.<sup>206</sup> The speaker-poet moves from the particulars of the “plastic” *curandero*’s bogus healing practices in satisfying the quest for quick-fix inner peace to the devastation of current wars where peace remains elusive:

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Professor Brother Miguel Angel  
 is healing “mexican style”  
 every day of the week for free.  
 He is healing “different from others.”  
 He will “run away bad neighbors”  
 if you ask him. Note: he stuck his  
 promotional poster on your neighbor’s house  
 as well as your own.  
 He will “bring back boyfriends”  
 and “give names of persons.”  
 Call for appointment  
 night or day. Good luck for Bingo,  
 too. Bingo is capitalized,  
 mexican is not. I want  
 brown magic this year.  
 Brown dusty desert magic.  
 I want peace even if it involves  
 a lot of weeping and apology.  
 Can you help me? Keep  
 your Bingo joy, I need real  
 people lighting sage sticks,  
 being honest. Say disaster.  
 Thank you.  
 (125-126)

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<sup>206</sup> The *curandero*, endowed with the gift of natural and supernatural healing, maintains an important role in the healthcare practices of Mexican-Americans. See Tafur *et al.* (2009).

Nye occupies several positions within the American poetic landscape, as a poet skirting the mainstream American canon, as a Palestinian-American poet (studied within the ethnic canon) and as a leading poet of the Southwest.<sup>207</sup> The fluidity in Nye's journeying between a Southwestern and Arab-American identity within the same poem point to a larger concern of seeking out an honest relationality between peoples. Nye's belief in mixtures never foregoes the traumas inherent in crossing borders; the hybrid embrace always carries notes of caution. Here, centuries of indigenous healing techniques, of life-long learning and deeply-held belief in the natural and supernatural, "Brown dusty desert magic", attain purchase value in a quick fix culture, "Bingo is capitalized / mexican is not." The speaker-poet wants "real people lighting sage sticks, / being honest." The burning of sage sticks as a purification ritual originated in the Native American customs of the Southwest and its appropriation by mainstream culture is totemic of the instant self-healing of spiritual faddism. Implicit in the speaker-poet's desire for "peace even if it involves / a lot of weeping and apology" is the post-9/11 reality of Bush's wars and continued oppression of the Palestinians; the vanity of the self's wants, "Bingo joy", a stark reminder of that "peace" which remains out of reach: "Say disaster. / Thank you."

The speaker-poet understands that peace involves a willingness to engage in actions and a vocabulary ("weeping" and "apology") anathema to the military sublime. Najmi, in her examination of the appropriation of language in war discourse, draws on Carol Cohn's theorizing of the Gulf War wherein "socially entrenched gender-coding [...] privileges specific ways of speaking and thinking about war. This gendered discourse silences other modes of thinking by devaluing them as feminine" (162). The concepts of "weeping", apologizing, admitting that military intervention has been a "disaster", disrupt the auto-image of America as a valiant, democratizing nation. If peace requires another vocabulary, a vocabulary removed from masculinist concepts of nation, the speaker-poet remains less than hopeful; the arrival of "Spring" in the next stanza does not bring renewal but is only "a bandage", and an ineffective one as "[t]he wound keeps oozing" (126). The idea of a festering wound is carried throughout the poem as Nye turns her attention to heightened fears of Arabs and Muslims in the post-9/11 era:

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I keep thinking how the man who said

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<sup>207</sup> Nathalie Handal contends in relation to Nye: "One can belong to a literary ethnic group while still belonging to the 'American' literary circle" (2001: 44).

*100 Arabs don't equal 1 American*  
 was wearing a white shirt  
 and had seemed perfectly normal  
 up till then.

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Favorite questions from the FBI:

*In all your travels, have you ever met  
 anyone who used an assumed name?*

Uh, it is possible Abdul Faisal Shamsuzzaman  
 was really Jack Smith, but how would I know?

*In all your travels, did you ever meet anyone  
 who wanted to overthrow their country?*

Hmmmm, would they have announced it?

Yes.                      Me.                      Now.  
 (126-127)

Nye's approach to countering war ideology is to subvert the gendered coding of war, rationality and courage belonging to those who refuse to accept the dogma propagated in the service of national interests. Najmi contends that "national self-definition depends upon racially and sexually inflected conceptions of self and other" (154). Illustrating particular moments of racialized manifestations of war ideology in everyday society, Nye engages an aesthetic of smallness to highlight the absurdity of our fear of others. The speaker-poet channels the American auto-image of the regular guy – the white mainstreaming of American identity – who seems "perfectly normal". Refusing to interiorize the outrageousness of this man's assertion that "*100 Arabs don't equal 1 American*", she instead draws attention to its utter strangeness. Indeed, the speaker-poet does not feel marginalized by his utterance because the individual who thinks it is *normal* to declare such a thing in everyday conversation has cast himself adrift from the lives of the others.

The post-9/11 intensification of open bigotry towards Arab peoples in mainstream society, wherein it is safe to speak out because it is tolerated, is thrown into sharp relief here.<sup>208</sup> This toleration has been exacerbated by the discourses of officialdom – the lawful

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<sup>208</sup> More than two decades before 9/11, columnist Nicolas van Hoffman noted that Arabs were "the last ethnic group safe to hate in America" (quoted in Hishmeh 2009: 93).

sanctioning of profiling, interrogation and detention – that make Arab and Muslims the target of individual and collective suspicion. Here, the practice of exclusionary identity through the signification of name as alien Other is upended through the speaker-poet's humorous riposte to the FBI's "favorite" line of enquiry: "Uh, it *is* possible Abdul Faisal Shamsuzzaman / was really Jack Smith, but how would I know?" The parameters for assuring the security of the state fall victim to their own illogicality when meaning is sought through the rigid and impersonal language of bureaucracy: "*In all your travels, did you ever meet anyone / who wanted to overthrow their country?*" Small moments of human interaction that foreground "Othered absurdity" become a strategy of resistance to racist ideologies that do not rely on the defensive deconstruction of stereotypes for their import but on the ability of antagonists (a seemingly normal individual, the collective FBI) to highlight the unreasonableness of their positions through their own declarations and actions.

Nye juxtaposes the boundaries of national and racial identity politics with other ways of being and knowing. The speaker-poet journeys to her own backyard to witness the small joy of turtles emerging from hibernation: "we were so ready to feed them" (128). Implicit in this journey from essentialist modes of being, where humans fail to see themselves in the other, to the awakening turtles, is the larger disconnect that humans have from the world around them. As Nye notes in the introduction to *Honeybee*: "Facts about insects and animals feel refreshing these days, when human beings are deeply in need of simple words like 'kindness' and 'communicate' and 'bridge'" (8). Nye's delineation of our human and planetary interconnectedness through an aesthetic of smallness has led Najmi to characterize her poetry as a "countersublime". Drawing on the work of 18<sup>th</sup>-century authors John Baillie and Joseph Priestly, Najmi notes that "in emphasizing the magnitude and grandeur of human love and generosity of spirit, their critiques align with contemporary feminist rereadings of the sublime" (166-167). In the context of women of colour theorizing, this "countersublime" speaks to a need to go beyond an oppositional consciousness in the search for spaces of belonging:

As human beings, we have a sacred connection to one another, and this is why enforced separations wreak havoc on our souls. [...] Our oppositional politic has been necessary; but it will never sustain us [...] it can never ultimately feed that deep place within us: that space of the erotic, that space of the soul, that space of the Divine. (Alexander 2002: 99)

Nye always wants to "feed that deep place within us", to recognize the numerous influences that speak to our sense of belonging, influences which cannot be contained within categories

of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender. However, feeding that place “does not also mean that it is no longer possible to draw boundaries between privilege and disenfranchisement” (Shohat 1998: 6) as the closing stanzas make clear:

\*  
 Homeland Security wanted to know  
 what those mysterious silver objects were,  
 entering my cousin’s home –  
 trays of *tabouleh*  
 covered with aluminum foil.

\*  
 Logic hibernates.  
 Truth, too.  
 It has been known to stay gone  
 for years. ❁  
 (129)

The impact of war ideology on how a nation perceives itself and its citizens has far-reaching consequences for those members of society whose race or ethnicity calls into question their Americanness. The paranoid insistence of mapping subversive actions onto innocuous activities in the aftermath of 9/11 denies the ordinary humanity of Arab-Americans. Najmi argues that an aesthetic of smallness “can also be associated with the political underdog in productive ways. Political associations of this kind potentially cast smallness as a challenge to America's big, strong, masculine, and aggressive self-image” (156). In “Hibernate”, the gendered auto-image of a rational, tough-talking America safeguarding its people is challenged in the absurdity of “Homeland Security” mistaking “trays of *tabouleh* / covered with aluminum foil” for potential terrorist activity. The domestic space, a scared place in Nye’s poetry, with its rituals of cooking and familial bonding, is no less immune to humiliating counter-terrorism measures than the public space of an airport terminal. The racist logic of war ideology is laid bare through the disruption of the domestic sphere; the mundane activity of bringing foil-wrapped food to a gathering is only mundane if carried out by a certain strata of American society. As Lisa Suhair Majaj has noted, Nye’s conception of Arab-American identity is “not something to be preserved or denied or escaped or romanticized: it is just another way of being human” (2008 para. 16). The inability to see the humanity in others is the “logic” that “hibernates”. Nye, a poet of border-crossings and

bridge-building, ends the poem on a dispiriting note as this “truth” “has been known to stay gone / for years.”

Nye’s speaker-poet remains at home in her hybrid skin because the truth of her lived reality is the “Arab” and “American” within her, cross-cultural and transnational spaces of belonging that cannot be compromised by the intolerance of others. For the speaker-poet in Mohja Kahf’s “The Passing There”,<sup>209</sup> the uncertainties of bicultural identity and the anguish of living between worlds take root in childhood. Kahf resists neo-Orientalist representations of Arab womanhood and manhood by centering her poem in the universalizing innocence of childhood, privileging the viewpoint of siblings Mohja and Yaman at that moment when they learn that not all children are the same.

#### 4.3.4 Mohja Kahf: *The Passing There*

In Mohja Kahf’s first poetry collection, *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), the eroticized Scheherazad of Western fantasia is swiftly de-Orientalized and brought back to earth as Kahf wittily re-imagines her as a latter-day New Jersey author, amicably divorced from Shahrayar with whom she shares custody of their daughter (“E-mail from Scheherazad” 43).<sup>210</sup> Kahf directly calls out Western understanding of the oppressed Arab woman in the poem “So You Think You Know Scheherazad” (44-45)<sup>211</sup> and Scheherazad becomes in the collection emblematic of the “power of the telling of a story” (ibid: 44), of writing the Muslim Arab-American woman anew. Kahf herself has said that one of her poetic motivations is “[t]hat kind of personal truth telling about an unrecognized or misrecognized part of reality [of being a Muslim woman]” (2004: 14). If Kahf is forthright in identifying as a Muslim Arab-American woman, *E-mails from Scheherazad* never succumbs to root-oriented cultural politics, each poem skillfully dissecting categories of “Arab”, “American”, “Muslim woman” to create a semi-autobiographical portrait of plural and shifting identifications. It is the telling of one’s own story as “a mode of questioning, focusing on the discursive and autobiographical construction of an antiessentialist Arab American subjectivity rooted in the Arab American [*sic*] experience” (Fadda-Conrey 2007: 155). The

<sup>209</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.14.

<sup>210</sup> The enduring Orientalism of the “harem beauty” as personified by Scheherazad is examined by Marsha J. Hamilton (1994).

<sup>211</sup> See Abdelrazek’s essay on Kahf for an analysis of the figure of Scheherazad in *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2007: 100-114).

collection, spanning three decades, is rich in its variation of tone and voice, the gutsy dismantling of the hetero-image of the “Muslim woman” in the *Hijab* poems giving way to reflective ruminations on identity in the 2001 poem “The Passing There”, which will be the subject of this analysis.

The confrontational tone of embodied authoritative agency (Dowdy 2007) in Kahf’s “Little Mosque Poems”, analyzed in chapter three, is therefore absent in the memory-driven experiential agency (ibid.) of “The Passing There” wherein young Mohja and her brother Yaman navigate the uncertain terrain of Arab and American belonging in the rural Midwest of the 1970s.<sup>212</sup> Yet the alienation that ensues when cultural authenticity is understood as integral to one’s identity has long-lasting consequences, whether it is the trauma of authoritarian insistence on “ritual purity” in “Little Mosque Poems” or the “cruel kindnesses” of first generation Syrian immigrant parents in “The Passing There”. In “Little Mosque Poems”, the heteropatriarchal orthodoxy of the mosque is situated within an intersectional feminist framework; “fearful to protect itself / from the bricks of bigots” (2005: 121), the mosque fails to see its own bigotry in its treatment of its Muslim daughters, just as it turns a blind eye to the suffering of non-Muslims in its neighbourhood. Kahf’s poetic investigations transverse multiple aspects of Arab- and Muslim-American spaces of belonging/non-belonging. The speaker-poet’s childhood in “The Passing There” is removed from a gendered reading to embrace the communal “we” of siblings whose search for belonging comes up against the barriers of white America’s formulation of the Other at the intersection of ethnicity and religion and the experiences and expectations of parents newly arrived in the hostland.

In the poetry anthology, *Grape leaves*, Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa posit Arab identity firmly within the realm of family: “one might not be exaggerating to say that for poets of Arab heritage, family *is* self” (2000: xix). This apparent truism has been increasingly critiqued by contemporary Arab-American poets who seek a more heterogeneous and fluid interpretation of the interplay between family and self. Carol Fadda-Conrey argues for a reading of Kahf’s poetry as relational autobiography, where an “alternate self”, never wholly individual or collective, is drawn, a merging of “the shared and the unique” (after Friedman,

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<sup>212</sup> Dowdy, in his formulation of embodied experiential agency, argues that “Poetry is political [...] when it ‘keeps in touch’ with experience [...] when it responds to the ways that people live their lives in the world, to their needs, and to their experiences” (35). A political reading of “The Passing There” is premised on a far-ranging definition of the term “political” whereby “poems of experiential agency [...] are exemplars of a strategy unconfined to a type of experience or to a certain set of political and social engagements” (ibid: 52).

2007: 157). This merging in “The Passing There” - a childhood of “I”, “we”, “my brother and I” - enables resistance to univocal cultural inscriptions on multiple fronts. The non-gendering of memory refuses the compartmentalization of Arab male and female roles necessary to an Othered discourse of intra-communal oppression with its demonization of the Arab male. In the context of the post-9/11 reception environment, where Arab manhood has become a synonym for threat and terror, there is quiet devastation in the portrayal of childhood innocence awakening to the reality of that other more hostile America. Yaman and Mohja, children in an era when the Othered Arab first became concretized in the American imagination, will grow up to know that things will only get worse.

The “we” of Mohja and Yaman also has to confront the unfamiliar *of* the familiar, as they negotiate expectations within the domestic sphere. In the parental home, the siblings find another boundary to belonging in the very people who identify with them, the poem encompassing the inter-generational tensions prevalent in Arab-American literature where to be “Syrian” carries a host of *learned* signifiers and identity is *passed down* through the stories of “remembered landscapes” (“The Passing There”: 19).<sup>213</sup> The poem highlights the complexities of ethnic communal belonging for those who either left the homeland as young children and whose memories of the Mother country are fleeting or who were born in the hostland and for whom the Mother country lives in the imaginary. Growing up and growing into selfhood on American soil, communal identity for Mohja and Yaman is not entrenched within essentialist definitions of belonging. Lisa Suhair Majaj has critiqued the “static conception of identity unamenable to change” often found in the nostalgic writing of second- and third-generation Arab authors, which “claim[s] the ethnic past as a model for present life” and “in the metonymic slippage [...] between family, community, tradition, ethnicity, and the past implicitly affirms patriarchy as an ethnic value” (1996: 274).<sup>214</sup> The speaker-poet in “The Passing There” creates of memory a space where the ancestral culture is neither romanticized nor abnegated but becomes in the shared history of Mohja and Yaman, “that

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<sup>213</sup> Nadine Naber notes: “The concept of Arabness as family resembles discourses that many communities have relied upon for survival in the United States. Indigenous people, people of color, and immigrants and refugees have found collective strength in concepts and practices of family [...] Diaspora studies scholars argue that continuities between concepts of nation and diaspora help explain the profound significance of “family” as a marker of cultural distinction in the diaspora” (2012: 74).

<sup>214</sup> Arab-American scholars have pointed to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War as a key moment in the movement away from assimilatory identities to an assertion of ethnic belonging and political engaged identities in the Arab-American community (Naber 2012, Orfalea 2006). Majaj notes that “the representation of ethnicity and ethnic memory in individual texts reflects the concerns of particular historical periods” (1996: 266). In the poem “Jasmine Snowfall” Kahf calls herself one of the “children of ’67 / sprung from between the cracks” (2003: 93) and the 1970s setting of “The Passing There” is significant to the conceptualization of identity as contingent on the socio-political conditions of the prevailing era.

remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present” (hooks 1990: 150). Refusing the either/or identifications of “Syrian” or “American”, Mohja and Yaman learn that it is the “passing” “between two worlds” that “makes all the difference” (“The Passing There”: 20).

The poem’s title is taken from Robert Frost’s ironical poem “The Road Not Taken” (1916), where the individualistic desire to tread “the [road] less traveled by” carries an illusory quality: “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.”<sup>215</sup> In Kahf’s poem, the option of assimilation into an “American” identity or consolidation of a “Syrian” identity, two paths seemingly strikingly antithetical, are also illusory, in fact “impossible” (“The Passing There”: 20), as they each rely on unilateral, unchanging conceptions of identity formation. By interrogating imagotypes of “American” and “Syrian”, an imagological analysis of the poem opens up the illusory nature of either/or belonging. The poem begins in the vein of a Frostian pastoral:

My brother and I crossed through a field.  
Soybeans grew there. We were nine and ten.  
It wasn’t ours. It was golden.  
I remember raspberry bushes  
way at the back, and rusted wire,  
once a fence, defunct now and trampled under

by generations of children who belonged  
to this Indiana landscape in the seventies,  
sixties, forties, tens: Matthews and Deborahs,  
Toms and Betsys, Wills and Dots. Here we were,  
Yaman and Mohja,  
Getting a kajillion scratches,  
knuckles bleeding, on our little knees,  
forgetting everything but gold and green,  
scrabbling for another sweet hit of summer berry. (18)

The first two stanzas play on the auto-image of the American childhood idyll – “field”, “raspberry bushes”, “Indiana landscape”, “kajillion scratches”, “gold and green”, “sweet hit of summer berry” – which in coming-of-age literature is always a harbinger of loss, the loss of childhood innocence itself. For writers of colour, that loss is the recognition that one’s own body is a marker of non-belonging. In “The Passing There”, the impending loss is signaled through hetero-images of a landscape of borders – “It wasn’t ours”, “rusted wire / once a

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<sup>215</sup> Published in Jay Parini’s (1999). *Robert Frost: a life*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., pp.153-154.

fence” – and the inhabitants within these borders – “generations of children who belonged”, “Matthews and Deborahs, Toms and Betsys, Wills and Dots.”<sup>216</sup> Before the body becomes marked, the act of naming intuitively difference; the landscape belongs to children who do not sound like “us”, names that have been at home here “in the seventies, sixties, forties, tens”. The “Matthews and Deborahs” are the children of the American popular imagination, the protagonists of books, films, cartoons, and there is an allusion here to the way in which the hegemony of white culture becomes naturalized from a young age; the “Indiana landscape” as a birthright of white belonging. The present-tense speaker-poet evokes the pervasiveness of white normativity in the American psyche while the childhood Yaman and Mohja are busy being children, “forgetting everything but gold and green”. That moment when alterity becomes a material reality, when the budding self must learn to straddle *los intersticios* (Anzaldúa), is yet to come:

The man who owned the field was no Robert Frost  
 although he spoke colloquial. “Git  
 off my property,” he shouted, “Or I’ll –”  
 The rest of what he said I do not care  
 to repeat. It expressed his concerns  
 about our religion and ethnic origin.  
 He had a rifle. We went on home. (18)

The Frostian pastoral, with its excavation of the interior struggles of its rural New England inhabitants, has always been more than a surface hymn to country life. As Jay Parini notes, “[Frost’s] poems are full of outsiders, wanderers on the fringe of town at the edge of night, characters who plunge into the woods alone” (442). While the farmer possesses the rural vernacular celebrated in Frost’s poetry (“he spoke colloquial”), the speaker-poet shows another side to the auto-image of “the stoic, independent-minded men and women who worked the harsh, unyielding soil” (Parini: 447). The farmer is “no Robert Frost” as the corresponding, unheralded reality of the self-reliant Frostian protagonist is the insularity that can accompany the provincial mindset, where outsider status is not conferred on the level of psyche but on the tangible manifestation of the non-white non-Christian trespassing on the land. The speaker-poet, then, transforms the potent identification of masculinist heroic

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<sup>216</sup> Abdelrazek expands on the conception of “border zones” in the poem: “With mass migration, refugees, and exiles, borders that used to act as dividing lines between here and there or East and West now resemble the ‘rusted wire / once a fence’ that had become ‘defunct,’ ‘trampled under’ by technological communication and transatlantic migration” (2007: 84).

nonconformity embedded within the American national character – understood as both auto-image and *meta-image*<sup>217</sup> – into a very ordinary bigotry.

The reification of the Other occurs at the level of the “image”, understood in imagological terms as “the mental silhouette of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people, or race. Such an *image* rules our opinion of others and controls our behavior towards them” (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 4; emphasis in original). The tropes that form the hetero-image of the Arab Muslim the present-day speaker-poet “do[es] not care to repeat” and does not need to repeat as the reader conjures his or her own “mental silhouette”. That moment of childhood trauma, when the self is recast in the image of the Other, and innocence becomes loss, is the beginning of the child’s recognition of the “third space” (Bhabha). As Evelyn Alsultany notes, drawing on Anzaldúa’s formulation of the self-trapped in *los intersticios*, “Dislocation results from the narrow ways in which the body is read, the rigid frameworks imposed on the body in public space” (2002: 108). For Yaman and Mohja, this originary dislocation is accompanied by the implicit threat of violence: “He had a rifle. We went on home.” Yet “home”, as the children discover, does not bring the solace of communal identification but further compounds their sense of marginalization:

My brother knows this song: running home,  
 behind us, a field that wasn’t ours,  
 ahead, a house of alien expectations,  
 the cruel kindnesses of parents who,  
 coming from the Syrian sixties,  
 thought they had succeeded  
 in growing little hothouse Syrians.  
 My brother and I crossed through a field;

We ran and ran. Somewhere in Syria,  
 Earth brown like nut, sky like the turquoise  
 in my earring, other purples waited,  
 a plum tree had our name on it. Days passed  
 in another country, like photographs  
 with our silhouettes cut out, where one day  
 we would fit back in, we thought.

There the vineyard watchman chased away  
 children whose names he knew, yelling at them

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<sup>217</sup> Leerssen defines *meta-image* as “how a nation believes it is perceived by others” (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 344).

in the language of their parents  
 and their parents' parents,  
 our parallel-universe Syrian selves among them,  
 hearing their names called among the others,  
 Yaman and Mohja, running home  
 and getting there, skin bright, panting,  
 getting home. (18-19)

Samaa Abdurraqib (2009) advances Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" to explore the ways in which second-generation immigrants, who feel ostracized in the hostland, conjure a homeland of possibilities, where their belonging will go unquestioned. Yet, the pertinent question remains: "How can this imagined community sustain a sense of identity when it is intangible?" (ibid: 455). Yaman and Mohja caught between "a field that wasn't ours" and "a house of alien expectations" swap one field for another; in this parallel universe the racist farmer is replaced by the "vineyard watchman", and foreignness becomes familiarity as they are yelled at in their ancestral language by a man who knows their names. The adult speaker-poet, no longer under the spell of phantasmal belonging, ruefully reflects on the homeland-as-haven that she and her brother created, "where one day / we would fit back in, we thought."<sup>218</sup> The bond between brother and sister, the "we" of their narrative, is their shared awakening to "the loneliness of cultural dislocation" (Majaj 1996: 277); neither of "America" nor the "little hothouse Syrians" their parents desire, they find solace in navigating their in-betweenness together.

If *writing* the wrongs of anti-Arab prejudice has become a tiresome but frustratingly necessary experience in Arab-American feminist theorizing (Jarmakani: 2011), with its reliance on a corrective of defend and explain, Kahf resists essentialist definitions of Arab man- and womanhood, emanating from without and within the Arab community, by writing the "we" of experience; a relational autobiography not predicated on gendered representations. Here, mainstream stereotypes of gender roles within Muslim Arab-American communities are broken down in myriad subtle ways by locating cultural fragmentation in the shared childhood pain of brother and sister:

My brother and I crossed through a field.

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<sup>218</sup> The journey to the physical homeland often ends in the knowledge that one does not fit in there either. Even if this journey is never made, the pursuit of an imagined homeland can never be a panacea for the disheartening realities of life in the hostland: "The intangibility of these communities is not wholly satisfactory, because the imaginative capacity of a community cannot assuage the real displacement, isolation, and ostracization of the experiences of Kahf's speakers" (Abdurraqib: 455).

Its golden music wasn't ours. We listened  
 to its cornflower choirs and tried  
 to feel like Hoosiers. Aunts and uncles  
 fed us Syrian pastries, heavily syruped,  
 and parents promised Arabian gold.  
 We sang the anthems  
 of their remembered landscapes on request  
 for visitors and foreign guests.  
 At school, we pledged allegiance,  
 trying not to feel like traitors. (19)

According to Lisa Suhair Majaj, “[cultural] consolidation is frequently arrived at in Arab-American writing through an invocation of the past in which personal and familial memories acquire representative cultural significance. [...] This emphasis on memory takes the preservation of familial and ethnic history as constituting identity itself” (1996: 271). The willing of an Arab identity by adult onto child through cultural markers or auto-images of ethnic pride – “Syrian pastries”, “Arabian gold”, “anthems of their remembered landscapes” – is bewildering for children who make sense of the world through their immediate environment. It is no accident that for the siblings their “parallel-universe Syrian selves” engage in outdoor activities that mirror the ones they enjoy in the hostland and have nothing to do with a vicarious knowledge of *being Syrian*. It is also significant that the children’s sense of *being American* is intimately linked to the tangibility of locality: “We listened / to its cornflower choirs and tried / to feel like Hoosiers.” When their imagined Syrian life bears little relation to their elders’ notions of home, another crack in the children’s fledging sense of self opens and *los intersticios* becomes “not knowing how to recognize the homeland and not knowing exactly how to feel at home in the current land” (Abdurraqib: 459). Not surprisingly, young Mohja and Yaman assume performative identities in their quest to please competing cultures. At home, anthems are sung “on request / for visitors and foreign guests” and “At school, we pledged allegiance, / trying not to feel like traitors.” Fadda-Conrey, in an analysis of another of Kahf’s poems, remarks on the “tension between here (the present) and there (the past), even when ‘there’ is a place that is purely constructed from stories handed down from one exilic generation to another. Hence, any move to assimilate into the ‘here’ of the United States, and its acceptance as a permanent home, becomes a betrayal of the lost homeland” (2007: 170). In the final stanza, the speaker-poet strips away the ironical tone of Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”:

My brother knows this song:  
 How we have been running

to leap the gulch between two worlds, each  
with its claim. Impossible for us  
to choose one over the other,  
and the passing there  
makes all the difference.(20)

For the speaker-poet, bicultural belonging, with all its tensions and complexities, becomes the only possible means of engaging with the world as both the homeland and the hostland have a “claim” on the siblings’ individual and communal identity. As Lisa Suhair Majaj asserts:

[Kahf] insists that Arab-American identity exists at the point of crossing: the hyphen linking cultures, the gulch between worlds. Hers is not the dream of univocal identity, feet firmly rooted on one side of the divide, but rather the messy reality of hands stained with American berries, shoulders limned with Syrian dust. (2008 para. 36)

Majaj, next, provides a counterpoint to the expectations of conforming to ideas of “Arabness” and “Americanness” in her poem “Cadence”<sup>219</sup>. Here, the navigation of identity takes place at “the point of crossing” where the poet and the Arab-American woman meet.

#### 4.3.5 Lisa Suhair Majaj: *Two cultures can be lighter than one*<sup>220</sup>

Lisa Suhair Majaj is a poet and scholar of Arab-American literature. She has co-edited three collections of literary criticism, including *Going global: the transnational reception of Third World women writers* (2000) and *Intersections: gender, nation, and community in Arab women’s novels* (2002). The thematics of *Going global* – the politics of location that determine how Third World women’s texts are disseminated and read – are carried over into *Intersections* to examine “the reception of [Arab women’s novels] within an international context [where] their texts are often constructed or reconstructed to fit First World expectations of Arab women” (2002: xxiii). In the poem “Cadence” from Majaj’s 2009 collection, *Geographies of light*, poetic and scholarly interests combine in a first person experiential narrative of an Arab-American woman poet in the post-9/11 reception environment. An early version of the poem, published in *Scheherazade’s legacy* (Darraj: 2004), was simply titled “The Arab-American Woman Reads Poetry” and both outings take their lead from the expectations of the Arab-American woman poet by imagined audiences of

<sup>219</sup> For full text, see Appendix B.15.

<sup>220</sup> From the poem “Cadence”.

Arabs and non-Arabs. Paramount to the text then is a meta-image (Beller and Leerssen: 2007) of the Arab-American woman poet, specifically how this meta-image is understood on “only one side / of the hyphen” (“Cadence”: 65), the Arab within Arab-American, a source of exotic curiosity for a non-Arab audience and an affirmation of belonging for the Arab audience. Dowdy contends that “[p]olitical poems of experiential agency usually employ self-reflexive narrators who consider the implications of poeticizing experience” (2007: 25). Majaj’s heightened form of meta-engagement queries the referential weight brought to bear on the poetry of Arab-American women so that “Cadence” is both a political poem and a critique of the very cultural and political assumptions that greet a diverse body of work. The authoritative strain of embodied agency (Dowdy 2007) is present in the use of a third person narrative, the speaker-poet’s experiences seen to echo that of the Arab-American woman poet writ large.

The politicization of the Arab and Arab-American woman - the body as visible marker of invisibility - that grew out of U.S. national security narratives from the 1970s onwards and intensified after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, has been instrumental in the marketing and dissemination of literature by Arab and Arab-American women in the American reception environment. Arab-American feminists have critiqued the appetite for female “Victim-Escapee narratives” (Kahf 2011), especially of the Arab and/or Muslim woman *testimonio* variety, which grew in popularity after 9/11 and merely serve to confirm the worst suspicions of Arab and Muslim culture for a mainstream readership (Maira 2009; Jarmakani 2011). More insidiously, scholarly and literary works by Arab and Arab-American women that have sought to rectify misrepresentations of Arab culture or otherwise engage in a multi-faceted exploration of the Arab or Arab-American community have been marketed with jacket covers, usually of the “Faceless Veiled Woman”, that reify the very misconceptions their authors sought to demystify (Amireh 2002; Darraj 2011).

The proliferation of poetry by Arab-American women in the aftermath of 9/11, partly driven by a desire to reclaim their narratives, also feeds off public inquisitiveness about the “Arab side” of their hyphenated identities. According to Jarmakani, the increased interest in the cultural production of Arab-American women carries the risk that “an understanding of Arab womanhood is important only in relation to larger political and international conflict and achieves a moment of recognition in the shadow of such events” (2011: 239). Even if a non-Arab-American poetry audience does not consciously subscribe to Arab stereotypes, a mainstream diet of Orientalist signifiers (the veiled submissive, the fetishized harem girl/belly dancer) and their contemporary iterations (the escapee, the fanatic/terrorist) carries

expectations that the experience of *Arab* womanhood will be addressed. Likewise, the meta-image of the Arab-American woman poet for an Arab-American audience brings expectations of a poetry reading that will validate or at the very least speak to something of their experiences and concerns. As Hayan Charara notes:

Rarely is the integrity of the “American” in Arab American [*sic*] (or any other “ethnic” American literature) questioned, especially not over what the poet does or does not write about. But too often, the poet’s “Arabness” is questioned, usually because of what he or she does *not* write about. The integrity of the poet’s identity (on either side of the hyphen) must be vehemently defended. (2008: xxix; emphasis in original)

This questioning of the poet’s “Arabness” and how this “Arabness” informs women’s subjectivity and communal identifications goes to the heart of the speaker-poet’s quandary in “Cadence” when she steps onto the podium and “wants to read a poem about climbing a mountain” (66). Arab-American poetry as an emergent literature in an American reception environment bred on fear and alienation of Arab peoples must of necessity tackle and redefine an identity so maligned and misunderstood. For a Palestinian-American poet like Majaj, counterhegemonic narratives of a people denied a homeland and history under the auspices of the Zionist project are critical to the poet’s role “to resist, to celebrate, to take action” (Majaj 2004: 31). Yet, as Carol Fadda-Conrey asks: “How can Arab-American artistic and cultural production transcend the pressures of representation in developing a transnational politics of dissent?” and is such transcendence even possible during “this crucial stage of identity reformulations?” (2014: 156). Majaj was among a number of women poets, including Kahf and Nye, who contributed essays to *Scheherazade’s legacy: Arab and Arab American women on writing* (2004). Editor Susan Muaddi Darraj later stated that one of the lines of enquiry was “Are we compelled to write about Arab-related themes, and why?” (2011: 248). Kahf was typically forthright: “[I]t is still okay to write a poem about your cat. Sometimes social justice and feminism and community politics need to chill and let a gal take her woman-warrior helmet off and find poetic bliss in a bowl of fruit” (2004: 15). For the speaker-poet in “Cadence” the difficulty arises in translating this private “poetic bliss” to the “pressures of representation” in the public sphere. In the first instance, as the opening stanza elucidates, these pressures are informed by a hetero-image of the Arab-American woman:

The audience watches curiously  
as the Arab-American woman steps up

to the podium. Light hair and skin,  
 unaccented English...they thought  
 she'd be more – you know – *exotic*. (65)

The expectation that the Arab-American woman poet will carry bodily markers of difference presupposes the idea that she will also speak to this difference. In “Boundaries: Arab/American” (1994), Majaj writes of her early dislocation as a woman of colour whose external appearance and accent do not signify “Arab”. For Majaj, born in America to a Palestinian father and an American mother of German descent, and growing up as a non-Arabic speaking Christian in Jordan, “[my] sense of liminality grew as I became more aware of the rigid nature of definitions: Arab culture simultaneously claimed and excluded me, while the American identity I longed for retreated inexorably from my grasp” (ibid: 79). Moving between the Arab world and the West, Majaj’s minority status as a woman intersected with varied oppressive readings of her ethnicity and religion, never quite white or quite Arab enough, a minority religion in one world and a perceived-to-be minority in another (Western conflation of Arab and Muslim), and, with her “British-inflected Jordanian English” (ibid: 66), linguistically Other in both locations. The enduring legacy of Orientalist narratives of the Arab woman finds expression in the sense of deflation that greets the Arab-American woman poet who could almost *pass* as one of “us”: “they thought / she’d be more – you know – *exotic*” (“Cadence”: 65). Oblivious to its hegemonic distortions, the Western liberal embrace of multiculturalism both prides itself on an acceptance of difference and anticipates that this difference will coalesce with its definitions; in this instance, that the Arab-American woman will be *exotic* enough to satisfy pre-ordained categories.

Jarmakani underscores the pervasiveness of Orientalist signifiers in the dominant ideology: “[A] key productive paradox in the cultural mythology of veils, harems and belly dancers in the United States: the idea that they are historically accurate and authentic representations of Arab womanhood is the lie that makes their fabrication possible” (4). The point is not that a non-Arab audience will map the harem beauty or belly dancer onto the poet’s body but that these historical representations of exoticized Arab womanhood persist in the present imaginary and the Arab woman is detectable to the extent that she carries these mythologized traces on her person. Cultural shifts in the representation of Arab womanhood correspond to their efficacy at a given historical juncture so that the currency of the veil in the early-21<sup>st</sup> century accords with U.S. security narratives that locate Islam as the preeminent threat to progressive societies in the era of globalization. Therefore, as Jarmakani notes, “the

shifts and changes in contemporary representations of Arab and Muslim womanhood demonstrate a shifting American relationship to empire and capitalism, while the citational quality of the images keeps them tied to the legacy of orientalism and colonialism” (ibid: 149). The speaker-poet, absent this citational quality, does not easily signify to a non-Arab audience but signifies all too readily to an Arab audience:

Or: the audience waits attentively  
as the Arab-American woman steps up  
to the podium. She is cousin, compatriot,  
fellow-traveler, Arab resonance  
in a place far from home. (65)

The dual expectations of the two audiences are first posited by their actions; the Othered gaze of an audience that “watches curiously” in contradistinction to an auto-image of the audience “wait[ing] attentively”. Where these expectations converge is in the desire for the speaker-poet to inhabit an imagined “Arab resonance”, one that speaks to difference in the first instance and to recognition in the second. Inscribed in the auto-image of Arab identity are interdependent concepts of family (“cousin”), nation (“compatriot”), displacement (“fellow-traveler”) and root-oriented belonging (“a place far from home”). The imperative for the Arab-American audience to find in the speaker-poet *one of their own* is borne out of what Nadine Naber has called a “diaspora of empire”:

a tacit knowledge that Arabs or Muslims living in the United States have been forced to engage with U.S. imperial discourses in their everyday lives, discourses that associate Arabs and Muslims not with the U.S. nation but with real or fictive places outside the boundaries of the United States, and against which the United States is at war. [...] Here, empire inscribes itself on the diasporic subject within the domestic (national) borders of empire. (2012: 27)

The speaker-poet’s presence articulates a safe space of belonging for a marginalized people, but insofar as this diasporic solidarity anticipates an uncritical idea of Arabness, the speaker-poet is confronted with the weight of “carrying history in one’s pocket” (Zaatari: 2011).<sup>221</sup> At what point does resistance to racialized imperialist discourses become an unthinking affiliation with the idea of an Arab community and concomitant disavowal of the other side

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<sup>221</sup> Zaatari writes that “Engaging with history on a personal level [...] is a burden as well as a privilege. Carrying history in one’s pocket makes one conscious of where one comes from and of what social structures attempt to define one’s existence. It is about recognizing the roots that ancestors have laid for us” (2011: 64).

of the hyphen? The speaker-poet addresses the tensions the writer faces as a perceived “literary embodiment” of Arab communal identifications:

The Arab-American woman hesitates.  
 She’s weary of living on only one side  
 of the hyphen. Her poems aren’t just translations.  
 But if she blinks, someone always cries out,  
*Look at those Arab eyes!* (65)

Naber contends that concepts of Arabness have been shaped by “an assemblage of different visions of how we are to make our way in the world. [...] Articulations of Arabness are grounded in Arab histories and sensibilities about family, selfhood, and ways of being in the world but are also hybrid, syncretic and historically contingent” (2012: 8). The speaker-poet, as a mixed-race Arab-American growing up between both worlds, “hesitates” in front of an Arab-American audience shaped by their own diverse histories of immigration and exile and hoping to find *their* “articulations of Arabness” mirrored in the poet’s work: “Her poems aren’t just translations”. The speaker-poet’s weariness stems from the subsumption of her American heritage within Arab narratives of belonging so that the “American” on the other side of the hyphen becomes intelligible insofar as “American” speaks to a place of loss and dislocation. The use of the word “translation” also suggests the idea of the Arab-American poet elucidating “Arabness” for a non-Arab audience. According to Amal Talaat Abdelrazek:

[Arab-American women writers] make clear that the category Arab American [*sic*] itself is neither united nor monolithic. They argue that the American construct of Arab risks erasing important cultural and historical differences among those designated Arab, even though the category makes it possible for the highly diverse communities of Arabs in America to speak with a collective, though marginalized, voice in the first place. (2007: 3-4)

The speaker-poet highlights the tensions and contradictions of speaking with a collective voice that emanates from a cross-cultural sensibility of belonging. For, “if she blinks, someone always cries out, / *Look at those Arab eyes!*” The bodily marker of “*Arab eyes*” is representative of both an *auto*- and hetero-image of ethnicity, underscoring the degree to which perceptions of the poet are rooted in the “Arabness” of her lived experience. As Hayan Charara notes: “the very notions of ‘Arab’ and ‘Arab American’ [*sic*] are ready to burst. We are ripe for reinvention” (2008: xxix). The speaker-poet remains aware that reinvention is problematized once the poet enters the public discourse:

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

wild rivers. Already she can hear the questions:  
 “Do Arab women do things like that?”  
 And the protests: “We have so many problems!  
 –our identity to defend, our cultures under siege.  
 We can’t waste time admiring trees!” (65)

The speaker-poet’s metonymic yearning to go where language and the muse will take her, “to walk into the forest empty handed”, echoes Majaj’s insistence on writing as offering “not only a way to travel to the depths but also a way to live more fully on the surface” (2004: 29). What is at stake is the integrity of the poet to empty herself of expectations “bearing no more than what any person / needs to live” (“Cadence”: 65) and to allow her “very being [to be] saturated with the possibilities of language” as she takes in the world around her (Majaj 2004: 29). The writerly freedom to explore at will is mirrored in the joyous language, “her voice cascading down / wild rivers”, but the speaker-poet’s “dreams of shouting from / a high place” are abruptly cut off as she imagines a mainstream audience’s response to her poetic reveries: “Do Arab women do things like that?” Implicit in this line of questioning is another: “Are Arab women *allowed to* do things like that?” The meta-image of the mainstream audience’s response is grounded in a range of suppositions about Arab women’s freedom of movement and bodily autonomy. The idea that Arab-American women are denied the independence “to live more fully on the surface” in the way their Western counterparts do is concomitant with the idea that psychically (artistically) the speaker-poet is inhibited from “[traveling] to the depths” of subjectivity. In this way, the speaker-poet’s attempt to practice an inclusionary identity is stymied by the imagined audience’s reading of her personhood as fundamentally antithetical to the *American way of life*. The stereotype of the Arab woman as a non-agentic being at the mercy of a heteropatriarchal culture is so ingrained within the American psyche that attempts to overcome it are greeted as individual acts of defiance rather than as a fresh understanding of the multiplicity of Arab women. As Darraj notes:

[The Faceless Veiled Woman] signals a fundamental lack of understanding about the Middle East on the part of the West, setting up a formula by which the silenced veiled woman is the norm, and other Arab women whether

unveiled or veiled, but assertive and vocal – constitute an anomaly, a deviation. (2011: 256)

On the other hand, the Arab audience's desire for the poet to counteract Orientalist misperceptions also compromises the writer's subjectivity: "We have so many problems! / – our identity to defend, our cultures under siege. / We can't waste time admiring trees!" ("Cadence" 65). The irony of the poet "wast[ing] time admiring trees!" is that "writing a non-political poem [can] itself [be] a political act" (Majaj, Survey Appendix A.5: Q13)<sup>222</sup>. Absent those signifiers that draw attention to Arab stereotypes in the very act of dismantling them, "admiring trees" invites the very multiplicity that is negated in a mainstream understanding of Arab culture, that same multiplicity the Arab audience wishes to make knowable. As Charara makes clear: "Even when a poet does not deal directly with issues that are generally associated with Arab Americans, it would be irresponsible to assume that the content, and the form, do not speak to the Arab American [*sic*] experience" (2008: xxix). The cry to defend "our identity" again calls into question the paradoxical nature of de-essentializing Arab identity in a quest to "unveil" the authentic Arab within the Arab-American self:

The Arab-American woman knows who she is,  
and it's not what you think. She's authentic  
in jeans or in an embroidered dress.  
When she walks up a mountain, her identity  
goes up with her and comes back down again.

Besides, she's learned a secret.  
Two cultures can be lighter than one  
if the space between them is fluid,  
like wind, or light between two open hands,  
or the future, which knows how to change.  
(65-66)

It is significant that the speaker-poet's entreaty to recognize the plural realities of the "Arab-American woman" is directed at both the non-Arab and Arab audiences: "The Arab-American woman knows who she is, / and it's not what you think." The speaker-poet underscores the reductivism of reading authenticity in bodily signifiers for those who Otherize *and* identify with the Arab-American woman: "She's authentic / in jeans or in an

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<sup>222</sup> See result of Survey (Appendix A.5, p. 307).

embroidered dress.” Naber contends that Orientalizing configurations of Arab and Arab-American identity are often mirrored in the static conceptions of Arab culture practiced within Arab-American communities:

Articulating immigrant cultural identity through rigid binaries is not an unfamiliar resolution to immigrant and people of color’s struggles in a society structured by a pressure for assimilation and racism [...] Yet this same concept of Arab culture, usually associated as it is with essentialist understandings of religion, family, gender, and sexuality among Arab communities, allows Orientalist thought to be left intact and activated. Consigned to the cultural, aspects of dynamic, lived experience come to be seen as frozen in time – essentialist Arab traditions that exist outside of history – and this is the same conceptualization that operates as the basis for the demonization of Arab communities in the discourses and practices of U.S. empire. (2012: 6-7)

Resistance to stereotyping of Arab-American womanhood that merely reifies the woman’s role within a culture and negates her identity as both “Arab” and “American” is a futile enterprise; the only place the speaker-poet can speak from is “the space between [cultures]”. The expectedness of the Arab-American woman poet, that she will speak to difference for the non-Arab audience and recognition for the Arab audience, ultimately diminishes her subjectivity as both woman *and* poet: “When she walks up a mountain, her identity /goes up with her and comes back down again.” The speaker-poet does not make a defensive argument for hybridity – as a painful necessity in navigating two cultures – but as the most fruitful opening up of identity formations: “Two cultures can be lighter than one”. However, as the speaker-poet makes clear, a productive hybridity is only possible when it is nondiscriminatory, when it recognizes the “fluid” and multiple natures of ethnic and cultural identities and their historical contingencies – of peoples, communities, ethnicities not standing still but in perpetual motion: “the future, which knows how to change.”

She’s standing at the podium, waiting.  
She wants to read a poem about climbing  
a mountain. It’s the song of what travellers  
take with them, leave behind, transform.  
From stillness, words ripple: clear cadence. (66)

“Cadence” as a synthesis of Majaj’s feminist-theoretical and poetic-philosophical concerns speaks to that very heterogeneity through which, the speaker-poet articulates, we must be known. At the heart of “Cadence” is an impassioned argument for the mutability of identity

and its transformative capabilities, the *modulations* in ways of knowing and being for diasporic communities, and the poet's prerogative to write this mutability and embrace its rhythms in the post-9/11 reception environment.

#### **4.4 Double marginalization: Imagological Discussion**

An imagological analysis of a select number of poems by Arab-American women poets in Section 4.3 carries with it the risk of a potentially reductive exercise of seeking out imagotypes within texts which explicitly speak to gender oppression as it is reinforced by and intersects with racial and colonial oppressions. In other words, of seeking out those texts which debunk mainstream representations of Arab-American women as non-agentic beings through resistant readings of the veil, the harem, the belly dancer and other hetero-images of Arab womanhood in the context of the post-9/11 reception environment. The complexities of Arab-American women navigating hybrid identities within the United States can fall prey to an essentialist focus on the Arab within the Arab-American woman's experience, compelling those very binaries which Lisa Suhair Majaj calls attention to in her poem "Cadence". It should come as no surprise that Arab-American women poets expend very little of the writerly muse on debating Orientalist tropes of the harem and belly dancer, nor that the enduring mythology of the veiled Arab woman is often treated in subtle and allusive ways unsuited to an imagological approach. Furthermore, Arab-American women poets often draw on non-gendered discrimination of Arabs and Arab-Americans in their work, that shared history of oppression and alienation which Mohja and her brother Yaman navigate in Kahf's "The Passing There". If Arab-American women poets have prioritized struggles against racism in mainstream society over intra-communal sexism in their work, legitimate fears of reifying dominant American perceptions of Arab patriarchy have certainly played a part in this, as Kahf's explorations in "Little Mosque Poems" make clear. Arab-American women must contend with the same mainstream feminist myopia that other women of colour fight against: the twinning of cultural identity and intra-communal oppression, whereby sexism is that oppression which Arab women face within their community and emancipation is realized through a Western progress model, a logic which ignores the systemic nature of sexism within American society as a whole. Indeed, one of the key concerns in the texts is re-envisioning the idea of what being "American" means in the post-9/11 era and, in

imagological terms, how auto- and hetero-images of American *and* Arab identity are broken down and reconstructed through this re-envisioning.

An understanding that the experiences of Arab-American women cannot be divorced from their experiences as people of colour nor from their experiences as a diasporic people marginalized by an ongoing American imperial legacy “over here” and “over there” have led Arab-American feminist scholars to look to intersectional and transnational models of feminism as strategies of resistance to mainstream representations of Arab-American identity, frameworks which in turn inform a reading of the texts. The concept of a universal sisterhood, united in gender emancipation, as espoused by hegemonic feminism, ignores the realities of systems of oppression which co-opt women. That women can be oppressed by other women and that this oppression often comes under the unwitting guise of solidarity forms a central theme of Laila Halaby’s poem “rage”. Halaby creates a hetero-image of the white liberal mother, revealing the fallacious intent behind her earnest stance against the Iraq War, and, in doing so, draws a guerrilla ethnographic portrait (Bredin op. cit.) of the mainstream middle-class feminist. The liberal mother believes in transnational solidarity but her true concerns lie in the consumerist drive at the heart of American society, for what is most at stake is not the suffering of those “over there” but the potential consequences for the middle-class freedoms of those “over here”. Halaby warns of the dangers of assimilating differences in a multicultural society when this assimilation is used as a tool for perpetuating hegemonic power. The speaker-poet’s anger is not only compelled by the liberal mother’s want of feeling for those who are actually affected by war but also by being assimilated into the liberal mother’s sphere of white middle-class maternal consciousness. For Halaby, the risks for multi-ethnic immigrants, borne out by the legacy of previous generations, lie in buying into the dream of American prosperity with its attendant middle-class respectability, and forgetting that one is part of a “diaspora of empire” (Naber 2012: 17) where one struggles against imperial oppression “over here” as well as on behalf of those “over there”. When one rejects ethnic differences in favour of class and gender solidarity, Halaby intones, one is complicit with the domination of one’s people. Halaby in “rage”, therefore, can only extend the bridging of difference to people of colour communities “over here” and “over there”, for white liberal America merely wears the guise of multiculturalism, it never practices the real thing.

If, for the speaker-poet in “rage”, white liberal maternal-based solidarity is a source of suspicion and distrust, the speaker-poet in Angele Ellis’s “The Blue State Ghazals” sees in

“politicized maternity” (Nicolosi op. cit.) the potential for a space of belonging outside of an exclusionary patriotic American identity. The figure of Cindy Sheehan, the citizen-mother protesting the Iraq War on behalf of “*all the other mothers*” (“The Blue State Ghazals”), is configured as an auto-image of an inclusionary American identity, bridging difference across race, class, and political affiliations, to argue for a vision of America that recognizes the mother in the Other “over here” and “over there”, a transnational feminist relationality rooted in the feminist as spiritual activist. This spiritual activism is based on the belief, as elucidated by Gloria Anzaldúa, that “despite the many differences among us – we are all interconnected” (Keating 2002b: 521) and draws its strength from re-imagining communities of belonging: “the fact is that there *is* no other work but the work of creating and re-creating ourselves within the context of community” (Alexander 2002: 100; emphasis in original). The speaker-poet protests the national myth of an exceptional American identity - an idea upheld across the blue and red political divide - that enables the U.S. government to justify neo-imperialist expansionism under the rubric of benevolent democracy-building and national security interests. A belief in American Exceptionalism sustains an “us” and “them” mentality and invites a reading of any citizen who resists America’s *inherent* superiority as being fundamentally un-American. The speaker-poet, as citizen-activist-mother, invites solidarity with *all* of those who actively resist “imperative patriotism” (Salaita 2005); her concern is with how communities of difference can unite in a common cause that is simply the shared recognition of our humanity. However, the final couplet, acknowledging that people fail to recognize themselves in the Other, confirms the bleak vision of America’s future at the heart of Ellis’s ghazal.

The auto-image of America as the benevolent father, bestowing freedom and democracy on those nations he “rescues”, is also resisted by Naomi Shihab Nye in “Hibernate” through a feminist “aesthetic of smallness” (Najmi). Nye draws attention to the masculinized tropes of rationality, strength and courage that pervade war ideology and, by extension, national pride in the American imaginary. Nye subverts the gendered coding of war by transforming it into an illogical, hubristic endeavor where weakness belongs to those unwilling to admit their culpability and failings, and pride comes at the cost of peace itself. Through particularized moments of human interaction, Nye highlights how war ideology infects every strata of society, the racialized coding of the “War on Terror” permeating governmental bodies (the FBI, Homeland Security) and seemingly normal individuals. For Nye, ideology blinds us to the psychic borders we erect with each other and “Hibernate” is

ultimately concerned with tolerance. The “dream” of tolerance is delineated through the figure of Farouk who decries religious fundamentalisms of all persuasions for using God as a tool to perpetuate bloodshed. By implicating the intolerance of *all* religions, stereotypes of the Muslim Arab male are challenged without relying on a counterhegemonic narrative that “strategically incorporate[s] some of the self-same language of discrimination and occlusion [it is] seeking to undercut and refute” (Fadda-Conrey 2014: 156). In other words, an auto-image of the Arab male is put forward in “Hibernate” that does not first rely on the countering of a hetero-image. Nye’s ruminations in “Hibernate” accrete into an over-arching theme of our human and planetary interrelatedness; an understanding that it is only through bridging difference that we come to tolerate and respect each other and our environment.

In Mohja Kahf’s “The Passing There”, the push and pull of Arab versus American belonging fosters the illusion that one can choose an either/or ethnic identification, an illusion that exacerbates feelings of isolation and cultural marginalization. Halaby and Ellis employ the language of motherhood to voice their anguish about the legacy of a hostile post-9/11 world on this generation of children. Kahf, in journeying back to the originary moment for the child when she realizes she does not belong, bridges 1970s America, when Arabs were first reified as a “problem minority” (Naber 2012 op. cit.), with the contemporary “in-betweenness” (Bhabha 1994) experienced by Arab-Americans in the post-9/11 era. The universal language of play in these poems, through which children discover the world around them, is contrasted with the constructedness of race, that difference we are taught which forever changes how we navigate the world around us. In moving from the adult world of mother (Halaby, Ellis) to the childhood world of sister/daughter, Kahf enables a resistant reading to Arab-American stereotypes through the universalizing innocence of her young protagonists, Mohja and Yaman. An imagotype of the white provincial farmer provides their first introduction into the dualistic realities of America; race, ethnicity and religion determinants of who fits in and who will be branded as foreign. A pejorative mental silhouette (Beller and Leerssen op. cit.) of the Arab is so engrained that the speaker-poet does not have to repeat the farmer’s diatribe, an omission which allows Kahf to posit an oppositional consciousness without incorporating the oppressor’s language. For young Mohja and Yaman, foreignness is also something they grapple with in the safety of their home, the ideas of Syrian-ness imposed on them by their loving parents and extended family far removed from the Syria they travel to in their minds, an outdoor space of exploration and mischief that mirrors their wanderings through the Indiana landscape. “The Passing There” is

suffused with love and understanding for elders who want to keep the memory-scape of Syria alive for the next generation but who fail to realize the alienation this engenders in those growing up on American soil. Of course, as the children learn, there is no true Syrian as there is no true American, life is lived in the hyphen between two imagined communities (Anderson op. cit.).

Kahf's employment of relational autobiography (Fadda-Conrey 2007), the connectedness of the speaking "I" and the "we" of brother and sister, allows for an understanding of group identification as shifting, fluid and historically contingent; the siblings' shared dislocation at one remove from their parents' sense of dislocation. Autobiography as agency is the leitmotif running through all the poems studied; in Arab-American feminist writing as a whole, the experiential narrative remains an important counterhegemonic tool in relaying the multiplicity of Arab-American womanhood, of telling a story that is "not what you think" ("Cadence"). It is significant that the speaker-poet in Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Cadence" addresses both an Arab and non-Arab audience, for meanings attaining to Arab-American womanhood are felt as keenly in-house as they are experienced in the outside world of Othering; both prioritize the Arab in the female's hyphenated identity. The Arab-American woman is read at the intersection of gender and ethnicity; as assuredly as she must resist the hetero-image of the submissive veiled woman silenced by Arab patriarchy in American public discourse, she must also resist cultural inscriptions of womanhood emanating from her own community. As Naber (2012) makes clear, both representations concretize an idea of Arab culture as static and immutable. Majaj recognizes the inherent dangers of promulgating authentic forms of national or ethnic identity. Appeals to authenticity legitimize the binaries of identity politics, the Arab woman in an "embroidered dress" becomes one of "us" for those who see her as kin and one of "them" for those who Otherize her; in both configurations she is outside of American spaces of belonging. The Arab-American woman, Majaj insists, can never be knowable through external markings; she is "authentic" outside of how she signifies, she inhabits both sides of the hyphen.

The creation of a meta-image of the poet in "Cadence" – that burden of public expectation placed on the Arab-American woman poet to speak to a sense of Arabness – is juxtaposed with the speaker-poet's interior yearning to write all of who she is, outside of the categories and labels, where the imagination has free rein. As the childhood Mohja in "The Passing There" knew, the Arab-American woman poet also knows, that both cultures have a claim on their self- and communal belonging, and that when "the space between" is plural,

mutable, and fluid, “Two cultures can be lighter than one” (“Cadence”). The poem functions as an over-arching investigation of the role of the poet in society, but more specifically, of the pressures of representation placed on the Arab-American poet in the post-9/11 era. Majaj not only defends the necessity of the poet to write what the muse brings forth, but argues that the writing of the Arab-American experience is to be found in this very multiplicity. For the women poets studied in this chapter, “It’s the song of what travelers / take with them, leave behind, transform” (“Cadence”).

## Imagological Findings and Conclusions

*“Dissident poetry is not unAmerican.”*

- Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Poetry as Insurgent Art* (1975)

National identities are not simply natural growths but conscious constructs created over the course of modern history (Grew 1986). In an American national context, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are repeatedly depicted as “having changed America forever” (Haddad 2011: 1). Whether or not such hyperbole is completely justified, there can be little doubt of the reverberations of the event in all spheres of American life in general and in the lives of Muslims and Arabs living in America in particular (ibid.). Though Arab-Americans are not considered as an ethnic minority in America, the events of 9/11 brought about the proliferation of anti-Arab stereotypes as well as the conflation of the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” and “terrorist” Other trope which brought about dualistic mechanisms of exclusion: patriot versus enemy/with us or against us. Arabs in America were targeted based on their association to a foreign culture and antagonistic religion that affiliated them with the notion of a potential enemy of the nation. The subsequent war on terror raised questions about the values, sympathies, and loyalties of Arab and Muslim Americans, subjecting them to intense public scrutiny, backlash, and government surveillance. Throughout this study, I have attempted to reconsider the confines of post-9/11 Arab-American national identity in its socio-political and literary notions and to address the constructions of cultural confrontation between the American “Self” and Arab “Other” and vice versa expressed in the contemporaneous poetic discourse of Arab-Americans.

The method which I have brought to bear on the subject-matter is that of imagology. Imagology may be loosely defined as the study of the discursive or literary expression of national attitudes. Initially concerned with the literary characterization of “*l'étranger tel qu'on le voit*”, it has developed in more recent times the realization that national attitudes can govern the very fabric of the discursive or literary activity of a given period and vice versa (Leerssen 1986). In line with that, this study focused on: establishing the intertext of a given national/ethnic representation as trope; contextualizing the trope within specific literary and historical conventions; analysing patterns, not only of Othering, but also of the maintenance of selfhood through historical remembrance and cultural memory; as well as addressing

cross-national relations between America and the Arab world rather than rigidly following the pattern of American ethnic studies models which range from the cultural nationalism of the Civil Rights Era to most recent models of transnationalism.

The idea of “national character” adopted in this study is one that aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the characteristic behaviour of an ethnic population (Arab-American ethnicity) in a specific historical period (post-9/11), from a literary/imagological perspective (i.e. from a subjective, perspectival insight arising from the literature in question). The issue of ethnicity in America “inevitably arises at the national level whenever the ideology of the American Dream or of Americanism *tout court* malfunctions or hyperfunctions or simply comes in for such routine scrutiny as the presidential elections” (Boelhower 1987: 17). In between times, almost everywhere in America it remains the great unknown local factor (ibid.). From an ethno-national perspective, it is common knowledge that immigration, far from being a peripheral matter, is the very history of America (Gleason 1981; Boelhower 1987). Until the instauration of the multi-ethnic paradigm in the 1960s “a super-identity was projected as the solution to ethnic anarchy” (ibid: 19). It now seems evident that the two extremities of the yardstick used to determine American cultural citizenship, namely assimilation and pluralism, correspond to the two paradigmatic ideologies, monocultural America versus multi-ethnic America. The basic question regarding the real nature of ethnicity, to quote Boelhower (1987), is “equally shared by both paradigms and both intend the ethnic factor as *distinctio*, as an absolute principle of exclusion and inclusion” (20). From the onset, Arab-Americans, like other early-immigrant communities, have fit uneasily in the American national paradigm. The question of citizenship and belonging gave the pioneer Arab-Americans “their first real taste of discrimination” (Samhan 1987: 14). Arab immigrants to America at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century faced uneasy racial classifications as the U.S. Bureau of Immigration cracked down on the eligibility of certain immigrants for naturalization at the time. As members of many subnational and religious groupings with unclear ethnic boundaries, Americans of Arab descent generally either assimilated as individuals or retreated to their ethnic and religious enclaves. With the passage of time and generational assimilation into American society and nation, and as a consequence of political, religious and sectarian tensions within the community itself, Arab-Americans witnessed a process of intensified diasporic fragmentation and organizational turmoil that threatened the political vitality of the Arab-American diaspora and complicated further the question of Arab-American identity (Shain 1996). 9/11 and its aftermath consolidated, according to scholarly arguments, the racialization of the category

“Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” as a signifier of non-white Otherness. Moreover, the attacks brought Arab-Americans into the spotlight as having “hyper-visibility” (Alsultany 2012). In this sense, the terms in which Arab-Americans became “hyper-visible” within dominant public discourses on multiculturalism after 9/11 paralleled the rhetoric of the Bush administration and the corporate media that distinguished between “good Arabs or Muslims” and “bad [Arabs]/Muslims” (Mamdani 2004 cited by Naber 2008a: 2-3).

Arab-American writers seek to challenge this dualism or opposition between self and other by questioning stereotypes that constitute “Arab” ethnicity as an alien Other to the American nation. These writers promote a dynamic and fluid identity of negotiation and resistance, celebrating rather than denying difference, a kind of difference not determined by a dominant culture but one that breaks down the dichotomy between self and other. In this sense, the writers analysed in this study, use difference as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance and not as a tool of segregation, to exert power on the basis of racial, cultural and/or ethnic essences. Moreover, the notion of “identity” adhered to in the study is understood in an implicitly constructivist-literary sense, rather than in a transcendent-essentialist one. Following a literary imagological methodology, the main imagotype pertaining to the aforementioned paradigms of analysis of Arab-American post-9/11 identity construction is that of the “Arab” as “the enemy within” the confines of the American nation.

The poetry in this study is placed within rubrics of the political, i.e. as representations of agency. The poems negotiate the individual agent’s (i.e. poet’s) ability to act according to her/his purposes in relation to the determining material, political, and social forces that constrain action (Dowdy 2007). The poetry is considered countercultural in that it is resistant to dominant post-9/11 anti-Arab discourse and the sociocultural norms it supports. The main imagological outcomes observed in the literature, moreover, place Arab-American identity representations within racialized and hybrid rubrics. The poetic discourse exhibited cross-cultural communication with other “minorities of color” in America, such as African Americans and Asian Americans, amongst others, as well as postcolonial dissent within transnational modes of representation. The poetry speaks back to American racial formations and imperial expansion. An agential reading of Arab-American poetry within rubrics of the political redirects the extant of criticism about the isolated, speaking “I” of poetry into social and political space: as such, action does not express a pre-existing identity; rather, action creates and forms identity. The discursive imagological articulation of identity expressed in

the literature empowers Arab-Americans to articulate a complex form of national belonging that resists the homogenizing factors of post-9/11 narratives of patriotism. They do so by recognizing the power of alliances that cut across racial, ethnic, religious, and even national boundaries in constructions of solid yet complex types of American citizenships (Fadda-Conrey 2014). The negotiation of Arab-American inclusion evident in the literature creates a space for reformulating hegemonic and unilateral understandings of American citizenship and belonging.

The Arab Other and American Self are appropriated within racial, cultural, and feminist rubrics that open up discursive spaces of belonging to the American nation through identifying with marginalized/racialized minorities and solidifying coalitions with communities of colour. All five poems in Chapter 2 (“Race and Post-9/11 Arab-American Poetic Identity”) identify with the culture, art, and politics of minorities of colour. They do so according to their respective outlook on anti-Arab racism in a post-9/11 context. In pairing Arab-American experience with that of communities of colour, the poets analyzed in the study negotiate their inclusion into the nation and use a strategy of identity building as Arabs/Arab-Americans which affiliates and aligns the authors and their ethnic community with the socio-cultural, political and historical marginalization and subordination of non-“white” ethnic communities. Even though the historical contingencies of ethnic groups in America intrinsically differ, the writers surveyed in this study pair Arabness with minorities of colour in order to re-think and unpack the problematic ideology of racial hierarchies at the heart of the American nation-state, and challenge the ensuing privilege of neo-imperialist strands which govern notions of American foreign policy and geopolitical inclinations in the Middle East and Arab world. Basically, an appropriation of Arabness to people of colour minorities evident in the literature highlights the racial, hierarchical mindset underpinning the Othering of Arabs in America in a context of American military, political, cultural and economic expansion in the Middle East and globally. The discourse calls for an exorcism that destroys the conditions and systems of thought that enable racism and help prevent people from seeing others as fundamentally human.

Moreover, the poets surveyed in the study (Chapter 3: “Cultural Politics and Post-9/11 Arab-American Poetic Discourse”) negotiate cultural politics from the “liminal” third space of enunciation, whereby they rearticulate the sign (imagotype) of the “Arab Other”/“enemy of the nation” trope and take on “signifying positions” of representation which rise from

hybrid sensibilities. They separate “Arab” (culture) from “Islam” (religion), “Islam” from “terrorism”, and appropriate “Arabness” to America from dissident positions of cultural translatability. The poets do so by debunking bigotry on both sides of the spectrum, American anti-Arab stereotypes as well as constricting Arab cultural practices (e.g. the disciplining of the female body, the tedious practice of diminution, as well as the silences of obedience). They hold on tight to their Arab and/or Islamic affinities while accommodating and advocating a democratic American liberal worldview. Moreover, the poets “translate” Arab culture via its historical, secular, and artistic signifiers to a Western audience, while repudiating the repressive confinements of certain cultural practices that circumscribe and limit cultural communication with the Western Other. They stress heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity in the characterization of Arab/Arab-American culture(s) in order to disrupt the current hegemonic relationship between “dominant” and “minority” positions. In this sense, they argue for an Arab-American necessity – politically, intellectually, and personally – to organize, resist, and theorize *as* Arab-Americans. As such, “the horizon of translatability” becomes a form of resistance in the poetry which displaces the “sacrificial understanding of its own origins” (Bhabha 1994: 9). The poems refute and disrupt the “terrorist” trope affiliated with “Arabness” in post-9/11 America, and reinterpret the antagonisms which hold “Americanness” and “Arabness” as polar opposite, incommensurable entities. The liminal position from which such hybrid poetic discourse emerges becomes “an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment”, to quote Bhabha, revealed in the possibilities for dissonance and dissidence in the life of the initiate (1994: 6). This position which emerges from the literary discourse becomes a “transformative moment” that belies any attempts at settled assumptions about identity because of inherent contradictions and instabilities (ibid.).

Arab-American feminist discourse revolves around “the need to write or be written” (Aziz 2004: xii). As Arab-American women, born and raised in America with a hybrid cultural consciousness, they negotiate their identities between two worlds, and assert agency from the liminal “third space of enunciation” (Bhabha 1994), whereby they define their own voice as Americans. They also trace their affiliation with their Arab culture, language, family traditions (as distinct as these are across the Arab world) and assert their identities from within the confines of Arabness. On the other hand, they contest patriarchal and confining practices that come along with Arab cultural affinities while maintaining their political and social standpoints *as* Arabs/Muslims/Easterners. They also negotiate their Americanness

beyond Orientalist stereotypes of the exotic, veiled, and “innately oppressed” Arab/Muslim woman. In the aftermath of 9/11, Arab/Muslim-American women were doubly marginalised as Arabs/Muslims *and* as women. Arab/Muslim-American women writers found themselves explaining Arab and Islamic culture(s) to Americans and demystifying American representations of the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” alien Other, while asserting their Arab-Muslim socio-political affiliations. For example, Feroze Sidhwa, an Arab-American graduate from Johns Hopkins University and political journalist, asserted in a letter to the *New York Times* (June 4, 2003), “[t]here is nothing complicated about the Muslim world’s anti-Americanism. It is a product of Israel’s occupation of Palestine, and now of our occupation of Iraq. What more reason could these people need than unprovoked usurpations of their territory?” (cited in Afzal-Khan 2005: 6). This is an observation that remains at the psychic center of Arab-American feminist struggles, in their bifurcated identities as Arab/Muslim-American women. Moreover, Arab-American feminists identify with “women of color” feminism in order to negotiate multiple systems of oppression which intersect with gender politics. The Orientalist mythos of Arab/Muslim women as victims of a barbaric and backward culture that need saving by American military interference, and the inability to relate to mainstream feminist movements, as well as the racial subjugation and exclusion of Arabs in post-9/11 America have prompted Arab-American feminists to seek representation and safe haven in American third world and women of colour feminisms.

The imagological outcome of the texts (Chapter 4: “Feminism, Identity and the Poetry of Arab-American Women”) showed strategies of resistance as Arab-American women within intersectional and transnational feminist frameworks. The imago-type of the “exotic, oppressed Arab/Muslim woman” was commensurate with the dissemination and proclamation of American military interference in the Middle East and Arab worlds after 9/11. The expansion of American political control in the Arab world and globally is considered an expansion of a more civilized and superior American/Western culture where uncouth and irregular manners practiced by less developed cultures, (the hetero-image of the Arab/Muslim in post-9/11 America) which require immediate emancipation, prevailed. The poets surveyed expressed central issues facing women of colour about identity, role of agency, experience, and ideology in the formation of the subject.

Finally, apart from such abstract matters and appellations as “Arab” and/or “American”, it is noteworthy to remind the reader that Arab-Americans are first and foremost American in every sense of the term: culturally, linguistically, and in terms of legal

citizenship and national belonging. However, the projections, imputations, recriminations, enmities and alienations that were addressed in the study have not yet lost their currency. In asserting anti-Imperialist and anti-Orientalist forms of belonging to the American nation, the literature in question challenges the idea of a hegemonic national inclusion and assimilation into a dominant culture that views “Arabness” as a polar opposite to “Americanness” and, by extrapolation, to modernity and civilization. Instead of pursuing an apologetic or defensive track, the poetic discourse under study exhibited a provisional Arab-American identity and focused on the transgression of anti-Arab sentiments after 9/11 in order to re-center power relations and the position of Americans of Arab/Muslim descent at “home” in America. However, it would be false to overstate the importance of 9/11 to Arab-American literature, since this literature from its very onset has negotiated a complex double-consciousness “that translates and troubles both the American and Arab, from literary traditions to political ideology” (Metres 2013: par.4). Accordingly, the poetic discourse analysed in this study challenges the national imagotype of the “Arab” Other/“Enemy within” which predates 9/11 and deconstructs ideological and political notions that underlie such forms of national exclusion for Arab-Americans. Moreover, it is evident that the literature in question experienced a major turn/shift from the cultural negotiation of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century to the more contemporaneous literature of dissent. The “War on Terror” has firmly incorporated Arab ethnicity under the cultural/religious rubrics of Islam which in turn has become a synonym for “militancy”, backwardness, and aggression. Arab-American writers, as is evident throughout this study, felt the need to negotiate and appropriate postcolonial, racial, and hybrid positions in order to accentuate their belonging to the American nation in times of war. It is fitting to end this study with an excerpt from Etel Adnan’s poem “To be in a Time of War” (2005) which clearly elucidates this disposition:

To keep a benevolent look. To complain about noise. To cry over the sack of Baghdad’s archeological museum. To feel pain. To bury love. To spit bitterness. To brush one’s teeth. To be sure that the day will look like yesterday. To keep being surprised by the reporters’ insensitivity. To throw the paper. To remember the different wars that wove one’s life. To look in one’s brain at English soldiers walking in Beirut. Not to reach them, because they will remain images. To wash one’s hands, dry them. To take a pill. To stare at the curtains. To not sleep during the day.

[...]

To wait for the unknown. Not to know that Baghdad's Library has been destroyed. To resent the new Barbarians. To bleed for each book. To never be able to read one of those books. To plunge into one's veins. To hide into one's brain. To preside over the loss. To observe real endings. To wipe tears. To discover inner tears which turn into wounds. To explore new diseases. To immure oneself in loss. To wallow in dead civilizations, to become one. To bump into the dead. To vomit one's stomach and spit out the heart. To amputate one's head. To agonize on Baghdad's soil. To invoke heat as a weapon. To drink with Michael McClure the blood turned into wine of the Arabs. (114-116)

To be all this is to be Arab. To be Arab is to be under siege, and to be an Arab writer at home in the Arab world or in the diaspora is to regularly affirm one's belonging to humanity and to constantly wonder, along with the late Edward Said in *Culture and imperialism* (1993): how do we resist the stereotype?

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## **Appendix A: Survey Study**

## Survey Study

### Method and Objectives

The survey study applied in this thesis will gather qualitative data to assist theoretical sampling. The study adheres to a *grounded theory* approach, oriented toward enhancing understanding of relevant literary, sociological and cultural concepts underlying post-9/11 Arab-American poetic discourse. In order to do so, the study investigates various reactions to, or perceptions of a particular concept: post-9/11 identity construction in contemporary Arab-American poetry; taking into consideration the participants' various and subjective perceptions. I followed a grounded theory approach in order to develop theory pertaining to the main paradigms addressed in the study, namely: Arab-American poetic discourse, racialization, cultural politics and feminist discourse. The grounded theory approach adhered to in this study follows a "bottom-up" perspective (i.e. from phenomena and practices to theory and explanation) (Flick 2007: 19). As such, it is oriented towards the inductive generation of theory from data that has been systematically obtained and analyzed (Glaser and Strauss 1967 cited in Locke 2001). This approach is well-suited to studying identity construction because it is important to understand how individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives share common experiences about the phenomena under study. This will enhance a deeper understanding of the major paradigms addressed in the study and will aid in extrapolating theoretical findings.

I hope to gain some insight into the world of my participants and to describe their perceptions and reactions to the discourse at hand. Data has been collected using an open ended questionnaire (via e-mail for self-completion). The general assumption and choice of participants assume that there is some commonality to the perceptions that participants (Arab-American poets/critics) have in how they interpret similar experiences (racialization, marginalization, cultural politics, gender/feminist discourse, and identity construction in general). The chosen participants are all prominent Arab-American poets and critics. The participants therefore represent a defined population (Arab-Americans) and a literary genre (poetry) in a narrow and specific focus pertaining to this study. I understand that the participant sample does not represent Arab-Americans on a pan-ethnic sociological/ethnographic level. Moreover, the survey is a sample survey since less than 100 per cent of the population in question is represented, both on a demographic and a literary level.

The main objectives directing this study are fourfold. Firstly, I intend to analyse concepts/negotiations of identity construction in contemporary Arab-American poetry in general. Secondly, I intend to interpret the concept of racialization of Arab-Americans in relation to citizenship and ethnicity within the American national context. The main focus here will include popular contemporary discourses on race in America and their significance to Arab-Americans and their literary productions. Thirdly, I intend to identify politico-religious (under the umbrella term: Cultural Politics) themes evident in Arab-American poetry. Such themes are relevant since Arab-Americans as a pan-ethnic entity are directly affiliated with and affected by U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, war on terrorism and Islamophobia. And finally, I intend to investigate issues pertaining to Arab-American feminist criticism (i.e. "women of color" concepts and the "Orientalised body", Kahf 1999) relevant in contemporary Arab-American poetic discourse.

Therefore, the questionnaire will be divided into four main thematic sections (Units of Analysis). The questions are open ended in that they supply a frame for respondents' answers, coupled with a minimum of restraint on their expression. Other than the subject of the question, there are no other restrictions on either the content or the manner of the respondents' replies, facilitating a

richness and intensity of response. Thematic sections will be guided by the following study propositions based on theoretical readings to narrow down and direct attention to precise information and data gathering:

- I.** Contemporary Arab-American poetry (American literary context);
- II.** Racialization and Arab-American literature (specifically poetry);
- III.** Cultural politics and Arab-American literature (specifically poetry); and
- IV.** Feminist discourse and Arab-American literature (specifically poetry).

Study propositions and theoretical output is focused on an American national context, post-9/11 setting. Data analysis will focus on meaning generated from participant replies in light of the literature review and theoretical criticism available on the subject matter. The outcome will provide a basis to formulate themes, refine concepts and create analysis of the topic/spected ethnicity at hand. This material will then be interpreted in light of the theories and the literature in the field. Research findings will be used in the final thesis in order to generate theories and update current information on the subject matter.

The respondents' participation in this study is voluntary, and no direct benefits to the participants will be administered. All participants have agreed to participate in the study and have undersigned a consent form allowing research access to their specific answers.

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank all participants, namely Angele Ellis, Hala Alyan, Hayan Charara, Laila Halaby, Pauline Kaldas, Elmaz Abinader, Andrea Assaf, Lisa S. Majaj, Marianne Haddad, and Philip Metres for their insightful participation. The answers included here are a selection directly quoted in the body of the thesis.

## **Initial Case Study Questions: Questionnaire (Total: 15 questions)**

### **I. Contemporary Arab-American Poetry (Total: 5 questions)**

**Theme:** Location of Arab-American Literature (emphasis on poetry)

- Q1.** Where, in your opinion (“mainstream American canon” or racialized “ethnic” literatures), does Arab-American literature in general fit in the literary scene in America today?
- Q2.** Can you describe your role as an Arab-American poet and/or critic?
- Q3.** Who is the target audience (if any) that you hope to reach?
- Q4.** In your opinion, which modern/postmodern American poetry tradition/school (i.e. Language Poetry/New Formalism/The Beat Generation/Objectivist Poets/Black Mountain School/The Last Poets/Other) informs your works (or Arab-American poetic productions in a contemporary American context in general)? How?
- Q5.** Do you think Arab-American poetry is informed in any way by Arab literary conventions (in terms of language, themes, prosody)? How?

### **II. Racialization and Arab-American literature (Total: 2 questions)**

**Theme:** “Racialization” of Arab-American ethnicity/American multicultural context

- Q6.** According to recent and various scholarship, September 11, 2001 consolidated the racialization of the category “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” as a signifier of non-white Otherness. How does the literature confront or negotiate such racial categorizations?
- Q7.** American liberal multiculturalism, according to Moallem and Boal (1999), consistently evades engagement with three pressing issues: the enduring heritage of Eurocentrism, the question of justice, the connections between national and global domains. Does Arab-American literature highlight or address such issues and how?

### **III. Cultural Politics and Arab-American Literature (Total: 3 questions)**

**Theme:** “Arab” Cultural representations/authenticity

- Q8.** What is an authentic “Arab” culture in your opinion and how is this culture expressed in the US diaspora through contemporary (post-9/11) Arab-American poetry, in specific?
- Q9.** What is the significance of “Arab” cultural signifiers (i.e. food, music, religious affiliations, dress, language, geographical locations, mythologies, legends), and what do these signifiers express about the experience of being Arab in America after 9/11?
- Q10.** In your opinion, how does contemporary Arab-American poetry negotiate an “Arab” cultural identity in a contemporary (post-9/11) American setting?

#### IV. Discourse of Arab-American women writers (Total: 5 questions)

**Theme:** Double marginalization in the poetry of Arab-American women

**Q11.** In her introduction to *Contemporary Arab American women writers* [sic], Amal Talaat Abdelrazek (2007) asks “What does it mean to be an Arab-American in a post-9/11 world? How can an Arab-American woman – when her physical appearance, distinct traditions, body language, and style of dressing signal her as Other – be American?” How are these questions addressed in the poetry of contemporary Arab-American women?

**Theme:** Politics in Arab-American women’s poetry

**Q12.** In what ways have the events of 9/11 and its aftermath shaped the poetry of Arab-American women?

**Q13.** Could it be argued that there is a greater imperative among contemporary Arab-American women poets to make poetry *political*, implicitly or explicitly; to tackle oppression, marginalization and social justice through the printed or spoken word? Conversely, is there a tendency to seek out the political in poetry by Arab-American women and does this circumscribe the scope of meaning elucidated in the poetry?

**Q14.** The veil, in the tradition of symbolic appropriation perpetuated by Western colonial interests, has become one of the most potent signifiers of the backwardness of ‘Arab’ culture in the legitimization of the U.S. led “War on Terror”. Has the conflation of Arab and Muslim identity in American mainstream, and especially right-wing, discourse impacted on Arab-American women’s poetry more generally?

**Q15.** “We are the opposite of the angry young artist at this point in our journey”, Barbara Nimri Aziz writes in the foreword to the 2004 publication, *Scheherazade’s legacy: Arab and Arab American women on writing*. Nearly 10 years later, do you think this statement is true of contemporary poetry by Arab-American women writers and why?

## Survey Outcome: Participant Answers<sup>223</sup>

### A.1

**Participant:** Angele Ellis, Arab-American poet

#### I. Contemporary Arab-American Poetry (Total: 5 questions)

**Q1 Answer:** In my opinion, Arab American literature today still is a racialized “ethnic” literature, just beginning to emerge from its chrysalis (or *hijab*) to spread its wings for scholars and serious readers and critics, much less for the general reading public. There are, of course, a number of fine Arab American poets—including highly distinguished ones such as Lawrence Joseph and FadyJoudah—but poetry is an art form more practiced than read in the United States, and only the tireless and prolific poet and children’s writer Naomi Shihab Nye has come close to achieving mainstream recognition. The number of Arab American novels and short story collections is growing slowly, and writers as diverse as Mojha Kahf, Alicia Erian, and Diana Abu-Jaber have made public splashes—but their success is minor compared to that of fiction writers from other “ethnic” groups. (This has not stopped me from being in the process of writing my own Arab American novel, whose first chapter can be accessed at <http://eunoiareview.wordpress.com/2013/02/02/desert-storms/>.) One has only to think of the gains made in the past thirty years by Asian American, Latino American, Native American, and Indian American writers to recognize the truth of this response. Contemporary Arab American literature has no Amy Tan or Maxine Hong Kingston, no Sandra Cisneros or Junot Diaz, no Louise Erdich or Sherman Alexie, no JhumpaLahiri or Salman Rushdie (to name a few writers who spring immediately to mind). The most famous and popular Arab American writer remains Gibran Kahlil Gibran, whose poetry and artwork is more associated with the mysticism of the 1960s than with Arab American literature, although he may be denied the posthumous honor of a U.S. postage stamp simply because Arab American political groups have organized to promote him for one. (Gibran reminds me of the West Coast artist in RabihAlameddine’s novel *Koolaid: The Art of War*, whose paintings are taken for abstractions until another Lebanese expatriate recognizes them as representations of houses on a terraced Lebanese mountainside.)

**Q2 Answer:** My career as an Arab American poet and sometime critic—and emergent fiction writer and novelist—has been spurred by not only by the events surrounding 9/11, but by my upbringing in the 1960s and 1970s, whose racist media caricatures of Arabs left invisible scars (at the same time as the wars in the Middle East, including my grandparents’ country, Lebanon, were leaving real scars). The 1970s witnessed the beginnings of Arab American political interest groups—in which my father participated—and the formation of new Arab American identities, in which the work of Arab American writers and scholars—crucially, Edward Said, and also scholars such as Jack Shaheen—played a vital part. (My own uncle, Kail [born Khalil] Ellis, helped to found the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies at Villanova University in 1983.) As someone who has been involved in the U.S. peace and justice movement since the early 1980s, I have seen sympathy and support for Palestinian and other Arab liberation movements grow markedly among the liberal/left U.S. population during the past 20 years or so, although this support has been met by virulent opposition in all sectors of American society, including academia.

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<sup>223</sup> Participant answers have not been transcribed or edited by researcher and are left as initially applied by participant in terms of syntax and lexicon.

This is a lengthy way of saying that I see my role as an Arab American artist as that of both educator and instigator, even provocateur. I titled my first book of poems *Arab on Radar* over the heated objections of my parents, who thought doing so would rouse hostility and limit my audience. Perhaps it did. But I think it also helped, in its small way, to raise consciousness.

**Q3 Answer:** Oh, I'm absurdly ambitious. I want to reach everyone. I've done over fifty readings since I started publishing my poetry—most in the past five years—including some college presentations, and I've had positive reviews in publications as diverse as *Al-Jadid* and *Pittsburgh City Paper*. I gave away as many copies of *Arab on Radar* (Six Gallery, 2007) as I sold (there are approximately 550 copies in circulation—including some in libraries and bookstores—not bad for a first book of poetry from a very small press). My chapbook, *Spared* (Main Street Rag, 2011), although not strictly Arab American poetry, contains some of the same threads as *Arab on Radar*. (It was printed in a run of 500; over half of these copies are in circulation.) The kids in my neighborhood know I'm a poet—and at least one has read some of my work aloud to her young daughter. I was thrilled last year when my sister Rafaela, who teaches English composition and literature at Polk Community College in western Florida, used some of my work in her classes—she paired “Arab on Radar” with an outrageously racist YouTube video of the 1960s pop song “Ahab the Ay-rab” (I reference this song in the poem). Rafaela's students, especially her black and Latino students, engaged in vigorous discussion—even the class that had been so unresponsive she called them “The Easter Island Heads.” (They also discussed my poem “Mauches” from *Spared*, which deals with discrimination suffered by my Italian immigrant grandmother. You can see the video version at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F60qdbS2IHY>.) I'm amazed at the number of writers and readers who go out of their way to tell me about their own Arab heritage, whether or not it figures in their work. I didn't grow up in an Arab American community, with the exception of my immediate and extended family, so finding this new community excites me. (I also have to thank the literary communities of Mizna and RAWI, both of which have published my work and introduced me to other Arab American writers.)

**Q4 Answer:** A number of traditional/modern/postmodern sources inform my work, and continue to inform it. I learned to recite English and American poetry as a young child from my mother, who was a champion reciter in the days when schools encouraged this facility—great modernists such as Yeats and Frost, along with poets almost no one reads anymore, such as Longfellow, Alfred Lord Noyes, and Leigh Hunt (best known today as a patron of Keats). At age nine, I discovered Shakespearean sonnets in my father's college *Collected Works of Shakespeare*. As a teenager, I was enamored of Emily Dickinson (still am), T.S. Eliot, Theodore Roethke, William Carlos Williams, Rainer Maria Rilke, Federico Garcia Lorca, and Mahmoud Darwish's “Lover from Palestine” (the latter three poets in translation, as I cannot read any language but English with genuine fluency). In college, I studied English literature and writing, and liked almost everything—catholic tastes with a small c—including Dylan Thomas, H.D., Ezra Pound, Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Stephen Crane and Herman Melville—along with Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. (Later, I discovered the contemporaneous Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, and Muriel Rukeyser—the first two fast friends, the latter a rival of Bishop's and a great political poet.) I can't leave out the Beats—I might not have written “Arab on Radar” if not for Allen Ginsberg's “America,” although my poem also is influenced by performance poetry, whose roots stem in part from the work of the Last Poets—as the Ghazals in *Arab on Radar* are influenced by Adrienne Rich's interpretation of this form. The neo-traditional fluency of Agha Shahid Ali's Ghazals eludes me, although as a poet who on occasion writes rhymed verse, including pantoums and sonnets, I have a touch of the New Formalist—as well as of the Objectivist, due to my love of the Imagists and the political bent of a significant number of my poems. Most recently, I've been intrigued by traditional and modern haiku and tanka (whose emphasis on line

and “breath” precedes the Black Mountain Poets), and by incorporating the discontinuities of the Language Poets into my prose poems and flash fiction—Lyn Hejinian is one influence.

As for other contemporary Arab American poets, they (a diverse and highly accomplished, if not popularly acclaimed, group) display an amazing range of influences, including Arab poetry—and some, as you know, are accomplished translators as well as poets (Khaled Mattawa, Fady Joudah). I attribute my own love of repetition in verse to what I know of Arab poetry.

**Q5 Answer:** Certainly the use of rhyme, or *sal*, continues to this day in some Arab American poetry, even in free verse that employs internal rhyme. As previously mentioned, the Ghazal (both traditional and modern) and the use of repetition are features of some Arab American poetry. Insofar as themes, love (including romantic love and love/loss of homeland), family, nature, and politics are recurring themes. Insofar as prosody, as the iamb and other poetic forms features so heavily in Arabic verse, perhaps there is a Jungian archetype in each Arab American poet.

## II. Racialization and Arab-American literature (Total: 2 questions)

**Q6 Answer:** Various. On a knife’s edge, as I said before. Some writers joyously embrace a non-white Other identity; other writers struggle with having such an identity imposed upon them, or feel torn between “hiding” or “outing” themselves (so many names, even, have been flattened by the American steamroller of conformity). Remember that the community of Arab American writers is many communities, and includes both immigrants and the children and grandchildren of immigrants.

**Q7 Answer:** The American industrialist Henry Ford (whose Dearborn, Michigan now is the heart of Arab America) put his workers through a stage “machine”—actually a large box in which they would exchange the clothing of their native lands for American suits. American liberal multiculturalism does the opposite—the “ethnics” emerge from the Eurocentric box (at least for a time) in their “native” costumes, doing their “native” dances, and bearing their “native” foods. It is difficult for Arab American writers to escape that box—particularly since food, dance, and music are for Arab Americans (as for Americans of other ethnicities) cultural and artistic touchstones as well as stereotypes.

But in the case of Arab Americans, clothing is a charged issue—as keffiyahs, hijabs, and turbans are seen as sinister and threatening (and those wearing them—including Hindus and Sikhs—have been subject to brutal and even fatal attacks, particularly since 9/11). Religion is a charged issue. Politics, ever present in Arab life, are in the U.S., due to the strength of the pro-Israel lobby and the deliberately apolitical stance of many Americans, a charged issue. So Arab American writers cannot help but deal with these issues directly. Mojha Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and Randa Jarrar’s *A Map of the World*, to give two examples, explore these issues in fiction. Philip Metres’s *Abu Ghraib Arias* and Khaled Mattawa’s *Tocqueville*, to give two examples, explore these issues in poetry.

## III. Cultural Politics and Arab-American Literature (Total: 3 questions)

**Q8 Answer:** I think this depends on how you define the words “authentic” and “diaspora.” If by authentic, you mean the culture(s) of immigrants from Arab countries (and those of their American-born children, if those children speak and/or read fluent Arabic, visit their parents’ native countries, and

identify as Arab), then a poet such as myself is inauthentic: my grandparents were the immigrants, I have no more than scraps of Arabic (food names, greetings, and curses, although—as in the mind of a backward toddler—other words will occasionally bubble to the surface), and I have visited Lebanon only once, although I do identify as Arab—a problem for some Lebanese who identify as Phoenicians! (As the descendent of Maronite Christians who was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, but now is a heretic—and also as a political left-winger who was reared with strong Palestinian sympathies—I am a minority within a minority anyway.) The fact that my grandparents and their six children (whose sense of “Arab” or “Lebanese” identity ranges from strong to minimal) were/are important presences in my life might not make me anymore “authentic” in the eyes of a purist, given also that I am “fair” (as my grandmother often remarked), and bear a French given name and an Anglicized surname. Yet the sense of displacement and Other identity lingers...perhaps “authenticity” is a word to be used with care and understanding, if at all.

Back to diaspora, which comprises a number of diaspora. If you’re speaking strictly, for example, of the period from the 1880s-1920s, when a large number of immigrants came to the U.S. from “Greater Syria,” lured by promises of a prosperous life or bent on escaping World War I and the Allied embargo on the region because it was under the rule of Turkey, along with the famine and disease of those war years—then I’m part of that by descent. If you’re speaking of the Palestinian diaspora, or the more recent Lebanese, Iraqi, Egyptian, or Syrian diaspora, or even the post-World War II movement to the U.S.—accelerated from the 1960s onward—of a portion of the educated or striving classes from almost all Arab countries—then I’m not connected to that, except for the friendships and collegial relationships I have with some people who fall within these diaspora. I believe, however, that all of these diaspora influence contemporary Arab-American poetry, whether one has experienced them personally or vicariously.

**Q9 Answer:** Omar, I believe I addressed this issue in the earlier part of the survey—but I will say that EVERYTHING AND ANYTHING Arab is suspect or viewed negatively by a significant portion of the U.S. population after 9/11. Look at the hate directed at the Coca-Cola commercial shown during the January 2014 Superbowl (you know, the huge annual U.S. football championship), which dared to show an Arab-American Muslim woman in a hijab enjoying a Coke! And the Arab foods sold in supermarkets (as opposed to specialty stores) are packaged as either American or Israeli (“Sabra Hummus”). I’ve recently gotten some weird looks—and a few warm greetings from African Americans—for wearing what I call my “Pittsburgh Steeler keffiyeh,” described in the Arab American National Museum catalogue as “sand.” (I thought it would be black and beige, but it’s black and gold, the official colors of all of the professional sports teams in Pittsburgh.) Let the cognitive dissonance roar!

**Q10 Answer:** I believe I’ve addressed this question elsewhere in this survey. I do think that anti-racism and anti-patriarchy are themes of post-9/11 Arab-American poetry, as few Arab-American Muslim poets are religious in the sense of wishing to engage in religious indoctrination—a totally different matter than promoting religious understanding and acceptance—and most Arab-American Christian or Druse poets (I’m speaking of cultural identification) are sympathetic to/interested in creating anti-racist and anti-patriarchal narratives. These themes are seen in poets, books, and organizations I cited earlier in this survey, as well as in my own work.

#### IV. Discourse of Arab-American women writers (Total: 5 questions)

**Q11 Answer:** I want to note that a significant portion of Arab-American women poets—including a number of Muslim-American poets—do not dress in a style that immediately identifies them as “Arab,” and many speak fluent English with an “American” accent or only a slight “foreign” accent.

Even some of those who wear hijabs pair these with modest “Western” clothing. (Not that the hijab itself isn’t a HUGE signifier and a target for haters, as I discussed earlier in this survey. See this article: <http://oaklawn.patch.com/groups/around-town/p/muslim-woman-discovers-friendly-new-world-when-a-knit-scarf-covers-her-hijab> )

Also remember that in a multiracial society such as the U.S., an Arab-American woman who does not wear a hijab or traditional dress—if her skin, eyes, and hair are dark/er—might be assumed to be Italian or Latina or African American or American Indian (these assumptions come with their own sets of sometimes furious bigotries, of course).

But let’s turn our attention to post-9/11 Arab-American woman poets whose cultural signifiers (or those of close relatives) are immediately assumed by many to be “foreign/Arab/enemy.” I’ll give three well-known examples:

1. “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears”

~ Mohja Kahf

*A few notes on this text: Kahf (b. 1967) came to the U.S. from Syria at the age of five. She has both worn and not worn a hijab in various phases of her life, as explored in her poetry and fiction. For a hundred years, Sears was the great American housewares emporium, although it recently has fallen on hard times. Kahf’s final image of “...and we all emerge on the sales floor / and lose ourselves in the great common ground / of housewares on markdown” is both a humorous and an ironic reference to the capitalism and consumerism that underlie the American Dream and it’s infamous “melting pot.”*

2. “Blood” ~ Naomi Shihab Nye

*A few notes on the text: Nye was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1952, and did not visit her father’s homeland, Palestine, until 1966. She has a German-American mother and dresses in Western clothing. As in Kahf’s poem, a close relative serves as the cultural signifier—and the repetition of “true Arab” (referencing your earlier question about authenticity) is contrapuntal to Nye’s weaving back in forth in time from a happy and even innocent childhood (despite the neighbor girl’s coming to the door “want[ing] to see the Arab” as one might ask to see an exotic animal) to an adulthood of confronting hard, intractable political realities.*

3. “First Writing Since [9/11]” ~ Suheir Hammad

(Poem on Crisis of Terror)

*A few notes on the text: Suheir Hammad (b. 1973) came to New York City from Palestine at the age of five. Although she sometimes performs in and is photographed in traditional Arab dress, she just as often performs in Western dress. She is a performance poet first, as evidenced by the style and rhythms of her work, and is strongly associated with the African American performance poetry community. The immediacy and vividness of this poem, its rapid-fire shuttling between the political and the personal, the local and the global, as well as its direct address to the audience and its overt uplift and moralizing, is characteristic of hip-hop and of performance poetry, springing as much from*

*African American cultural traditions as from Arab American cultural traditions, and in some ways bypassing the Western “canon.”*

**Q12 Answer:** I think most writers (Arab-American women poets included) would say that they write to free themselves of inhibitions to the greatest extent possible—and I think that Arab-American women writers get in more trouble for reinforcing (or for being seen to reinforce) neo-imperialist stereotypes of the Arab man than of the Arab woman. Although at a RAWI (Radius of Arab American Writers) conference I attended in 2007, a number of Arab and Arab-American women authors in all genres (including poets) complained of being pressured by their publishers—sometimes successfully—to use a veiled woman as their cover image, because veiled women (a hot neo-imperialist stereotype) sell books!

There also is the issue, in Arab-American writing, of fear not only of reinforcing stereotypes of one’s own people, but of offending and alienating one’s own family. As more than one Arab-American writer recounts with a shudder, the Palestinian-American novelist Randa Jarrar’s father cut her off completely because he was so angry at her portrait of the father in *A Map of Home*—and it wasn’t even that bad! (Jarrar was born in Chicago in 1978, but grew up until age 13 in Kuwait and Egypt.) My own father is displeased at the “family” novel I’m writing—as he was displeased by the title of *Arab on Radar* and by some of my poems—but we Lebanese are stubborn.

Sometimes I think that the bigots (and the angry Arabs, but aren’t we all) are going to read stereotypes into my work and that of others no matter what I/we do—and that along with familial disapproval, can be inhibiting. But to hell with everybody, really—everything is material to a writer.

**Q13 Answer:** I think it is instructive to do both types of readings. There is a distinct Arab/Arab-American feminist consciousness, and also—as I mentioned earlier in this survey—cultural, collegial, and personal connections between/among Arab-American women and women of color.

**Q14 Answer:** No! I believe that for any woman—even a traditional or conservative or reactionary woman—writing is a feminist act, as education, writing, and publication (except done on the sly, or under a male pseudonym) have been denied to women and/or derided and/or punished when done by women in every society at some point in time, up to the present day. Plus, we live in an age in which even women writers and poets who decry feminism or the word feminist are influenced by feminism’s political and social impact—some of them live ahead of what they write, and some of them live “behind” what they write. (Others, like Nawal El Saadawi, are simply extraordinary.) Omar, as I’ve said throughout this survey—in both text and examples of the work of Arab-American women poets—9/11 blew the lid off for Arab-American women poets, both established and new. (I wrote my first book as a response to 9/11, “coming out” as an Arab.) Everything changed—even if one agrees with Auden that poetry makes nothing happen.

**Q15 Answer:** Yes, I think there is a greater imperative for us to make poetry political—as the examples that I’ve given in this survey, and many others that you can reference, demonstrate—but I’m someone who was politicized in childhood, long before I became a published poet, as well as a peace activist and seven-time civil disobedient. (I was shocked—shocked!—to find, even as an adult, that politics was a forbidden topic at many “polite” dinner tables, including that of my former mother-in-law—a conservative, working class Irish-American, daughter of immigrants, who ascended to the middle classes. In my family, we talked about politics a lot—and I think that this is a familiar experience for many Arab-Americans.) And yes, conversely, our emphasis on politics can circumscribe—in some eyes—the meaning and subject matter of our work. (“Don’t you write any

personal poems?” a college student at one of my presentations—male, white, “American” looking—asked.) I do, but sometimes, they’re overlooked. And to me, the personal is political is personal.

Ya Omar, I think this was true for Barbara Nimri Aziz (born, I “guesstimate,” around 1946) when she wrote those words—and I also think she was expressing the fact that Arab-American women poets have a history, a tradition, going back (now) a hundred years. But there are days when I still feel like an angry teenager—and I didn’t publish my first adult poems until rather late (2003), and didn’t publish my first book of poetry until the end of 2007 (it’s sometimes listed as January 2008). Also, I am acquainted with a lot of young women poets (some of whom are Arab-American), who exemplify the angry young artist.

They say that a generation is every six years—but even if you stretch that period out, and account for the influence of older poets on younger ones, our community is as varied by age and experience as it is in other ways—by generation of immigration, by country of origin, by religious tradition or affiliation, by knowledge/lack of knowledge of Arabic, by regionalism in a geographically large nation (the U.S.A.), by education, by poetic form(s), by travel, by profession.

**\*\*\* END OF SURVEY A.1\*\*\***

## A.2

**Participant:** Hayan Charara, Arab-American poet/critic

**I. Contemporary Arab-American Poetry (Total: 5 questions)**

**Q1 Answer:** In both categories, though the tendency is to find Arab American literature (when considered collectively) described as “ethnic” or “minority.” Even when poets, for instance, are found in mainstream anthologies—Lawrence Joseph, for instance, whose work appears in many major canonical publications—his identity as an Arab American figures more heavily than any other construction (an aesthetic, for instance, or a poetic school) insofar as the poems chosen to represent his work,

**Q2 Answer:** I have published two books of poems (a third collection is forthcoming) and I edited a major anthology of contemporary Arab American poetry, *Inclined to Speak*.

**Q3 Answer:** I think of my audience as a “general” poetry audience—readers, poets, those interested in poetry, but also those interested in things Arab American.

**Q4 Answer:** The schools that most inform my own work are the New York School, the Beat poets (but to a lesser degree) and the confessional/post-confessional poets. Stereotypes are often turned upside down in poetic works by Arab Americans through several means: language, image, form and content. While demystification of the “Arab” or the “Muslim” had already been taking place pre 9/11, this work intensified (as did the focus on it) after the September 11 attacks. Generally speaking, Arab American poetry seeks to speak for Arab Americans, not so much to represent Arab Americans collectively but to give voice to a group which has been historically spoken for by non-Arabs. So much of what it said and written about Arab Americans—and the issues that they tend to be associated with (terrorism, for instance) are often simply wrong. Arab American poetry “right” these wrongs, and challenge them, by providing a myriad of other narratives and images of Arab Americans—images and narratives that are themselves varied, contradictory, self-interrogating, and so on—that is to say, they are not one-dimensional; they are not monolithic.

**Q5 Answer:** This depends on the poet, though most are not informed by Arab literary conventions. While a few began their writing (and reading) lives in the Middle East, most took up writing and were educated in the United States, and the poetic influences on them—as well as cultural, social, and so on—were American, or Western. Many claim that English is their first language, too, and a good number of them, especially the younger and “middle” generation poets (those now in their 20s through to those in their 40s and 50s) were born in the United States or else came to the States as young children. The youngest of these poets, who have studied in creative writing programs, did so under American poets, whose expertise tends to be in American or Anglophone poetry/poetics. To put it simply, many—though not all, of course—write about their lives, and the lives of the people they know, and as such they are dealing immediately with the issues that concern themselves. Also, perhaps because of the intense scrutiny of Arab Americans (by the media, in foreign policy, and so on) Arab American poets and writers find themselves addressing larger issues that concern Arab Americans directly (representations in the media, affects of US foreign policy in the Middle East, and so on). So as a subject of inquiry, these and other issues important to Arab American generally find themselves in poems. Insofar as how poets deal with them—aesthetically, formally, linguistically—depends on the individual poets. It goes without saying—and this can be evidenced by a survey of the major writings by Arab American poets—that as a group,

Arab American poets often disagree with each other, or at least provide us with different takes on the concerns of Arab American as an ethnic community in America. Some may focus on the concerns that affect the Palestinian community, while others may address the concerns of the larger “Arab” community in the United States. Some deal with issues tied to gender and sexuality, while others focus on issues tied to religion (within these, obviously, there will be differences).

## **II. Racialization and Arab-American literature (Total: 2 questions)**

**Q6 Answer:** The way that 9/11 served to “consolidated the racialization” of these categories is one reason why Arab and Muslim American writers confronted the categorization of race and ethnicity, often with the purpose of undoing the consolidated nature of the categories. Specifically, many poets have sought to undermine the categories by pointing out what might be obvious to an Arab or Muslim (i.e. inconsistencies, contradictions, ironies, biases, and so on about Arabs and/or Muslims) while others provided readers with alternative narratives or images, ones in and of themselves may not have anything to do with September 11<sup>th</sup> or terrorism or violence or even (explicitly) Arab or Muslim identity, but in the context of this so-called consolidation, these other narratives/images (which are varied and at times divergent) serve to question the unity and coherence of the dominant (and negative) way that Arab Americans, Middle Easterners, and Muslims have been racially categorized.

**Q7 Answer:** Yes. While some point to Gibran and the Mahjar poets as the earliest Arab American writers, I don’t believe this is quite right, in great part because those writers mostly thought of themselves as Arabs writing in America (some did not write in English, in fact). Whereas Arab American poets and writers think of themselves, primarily, as Arab American (not just Arab) and they practice their writing in English; and, as earlier noted, many think of themselves, culturally, socially, politically, artistically, as belonging to an American literary heritage in addition to (if not more so, or even exclusively) an Arab one. All this is to say that, really, Arab American writing is a much younger than those who date it back to Gibran et al. More accurately, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is a better date to look to, and we can see, from then on, a consistent and steady growth of the number of poets (and writers) who identify as Arab American or whose writings associate them with this group. The earlier poets include Sam Hazo, Eugene Nasser, Etel Adnan, D.H. Melhem, and later, Naomi Shihab Nye, Lawrence Joseph, Elmaz Abinader; following them, the third generation, if you will, the major poets include myself, Suheir Hammad, Nathalie Handal, Fady Joudah, Philip Metres, and many others. There is another, new generation of Arab American poets (in their 20s and 30s) whose first works are now being published. These writers find themselves in what we might call the postcolonial period; from every generation, there is an awareness (expressed in their writings, and in interviews) of their subject positions, as others, as postcolonial subjects (as exiles often, or as displaced members of a larger, wider Arab diaspora) in the “West,” and the Eurocentrism of liberal thinking (and what it lacks or neglects) is often a subject of the writings of many of these poets. The question of justice, as well as of connections between national and global domains, is integrally tied to the postcoloniality of these writers. Again, it is addressed in the poetry, in interviews, in essays written by these writers, and in talks that many of them give at conferences and at universities. I know many of these writers personally, and more than once we have, in informal conversations, talked about the ways that our “American” counterparts (especially those who claim to operate under the banner of liberalism) are incredibly lacking when it comes to the aforementioned issues.

**Note: Parts III and IV have not been answered.**

**\*\*\* END OF SURVEY A.2\*\*\***

## A.3

**Participant:** Pauline Kaldas, Arab-American poet

**I. Contemporary Arab-American Poetry (Total: 5 questions)**

**Q1 Answer:** I think Arab American literature is situated within the context of multicultural/ethnic literature within the United States. Within the university, it is more likely to be placed in the context of a course focused on just Arab American literature or within a multicultural literature course.

**Q2 Answer:** As an Arab American writer, I define my role as giving voice and visibility to the experience of being an immigrant and an Arab American. The place of Arab Americans within the larger context of American culture is often overlooked, ignored, or misunderstood. I hope through my writing to reveal the complexity and uniqueness of the experiences of Arabs living within the United States.

**Q3 Answer:** As a young immigrant (I came to the U.S. when I was 8 years old), I consider myself to be part of the “one and a half generation”—those who immigrate at a young age. So one of my audiences is other immigrants regardless of country of origin. There are overlapping experiences and struggles among all immigrants and I believe my work explores those areas. We all need to see ourselves in the literature we read, so I also hope to reach other Arab Americans through my work. And of course I want to appeal to a larger American audience—those interested in understanding the complex and varied nature of American culture. In addition, I also see that my work can reach an audience in Egypt—there has been so much immigration from Egypt that most families have someone who lives in the U.S. and I believe there is a growing interest in what life is like for those who emigrated.

**Q4 Answer:** I am most influenced by other multicultural American poets, such Myung Mi Kim, Chrystos, Irena Kelpfisz, Audre Lorde, Mohja Kahf, Lisa Suhair Majaj. Their attention to language, form, and storytelling has informed my own writing. These poets have stories that don’t fit neatly into categories so I find their experimental styles to be the most helpful as I formulate my own poetic style.

**Q5 Answer:** I expect this really depends on the poet and how much access they have to Arab poetry. My ability to read Arabic is limited so I have not had much exposure to Arab poetry and I think my work is more influenced by American poetry. However, I do speak Egyptian Arabic fluently and my use of language in poetry is influenced by the rhythms and vocabulary of the Arabic language. I have also brought Arabic into my poetry through translation, transliteration, and actual Arabic writing. Each poet brings their own unique cultural identifiers into their work. The ones you mentioned—especially culinary, cultural, and political—tend to dominate. In my own work, I would add religion and language. Since my family is part of a minority religious group in Egypt (Coptic), religion enters into my work as a signifier of identity when I’m in Egypt. As a young immigrant, the transition from Arabic to English was pivotal in the development of my dual cultural identity. Finding ways to bring both English and Arabic into my work is something I continue to explore in my writing. For me, this becomes an expression of the layering of my identity as an Arab American.

## II. Racialization and Arab-American literature (Total: 2 questions)

**Q6 Answer:** This has been an on-going issue within the Arab American community. Although we are treated as minorities and experience discrimination, we are not legally defined as a minority group within the U.S. People from the Middle East and North Africa are still classified as white. Our literature constantly highlights that “otherness” as it reveals how we are pushed to the edges of mainstream culture.

**Q7 Answer:** I’m not sure about Eurocentrism but I believe that Arab American literature does address issues related to justice and the connection between national and global domains—certainly this comes up in work that explores the effects of 9/11 on Arab Americans and issues related to Palestine. I think it is perhaps culture, religion, and national identity more than race that concerns Arab American authors. Resisting stereotypes that exist of Arabs and presenting a more accurate and positive portrayal of Arab Americans has been a large part of what we are doing as Arab American writers.

## III. Cultural Politics and Arab-American Literature (Total: 3 questions)

**Q8 Answer:** I’m not sure that it’s possible to define an “authentic” Arab culture. The Arab culture that exists in the U.S. is an Arab American culture, which is different from the Arab culture that exists in the Arab world. The poetry that came out in response to 9/11 was therefore an Arab American poetry, written out of the identity and experience of being an Arab living in America. Part of that response reflected the sudden shift from being invisible as an Arab to having a heightened visibility as an Arab American after 9/11.

**Q9 Answer:** These cultural signifiers of identity give Arabs in America a set of tangible elements that help to define their cultural identity. They also become a way of explaining, sharing, and expressing cultural identity. After 9/11, some Arabs may have removed those cultural signifiers in order to not be visible and therefore open to attack while others heightened these cultural signifiers as a way of asserting their Arab identity.

**Q10 Answer:** This really depends on the poet. Some look back to the homeland, some explore the discrimination experienced in the U.S., and some praise the signifiers of Arab culture to show its value.

## IV. Discourse of Arab-American women writers (Total: 5 questions)

**Q11 Answer:** Each poet addresses these issues in a different way. Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad and Lisa Suhair Majaj are all good examples of poets who assert an American identity and a right to be a full participant in American society while also maintain a strong Arab identity.

**Q12 Answer:** I’m not sure. Perhaps it has shifted the lens from the feminist issues to the political issues?

**Q13 Answer:** I think it is possible to make that argument, however, there is too much variety to put all Arab American women’s poetry in such a narrow category. The tendency to seek out the political in certain types of poetry always happens. Readers often find what they are looking for.

**Q14 Answer:** Certainly, some Arab American women poets respond to this issue. Mohja Kahf's Hijab poems do this quite well.

**Q15 Answer:** It may be true for some but certainly not all Arab American women poets. Anger is an important emotion and one that has been often denied to minority women. (See Audre Lorde's "The Use of Anger.") Suheir Hammad's poetry is an excellent example of the expression and power of anger.

**\*\*\* END OF SURVEY A.3\*\*\***

## A.4

**Participant:** Andrea Assaf, Arab-American performance poet

**I. Contemporary Arab American Poetry (Total: 5 questions)**

**Q1 Answer:** Currently, Arab American literature is mostly marginalized into "ethnic" or "multicultural" literature categories. Most Arab American authors do not have access to the "American mainstream" in terms of market distribution or widespread academic recognition. But I always question whether that should be our goal. Every writer wants to have the widest readership possible, but when you consider the systemic racism, Eurocentrism and gender bias inherent in the construction of the "canon" and mainstream markets, you have to ask yourself what it would mean to be valued in those systems. Within the Arab American literary community, we often have conversations about who defines "success," and when certain works have been successful in the mainstream, to what extent they are self-exoticizing or feeding mainstream American (usually racist or stereotypical) constructs of Arab identity. As an African American colleague once said, "you can't beg and fight the same man." Of course, there are some remarkable exceptions -- Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* is said to have sold more than any other book in the 20th century except the Bible (which may not have been so had he not written in a Christian tradition to begin with); and on the other end of the media spectrum, poet Suheir Hammad is one of the most famous and loved, and politicized, writers of the *Def Poetry Jam* generation (though it still may be arguable to what extent the Spoken Word community can be considered "mainstream," despite *Def Poetry's* success on Broadway and HBO). Nonetheless, Arab American literature as a whole is far from being part of the "mainstream American canon"... and I remain uncertain as to whether canonization is actually an appropriate goal.

**Q2 Answer:** I feel I can best answer this question by describing how I view my role as an artist. In part because I am a multi-disciplinary artist, a performer and theatre creator as well as a poet and writer; and in part because I must know who I am as an artist *before* I can understand who I am in any one of the several identities that affect how I am perceived and function sociologically as an artist. I believe that an artist's role in society is to observe deeply, reflect honestly, question fearlessly, and vision wholeheartedly, freely and passionately. I believe that artists create opportunities for transformation, both personal and social. I also believe that artists have a responsibility in society, particularly with reference to issues of representation and justice, from the moment our work enters the public sphere. I am an artist because I must be, because it is the only way I know to survive as an emotionally functional human being in this inhumane world. Much of my work is concerned with violence, from domestic to global, and the interrelatedness of private and public manifestations of violence. I create from deep wells of pain and sorrow, as many artists do, and I cannot help but connect to the injustices and violence I see in the world through my own personal history of surviving violence. I cannot help but care. My role as an artist is to transform destructive energy into creative energy. That is how I have survived, and I believe how humanity might survive. So when I connect all that to being Arab American, and a poet

-- it goes without saying that I am driven to write about the violence being perpetrated on Arab peoples by my own American society. I must write about war, I must write about prejudice, I must write about injustices and degradation. I must write about the outrageous contradictions, this "double consciousness" I have been thrust into as a U.S. citizen of Arab descent post-9/11. I must write to survive it. I must write and speak in order to serve the responsibility I feel I have as someone who has access to the public sphere, limited though my access may be; and as someone who has the privilege of citizenship, and is

therefore not as vulnerable as many people in Arab American, and Muslim American, or anyone-who-looks-Arab-or-Muslim communities might be. I hope I would feel this sense of care, urgency and responsibility even if I were not Arab American myself. Because it is part of my role as an artist to care, just as I care about all manifestations of abuse and injustice ... Of course, I also write poems about love. That's important, too. And deeply connected to identity, and justice.

**Q3 Answer:** That generally depends on the project; different projects may have different audiences. As a theatre artist, I am accustomed to always thinking about the question of audience. In the case of *Eleven Reflections on September*, and other war-themed work I have done in recent years, I have multiple audiences in mind: Arab American and Muslim American communities; peace activists and veterans; educators and students, especially young people of color who are disproportionately targeted for military recruitment; and general audiences interested in live performance, theatre, poetry, media; or the intersections of any of these. Through performance, I try to bring people into a room together who may never otherwise encounter each other in the same physical space; and further, bring them into a shared experience together, and into dialogue. I also try to reach multiple audiences through multiple media: some of my poems have been made into visual art pieces through collaborations, or into YouTube videos, performed live on community radio stations, published in literary journals such as *Mizna*, or distributed as a CD. So I am always looking for ways to expand who might have access to my work, or encounter it, accidentally or intentionally ... Other projects may have completely different audiences (such as bilingual Spanish-English communities, LGBTQ communities, literary or spoken word communities, youth, etc.)

**Q4 Answer:** I am not sure to what extent I have been influenced by the above-mentioned schools of poetry. I am mostly a self-taught poet, and a trained performer. Certainly there are individual poets and writers from various periods and schools that have had a profound impact on me, at different points in my life -- especially women poets, from Emily Dickinson, to Adrienne Rich, to Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Suheir Hammad, Naomi Shihab Nye and Etel Adnan. But I don't think I follow any particular school. As a theatre artist who began performing my own poetry, the oral traditions of the Beat Generation to the resurgence of Spoken Word in the Hip Hop generation have been important for me, but not more so than the schools of acting that I have trained in (namely Meisner Technique and the experimental theatre lineage of Grotowski). Only recently have I begun to study oral traditions in Arab, North African and Middle Eastern poetry, which I am hungry to explore further (though I am limited by my ignorance the Arabic language). That will, no doubt, be a life-long project.

**Q5 Answer: Not Answered**

**Note: Parts II, III, and IV have not been answered.**

**\*\*\* END OF SURVEY A.4\*\*\***

## A.5

**Participant:** Lisa S. Majaj, Arab-American poet/critic

**I. Contemporary Arab American Poetry (Total: 5 questions)**

**Q1 Answer:** Racialized Ethnic literature, with some writers firmly grounded in the American canon as well (eg. Naomi Shihab Nye).

**Q2 Answer:** As a poet, I write out of the complex needs of any poet to use language to articulate deep emotions and to respond to the impress of the world. Much of my poetry is grounded in Palestinian issues, and much of my poetry seeks to give voice to these issues. But it would be an oversimplification to say that I write only to voice Palestine. I write out of the complicated weave of human experience. This includes very personal experience as well as more public experience; it includes my sense of being a citizen of the world as well as inhabitant of my own personal life (as daughter, mother, lover of the natural world etc.). It includes an understanding of voice as an act of agency in the world.

As a critic, I have sought to document and analyse the development of Arab American literature. I take a historical view of this literature but I also see the need to assess individual texts on their own terms. Now that “Arab American literature” exists, it is becoming more possible for writer to write simply as writers, rather than always as “Arab American writers.” I seek to explore the nuances of the categories within which Arab American writers and critics situate themselves. My criticism arises not only from a deep academic commitment to this body of literature, but from a very personal sense of why literature and criticism matter. My original work on Arab American literature was carried out from a deep commitment to making Arab American literature and experience visible in the world, and from a deep commitment to exploring the complexity of this literature and this experience. I have always felt that this body of literature could not be pigeonholed too neatly into one or another category: Arab or American. When I first started doing my work, many years ago, there were fewer available categories, and so I often felt I was straining against the available interpretive boxes. Now, I think we have a much broader and more nuanced understanding of how literature can be at once ethnic and diasporic, at once Arab and American but something larger and more complicated than both of those. As a poet, I write out of that complexity. As a critic, I seek to elucidate it in the work of others.

**Q3 Answer:** I hope to reach Arab Americans, Americans who are not Arabs, Arabs. I also hope to reach other people in other (non-Arab) countries. As a poet I believe my work can cross many boundaries. As a critic I also believe my work can cross borders, in part because I believe that the evolution of Arab American literature shares many parallels with the evolution of other literatures.

A recent experience teaching Arab American literature to Greek Cypriot students in Cyprus has taught me a lot about why and how literature such as Arab American literature can reach – and touch, and change – audiences who might have thought this literature has nothing to do with them. That moment of connection – that moment when someone in an entirely different world sees their own world differently because of the words on the page of an Arab American writer – teaches me how important the job of literature is.

**Q4 Answer:** Arab American poetry has historically been strongly lyrical, but I see many other influences emerging as well. I do not see any single school of poetry dominating. I see individual Arab American writers informed by particular schools (eg Suheir Hammad is informed by the Last Poets and hip hop). In

my own case as a poet, I have been influenced by lyric poets and by poets of social justice. Carolyn Forché, Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Denise Levertov have all been influences on me, as have been Naomi Shihab Nye and David Williams and Pauline Kaldas and a long list of other Arab American poets and writers. I have been influenced as well by Arab poets, especially Mahmoud Darwish, but my earliest literary influences were American lyric poets of social justice.

As a critic I have been influenced by writer/critics such as Adrienne Rich who write both creatively and critically. I believe that interface between poetry and prose, literature and criticism, is a very fruitful and important one, and that we can learn much by pushing the boundaries of our literary categories and seeing what lies in the borderlands.

I see Arab American literature as influenced by African American, Asian American and Hispanic American literature in various ways – thematically but also in terms of how to bring different languages (and even different scripts) into coexistence with each other on the page.

**Q5 Answer:** I am not the best person to answer, as I am not fluent in Arabic. I would say that much AA poetry probably is not informed by Arab literary conventions per se. Yet I cannot deny that echoes of Arabic language and certainly Arab thematics definitely enter some AA poetry. In addition, I am struck by the increasing willingness to bring Arabic – in transliteration or in Arabic script – into poetry. I think it signals a welcome desire to negotiate the interface between Arab and American and to insist that readers grapple with Arabic on a visual as well as cognitive level.

## II. Racialization and Arab American literature (Total: 2 questions)

**Q6 Answer:** Yes, for sure. Early Arab American poetry tended to fit more within the paradigm of either assimilation or an “ethnic revival” that was viewed in terms of culture and viewed in comparison to white ethnicity. Contemporary AA writing is strongly shaped by a much more decided attention to discourses of race and politics and to a claiming of a “racial” identity that earlier AA poets may have resisted. It challenges popular discourses about Arabs but does so with greater nuance, I believe, a nuance that come from greater confidence in AA identity and AA ethnicity. While earlier decades of poetry had to more or less “create” the notion of AA poetry, at the current time, the existence of AA poetry can be taken for granted. This makes it much more possible for writers to assert themselves, challenge discursive frameworks, experiment on both a thematic and linguistic level. First of all, this racialization was present long before 9.11 However, yes, 9.11 consolidated the category. It did not create it, and this is an important fact to take note of.

**Q7 Answer:** Yes, to all three. Actually, this is a clear example of how American liberal multiculturalism has failed Arab Americans.

AA writers increasingly bring Arab culture into their work, whether classical Arab culture or contemporary Arab locations, contexts, and concerns. They attend to issues of justice that are not just related to their Arab countries of origin and to AA issues, but to issues of justice that affect other communities of color, other oppressed or disadvantaged groups; they address issues of sexism, racism, etc. And they make clear connections between national and global contexts. Consider Suheir Hammad’s phrase “over there is over here”. For AA writers, writing is a form of resistance, a form of agency, a means of making connections; it links them to others across many dividing lines.

### III. Discourse of Arab-American women writers (Total: 5 questions)

**Q11 Answer:** AA women poets grapple with this issue directly, challenging the concept that to be different is to be not American. They both insist on difference and insist on redefining American identity to include this difference. We are moving beyond the binary; I believe we are no longer so tormented by the division between Arab and American. Our more nuanced understanding of transnationalism plays a role in this, I think. Post 911, if the boundaries of American identity are more rigidly drawn, the limitations of those boundaries are more obvious. We no longer struggle for inclusion: we insist on recognition of who we are. Ironically, the exclusions of a post 911 society have made this issue more starkly apparent: I believe that writers no longer try to assimilate through their writing: they speak and let their readers grapple with who they are.

**Q12 Answer:** I suspect that 911 has both shaped AA literature in profound ways, and in other ways simply accentuated the issues that were there all along. After 911 people wanted to understand the Arab world better. The surge in interest in Arab culture was often channeled through an interest in Arab women – perhaps a “safe” way to gain understanding. I believe that Nathalie Handal’s anthology *Poetry of Arab Women* sold a large number of copies after 911. People might have been searching for reaffirmation of their own stereotypes, or not. Either way, it is possible that AA women got more exposure after 911. So in a strange way it created a space for AA women even as it defined and constricted that space.

**Q13 Answer:** I think that AA poetry has always responded to political events, and AA identity has always been shaped in waves correlating to key political moments or events: 1967, 1975-6 (Lebanese civil war), 1982, 1991, etc.

Why do AA women poets write political poetry? Because their identity is inextricably shaped by politics. Why write about social oppression and justice? because these issues are central to AA life.

But they are not the only thing in AA life. Perhaps there may be a tendency to seek out the political in this poetry, in the same way that, in a previous era, we often emphasized the “Arab” markers of AA poetry in order to consolidate a sense of AA identity. At the end of the day, poems are many layered and open to many possible readings. Politics are integral to AA poetry, even as not every poem is political. Or perhaps writing a non-political poem is itself a political act. If we seek out the political and ignore other elements in the poetry, then we are circumscribing its meaning. But to ignore the political would also be a circumscription or distortion.

**Q14 Answer:** That’s a great question. I would say that for some poets, yes, for others, no. I think that many AA women poets make transnational linkages on the grounds of humanistic connection in a way that some male poets do not. However, then I immediately think of the male poets who make precisely these linkages (eg David Williams). Or I think of poets who use abstractions or experimental form that make linkages in a very different way. (Etel Adnan, Khaled Mattawa). I think many interesting comparisons and contrasts can be made, but I would be quite hesitant to come to solid gender-based conclusions. Poets like Mohja Kahf have reclaimed the veil and the right to wear it as a sign of female agency. So the veil enters some AA poetry redefined: not a symbol of oppression but a symbol of agency.

**Q15 Answer:** I definitely think the situation has changed. AA writing has matured, and more and more writers are not afraid to speak openly of the issues that confront us. I suspect the BDS movement will also play a role in AA literature: more and more, the boundaries are being broken, what was for so long unspoken can finally begin to be spoken.

**Note: Part III has not been answered.**

**\*\*\* END OF SURVEY A.5\*\*\***

## A.6

**Participant:** Marianne Haddad, Arab-American poet

### III. Cultural Politics and Arab American Literature (Total: 3 questions)

**Q8 Answer:** I believe my longer commentaries in Section A cover this. Authentic Arab culture, I believe, is carried by us into the American mainstream, no matter where our immigration or our parents' or grandparents' immigration has taken us, brought us to, placed us; our language with us, we carry the names of our cities, as well, within our respective countries with us, they surface endemically in our work, sometimes all at a time, sometimes piece by piece, place by place: Hama, Homs, Majta il Hilew, Safita, Juwaikhat. The organic placement of these names of places and people within our art.

**Q9 Answer:** Large significance. Again, my previous answers hold a lot of the response this question seeks. All that you mention in the parentheticals here construct our identity, thus inform the hearer, in any country. I have always been intrigued by women who wear traditional Muslim garb, coming forward in great defense of it. Upon entering the Dubai airport, I was astonished by the variances of Muslim dress, and the degree of religiosity that was definable by the level of their covering or small signifiers that told us more about them if we tuned in.

**Q10 Answer:** I feel this question has been answered in many of my VERY LONG ☺ previous answers. So many of our writers are writing about, in some ways, the country from which their ancestry stems. I think our pool of poets and writers is increasing and in so doing, more geographical territory is covered, always someone coming from a new Middle Eastern country or African Arabic-speaking country. Why, even in Brussels, Belgium, we have the dear Shafiq Naz who yearly gathers poems for his poetry calendar, which is always a wondrous anthology, where he incorporates the work of fine Arab American poets amidst the best non-Arab American poets writing today.

### IV. Discourse of Arab-American women writers (Total: 5 questions)

**Q11 Answer:** I don't, per se, address this, since A. Speaking for myself, as an example, I am not Muslim and do not dress in traditional Muslim garb, but perhaps the fact I dress freely and might reference this freedom, speaks to the same subject by giving a range of ideas from Muslim and Non-Muslim women, even conservative Christian women, and the lack of fear of first and second generation women to Americanize or westernize their garb. Or not to, holding on dearly, some, to a proclaimed love and respect for head and body coverings. A good reference I spoke of somewhere above is the anthology I mentioned, SCHEHERAZADE'S LEGACY. I taught it in a university undergraduate world literature course, and a Pakistani student defended the traditional Muslim garb, though she, herself, did not wear it. It depends on the poet/writer and that poet's/writer's beliefs. For me, I could say it does not inhibit me, but it did once, the very first essay I wrote on Arab American female identity, entitled Lost in Translation. I cried when I wrote it, and I knew it would be published. In speaking against the patriarchal roles I was raised with, I felt I had become a sort of traitor to my culture, and some of the men who were dearest to me. I called a professor who had connected me to this journal for which I was writing the piece. I explained to him the sadness and feeling of betrayal I sensed, that I would tell the public, written, for all to see, some truths. He

advised me to be courageous and to tell these very necessary truths. The portion of the essay, small as it was in spatial measurements on the age, was very loud and very clear, speaking out against patriarchal reins and reigns. He convinced me it should stay, as I deep-down believed so, as well. Did I keep it, yes? Did I take steps to soften it in tone, I must admit I did. The keen reader could sense the real and hard truth/s. My sister said her husband, Syrian-born American and had read it, she advised me that he was slightly offended by the sentence, but she said, then he saw that you said something positive or clarifying or qualifying it, so he liked it. I had added a phrase that “covered” the integrity of the men that I also wanted to tell about. While unveiling some hard characteristics of theirs, I also felt I should explicate the good, offsetting, thus, the hardness of the claims. I did, though, keep the difficult passage in.

As an aside, I have a powerful anecdote...an editor of an excellent anthology, I do not have permission to give names, was VERY concerned that her large publishing houses smaller imprint decided against the book cover that had been agreed upon, replacing it with a burka-wearing woman, the publisher felt it would sell more, the editor told me she cried, because all the content within the book was working against that, and at the last minute, without consulting with the anthology’ editor, they sprung a cover on her that she felt negated the entire content of the pieces in the book.

**Q12 Answer:** Answers in my long passages above. Maternal instinct also comes into play, wanting to identify and defend the goodness of our people.

**Q13 Answer:** THIS IS DEFINITELY IN MY SECOND LONG ANSWER WHERE I EXPLICATE THE PROCESS OF COMING TO THE LITERARY ARTS AS ART FIRST AND ONLY WHEN ORGANICALLY SURFACING AS MEMORY OR NAME OR POINT, TO INCLUDE THE POLITICAL.

**Q14 Answer:** I think perhaps there might be an intent to impact it as such, but in the long run, I do not think it does; the intention does seem to be there by the Western colonial interests, but the poets and authors themselves, most of them, at least, are too strong to be bullied or afraid, it is my opinion that the speaker in the literature will speak, no matter the intent to quiet or dilute, at least in most cases.

**Q15 Answer:** I can speak for myself, and I feel Aziz is absolutely correct. There are other writers and poets, entering, as we speak, though, who still carry or will carry some anger or angst and *much* memory. Our pool of writers follows, as does anything, some sort of bell curve attached to another bell curve, a series of bell curves—buoyant with the constant addition of new voices speaking; so to say it is this way for me, is not to say it is this way, or that, for them...we are all arriving at different times...I know, for me, fifteen years ago, I had an essay and a poem resisting marriage. Does that come from anger at a culture that insists we engage in something? Is it me being rebellious and saying, “No, I am independent.” That voice has subsided though it still lives in its original texts, now I have, on the very back burner, one of twelve manuscripts [poetry and prose (creative non-fiction/personal essays/memoir)] a collection of essays, which will incorporate “some” reference to Arab American women of Arab immigrants dating in an American world, but this collection takes on, more often, a lighter voice, less anger, more sense of humor throughout, as we *age* into it; the collection was named over an E-mail conversation, and in some way inspired by it, though I had thought of the essays prior, that I had written and will write, but it was Naomi Shihab Nye who named it SAY HELLO TO ALL MY HUSBANDS [which infers the courtiers who could or would try to become “the husband”], which is a reflection of how Arab immigrant parents deem marriage a

panacea of sorts, and expect their daughters to enter [though the book is not limited to Arab or Arab American courters—which is part of the immigrant experience, marrying outside the culture, if at all]. My father’s literal last words to me on his death bed, *Allah yirhammoo, enshallah*—he said, so sadly, and in a disturbed voice, in Arabic, “Luk, shoo ken surleek kintay it-ju-uzztay \_\_\_\_\_.” Or to paraphrase, “You should have married the doctor.”

**Note: Parts I and II have not been answered.**

**\*\*\* END OF SURVEY A.6\*\*\***

**Appendix B: Primary Material**  
**(In order of appearance in body of thesis)**

**B1:** “first writing since” by Suheir Hammad

1. there have been no words.  
 i have not written one word.  
 no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.  
 no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.  
 not one word.

today is a week, and seven is of heavens, gods, science.  
 evident out my kitchen window is an abstract reality.  
 sky where once was steel.  
 smoke where once was flesh.

fire in the city air and i feared for my sister's life in a way never  
 before. and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us.

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot's heart failed, the  
 plane's engine died.  
 then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.  
 please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone  
 who looks like my brothers.

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill.  
 i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger  
 i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen.  
 not really.  
 even as a woman, as a palestinian, as a broken human being.  
 never this broken.

more than ever, i believe there is no difference.  
 the most privileged nation, most americans do not know the difference  
 between indians, afghanis, syrians, muslims, sikhs, hindus.  
 more than ever, there is no difference.

2. thank you korea for kimchi and bibim bob, and corn tea and the  
 genteel smiles of the wait staff at wonjo the smiles never revealing  
 the heat of the food or how tired they must be working long midtown  
 shifts. thank you korea, for the belly craving that brought me into  
 the city late the night before and diverted my daily train ride into  
 the world trade center.

there are plenty of thank yous in ny right now. thank you for my  
 lazy procrastinating late ass. thank you to the germs that had me  
 call in sick. thank you, my attitude, you had me fired the week  
 before. thank you for the train that never came, the rude nyer who  
 stole my cab going downtown. thank you for the sense my mama gave me  
 to run. thank you for my legs, my eyes, my life.

3. the dead are called lost and their families hold up shaky  
 printouts in front of us through screens smoked up.

we are looking for iris, mother of three. please call with any  
 information. we are searching for priti, last seen on the 103rd  
 floor. she was talking to her husband on the phone and the line

went. please help us find george, also known as a ! ! del. his family is waiting for him with his favorite meal. i am looking for my son, who was delivering coffee. i am looking for my sister girl, she started her job on monday.

i am looking for peace. i am looking for mercy. i am looking for evidence of compassion. any evidence of life. i am looking for life.

4. ricardo on the radio said in his accent thick as yuca, "i will feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there. and my friends feel the same way."

on my block, a woman was crying in a car parked and stranded in hurt. i offered comfort, extended a hand she did not see before she said, "we're gonna burn them so bad, i swear, so bad." my hand went to my head and my head went to the numbers within it of the dead iraqi children, the dead in nicaragua. the dead in rwanda who had to vie with fake sport wrestling for america's attention.

yet when people sent emails saying, this was bound to happen, lets ! ! not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second i felt resentful. hold up with that, cause i live here, these are my friends and fam, and it could have been me in those buildings, and we're not bad people, do not support america's bullying. can i just have a half second to feel bad?

if i can find through this exhaust people who were left behind to mourn and to resist mass murder, i might be alright.

thank you to the woman who saw me brinking my cool and blinking back tears. she opened her arms before she asked "do you want a hug?" a big white woman, and her embrace was the kind only people with the warmth of flesh can offer. i wasn't about to say no to any comfort. "my brother's in the navy," i said. "and we're arabs". "wow, you got double trouble." word.

5. one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.  
one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.  
one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed. one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people.  
or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page.

we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma. america did not give out his family's addresses or where he went to church. or blame the bible or pat robertson.

and when the networks air footage of palestinians dancing in the street, there is no apology that hungry children are bribed with sweets that turn their teeth brown. that correspondents edit images. that archives are there to facilitate lazy and inaccurate

journalism.

and when we talk about holy books and hooded men and death, why do we never mention the kkk?

if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip.

6. today it is ten days. last night bush waged war on a man once openly funded by the cia. i do not know who is responsible. read too many books, know too many people to believe what i am told. i don't give a fuck about bin laden. his vision of the world does not include me or those i love. and petitions have been going around for years trying to get the u.s. sponsored taliban out of power. shit is complicated, and i don't know what to think.

but i know for sure who will pay.

in the world, it will be women, mostly colored and poor. women will have to bury children, and support themselves through grief. "either you are with us, or with the terrorists" - meaning keep your people under control and your resistance censored. meaning we got the loot and the nukes.

in america, it will be those amongst us who refuse blanket attacks on the shivering. those of us who work toward social justice, in support of civil liberties, in opposition to hateful foreign policies.

i have never felt less american and more new yorker, particularly brooklyn, than these past days. the stars and stripes on all these cars and apartment windows represent the dead as citizens first, not family members, not lovers.

i feel like my skin is real thin, and that my eyes are only going to get darker. the future holds little light.

my baby brother is a man now, and on alert, and praying five times a day that the orders he will take in a few days' time are righteous and will not weigh his soul down from the afterlife he deserves.

both my brothers - my heart stops when i try to pray - not a beat to disturb my fear. one a rock god, the other a sergeant, and both palestinian, practicing muslim, gentlemen. both born in brooklyn and their faces are of the archetypal arab man, all eyelashes and nose and beautiful color and stubborn hair.

what will their lives be like now?

over there is over here.

7. all day, across the river, the smell of burning rubber and limbs floats through. the sirens have stopped now. the advertisers are back on the air. the rescue workers are traumatized. the skyline is brought back to human size. no longer taunting the gods with its height.

i have not cried at all while writing this. i cried when i saw those buildings collapse on themselves like a broken heart. i have never owned pain that needs to spread like that. and i cry daily that my brothers return to our mother safe and whole.

there is no poetry in this. there are causes and effects. there are symbols and ideologies. mad conspiracy here, and information we will never know. there is death here, and there are promises of more.

there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting, but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen.

affirm life.

affirm life.

we got to carry each other now.

you are either with life, or against it.

affirm life.

**B2: “Quadroon/Shatti Ya Dunya” by Andrea Assaf**

Every fourth drop is from there ...  
if blood can be calibrated.

Every fourth drop  
carries the desert,  
drips from the cedar,  
stains a small rock on the shore.

Every fourth drop  
knows the intimacy of sirens,  
the smoky trail of hookah,  
and wrinkled hands hard as olives, freshly picked.

If blood, indeed, can carry such things ...

And they say it can:  
those same who lift our arms and pass radar through our bodies at the gate,  
those same who swear they will never forget and daily do,  
those same who point flags like arthritic fingers, gnarled and tight.

They search my face for it.  
They count every fourth drop.  
They believe in the calibration,  
the undeniable evidence  
that I am,  
one fourth,  
*from there.*

Wherever *there* is, this September.

And every fourth drop  
boils this time of year,  
leaping in alarm and rage,  
screaming past the sinews  
to insist on mingling with the other three,  
to insist in its cellular universe  
that there is no detectable difference:

*I cannot be separated,* each says,  
*I am of you ...*

*I refuse the calibration,  
I run through you, as you do me ...  
but you waste my blood as yours,  
as if I were yours to waste!  
I am dripping from the cedar tree,  
dripping from the cloudless sky,  
staining these rocks, this shore  
spilling you all over me,  
as if you were mine to spill.*

*I am boiling against your cold,  
I am cutting the sky with my scream,  
I carry the sound of the air raid  
through veins ...  
embedded with shrapnel.*

I am the fourth drop:  
every fourth drop,  
ringing through the desert,  
not knowing how anyone will ever hear ...

So I count  
each drop of blood  
that falls, and ask:

If every fourth drop ran together  
and infused the other three,  
until all were four, and one were one ...

*Would I be a different person?  
In a different world?  
Would it have been a different day?*

*Or would I be ...*

*September?*

**B3:** “the journey” by Laila Halaby1

born

out of place  
 a single mother’s only child  
 fatherless  
 blanketed in foreignness

my mother ran  
 from one desert to another  
 until she found home

alone  
 we were opposites in a small house  
 me, loud and moving  
 wild with a longing  
 I didn’t speak fluently  
 she, quiet and still  
 stashing her multilingual sorrows  
 in the tool shed out back

she tried to teach me in American  
 how to be an Arab  
 but didn’t get it quite right  
 left stuff out  
 left me uncomfortable  
 in my shoes  
 always searching  
 for the right pair

I found them in high school  
 all by myself  
 no flour-white fairy godmother to guide me  
 no handsome dark prince to slide them  
 on my delicate size five feet

these shoes were  
 all me  
 all mine  
 white leather  
 size eight  
 with a star and crescent carved out  
 etched in silver  
 they curved up at the toes  
 genie shoes  
 I could disappear if I wanted to  
 and I did

away from the main-line mold  
 of A-line skirts  
 preppy shirts

making out after football games  
 I spat all of America out  
 like a giant wad of chewing tobacco  
 begged my shoes to carry me home

I spoke with an accent  
 Played my born-in-Lebanon trump card  
 sailed on the fact that my father  
 and six half-brothers and sisters  
 were still There

my life became rich  
 with the world's tragedies  
 (Palestine and South Africa)  
 while my American connections frayed  
 and I finished them off  
 with my massive superior dagger  
 one by one  
 until they were gone

first Sara  
 the Jewish girl  
 once my best friend  
 who told me that Arabs were barbarians  
 called me fat-Arab-slime-girl

chop

then Shawna  
 (we used to bake  
 chocolate chip cookies together)

chop

even Nina  
 (she taught me dancing)

chop

I kept Kaiser  
 (he was Chinese  
 after all)

and Annie  
 (she was half Mexican  
 we had grown up together  
 were like sisters on good days)

I added Jommana  
 and Rula  
 Murad  
 then Hania  
 Mona  
 Marwan  
 and Saeed

Anoushka  
 Azzam  
 and Marcelino  
 Elias  
 Fethi  
 Resat  
 and Nora  
 Katia  
 Hassan  
 and Ala  
 I taught my tongue to dance  
 in Spanish  
 Italian  
 French  
 and Arabic  
 with snatches of Turkish  
 Greek  
 and Persian  
 unaccented and sloppy in each

I cremated my Americanness  
 flung it from the top of the castle in Ajlun  
 tossed it into the Dead Sea  
 drowned it off a boat in Aqaba  
 buried it near the ruins in Um Qais

2

I wrote  
 in a windy-city in the north of Jordan  
 collected stories  
 memories  
 histories  
 got adopted by a 'real' family  
 visited villages  
 schools  
 refugee camps

my adjectives  
 changed daily  
 (depending  
 on who was watching)  
 American  
 Arab  
 Palestinian  
 Jordanian  
 retarded  
 Spanish  
 Christian  
 Muslim  
 deaf  
 Italian  
 Algerian

I vomited labels

(not one agreed with me)  
 Devoured rich and fatty stories  
 (this kept my weight balanced)

suitcases heavy with zaatar and coffee  
 I returned to the States  
 wrote  
 went to school  
 kept writing  
 dipped my bread in olive oil  
 wrote more  
 kept studying  
 boiled my coffee three times  
 got married  
 had babies  
 continued writing  
 demanded validation  
 as a woman  
 as an Arab  
 as a writer

and then

when no one wanted my stories  
 and no one cared where I was born  
 where my father was from  
 why I looked the way I did  
 I walked away from my constant scribbling  
 sat myself at the back of the smelly city bus that is life  
 and accepted that i had become  
 exactly who I always wanted to be:  
 a normal person whose labels  
 were irrelevant

3

until

one sweet, quiet morning  
 curled up asleep with my younger child  
 the world imploded

people shrouded in religion  
 and stuffed in planes  
 took away our collective human breath

some people got theirs back faster than others

our grief  
 got cut short  
 by stares  
 over-zealous security guards  
 by silence  
 followed by hatred  
 the same kind that fuels people

to get on planes and fly into buildings

I unfolded my familial pledge of normalcy  
 and not-devoting-hours-to-imaginary-people  
 studied it  
 smoothed out the wrinkles  
 pressed it between the covers of a book  
 not the Bible  
 or the Quran  
 I stashed my promise between the pages  
 of *Cry the Beloved Country*  
 the book that taught me the power of words

in spite of my over-stuffed reality  
 already at bursting with  
 two young children  
 a house  
 a husband  
 a day job  
 I searched for a publisher  
 sent off poems and manuscripts  
 and I wrote  
 even though it meant  
 waking up just after four  
 when sometimes I hadn't slept until midnight  
 and my younger child had woken ip  
 twice in the night

4

this time

everything worked out nicely  
 my book looked great in print  
 my contract for a second book was generous  
 requests came in  
 from all over the world  
 to hear what I had to say

but really  
 nothing changed

5

being  
 published  
 did not make me a writer  
 eating zaatar  
 did not make me an Arab  
 getting married and having children  
 did not make me a woman

I have been  
 all of those things  
 the whole time I've been sitting here

at the back of the stinky city bus  
(by choice, in spite of the fumes)

back here  
you get to see

everything

**B4:** “Why Not Say What Happens?” by Lawrence Joseph**I**

Of icons. Of divination. Of Gods. Repetitions  
 without end. I have it in my notes,  
 a translation from the Latin, a commentary  
 on the book of Revelation – “the greater  
 the concentration of power on earth,  
 the more truth is stripped of its power,  
 the holiest innocent, in eternity,  
 is ‘as though slain ...’”  
 It has nothing to do with the apocalypse.  
 The seven-headed beast from the sea,  
 the two-horned beast from the earth, have always –  
 I know, I’ve studied it – been with us.  
 Me? I’m only an accessory to particular images.

**II**

According to the translation of the police transcript,  
 the sheikh – the arrested head  
 of the cell mockingly said – in a plot  
 involving a chemical attack,  
 needs, simply,  
 two or three young men with brains and training  
 with nothing to gain or lose,  
 not an army.  
 It doesn’t take much these days to be a prophet.  
 Do you know how much poison can be put  
 in a ten-liter barrel?  
 You pour it and spread it, then you leave.  
 The web is, prosecutors believe,  
 so intricate, the detainee,  
 they think, may also be a member  
 of cells in Barcelona and Frankfurt.

**III**

Yet another latest version of another  
 ancient practice – mercenaries, as they were once known,  
 are thriving, only this time  
 they’re called “private military contractors.”  
 During the last few years their employees  
 have been sent to Bosnia, Nigeria, Colombia, and, of course,  
 most recently, Iraq. No one knows  
 how extensive the industry is, but some military experts  
 estimate a market of tens of billions of dollars.

**IV**

Autumn turned to winter and the site  
 began to clear. The limits of my language  
 are the limits of my world, said Wittgenstein.  
 The realization – the state of the physical world  
 depends on shifts in the delusional thinking

of very small groups. One of Garfinkle's patients tripped over a severed foot while evacuating the Stock Exchange. Several others saw the first plane pass right next to the almost floor-length windows of their conference room. "When I'm not working, the last thing I want to do is talk about it," said one policeman, who, like many of the city's uniformed officers, is still working a schedule of twelve hours on, twelve hours off ... Shoes, books, wallets, jewelry, watches, some of them still keeping time ... The congressman says he can't say for sure there isn't a suitcase with a nuclear bomb floating around out there. Everything immense and out of context. The large item in the mud, one of the motors that powered the Towers' elevators. "It's intense" – says Lieutenant Bovine – "no photographs! This is a crime scene!" What happened was one floor fell on top of another, as many as ten floors compressed into a foot of space. What fell was mostly metal ... The cement vaporized ... *The Night Watch* was what the laid-out scene looked like. The fences around the wreckage covered with T-shirts, teddy bears, and memorial banners signed by thousands of visitors; tourists snap pictures, and, subject to the way the wind is blowing, the air is tinged with an acrid smoke ... "Lost/Missing Family 1-866-856-4167 or 1-212-741-4626..." A Web Exclusive, the poet will speak about poetry and grief ... The smells of burning wiring, dankness from the tunnels, the sharp and sweet cherrylike smell of death. At eight-ten on Friday two more bodies are found in a stairwell of the South Tower. Work, again, stops, and the ironworkers, who have been cutting steel beams, come out from the hole. The work goes on until well past midnight. More debris is removed, another body recovered. A group of ironworkers stands on a gnarled beam, one end of which juts over the pit like a gangplank. Three 35-millimeter movie cameras are placed on top of nearby buildings, each programmed to take a picture every five minutes, day and night. A bugler slips onto the site and plays "Taps".

## V

That period of ten or eleven years – concerning it I can express myself briefly. At some point, in collective time, electronic space turned into time. The miraculous multiplication of loaves was restricted to the rentiers. A grappa in a black, pyramid-shaped bottle

was taken cognizance of,  
 and, with no resistance,  
 for the most part, no guarantees  
 were made for the slow, the meek, or the poor of spirit,  
 who, for reasons unexplained,  
 allowed themselves to disappear  
 into the long, red evenings, night's early gray-blues.

## VI

Screaming – those who could  
 sprinting – south toward  
 Battery Park, the dark cloud  
 funneling slowly –  
 there are two things you should know  
 about this cloud –  
 one, it isn't only ash and soot  
 but metal, glass, concrete, and flesh,  
 and, two, soon  
 any one of these pieces  
 of metal, glass, or concrete  
 might go through you.  
 As she turns to run, a woman's bag  
 comes off her shoulder,  
 bright silver compact discs sent  
 spinning along the ground, a man,  
 older, to the right,  
 is tripping,  
 falls against the pavement,  
 glasses flying  
 off his face.

## VII

Have I mentioned my grandmother,  
 my father's mother, who died long ago  
 but who visits me in dreams?  
 It's to her, mostly, I owe  
 the feeling that, in cases of need,  
 those transfigured in eternal love help us  
 certainly with eternal,  
 and, perhaps, also, with temporal gifts;  
 that, in eternal love, all is gratis –  
 all that comes from eternal love  
 is gratis.

## VIII

My father? – my father was a worker. I can still hear him  
 getting up in the morning to go to work.  
 Sadness, too, has to be learned,  
 and it took my father time to learn it,  
 but he did, though when he did  
 his tears were never chronic.  
 As for the economies on which my parents' lives depended,  
 they won't be found

in any book.

## IX

It's the details that dream out  
 the plot. Rearrange the lies, the conceits,  
 the crimes, the exploitation  
 of needs and desires,  
 and it's still there, the whole system's  
 nervous system – inside it,  
 at times, a dreamer at work, right now  
 it's me. The air not yet too cold with winter,  
 at a sidewalk table at the Cornelia Street Cafe –  
 a dream, it's a dream, the dream  
 of a dream song, the dream of a dream,  
 a glass of Sancerre on the table, re-visioning,  
 in a purple mist, a tugboat, practical and hard,  
 as it approaches a freighter,  
 black, with the red-lettered name BYZANTIUM.

## X

Capital? Careful! Capital captializes,  
 assimilates, makes  
 its own substance, revitalizing  
 its being, a vast metabolism absorbing even  
 the most ancient exchanges, running away,  
 as the cyberneticians put it,  
 performing, as it does, its own  
 anthropomorphosis, its triumph  
 the triumph of meditation –  
 and, let's not forget,  
 it organizes, capital organizes, capital is  
 “an organizing,”  
 organizing  
 social forms.

## XI

Pink above the Hudson  
 against the shadows lingering still,  
 the sky above an even blue and changing  
 to a pale gray and rose.  
 A coat of snow in the park on Tenth Avenue,  
 clumps of grass sticking  
 out of it, late afternoon, in Druids,  
 Sam Cooke on the jukebox, lines  
 from an obscure tune from the box set,  
 “even my voice belongs to you,  
 I use my voice to sing, to sing, to sing to you ...”  
 The lives of the two or three others who pass through  
 as close to you as the weather.  
 Walking back, the dotted lines  
 of the lights on the Bridge, the sun  
 blotted out by a burst of vermilion.

**XII**

I remember it – the gold burnt into gold,  
the gold on gold and on white and yellow,  
an incandescence condensing the sunlight,  
outburning the sunlight, the factory  
molten, the sun behind it, in it, thin,  
gold, pig iron, a spray of fire, flywheels  
revolving through the floor, rims almost  
reaching the roof, enormous engines  
throwing great pounding cylindrical arms  
back and forth, as if the machines  
are playing a game, trying to see how much  
momentum can be withstood before one  
or the other gives way. I remember – down Sixth  
to Downing, to Varick, down Varick, downtown.  
A cat is in the rubbish in the street. The sun  
over Jersey. The gap at the end of West Street,  
the sun on the clock tower. The melancholy  
induced by the pressure of time, the wavering  
ambitions, failed ideas, time wasted.  
The unexpected breeze, warm, the sense  
of the river. The sky blue, dark blue  
yet pure in color, not blackened  
or tarnished, above the low, old  
buildings, like a painting of something  
solid rather than the solid thing itself,  
a high and low composition. But what  
light there is in that landscape ...

**B5:** “Arab on Radar” by Angele Ellis

the band poster said, an accusation, a declaration of secret identity. *Ayhrr-ub*, I hear in my grandfather's voice, then *Ahab the Ay-rab*, that novelty song of the sixties where the girlfriend whinnies like a camel –very funny – by the guy who later sang that everyone is beautiful but I guess he made a few exceptions. We usually said Lebanese, a measure of blamelessness until Beirut became a synonym for Hell. Some preferred Phoenician, ancients in merchant ships with purple sails, anything to erase the hated word that brought us from whiteness to darkness. It was all about whiteness. Trying to ignore the cartoon sheiks with their huge noses while we measured ours, praying they wouldn't get bigger. *You're not Lebanese?* said the bookstore clerk who recognized the golden cedar of Lebanon around my neck. Yes, I am. *But you're so pale!* he cried. Malcolm X had a vision of universal brotherhood if not sisterhood on his pilgrimage to Mecca, *hajis* in every shade from ivory to sable, but we were Christians so that let us out. Sometimes we were taken for Jews – ironic recognition, Semite to Semite, or just another tired form of bigotry. My grandfather, slowly dying, speaking to me in Arabic from hi hospital bed. My aunt saying, *Bayee, you know she doesn't understand. Your father should have taught you*, he replied in English as heavy as punishment. *But your father said to me, What do I need it for?* What do I need it for now except that the pain of denial persists like a blip on the screen of consciousness in every war, declared or silent.

**B6:** “Little Mosque Poems” by Mohja Kahf

In my little mosque  
 there is no room for me  
 to pray. I am  
 turned away faithfully  
 five  
 times a day.  
 My little mosque:  
 so meager  
 in resources, yet  
 so eager  
 to turn away  
 a woman  
 or a stranger.  
 My little mosque  
 is penniless, behind on rent.  
 Yet it is rich in anger –  
 every Friday, coins of fear and hate  
 are generously spent.  
 My little mosque is poor yet  
 every week we mosque-goers donate  
 to buy another curtain  
 to partition off the women,  
 or to pave another parking space.  
 I go to the Mosque of the Righteous  
 I have been going there all my life.  
 I have been the Cheerleader of the Righteous Team.  
 I have mocked the visiting teams cruelly.  
 I am the worst of those I complain about:  
 I am a former Miss Mosque Banality.  
 I would like to build  
 a little mosque  
 without a dome  
 or minaret.  
 I'd hang a sign  
 over the door:  
 Bad Muslims  
 welcome here.  
 Come in, listen  
 to some music,  
 sharpen  
 the soul's longing,  
 have a cigarette.  
 I went to the mosque  
 when no one was there  
 and startled two angels  
 coming out of a broom closet.  
 "Are they gone now?" one said.  
 They looked relieved.  
 My great big mosque  
 has a chandelier  
 big as a Christmas tree  
 and a jealously guarded

lock and key.  
 I wonder why  
 everyone in it  
 looks just like me.  
 My little mosque  
 has a bouncer at the door.  
 You have to look pious  
 to get in.  
 My little mosque  
 has a big sense of humor.  
 Not.  
 I went to the mosque  
 when no one was there.  
 The prayer space was soft and serene.  
 I heard a sound like lonely singing  
 or quiet sobbing. I heard a leafy rustling.  
 I looked around.  
 A little Qur'an  
 on a low shelf  
 was reciting itself.  
 My little mosque has a Persian carpet  
 depicting trees of paradise  
 in the men's section, which you enter  
 through a lovely classical arch.  
 The women's section features –  
 well, nothing.  
 Piety dictates that men enter  
 my little mosque through magnificent columns.  
 Piety dictates  
 that women enter  
 my little mosque  
 through the back alley,  
 just past the crack junkie here  
 and over these fallen garbage cans.  
 My little mosque used to be democratic  
 with a rotating imam  
 we chose from among us every month.  
 Now my little mosque has an appointed imam  
 with a classical training from abroad.  
 No one can dispute his superior knowledge.  
 We used to use our minds  
 to understand Qur'an.  
 My little mosque discourages  
 that sort of thing these days.  
 We have official salaried translators  
 for God.  
 I used to carry around a little mosque  
 in the chambers of my heart  
 but it is closed indefinitely pending  
 extensive structural repairs.  
 I miss having a mosque,  
 driving by and seeing cars lining the streets,  
 people double-parking, desperate  
 to catch the prayer in time.  
 I miss noticing, as they dodge across traffic

toward the mosque entrance between  
 buses and trucks,  
 their long chemises fluttering,  
 that trail of gorgeous fabrics Muslims leave,  
 gossamer, the colors of hot lava, fantastic shades  
 from the glorious places of the earth.  
 I miss the stiff, uncomfortable men  
 looking anywhere but at me when they meet me,  
 and the double-faced women  
 full of judgment, and their beautiful  
 children shining  
 with my children. I do.  
 I don't dream of a perfect mosque.  
 I just want roomfuls of people to kiss every week  
 with the kisses of Prayer and Serenity,  
 and a fat, multi-trunked tree  
 collecting us loosely for a minute under  
 its alive and quivering canopy.  
 Once God applied  
 for a janitor position at our mosque,  
 but the board turned him down  
 because he wasn't a practicing  
 Muslim.  
 Once a woman entered  
 my little mosque  
 with a broken arm,  
 a broken heart,  
 and a very short skirt.  
 Everyone rushed over to her  
 to make sure  
 she was going to cover her legs.  
 Marshmallows are banned  
 from my little mosque  
 because they might  
 contain gelatin derived from pork enzymes,  
 but banality is not banned,  
 and yet verily,  
 banality is worse than marshmallows.  
 Music is banned  
 at my little mosque  
 because it is played on  
 the devil's stringed instruments,  
 although a little music  
 softens the soul  
 and lo, a hardened soul  
 is the devil's taut drumskin.  
 Once an ignorant Bedouin  
 got up and started to pee against a wall  
 in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.  
 The pious protective Companions leapt  
 to beat him.  
 The Prophet bade them stop.  
 A man is entitled to finish a piss  
 even if he is an uncouth idiot,  
 and there are things

more important in a mosque than ritual purity.  
 My little mosque thinks  
 the story I just narrated  
 cannot possibly be true  
 and a poet like me cannot possibly  
 have studied Sahih al-Bukhari  
 My little mosque  
 thinks a poem like this must be  
 written by the Devil  
 in cahoots with the Zionists,  
 NATO, and the current U.S. administration,  
 as part of the Worldwide Orientalist Plot  
 to Discredit Islam.  
 Don't they know  
 at my little mosque  
 that this is a poem  
 written in the mirror  
 by a lover?  
 My little mosque  
 is fearful to protect itself  
 from the bricks of bigots  
 through its window.  
 Doesn't my little mosque know  
 the way to protect its windows  
 is to open its doors?  
 I love my little mosque,  
 ego-ridden, cracked and flawed  
 as it is,  
 and I know  
 the bricks of bigots  
 are real.  
 I wish I could protect my little mosque  
 by hiding it behind my body.  
 My little mosque loves Arab men  
 with pure accents and beards.  
 Everyone else is welcome  
 as long as  
 they understand that Real Islam  
 has to come from an Arab man.  
 My little mosque loves Indian  
 and Pakistani men with Maududi in their pockets.  
 Everyone else is welcome because as we all know  
 there is no discrimination in Islam.  
 My little mosque loves women  
 who know that Islam liberated them  
 fourteen hundred years ago and so  
 they should live like seventh-century Arabian women  
 or at least dress  
 like pre-industrial pre-colonial women  
 although  
 men can adjust with the times.  
 My little mosque loves converts  
 especially white men and women  
 who give "Why I embraced Islam" lectures  
 to be trotted out as trophies

by the Muslim pom-pom squad  
 of Religious One-up-man-ship.  
 My little mosque faints at the sight  
 of pale Bosnian women suffering  
 across the sea.  
 Black women suffering  
 across the street  
 do not move  
 my little mosque much.  
 I would like to find a little mosque  
 where my Christian grandmother  
 and my Jewish great-uncle the rebbe  
 and my Buddhist cousin  
 and my Hindu neighbor  
 would be as welcome  
 as my staunchly Muslim mom and dad.  
 My little mosque has young men and women  
 who have nice cars, nice homes, expensive educations,  
 and think they are the righteous rageful  
 Victims of the World Persecution.  
 My little mosque offers courses on  
 the Basics of Islamic Cognitive Dissonance.  
 "There is no racism in Islam" means  
 we won't talk about it.  
 "Islam is unity" means  
 shuttup.  
 There's so much to learn.  
 Class is free and meets every week.  
 I don't dream of a perfect mosque, only  
 a few square inches of ground  
 that will welcome my forehead,  
 no questions asked.  
 My little mosque is as decrepit  
 as my little heart. Its narrowness  
 is the narrowness in me. Its windows  
 are boarded up like the part of me that prays  
 I went to the mosque  
 when no one was there.  
 No One was sweeping up.  
 She said: This place is just a place.  
 Light is everywhere. Go, live in it.  
 The Mosque is under your feet,  
 wherever you walk each day.

**B7:** *from* “Fable” by Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore

## 10 / THE LEADER’S GHOST

Some claim they have  
 seen his ghost haunting the  
 armaments depot, standing behind the  
 governor’s chair when the  
 senate is in session, suspending a huge  
 ripe watermelon in stasis above the governor’s  
 head during long debates. Believers in  
 reincarnation say he is only  
 one man, from the  
 beginning of the world, Cain perhaps,  
 citizen of the most  
 basic human betrayal, unthinkable but  
 fact, eon after eon, in garbage-lined alleyways or behind  
 glass-topped corporate desks in glossy offices.

His ghost down wide avenues, pushing its  
 hands up policemen’s sleeves to  
 reduce their aspirations for justice to  
 snarling animal hatred. As the

world of humankind stands stunned at the  
 apparent latitude given to  
 tyrants, aided by  
 humanitarian governments,  
 accompanied by mass choirs of their  
 mewling subjects  
 (like King Farouq, these tyrants grow fat and parade immodestly  
 by the sides of  
 Swiss swimming pools), those who have  
 seen his ghost marvel at its  
 survival, its uncanny knack for  
 indomitable survival.

## 11 / THE MESSENGER

The Messenger revealed himself to the  
 leaves of trees and the  
 trees bore fruit, both  
 edible and mysterious. The edible fruit ran its  
 luscious juices down chins of children, soaked  
 beards of old men, was thoughtfully cut into

sections by quiet women watching over  
the peeled and sliced world.  
The mysterious fruit burst like lightning above  
nomadic herdsmen, nervous travelers, inspired  
explorers and the  
    long silent, suddenly  
    whisking away filagreed screens of self-  
    satisfied distraction onto an  
open abyss of dark emerald crags and steep  
ravines, chasms down which you can glimpse  
a starry sky so bright blue it seems like  
day down there. Star-twinkle roars up its  
colossal light. Beams of it  
shoot straight up sheer sides to blind our  
entire faces as we peer over with such intellectually  
    justified hesitation, and makes us  
see right through eyelids made suddenly transparent, through the  
actions of tyrants and their victims: The victims who raise up  
tyrants on sticks in the  
    dualistic cosmic Bar-B-Que; and  
the tyrants who melt down like  
    common candle-wax after their  
    tremendous passion has been spent.

## 12 / PUNCTUATION

God Himself is the message:  
The Messenger is God's punctuation: To  
question, pause, stop. Then  
    to exclaim. And the  
exclamation point is the shout of an  
    existence that precedes our individual  
    births and surges from so  
deep within us and rises with such force that  
factory windows a thousand miles away  
shatter into star fragments, deserts become  
even more humbled in their dips and flats by the  
sheer weight of it, an  
    obliterating exclamation of Godhood that  
blots the sun and makes the moon, for a moment,  
fertile. The human tribe dances on its

heels and toes in a great swirling circle at the  
    echo of that exclamation, forest  
animals cock their ears forward, some become  
    curious, take a few shy steps out of total  
animal darkness. Even ocean waves flick silver

tips in assent at the flattening  
 impact of that exclamatory song of a  
 Unity so great that actually  
 life is many mouths singing from one voice, many  
 voices from one larynx, many vocal-chords from the  
 resonance of  
 one heartbeat, from cloud to stone in one  
 absolute  
 vibrating chord even giddily fluttering  
 gnats in flickering firelight  
 understand.

### 13 / THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND

Gusts of green wind blow across dunes at high speed  
 sweeping some dunes away, revealing  
 dunes that slope and float across  
 sand. Light falls straight down in dry  
 pools between smooth breasts of sand. Wind  
 blows its purse-lipped breath across angular  
 divine particles, each one containing  
 a world. Rearranges them in carpet  
 patterns woven on the warp and woof of pure materiality.

Grain-worlds jostle together. Cubas of insurrection collide against  
 Siams of elegant formality. Chinas of monumental  
 populations get flung up against  
 Samoas of dwindling folk-wisdom, men and women with  
 long brown faces looking at  
 firelight, watching significant  
 gestures of sparks scribble  
 gold alphabets against black  
 night. Worlds lie next to each other as a  
 softer wind blows. Gusts become puffs, then  
 steady streams of cool air

as I lean over your body gazing down into your  
 eyes blowing green  
 breath across your breasts against a  
 backdrop of all the swirling  
 worlds in the world, all the

sloping grains of indistinguishable sands of the  
 shifting dunes of you  
 at rest.

**B8:** “Thirty-Three Beads on a String” by Zaid Shlah**1**

I woke from the nightmare  
of a gutted *maqam*.

**2**

Not because I have  
not yet bled my life

in yellow, but because  
minarets sky downwards,  
looking for purple births.

**3**

One burly buffalo  
shrouded in hooves  
and hot breath.

**4**

Because the skin  
is not yet numb,  
and the lights  
are not flickering.

I will continue to sip  
at my hot tea, and stare  
at the dust coloured noon.

**5**

One white *dishdadha* screams  
with the brilliance of red.

**6**

Can you hear them –  
the melodious intent, the  
glimmering oud in their eyes?

**7**

Faith, stitch by seam,  
a garment I have sewn  
to my skin.

**8**

Whatever remains of Al-Gubbenchi’s  
1932 Cairo studio recording, lives

between the old cobble-stoned quarter,  
and my still-warm mahogany ear.

**9**

I should've gotten  
up to shake his hand,

this uncomfortable tension  
between me and God.

**10**

Medina, its streets adorned  
with smells from the bazaar, yet  
I have chosen to adorn myself  
in the still concrete of columns.

**11**

I'm for the transcription  
of the Arabic – sweet spread  
over toast, a dark syrup from  
dates.

**12**

Last night Al-Gubbenchi  
dreamt of his father's fallen  
tooth.

**13**

In the morning he howled  
a song in the name of his father;  
Iraq's new fathers weep at  
the birth of their sons.

**14**

Do not cry for Leila or for Hind,  
but drink the red wine, and grow  
your love doubly, one for the ruby  
in the cup, the other for its rouge  
upon your cheek.

**15**

Bombs raked the eyes of the  
sleeping Assyrian gods.

**16**

As if it were only a sandbox,  
a few worthless grains of sand.

17

I'll cut for you the last swath  
of blue from the sky, sever my  
hand if you'll let me

but for five minutes more,  
leave me to sleep without the  
knowledge of war.

18

A quanoun weeps  
near the funeral of music.

19

Having been occupied,  
noted mourn for the  
loss of their song.

20

I'm for a concert of horses;  
the origin of gazelles leapt up  
from the heart of Al-Gubbenchi.

21

Had you made small steps into  
the desert inside us, or listened  
for the guttural lodged deep within  
our throats, you would have come  
bearing gifts.

22

I have nothing in red  
that I would not abide  
in green.

23

Al-Mutanabbi wrote the  
heart of our silken *tarab*;  
what need have we for you?

24

No poem is ever enough red –  
but that its blood might river  
through the life of its people

25

Beneath the desert-sun,  
 a cage in Abu Ghraib,  
 one man by one man by one man,  
 breathe six.

26

Thousands of tons rung  
 sonorous from the sky.

27

Black eyed woman,  
 the street-dogs are running  
 wild, will you save me?

28

Simple white ignorance:  
 even the desert has gone into hiding.

29

There is no more meaning  
 here than the crested moon  
 holds towards a dying grove  
 of date trees.

30

I'm for the transcription  
 of the Arabic – *za'tar zate*  
 over fire-baked bread.

31

The twin rivers have already  
 carved for us a history, our poets  
 have already explained to us  
 the desert; by what right have  
 you come?

32

Who of you has seen  
 the rustic crane in the tree,  
 no chimes, but for its delicate  
 wide beak, ushers an intemperate  
 reprieve.

33

Thirty-three beads on a string,

why pretend to know beyond  
the presence of a click.

**B9:** “Usage” by Hayan Charara

An assumption, a pejorative, an honest language, an honorable death. In grade school, I refused to *accept* the mayor’s handshake; he smiled at everyone *except* people with names like mine. I was born here. I didn’t have to *adopt* America, but I *adapted* to it. You understand: a man must be *averse* to opinions that have *adverse* impacts on whether he lives or dies. “Before taking any *advice*, know the language of those who seek to *advise* you.” Certain words *affected* me. Sand nigger, I was called. Camel jockey. What was the *effect*? While I *already* muttered under my breath, I did so even more. I am not *altogether* sure we can *all together* come. Everything was not *all right*. Everything is not *all right*. Imagine poetry without *allusions* to Shakespeare, Greek mythology, the Bible; or *allusions* without the adjectives “fanatical,” “extremist,” “Islamic,” “right,” “left,” “Christian,” “conservative,” “liberal.” / Language written or translated into a single tongue gives the *illusion* of tradition. *A lot* of people murder language—*a lot* fully aware. *Among* all the dead, choose between “us” and “them.” *Among* all the names for the dead—mother, father, brother, sister, husband, wife, child, friend, colleague, neighbor, teacher, student, stranger—choose *between* “citizen” and “terrorist.” / And poet? *Immoral*, yes, but never *amoral*? Large *amounts*, the number between 75 and 90 percent of the estimated 150 million to 1 billion—civilians—killed during wars, over all of recorded human history. *Anxious* is “worried” or “apprehensive.” / American poetry, Americans. Young, I learned *anyone* born here could become President. Older, I can point to *any one* of a hundred reasons why this is a lie. *Anyway*, I don’t want to be President, not of a country, or club, not here or there, not *anywhere*. He said, “I turned the car around *because* it began raining bombs.” There’s no chance of ambiguity—an *as* here could mean “because” or “when”; it makes no difference—he saw the sky, felt the ground, knew what would come next; it matters little when the heart rate jumps from 70 to 200 beats per minute in less than a second. What they did to my grandfather was *awful*—its wretchedness, awe-inspiring; its cruelty, terrible; it was *awfully* hard to forget. Just after 8:46 A.M., I wondered *awhile* what would happen next. At 9:03 A.M., I knew there was going to be trouble for *a while* to come. When in her grief, the woman said, “We’re going to hurt them *bad*,” she meant to say, “We’re going to hurt them *badly*.” For seventeen days, during air strikes, my grandfather slept on a cot *beside* a kerosene lamp in the basement of his house. *Besides* a few days worth of pills, and a gallon of water, he had nothing else to eat or drink. Given these conditions, none of us were surprised that on the eighteenth day, he died. / *Besides*, he was eighty-two years old. I *can* write what I please. I don’t need to ask, *May I*? Like a song: Men with *capital* meet in the *Capitol* in the nation’s *capital*. Any disagreements, *censored*; those making them—poets, dissenters, activists—

*censured*. The aftermath, approximately 655,000 people killed. / “The Human Cost of War in Iraq: A Morality Study, 2002-2006,” Bloomsburg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, Maryland); School of Medicine, Al Mustansiriya University (Baghdad, Iraq); in cooperation with the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, Massachusetts). The figure just *cited*—655,000 dead—resulted from a household survey conducted at actual *sites*, in Iraq, not the Pentagon, or White House, or a newsroom, or someone’s imagination. Of *course*, language has been corrupted. Look, the President, who speaks *coarsely*, says, “We must stay the *course*.” The problem with “Let your *conscience* be your guide” is you must first be aware, *conscious*, of the fact that a moral principle is a subjective thing. I wonder: when one “smokes ’em out of a hole,” if the person doing the smoking is *conscious* of his *conscience* at work. / Am I fully *conscious* of how I arrived at this? The *continual* dissemination of similar images and ideas. / The *continual* aired footage of planes striking the towers, the towers crumbling to the streets, dust, screams, a *continuous* reel of destruction, fear, as if the attacks were happening twenty-four hours a day, every day, any time. For a while, I *couldn’t care less* about war. / Then I saw corpses, of boys, who looked just like me. This was 1982, at age ten. Ever since, I *couldn’t care less* why anyone would want it. In 1982, any one of those boys *could have* been me. Now, it’s any one of those dead men could be me. The Secretary of State offered such *counsel* to the ambassadors of the world that the United Nations Security *Council* nodded in favor of war. *Criterion* easily becomes *criteria*. Even easier: to no longer require either. The *data* turned out false. / The doctrine of preemption ultimately negated its need. While we both speak English, our languages are so *different from* each other, yours might as well be Greek to me. When the black man in the park asked, “Are you Mexican, Puerto Rican, or are you Pakistani?” and I said, “I’m Arab,” and he replied, “Damn. Someone *don’t* like you very much,” I understood perfectly what he meant. The President alluded to the Crusades because of (not *due to*) a lack of knowledge. / Later, he retracted the statement, worried it might offend the Middle East; it never occurred the offense taken was *due to* the bombs shredding them to bits and pieces. “You are *either* with us or with the terrorists” (September 20, 2001). “You’re *either* with us or against us” (November 6, 2001). The day after, the disc jockey advocated, on air, a thirty-three cent solution (the cost of a bullet) to the problem of terrorists in our midst—he meant in New York; also, by terrorists, I wonder, did he know he meant cab drivers, hot dog vendors, students, bankers, neighbors, passers-by, New Yorkers, Americans; did he know he also meant Sikhs, Hindus, Iranians, Africans, Asians; did he know, too, he meant Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Atheists; did he realize he was *eliciting* a violent response, on the radio, in the afternoon? / Among those who did not find the remark at all *illicit*: the owners of the radio station, the FCC, the mayor, the governor, members of the House, the Senate, the President of the United States.

*Emigrate* is better than *immigrate*. Proof: No such thing as illegal *emigration*. Further proof: *Emigration* is never an election issue. I heard *enthusiastic* speeches. They hate our freedoms, our way of life, our this, that, and the other, *and so on* (not *etc.*). Not *everyone* agreed *every one* not “with us” was “against us.” Detroit was *farther* from home than my father ever imagined. / He convinced himself soon after arriving here he had ventured *farther* than he should have. *Fewer* people live in his hometown than when he left, in 1966. The number, even *less*, following thirty-four straight days of aerial bombardment. *First* (not *firstly*) my father spoke Arabic; *second* (not *secondly*) he spoke broken English, *third* (not *thirdly*) he spoke Arabic at home and English at work; *fourth* (not *fourthly*) he refused to speak English anymore. Not every poem is *good*. Not every poem does *well*. Not every poem is *well*, either. Nor does every poem do *good*. “To grow the economy” is more than jargon. / Can a democracy *grow* without violence? Ours didn’t. / They still plan to *grow* tomatoes this year, despite what was done. Several men, civilian workers, identified as enemies, were *hanged* on a bridge, bodies torched, corpses swaying in the breeze. / Photographs of the dead were hung with care. I can *hardly* describe what is going on. Day after day, he told *himself*, “I am an American. I eat apple pie. I watch baseball. I read American poetry. I speak American English. I was born in Detroit, a city as American as it gets. I vote. I work. I pay taxes, too many taxes. I own a car. I make mortgage payments. I am not hungry. I worry less than the rest of the world. I could stand to lose a few pounds. I eat several types of cuisine on a regular basis. I flush toilets. I let the faucet drip. I have central air-conditioning. I will never starve to death or experience famine. I will never die of malaria. I can say whatever the fuck I please.” Even words succumbed; *hopefully* turned into a kind of joke; *hopeful*, a slur. *However*, I use the words, but less, with more care. The President *implied* compassion; but *inferred* otherwise. This is not meant to be *ingenious*. Nor is it *ingenuous*. The more he got *into* it, the more he saw poetry, like language, was *in* a constant state of becoming. *Regardless*, or because of this, he welcomed the misuse of language. Language is *its* own worst enemy—*it’s* the snake devouring *its* own tail. They thought of us not *kind of* or *sort of* but as *somewhat* American. *Lie*: “To recline or rest on a surface”? No. “To put or place something”? No. Depleted uranium, heavy like *lead*; its use—uranium shells—*led* to birth defects. When in his anger, the man said, “We’re going to *teach* them a lesson,” I wonder what he thought they would *learn*. In a war, a soldier is less likely to die than a civilian. He looks *like* he hates our freedoms. / You don’t know them *like* I do. / He looks *as if* he hates our freedoms. / You don’t know them *as* I do. When in his sorrow, my father said, “Everybody *loose* in war,” I knew exactly what he meant. It *may be* poets should fight wars. *Maybe* then, metaphors—not bodies, not hillsides, not hospitals, not schools—will explode. I *might have* watched the popular sitcom if not for my family—they were under attack, they *might have* died. / Others *may have* been laughing at jokes while bodies were being torn apart.

I could not risk that kind of laughter. Of all the *media* covering war, which *medium* best abolishes the truth? I deceive *myself*. / I will deceive you *myself*. In the Bronx, I *passed* as Puerto Rican. I *passed* as Greek in Queens, also Brazilian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, even a famous, good-looking American movie actor. As Iranian in Manhattan. At the mall in New Jersey, the sales clerk guessed Italian. Where Henry Ford was born, my hometown, I always *pass* as Arab. / I may look like the men in the great paintings of the Near East, but their lives, their ways, I assure you, are in the *past*. *Plus*, except in those paintings, or at the movies, I never saw Arabs with multiple wives, or who rode camels, lived in silk tents, drank from desert wells; *moreover*, it's time to move past that. Did language *precede* violence? / Can violence *proceed* without language? It broke my father's heart to talk about the *principle* of equal justice. The news aired several *quotations* from the airline passengers, one of whom was a middle-aged man with children, who said, "I didn't feel safe with them on board." He used the word "them" though only one, an Arab, was on the plane. Being from Detroit I couldn't help but think of Rosa Parks. Then I got angry. I said to the TV, to no one in particular, "If you don't feel safe, then you get off the goddamn plane." / You can *quote* me on that. I was *really* angry—not *real* angry, but *really* angry. The *reason*? A poet asked me why I didn't write poems about Muslim and Arab violence against others, and I said I did, and then he said he meant violence against American and Israelis, *respectively*, and I said I did, and before I could go on, he interrupted to ask why I didn't write poems about mothers who sent their sons and daughters on suicide missions. As if, as if, as if. I *respectfully* decline to answer any more questions. / Write your own goddamn poem! Does this poem gratify the physical senses? Does it use *sensuous* language? It certainly does not attempt to gratify those sense associated with sexual pleasure. In this way, it may not be a *sensual* poem. However, men have been known to experience sexual gratification in situations involving power, especially over women, other men, life, and language. My father said, "No matter how angry they make you, invite the agents in the house, offer them coffee, be polite. If they stay long, ask them to *sit*. Otherwise, they will try to *set* you straight." When in his frustration, he said, "*Should of*, *could of*, *would of*," he meant, "Stop, leave me alone, I refuse to examine the problem further." Because (not *since*) the terrorists attacked us, we became more like the rest of the world than even before. This is *supposed to* be a poem; it is *supposed to* be in a conversation with you. Be *sure and* participate. "No language is more violent *than* another," he said. *Then* he laughed, and said, "Except the one you use." Do conflicts of interest exist when governments award wartime contracts to companies *that* have close ties to government officials? From 1995 to 2000, Dick Cheney, Vice President of the United States, was CEO of Halliburton, *which* is headquartered in Houston, Texas, near Bush International Airport. Would they benefit *themselves* by declaring war? Please send *those* men back home. My grandfather lay *there* unconscious. For days, *there* was

no water, no medicine, nothing to eat. The soldiers left *their* footprints at the doorstep. / His sons and daughters, *they're* now grieving him. "Try not *to* make *too* much of it" was the advice given after *two* Homeland Security agents visited my house, not once, not twice, but three times. I'm *waiting for* my right mind. The language is a long *ways* from here. After the bombs fell, I called every night to find out *whether* my father was alive or dead. He always asked, "How's the *weather* there?" Soon enough, he assured me, things would return to normal, *that* (not *where*) a ceasefire was on the way. *Although* (not *while*) I spoke English with my father, he replied in Arabic. Then I wondered, *who's* to decide *whose* language it is anyway—you, me? *your* mother, father, books, perspective, sky, earth, ground, dirt, dearly departed, customs, energy, sadness, fear, spirit, poetry, God, dog, cat, sister, brother, daughter, family, *you*, poems, nights, thoughts, secrets, habits, lines, grievances, breaks, memories, nightmares, mornings, faith, desire, sex, funerals, metaphors, histories, names, tongues, syntax, coffee, smoke, eyes, addiction, witness, paper, fingers, skin, *you, your, you're* here, there, the sky, the rain, the past, sleep, rest, live, stop, go, breathe

**B10:** "Shades of Anger" by Rafeef Ziadeh

Allow me to speak my Arab tongue  
 before they occupy my language as well.  
 Allow me to speak my mother tongue  
 before they colonize her memory as well.  
 I am an Arab woman of color.  
 and we come in all shades of anger.  
 All my grandfather ever wanted to do  
 was wake up at dawn and watch my grandmother kneel and pray  
 in a village hidden between *Jaffa* and *Haifa*  
 my mother was born under an olive tree  
 on a soil they say is no longer mine  
 but I will cross their barriers, their check points  
 their damn apartheid walls and return to my homeland  
 I am an Arab woman of colour and we come in all shades of anger.  
 And did you hear my sister screaming yesterday  
 as she gave birth at a check point  
 with Israeli soldiers looking between her legs  
 for their next demographic threat  
 called her baby girl "Janeen".  
 And did you hear Amni Mona screaming  
 behind their prison bars as they teargased her cell  
 "We're returning to Palestine!"  
 I am an Arab woman of colour and we come in all shades of anger.  
 But you tell me, this womb inside me  
 will only bring you your next terrorist  
 beard wearing, gun waving, towelhead, sand nigger  
 You tell me, I send my children out to die  
 but those are your copters, your F16's in our sky  
 And let's talk about this terrorism business for a second  
 Wasn't it the CIA that killed Allende and Lumumba  
 and who trained Osama in the first place  
 My grandparents didn't run around like clowns  
 with the white capes and the white hoods on their heads lynching black people  
 I am an Arab woman of colour and we come in all shades of anger.  
 "So who is that brown woman screaming in the demonstration?"  
 Sorry, should I not scream?  
 I forgot to be your every orientalist dream  
*Jinnie* in a bottle, belly dancer, harem girl, soft spoken Arab woman  
 Yes master, no master.  
 Thank you for the peanut butter sandwiches  
 raining down on us from your F16's master  
 Yes my liberators are here to kill my children  
 and call them "collateral damage"  
 I am an Arab woman of colour and we come in all shades of anger.  
 So let me just tell you this womb inside me  
 will only bring you your next rebel  
 She will have a rock in one hand and a Palestinian flag in the other  
 I am an Arab woman of color  
 Beware! Beware my anger.

**B11:** “rage” by Laila Halaby

**the Iraq war, day 6**

I am angry

at everyone  
for not doing enough  
to stop this

I am numb

with fear and sadness  
for everyone involved

mostly I am impotent

which is why this safe school  
for little children  
is a blessing

where people say  
*how are you?*  
and mostly mean it

the Brazilian teacher  
leans outside, smiles  
*you guys okay?*

my rage quiets  
throughout the sweet morning  
filled with giggles

digging and singing  
crackers and popsicles  
stories and cuddles

is all but forgotten until  
we are headed to the car  
and I am ambushed

not by a right-wing  
pro-war  
evangelical Christian parent

who questions my nationality  
worries about  
our connections

but by a well-traveled  
liberal mother who stops me  
puts her hand on my arm

as you would  
to someone who is grieving  
and quivers  
*I'm outraged*

then tells me  
about the gourmet dinners  
she arranges  
with fellow liberals  
to discuss her disgust

*I need like-minded people  
what an awful,  
sickening, grotesque display ...*

though I see her anger is genuine  
perhaps a reflection of my own  
her designer words

make me want to spit

bundles of toddlers  
climb the wooden equipment  
in front of us

she points and shakes righteously  
*these children* she says  
and you can see she is struggling  
with her own fury

*these children will  
not be able to travel*

her words have found the keyhole  
to my locked-up anger  
which is purple in color

red in volume

*children just like these  
won't be able to live!*  
shouts my voice in puce

decorum broken  
I carry my three-year-old  
to safety

away from my unfolded fury

away from abstract  
visions of war  
and destruction

away from liberal mothers  
and their intellectual

outrage financed by

working husbands  
American dollars  
and discussed over

white china plates  
of marinated kebob

**B12:** “The Blue State Ghazals” by Angele Ellis

*I'm crying for all the other mothers.* – Cindy Sheehan

**8/17/05**

Humble-hearted mother, war is unkind.  
Weep on the bright splendid shroud of your son.

I cry for the kids playing tag on the grass.  
They still believe that we are free and brave.

Would thirty flickering candles make a target?  
We cup our flames as tenderly as babies' heads.

Say fifteen hundred, fifteen thousand, a quarter million.  
We toll the deaths and those come to mourn them.

Unity is fragile as a child's paper chain.  
Doing a small thing, then dispersing into darkness.

**8/20/05**

At war's doorway, a man places a makeshift sign.  
*No Lies Told Today, Recruitment Center Has Been Shut Down.*

The Fox cameraman betrays his politics, screaming:  
Arrest them, they assaulted my camera.

A police dog bites the leg of a grandmother, retreating.  
Pepper spray spatters a woman's glasses as she is Tasered.

Again, the air stings with outrage and involuntary tears.  
Handcuffs appear, with no magician's spell to spring them.

Crimes against property will always be punished.  
The invisible ink on the Bill of Rights, appearing under fire.

**8/22/05**

I ignore alerts as the sky changes colour:  
Yellow dawns, pollution-orange sunsets, bloody nights.

Is memory more than cards of identity?  
Enemies are faceless, fear the mirror of the soul.

Any eye might be a lens, any vagrant a terrorist.  
Safety demands we swallow everything whole.

Territories bear prints of the powerful and dying.  
I want to wash all the flags instead of burning them.

Every map they show is distorted:  
Our souls are gerrymandered, whorls of red and blue.

**B13: “Hibernate” by Naomi Shihab Nye**

\*

My father’s friend Farouk  
 Has a dream:  
 God resigned.  
 And all the people took better care of one another  
 And got together then  
 because, well, they had to.  
 Things grew really smooth.  
 There was no one to blame or impress.

\*

Professor Brother Miguel Angel  
 is healing “mexican style”  
 every day of the week for free.  
 He is healing “different from others.”  
 He will “run away bad neighbors”  
 if you ask him. Note: he stuck his  
 promotional poster on your neighbor’s house  
 as well as your own.  
 He will “bring back boyfriends”  
 and “give names of persons.”  
 Call for appointment  
 night or day. Good luck for Bingo,  
 too. Bingo is capitalized,  
 mexican is not. I want  
 brown magic this year.  
 Brown dusty desert magic.  
 I want peace even if it involves  
 a lot of weeping and apology.  
 Can you help me? Keep  
 your Bingo joy, I need real  
 people lighting sage sticks,  
 being honest. Say disaster.  
 Thank you.

\*

Spring feels different this year.  
 It’s a bandage.  
 Mountain laurel ... jasmine ...  
 The wound keeps oozing, though.

\*

I keep thinking how the man who said  
*100 Arabs don’t equal 1 American*  
 was wearing a white shirt

and had seemed perfectly normal  
up till then.

\*

Favorite questions from the FBI:

*In all your travels, have you ever met  
anyone who used an assumed name?*

Uh, it is possible Abdul Faisal Shamsuzzaman  
was really Jack Smith, but how would I know?

*In all your travels, did you ever meet anyone  
who wanted to overthrow their country?*

Hmmmm, would they have announced it?

Yes.                      Me.                      Now.

\*

The turtles who live with us emerge from hibernation  
on the first day of Official Spring.

How do they know?  
And where were they for the whole iffy winter?  
In which bed of leaves did they bury  
themselves?

On the first Official Day,  
they climbed heavily back into their old red tub  
lifting reptilian heads above water,  
blinking slowly ...  
we were so ready to feed them.

\*

It's awkward to be with people sometimes,  
making shapes in the air  
that feel like sense –  
I'd rather talk to J. Frank Dobie  
who died years ago.

Lucille remembers him sitting  
in a white linen suit  
on her grandfather's South Texas porch,  
stories spinning like spiders  
along the wooden beams ...

\*

Homeland Security wanted to know  
what those mysterious silver objects were,  
entering my cousin's home –  
trays of *tabouleh*  
covered with aluminum foil.

\*

Logic hibernates.

Truth, too.

It has been known to stay gone  
for years. 🌸

**B14:** “The Passing There” by Mohja Kahf

My brother and I crossed through a field.  
 Soybeans grew there. We were nine and ten.  
 It wasn't ours. It was golden.  
 I remember raspberry bushes  
 way at the back, and rusted wire,  
 once a fence, defunct now and trampled under

by generations of children who belonged  
 to this Indiana landscape in the seventies,  
 sixties, forties, tens: Matthews and Deborahs,  
 Toms and Betsys, Wills and Dots. Here we were,  
 Yaman and Mohja,  
 Getting a kajillion scratches,  
 knuckles bleeding, on our little knees,  
 forgetting everything but gold and green,  
 scrabbling for another sweet hit of summer berry.

The man who owned the field was no Robert Frost  
 although he spoke colloquial. “Git  
 off my property,” he shouted, “Or I’ll —”  
 The rest of what he said I do not care  
 to repeat. It expressed his concerns  
 about our religion and ethnic origin.  
 He had a rifle. We went on home.

My brother knows this song: running home,  
 behind us, a field that wasn't ours,  
 ahead, a house of alien expectations,  
 the cruel kindnesses of parents who,  
 coming from the Syrian sixties,  
 thought they had succeeded  
 in growing little hothouse Syrians.  
 My brother and I crossed through a field;

We ran and ran. Somewhere in Syria,  
 Earth brown like nut, sky like the turquoise  
 in my earring, other purples waited,  
 a plum tree had our name on it. Days passed  
 in another country, like photographs  
 with our silhouettes cut out, where one day  
 we would fit back in, we thought.

There the vineyard watchman chased away  
 children whose names he knew, yelling at them  
 in the language of their parents  
 and their parents' parents,  
 our parallel-universe Syrian selves among them,  
 hearing their names called among the others,  
 Yaman and Mohja, running home  
 and getting there, skin bright, panting,  
 getting home.

My brother and I crossed through a field.  
Its golden music wasn't ours. We listened  
to its cornflower choirs and tried  
to feel like Hoosiers. Aunts and uncles  
fed us Syrian pastries, heavily syruped,  
and parents promised Arabian gold.  
We sang the anthems  
of their remembered landscapes on request  
for visitors and foreign guests.  
At school, we pledged allegiance,  
trying not to feel like traitors.

My brother knows this song:  
How we have been running  
to leap the gulch between two worlds, each  
with its claim. Impossible for us  
to choose one over the other,  
and the passing there  
makes all the difference.

*2001*

**B15:** “Cadence” by Lisa Suhair Majaj

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

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

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

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

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

The Arab-American woman knows who she is,  
 and it's not what you think. She's authentic  
 in jeans or in an embroidered dress.  
 When she walks up a mountain, her identity  
 goes up with her and comes back down again.

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

She's standing at the podium, waiting.  
 She wants to read a poem about climbing  
 a mountain. It's the song of what travelers

take with them, leave behind, transform.  
From stillness, words ripple: clear cadence.