

ARAB AMERICAN POETRY 1967-PRESENT: SONGS  
OF DEFIANCE AND HOPE IN THE FACE OF ARAB-  
U.S. POLITICAL TENSION

by

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To My Husband and Children

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Arab American poetry 1967-Present in light of the political tension between the United States and the Arab World. It explores the ways in which the Arab American community has been greatly impacted by such frequent political pressures as the Arab-Israeli conflict, violent events in the Middle East, and America's foreign policy in the region. The poems discussed in this dissertation reveal the community's collective anxieties, alienation, and fears due to hostility, anti-Arab racism, and media misrepresentation that often escalate during every crisis involving the U.S. and the Middle East. Analysis of these poems demonstrates a defiant response to a tense situation coupled with glimpses of hope for a better future. It also reveals the complexities of Arab American identity evident in the constantly ambivalent relationship between Arab and American contexts that is exacerbated by frequent political crises. Arab American poets address themes of war, violence, injustice, and hegemony, simultaneously touching upon deeper issues of belonging, hybridity, interrogation of identity, and reconciliation.

My dissertation aims at emphasizing the role of politics in the Arab American experience since 1967, as well as the role of Arab American poetry in articulating post-1967 Arab America. This study traces political events chronologically, and each of its chapters begins with a major political crisis in order to reflect the persistence of a strained Arab-U.S. relationship throughout the past decades. Thus, Chapter One begins with the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Chapter Two with the First Gulf War of 1991, and Chapter Three with 9/11. As seen throughout the three chapters, Arab American poets seem to be singing songs of defiance and hope, critiquing the chaotic political realities both in the Middle East and domestically

within the U.S., while holding onto their aspirations for a better Arab America. Between Arab homelands and the United States resides the collective tension of Arab Americans whose poetry discussed in this work tells the stories of strong Arab American voices against injustices and discrimination. The Conclusion of my dissertation sheds light on the current and future challenges that Arab Americans in general, and individual poets in particular, confront, as well as their constantly renewed responsibility to define and defend their community, especially during times of political turmoil.

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## INTRODUCTION:

**Arab Americans: A Life of Endless Challenges**

*Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;  
the most massive characters are seared with scars.*

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

The Arab-US relationship has been strained for many long decades. The emergence of the United States as a world power after World War II and its consistent support for the then newly- created state of Israel has contributed to persistent tension between the U.S. and the Arab World, which reached its height with the devastating defeat of Arabs in the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967. This critical post-1967 period in the Arab World was also marked by the sudden death of Egyptian leader and founder of pan-Arab Nationalism, Gamal Abdul Nasser, in 1970. The 1967 defeat and the departure of Nasser galvanized a stronger American-Israeli alliance that worked toward securing a stronger Israel and preserving and expanding American interests in the Middle East. Since then, the Arab-U.S. relationship has been characterized by constant friction due to countless political crises that included the 1970s oil wars, 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the unresolved Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the 1982 and 2006 Israeli attacks on Lebanon, the First Gulf War (also called Desert Storm), the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America, the invasion of Iraq (Second Gulf War), and the 2008-2009 and 2014 Israeli offensives on Gaza. In light of this vexed relationship since 1967, the Arab has been widely viewed by the United States as the nemesis of its sponsored Zionist enterprise, as well as a highly attractive domain to achieve America's imperial goals.

Arab American literature, poetry in particular, has notably reflected this political tension. In this dissertation, I seek to interrogate the ways in which Arab American poets have responded to escalating political pressures both in the Middle East and in the United States, as well as the implicit framework of defiance and hope shaping Arab American consciousness within this politically vexed milieu. Ostensibly, chaotic events in the Middle East, the Arab-Israel conflict, and the turbulent Arab-U.S. relation have been recurring themes in the works of Arab American poets. This is evident in the first Arab American literary anthology *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (1988),<sup>1</sup> which many critics consider a defining moment in the history of Arab American literature. Edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, this collection depicts a community of writers preoccupied by the thought of homeland, the destructive wars there, and their ambivalent bind both to American home and to Arab roots. Some of the poems in *Grape Leaves*, for instance, speak for the lost Palestine, for the slaughtered victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacres during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and against the United States' pro-Israeli stance during that invasion. Arab American poets in this anthology felt the responsibility of presenting their Arab cause to the American public who lack a true understanding of Arabs and their plights and aspirations. *Grape Leaves* has, without a doubt, generated and consolidated a literary unity within the Arab American community and established Arab American literature as a category within the field of ethnic American literature.

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<sup>1</sup> This collection is a revised and expanded version of the 1982 pamphlet *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets*, edited by Gregory Orfalea.



*Grape Leaves* was followed by many other publications where the political scene in the Arab World remained a major concern to Arab American writers. These collections included *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999), *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004), *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004), *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* (2008), *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (2010), and *Talking Through the Door: An Anthology of Contemporary Middle Eastern American Writing* (2014). Beside the central issues of wars, violence, and injustice, Arab American writers in these anthologies provide insights on topics such as Arab American feminism, double consciousness, and Anti-Arab stereotypes in American mainstream media. Their writings have demonstrated their emotional and political observations of such crises as the 1991 Gulf War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the American invasion of Iraq (2003), the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon, and Israel's frequent offensives on Gaza. This political chaos has also been a key topic in journals, including *Mizna*, *Jusoor*, and *Al Jadid*, as well as the Radius of Arab-American Writers, Inc. (RAWI), a national organization that organizes various conferences and events to bring together Arab American writers from all over the United States. In addition, Arab American literary criticism has notably grown. Over the past decades, a number of Arab American scholars and critics have emerged and gained attention, such as Michael Suleiman, Evelyn Shakir, Gregory Orfalea, Steven Salaita, Lisa Suhair Majaj, and Amal Amireh. Their writings have helped

enrich and expand the matrix of Arab American literary criticism within the landscape of literary America.

Despite the considerable flourishing Arab American literature has experienced since 1967, it still is often excluded from the larger body of American ethnic literature. Of the very few non-Arab-American critics who have devoted themselves to Arab American literature is Tanyss Ludescher who argues in a 2006 article that Arab American literature is generally “an understudied and undervalued area of ethnic literature” (93). Ludescher also notes in her conclusion that although the literature of latest Arab American generations “has received more attention, most of the critical work has focused on fiction at the expense of poetry” (108). An examination of the first and most recent poetry anthologies, *Grape Leaves* (1988) and *Inclined to Speak* (2008) supports Ludescher’s claim. In the introduction to *Grape Leaves*, Orfalea and Elmusa state that “Arab American poetry is an especially rich, people-involved, passionate poetry. At the same time, it has been spawned, at least until recently, in isolation from the American mainstream. If art intensifies on peripheries, this is art” (xiii). Twenty years later, the same claim is made by Hayan Charara who, in the introduction to *Inclined to Speak*, expresses his frustration that Arab American poets have not gotten the attention they deserve, pointing out that many poets included in his anthology

are winners of and finalists for the National Book Award, the American Book Award, the Yale Younger Poets prize, and the Pushcart Prize, as well as recipients of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Guggenheim

Memorial Foundation, and the Lannan Foundation. Many have earned international reputations, their writings translated into dozens of languages. One was the first poet laureate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Yet except for a small number, the poets gathered here remain mostly unknown not only to the larger public but even to “experts” in the field of contemporary American poetics and to other poets. (xxi)

Alluding to such award and fellowship winners as Sam Hazo, Gregory Orfalea, Khaled Mattawa, Etel Adnan, Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hammad, and Elmaz Abinader, Charara expresses his dismay over the continual marginalization of most Arab American poets despite their successful careers and achievements.

My study, therefore, focuses on contemporary Arab American poetry and aims to offset its neglect by American literary scholarship. Another important reason for devoting this dissertation to poetry of Arab Americans is the fact that poetry is an especially rich tradition in Arab literature that has assisted Arab American poets in asserting their Arab identity as they respond to those intense events. Arabic poetry has been historically known for being passionate, humane, and dense, and its impact on Arab American poets has been remarkably inspiring. Much of modern Arabic poetry is deeply political and has powerfully reflected multiple political issues in the Arab World, especially the Palestinian cause.<sup>2</sup> Arab American poets, thus, have found the genre well-suited to any sharp argument and to being the battlefield for their literary defiance of the status quo.

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<sup>2</sup> Palestinian resistance poetry emerged in the aftermath of the Zionist occupation of Palestine. The two major pioneers of this poetry movement are Mahmoud Darwish and Sameeh Al-Qasem.

Furthermore, since the political crises witnessed by contemporary Arab Americans have been ceaseless and immediate, poetry has allowed them to produce prompt, human poetic responses that are both empowering and healing. The exploration of these responses in the following chapters highlights stories of tension that have collectively pervaded the lives of Arab Americans due to a continuous series of political conflicts. It will also unfold the complexities of Arab American identity in light of the ambivalent interplay between Arab and American contexts. Because the relationship between their ancestral homes and the United States has always been on edge, Arab Americans have suffered continuous hostility, fear, and media misrepresentation. Every time a crisis occurs in the Middle East or domestically, anti-Arab discrimination significantly resurfaces, tension within Arab American community escalates, and its loyalty to America is questioned in public. Nevertheless, Arab American poets discussed in this study demonstrate the courage to assert an Arab identity on a cultural and political level, to celebrate hybridity within the multicultural American society, and to criticize the pitfalls and injustices of American policies in the Middle East. Arab American poetic responses to the events occurring in the 1967-present period are in fact a brave political argument concerning who Arab Americans are, the kind of internal conflict they experience, and their ways to resolve this conflict.

To better understand the contemporary literary scene of Arab American experience, it is useful to review its history that extends back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Arab immigration to the New World, according to the Arab American historian and writer Gregory Orfalea, began in the 1870s with the first wave of immigrants and was followed with the second wave after World War II, while the third and last wave of Arab

immigrants began in 1967 and continues to the present time (*The Arab Americans* 50). Arabs in the first waves left the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine), which was under the yoke of Ottoman Turkey, mainly for economic reasons while political factors, particularly the loss of Palestine, were behind the immigration of Arabs in the second wave. Other differences between the first and second waves are detailed by Orfalea:

Unlike the early Syrians – who were 90 percent Christians – the Second Wave Arab immigrants were 60 percent Muslim. They arrived more by plane than boat and tended to be in much better financial position than were the early turn-of-the-century Arabs. They were better educated than the earlier group, whose members were overwhelmingly illiterate before coming to the United States. This combination of distinctive differences between the Second Wave and the First Wave kept the two communities for many years separate and distinct, until the cataclysmic wars of 1967, 1973, and particularly 1982, drew them into a unique political cohesion, however ephemeral. (153)

Despite these differences, there were some similarities between these two waves of Arab immigrants, first and foremost which was the fact that the majority of both groups adopted assimilation as a strategy as they pursued their new lives on American soil. As noted by Randa Kayyali, “Muslims and Christians alike changed their names from Arabic names to more common names found in the United States to avoid possible problems with immigration restrictions and to achieve financial success,” and, except for a few of

them, “[t]he preference for assimilation over ethnic pride showed an outward reorientation toward the culture of the United States” (53).

Before the coming of the third wave in 1967, Arab American literature had existed in the form of individual writings by the *Mahjar* “immigration” writers who culminated their efforts in the foundation of *Ar-Rabitah al-Qalamiyyah* “The Pen League” in New York in 1920. The group’s most accomplished members are Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani who wrote mostly in Arabic but also produced some remarkable literary pieces in English. Although these writers lived in a heavily assimilationist U.S. context, they reacted to those pressures by attempting to bridge Eastern and Western cultures, Arab spirituality and American materialism. One of Rihani’s remarkable works is *The Book of Khalid* (1911), the first Arab American novel, while Gibran is mostly celebrated for his book of mystical poetry, *The Prophet* (1923), which has been translated into more than twenty languages. Indeed, the phenomenal success of *The Prophet* led Gibran to be the most famous Arab American writer ever and one of the world’s greatest writers. The decades following the *Mahjar* writers saw deeper assimilation into mainstream America and less literary writing, most of which exhibited a denial or rejection of Arab identity as evident in Vance Bourjaily’s novel *The End of My Life* (1947) and William Peter Blatty’s autobiography *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1960). However, the revival of Arab identity and heritage in the 1970s and the 1980s greatly contributed to an urgent need for a new definition of Arab American literature that could involve Arab culture and politics, especially with a new influx of Arab immigrants.

The number of Arabs in the third wave was many times larger than that in the second wave. Arab immigrants since 1967 have embraced their Arabness openly and worked enthusiastically toward developing a proud Arab American identity. They have arrived in the United States, fleeing abysmal violence and political crisis resulting from events such as the Arab defeat in the Six-Day 1967 war with Israel, the second Arab-Israeli war of 1973, the Lebanese Civil War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the 1980s Iraq-Iran War, the two U.S. invasions of Iraq (1991 and 2003), and the most recent intra-Arab political unrest resulting from the so-called Arab Spring revolutions. Carrying the plight of their homelands in their hearts and consciousness, Arabs who arrived in the United States after 1967 were greatly disappointed with and shocked by the anti-Arab discrimination they experienced in mainstream American society, particularly the media coverage of the culture and political events in their home countries. Orfalea highlights the political awareness of post-1967 Arab immigrants that distinguishes them from earlier waves:

The Third Wave immigrants, partly because so many were highly educated Palestinians, also felt a greater drive to participate in the new Arab-American political groups that grew in the wake of the 1967 June War. Third Wave Palestinians, with the homeland still fresh in their minds, were ready to be foot soldiers in the tedious, frustrating task of lobbying US policy makers, unlike First and Second Wavers who could either be cynical or despairing and in any event tended to be isolated chiefs. (*The Arab Americans* 190)

The civil rights movement that matured in the 1970s and 1980s and the accompanied rise of multiculturalism inspired Arab immigrants to revive their Arab heritage and encouraged them to adopt the “Arab American” label as the name of their own American ethnic group and to nurture and celebrate its cultural and political merits.

Interestingly, Arab Americans are classified as “white” by the U.S. Census. Arab Americans in the early twentieth century had, in fact, rejected their then alleged “Asiatic” racial classification and fought instead in U.S. courts to win the “white” classification and thus secure their rights to U.S. citizenship<sup>3</sup>. Decades after winning this battle, Arab Americans, enlightened by the era of multiculturalism, began to realize the negative impact of this racial category on their community. In her popular essay “Not Quite White: Race Classification and the Arab-American Experience,” Helen Hatab Samhan argues that the current racial status of Arab immigrants as “white,” which they have shared with the European majority in America, “has been a source of confusion and a challenge,” and some Arabs, as a result, “have become accustomed to perennial ‘other’ status or to straddling their technical white identity with their practical affinity to ‘people of color’” (219). This odd gap between the Arab identity in reality and the one assigned by the federal law has complicated the experience of contemporary Arab Americans.

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<sup>3</sup> Arab Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries faced multiple hurdles with racial classification. Most of them were Christians from Greater Syria (consisted of today’s Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan), which was part of the Ottoman Empire. They tried to take advantage of their affiliation with Christianity and its birthplace in order to get the “white” classification. However, they were granted inconsistent categories such as being from “Turkey in Asia,” “Syrians,” and “Asiatic,” and a countless number of naturalization cases by Arab petitioners were denied or challenged by judges who provided no clear definition of “whiteness.” Instead, they tended to link their decisions to issues relating to the race, geography, skin color, religion, or culture of Arab applicants. This debate remained intense until the 1940s when the immigration authorities, in response to some controversial court cases, issued a statement that a person of “the Arabian race” was eligible for naturalization. For more information on this subject matter, see Randa Kayyali pp. 45-64.



Arabs of America see that, by being racially classified as white, they have been doubly excluded from both “white” America – since they are popularly perceived as non-white – *and* from mainstream recognition as marginalized people of color.

The Arab American experience is pregnant with strife and pain as experiences of other minorities are. The history of such groups as Native Americans, African Americans, Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans reveals a pattern of discrimination against these minorities and wounds that they have strived to heal. Upon their arrival, Irish immigrants faced significant discrimination due largely to their Catholicism and were stereotyped as “lazy, promiscuous, hostile, drunkards, less-than-human, unintelligent, and immoral” (McKinney and Marvasti 102). However, aided by their light skin, Irish immigrants were able to overcome discrimination through assimilation and sought to “[identify] with elite whites rather than with people of color along class lines” (102). The Irish American experience is similar to that of Jewish Americans in terms of an ultimate integration and acceptance into the “white” American larger community. Jewish immigrants suffered prejudice and anti-Semitism, especially between the two World Wars. They were discriminated against in the workplace, universities, hotels, and clubs, and were easy targets for the anti-immigrant propaganda of the Ku Klux Klan. According to Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers, anti-Jewish sentiment was publicly expressed by famous individuals, particularly in the 1930s when “Detroit’s Father Charles Coughlin succeeded Henry Ford as the nation’s best-known anti-Semite” (245). This discrimination was later battled by the U.S. government as the Jews of America deeply integrated into American culture and, like Irish immigrants, associated themselves with the “white” majority. By the end of

Second World War, the Jewish American community proved their influential status in American society when they gained American support for the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Today, the Jewish lobby in America plays a notably powerful role in foreign policy decision-making, especially in matters associated with Israel and the Middle East.

Other minority groups, however, still carry the scars of their wounds to this day. Although African Americans, Native Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans now lead better and more secure lives, the shadow of discrimination persists. Unlike Jewish and Irish immigrants, Asians and Latinos cannot so easily blend in with “white” society. Asian immigrants were perceived as “savage, immoral, and childlike, and sometimes even referred to as ‘niggers’” (McKinney and Marvasti 105). Their large numbers and their “foreignness” elicited anti-Asian sentiment, which led to some discriminatory immigration acts, including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act that restricted Chinese immigration and the 1907 Gentleman’s Agreement that restricted Japanese immigration. Furthermore, discrimination against Japanese Americans reached its peak when they were placed in internment camps for nearly three years during World War II. Since the war, Asian Americans have worked hard to take their place in mainstream America, and they have excelled in their studies and professions, but, as pointed out by McKinney and Marvasti, they “still face an occupational ‘glass ceiling,’” which means their success has a certain limit they cannot easily break through (104). Like Asian Americans, the immigrant experience of Latino Americans has been marked by racism-based hardship, but, unlike Asians, Latinos in America are now among the poorest and least educated ethnic groups. In addition, Mexican Americans, in particular, are

stereotyped as “illegal immigrants” and Puerto Ricans as “a drain on the welfare system,” and Spanish is perceived by many Americans as “a cultural threat” to American society and its official language, English (107).

Of all other minorities, African Americans and Native Americans have experienced racism and discrimination the most throughout American history. Native Americans were massacred by the invading Europeans who sought to steal their land with all of its diverse resources. Those white invaders viewed the Indians as “ ‘something little better than animals but not quite human, something to be on guard against, something to be eternally watched with suspicion and killed with no more compunction than one would kill a coyote’ ” (qtd. in Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers 199). Today, many Native Americans suffer poverty, low income, poor segregated housing, and continued stereotypical images of their culture. Likewise, violent racism was at the heart of African American experience as blacks suffered centuries of slavery, lynching, and segregation. Because of their long-standing past discrimination and inherited economic deprivation, African Americans now face disproportionately high levels of poverty, discrimination in the workplace and health care system, and poor education due to segregated schools and segregated housing (McKinney and Marvasti 103, 104).

Arab Americans truly relate to the painful experiences of all other ethnic groups, especially with Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino Americans, whose battles with racism are not over yet. Since their arrival during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in pursuit of the American Dream, Arab Americans have faced racism that has targeted their Arab culture and identity. Besides their shared struggle against

discrimination, Arab Americans and other ethnic minorities share some of the racist images applied to them. For instance, like African Americans and Native Americans, Arabs of America have been stereotyped as savages, uncivilized, and violent, and, like African Americans (and Asians), Arab Americans have been labelled “niggers” or – to be precise – “sand niggers.” There are also stereotypical images that have been applied only to Arabs and Arab Americans, persistently reinforced by the media. These stereotypes include images of the “terrorist,” “sheikh,” “camel-rider,” “bomber,” “belly dancer,” “fanatic Muslim,” and “Bedouin.” When examining the current dimensions and causes of discrimination experienced by Arab Americans, it becomes clear that politics has predominantly shaped their lives and public images, and their acceptance into American society has been strictly governed by periodic political friction between their Arab homelands on one hand, and the United States and its life-long ally, Israel, on another. Also, while the discrimination endured now by other racial minorities is generally less than it used to be in the past, the wounds of Arab Americans have been deepening over time due to mounting political conflicts between the United States and the Middle East.

Anti-Arab racism before 1967 had a mainly cultural dimension, evident in many stereotypes that denigrated Arab culture, but, since the Arab-Israel war of June 1967, politics has dominated the scene. As demonstrated by Nadine Naber in her introduction to *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, “[t]he 1967 war marked the U.S. confirmed alliance with Israel as well as the intensification of U.S. military, political, and economic intervention in the Arab region, anti-Arab media representations, and anti-Arab discrimination and harassment within the United States” (32). Naber also notes that this anti-Arab discrimination deepened in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution “when

hegemonic discourses on the ‘Arab Other’ in the United States increasingly deployed the assumption that all Arabs are Muslim and that Islam is an inherently backward and uncivilized religion” (32). Since then, an Arab has been perceived as the antithesis of America, of peace, of civilization, and of democracy. Steven Salaita details this racial view of the Arab:

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 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. In short, the redirection of classic American racism at a non-White ethnic group whose origins lie in an area of the world marked for colonization by the United States and whose residents are therefore dehumanized for the sake of political expediency. (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 12-13)

As objects of such racism, Arab Americans are forced to live a daily collective feeling of alienation, as well as a collective fear with every new Arab-U.S. political crisis. In essence, the parameters of their lives since 1967 have been defined by three major factors

that need to be briefly examined: United States foreign policy in the Middle East, U.S. mainstream media, and the Zionist lobby in America.

The United States foreign policy in the Middle East has always been a major concern for Arab Americans. Hayan Charara, in his introduction to the anthology, *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*, contends that, despite the cultural and religious diversity that characterizes the Arab American community, “engagement with the political, especially in terms of U.S. policy in the Middle East, seems to bring Arab Americans together more than any other experience” (xxiv). In fact, Arab Americans have often criticized U.S. foreign policy for being engendered by imperialist and Zionist ambitions. Since after World War II, the United States has consistently sought to proclaim its power and impose it on the rest of the world, particularly the Middle East, one of its major post-war geo-strategic zones. This drive for control is interpreted by Antonio Gramsci as “merely an aspect of the function of domination” (59). To secure its domination of the Middle East, the United States has undergone a longstanding competition with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and today much of the region seems to be under the U.S. control despite the growing influence of Russia and China there. American foreign policies consist of interventions in the internal affairs of Arab countries, unconditional support for Israel, and use of force (e.g. bombing Libya in 1986, bombing Sudan in 1998, the attack on Iraq 1991, the invasion of Afghanistan 2001, the invasion of Iraq 2003, and the use of U.S. drones in multiple Middle Eastern states).

This imperialist agenda has been a target for criticism by Arab Americans who have especially condemned the use of U.S. military power against their homelands. Moreover, the United States faced international criticism for its violations of international law and human rights, which was evident in such offensives as the 2003 American invasion of Iraq that took place against the will of the United Nations and left behind hundreds of thousands of casualties. Commenting on this, Noam Chomsky states: “[t]he United States is invading Iraq. It’s as open an act of aggression as there has been in modern history, a major war crime. This is the crime for which the Nazis were hanged at Nuremberg, the act of aggression” (*Imperial Ambitions* 35). Arab Americans also believe that this aggression is partially practiced under the guise of counter-terrorism in order for America to expand its domination over the Middle East. Furthermore, Edward Said links the issue of counter-terrorism to America’s desire for hegemony even beyond the borders of the Middle East, arguing that “[s]ince the United States is the global superpower, has or pretends to have interests everywhere, from China to Europe to southern Africa to Latin America and all of North America, terrorism becomes a handy instrument to perpetuate this hegemony” (*Culture and Resistance* 89-90). Inasmuch as the United States keeps pursuing its imperial interests in the Middle East at the expense of its relationship with many Arab states, the lives of Arab Americans continue to be conflicted and susceptible to frequent upheaval.

Mainstream media serves as support for America’s imperialist quest. The media misrepresentation of Arabs is essential in swaying the general public into directly or indirectly approving U.S. hegemonic actions in regard to the Middle East events. This is what Antonio Gramsci calls “consent,” but that consent, according to Gramsci, has to be

a “‘spontaneous’ consent of the masses who must ‘live’ those directives, modifying their own habits, their own will, their own convictions to conform with those directives and with the objectives which they propose to achieve” (266). The demonization of Arabs in mainstream media, however, has not been an arbitrary process but rather one that has gradually permeated the daily life of the public who “lived” it as a result of a long-term anti-Arab campaign. Edward Said describes this “spontaneous” demonization as “a cultural war” that involved “appalling racist caricatures of Arabs and Muslims suggest[ing] that they are all either terrorists or sheikhs, and that the region is a large arid slum, fit only for profit or war” (*Culture and Imperialism* 301). The consequences of this “cultural war” unfold during periods of political tension between the United States and the Middle East when hating Arabs would often indicate for part of the public a sort of patriotism.

Many Arab Americans are inclined to believe that America’s mainstream media and its politics are not to be viewed as detached. In his book *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs After 9/11*, Jack Shaheen argues that at the heart of Hollywood’s production is American politics that has compelled “reel” Arabs to “have mutated over time, like a contaminated virus,” stressing that “ ‘Washington and Hollywood spring from the same DNA ’” (xv, qtd. in xxiii). In other words, Hollywood’s portrayal of Arabs is political in that it reflects and consolidates the opinion of the White House on matters relating to Middle Eastern events. The notion of a shared “DNA” between the U.S. administration and Hollywood is explained by Antonio Gramsci who states that “[t]he state does have and requests consent, but it also ‘educates’ this consent, by means of the political and syndical associations” (259). Accordingly, the prolonged demonization of Arabs in



Hollywood films is the outcome of a political “education” or “dictation” that serves goals set by the White House. Shaheen provides a shrewd example of this connection as follows:

Long before the United States launched real expeditionary operations against Iraq in March 2003, Hollywood was already launching a reel war against reel Arabs. For years, numerous pre-9/11 Arab-as-Enemy movies helped fuel misperceptions and prejudices. Pre-9/11 action films showed Captain Kid Carson unloading bombs over Baghdad’s “devil-worshippers” in *Adventure in Iraq* (1943); in *Deterrence* (1999) the US president dispatches a nuclear bomb over Baghdad. Viewers saw a marine captain blow up a Saddam look-alike and Iraqis in *The Human Shield* (1992); viewers also saw Meg Ryan and her troops gunning down Iraqis in *Courage under Fire* (1996). Kill-‘em-all films like *Navy SEALs* (1990), *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), and *Rules of Engagement* (2000) projected our GIs, civilians, secret agents, the American president, Israeli troops, even cowboys, terminating reel barbaric Arabs. These scenarios and pothers depicted us as perfectly good angels killing the perfectly evil infidels. They assured audiences that God was on our side, that we were good Clint “Make my day” Eastwood guys, sure to win easily over bad Arab guys. After seeing our reel Western heroes shoot those bad Arabs dead in their sandals, some viewers stood and applauded.

(xix).

This pre-9/11 distortion of Arabs throughout all those decades fueled a psychic readiness for the war within American public. The conception of the “enemy” Arab has been the product of the media that reflects a striking harmony with governmental policies toward events in the Middle East.

The Arab American experience is particularly complicated due to the great influence of the Zionist lobby on the U.S. foreign policy and the media. This lobby has been championing and idealizing Zionism<sup>4</sup> and its Israeli enterprise in Palestine, infusing American public life with an overly anti-Arab sentiment. Therefore, the dark side of the Zionist ideology is nearly neglected in mainstream America.<sup>5</sup> The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is the most important group of the Zionist/Israeli lobby in the United States whose role in the American political society has been increasingly powerful since the 1967 war. Paul Findley, in his book *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby*, writes that “[i]t is no overstatement to say that AIPAC has effectively gained control of virtually all of Capitol Hill’s action on Middle East policy. Almost without exception, House and Senate members do its bidding, because most of them consider AIPAC to be the direct Capitol Hill

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<sup>4</sup> Zionism is a term that generally refers to a political movement, founded in late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Jewish journalist and political activist Theodor Herzl, which advocates for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. In 1917, Britain’s Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour promised British support for the Zionist enterprise. This promise was validated during the 1920-1948 British mandate of Palestine, which prepared for and supported a Zionist military control of the Palestinian land before Britain withdrew its forces in 1948. In that same year, the creation of Israel was proclaimed ([www.britishempire.co.uk](http://www.britishempire.co.uk)). Since then, Zionism has been concerned with the development and expansion of the state of Israel by means of seizing more Palestinian and Arab lands and building more settlements on Palestinian territories.

<sup>5</sup> In his essay “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims,” Edward Said criticizes the lack of American and Western debates on the destructive and brutal practices of Zionism, arguing that “[i]t is much easier to talk about and deal with something appearing than with something going out of existence, particularly when the two phenomena – Israel and the Palestinians – are so directly connected, and when appearance has all the obvious attributes of achievements” (48).

representative of a political force that can make or break their chances at election time” (25). This deep penetration of AIPAC has secured an American pro-Israeli foreign policy, as well as extraordinary financial, political, and military support for Israel, thus leading to a more strained relationship between the United States and the Arab World. Meanwhile, a number of Arab American organizations were founded after 1967, including the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the Arab American Institute (AAI) whose efforts have been directed toward advancing the Arab cause, as well as raising the American public awareness of the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Israeli lobby has adopted a strategy of suppression in order to protect Israel and its policies from criticism. Findley asserts that representatives of this lobby exist almost everywhere, and their major role is to stifle any debate on the Arab-Israel dispute. This is demonstrated by the fact that

prestigious universities shun academic programs and grants which [this lobby] opposes. Giants of the media and military leaders buckle under its pressure. Instead of having their arguments and opinions judged on merit, critics of Israel suddenly find their motivations, their integrity, and basic moral values called into question. No matter how moderate their criticism, they may be characterized as pawns of the oil lobby, apologists for Arab terrorists, or even anti-Semitic. (315)

This 1980s intimidating climate described by Findley still exists to this date. In a book he published in 2006, Steven Salaita highlights the pressures of the Zionist lobby within the American academic sphere. He states, “. . . most Arabs in American universities exist in

contradictory and problematic spaces: for an Arab academic (in, say, the humanities), the simple act of raising one's voice can be controversial . . . Junior Arab faculty such as myself know exceedingly well that our tenure is threatened by the simple biological function of speaking” (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 112). Ironically, Salaita is currently living this same exact experience of being in “contradictory and problematic spaces.” He is today's latest academic victim of Zionist pressures, paying the price for the “simple biological function of speaking.”<sup>6</sup>

In the chapters that follow, I propose to examine how contemporary Arab American poets articulate their thoughts and feelings in response to political events as they frequently occur. Every time a political conflict takes place in the Middle East, the Arab American community is struck by a collective tension coupled with feelings of shock, sadness, frustration, and fear. To better depict these parallel patterns of political crises and of communal anxieties, I have divided my dissertation chronologically into three main chapters. Each chapter begins with a war, which reflects both the role of political chaos as a dominating factor in the lives of Arab Americans and the sense of urgency that has shaped the impact of those violent political events upon the community. While new poetic voices will emerge in each chapter, some of them will be discussed under more than one chronological period. Chapter One, “Breaking Silence,” covers the

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Salaita was offered and accepted a job offer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and he was scheduled to start work there on August 16, 2014. But, shortly before then, the university withdrew its offer after Salaita had posted some tweets criticizing Israel's recent war in Gaza. There is evidence that the university's decision was made after the Jewish Community of Champaign Urbana and wealthy donors put pressures on the board and the university administration, threatening to withdraw their financial support if Salaita is not de hired. [http://www.dailyillini.com/news/article\\_a2730e4e-33ec-11e4-bd55-0017a43b2370.html](http://www.dailyillini.com/news/article_a2730e4e-33ec-11e4-bd55-0017a43b2370.html)

period 1967-1989 that begins with the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 and its direct and indirect consequences on the Arab American community. Examinations of various Arab American poems will shed light on Arab American deep concerns about the violent conflicts taking place in their ancestral homes and the way these stories are handled by American media and foreign policies. Arab American poets give voice to their views on Middle Eastern events, expressing their emotional solidarity with their Arab brothers, particularly those suffering the Israeli offensives in Palestine and Lebanon. The period 1990-2000 is traced in Chapter Two, "Challenging Conventional Boundaries," that begins with the First Gulf War and the anti-Arab climate marking its aftermath. Poetry discussed in this chapter delineates the pressures endured by Arab Americans during those hard times as they struggled to maintain their Arab identities and connection with their homelands. This chapter will show how Arab American poets in the 1990s sought to challenge anti-Arab stereotypes and to cross borders by emphasizing their double identities and forming coalitions with other marginalized groups. Chapter Three, "Speaking Louder," explores the period from 2001 to the present with the 9/11 terrorist attacks as its opening. Poems selected in this chapter will focus on post-9/11 Arab America with regard to the backlash against Arab Americans, the war on terror, and the invasion of Iraq. Arab American poets here confront the 9/11 disaster and its aftermath through their writing that speaks out against fear, violence, and injustice. My conclusion, "Hope for a Better Future," offers reflections on the distance Arab American poetry has traveled since 1967 in light of the Arab-U.S. relationship, as well as the current and future challenges lying ahead for Arab Americans.

Throughout the span of this study, we see how Arab American poets sing songs of defiance and hope in parallel with the intensity of the chaotic political realities surrounding them. As they anxiously observe those events, they seem to grapple with questions that address concerns both of the individual and of the collective: How can we define our Arab American identity amid these overwhelming pressures? What are our responsibilities as poets and as members of our anguished community? How can we defend ourselves against increasing anti-Arab racism? Certainly, Arab Americans in general resist, and individual poets chose to speak out. Their poetry is a record of their political commitment and courageous spirits. As Samuel (Sam) Hazo articulates in one of his poems:

Watching the way

of leaves prefigures what I know

will come.

It urges me

to take a flight to elsewhere

or make my creed defiance.

Meantime, I choose to mount

my mutiny in words . . . (“The Mutineer” 145)

## CHAPTER ONE: ARAB AMERICAN POETRY 1967-1989

**Breaking Silence**

*the sun burst STOP the sun swelled burst traveled !!!!! HOU!  
the yellow sun is a bagful of pus collected with a spoon in the Arabs' wounds*

Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*

**Introduction**

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war marks the beginning of a new era for Arab Americans characterized by Arab pride and deep concerns about ongoing Arab plights. Before 1967, most Arab Americans, faced with prevalent anti-Arab cultural and political stereotypes, rejected their Arabness and “assimilated themselves out of existence” (Naff 330). However, as Michael Suleiman demonstrates in the introduction to his book *Arab Americans: Building a New Future*, despite the 1967 shocking defeat of Arabs, “the consequence was for Arab Americans to shake off their malaise and to organize” (13). This “shaking off” opened the door to a “new future” for Arab Americans who began openly and seriously to recognize their Arab heritage. Prior to this war, in which the Israeli army defeated Arab armies, seizing large portions of Arab lands, the US-Israel alliance was already firmly in place, but this “special relationship” had significantly “matured” after the war, and “[s]upport for the concept of Israel as a ‘strategic asset’ has, then, been considerable among those who exercise power in the U.S.” in order to protect America’s imperialist ambitions in the Middle East (Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle*, 9, 22). Animated by the civil rights and multiculturalism movements that were flourishing in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and galvanized by the political frustrations of

their homelands, Arab Americans started calling themselves “Arab” for the first time and sought to embrace their Arab heritage in their daily lives. They also founded their own political organizations, which included the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) in 1967, the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) in 1972, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) in 1980, and the Arab American Institute (AAI) in 1985 whose goals were to empower Arab Americans and uphold their civil rights, as well as promote an American foreign policy based on justice and peace for all conflicting parties in the Middle East. Overall, Arab Americans’ passionate connection to their homelands compelled them to defend Arab causes, particularly the vexed questions of Palestine and Lebanon (where most of the Middle East conflicts were centered), and to condemn the predominantly pro-Israeli foreign policies of the United States.

Arab Americans in the post-1967 period suffered increasing anti-Arab discrimination and exclusion in the United States. Their right to speak, assemble, and rally around their Arab concerns has been constantly challenged by the Zionist lobby whose presence in the United States has been powerful. In her essay “Politics and Exclusion: The Arab American Experience,” Helen Hatab Samhan argues that fierce efforts by Zionist activists attempted to silence the debate on the Middle East, and “many of the most respected Jewish organizations and leaders have reacted to the maturity and visibility of the Arab American community with such alarm that discrediting Arab American activity has become a disproportionate part of their agenda” (18). Amidst this antagonistic climate, Arab Americans in the 1970s and 1980s chose to speak up. At times, this hostility turned seriously violent with “[s]everal cases of harassment or



violence against Arab American individuals” that “have been documented . . . The incidents range from anonymous telephone threats to the fire bombing of Arab American offices or vandalism of Muslim religious centers” (16). In addition to that, the increasing turmoil in the Middle East – including the Arab-Israeli 1973 war, the Lebanese civil war, the U.S.-Arab oil embargo, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the U.S. bombing of Libya in 1986, the on-going Palestine-Israel conflicts – was a source of overwhelming anguish for Arab Americans. Meanwhile, the pro-Israel role played by the United States during these crises further complicated their situation.

Of significance in this critical period is the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) that inspired a great number of contemporary Arab American authors to reify their Arab culture. In this book, Said presented Orientalism as a Western ideology whose aim is to have authority over the Orient, and his discussion also raised questions about power, knowledge, and representation. Said argues that the West views the Arab as inferior because he is merely seen “as the disruptor of Israel’s and the West’s existence, or in another view of the same thing, as a surmountable obstacle to Israel’s creation in 1948. Insofar as this Arab has any history, it is part of the history given to him (or taken from him: the difference is slight) by the Orientalism tradition, and later, the Zionist tradition” (286). This misconception of the Arab has dominated the consciousness of mainstream American society that is shaped by pro-Israeli sentiment. It indeed shares Michael Foucault’s perspective on the marriage of knowledge to power that results in a constructed truth, which Foucault defines as “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to

effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth” (1669). That said, the negative representation of Arabs in the United States is the product of both the political system and the media, and the two fuel each other. For instance, the U.S. pro-Israel media coverage of the Israeli repeated bombing raids of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon throughout the 1970s, which resulted in the killing of thousands of refugees, reflected the U.S. anti-Arab stance in that Middle Eastern crisis and its persistent vetoes of UN Security Council resolutions that condemned the Israeli aggression. Unsurprisingly, when surveys are conducted in the U.S. on Arabs, anti-Arab cultural and political stereotypes appear in the background as a result of this interplay of ideological and political powers. In a 1977 survey, for example, a poll showed that Arabs were seen as “rich and ‘backward, primitive, uncivilized,’ people who dressed strangely, mistreat women, and appeared to be ‘warlike, bloodthirsty,’ ‘treacherous, cunning,’ ‘strong, powerful,’ and ‘barbaric, cruel’” (Suleiman, “America and the Arabs . . .” 251).

This survey elucidates the Gramscian notion of political hegemony and its impact on the public sphere. Antonio Gramsci describes hegemony as the way in which a politically dominant class controls a society through a network of social, political, and media institutions whose goal is to impact the public consciousness in a way favorable to the dominant group’s ascendancy. Gramsci calls this network “a hegemonic apparatus” that “creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact” (365-66). Given the fact that the “methods of knowledge” about the Middle East available to the American public are significantly affected by pro-Zionist agencies, the Arab American community faces the challenge of having its voice heard. In other words, a “reform of

consciousness” takes place during Middle Eastern crises when the U.S. media launches campaigns to get public support for Israel and to apply pressure on political decision makers, treating the Arab side of the story with lack of understanding and indifference. In his 1973 book *Green March, Black September: The Story of the Palestinian Arabs* author and journalist John Cooley affirms this perspective, contending that the media coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one-sided. He states, “[a]s I lived through the events surrounding the Arab-Israel war of 1967, as well as what came before and what has followed, it became my firm conviction that much reporting about the Middle East, both journalistic and scholarly, was missing the point” (ix). To get that “point” across was also the goal of *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East*, a book by another journalist, David Hirst, that was rejected by many American editors before it was eventually published in 1977. As he introduces his narrative of the violence in Palestine, Hirst claims that his account is neutral even though “the first impulse of many readers, friends of Israel, will be to cry that if ever there were prejudice and propaganda it is here” (4). However, he presumes that “upon maturer reflection they will come to another conclusion: that the literature hitherto available to them, particularly if they are Americans, has been overwhelmingly Zionist in sympathy or inspiration. It is therefore only right and proper that the balance be redressed, the other side of the story told” (4). What was missing to most Americans was this “other side of the story,” a story that Hirst and Cooley were able to obtain only because they truly lived it year by year.

Challenged by intensive anti-Arab prejudices and spurred by frequent disasters in the Middle East, Arab American poets stood together fearlessly to tell their Arab brothers and sisters’ “side of the story.” Their poetic expression reveals their rising political

awareness and communal solidarity, as well as the impact of the Arab and American poetic atmospheres of the time: Arab resistance poetry and American poetry against the Vietnam War. Both modes of writing protested against a world of injustices and needless deaths, which nurtured the obstinate spirit of Arab American poets. For instance, in a poem opposing the Vietnam War entitled “Danger from the Outer World,” the American poet Robert Bly considers pain a “shining thing, inside, that has served us well”: “This is only the body burdened down with leaves / The opaque flash, heavy as November grass / Growing stubbornly, triumphant even at midnight” (47). This same idea of being “triumphant” is repeatedly celebrated in the poetry of the prominent poet of the Palestinian resistance Mahmoud Darwish who, in his poem “Winds Shift Against Us,” considers the “triumph” against the attacking “winds” an inevitable and genuine act: “An eagle settles on our bodies, and we chase our dreams. May we find them / They soar behind us to find us here. There is no escape! / We live our death. This half-death is our triumph” (18). This resistant spirit in the poetry of Bly and Darwish reverberates in poems by Arab Americans where pains and wounds battle injustices. For instance, in the following lines by the Arab American poet Etel Adnan, triumphant Beirut is to be reborn after the destruction and mass deaths caused by the Israeli attack in 1982:

Blessed be those who fight  
 with their fists  
 against airplanes  
 Blessed be their weddings  
 and their tombs  
 Take my word for it:

We shall resurrect! (“Beirut 1982” 231-32)

The quest for justice in the writing of Arab American poets in the period 1967-1989 was indeed a literary battle by means of “their fists” in order to challenge a silence imposed on stories of ongoing grief suffered by their Arab brothers.

The poems discussed in this chapter reflect an Arab American literary community that is fraught with tension and anxieties. Yet, silence is broken here by Arab American poets who confronted their concerns over increasing Middle Eastern political conflicts with a solid collective will and a strong desire to give voice to unspoken realities in the Middle East. Their poems focus on themes of chaos, violence, continuous Palestinian struggle, and Lebanon’s recurring crises. All of the poets discussed here are either Palestinian or Lebanese by origin, which reveals a sense of both empathy and responsibility toward their homelands, the prime sites of Middle Eastern chaos at that time. In search of truth and justice, Arab American poets in the 1970s and 1980s decided to challenge the misrepresentation and exclusion of Arabs and Arab Americans by voicing the story of Arab wounds that was missing from the landscape of mainstream American consciousness. Therefore, the stories they told here convey the trauma and pain suffered by their Arab people and manifest implicit and explicit critiques of the United States, Israel, and many Arab states.

### **The Arab World: Violence and Terror**

The theme of violence and terror characterizes many poems by Arab American poets after 1967. The constant brutal realities that Arabs lived in unstable regions such as Palestine and Lebanon not only propelled Arab Americans to embrace their heritage more seriously but also generated a political impulse to speak for their suffering people. For

instance, Mojahid Daoud speaks in his essay “Growing up Arab in America” of his political awakening upon the 1982 Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut. That terrifying nightmare marked an abruptly transformative point in Daoud’s life:

I lived, ate, and drank with Americans, and they remained my only reference for judging the world. I was having a great time American-style, and I was not about to change it. But that orientation was drastically altered with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Up until that time my political awareness was lacking, and I still faithfully believed in American politics. That, however, quickly dissolved after viewing, night after night, Israeli’s massive bombardment of Lebanon, with America’s blessing. My human spirit was being tested as I realized that I could not sit idly by. I decided that I had to make myself aware of what was occurring. I suddenly realized that these were my brothers and sisters who were being terrorized day after day. (176-77)

Authors like Daoud transposed their political awakening into genuine writing that unveils the disheartening wounds of Arabs in the Middle East.

Discussed below are poems by poets Samu Hazo, Gregory Orfalea, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Hazo and Orfalea are both descendants of Lebanese immigrants and have responded to the 1982 Israeli offense against Lebanon. The Palestinian American poet Nye presents a human portrayal of violence against Palestinian children during the first *Intifada* (uprising) that broke out in 1987. These Arab American poets underscore the violence and terror that govern and impoverish the lives of their people in the Middle East, which deprive them from their basic right to peace and dignity.

*Lebanon and “the Voice from Washington”*

In “The World That Lightning Makes,” Sam Hazo paints a frightening picture of the violence inflicted by Israel during its invasion of South Lebanon in the summer of 1982. He also criticizes the silence of the United States towards the Israeli offense, which he describes as a “summer thunder” that is

Bursting  
like rocketry, a scar of fire  
slashes down the sky.

It noons  
the night and shocks me  
to a crawl. (123)

Here, Hazo employs audio and visual images to vividly describe how the Lebanese sky is invaded by mortal thunder and lightning produced by Israeli weaponry. Hazo here depicts the Lebanese sky as a victim that is being brutally “slashed down” by Israel’s heavy, advanced weapons. Doing so, he attempts to imply to his readers the insanity of this war and thus the inevitable massive number of human victims of these destructive weapons.

The poet shrewdly displays the massive casualties in Lebanon through a sudden invocation of Guernica. Recalling the Spanish Civil War, Hazo compares the bombing of Guernica by the Germans and Italians with the tragedies in “this Guernica in Beirut.” He then remembers Lorca, the Spanish poet,

who believed the lightning-worlds

of love and poetry could have  
 no enemies.

He never dreamed  
 of lightning-chevron on black  
 shirts, lightning-wars  
 and lightning-zigzags crayoned  
 on a victor's map that named a war  
 that scarred a generation . . . (124)

This striking contrast between the world of war and the world of love, between the world of brutality and the world of passion, creates an exquisite irony. Paradoxically, Lorca left behind a lightning-world of living literature after his murder while the Spanish War generals left nothing but corpses and a “scarred generation.” The Israeli troops, according to Hazo’s poem, are today’s war generals, the “condors” who are “storm[ing] another Spain,” Lebanon. To better portray the anguish of his brothers and sisters in Lebanon, Hazo deepens this analogy between Beirut and Guernica by comparing Lorca, who was assassinated by anti-communist nationalist forces, with the Lebanese and Palestinians who are victims of the Israeli offense: this “rain’s a litany of Lorcas bulldozed into pits.”

From Lebanon, the poet shifts his poetic setting to the United States with a condemnation of America’s reaction (or inaction) to this war. The last



three lines of the poem underscore the passivity of America and the rest of the world towards the devastated Lebanon: “The voice from Washington is no one’s/ and the world’s./ *Viva la Muerte!*”<sup>7</sup> (124). Sarcastically, Hazo contends how the world, particularly its leading country, was not only voiceless but also seemed to give the aggressors its blessing. In fact, beyond this silence was strong U.S. political and diplomatic support for Israel that revealed itself at the UN Security Council. For instance, “on June 26, 1982, the United States stood alone in vetoing a UN Security Council resolution calling for simultaneous withdrawal of Israeli and Palestinian armed forces from Beirut” (Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle* 9). This solid support for Israel continued throughout the invasion at the expense of Lebanon’s safety and autonomy.

However, many American writers opposed the United States government’s stance during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The American poet James Scully, for instance, confirms the commonly-observed double standard of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East in a poem he wrote on the 1982 Lebanon war. He states:

When the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan, the Soviet

Union invades Afghanistan.

When Israel invades Lebanon, Israel does not invade

Lebanon. Israel liberates Lebanon. The operation is

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<sup>7</sup> Long live death!

called Peace for Galilee. (208)

This double standard interprets the Reagan administration's silence. What, in fact, stands beyond this silence was a Reagan Middle East strategy of force referred to by Fouad Ajami in one of his essays as "the shadows of hell." As Ajami argues, "Reagan and some of his officials had talked about the primacy of force. Begin and Sharon [Israeli Prime Minister and Israeli Defense Minister] would act out in real life the views and preferences asserted by Reagan and his advisers before responsibility began to soften and shade those views" (98). After receiving the green light, the game of force began, and "[t]he Reagan ideologues had sown the wind: with the invasion of Lebanon, all – particularly the Lebanese and the Palestinians – reaped the whirlwind. Begin would hold the new administration to its initial rhetoric and promises" (98). Tacitly, the Reagan administration would never object to something it had initially recommended *and* approved, which led to what Hazo critiques in his poem – the evasiveness of the White House concerning the destruction of Lebanon and its people at the hands of the Israeli forces.

Interestingly, the poet begins and ends his poem with the "silent" America, this "dashboard voice from Washington." This silence establishes a shrewd frame for the poem and implies an implicit political question addressed by Hazo to his country's government: How could you approve such a mad war?

***Abdu and "the bomb with American lettering"***

While Hazo criticizes U.S. political support for Israel during the latter's offense on Lebanon, Gregory Orfaela condemns the military support the U.S. provides for Israel. In particular, he protests the fact that the weapons Israel used to kill the Lebanese and Palestinians in 1982 were American. In "The Bomb That Fell on Abdu's Farm," the reader traces a bombing operation by the Israeli air forces from the moment they appear in the sky until they hit their target – "the village." Orfaela divides his poem into five stanzas, the first of which is set in the sky while the other four record the scene on earth before and after the bomb falls. "The Phantoms approached, we were told," Orfaela begins, and the Phantoms were not ordinary; they were "like warps in the sky, like gossip / gone real, aimed in steel / at the eyes of the village" (260). Then, the poet takes the reader downward to the villagers who are observing the weird airplanes:

All the farmers and farmers' boys ran  
to the rooftops and watched,  
for it was terrifying  
and beautiful to see a wedge  
of silver up from the South. (260)

The unpredicted naiveté of the villagers is highly significant. Their desire to "watch" that "wedge of silver," instead of fleeing it, strongly reveals that what the farmers were observing was something that seemed mysteriously astounding to them. Building on this "terrifying and beautiful" image of the warplanes, Orfaela initially alludes to the Phantoms as some of the most

advanced and destructive weapons in the world. In regard to this matter, Noam Chomsky confirms that “[t]he attackers [in the 1982 war against Lebanon] used highly sophisticated weapons, including ‘shells and bombs designed to penetrate through the buildings before they explode,’ collapsing buildings inwards, and phosphorus bombs to set fires and cause untreatable burns” (*Fateful Triangle* 218). The bomb in Orfalea’s poem clearly is a phosphorous one, a type among many highly developed weapons that the United States bestowed to its strongest Middle East ally, Israel.

Israel showered Lebanon with bombs and shells so viciously that, as Orfalea proceeds, they “ringed Damascus,” the capital city of neighboring Syria. And only when the bombs “began to fall with a vengeance” did those naïve “villagers whoop” and realize that the Phantoms were sending nothing but evil gifts. This audio-visual image of the Israeli violence is manifest in the incredible destruction caused by those highly explosive bombs, “for there seemed to be a magic field around their fields” that is too sparkling and too ruinous to believe.

The shocking violence that accompanied the Israeli invasion of Lebanon spurred Arab Americans to take actions in order to try to get the U.S. to stop sending arms to Israel. Orfalea, in an essay entitled “Sifting the Ashes, Arab-American Activism During the 1982 Invasion of Lebanon,” highlights some of the political activities of Arab Americans and Arab American organizations during the war. He states that the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee “resorted to a tactic used by Vietnam war

protesters” by holding the “manufacturers of arms to task, such as Honeywell Corporation, which made one of two major types of cluster bombs, the Rockeye MK-20. Zoghby [then director of ADC] asked Honeywell to halt production and, when hostilities stopped, to send representatives to Beirut to remove unexploded bombs which children were already picking up and accidentally detonating,” but “the company refused” (215). Other desperate attempts included “ADC’s blanketing of sixty-four full-page ads in sixty-two U.S. cities that drew the most attention. A typical ad ran with a headline such as ‘Should Jacksonville Taxes Be Used to Kill People in Lebanon?’” (214). Unfortunately, nothing could stop the bombardment of civilians in Beirut or change U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

The “magic field” in Orfalea’s poem embodies the Arab blood that continued to be shed in Lebanon in the summer of 1982. There, “a cow-shed flew in red to the sky / and a mother milking collapsed / in her milk. The milk ran pink” (Orfalea, “The Bomb That Fell on Abdu’s Farm” 261). Though not very complex, this death image is so captivating in that it fabulously portrays the dreadfulness of the scene: a flying body, splashing blood, and blood-spattered ground. Orfalea then explicitly *and* solidly reveals that the cause of all this bloody destruction is “the bomb with American lettering.” This fact – the American weaponry used by Israel in Lebanon – prompted many American poets to write on the incident, including the African American poet June Jordan who wrote “Apologies to All People in Lebanon” in which she acutely asserts:

Yes, I did know it was the money I earned as a poet that paid  
 For the bombs and the planes and the tanks  
 That they used to massacre your family  
 But I am not an evil person  
 The people of my country aren't so bad  
 You can't expect but so much  
 From those of us who have to pay taxes and watch  
 American TV  
 You see my point.  
 I'm sorry  
 I really am sorry. (*We Begin Here* 195-96)

Regrettably, Jordan and “all people of Lebanon” must have been deeply shocked to realize that, despite Israel’s responsibility for the destruction of Lebanon and the massacres of thousands of civilians there, President Reagan and Congress provided it right after the invasion with a significant increase in the level of annual aid, including military support.

When a bomb is so sophisticated, it never misses its target. Therefore, “the bomb with American lettering / did not go off” (Orfalea 261).

Interestingly, the farmer’s name, Abdu, is only mentioned in the title of the poem. His absence throughout the poem is supremely apparent and could be interpreted as a sign of his death during the bombardment of his fields.

Considering the details and images of the poem, one would argue that Orfalea’s brief message is that “the bomb that fell on Abdu’s farm” was a

highly destructive American weapon. It completely wiped out both Abdu and his farm.

***Violence and the “dead Ibtisam”***

Violence in the Middle East, according to Orfalea and Hazo, has a strong connection to America’s political involvement in the region, but Naomi Shihab Nye’s “For the 500<sup>th</sup> Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh” presents it from a mainly human point of view. Nye’s poem tells the story of the little Palestinian girl Ibtisam Bozieh who was murdered by an Israeli soldier during the first Palestinian *Intifada*, also called the Stone *Intifada*. Nye wrote this poem after American media reports on the countless number of Palestinians killed during the uprising, many of whom were children. “Only when the number fattened to a ripe round 500 did the victim receive a story . . . After reading that slim story, I could not stop thinking about Ibtisam Bozieh. She followed me, in waking, in troubled sleep. A small poem was born, written to her” (“Banned Poem” 98). This poem speaks, with great affection, to the dead girl whose name happened to be ‘Ibtisam,’ which literally means ‘smiling’ in Arabic: “Little sister Ibtisam / our sleep flounders, our sleep tugs / on the cord of your name” (53). Ironically, the “cord” of Ibtisam’s name symbolizes the joy and hope lost with her murder.

Nye’s most powerful lines narrate the last moments of Ibtisam’s life when she was a direct target of an Israeli soldier. With exceptional subtleness, Nye draws a picture of childhood innocence in the face of adult aggression:

Dead at thirteen, for staring through  
 the window into a gun barrel  
 which did not know you wanted to be  
 a doctor  
 . . . . .  
 . . . had I stayed in your land  
 I might have been dead too, for  
 something simple like staring  
 or shouting what was true. (53)

Even though Ibtisam was not then throwing stones like her fellow Palestinian children, the gun made no exception and punished the innocent girl for daring to “stare through the window” into the armed Israeli. By killing the child Ibtisam, this destructive machine has also killed the future she was eager to pursue.

This image of the Israeli weaponry vis-à-vis Palestinian children is illustrated by Edward Said who points to the imbalanced confrontation between the two sides. Said contends that “the symbols of the intifada – the stone-throwing children – starkly represented the very ground of the Palestinian protest, with stones and an unbent political will standing fearlessly against the rows of well-armed Israeli soldiers,” which is supported by “one of the world’s mightiest defense establishments . . . bank-rolled unflinchingly and unquestioningly by the world’s wealthiest nation, supported faithfully and smilingly by a whole apparatus of intellectual



lackeys” (“Intifada and Independence” 26). Nye’s Ibtisam who courageously “stared” at the Israeli soldier is an emblem of those Palestinian children who were “standing fearlessly against the rows of well-armed Israeli soldiers.” However, the poet implicitly shows that the gun is a threat not only to its ‘little’ targets but also to its holder whose aggression can be inhumanly obsessive. The poet Dan Almagor would completely agree with Nye’s point of view. Almagor, a peace-loving voice from Israel, himself wrote a tribute poem on Ibtisam Bozieh followed by another honoring the Palestinian children of the *Intifada* entitled “We Shoot Children Too, Don’t We?” His latter poem elucidates how an occupation coupled with extreme violence can strip occupiers of their very basic human characteristics:

We turned a deaf ear, we turned a deaf heart,  
mean, arrogant, and dumb.

Who do we think we are?

Who gave us the right

To be so deaf, so dumb?

Ignoring the obvious:

They are as human as we are, as we are.

At least as we used to be

only forty one years ago. (2)

In both Nye’s and Almagor’s poems, one senses a human voice calling on humans to know and hear one another, to feel for one another, to forge a true peace that could defeat a self-destructive whim.

Nye included her Ibtisam poem in her collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* whose central theme is peace and whose major audience is young adults. In the book's introduction, she remarks that "we must remind others never to forget the innocent citizens of the Middle East who haven't committed any crime. The people who are living solid, considerate lives, often in difficult conditions – especially the children who struggle to maintain their beautiful hope" (xvii). Nye wrote her poem on the little Palestinian martyr Ibtisam in order to "remind" her readers of the child's "beautiful hope" and dreams that were eventually murdered. To Nye's disappointment, however, the poem did not reach the children in the occupied territories because Israeli censors refused to give permission for it to be printed in an Arabic newspaper after some Palestinian journalists had translated it into Arabic. Nye, on the same day of this denial, wrote an essay that expresses her peculiar feelings:

[The poem] came back today slashed with red Xs, stamped at the bottom of the page, REJECTED ENTIRELY, in Arabic and Hebrew. The journalists have encircled it with barbed wire and placed it on red velvet under a frame, presenting it to meet the microphone in front of the crowd, a gift to take home. So I may remember them and the shape of their days. "Now you are one of us," they say. It's a strangely honorable linkage, to be rejected by their own censors. ("Banned Poem" 100).

For Nye, this rejection was no less than a sort of mental violence indicated by the “barbed wire” around her creative piece of writing, which granted her “a strangely honorable linkage” with other victims of Israeli aggression.

Nye views stones thrown by Palestinian children as a better relief from grief than her helpless poem. She is “throwing this ragged grief into the street / scissoring news from stories free from the page / but they live on [her] desk with letters, not cries” (“For the 500<sup>th</sup> Dead Palestinian . . .” 54). Indeed, the Palestinians’ stony “cries” sensibly configure their rage that is in itself an outcome of a long-suffered violence and suppression. Edward Said clearly attributes the first *Intifada* to decades of ongoing occupation with Israelis “less interested in peace and coexistence,” arguing that “[t]he U.S., the other Arabs, even putative allies like the Soviet Union seemed paralyzed by that mixture of foregone hypocrisy and benevolent hand-wringing that always contributed to sustaining the occupation still longer. Therefore the time had come to start trying to change realities, from the bottom up (“Intifada and Independence” 26). Ibtisam had lived these extremely difficult times with her people, hoping to become a doctor in the future, but she did not know her dream had no place amidst persistent violence. As Fawaz Turki states, “[a] Palestinian’s consciousness is stuffed and devastated by images of violence. Violence that a Palestinian grows up with like he grows up with his skin. Violence that was inflicted upon him every day of his street life, camp life, and his life as a refugee, and that reduced him – like his history – to a fragment” (“To Be a Palestinian” 7). In reaction to such violent and oppressive realities from which Palestinians had suffered, the Stone *Intifada* broke out, asking for radical changes in order for children like Ibtisam to live out their dreams.

Contrary to the Israelis' and the American categorization of the Palestinian uprising as something violent, Nye considers it as "cries," or rage. Inasmuch as the U.S. media is pro-Israeli, the American public is unaware of how much violence affects the life of a Palestinian due to the occupation. Thus, instead of sympathizing with Palestinians as victims of a military occupation, many Americans view the Palestinian resistance as a violent and unjustified act. However, Hannah Arendt distinguishes between violence and rage, contending that "violence functions as the last resort of power against criminals or rebels," but this power has to be "legitimate" and "[spring] up whenever people get together and act in concert" (155, 151). Rage, on the other hand, is different; "[o]nly where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise. Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage." Arendt goes on to assert that acts of rage "belong among the 'natural' *human* emotions, and to cure man of them would mean nothing less than to dehumanize or emasculate him" (160, 161). In light of Arendt's argument, the Israeli aggressive treatment of the Palestinians before and during the *Intifada* is "illegitimate" violence while such uprisings of the Palestinians are raging reactions. The power of the Israeli government represents only the Israelis while the rest of the population living in the occupied territories, who are not "criminals or rebels," face daily discriminatory treatment. Consequently, it is legitimate for the Palestinians to rage against the harsh realities of violence, discrimination, and oppression; when their "sense of justice is offended" on a daily basis, it is "natural" that they rise up to save their humanity.

Although the Israeli reaction to the Palestinian uprising is often labeled as "self-defense" by the U.S. media, Arendt's argument above would easily contest that labeling.

Moreover, in an interview, Edward Said challenged the “self-defense” slogan adopted by the American media when he argued clearly that the Palestinians are

a population of stone-throwing youths against Israel missiles, jets, helicopter gunships, tanks, and rockets. The most important thing is that all the fighting has taken place on Palestinian territory. So to use the word “defense” here is a grotesque misnomer. This is an occupation force inside Palestinian territory. The Palestinians are resisting military occupation and the Israelis are prolonging the occupation, and making, as all colonial troops have done, whether in Algeria, Vietnam, or India, the civilian population pay the price of resistance. (*Culture and Resistance* 34)

To put it simply, Ibtisam and her people threw stones at the heavily armed Israeli troops to express their refusal to endure the daily injustices they suffered at the hands of those forces.

Through the story of Ibtisam, Nye encourages her American audience to look seriously at the human dimensions of the Palestinian plight. This little girl’s sense of justice and humanity were offended three times: before, during, and after her murder. The harsh life she had lived, the terrible way she was killed, and the fact that her killer got away with it – with no punishment – are all bitter facts that shape Palestinians’ lives. Nye wonders why not change this world for the better: “[h]ow do we carry the endless surprise / of all our deaths? Becoming doctors / for one another, Arab, Jew / instead of guarding tumors of pain” (54). Nye promises Ibtisam to transform that harshness into consolation: “I would smooth your life in my hands / pull you back . . . / Some who never saw it / will not forget your face” (54). Nye’s poem will keep the little *Shaheeda* Ibtisam

alive with peace and dignity. It will show those “who never saw it” the hideously violent and non-human lives of Arab children in Palestine.

### **Palestine: Chronic Plight, Chronic Pain**

The thing that unites Arabs and Arab Americans the most is the Palestinian cause. Arab American poets in general, and Palestinian American poets in particular, have dealt with the issue of Palestine, including themes like dislocation, refugees, anger, frustration, and peace. Without a doubt, the public and official sentiment in America is anti-Palestinian, and, as demonstrated by Paul Findley, the pro-Israeli lobby has become greatly influential, that it “has thoroughly penetrated this nation’s governmental system, and the organization that has made the deepest impact is AIPAC, to whom even the president of the United States turns when he has a vexing political problem related to the Arab Israeli dispute” (27). These political pressures, according to Edward Said, are just one side of a discriminative “web” that renders a Palestinian’s life in America a “disheartening” one, for “[t]he web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is that web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny” (*Orientalism* 27). Living within this hostile climate, Palestinian Americans after 1967 have felt desperate about the cause of their homeland, which, they believe, has been sold out by both the United States and many Arab states.

Life for Palestinians in America is inscribed with frustration as a result of the demonization of the Palestinian cause by both the media and U.S. administrations. Discussion of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by the U.S. media is dominated by the misleading propaganda that Palestine does not exist in the first place, which strips

Palestinians of their very right to their land and history. Add to this the fact that the U.S. government's attitude toward resolving the Palestinian question has been, according to Chomsky, "rejectionist." Chomsky argues that "[s]ince 1967, a broad international consensus has taken shape, including Europe, the USSR and most of the nonaligned nations. This consensus initially advocated a political settlement along approximately the pre-June 1967 borders, with security guarantees, recognized borders, and various devices to help assure peace and tranquility," but that solution "has lost out in the internal policy debate in favor of the concept of an Israeli Sparta serving as a 'strategic asset'" (*Fateful Triangle* 40, 43). Hence, the longer the Palestinian cause remains unresolved, the more it problematizes the experience of the Palestinian exile.

What makes this experience even more complicated is the deliberate silencing of pro-Palestinian arguments in the United States. This policy of repression has intensified since 1967 when discussions of the Palestine-Israel conflict became "difficult or impossible in the United States as a result of a remarkably effective campaign of vilification, abuse, and sometimes outright lying directed against those who dared to question received doctrine" (Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle* 11). However, Palestinian-American poets, like Fawaz Turki and Sharif Elmusa, have produced writings that attempted to challenge this campaign by telling the stories of the lost homeland and the expelled population. The following discussion of poems by Elmusa and Turki depicts mixed feelings of anger, pain, hope, resistance, and frustration. Propelled by the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1960s, the emergence of the Palestinian Resistance Movement after the 1967 war, and their strong ties to the land of their ancestors, these poets show how the loss of home coupled with

significant ongoing injustices makes the Palestinian diaspora a distinct experience fraught with tension and defiance.

*Palestinians and “their anger . . . their affections”*

For Palestinians, memories of wounds caused by the violent loss of their land and its tragic aftermath are irrepressible. This notion dominates most of Fawaz Turki’s writing. “I just know that my being / is siding with my becoming / and my me with us,” he writes, unveiling the fragments of his self (“A Self-Made Truth” 9). “Being” and “becoming,” present and future, are woven together by the past, simultaneously conveying the collective wounds of Palestinians. According to Edward Said, this connection between the Palestinian exile and his memories is of great significance because “[w]hat has been left behind may either be mourned, or it can be used to provide a different set of lenses. Since almost by definition exile and memory go together, it is what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it that determines how one sees the future” (*Reflections On Exile and Other Essays* 23). Turki remarkably portrays the intricate Palestinian experience of exile in his poem “Palestinians in Exile”:

If you have not met Palestinians  
in exile,  
you are fortunate.  
Observe them  
observe the pieces they leave behind  
as they move on to the next place,  
observe the words that come  
out of their mouths. (20)



The increasingly cumulative memories of “the pieces [Palestinians] leave behind” deepen their wounds. This notion is demonstrated by James Clifford who argues that “[p]eoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be ‘cured’ by merging into a new national community. This is especially true when they are the victims of ongoing, structural prejudice” (307). As Palestinians continue to carry the burden of their painful memories and to face ceaseless unjust realities, the thought about their Palestinian identity becomes increasingly obsessive.

Turki’s poetry reveals how the passion of Palestinians and Palestinian Americans for their lost homeland is inescapable. For them, Palestine is a landscape that is geographically and mentally shattered. The outcome of this shattering is a sentimental matrix of “anger,” “affection,” and “tension”:

. . . avoid  
 the tension in the space around them,  
 avoid the transcendence  
 they point out in the banal,  
 avoid their blessed visions  
 their incessant talks,  
 their anger  
 their affections. (“Palestinians in Exile” 20)

In the background of this shattered landscape stands the question of statelessness. Palestinians have been deprived of the right to citizenship, and their passports are merely refugee travel documents. Even the passports that were issued to the Palestinians of the

West Bank and Gaza Strip after the Oslo Accords of 1993 have been rejected by many countries. In *The Disinherited: Journal of Palestinian Exile* Turki relates an episode that happens only to Palestinians and, perhaps, only Palestinians would sincerely empathize with it. “I get off the plane at Frankfurt,” recounts Turki. “I have no visa. Only my stateless travel document. ‘You have no visa. You can’t enter the country,’ I am told by the immigration officer. ‘You are stateless; a visa is necessary.’ Help me, man, ignore my little document of disgrace. ‘You go back to Saudi Arabia,’ he says. Fuck you, I say. I don’t care where you send me. Send me to heaven. I have been to hell already” (93). Turki’s story goes on: he was told by a German officer at the airport to go back to London where he had come from, get a visa there at the German embassy, and come back. Turki, thus, went back to Great Britain but was not allowed entrance to the country because of his “dubious nationality” (94). When back in Germany, he was denied entrance again, and airport officers forced him to board a plane to Beirut. This powerful narrative is a microcosm of Palestinian diaspora where scattering is destined and belonging is denied. Turki’s wandering between airports reveals the international indifference to the Palestinians’ plight and the painful peculiarity of their situation.

Turki’s poems are fused with anger, but that anger is passionately articulated. Despite frustration and disappointment, the Palestinian in exile holds his homeland tight to his heart and to his consciousness and transforms his outrage into a challenge and a hope for return:

Burn our land

burn our dream

pour acid onto our songs

cover with sawdust  
 the blood of our massacred people  
 muffle with your technology  
 the screams of our imprisoned patriots,  
 destroy,  
 destroy  
 our grass and soil raze  
 to the ground every  
 farm and village our  
 ancestors had built  
 .....  
 Do that and more,  
 I do not fear your tyranny.  
 I guard one seed  
 of a tree  
 my forefathers have saved  
 that I shall plant again  
 in my homeland. (Turki "The Seed Keepers" 22-3)

This a collage of the Palestinian odyssey where pictures of "blood," "massacres," and "destruction" are blended with those of "songs," "dream," "soil," and "seed." In other words, the Palestinian homeland is not a leaf that fell off the tree and died; rather, it is a "seed" that is yet to plant and live on. No matter how brutal the Israeli forces are, the

Palestinian exile will keep this seed and continue his triumph over alienation and displacement.

After being expelled from their land, Palestinians have lived all around the globe, including North America. In the United States, Palestinians live in a climate hostile to their national aspirations. Negative stereotypes of Palestinians have pervaded the U.S. mass media, films, and pop culture, distorting the image of Palestinians and their national cause. For example, in his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Jack Shaheen traces decades of anti-Arab racism in Hollywood movies, including movies that explicitly or implicitly addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Commenting on these films, Shaheen argues that Hollywood movies are manipulative: “Never do movies present Palestinians as innocent victims and Israelis as brutal oppressors. No movie shows Israeli soldiers and settlers uprooting olive orchards, gunning down Palestinian civilians and Palestinian cities. No movie shows Palestinian families struggling to survive under occupation, living in refugee camps, striving to have their own country and passports stating ‘Palestine’” (26). Living within this antagonistic environment, Palestinians in America have struggled to lead a normal life. This is evident in Turki’s “Being a Good *American*” where the Palestinian American speaker attempts sincerely to live an American lifestyle:

Last Sunday was a fine day  
for me to be a good *American*  
I painted the kitchen table  
and talked to my next door neighbor  
while he washed his car.

I watched TV for three hours  
 and then went to bed.  
 I thought about our dog  
 who died recently.  
 I would have taken him for a walk  
 around this time. (198, 199)

The speaker's thoughts about Palestine arise only at night, "which is a safe time to think / of Palestine and olive trees" (199). This secret thinking about Palestine indicates a sense of fear and caution due to the increasing suspicion and scrutiny of Palestinians in the 1970s when Turki's poem was written. "Beginning in 1972 with Operation Boulder," states Edward Said, "the [U.S.] government has placed the Palestinian community on its priority surveillance list," and this intimidation practiced against Palestinians and their cause has continued to this date (*The Politics of Dispossession* 54). As a result of this ominous atmosphere, the speaker in Turki's poem experiences an ambivalent internal conflict between his American life and his Palestinian consciousness, between the "self" he conveys and the "other" he hides. This Palestinian American man finds problematic a reconciliation of his conflicting identities and tends, instead, to think that keeping his Palestinian identity as a secret is his only option of "being a good *American*."

All these public and political pressures contributed to the complexity of the life of the exiled Palestinian who still keeps his thoughts about his lost homeland. While he tries in America to be "a good *American*," to fit in an anti-Palestinian milieu, Palestine remains inside him a living spirit and an agitated passion.

*Refugees Where “nothing from heaven fell”*

Of most importance to Palestinians is their disheartening experience of rootlessness. Fawaz Turki and Sharif Elmusa grew up in refugee camps, an unforgettable experience whose physical and mental landscape they draw with pain and passion. The personal and the political are inseparably woven in their poems, which demonstrates that politics lies at the heart of their past and present plights as Palestinians. Their poetry narrates post-1948 stories that, for ages, have seemed uninteresting to the West and, thus, received little international attention. Edward Said stresses the vexed relationship between the West and the Palestinian issue:

what happened to the Palestinians when Israel came into existence in 1948, what they did, how they left Palestine and became refugees – all this is very much enshrouded in controversy, polemic, ideological (and barely historical) debate in the West. It is much easier to talk about and deal with something appearing than with something going out of existence, particularly when the two – Israel and the Palestinians – are so directly connected, and when appearance has all the obvious attributes of achievements. (“Zionism From the Standpoint of Its Victims” 48)

But, for a Palestinian, his refugee experience is an indelible memory. “The refugee camp on the edge of Jericho where I grew up wasn’t home. Home was in Palestine,” asserts Elmusa (“A Poetics of Return” (1). Inasmuch as home still exists, the dream to return never dies: “[t]he Palestinian refugees always imagined they would return as a community. They would be like ‘flocks of returnees,’ as ‘the nightingale told’ the great Lebanese singer Fairuz, when they both met ‘at a bend’ in the road” (2). Abandoning

their right of return would mean like erasing the history of their lost homeland and the forced expulsion of its people associated with it. Elmusa tells his own refugee story in Jericho to remind the entire world of the Palestinian plight.

In “In the Refugee Camp,” those tales of home were Elmusa’s source of nourishment. He details the humiliation and disgrace that surrounded him:

The huts were of mud and hay,  
 their thin roofs feared the rain,  
 and walls slouched like humbled men.  
 The streets were laid out in a grid,  
 as in New York,  
 but without the dignity of names  
 or asphalt. Dust reigned.  
 Women grew pale  
 chickens and children  
 feeding them fables from the lost land. (230)

Nothing in the camp bore a sign of its human existence; nothing in this grim scene was dignifying except for the “fables from the lost land.”

Palestine is a lost paradise in the second stanza, and Elmusa is an Adam begging for divine help. Miserable and helpless after the loss of his land, this Palestinian refugee ultimately resorted to the sky, but “nothing from heaven fell”:

Of course I gazed at the sky  
 on clear nights,  
 at stars drizzling

soft grains of light,  
 at the moon's deliberate face,  
 at the good angel wrapped in purple air.  
 I had no ladder  
 and nothing from heaven fell  
 in my crescent hands. (230)

The estrangement and loneliness of this Adamic Palestinian certainly have a political implication. Palestinians, especially after 1967, have strongly felt that the world in general and Arabs in particular have forsaken them, that their refugee state could be resolved should these Arabs take seriously their responsibility toward their Palestinian brothers. As noted by Edward Said, “since 1967, [the Palestinian] has become a politicized consciousness with nothing to lose but his refugeedom,” for what is left to the Palestinian out of “the demystification of the Arab potential” is nothing but “the fact that he is a deracinated refugee from Palestine” (*The Politics of Dispossession* 19, 20). This “deracinated refugee” in his fallen world proclaims his resentment and intense helplessness: “Ah, how I cursed Adam and Eve / and the ones who made them refugees” (230). Whose fault (or sin) is it, in Elmusa’s view? It is hard to tell, for the Adamic refugee here seems to curse everyone – everyone, including himself.

Stories of Palestinians in Arab American poetry also shed light on the collective killing committed against Palestinian refugees since the creation of Israel. In the 1970s that saw the Lebanese civil war, for example, thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were massacred by both the Israeli forces and the Lebanese Christian militias whom Israel armed and supervised. In his moving prose poem “Tel Zaatara Was the Hill



of Thyme,” Fawaz Turki chronicles the besieging, bombing, and mass slaughtering of Palestinian refugees in Tel Zaatar refugee camp in 1976. During this bloody incident, “[f]ascists surround the Hill from every direction. They pound it with artillery shells, day and night. Day and night. Day and night. There is no respite between the setting of the sun and the break of dawn, between the noon sun and the afternoon wind,” which created “the fear of death from dehydration, thirst, starvation, unattended wounds and from living in a place with such a lyric name” (66).

These afflictive refugee narratives have existed since Palestinians were first driven out of their homeland in 1948. In regard to the significant impact of land occupation, Frantz Fanon argues that “[b]ecause it is a systematic negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: ‘Who am I in reality?’” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 182). Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian American poet who emerged later in the 1990s, often wonders about her own realities as a Palestinian, her own memories as a child refugee, and the reason why her very right to existence was denied. She cannot separate the stories of her birth and childhood in a refugee camp from those of the birth of Israel whose founders declared openly a desire to wipe off all Arab children as part of their Zionist enterprise. She states in an interview:

the thing that stands out to me, as a Palestinian, about my birthday is that the year before on October 25, 1972, Golda Meir had delivered a speech where she says – and I am not paraphrasing – “I cannot sleep at night knowing how many Arab babies are being born this same night.” This was a speech delivered to her countrymen and women as a nationalistic call to

ethnic and national pride. It gave me the sense that Palestinians' children's birth was the nightmare for the Israeli enterprise. This idea that we had no so seeped into the subconscious and the fabric of creation of this state . . . would keep people up at night. That's what I think about most when I think about my birthday in the context of a Palestinian exile community and the children that have been born to refugees. Every child has a story like that . . . I think any Palestinian child born since that statement was made was a reflection of humanity that Golda Meir and her comments tried to diminish. (Knopf-Newman 72).

Whether in Tel Zaatar or any other refugee camp, Palestinian refugees like Turki, Elmusa, and Hammad have lived a deprived life surrounded by violence and terror. Their narratives uncover the deep consciousness of a Palestinian whose land is occupied and whose life is, at the very least, inhumane, cruel, and degrading.

Out of Turki's deadly experience at Tel Zaatar camp came his sharp criticism of the passivity of the international community. Whereas the ghost of death seemed to exist almost everywhere and at every moment, the only thing that "stood between the Hill and the world, all this time, was the Hill's knife and the world's silence" (Turki, "Tel Zaatar Was the Hill of Thyme" 65). Although stories of these massacres are overlooked in Israeli and Western histories, there have been some courageous voices, including Jewish ones, that have dared to speak out, oppose, and condemn the targeting of Palestinian civilians under the guise of protecting the existence of Israel. For example, the American ultra-Orthodox group Neutrei Karta criticizes the Israeli aggression against Palestinians throughout the twentieth century. It proposes that "Zionism has for over a century denied

Sinaitic revelation. It believes that Jewish exile can be ended by military aggression . . . Zionism has spent the past century strategically dispossessing the Palestinian people. It has ignored their just claims and subjected them to persecution, torture and death” (qtd. in Steven Salaita, *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 141). Standing paradoxically in contrast to this powerful statement by Neutrei Karta is the Arab silence toward the miseries of Palestine and its refugees, a silence that Turki describes in his poem with disgust. He views the massacred Hill as a shameful spot on the face of the Arab League that shockingly did nothing to stop the bloodshed: “[t]he ideology of this Arab world, around the Hill of Thyme, rattles its sounds like the dirt under the fingernails of all the dead bodies in our mass graves” (“Tel Zaatar Was the Hill of Thyme” 67). The furious tone of this proclamation unfolds the state of mind of the Palestinian refugee who has been bitterly let down by Arab leaders and left alone in the face of death.

### **The Arab World: Chaos and Confusion**

The frequent political crises in the Middle East during the period 1967-1989 led to a great sense of frustration and confusion among Arab Americans. Many Arab American poets, like Etel Adnan and Naomi Shihab Nye, have expressed these troubled thoughts and feelings in their writings. As Kathy Engel finely put it, poetic responses to Arab political chaos are mental fragments longing for wholeness and persistent questions searching for truth:

[m]ade from thought, daring, complex and historic love, everyday life, a desire for truth and the will to remember, these poems are necessary. They are medicine, muscle, bones, and they are laughter. They are wit when it seems there can be none. These works, born of our individual and

collective spirits and minds, born of our tentative bodies, represent our capacity to question, to survive, to become, stretch toward sovereignty of mind and heart, toward one another, living in dissonance, reaching for wholeness. (xv)

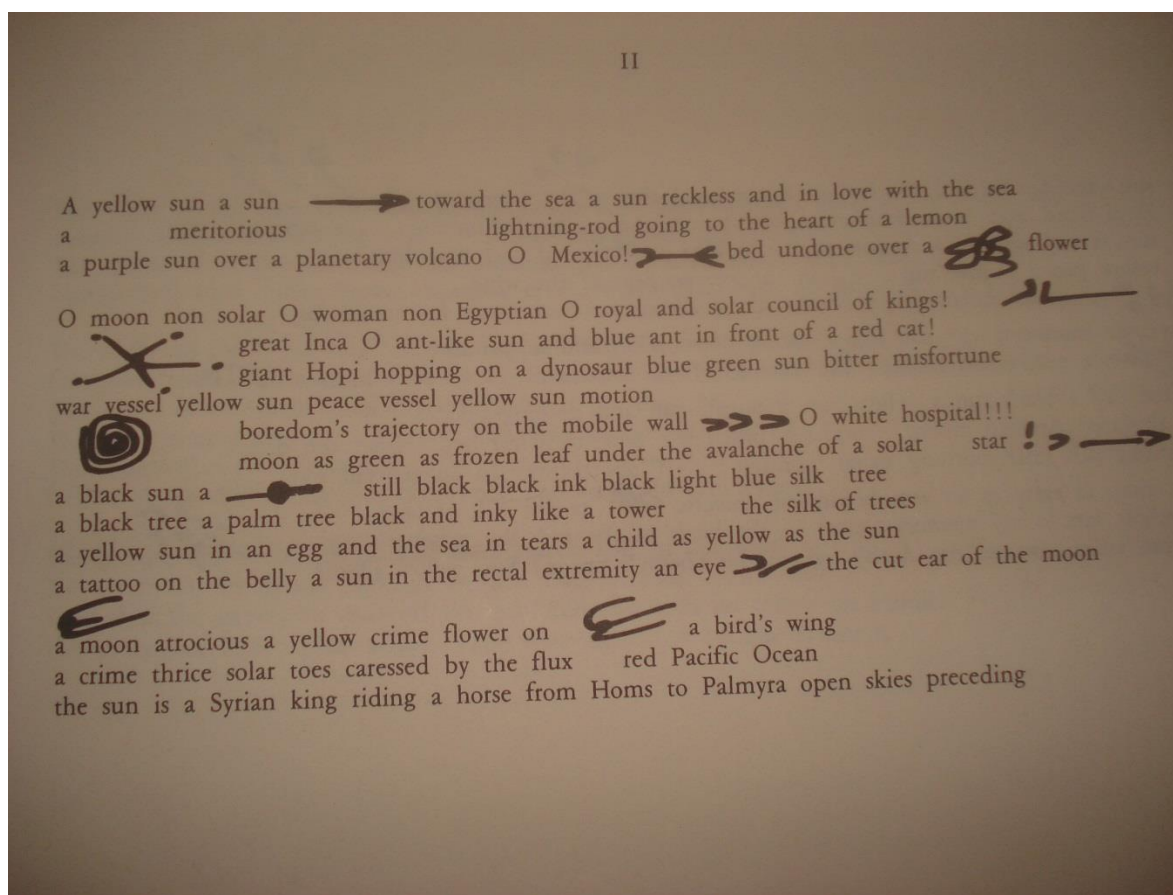
This writing involves a process of digging deep into “spirits and minds,” into “hearts,” “muscle,” “bones,” wherever wounds reside. The following poems by Etel Adnan, who is the daughter of a Muslim Syrian father and a Christian Greek mother, and Naomi Shihab Nye convey the two poets’ struggling spirits and anxious minds, which, in turn, mirror the catastrophes that afflicted the Arab World.

***The War that “laid its flowers under tombs”***

Adnan’s *The Arab Apocalypse*<sup>8</sup> is an epic that has been written in a highly innovative style as a reaction to the conflict that intensified in Lebanon before and during the civil war, leading to the catastrophe of Tel Zaatar camp in 1976. Adnan employed in *The Arab Apocalypse* her skills as a visual artist to support her political critique of the Arab World. Consisting of 59 sections and juxtaposing words and images, this poem opens with what seems to be an Arab universe that is crowded with images of suns, moons, earth, sea, eyes, eggs, flowers, children, ears, nostrils, toes, wings, horses – all occupy spaces in that universe but have ambivalent relations with one other:

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<sup>8</sup> *The Arab Apocalypse* was originally written in French in 1980, then rewritten in English in 1989, and was finally translated into Arabic in 1991.



(9)

These languages of image and word set the climate of the poem: a combination of extreme passion, energy, and fury. Due to these extremes, no idea is easy to apprehend since thoughts go in different directions.

Indeed, the reader of *The Arab Apocalypse*, though able to live the traumatic scene set for him, cannot get a clear interpretation of its details. As vividly put by Caroline Seymour-Jorn, the poem “resists analysis to a great extent,” for “[e]ach line embodies a thought that is struggling to be expressed, and that brings with it a mass of multivalent symbols and connected ideas. Many of the poems in the collection hurl images at the reader just as bullets fly from the Kalachnikov, and in doing so express a

situation of frightening confusion, a reflection, perhaps, of a warring world” (38).

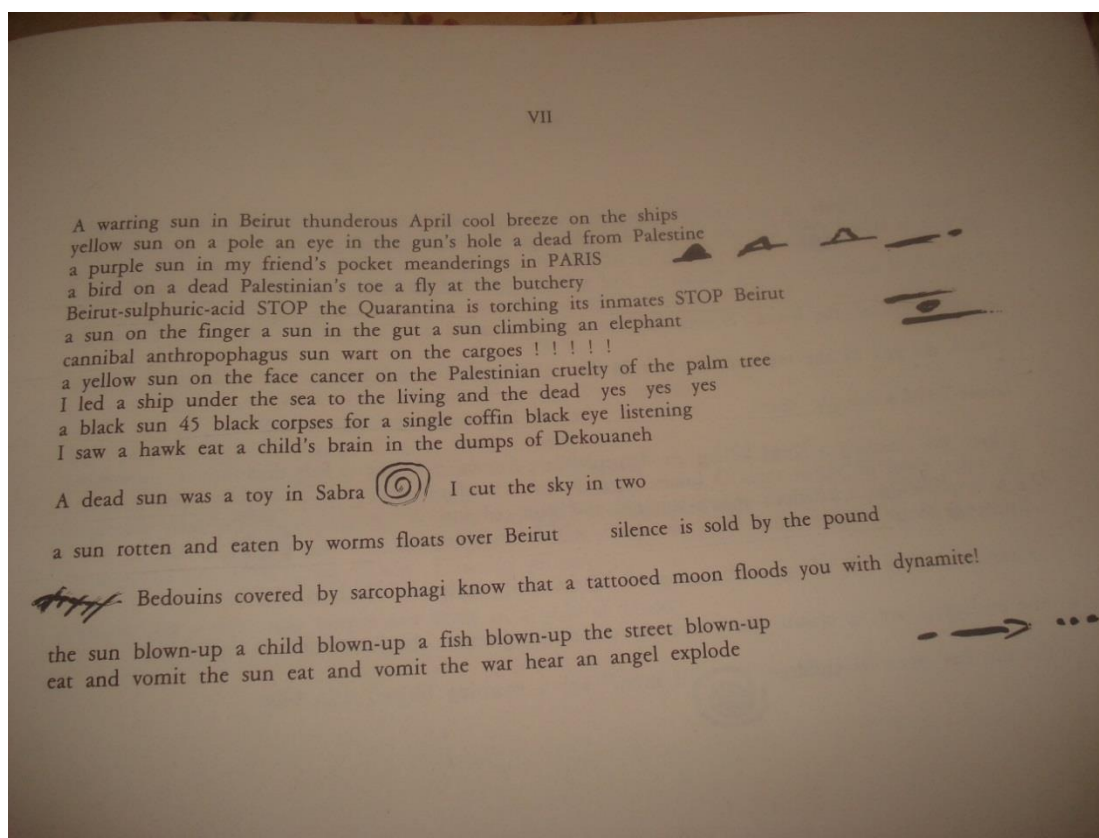
Ostensibly, these “bullets” are shot here and there, but the arrows take the reader in one direction – to the East. Hence is the surreal vision of a chaotic Arab world coupled with an inescapable sense of explosion, of madness, of disaster. Adnan knew this chaos in her adolescent years when Lebanon was under French occupation and the rest of the world was facing a political conflict resulting from the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

Adnan explains how those years have influenced her creative writing:

[t]he years that qualify most as being a writer’s or poet’s formative years are the years of our adolescence. These are years when our reason and our senses grow conspicuously but in separate ways, and develop as if independently from one another. This is why they are years of violent emotions and mental confusion. We are then like some young trees whose branches grow in separate directions giving the impression that the stem will break apart under opposite pulls. (“Growing Up To Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon” 12)

Adnan’s “violent emotions and mental confusion” emerge in her writing every time a disaster hits Lebanon or any other Arab country. They are manifest in *The Arab Apocalypse* through a notably ambivalent picture of Lebanon’s civil war.

As chaos splashes out throughout the poem in word and imagery, one senses it everywhere. This chaos is evident in its inconsistent symbolism and abrupt evocations. For instance, Adnan uses the same image of the sun to symbolize different meanings. Consider the following verse from poem VII:



(19)

The first “warring sun” supposedly represents the Israeli forces that attacked south Lebanon in the 1970s, but the “cannibal anthropophagus sun” symbolizes the Phalangists who, under Israeli supervision, murdered the Palestinian refugees in Tel Zaatar and Quarantina camps. Also, there are other suns seen all around the bloody scene – in the sky, in the sea, on earth, under the ground – like the “yellow sun,” the “purple sun,” the “black sun,” the “dead sun,” the “rotten and eaten” sun, and the “blown-up” sun whose meanings are apparently dissimilar. Seymour-Jorn contends that “the very slippage between symbols and meaning in Adnan’s poetry is itself significant. It seems to reflect the chaotic nature of her subject, a world constantly at war with itself – one which meaningless suffering and death figure prominently” (38). Alongside this inconsistency

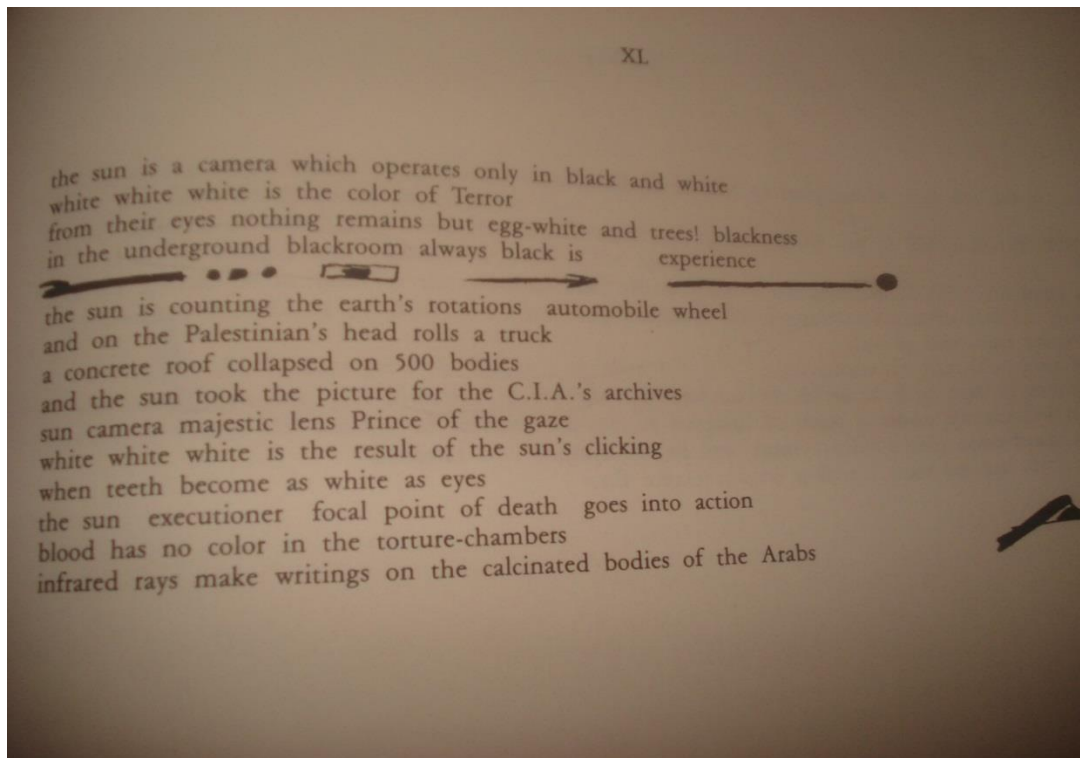
in symbolism are the evocations that the reader unexpectedly encounters. As the poet paints her Arab universe with anger and frustration, she unpredictably evokes such historical and literary epochs and figures as “BABYLON,” “GILGAMESH,” “MOHAMMED,” (32) “dead Indians,” (10), “ISHTAR,” (46) “BAUDELAIRE,” (43) the “Kurd killing” and the “Armenian killing,” (20) and “MAO” and the “new Rimbaud” (74). Due to these sudden references, the reader is frequently confused by an endless series of incoherent thoughts, broken sentences, and uncanny expressions.

What has created chaos in the Arab World? Who is responsible for Lebanon’s calamities? Adnan refers to colonialism and imperialism as causes of Lebanon’s chaos and Arab disarray in general. The French colonization of Lebanon attempted to erase Arab identity through its suppression of the Arabic language: “I said that this tongue smoking like roast-lamb will disappear / make tomorrow’s men speak in signs collectively / They threw the Arabic language to the garbage toads took it up” (75). Adnan herself is a victim of this colonial strategy that deprived her of learning Arabic and, thus, of writing in Arabic. For her, Arabic “is such a beautiful language,” so “it almost breaks [her] heart not to write in Arabic. But the main reason is the colonial school system that was imposed on Lebanon during [her] childhood” (Kilpatrick 118). Adnan’s poem portrays these colonizers as the “geomagnetic forces” that “dry up our regions, as the sun that “unites the Arabs against the Arabs” (*The Arab Apocalypse* 36, 40). One reads here a critique of Western colonialism and imperialism that have stood against Arab unity. As Hisham Sharabi states in his *Neopatriarchy*, the post-colonial Arab world reflected a dark era of imperialism, and this “imperialism was responsible for fragmenting the Arab world politically and economically,” leading to imposed



neopatriarchy that “[hindered] normal socio-political change in the Arab world” (74). The sectarian system in Lebanon, which is the fundamental cause of political and social conflicts there, was created – and reinforced – by the French colonialists who gave priority and superiority to the Maronite Christians over Muslims due to the former’s rejection of a pro-Arab Lebanese state. After the independence of Lebanon, European imperialism continued to feed such disparities in Lebanon, helping to arm the Christian militias who massacred Muslim Lebanese and Palestinian refugees in Tel Zaatar during the civil war and many more thousands later during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Considering these political facts, Adnan bitterly laments: “Beirut is a corpse presented on a silver platter,” “there is in every Arab a traitor thirsting for the West,” “the sun sells its lineage as slaves at dawn and in the west . . .” (41, 51, 40).

Israeli colonization is another factor that led to a tattered Arab world. Seymour-Jorn argues that the ‘sun’ in *The Arab Apocalypse* is “a metaphor for colonial powers that, in their determination to control the earth, decimate much of what stands in their way” (38). Pointing to poem XL, Seymour-Jorn contends that “the sun seems to represent the Israeli authorities, and is described as a camera that takes only black and white photos,” with the Palestinian as “the colonized subject” and the camera as “the colonial gaze” (40):



(59)

The repetition of “white” and its relation to “terror” and “the sun’s clicking” indicate colonial aggression, for the camera is a frightening weapon with only “black and white” snapshots: the whiteness is of its lightning flash and the blackness is of the massive dead bodies it leaves. This poem refers to “500 bodies” of Palestinians whose pictures were taken by the “C.I.A.,” which alludes to the relationship between the Israeli colonials and United States government. Beside its linkage to the American government, this colonial violence is also connected to American money that pays for those deadly “cameras”:

“Millions of dollars of pain tons of crushed flesh / There have been mountains of corpses and rivers of blood / Bags filled with bones baskets filled with eyes bowls filled with lymph” (69). That said, Adnan contends that the Arab turmoil is rooted deeply in

continuous colonial projects that have rendered the region a fertile place for violence, constant tension, and Arab-to-Arab rivalry.

Against Lebanon's disorder and absurdity, this epic is a poetic rebellion. As pointedly remarked by Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, one could describe *The Arab Apocalypse* as "a verbo-visual outcry against the civil war that threatened to engulf the entire Arab Middle East in a profound crisis. Breaking the Arab world's silence – which Adnan depicts in *Sitt Marie Rose* as 'the original illness' – it resorts to visual art in order to reinvigorate language at a time when words had lost their innocence and credibility" (209). As in Adnan's compelling novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, silence is a persistent Arab illness in her *The Arab Apocalypse* where she remarkably bounces between the Arab silence and the Arab apocalypse. Thus, when "an apocalyptic sun explodes," the Arab "yellow sun [is] stricken with menopause O patience!" (*The Arab Apocalypse* 39, 38). This aging Arab world is also ill with vanity and irresolution: "O people with no calendar O Arab people O people unstable O phosphorescent people!" (38). With an elegiac tone, the poet says, "I am the prophet of a useless nation," a nation slumbering among the dead bodies of its own people, "[a]midst a smell of corpses forgotten by the garbage collector sleeps the sun" (41). One of Adnan's most astonishing techniques to counteract the Arab "illness," to break the silence, is the frequent use of the telegram punctuating word "STOP." Its use is indicative of extreme outright anger at the relentlessness of the Lebanese catastrophe, and each STOP is an outcry to stop it: "stone has no memory STOP the sun neither STOP" (57). Between these STOPS, between these outcries, the poem's details of the Arab apocalypse are mostly quick, incoherent, and inadequate, conveying the poet's rapid flow of passion. Interestingly, Adnan's protest is also

demonstrated by using the word STOP according to the traffic light language. Hence, we see her cry loudly ‘STOP’ when the scene is dreadfully red even if blood is not explicitly declared: “the children played ball with the sun’s dead body STOP / they put nails chains and metal bars in the sun’s body / They came wearing masks STOP They came poisoned STOP They came / castrated STOP” (46).

The fusions of madness and anger, of defiance and rage, stand out in *The Arab Apocalypse* to reflect the torn Lebanon during the civil war. Its detailed description of that chaos, however, makes it resonate with all other disasters that have afflicted the Arab Middle East since then.

***The News of Sabra and Shatila “clot in my blood”***

Naomi Shihab Nye’s writing style is different from Etel Adnan’s. While Adnan tends to give details of political incidents using surrealistic language and an angry tone, Nye’s style is subtle and pensive. Nye’s “Blood,” about the 1982 massacres committed in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps against thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon by the Phalangists and the Israelis, reveals the great amount of anxiety and confusion from which Arabs and Arab Americans suffered as they followed the news of the continuous bloodshed day by day. This inside look into the mind is delineated by Nye in an interview: “I like the reportorial eye and voice, but I do feel I’m always looking for some deeper layering of imagery, of a realm beyond the reportorial. I am very interested in what language does beyond the flat telling of a tale” (Milligan 45). And she found that “realm” in “Blood” where the reader is introduced to a Palestinian American daughter trying desperately to make a connection between the tales about Arabs’ folk wisdom told by her father and the harsh Arab reality taking place in Beirut. She says, “A true Arab

knows how to catch a fly in his hands' / my father would say. And he'd prove it, /  
cupping the buzzer instantly / while the host with the swatter stared" ("Blood" 272).

Unfortunately, comparing her father's Arab tales to what is going in Lebanon, the daughter finds no connection; on the contrary, she discovers the two are nothing but opposites that lead to her puzzlement.

Later in the poem, the reader realizes the speaking daughter is the poet herself, Naomi Shihab Nye, who recalls how she got to know the meaning of the Arabic name she carries, 'Shihab.' She narrates:

Years before, a girl knocked,  
Wanted to see the Arab.  
I said we didn't have one.  
After that my father told me who he was,  
"Shihab" – "shooting star" –  
a good name, borrowed from the sky.  
Once I said, "When we die, we give it back?"  
He said that's what a true Arab would say  
Today the headlines clot in my blood.  
A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.  
Homeless fig, this tragedy is too big for us. (272-73)

The first few lines present a dialogue between the father and his daughter who rejoiced in her father's talk about "true" Arabs, their unique names, and their impressive wisdom. But later, both Nye and her father are confronted with the shocking news of Lebanon that was "too big" for them, too hard to believe, and too painful to bear. Confronting these

tragedies, Nye seems confused with crowded thoughts and questions. She asks and immediately answers her own question: What flag can we wave? / I wave the flag of stone and seed, / table-mat stitched in blue” (273).

While confused, Nye reveals her inescapable thoughts of her responsibility towards her suffering Arab brothers and sisters. As Gregory Orfalea contends in an essay on Nye’s poetry, Nye, in every Arab crisis, asks herself, “What is my responsibility in this tragedy as a writer with a gift? How is the gift deployed? One senses this is a burden she would not have chosen, as do our moth-poets flying into the fire of various conflagrations, the further away the better” (59). Thus, when the fig is “homeless,” she must “wave the flag of stone and seed,” expressing solidarity with her Palestinian people. This solidarity is demonstrated in Lisa Suhair Majaj’s essay “Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory” where the author argues that Nye’s poem “deconstructs the naturalization of an Arab cultural ‘essence,’ while simultaneously foregrounding the politicized overdetermination of Palestinian identity” (283). That said, the juxtaposition of the speaker’s confusion and her solidarity with Palestinians reveals the depths of her mind where a profound love for Palestine cannot be blurred by excessive worries and uncertainties. However, since Nye cannot still see the “true Arabs” in Lebanon’s traumatic scene, her confusion continues.

Nye’s mind keeps asking questions, but this time the questions are left unanswered. Both she and her father seem helpless and bewildered:

I call my father, we walk around the news.

It is too much for him,

neither of his two languages can reach it.

I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,

to plead with the air:

Who calls anyone *civilized*?

Where can the crying heart graze?

What does a true Arab do now? (273)

One senses here a desperate attempt to resolve the confusion by asking questions that reveal deeper thoughts about the tragic crisis. The “who,” “where,” and “what” questions mark the ending of the poem, simultaneously revealing a sudden serious critique of Arabs’ reaction to the massive killings of their Arab brothers in Beirut. Accordingly, Majaj argues that the ending of the poem presents a “[movement] from a lightly humorous consideration of the possibilities of being a ‘true Arab’ offered by [Nye’s] father’s folk tales to a deeply troubled questioning of the implications and responsibilities of this identity” (282-83). This significant shift reveals Nye’s and Shihab’s frustration with the *untrue* Arabs who have done nothing to halt the massacres, with those *uncivilized* Arabs killing other Arabs in Lebanon. Orfalea states that the poem’s “triple-question end may not be ‘poetic,’ but it appropriately and movingly translates the reaction when people face horror of which they are both victim and perpetrator. Nye’s raw questions do not ring, but toll. They lead to speechlessness” (61). “Horror” and “speechlessness” dominate in the poem’s ending. As Nye says, her father’s “two languages” are insufficient, the disaster is “too big for [them],” and “too much for [her father].” The last line and question, “What does a true Arab do now?” therefore, conveys an Arab American mind troubled and burdened with unfinished worries and unresolved confusion.

One would wonder why Nye entitled her poem “Blood” when the notion of blood is not directly addressed and the word “blood” is only mentioned in one line. “Today the headlines clot in my blood” is, in fact, the most powerful line in “Blood.” Does she mean by “blood” her own Palestinian and Arab blood? Or does she mean the blood of Palestinians and Arabs that is shed in Beirut? Nye seems to refer to both. Her clever choice of words in the previous line shows how a shrewd metaphor renders the two types of blood as one. She says, “the headlines clot in my blood,” which means the tragic news of those murdered Arabs runs her blood cold, and the resulted “blood clot” is a figurative indication of a heavy burden of physical wounds (those of Palestinians) and mental and emotional wounds (those of Nye and her father). In the introduction to her *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Nye beautifully describes her troubled yet warm connection with her blood-related people in the Arab Middle East: “All my life I thought about the Middle East, wrote about it, wondered about it, lived in it, visited it, worried about it, loved it. We are blessed and doomed at the same time . . . It always felt good to be rooted and connected, but there were those deeply sorrowful headlines in the background to carry around like sad weights . . . a series of endless troubles” (xii, xiv).

“[B]lessed and doomed” by being an Arab American and burdened with “sad weights,” Nye draws in “Blood” the landscape of an Arab American witnessing a horrendous Arab tragedy. Mixed feelings of love, horror, responsibility, helplessness, and sorrow are chief features of the picture.

***Feeling and speaking out their wounds . . .***

In her “Gravities of Ancestry,” Naomi Shihab Nye describes a feeling of stirring inside her as she remembers her Palestinian grandmother. She remarks, “[a]s I sit in



Texas, pickup truck in the driveway, tortilla factory down the block, my grandmother's West Bank village keeps returning to me. We were there two weeks ago, with the almond trees in fragile white blossom and the unswerving dignity of all those eyes" (266). The "gravities of ancestry" generated astounding passion and connection, creating the premise of Arab American poetry in the period 1967-1989. As proposed by Hayan Charara, "regardless of the distances of time, space, language, or nationality, complete detachment from the Arab world seems to be all but impossible for Arab American poets" (xxiii). Although they were far away from the conflict zone, Arab American poets shrank the long distance and lived the painful events in their respective homelands through their poetry.

Stories of the injured homelands hurt the Arab American consciousness, triggering a feeling of pain blended with defiance. In her "Journeys to Jerusalem," the Palestinian American writer Lisa Suhair Majaj describes her very thought of Jerusalem as a mental journey into a deep "wound":

Going to Jerusalem is like entering a wound. We go to Jerusalem like bleeding medics, helpless against the injustices of the world. We go to Jerusalem like refugees from history, bearing nothing but our children, the future gripped between our teeth. We go to Jerusalem because the city lives inside us like the stone of a fruit. We go because we have voices, although the world does not have ears. We go because above Jerusalem's ancient walls the sky still rises, leavened with light. (101)

"[L]ike the stone of a fruit" lives the Arab World inside Arab American writers.

Remarkably, Arab American poetry in this chapter portrays a wounded region whose

people are trapped by chaos, death, violence, and pain. Hence, when their Arab brothers and sisters experienced trauma, Arab American poets felt the pain and screamed in poems whose pulse continued to beat, bearing the scars of their people's wounds.

## CHAPTER TWO: ARAB AMERICAN POETRY 1990-2000

**Challenging Conventional Boundaries**

*Tonight it is possible to pull the long string and feel someone moving far away  
to touch the fingers of one hand to the fingers of the other hand  
to tug the bride and widow by the same thread to be linked to every mother  
every father's father . . .*

Naomi Shihab Nye, "String"

**Introduction**

The First Gulf War in 1991 had a great impact upon the lives of Arab Americans. The strategy of war to resolve the Gulf crisis, which resulted from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, was rarely questioned by the mainstream media; instead, Saddam or the Iraqi "Hitler," as he was once called by President George H. W. Bush, was presented as a threat not only to Kuwait and other Gulf states, but also to America and the rest of the world. "We are determined to knock out Saddam Hussein's nuclear bomb potential. We will also destroy his chemical weapons facilities . . . Our operations are designed to best protect the lives of all the coalition forces by targeting Saddam's vast military arsenal," said President Bush on January 16, 1991, announcing his war against Iraq – or against Saddam ("Address to the Nation on the Invasion of Iraq" 2). Such fervent rhetoric made a number of Arab American intellectuals question the validity of this war. For instance, Edward Said wrote:

What right does the United States have to send a massive military force around the world in order to attack Iraq in this tough, relentless, preachy way? This is very different from opposing aggression, which many Arabs would have been anxious to do. What the American move has done is effectively to turn a regional issue into an imperial one, especially since the United States has shown no concern over other aggressions – its own or those, like Israel’s, which it supported and paid for. (*The Politics of Dispossession* 297-98)

This turn to military force by the United States appeared to consolidate its imperial power. Prior to the First Gulf War, the U.S. policies in the Middle East embodied a predominantly political, cultural, and moral hegemony, but by resorting to armed force in the 1991 Gulf War – also known as Desert Storm -- the United States turned to military power, a significant turn from Gramscian “consent” to “coercion.” By doing so, the United States asserted its imperial leadership through acquiring what Antonio Gramsci calls a “dual perspective,” which is the “levels of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization, of the individual moment and of the universal moment” (169, 170). As a hegemon, the United States can either use its soft power (consensual means) or military power (coercive means) to preserve its domestic and international domination. Said criticizes this American hegemonic gaze at Iraq, pointing out that the U.S. administration’s obsessive intention to strike Iraq makes President George H. W. Bush view Saddam Hussein “as his Moby Dick, to be punished and

destroyed – the war plan was designed for that – as if bombing and frightening natives would be sure to lead to a crumbling of their will” (*The Politics of Dispossession* 298).

With the sound of war drums came a backlash against Americans of Arab descent in the form of violence and hate crimes. For decades prior to the First Gulf War, the relationship between Americans and Arabs had been tense. According to Michael Suleiman, “[t]he bad press, the negative stereotypes, the Zionist and other lobbying and pressure groups all contribute to the frustration of a good relationship between Arabs and Americans” (“America and the Arabs . . .” 264). However, during and after the Gulf crisis, frustrations intensified, with persistent media and pop culture campaigns demonizing Arab and Muslim cultures, as well as FBI interviews targeting many Arab Americans. For instance, in his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Jack Shaheen illustrates how Hollywood has carefully portrayed Arabs as villains. Up until 2001, the publication year of the book,

[h]undreds of movies reveal Western protagonists spewing out unrelenting barrages of uncontested slurs, calling Arabs: “assholes,” “bastards,” “camel-dicks,” “pigs,” “devil-worshipers,” “jackals,” “rats,” “rag-heads,” “towel-heads,” “scum-buckets,” “sons-of-dogs,” “buzzards of the jungle,” “sons-of-whores,” “sons-of-unnamed goats,” “and “sons-of-she-camels.” . . . Still other movies contain the word “Ayrab,” a vulgar Hollywood epithet for Arab that is comparable to dago, greaser, kike, nigger, and gook. (11)

These types of epithets intensified after 1990. They exemplify Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of labels that become inextricably linked to things, of "truths" that are, in fact, "illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigor, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins" (878). The intended political implication of such "illusions" and "metaphors," especially in times of troubled Arab-American relations, is greatly governed by a number of key factors like U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, U.S. interests in the region, and the United States-Israeli exceptional relationship.

In this turbulent climate, the Arab American community lived through the First Gulf War experience only to face increasing hostility and prejudice. More and more, Arab Americans were caught between their identity as Americans and their strong ties to Arab traditions and causes. As Lisa Suhair Majaj writes, "[d]uring the Gulf War a radio commentator proclaimed, 'In a war there are no hyphenated Americans, just Americans and non-Americans.' I am never *just* an American, any more than I am *just* a Palestinian" ("Boundaries: Arab/American" 82). The impact of the radio statement on Arab Americans was overwhelming inasmuch as this war was in fact an American-Arab war between an international coalition led by America on one hand and Iraq on another hand. What made it worse was the fact that a number of Arab states supported a U.S. military intervention in the Gulf and some of these states, such as Syria and Egypt, even sent their troops to join the US-led coalition. This caused a division within the Arab American community itself and a general feeling of being torn between one's loyalties to America

and his/her concerns for and sympathies with Arabs, Iraqis in particular, in the Middle East. Therefore, Arab Americans faced internal and external emotional and social pressures that continued in parallel with rising public hostilities towards them. Majaj paints a picture of her daily fear in those troubled times

Of the unknown person in my apartment building who intercepted packages I had ordered from an Arab American organization, strewing their contents, defaced with obscenities, at my door. Of the hostility of airport security personnel once they know my destination or origin point: the overly thorough searches, the insistent questions. Of the anonymous person who dialed my home after I was interviewed by my local paper, shouting “Death to Palestinians!” Of the unsigned, racist mail. Of the mysterious hit-and-run driver who smashed my car as it was parked on a quiet residential street, a Palestine emblem clearly visible through the window of the car door. (81-2)

All these forms of intimidation and hate crimes went on and even escalated after the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center by some Middle Eastern extremists. Later, when some white males bombed the Alfred Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995, the primary suspects at first were Arabs and Muslims. Within hours of the bombing, experts on terrorism spoke on renowned network news and stressed a possible connection between the incident and radical Islamic terrorism. The next day, a huge headline on *The New York Times* read, “TERROR IN OKLAHOMA: ISLAM IN OKLAHOMA; Fear About Retaliation Among Muslim Groups.” The article opened with a long, powerful

statement: “For many Arabs in the United States, and particularly in and around this city, the bombing on Wednesday and the speculation that it might have been the work of Muslim fundamentalists is a reminder that the lives they have so carefully built have not isolated them from the mistrust and fear that can surface in a crisis” (Bernstein 1).

Galvanized by such daily unjust “reminders,” Arab Americans had to confront the challenge and redefine themselves. Their means was to move beyond all boundaries of identity and ethnicity and re-emerge as ethnic Americans who negotiate the faces of their Arab and American identities, simultaneously colliding with other marginalized ethnic groups. Paulo Freire stresses in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* the importance of a “transformation” in the structure of domination as a counter-hegemonic act. He states that “the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not people living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’ – inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (74). Accordingly, Freire calls for border crossing as an emancipatory struggle over identity and difference. In their struggle to “become ‘beings for themselves,’” Arab Americans deconstruct all structural boundaries and invent their own spaces of resistance that define their “beings.” Henry A. Giroux demonstrates this Freirian notion of border crossing by arguing that it has “intentions, goals, and effects,” for these “movements offer the opportunity for new subject positions, identities, and social relations that can produce resistance to and relief from the structures of domination and oppression” (18). Hence, in order to resist the political and cultural dominance of mainstream America that suspected their loyalties to



America and demonized their Arabness, Arab Americans in the 1990s became border crossers who asserted their hybrid identities and identified with other communities of color.

This dynamic identity of border crossing is demonstrated on the literary scene. Up until the 1990s, Arab Americans were excluded from most U.S. multicultural texts and ethnic studies. However, some multicultural anthologies later began to show some interest in works by Arab American writers, especially Etel Adnan and Naomi Shihab Nye, which validates a clear step toward crossing identity borders. The growth of Arab American literature in the 1990s was also manifest in the publication of Arab American anthologies, namely *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* and *Post-Gibran Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, as well as the emergence of Arab American literary journals and magazines: *AlJadid*, *Jusoor*, and *Mizna*. Additionally, Arab Americans organized conferences and events focusing on Arab American writing, and they founded Arab American writers' organizations such as the Radius of Arab-American Writers, Incorporated, or RAWI. (The acronym literally means 'storyteller' in Arabic). This flourishing was backed up by the emergence of new Arab American literary voices, most of whom were indeed women writers. In her introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers*, Joanna Kadi employs a striking metaphor to describe the Arab American uneasy experience of border deconstructing: ". . . I believe it is necessary to create maps that are alive, many-layered, multi-dimensional, open-ended, and braided. I watched Gram combing that long hair, dividing it into three equal

parts, twisting and turning and curving the pieces. Braiding tightly enough so that each hair stays in place, but not so tightly that it hurts. It is difficult finding that balance” (xiv).

The “braiding” of an Arab American “map” is present in the 1990s poetry. There, Arab American poets explored the tension they experienced in those years by interpreting their multiple identities and alliances. A journal dedicated specifically to Arab American literature, *Mizna*, was established in the 1990s, and the meaning of the Arabic word “Mizna,” as articulated by the journal’s editors, reveals the kind of strain Arab Americans were undergoing:

Mizna is an Arabic word meaning “the cloud of the desert.” This cloud of Mizna shades, protects and cools the desert traveler from the sun making the journey bearable. Mizna guides the caravan to its destination.

Writing for Arab American poets was their *mizna* under which they fought war with peace, hostility with tolerance, and frustration with hope. Their “caravan” crossed various borders addressing topics such as wars, feminist issues, anti-Arab stereotypes, and shared concerns with other diasporic communities standing against hegemonic structures of power. Arab American poets in the previous chapter struggled to have their voices heard by mainstream America, but, in this phase, they sought to resist invisibility by building bridges between their Arab and American cultures, between their community and other communities of color, weaving heterogeneous threads to map the geography of their identity in a time of tension.

### **The Gulf War: Pain and Strain**

For Arab Americans, the 1990s marked a collective strain, which they depicted in their poetry. Their poems view the First Gulf War as a reflection of the historical conflict between Arabs and the West. This conflict embodies the challenging experience of Arab Americans who were confronted both by internal chaos (within themselves as a community belonging to both conflicted nations) and by external chaos (the larger society's hostility fueled by extremely biased media coverage). As noted by Edward Said, "Americans watched the [Gulf] war on television with a relatively unquestioned certainty that they were seeing the reality, whereas what they saw was the most covered and the least reported war in history. The images and the prints were controlled by the government, and the major American media copied one another, and were in turn copied or shown (like CNN)" (*Culture and Imperialism* 302). Said's statement implies that what the American public saw was solely information packaged by the media and policy makers to provide cover for acts of acute violence taking place in the Gulf.

Like Said, many Arab American intellectuals stood against the use of force to resolve the Gulf crisis. They did not hesitate to courageously critique Desert Storm and to clearly establish their anti-war stance as the Arab-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye did in an interview in the spring of 1991: "I'm depressed by what Saddam Hussein has done to the already stereotyped Arabs. I'm depressed by Bush's lack of patience, by his bullying, manipulative, righteous stance" (Milligan 32). She expresses her sadness at the deteriorating Middle Eastern situation, warning that "[w]e have entered the cycle of violence in a way which will not be forgotten. Palestinians must laugh when Bush talks about 'the liberation of Kuwait'; they have been oppressed for years by his very same

weaponry. Forget ‘Desert Storm’ – we’re calling it ‘Desert Shame’” (32). While opposing a military intervention in the Middle East, the majority of Arab Americans asserted their Arab American identity, negotiating their two opposed identifications amidst mounting political tension. The following poems by Etel Adnan, D. H. Melhem, a Lebanese American, and Naomi Shihab Nye take us deeply into the pain and anxieties experienced by the Arab American hybrid as it crosses boundaries in order to intertwine its multiple identities within a troubled political environment.

***“Building a Nest” Despite Frustration***

Arab Americans in general and Iraqi Americans in particular lived in great frustration and anxieties during and after the First Gulf War. In “Ducks,” the Palestinian American poet Nye speaks of her friend, an Iraqi American, who has suffered mental and emotional consequences of the “war between her two countries” (52). The poem begins with an evocation of the deep and rich Iraqi culture in which this friend took pride. But “[l]ater in American libraries she felt sad / for books no one ever checked out” (52). The constant demonization of Saddam Hussein during the crisis added to the existing anti-Arab American discourse, reasserting the previously-shaped public opinion that Arabs are inferior – culturally and politically. Yet, the Iraqi American in Nye’s poem resists exclusion and remains committed to her double identities represented by the ducks she keeps in a pond by her house in the country:

. . . One of the ducks

often seemed depressed.

But not the same one.

During the war between her two countries

she watched the ducks more than usual.

She stayed quiet with the ducks.

Some days they huddled among reeds

Or floated together. (52)

A vivid, but complex, negotiation between the woman's Iraqi and American identities is portrayed here. She "quietly" meditates her contested identities, but the two parts intertwine and "huddle" and "float together." When interviewed by Nadine Naber, the Iraqi American political activist Dena Al-Adeeb tells of a similar experience of sadness and displacement during the 1991 Gulf War. She recalls a racially motivated incident when some neighbors came to her parents' home where she lived and inspected it room by room. This incident and many others deepened her sense of exclusion. Yet, she never stopped straddling her double essences: "My existence and identity continue to be negotiated, torn, and redefined through forced displacement and non-belonging; it inspires in me an immense sense of self, home, identity, community, and culture that is based on resistance, resilience, and a refusal to accept injustice. It is from such a place that I create and build home and community and seek justice" (216). It is this combination of endurance and resistance that characterizes the Arab American experience of identity negotiation, propelling Arab American consciousness to create order out of the chaotic political atmosphere.

As exemplified by Al-Adeeb's experience, the fragments of an Arab American identity reconcile, forming a whole. This is evident in the Iraqi American in Nye's poem whose two "ducks" never separate or negate one another. The poem ends with the ducks "building a nest":

She could not call her family in Basra  
 which had grown farther away than ever  
 nor could they call her. For nearly a year  
 she would not know who was alive,  
 who was dead.

The ducks were building a nest. ("Ducks" 52-3)

The "nest" is the space where the speaker's multiple identities embrace each other. It is, as Homi Bhabha explains, the "Third Space" of hybridity where multiple identities blend together to form one identity, a space "which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (37). Nye's "nest" metaphor echoes her "soup" image in a poem titled "Half and Half" where a whole self is made out of bits. A transformative interaction is manifest in the soup a woman is making, as the poet looks on: "She is making a soup out of what she had left / in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean. / She is leaving nothing out" (Nye, "Half and Half" 60). This wholeness woven of multiple essences elucidates Arab

American hybrids whose third space unfolds a mental triumph to build “a nest” out of their seemingly opposite Arab and American binaries.

The emotional burden that Arab Americans carried during and after the First Gulf War was hard to express amply. However, Nye tried to articulate it simply in a short prose poem titled “Trouble With the Stars and Stripes” where the speaker speculates: “I couldn’t make my annual flag cake, the one with strawberries / for stripes and blueberries for states and white mountain / frosting puffing up proudly between. I couldn’t even wear a bandana on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July” (20). Here, the speaker implicitly introduces herself as an American citizen who is ready to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July the way she is used to: making a special cake and wearing a bandana. Her “trouble,” as the title states, is demonstrated by the mixed feeling of tension and ambivalence she experiences on that most celebrated national holiday in her country. She immediately gives the reason: “It hurts, this year” (20). The pain implied here reveals the depth of an emotional navigation between her Arab and American identities, following the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians in the deadly Gulf War. Nye once described one’s attachment to her double essences as something as close as “a pulse” that beats inside (“Gravities of Ancestry” 266). Thus, it “hurts” the Arab American speaker in Nye’s poem, who she feels deeply connected to her Arab and American worlds, to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July when the shadow of wounded Iraq still looms over her consciousness.

Amin Maalouf compares this complex feeling of the hybrid to “a stretched parchment.” In his book *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, Maalouf remarkably describes the identity of the hybrid: “[a] person’s identity is not an

assemblage of separate affiliations, nor a kind of loose patchwork; it is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound” (26). Whether in Nye’s “Ducks” or “Trouble With the Stars and Stripes,” the parts of this “stretched parchment” are inseparable and form a whole “nest” or a “whole drum,” releasing a voice with multiple affiliations that interact with each other, affirming, even in difficult times, that it is both Arab *and* American.

### ***A Dialogue Interrupted by War***

The Gulf War of 1991 was devastating in the view of D. H. Melhem, and the resulting chaos was horrendous both physically and mentally. Boundaries are deconstructed, which allows multiple voices to converse in a perplexing environment. To reflect this idea, Melhem creates chaos as both a theme and a structure for her poem “Gulf War.” Voices are put into dialogue with one another; these voices include U.S. airmen, Shakespeare, an Iraqi soldier, President Bush, several Iraqi civilians, extracts from *New York Times* and *Time* articles, an excerpt from a TV interview with General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. The voices unexpectedly intersect and converse, causing enormous confusion:

Eight thousand sorties nonstop express over Baghdad  
 a sound and light show takeout boxed into your livingroom  
 (you can only see the nightstktop on TV;  
 the bloody bottom of the picture mars the image).



*Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!*

O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!

Smart bombs and cruise missiles, F-16 fighter jets,

Patriot antimissiles and rocket hardware.

Everyone wants them now.

(Was this a carnage

commercial?) (133)

Amidst such visual and audio images of death, one hears various voices without realizing who talks to whom until the speaker's voice rises up, "Everything ventured, chaos gained / Everything ventured, chaos gained" (139).

This chaos takes place in two considerably different contexts: American and Iraqi. Scenes from both contexts are presented interchangeably, which conveys the speaker's complex emotional burden as the two opposing contexts interact. For instance, in the middle of the poem, light is shed on the unique ancient history of Iraq, and then it is shifted to America where an extract from a *New York Times* article states that Iraq has been bombed "back to the 'pre-industrial age,' its infrastructure / destroyed, its people beset by famine and disease" (136). Similarly, an Iraqi civilian indirectly speaks with a couple of U.S. airmen, which creates a striking irony. While the Iraqi civilian prays for "food, water, electricity" and for "the museums, that [their] history not be obliterated," one U.S. airman finds delight in watching the demolition of Iraqi history, "[i]t was a great

sight – all those fireworks / like Christmas,” and another U.S. airman comments, “[i]t was a turkey shoot” (137). Melhem here gazes East and West, bringing diverse voices into dialogue, disturbed by her disputing Arab and American identities.

Melhem criticizes American politicians for having created deadly chaos in Iraq. Through the same double gaze technique, she implicitly condemns the provocative rhetoric employed by U.S. government decision--makers. In the following stanza, Melhem zooms in on an Iraqi shelter that was shelled by the American Air Force, and then immediately shifts her camera to an American scene where a U.S. government spokesperson comments on the deadly operation:

In the bomb shelter children are sleeping  
 in the arms of their mothers. Not hungry,  
 having supp'd full with horrors  
 Are targeted. Deliberately hit.  
 Well, enemies are enemies.  
 May hide anywhere. (133-34)

This description is based on an actual incidence of the bombing of a shelter that, according to an attached footnote by Melhem, was first thought to have been accidental. However, the Air Force later corrected this misconception, asserting that they targeted the shelter because “enemies are enemies / May hide anywhere.” This, of course, stands in contrast to Bush’s presidential addresses on the Gulf War where he ensured the public

that his war was not with the people of Iraq – but with Saddam Hussein. For example, in his February 27, 1991 speech on the end of the Gulf War, President Bush states, “[a]t every opportunity, I have said to the people of Iraq that our quarrel was not with them but instead with their leadership and, above all, with Saddam Hussein. This remains the case. You, the people of Iraq, are not our enemy. We do not seek your destruction” (2).

Melhem shows in her poem, however, the lives of Iraqis being destroyed by American weaponry, which challenges Bush’s statement. An Iraqi woman, for instance, cries, looking for her “lost family”: “I can hear them laughing / under the rubble of our house / The planes do not stop / Why must they kill us all?” (140). Due to this extreme violence, “. . . it becomes hard to distinguish victim from / victor in the gulf crisis’ . . . / *they want the oil / But they don’t want the people*” (139 italics in original). Melhem questions the “victory” of American troops not only by showing the devastating outcome of the war but also by suggesting that America’s credibility is at stake.

Aside from the gloomy and chaotic climate of the poem, one senses some peaceful moments at the beginning and end. There, the tone is solely religious. The epigraph of the poem is a passage from the Quran that reads, “When the sky is rent asunder; when the stars scatter and the / oceans roll together; when the graves are hurled about; each / soul shall know what it has done and what it / has failed to do” (Quran 82:1). The same evocation of the Day of Judgment is repeated at the end of the poem where the speaker calls for prayers “for us now and in the hour of our / devastations.” This remarkably demonstrates the multiple dimensions of Melhem’s identity, how a Christian Lebanese American invokes the Quran and identifies with her Muslim Iraqi

brothers and sisters who “kneel five times, / facing Mecca” (134). Furthermore, giving the poem such a religious tone and framing it with the image of death serve another purpose. By doing so, Melhem ostensibly gives the Arab-American political conflict more depth and a touch of spirituality, shifting the external dispute into an internal scene that could teach politicians lessons about dialogue and peace.

### ***The Tension Between “Here” and “There”***

The Self and the Other are meditatively interwoven in Etel Adnan’s *There: In the Light and Darkness of the Self and the Other*. This long prose poem by Etel Adnan consists of 39 sections that draw images of a number of opposing binaries including me and you, light and darkness, self and other, water and blood, here and there, life and death, love and hatred, peace and war, and brother and enemy. These binaries are in conflict but connected through historical passion: “. . . you and me, united in that private war waged within our boundaries, which boundaries, you may ask, those of the heart, this particular object with the red color of blood” (*There* 13). The “private war” is between two opponents who are both brothers and enemies: “So you’re my twin enemy-brother, my twin shadow,” and “[e]nimity made us lovers” (5, 69). Quite obviously, Adnan investigates the geography of the collective being where the self and the other dissolve into each other, where the “you” and “me” are blended into “us.” Throughout this investigation, a number of vexed questions are anxiously posited.

The first question the speaker asks comes at the opening of the poem. “Where are we? where? There is a *where*, because we are, / stubbornly, and have been, and who are we, if not you and / me?” (1). The “where” and “who” questions formulate the premise of

a border crossing quest, for, according to Lisa Suhair Majaj, “in order to cross those boundaries, we first need to understand who and where we are; to ground ourselves in our personal locations. This kind of self-definition is not a matter of passive discovery, but of active investigation and affirmation” (“Two Worlds Emerging” 66). To achieve “self-definition,” other related questions must be asked:

Where are we? In the middle, at the beginning, the end?

Who is we, is it you plus me, or something else expandable,  
explosive, the salt and pepper of our thoughts, the something  
that may outlast our divinities?

.....

Where are we? In a desert, on a glacier, within a mother’s  
womb or in a woman’s eyes, in a man’s yearning, or are we  
into each other, each other’s futures, as we have been in the  
past? Are we dead or alive? (Adnan, *There* 2, 3)

Though some of the questions are left unresolved, the question of space is further examined. Adnan consciously constructs the collective identity of the Self and the Other and grounds it across the boundaries: “Between you and me there’s plenty of air, of suspended / desires, and memories in heroic quantities, in this tomb of a / room and in the fabulous waterways of the arteries” (61). Homi Bhaba calls this space “between you and

me” the space of the hybrid, “the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38). In this “air” lies the “burden” of the conflict between the two essences of the hybrid that the poet is tirelessly exploring.

Adnan universalizes her quest and lifts it to the political level, simultaneously revealing her conflicting binaries to be Arab and American, East and West. Besides echoing issues of Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and Vietnam, Adnan brings up the subject of the Bosnia War where thousands of Bosnians were slaughtered by the Serbs in the 1990s when America and Europe decided at first not to interfere as they did in the Gulf: “. . . there’s the northern land north / of Northern Italy, and a river flowing East, over there / there’s Bosnia, where you had a home, and I had relatives / or was it the other way around, do I have to have a nation- / ality in order to be human . . . ?” In an interview with Aftim Saba discussing her work *There*, Adnan further illustrates this political situation by means of a remarkable analogy:

Under the guise of being neutral, the Europeans and the West in general applied an arms embargo that affected the Muslims of Bosnia and not the Christian Serbs. That is exactly what the British did in Palestine, who facilitated in the beginning the arming of the Jewish underground and actively prevented the Palestinians from arming themselves . . . Preventing a people from defending themselves against a massacre, why? Because they were Muslims. There was no other reason to what happened in Bosnia. Under our own eyes a new holocaust, a genocide, the raping of

women, the destruction of livelihoods, libraries and mosques, a whole culture just because they do not want Muslims in Europe. Simple. They want, however, the rich Muslim who buys a villa or comes to gamble his money but they do not want a Muslim Population. (1)

Whether in Europe, Asia, or America, human pains unsettle all geographical and historical borders, achieving a transnational identification between “here” and “there” and between “now” and “then.” Upon every new crisis, a past conflict returns to further explain and at times determine the dimensions of a current conflict. Therefore, the speaker in *There* cannot get rid of her memories: “I threw my memories out the window and they came back / alien, beggars and witches, leaving me standing like a sword” (*There* 3-4). Accordingly, the past and the present should converse to achieve a balanced future.

The negotiation between here and there, between me and you, between past and present, must replace violence. Since “[w]ar is our dialogue,” you suffer from “fatigue in your limbs, we walked for so long / . . . Trust / my hands, they will give you a blanket, but where would you lie / didn’t the army teach you how to rest against a wall . . .” (*There* 58, 50). The tension can only be resolved by a dialogue, so “[c]ould we talk across a border, on a barren field,” and “[c]an’t we understand each other and stop the killing, without / the dance, the run and the walk?” (29, 9). The exhaustion of conflict is inconceivable in Adnan’s view, and the constant clash between Arabs and Americans raises the question of belonging. To answer the question, “there” in *There* becomes “here,” and “you” becomes “me” and vice versa. Crises create the “heat,” and “[y]ou

know what the heat does? Where? Right here and all / around. It melts one's spirit" (44-5). The two opposing binaries, Arabs and Americans, East and West, melt, forming a fluid space where "[b]reathing needs miles of territory" (44).

### **Arab Americans: Fearful Faces**

Among the challenges faced by Arab Americans is their distorted and dehumanized image in American pop culture. This misrepresentation fuels societal hostility against them and further complicates their diasporic experience. Upon returning to the United States from Jordan after spending many years there, the Palestinian American poet and critic Lisa Suhair Majaj was shocked by an American cultural misconception about her Arab people:

Arabs, it appeared, were no longer the people I'd always known – loving and argumentative and sharp-witted and pragmatic and poetic, outstanding cooks and green-thumb gardeners, devoted parents and unbeatable businessmen and tireless backseat politicians. Instead, newspapers and movies and pop culture fiction and even so-called scholarly books offered portrayals of a violent, degraded people I didn't recognize. ("Two Worlds Emerging" 68)

Arab Americans have been tussling with these negative stereotypes, which, they realize well, have serious political implications. As proposed by Michael Suleiman, "the negative image Americans have of Arabs and Muslims makes it easy for anyone hostile to the Arabs to whip up public sentiment against them or against any Arab leader, country, or people. The Zionists certainly exploit this situation; so do American



politicians, political aspirants, and American presidents in pursuit of specific policies” (“America and the Arabs . . .” 252). It is this interplay between politics and popular culture trends that determines the way Arabs are presented to the American audience.

Hollywood, for instance, plays a significant role in creating and circulating a distorted image of Arabs inside and outside the United States. Jack Shaheen sheds some light on this role, assuring that, throughout the twentieth century, “Hollywood has projected Arabs as villains in more than 900 feature films. The vast majority of villains are notorious sheikhs, maidens, Egyptians, and Palestinians. The rest are devious dark-complexioned baddies from other Arab countries, such as Algerians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Lebanese, Libyans, Moroccans, Syrians, Tunisians, and Yemenis” (*Reel Bad Arabs* 13). Already exhausted by these discriminatory portrayals, Arab Americans have had to face even more demonization during the First Gulf War. According to Amir Marvasti and Karyn McKinney, “[t]he military conflicts with Iraq have reinforced the notion that people of Middle Eastern descent are natural enemies of the United States. During the first war with Iraq, the usual rash of hate crimes against Middle Eastern Americans, and those who appeared Middle Eastern, went on” (59). Later, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center by some Middle Eastern Islamic terrorists and the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City carried out by three white males (but whose first prime suspects were Arabs) added to the plight of these “enemy-looking” citizens of America.

Discussed below are poems by David Williams and Elmaz Abinader, both descendants of Lebanese immigrants, that present examples of American public fear of

Arab-looking faces. These poems reveal the amount of stress endured by Arab Americans throughout the 1990s. They challenge the media distortion of Arabs and attempt to disrupt those anti-Arab images, simultaneously asserting a sense of belonging both to America and to the Arab World.

***Between “‘Arabia’ and ‘the West’”***

“Almost One” by David Williams, son of Lebanese immigrants, is set in an airport during a security check. It depicts some of the anti-Arab discrimination that increased in the 1990s. Arab Americans wish they could pass the security check without being racially singled out, but their “Arab” appearance always betrays them:

Airport security recognized my roots. The poor guy at  
 the metal detector trembled and waved in reinforce-  
 ments. I offered coins, keys, belt buckle, wanted to  
 comfort them all, barely stifled a sudden longing to  
 shout something Whitmanesque . . . (66)

The airport security officers “recognize [the speaker’s] roots” the first time they look at him, which makes one of them tremble. Yet, that officer is to be pitied because he is the victim of the misleading American media as much as the speaker is of racist misrepresentation. Remarkably, the invocation of Whitman is an appeal to traditional American values of equality and justice evoked by Whitman and others, and it serves as a

sort of empowerment to the Arab American speaker against “[s]uch grandiosity and paranoia, not / uncommon among [his] kind” (66).

Though silent, Williams’s speaker, in a Whitmanesque rebellious spirit, rejects that hasty suspicion he sees in the eyes of the security officers: “. . . So many / people can’t wait to tell us, with a mathematician’s / pride, that they’ve got us figured out. Most / generalizations, mine included, are blunt instruments” (66). Stereotyping, in other words, turns Arabs and Arab Americans into a mathematical problem that can be easily solved by applying some simple, manipulated knowledge obtained from the media about them, which includes the way they look. Consequently, Arab Americans like Williams’s speaker form a group that has to be exclusively processed at airport security check points. This type of “generalization” based on stereotyping is further elucidated by Stuart Hall:

Stereotyping . . . is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the “normal” and the “deviant,” the “normal” and the “pathological,” the “acceptable” and the “unacceptable,” what “belongs” and what does not or is “Other,” between “insiders” and “outsiders,” Us and Them. It facilitates the “binding” or bonding together of all of Us who are “normal” into one “imagined community”; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them – “the Others” – who are in some way different – “beyond the pale.” (258)

So, the rule applied at American airports is that of the “Us and Them” according to which the Arab American speaker in Williams’s poem is grouped as an “Other” who is

inevitably “unacceptable” and “pathological.” As a result of this discriminatory treatment, this “blunt instrument,” he feels offended and excluded.

Williams then paints a compelling picture of a contrast he makes between reality and fantasy, between the Arabs he knows and the Arabs in Hollywood films. To do so, he draws upon a desert scene from the film *Beau Geste*:

. . . some at least have the epic sweep of a memory  
 ferociously repressed, or the momentum of the poor  
 Legionnaire in that long dying roll down a sand dune in  
*Beau Geste*. If I try to mention individuals – my cousins,  
 for instance – are huddled defenseless at this very  
 moment under an artillery duel in Beirut, the best of  
 them might smile wanly and say, “It’s been going on for  
 two thousand years.” (Williams 66)

*Beau Geste* is one of many Hollywood films that reinforce the Orientalist representation of Arabs as savages. In it, European legionnaires are besieged and killed by Arabs in a desert garrison. (The Arab attack has no clear motivation, though.) The legionnaire is “poor” because he was killed by the same people he was assigned to civilize. In his article, “Beyond Us and Them: Identity and Terror from an Arab American’s Perspective,” John Michael points out the reduced presence of Arabs in this film despite

their overly destructive role. “In fact, Arabs surprisingly appear only on the margins of this film and not at all until the second half. The first Arabs we see, dressed in robes and head cloths like all the Arabs in the film, are two nameless ‘scouts’ – like Indian scouts standard to the film Western – who guard the gateway to the desert, the place where white men cannot survive” (703). *Beau Geste* significantly contributed to the fixation of an Orientalist image of Arabs as desert-residents whose only language is violence.

Contrary to this negative image of Arabs pictured by this film is a portrayal of the painful reality of Lebanese (represented by the speaker’s cousins) who “at this very / moment under an artillery duel in Beirut.” Here, Williams reverses the previous picture. Arabs here are not attackers but the ones attacked and occupied and killed by Israeli forces. At the time this poem was written, Southern Lebanon was still occupied by the Israelis (before it was liberated in 2000, only to be attacked later by the same forces in 2006).

These conflicting visions come simultaneously in the Arab American speaker’s mind from two different directions: the West (*Beau Geste*) and Lebanon (his cousins). Emphasizing a hyphenated identity, he wonders about himself amidst the tension between the two:

“Arabia” and “the West” keep bringing out the  
 worst in each other, and what could save all our lives  
 can barely be heard. And I, neither here nor there, got  
 through the metal detector, with a double legacy and a  
 double grief, the way, you might say, a camel carries

water. (Williams 67)

The speaker's "double agency" is stunningly articulated, invoking W.E. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness. More than a century ago, Du Bois described the Black experience of double consciousness as an identity conflict that involves "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . . One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (9). The "metal detector" in Williams's poem implies this "twoness" felt by the Arab American speaker, as well as the psychological manifestation of the conflict between his "warring" worlds, "Arabia" and "the West." The speaker carries his "two souls" within a liquid space – indicated by the "Water" image – which implies a hybrid identity living the tension and ambivalence of the in-betweenness. Homi Bhabha contends that the "true" is always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself, the productivity of meanings that construct counter-knowledges *in medias res*, in the very act of agonism, within the terms of a negotiation (rather than a negation) of oppositional and antagonistic elements" (22). That said, what the speaker in Williams's poem experiences is the outcome of identity negotiation where Arabia and the West are its conflicting elements that lead him "neither here nor there."

The dialogue between the speaker's opposing identities is embedded within a larger political dialogue required between the West and Arabia – the thing that "could save all our lives." Instead of "bringing out the / worst in each other," the two worlds could have a constructive conversation where the two parties develop joint approaches to

resolve the conflict. This dialogue is what Michael Suleiman highly recommends between Arabs and the West, specifically the United States. “Any dialogue,” he states, “is more likely to be successful if the two parties share a common heritage or similar value systems. If they do not, and if one side lacks respect for the other or looks down upon its people as inferior, then the discussions take place with much reluctance and the whole exercise is viewed as a necessary evil at best, to be abandoned if a better alternative presents itself” (“America and the Arabs . . .” 263). Obviously, Williams’s lines do not indicate a successful dialogue because of the absence of “respect” of one side for the other one. The speaker’s Arabness is not only “looked down upon” by his American side but also dehumanized by being viewed as “a camel.” Therefore, a dialogue toward a resolution “can barely be heard,” and that, of course, causes the Arab American speaker a “double grief.”

While a political dialogue is not possible, a literary one is. Williams, in an essay titled “This Hyphen Called My Spinal Cord,” describes his writing (and Arab American writing in general) as “a conversation with the past. But the conversation is new . . . Sometimes the frustrations of Middle Eastern politics suggest we could go on writing the same poem over and over, and it would always stay relevant” (63). This literary dialogue is constructed here between the old and the new, between an Arab identity and an American one. When Williams’s speaker walks through the metal detector, he was “a camel” that “carries / water.” This, of course, suggests more than one thing. First, the fact that he is “a camel” while being checked by the security officers reflects their “looking down” upon him (a notion against which Suleiman warns above), as well as the

persistence of this anti-Arab stereotyping. Additionally, this “camel” carries no bomb, but “water,” which reverses the officers’ exaggerated fear of his presence. The water image is also of importance to the idea of hybridity, for it confirms a fluid in-between space relating to the Arab American speaker who is “neither here nor there.” That said, this Arab American man is viewed at the airport as a dangerous “camel” possibly carrying a bomb when, in fact, he presents himself as an Arab carrying the spirit of Whitman.

***“Don’t be Afraid” of Me***

In Elmaz Abinader’s “Sixty Minutes,” the poet speaks to someone watching a tense scene from Lebanon on TV. She gives a detailed description of how the stereotyping process takes place and how she becomes a source of terror to the viewer. When that person sees pictures of Lebanese fighters on TV, Abinader, a Lebanese American poet, reads his mind, realizes what goes on there and addresses him directly:

Don’t be afraid of the picture  
 you see of the hezbollah, faces wrapped  
 when they talk to the camera, so they won’t  
 be recognized. Don’t be afraid of the m-16’s strapped  
 like a quiver to their shoulders packed with ammo  
 instead of feathers that can end your life  
 or mine. Don’t be afraid of their fast language  
 and its passion or its fear, the thing that keeps



them moving or hidden, praying and giving up one  
 more thing, one more day, one more night smoking  
 in the dark. (19)

The pictures of “the hezbollah” are fused with terror, but Abinader tells the viewer repeatedly not to be afraid. Her implicit subversion of what is being displayed on TV leads to the argument raised by Michael Suleiman where he connects anti-Arab stereotypes with the unceasing political crises in the Middle East:

as long as the Palestine and Arab-Israeli conflicts remain unresolved, Zionist forces will use any and all resources at their disposal (including negative media campaigns against Arabs and political pressures on public officials) to get the United States to accept, adopt, and implement a view of the “national interest” that identifies a serious threat any Arab party, group, government, or movement perceived to be a threat to Israel.  
 (“America and the Arabs . . .” 264)

Because the American media is greatly influenced by the powerful Zionist lobby, the Arab-Israeli conflict is consistently reported in ways that favor Israel. Therefore, whoever is a threat to Israel, like the Hezbollah, is often portrayed as a threat to the United States, as well

Abinader realizes the negative impression the viewer is getting about her. She visualizes his thoughts, juxtaposing reality and illusion:

You looked for me in this landscape, wondered if I  
 had a suicide pact with someone, a battle plan, wondered  
 if the dark eyes you have stared into were an illusion,  
 if I had something behind my back, hidden beneath my clothes.  
 Or if I were a widow weeping into my apron, a mother holding  
 out the bloody child to the camera shouting, *show the world*  
*what they have done.* (21)

The poet shows here how the true face of an Arab American gets blurred by multiple faces with “dark eyes” portrayed on TV. For instance, she points to the “suicide” stories in the Middle East that the media tend to focus on, resulting in more distortion of the public Arab image. Commenting on the U.S. mainstream media coverage of suicidal acts in the West Bank and Gaza, Edward Said criticizes the absence of neutrality when covering these bombings. He points out that the media display photos, funerals, and names of Israeli victims, “[b]ut in almost every news report on almost every day from the West Bank and Gaza, if you look carefully at the end you will see that four, five, six Palestinians were killed. They are nameless. Killed for no particular reason. Lots of children have been killed. The rate of killing of Palestinians vs. Israelis is three, sometimes four, to one” (*Culture and Resistance* 134). Through the lenses of this manipulative covering of the Middle Eastern situation, the viewer in Abinader’s poem observes her with fear. The poet later shows the impact of this demonized portrayal in

real life situations: “. . . you go to the middle east grocer / not to buy food but to look at the faces you superimpose / onto mine and mine onto theirs” (21). “Superimposing” faces onto each other is a kind of fixation, or “masking,” as Homi Bhabha calls it. Bhabha defines misrepresentation as “the masking and splitting of ‘official’ and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse” (81-82). Thus, Abinader’s fellow citizen cannot see her true face because of the blend between the “‘official’ and phantasmatic knowledges” that makes reality with illusion, resulting in a blurred “landscape.”

Nevertheless, Abinader takes off this illusory mask, reminding the listener that she is American. She “was born in Pennsylvania with fertile blue grass, and uncharred / tree” (22). To prove her Americanness, the poet replaces that flimsy media-made picture with a flawless one where she integrates Arab Americans into the daily landscape of American society. “The flight attendant on your last trip was Lebanese / your accountant, a Jordanian. You notice the woman / taking your clothes at the dry cleaner has a name tag / that reads Samira,” she proclaims (21). As she deconstructs anti-Arab images, Abinader at the same crosses borders and claims an Arab identity deeply blended with an American one:

But remember I am an Arab, too, looking for a home

of my own, unoccupied, without siege . . .

At night I watch the moon that passed across Lebanon

before it came to this sky. The stars are your thousand eyes

watching the hezbollah move in the dark. And their glitter

is the name in my eyes that rises quickly and dies. (22)

This woman from Pennsylvania affirms that her “home” is the space between America and Lebanon. She refutes all the negative representation of Arabs, declaring an Arab American identity symbolized by the “moon” that straddles Lebanon and America. This notion of crossed boundaries is indicated in an essay by Abinader titled “Crossing the Threshold” in which her home is “the threshold” where borders do not exist: “I have a small town. It’s not anywhere in particular, or maybe it’s everywhere. In this village, people live with their doors open, moving back and forth over the threshold of what has been exclusive and what will some day be inclusive” (5).

Despite anti-Arab stereotypes and the pain and frustration they have caused the Arab American community, Abinader and her fellow Arab Americans maintain their hybridity, claiming mutually overlapping Arab and American identities, without losing hope that they “will someday be inclusive.”

### **Arab American Women at the Front**

The 1990s saw the growth of Arab American feminism. In the midst of the First Gulf War, Arab American women rose to emphasize their Arab American identity through anti-war activism and the fight against the misrepresentation of Arab women and their culture. Nada Elia, in her essay “A Woman’s Place is in the Struggle: A Personal Viewpoint on Feminism, Pacifism, and the Gulf War,” for instance, criticizes the

imperialist nature of the United States' military and political involvement in the affairs of the Arab World:

In 1991, I “fought” Desert Storm as a member of a peace coalition . . . I joined all the marches and political protests I could. Until then, my complex background allowed me not to feel personally involved because I could always claim to be someone else: Palestinian when the Lebanese were being criticized, a resident of West Beirut when the East Beirutis were described as bloodthirsty savages, Christian when the Muslims were called ruthless murderers. But I avoided all of that during the Gulf War. I was appalled at the arrogance of the United States appointing itself World Cop and couching everything in the hypocritical. “We’re doing this for democracy.” Centuries earlier, colonial England had said it was acting in the name of Christian charity by spreading civilization across the world. (114-15)

Most Arab Americans were deeply suspicious about the political rhetoric that mobilized the American public for war. Edward Said uncovers part of the misleading rhetoric of the Gulf War managed by the U.S. media, arguing that “Desert Storm was ultimately an imperial war against the Iraqi people, an effort to break and kill them as part of an effort to break and kill Saddam Hussein. Yet this anachronistic and singularly bloody aspect was largely kept from the American television audience, as a way of maintaining its image as a painless Nintendo exercise, and the image of Americans as virtuous, clean warriors” (*Culture and Imperialism* 301). Hence, the war was not presented to the

American public as a ferocious heavy-weaponed operation but as a virtuous mission carried out by democracy advocates.

American troops were not only viewed as “virtuous, clean warriors,” but also as Arab women’s liberators. In her essay “Military Presences and Absences: Arab Women and the Persian Gulf War,” Therese Saliba argues that “[m]uch of the U.S. media ‘foreplay’ to the Persian Gulf War relied on gender issues and ‘women’s liberation’ in order to mask the war’s racist intentions and to prove the moral superiority of the United States” (127). Saliba’s contention could be validated by an incident that happened during the Gulf War, related by Zana Macki, an Arab American political activist: “During the midst of the Gulf War, Bob David, a U.S. Congressman from Michigan, made an anti-Iraqi joke at a Republican fundraiser: ‘What’s the difference between catfish and Iraqi women?’ The answer: ‘One is a fish and the other has whiskers and smells bad’” (212). Macki and other women activists held a press conference the next day where photographers pictured them holding up a crate of fish, so that politicians like Congressman David could see the difference between women and catfish.

This incident reveals the double discrimination Arab American women have suffered from: as women and as Arabs. The political climate surrounding the event significantly indicates that the U.S. anti-Arab political agendas feed public attitudes vilifying Arab culture and Arab women. Thus, Arab American feminists stress the importance of articulating their discourse against both sexism and racism. This articulation, according to Susan Muaddi Darraj, “becomes an attack on the government because it calls the government’s policy into question. If Arab women are already so

vocal and visible, Americans might realize, then why do we need to insert ourselves into their domestic affairs?" ("Personal and Political . . ." 258). Through their immediate response to that offensive joke, Arab American women presented themselves as "vocal and visible" and showed an obvious insistence to fight back.

The poems discussed in this section are by Palestinian American poets and political activists Lisa Suhair Majaj and Suheir Hammad. Their poetry highlights the Arab American feminist discourse in the 1990s where women proved themselves as a unique part of the Arab American community. Arab American women responded to the strained climate of this period by voicing their political and cultural concerns, as well as crossing multiple boundaries in order to connect with women of other marginalized cultures.

***The Woman Who "swallows the moon whole"***

Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Claims" is a powerful statement against the stereotyping of Arab women. Majaj challenges negative stereotypes of Arab women by deconstructing the details of each image. The claims against genderism and racism are underlined when refuting stereotyped versions of the exotic and silent, helpless Arab women:

I am not soft, hennaed hands,  
 a seduction of coral lips;  
 not the enticement of jasmine musk  
 through a tent flap at night;

.....

I am neither harem's promise

Nor desire's fulfillment.

I am not a shapeless peasant

trailing children like flies;

not a second wife, concubine,

kitchen drudge, house slave. (84)

These negative images within the Orientalist tradition dominated the U.S. media and have later been reinforced and expanded by the Zionist and imperialist discourses. As nicely put by Michel Foucault, “[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of true: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (1668). This stereotyping of Arab women in American society as inferior has become part of a “regime of truth” that often suggests a striking contrast with the “superior” white woman in American culture. Similarly, Therese Saliba argues against these negative images that efface Arab women from the U.S. media scene either literally or symbolically. In both cases, “the *absent* Arab woman is objectified and contrasted to the ‘liberated’ Western woman, who often serves as a representative for Arab women. The white woman is granted agency to speak for Arab women, usually on behalf of their liberation” (“Military Presences and Absences . . .” 126).



Situating Arab women against a white context is significant. Although Arab Americans have long been categorized by the U.S. racial census as “White,” most of them have never accepted this racial identification. Instead, they closely identify with non-white groups and perceive of themselves as a community of color, subject to racial discrimination, including anti-Arab stereotypes. Arab American feminists, in particular, have joined women of color in the United States in order to share with them the struggle against forms of racism and sexism. Azizah Al-Hibri views the conflict between American mainstream feminism and Arab American feminism as having racial roots. She critiques the tendency of American feminists to hold “an Orientalist view of Islam, and act on that view,” which makes them unable to see or hear their fellow Arab or Muslim feminists (160). She expresses her frustration at the inner “veil” of American feminism: “Some of us were right there, in the forefront of the U.S women’s movement in the 1960s . . . Where did that consciousness go? What thick veil is the U.S. women’s movement wrapped in these days? Can we help you tear it off? Please tear off your western veil. It is blocking your insight” (161, 162). Al-Hibri’s powerful argument calls for an anti-racist U.S. feminism that could take into consideration the integrity of Arab American feminists and the importance for U.S. women of all ethnic groups to work together on a common ground.

Majaj’s overdetermined self-perception at the end of the poem endorses a feminist view, offered by a woman of color. She is “the woman remembering jasmine,” the “laboring farmwife,” and “the writer whose blacked-out words / are birds’ wings, razored and shorn” (“Claims” 85). Furthermore, Majaj associates herself with such colored

images like “soil,” “olive,” “seed,” and “tree.” She is a woman proud of her unique space and voice within the American milieu. There, her Arab and American identities are intertwined:

I am many rivulets watering  
a tree, and I am the tree.

I am opposite banks of a river,  
and I am the bridge.

I am light shimmering  
off water at night,  
and I am the dark sheen  
which swallows the moon whole.

I am neither the end of the world  
nor the beginning. (86)

Majaj “swallows the moon whole” because she belongs to both halves. In fact, her first name, Lisa Suhair, consists of two parts that incorporate her American and Arab identities. The first half is American (Lisa), and the second half is Arab (Suhair). Majaj employs the bridge metaphor to articulate her sense of home, which represents to her a sort of individual and collective empowerment. On this bridge lies the power of her voice, as well as her resistance to all borders of submission.

*The Female Body and “the smell of suffer”*

In “we spent the fourth of july in bed,” Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian American poet, stands in solidarity with suffering women all over the world. The setting of this poem is a bedroom, and the characters are a female speaker and a male listener. Here, Hammad juxtaposes gender and conscience, drawing a unique picture of an Arab American woman standing by woman’s struggle worldwide. She begins with Iraq:

even now

young walking girls are exploding legs

stepping on the shells of

american hatred left

dug in Iraqi soil. (89)

Hammad repeats the phrase “even now” throughout the poem, which demonstrates the continuous flow of sad memories. From Iraq, memories shift to “Malaysian girls” who have to “choose between the sex trade and / hunger,” to “young philipinas” who “go blind constructing the computer discs,” to “somali eyes” out of which “ants crawl,” to “the “Puerto rican woman” who “goes blind in / an all white prison cell / self-determination her crime,” to “yemeni eyes” that “search out concrete / bodega walls to feed / homesick elder” (89). These quick snapshots of suffering non-white women suggest a heterogeneously universal feminist community to which the speaker belongs.

Her bizarre description of her state of mind, “the smell of suffer,” indicates the increasingly uncontrollable train of memories that keeps moving. As it does, more women from around the world join that feminist community:

and though my head is filled

with your sweetness now

this same head knows

nagasaki girls picked maggots out of stomach sores with chopsticks

and Hiroshima mothers rocked headless babies to sleep

this head knows

*phalestini* youth maimed absorbing rubber bullets

homes demolished trees uprooted roots dispersed. (90)

Here, the female speaker crosses more borders and reaches out to more women in other cultures overseas. She explains that her “sincere love” is “for [her] peeps [her] family humanity / love for real for real freedom / well fed human dignity / for sisters and their lovers” (92). In trying to build transnational bridges with other non-white “sisters,” the speaker advocates for what could be called a global sisterhood. Meanwhile, she implicitly critiques Western “White” feminism for its bias and for lacking a truly sensitive appreciation of non-European women’s suffering. Hammad’s speaker declares, “I ain’t no / woman of steel,” claiming “there ain’t enough good feeling / to push the pain and awareness out” (93). This critique is consolidated by Michelle Sharif in her essay “Global

Sisterhood: Where Do We Fit In?” where she argues that in order to achieve a true understanding of diverse cultures, “western women must explore their own racism. Doing so would help them gain the respect and ultimately the trust of Arab and Muslim women. Only after the defeat of Eurocentrism can we begin developing a universal feminist agenda” (159). However, unlike the Eurocentric thought of Western women, the “pain and awareness” fills the body of Hammad’s feminist, such that “the smell of suffer” is on the go.

The drive of memories is irresistible. They form “. . . a history / deeper than groins,” and the “groans marry a story older / than this lust” (Hammad 91). Accordingly, one would argue that the force of this so “deep” and persistent history is comparable to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic chora. In her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva defines the semiotic chora as “a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their tastes in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated,” which contrasts with the symbolic defined as “the family and society structures,” the forces of rules and logic (25, 4). The writing (or speaking) subject, from Kristeva’s point of view, is “a complex, heterogenous force,” a combination of the semiotic (the unconscious) and the symbolic (the conscious) (7). As in Hammad’s poem, the dominant force in Kristeva’s theory is the female body. From there stem the psychic and biological drives that move toward disturbing the symbolic function and hence rejecting the repressive laws of society.

In view of Kristeva’s theory, Hammad’s female speaker speaks from her semiotic chora. The “smell of suffer” and the “sighs” that are “heavy with history” demonstrate

those semiotic energies driven unconsciously out of the body (92). As a Palestinian American woman who was born in a refugee camp to displaced parents, Hammad knows quite well what it means to be the victim of injustice. The impulses of “humanity” and sisterhood propel her to stand against bias and brutality, to stand with her sisters who now “lay in dirt vomit shit and blood” while she lies in bed “on this futon” enjoying love and sex (92). This poem in itself, therefore, exemplifies what Kristeva calls a “poetic language,” or what Hammad herself refers to as a “creative force” consisting of the “outskirts” and the “in-skirts.” In the Foreword she wrote to *Word: On Being a [Woman] Writer*, Hammad stresses the importance of the body for women writers, without which they will remain in the margin: “Women writers have practiced our craft from the outskirts. Our lenses have been aimed at the public spaces which have marginalized our voices. And yet, we also write from the ‘in-skirts’ – from our bodies and the intimate space around them. To find ourselves we hold up a mirror to the worlds we all inhabit” (xiii). The “in-skirts” or the female body is at the center of Hammad’s poem, which explains the speaking woman’s dominant voice.

Hammad’s poem, particularly its ending, emphasizes women’s duty toward each other. The woman states that she is burdened with “history destiny cum and responsibility” (92). Right after this declaration comes her description of the Bosnia genocide committed against Muslims by Serb forces who also raped thousands of Muslim women and girls:

on this third day of my

seven day candle the flame

flickers on bodies    on my walls of lavender purple  
 in the shadows we see goddesses    abandoning children  
 daughters and their nations getting  
 raped with big guns by  
 bastard sons of the earth. (92)

The tragedy of Muslim women was mentioned toward the end of the poem since the Bosnia War was still very recent at the time the poem was written and published. During and after the massacre, Arab and Muslim women in the United States critiqued America's silence in the face of the mass murder of Muslim men and boys and the mass rape of Muslim women and girls in Bosnia. They also critique the passivity of western women who see Arab and Muslim only through the lenses of racial stereotyping, as Al-Hibri notes:

These days, we wring our hands over Bosnia. If only it met *our* criteria for salvation. But it does not, and those Bosnian Muslim women keep getting impregnated by Serbs, the latter-day champions of "ethnic cleansing" who have corralled these women in "stud farms." So we turn our heads sadly, and forge ahead as though none of this has happened. We fight against Muslim/Arab veils, and for Muslim/Arab clitorises. We push for a United Nations human rights declaration which says that no country may commit violence against its women, even if that country justifies its violence on

the basis of religion, a statement which quietly implies that some religions (read Islam) condone violence against women. (Al-Hibri 161).

Like Al-Hibri, feminists such as Hammad and the female speaker in her poem wonder if Western women consider the issues of the Muslim/Arab veil and clitorises more serious than the Bosnian Genocide. Nevertheless, Hammad's poem enacts a feminist conscience that bursts out of an "othered" female body in the form of words. As Yovanne Vera nicely describes women writing, "[W]e [write] near the bone and spread the words all the way to the ankles. We [write] deep into the skin and under skin where the words could not escape . . . We [feel] the words in gradual bursts of pain" ("Writing Near the Bone" 59). Thus, Hammad's poem is an Arab American translation of the "bursts of pain" suffered by feminist "others" worldwide with whom she stands in complete solidarity.

The "smell of suffer" suggests a borderless zone that connects these global sisters. The woman declares the power and the ownership of her body mainly when she ultimately decides to translate her verbal support for her sisters into action, into political activism. Here, her determined words strongly indicate her leadership: "gotta get up soon / come on now baby / we got work to do" (Hammad 93).

### **Arab Americans and Other Ethnic Groups**

Arab Americans have often articulated their identity in relation to other ethnic communities. Literarily, Arab American poets have seen their own lives presented in new ways by other American writers of color. Lisa Suhair Majaj, for instance, found that the Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston "had a lot to do with [her] exploration, as did Native American poet Joy Harjo, and other writers whose work had nothing to do



with being Arab or Arab American, but a lot to say about being different from what is considered ‘mainstream’ American society, and about struggling to meld the personal, the communal, and the historical” (“Two Worlds Emerging” 66). Arab Americans’ strategy of identifying commonalities with other suffering people, while simultaneously maintaining a difference, helped them with their endeavor to emerge from the shadow. As Therese Saliba argues, “[r]ecognition of differences among Arab Americans and between ourselves and other disadvantaged groups has the potential to lead us to building productive political alliances and coalitions” (“Resisting Invisibility . . .” 307). Given the fact that Arab Americans were still a nearly invisible community in the 1990s, coalitions with other minorities were required to resist invisibility as part of a political ideology that opposed multiple forms of domination.

Forging cross-ethnic connections unfolds a sense of unity and empowerment between Arab Americans and other communities of color. Suheir Hammad’s first collection of poetry *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996) exemplifies a unique coalition between Arab Americans and Black Americans. Hammad, who was raised in Brooklyn in a Black neighborhood, reveals that June Jordan’s “Moving Towards Home” is “the poem that changed [her] life” and admires Jordan’s continuous bravery despite the death threats she received after writing that poem (Marcy 77). Jordan courageously expressed her solidarity with Palestinian women during the Sabra and Shatila massacres: “I was born a black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian.” This poem became a great source of empowerment and inspiration to Hammad before she began her writing career. In the preface to her collection, Hammad describes her feeling after reading Jordan’s poem: “I

remember feeling validated by her statement. She dared speak of transformation, of rebirth, of a deep understanding of humanity. The essence of being Spirit, something no label can touch” (“Author’s Note” xi).

A discussion of particular poems by Suheir Hammad and Naomi Shihab Nye will shed light on some commonalities between Arab Americans and other minority groups. Through a mixture of stories of struggle, these poems assert an Arab American identity while establishing connections beyond the boundaries of ethnicity.

***The Daddy Who “was born by the river in a little tent”***

Suheir Hammad’s moving poem “daddy’s song” shows the power of African American music that penetrates the souls of Arab Americans. Hammad passionately blends together the struggles of African Americans and Arab Americans through the song “A Change is Gonna Come” by the king of soul music Sam Cooke. Hammad speaks to her dad throughout the poem, tracing stages of their lives that were illuminated by Cooke’s song. The chronological order of these stages (“in your day . . . , I was in high school . . . , I was in college . . .”) reveals that the daughter has grown up with and through Cooke’s music until she eventually claims that song as hers: “that’s my song too daddy / and one day I’m gonna sing it / for you / in a poem” (46, 47). Thus, one sees here an obvious transformation of a daughter into a promising poet, as well as a father into a Black Palestinian. Consequently, with African American musical content and hip-hop rhythm, Hammad wrote “daddy’s song” especially in honor of her Palestinian father.<sup>9</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> Suheir Hammad grew up in Brooklyn where she was greatly influenced by hip hop music. She was a co-writer and performer in the Tony-winning Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway in 2003.

an essay “‘this sweet / sweet music’: Jazz, Sam Cooke, and Reading Arab American Literary Identities,” Michelle Hartman contends that “[t]he connection of the father and then the daughter to Sam Cooke is a true love of his music, and this cultural gift allows the two to find a shared space” (159). Accordingly, this song becomes the space to which Hammad and her dad belong, a song that any suffering people could relate to for, as Hammad states in an interview, Cooke’s music “created an anthem for people all around the world” (Brown 2). For the marginalized Arab Americans in general, and particularly for Palestinian Americans who have long suffered the loss of their homeland and an ongoing experience of violent displacement, Cooke’s music and lyrics are definitely an anthem that they sing with passion and love.

Hammad presents Cooke in contrast to the White musical figures Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, simultaneously connecting her father with the famous Black musician. She addresses her dad:

in your day there was sinatra presley  
 (you hated him / wouldn’t let us watch his flicks)  
 and some cat named  
 sam cooke  
 all the time / “sam cooke can sing sam  
 cooke sang real songs  
 simple and real” (Hammad 46)

Her father identifies with the Black singer because his songs are “simple and real,” convey a shared pain, and leave a healing touch inside his human soul. Hammad, according to Hartman, presents Sinatra and Presley as White figures because they “built and consolidated white identities for themselves over time partly to overcome their own indeterminate racial status in the United States” (158). As for Hammad’s dad’s distaste for Presley, Harman explains that the latter “is known as an artist who used racist slurs and made racist comments, yet exploited black artists and became famous by appropriating African American musical forms” (158-59). Hence, the Arab American daddy in the poem identifies with his fellow Other, the African American singer, and the two would understand each other’s struggle within White America. This is also evident in Hammad’s memoir *Drops of This Story* where she tells about a painful experience she had during the terrible massacres of Sabra and Shatila. Suheir’s childhood school was predominantly staffed by White teachers, and there she could not hide her grief over the loss of her people in refugee camps during those massacres:

My horror at the newspaper reports could only guess at the number dead. I could hear the shrieking and wailing of the old women as they sifted through bodies in search of one who belonged to them. I was too young to hear so many names not mentioned ‘cause the news wouldn’t take the time to find them out. They were just dead. The only teacher to let me know it was alright to cry was Ms. West, my only Black teacher. She held me as I cried over these people I didn’t know, and she cried with me. My other

teachers asked me, What did I expect? My people were terrorists. They got what they deserved. My tears turned to stones to hurl at them. (59)

This passionate bond between the child Suheir and her Black teacher is analogous to that between her dad and Cooke. Both cases display a shared experience of pain and a shared struggle for justice.

Tears, too, govern another real scene described in Hammad's poem. Her dad cries as he watches the final scene of *Malcolm X* when Cooke's song is playing. The spiritual connection Hammad's father feels with Cooke is magnificently portrayed:

you cried in your easy / boy reclining

your head to better listen / it was you

born by the river

daddy / in a little tent

and I swear you been running

running ever since. (Hammad 47)

Hammad's daddy's tears mark a point of profound interconnectedness. The two identities, Cooke and Hammad's father, overlap and melt into each other in the same powerful way the African American actor Denzel Washington lives his Malcolm X role. As Cooke sings, "I was born by the river in a little tent / Oh and just like the river I've been / running ever since," Hammad sees that river in her dad's crying eyes and realizes it was he who had been "born by the river in a little tent," and it was he who had been

“running / running ever since.” Hammad delineates in an interview the huge influence of Cooke on her father:

Sam Cooke somehow got to the Third World, because he was so fine, and he had that voice. So, the developing world welcomed his voice into their homes. So when my father came to the US, a young father of three in 1979, with my mother who was pregnant with their fourth child, he was familiar with Sam Cooke. I would hear him talking about Sam Cooke, and he was coming with this idea of America . . . So, for him, Sam Cooke represented his version of America. (Brown 2)

Although this “young father” from Palestine came to the U.S. about fifteen years after Cooke’s death, this spectacular singer remains a great inspiration to him. Both of them have strenuously striven, “running ever since” to build their “version of America,” an America free from injustice and racism. As a matter of fact, the bond between Arab Americans and African Americans has been notably good. This relation, according to Randa Kayyali, was first officially announced by Rev. Jesse Jackson when he spoke about Arab Americans at the 1984 Democratic National Convention “in sympathetic terms,” stating, “Arab Americans, too, know the pain and hurt of racial and religious rejection. They must not continue to be made pariahs” (142). Kayyali notes that “Arab Americans, after African Americans, were the second-largest donor support group for the Jackson campaign that year” (142). Expressing this strong connection between the two minority groups, Hammad eloquently weaves African American icons (Sam Cooke, Malcolm X, Denzel Washington, and the film’s director Spike Lee) together with her

Arab American father in a poetic scene that is visually and acoustically African American.

Hammad implicitly contends that there is something mysterious about African American music that profoundly touches Arab Americans. Cooke's voice is "smooth / smooth," and his music is "sweet / sweet . . ." This fervent description coupled with repetition explains her great love both for her father and for Cooke:

. . . i fell  
 in love with [Cooke's] voice / smooth / smooth  
 and I fell in love with  
 the daddy I thought / all  
 this time talking about  
 some sinatra presley like guy  
 not this sweet / sweet music. (46)

Hammad identifies with her two beloveds: her father and Cooke. She expresses this mixed passion in her memoir: "Your roots never change. I know no matter what I look like, I'm still Suheir. Still my parents' daughter, child of God, Palestinian, descendant of Africans, woman. After all this time, I'm still writing. So that our stories be told. For revolution. For sanity. So that we don't forget. So we always remember. I is we" (*Drops of This Story* "Author's Note"). Inside the heart of this "descendant of Africans" lives Cooke's song, her daddy's song: she "sing[s] it / for [him] / in a poem."

Interestingly, African American music has been influential in the lives of other minority writers, such as Joy Harjo, the famous Native American poet. However, while Hammad connects Black American music with her heart, Harjo associates it with her breath and DNA. She recalls in an essay when she once listened to John Coltrane, the African American Jazz saxophonist and composer, a time she calls a “moment of revelation.” She was in her father’s car listening to the radio as he was driving when Coltrane’s music crept into her body: “My rite of passage into the world of humanity occurred then, via jazz. Coltrane’s horn had made a bridge between familiar and strange lands, between mystery and the need to breathe. Molecular structure is shifted according to tone and grace, reshapes the DNA spiral” (77-8). Because this music builds that bridge, life becomes a wide horizon and one’s identity a lovely song: “The shapes of mountains, cities, a whistle leaf of grass, or a human bent with loss will revise the pattern of the story, the song. I take it from there, write or play through the heartbreak of the tenderness of being until I am the sky, the earth, the song and the singer” (78).

Hence, this horizon where borders are crossed through music emphasizes Hammad’s notion that “I is we,” that an African American song is her dad’s song, is her own Arab American song, is Harjo’s song, is an Other’s song.

### *The “String” That Connects Us*

Naomi Shihab Nye views border crossing among minorities as significant for identity exploration. Nye’s style is often simple, smooth, and embroidered with passionate metaphors that reflect her belief in a human connection among people all over



the world. Specifically, minorities in American society have suffered common racism and injustice, so Arab Americans tend to identify with them.

Nye is generally attached to Mexican Americans. Her Arab American experience has been enriched by living among them in San Antonio, Texas. As she states, “I had to live in a mostly Mexican American city to feel what it meant to be part Arab. It meant Take This Ribbon and Unwind it Slowly” (*Never in a Hurry* 148). Very similar to this border crossing perspective is Paulo Freire’s inspiring statement about discovering his own self through his confrontation with other people in other remote places:

It was by travelling all over the world, it was by travelling through Africa, it was by travelling through Asia, through Australia and New Zealand, and through the islands of the South Pacific, it was by travelling through the whole of Latin America, the Caribbean, North America and Europe – it was by passing all these different parts of the world as an exile that I came to understand my own country better. It was by seeing it from a distance, it was by standing back from it, that I came to understand myself better.

(quoted in Giroux 20)

Freire asserts one’s need to understand the depth of the process of border deconstruction, to re-examine borders, and to redefine one’s identity from multiple angles. This process is a daily cultural practice that resembles Nye’s “ribbon,” the thing we should “unwind slowly.”

Out of Nye's self-discovery experience within a Mexican American neighborhood came her bilingual collection (Spanish and English) of poems and stories from Mexico titled *The Tree is Older Than You Are*. In its introduction, Nye juxtaposes the themes of food and blood, reflecting the significant impact of some of the daily details of her border crossing quest:

Now I live in one of the most Mexican of U.S. cities, in an inner-city neighborhood where no dinner table feels complete without a dish of *salsa* for gravity, and the soft air hums its double tongue. For some, this may not qualify me to gather writings of a culture not in my blood. I suggest that blood be bigger than what we're born with, that blood keeps growing and growing as we live; otherwise how will we become true citizens of the world? (7)

For Nye, Mexican American issues speak to her Arab American experience and unfold some of its details. She makes shared dishes into something that could profoundly go deep into one's blood and make it "bigger." Experiences are shared, but each experience has its own taste: "We are who we are, but we're not stuck there. I love it when a non-Arab serves me *hummus*, believe me!" (Joy Castro 234). Therefore, between *hummus* and *salsa*, the borders are fluid, and the ribbon is loose, which indicates connections beyond ethnic boundaries.

The "string" is a recurring metaphor in Nye's writing. Very much like the message and ribbon metaphors, the string conveys Nye's faith in a unique bond among

marginalized people. She wrote a poem titled “String” where she presents this same idea in her same inspiring style:

Tonight it is possible to pull the long string and feel someone moving far  
away  
  
to touch the fingers of one hand to the fingers of the other hand  
  
to tug the bride and widow by the same thread to be linked to every  
mother  
  
every father’s father even the man in the necktie in Washington who  
  
kept repeating *You went the wrong way, you went the wrong way* with  
  
such animation he might have been talking about his own life (86).

For sufferers, the “touch” of each other’s “hand” is even healing and empowering. Nye recalls in an essay the time when a Native American tribe invited hundreds of people to a meal of barbecued salmon. Mostly colored American writers, the guests “have eaten together at long tables in a meeting house across the road . . . *This is my second family. The family that adopted me*” (“This Crutch That I Love” 5, italics in original). The “string” that connects these minorities is made of solidarity and empathy that move across and beyond all borderlines. Among this family, Nye, who is half Palestinian, specially identifies with Native Americans whose history of violent expulsion resembles in many ways that of the Palestinians. “Native Americans – the so-called American Indians I was always looking for as a child,” she reflects (4).

The Palestinian and American Indian histories significantly echo each other. No wonder that Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular will be deeply moved by the following lines written by Joy Harjo, the renowned Native American poet:

There are voices buried in the Mississippi  
 mud. There are ancestors and future children  
 buried beneath the currents stirred up by  
 pleasure boats going up and down.

There are stories here made of memory. (“New Orleans” 3081)

Nye is passionately aware of these Native American “stories” that dissolved into the Mississippi water. In her childhood, she thought to herself, as though in response to the above lines by Harjo: “Where were the Indians? Someone was missing. I felt them in the stones and trees, the deep river called Mississippi, an Indian name, tumbling silently past” (“This Crutch That I Love” 1). Nye and Harjo represent two different ethnic groups with histories that remarkably intersect, which explains the strong “string” that links them. Allen Hibbard provides in his essay “Our Ideals/Their Ideals, Our Realities/Their Realities: U.S. and Arab Writers Confront Justice” a detailed example of the striking impact of Native American experience upon an Arab audience:

When Native American writer Diane Glancy visited Syria while I was teaching at Damascus University in 1994, I was immediately struck by how much the experience of Native Americans resonated with her Syrian

audience. Here was a tragic story of native populations being forcibly pushed off their native land, suffering disease and death, involved in battle and warfare, eventually tamed, humiliated, defeated and contained on reservations. This story of unfair treatment resonated so strongly, it seems to me, because of a profound identification with similar experiences of Palestinians nearby, where populations have been forcibly displaced, resistance constantly suppressed, domination secured, and people contained in refugee camps, often in miserable conditions. (154)

Hibbard's statement displays the similar violent and traumatic historical events experienced by Native American and Palestinian ancestors and continue to haunt their descendants. The dispossession memories, human-land relationship, pain, and degradation form a psychological tide that runs deep inside their consciousness. It is, therefore, unavoidable for them to identify with each other and "touch the fingers of one hand to the fingers of the other hand" ("String" 86).

Nye's poetry often reinforces the notion of human solidarity regardless of language or origin. In her poem "Arabic," she remembers the man in Jordan "with laughing eyes" who "stopped smiling" and said to her: "'Until you speak Arabic / you will not understand pain'" (11). Nye did not immediately grasp how he made this connection between pain and language, but he went on, explaining his point: "Something to do with the back of the head / an Arab carries sorrow in the back of the head / that only language cracks, the thrum of stones / weeping, grating hinge on an old metal gate" (11). Like many Arab American writers, Nye cannot speak Arabic; yet, she claims a strong

emotional tie to her Arab origin, her Palestinian father, and her Palestinian grandmother whom she has celebrated in much of her poetry and prose. Natalie Handal argues that “culture is not only language; different linguistic traditions do not necessarily mean different cultural traditions” (42). Because Nye does lack this “linguistic tradition” of her culture, her response to the man’s statement was a mix of rejection and shame:

I thought pain had no tongue. Or every tongue  
 at once, supreme translator, sieve. I admit  
 my shame. To live on the brink of Arabic, tugging  
 its rich threads without understanding  
 how to weave the rug . . . I have no gift.

The sound, but not the sense. (11)

Nye consolidates her disapproval of the man’s point of view when she “hailed a taxi by shouting *Pain!* And it stopped / in every language and opened its doors” (11). Thus, Nye stresses that pain is not just a word to be read or written but a human feeling that crosses geographical and linguistic boundaries, a “string” that binds all humans. Kathy Engel delineates this universal bound through a reference to a message she received from an American citizen following the Israeli offensive on Lebanon in 2006: “In July, I received a message that was widely distributed through the internet, from a post-Hurricane Katrina volunteer, now working in Lebanon, saying something like: ‘Let the Lebanese and

Palestinian people know there are those in the United States who care; they are not alone. Let them know”” (xiv).

Nye’s *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems From Around the World* embodies the free-boundary world her poetry has longed for. Here, she brings together poetic voices from different parts of the world, wondering in her introduction to this collection, “[h]ow are our branches different and our stories similar? And what lovely, larger life becomes ours when we listen to each other?” (xii). Additionally, Nye found stories of struggling people specifically helpful in times of crises: “During the Gulf War of 1991, when the language of headline news seemed determined to push human experience into the ‘sanitized’ distance, I found myself searching for poems by Iraqi poets to carry into classrooms. Even if the poems had been written decades earlier, they helped to give a sense of human struggle and real people living behind those headlines” (xii). The “sense of human struggle,” of pain, transcends the confines of time and space and empowers subsequent generations of mankind.

### ***Building Bridges . . .***

Over seventy years before these poems were published, Ameen Rihani, the father of Arab American literature, explored the concept of building bridges between the East and the West. In “A Chant of Mystics,” for instance, he wrote:

We are not of the East or the West;

No boundaries exist in our breast;

We are free. (106)

This Rihanian notion of a boundary-free identity is consolidated by the poems discussed in this chapter. Arab American poets in the 1990s enjoyed this feeling of being “free” while deconstructing borders between their multiple identities. With much frustration and strain, they witnessed the increasingly turbulent relationship between their country of citizenship and their homelands due to the First Gulf War and constant political instabilities in the Middle East in general. In the face of growing alienation and invisibility, Arab American poets crossed the boundaries between their Arab and American cultures and built bridges with other diasporic communities, ensuring their hybrid identities and creating diverse alliances.

David Williams connects human defiance against injustices to “breath.” He highlights the triumphant experience of the entire community of humans, of “the people [he] come[s] from” who collectively challenge grief through the spirit of their song and the power of their breath:

I’m thirsty for words to join that song –  
 cupped hands at the spring, a cup of  
 rain passed hand to hand, rain pooled  
 on stone, a living jewel, a clear  
 lens trembling with our breath. (“Breath” 307)

As part of this human family, Arab Americans resisted their marginalization by building bridges between them and other ethnic minorities. Their poetry paints a vivid picture of



the Arab American journeyer as he crosses the boundaries around him, creating new spaces and new breaths in a borderless horizon: “a river below you and sky above, dust on your feet from the miles you’ve traveled and a road stretching out before you to the horizon” (Majaj, “Two Worlds Emerging . . .” 80).

## CHAPTER THREE: ARAB AMERICAN POETRY 2001–PRESENT

**Speaking Louder**

*... I  
 will not lend my name  
 nor my rhythm to your  
 beat. I will dance  
 and resist and dance and  
 persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than  
 death. Your war drum ain't  
 louder than this breath.*

Suheir Hammad, "What I Will"

**Introduction**

It is doubtless that the world has never been the same since 9/11/2001. Many believe that the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia have marked the beginning of an American era characterized by unprecedented intolerance, particularly toward Arab Americans. As Stephen Salaita contends, "no single event shaped the destiny of Arab Americans more than 9/11. After 9/11, the Arab American community was thrust into the spotlight" (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 77). After the George W. Bush administration confirmed the public's initial suspicion that the 9/11 hijackers were Arab and Muslim, Arab Americans experienced a sudden hyper-visibility and became the target of overwhelming public and media attention, and "[i]t is a general rule that ambivalence will follow when a once-ignored or outright slandered community is suddenly offered unceasing attention and is asked to define and redefine itself daily" (77-8). Hence, Arab Americans were placed in a situation where their Arabness was perceived as the antithesis of American patriotism.

Bush's infamous post-9/11 statement, “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” carried the erroneous implication to the American public that Arab and Muslim Americans constitute a serious threat to America and its national security. Fear and paranoia governed America’s national psychology, which paved the way for a number of post-9/11 government policies that mainly targeted Arabs and Muslims in America, including the infamous PATRIOT Act, which permits FBI agents to spy on mosques, civil rights groups, and Middle Eastern individuals, even at the workplace and schools. Nouri Gana describes this kind of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism as “a fully political apparatus” that “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” (1573). As the U.S. proceeded with its wars on Afghanistan and then Iraq, Arab Americans became the daily targets of government and public anger, and their lives were significantly characterized by extreme fear and anguish.

A very important factor in the preparation for these wars was obtaining public consent. This, according to Noam Chomsky, was done very effectively before the Iraq war, leading to quick public persuasion. “Evidence or not,” he notes, “the president and his associates issued grim warnings about the dire threat Saddam posed to the United States and to his neighbors, and his links to international terrorists, hinting broadly that he was involved in the 9/11 attacks,” and the fruitful outcome of this propaganda was that “[w]ithin weeks, some 60 percent of Americans came to regard Saddam Hussein as ‘an immediate threat to US’ who must be removed quickly in self-defense” (*Hegemony or Survival* 18). Seeking a domestic consensus alongside coercion is essential to the

Gramscian notion of hegemony. Here, the U.S. strategy to invade Iraq was to back up its resort to naked force by public consent. Through the strategy of overt coercion, the United States military hegemony switched from attacking Iraq (as it had done in the First Gulf War) to occupying it in 2003 and directly controlling it politically and militarily. The U.S. administration legitimized the use of violence at home and abroad under the guise of national security. As Jorge Hernández Martínez and Marian Ortega Breña propose, “[w]ith regard to foreign affairs, this is carried out on a transnational level that involves parts of the Third World, in which case what the United States seeks to defend is its hegemony rather than its national security. On the domestic front, this notion is used in a variety of ways to justify any kind of repression” (48). Thus, in the name of protecting its national security, America has employed aggressive tools globally and domestically such as its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, its illegal drones overseas in countries like Pakistan and Yemen, its controversial Guantanamo Bay detention facility where arbitrarily-detained suspected terrorists have been kept without any legal trials, as well as its racial profiling and Patriot Act which has mainly targeted Muslim and Arab Americans on American soil.

To help achieve America’s imperial agenda in the Middle East, the media and pop culture have continued to portray Arabs and Muslims as the major enemies of Americans. In his book *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11*, Jack Shaheen argues that “Arabs remain the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood, but the anti-Arab stereotypes after 9/11 are more powerful than before” (xi). Hollywood repeatedly misrepresents the Arab as the dangerous “other” who is “[i]ncapable of democracy,” a

“violent primitive mass opposing world peace and religious tolerance. Only a brave white man and a light saber can save the 'other' from himself” (xii). This idea is embodied in a countless number of American films, including *The Kingdom* (2007) whose plot significantly vilifies Arabs as the following summary by Shaheen demonstrates:

In this Rambo-in-Arabia shoot-'em-up, viewers applaud the heroics of four FBI agents who fly off to Saudi Arabia and kill Arabs. Before FBI investigators put their “boots on Saudi soil,” one agent describes Saudi Arabia as being “a bit like Mars.” In fact, it's much worse. Reel Saudi Arabia is a sinister desert, where evil, machine-gun-shooting Arabs lurk in the shadows, waiting to kill Americans. The audience is led to believe that we had better kill the Arabs – even the women and children – quick, before they kill us. Yes, the film shows two “good” Saudis, but their presence is mere tokenism. (26)

This fictional scenario of flying to the Middle East to hunt and cuff the “evil” there reflects and supports the political beliefs and plans of mainstream America. It obviously idealizes the American projects in Afghanistan and Iraq, which are viewed by Arab Americans as striking examples of America's imperialism conducted under the umbrella of the war on terror. This insistence on linking America's safety with launching a fatal war in the Middle East reminded Arab Americans of the political and public climate that preceded the First Gulf War in 1991. In fact, Arab American suffering from American imperialism is one factor that distinguishes the Arab American experience from the experiences of other ethnic groups. Salaita stresses that “[l]ike most other minorities,

Arab Americans 'piggyback' the ethnic tensions that were developed uniquely in the US based primarily on the oppression of Blacks and Indians. Imperialism, however, is the most immediate issue facing Arab Americans, since much of it is directed at the Arab World” (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 87). This interplay of anti-Arab racism and imperialism has greatly complicated the Arab American experience since the 9/11 catastrophe that “did not really disrupt anti-Arab racism in any momentous way. Rather, it polarized attitudes that had been in place years before the word *terrorism* entered common parlance” (87).

Right after 9/11, many Americans felt they were at war with Islam. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of them conflate Muslims with Arabs and vice versa placed both groups at risk for increasing hate crimes. For some Americans, Osama bin Laden became erroneously a symbol of Islam, which in turn represented to them an anti-American enemy that must be crushed. These misconceptions are evident in the first incident of post-9/11 hate crimes whose victim was Balbir Singh Sodhi who wore his traditional Sikh turban that was confused with Osama bin Laden's *kaffiyey*. Sodhi, who was neither a Muslim nor an Arab, was shot to death, and his murder was the first in a series of hate crimes, including murders, attempted murders, and threats that targeted American Arabs and Muslims. Many ethnic groups, like African Americans, Catholics, and Jews, who experienced such hostility and oppression at different times in U.S. history would definitely empathize with Arab Americans. However, it was the Japanese Americans who particularly observed the Arab American experience after 9/11 with great empathy. To them, the terror and pain suffered by Arab Americans in post-9/11 America echoed the

Japanese American experience of concentration camps following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during the Second World War. Many Americans, especially Arab and Muslim Americans themselves, wondered if there would ever be any Arab American internment. An Arab American woman responded once to a question about such comparison: “I think a lot of people in the community after [9/11] . . . were talking about . . . Japanese Americans. Could that kind of internment situation occur [again]? Could we all shipped out? Is it relevant that you have an American passport if your last name is [Arab name?]” (qtd. in Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 58). Not only did the Japanese American community empathize with Arab Americans, but it also expressed solidarity with them through various activities. The Japanese American activist Kathy Masaoka, for example, strongly condemned any attempt to hold Arab Americans responsible for crimes they never committed, asserting: “We weren't responsible for Pearl Harbor, and we don't have to prove our loyalty any more than anyone else. [Arab Americans] shouldn't have to, either” (59).

With every new US-Arab crisis, the issue of loyalty to America is often discussed with mistrust. With respect to the overwhelming paranoia that targeted them, many Arab and Muslim Americans reported how ambivalent their feelings were on and after 9/11. Philip Metres describes this feeling in a nicely spontaneous way: “[i]n the wake of the attacks, I remember being hyperaware of my Arabness and I recall catching paranoid glances from strangers – as if they accused me of being a terrorist. Even more strangely, I felt as if somehow I was responsible for these attacks” (“Remaking/Unmaking . . .” 1600). As it started to endure these “paranoid glances,” the Arab American community

responded quickly to the tragedy. The president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), for instance, promptly issued a statement assuring that “[n]o matter who was responsible for this terrible crime, which no cause or ideology could possibly justify, Arab Americans will be no less moved, no less, angry, and no less outraged than our fellow Americans” (qtd. in Orfalea, *The Arab Americans* 301). Despite this sincere statement by ADC and many others issued by other Arab American organizations, Arab Americans continued to be collectively perceived as political and cultural threats to America. Their images, as Moustafa Bayoumi writes, “are floating everywhere in the virtual landscape of the national imagination, as either villains of Islam or victims of Arab culture. Yet as in the postmodern world in which we live, sometimes when you are everywhere, you are really nowhere” (5).

It is significant that Arab Americans confronted the shock of 9/11 attacks and its aftermath with a determined claim to defend their place within the political and cultural “landscape” of America. This tragedy has prompted Naomi Shihab Nye to write her letter “To Any Would-Be Terrorist,” expressing the post-9/11 Arab American misery. Nye describes the deadly events of 9/11 as “a giant simultaneous break-down” that wounded America, the Middle East, and the rest of the world (364). She also frustratingly stresses how the Arab American pain is particularly deep, causing the current task of Arab Americans to be too heavy to shoulder:

I hate that word [terrorist]. Do you know how hard some of us have worked to get rid of that word, to deny its instant connection to the Middle East? And now look. Look what extra work we have. Not only did your



colleagues kill thousands of innocent, international people in those buildings and scar their families forever, they wounded a huge community of people in the Middle East, in the United States and all over the world. . . My hard-working American mother has spent 50 years trying to convince her fellow teachers and choir mates not to believe stereotypes about the Middle East. She 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 . . . My Palestinian cousins in Texas have beautiful brown little children. Many of them haven't gone to school yet. And now they have this heavy word to carry in their backpacks along with the weight of their papers and books.

(362)

Compared to poets discussed in previous chapters, Arab American poets in Chapter Three have had to shoulder a much heavier mission within a far more stressful social and political milieu. In essence, they have confronted the post-9/11 climate by speaking even louder than before as a way to strike out at the shock, grief, and threats that have engulfed their community. Their poems are stories of collective tension, trauma, challenges, and persistent hopes to heal the wounds of their nation, as well as their own wounds.

Although the spotlight on Arab Americans has been extremely negative, Nye and her fellow Arab American poets have never retreated; rather, they have faced the challenge with brave voices. As Nye stressed, "we believe in the power of the word and we keep

using it, even when it seems no one large enough is listening” (“To Any Would-Be Terrorist” 363).

### **9/11: Shock and Anxieties**

Like all Americans, Arab Americans can never ever forget Tuesday, 9/11/2001. Ambivalent, mixed feelings overwhelmed the entire Arab American community: shock, speechlessness, fear, grief, anger, anxieties, and alienation. This crisis triggered in Arab Americans the kind of pain they experienced before, during previous crises such as the First Gulf War and the attempted bombing of the New York Twin Towers by some Middle Eastern individuals in the 1990s. Whenever the tension rises between the U.S. and the Middle East, Arab and Muslim Americans become the victims of the media-constructed notion of an Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern enemy of the American nation. Even when terrorist acts are conducted by non-Arabs, those of Arab descent in America are the usual public and media suspects.

When 9/11 attacks occurred, Arab Americans found themselves thrust into a long-term nightmare that has continued through ongoing anxieties about their present and future lives. For instance, Philip Metres recalls his strange feelings about this nightmare: “the pictures of the terrorists in the newspaper looked almost like a bunch of cousins . . . . From a rational standpoint, the feeling is ludicrous; my worldview is so different from the attackers, they could be from a different universe. Yet identification is identification and reductively, absurdly so” (“Remaking/Unmaking . . .” 1600). For Moustafa Bayoumi, this “absurd” feeling is the sign of being “a problem” in today's America. In his book *How*

*Does it Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America*, Bayoumi compares the situation of African Americans during the time of slavery and after with that of Arab Americans after 9/11, using W. E. B. Du Bois's famous proclamation in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “Being a problem is a strange experience . . . peculiar even.” Bayoumi contends that a century after Du Bois portrayed in his book the ugly picture of Black experience in America, “Arabs and Muslim Americans are the new 'problem' of American society . . . when Arabs are the new chic and Islam is all the rage, Muslims and Arabs have become essentially a nagging problem to solve, one way or another. And being a problem is a strange experience – frustrating, even” (2, 6).

The following is a discussion of poems by Suheir Hammad and Dima Hilal, a Lebanese American, that draws upon this “strange experience” of Arab Americans after 9/11. It shows the daily individual and communal anxieties that generated within the Arab American community and continued to grow as the crisis went on.

***The Speechless Poet Who “[has] not written one word”***

Amidst the stunning speechlessness that took over the Arab American community at the outset of 9/11, Suheir Hammad’s “first writing since” appeared to break the Arab American silence through a spontaneous poetic burst of multiple feelings. This was in fact the first Arab American poem to circulate on the internet immediately after the 9/11 attacks. Traumatized by the horrible deaths of thousands in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania, Hammad states she cannot find the words to express her disbelief: “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” (98). Ironically, she does find the words to articulate the kind of shock and fear experienced by Arab Americans on 9/11. Hammad spontaneously reveals her apprehensive thoughts as she addresses God:

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. (98)

The poet’s prayers are almost what every Arab American uttered on that sad Tuesday. Arab American lives become extremely stressful during any American-Arab crisis or any domestic violence committed by people who “look like [their] brothers.” Furthermore, Hammad’s poem underscores the United States’ unjust double standard, which is particularly evident when violence is conducted by non-Arabs, for “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” (100).

Arab Americans faced increasing hostility and harassment even before the White House officially announced the names and nationalities of individuals responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Since Arabs and Muslims are the usual target of America’s finger pointing following similar crises, Arab Americans in post-9/11 America “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 U.S. citizens, are merely assumed” (Howell and Shryock 444). The immediate statements issued by several Arab American and Muslim American organizations demonstrate that that Arabs and Muslims in America felt compelled to publicly condemn the attacks and to confirm their loyalty to America. For instance, the statement of the president of American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, issued on September 12, 2001 and referred to earlier, stressed that Arab Americans are “no less moved, no less angry and no less outraged than [their] fellow Americans.” Some of these statements even tried explicitly to remind Americans that Arab and Muslim Americans were not outsiders but a vital part of the American nation. This is exemplified in the way Arsalan Tariq Iftikhar, the Midwest Communications director at the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), concluded his statement on the 9/11 tragic events: “We are no less American than we were on Sept. 10. I was born in the United States. I took my first steps on this soil. I have been a ball boy for the Chicago Bulls. I have been to four U2 concerts. I am a second-year law student specializing in international human rights. I and my 7 million Muslim brothers and sisters are contributing members of American society” (1).

Despite all these public statements, Arab Americans have continued to represent the face of the enemy in the eyes of some Americans. Hammad shows in her poem the various negative conceptions these people have about Arabs, which leads to a series of offensive accusations:

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. (100)

She raises here a significant misconception about the dead victims of 9/11 terrorist attacks. Perhaps, many Americans do not realize that there were Arabs and Muslims among those victims. In fact, “six of the firemen who risked their lives in New York City were Arab American,” “300 of the dead in the World Trade Center towers were Muslim, over 10 percent of the total,” “citizens of 80 nations had been killed. Among them was an American Muslim emergency medical technician who lost his life trying to save others” (Orfalea, *The Arab Americans* 301). However, these facts have been nearly absent in the U.S. mainstream media, which caused hostility against Arabs and Muslims to grow constantly.

On the other hand, Hammad shows the human side of some Americans whose emotional support for her was so empowering. With much gratitude, she shows the sympathy expressed by an American woman towards her and Arab Americans in general,

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” . . . (Hammad 100)

While “hugged” by this “white woman,” Hammad confirms she is an Arab from Brooklyn, and her “tears” indicate her “double trouble” as a Palestinian and as an American. She also makes a remarkable analogy between the devastating situation in New York and that in Palestine. Though two vastly remote geographical zones, New York on one hand and the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on another hand intersect, and human suffering is their point of interconnection: “if there are any people on earth who understand / how new york is feeling now, / they are in the west bank and the Gaza strip” (100). Yet, the poet realizes that many Americans cannot apprehend this comparison, so her pain and fear of anti-Arab backlash continue, and she “[cries] daily that [her] / brothers return to [her] mother safe and whole” (102).

Moreover, some Arab Americans felt not only grieved but also guilty about the whole catastrophic 9/11 incident. Amir Marvasti and Karyn McKinney state that some Arabs and Muslims of America at some point “felt a strong sense of guilt and shame about this [9/11] tragedy” (122). However, Hammad considers meaningless and ridiculous any attempt to connect her with the terrorists. She also condemns the political and media rhetoric following the attacks that tends to hide truths in favor of undeclared agendas:

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 . . . . .

there is no poetry in this. here 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. (101,  
102)

Thus, Hammad finely portrays a complicated picture of her feelings as an Arab American enduring the aftermath of 9/11. This portrayal is incorporated with a strong sense of frustration with the current chaotic scene of America in general and that of Arab America in particular. She quotes President Bush's infamous phrase "either you are with us, or with the terrorists" only to ultimately reject it sarcastically and replace it with "you are either with life, or against" (101, 102). Although she tells her fellow Americans to "affirm life," she admits that her upcoming life will never be full of roses: "I feel like my skin is real thin, and that my eyes are only going to / get darker. the future holds little light" (101).

### ***The American Dream and "those arabs"***

Dima Hilal's "america" is a poem that reflects the impact of 9/11 on the American dream as viewed by Arabs of America. Unlike Hammad's poem that expresses an Arab American's immediate psychological reading of 9/11, Hilal's "america" explores the long



journey of Arab Americans within America's landscape in light of 9/11, wondering about the current fate of the American dream that had long inspired them.

Hilal designed her poem so that the events of 9/11 occupy its center. The poem mainly envisions the Arab American quest for the American dream, which was interrupted by the 9/11 attacks, only to be resumed ambivalently in a more vexing way. "america" presents Arab Americans as a very hardworking community that strongly believed in the American dream:

we cross from Andalusia to these Pacific shores

we carry memories in a single suitcase

abandon brothers, skyscrapers and tight alleyways

villages framed with grape leaves and fig trees

the land of Jesus and Abraham

we flee fighter jets and darkening skies

escape shrapnel scenes,

for the American dream

we brush off dust from the old country

unearth the clay from beneath our nails

we fade into the fabric of these united states

pay our taxes, pledge our allegiance

lose our selves in its thick folds

success finds us and we find success

intoxicating. (104-05)

With all this excitement and hope, Arab Americans start their lives in the new world of America and face diverse obstacles to their American dream. As one Lebanese American puts it, “. . . [immigration] is not easy because it’s different . . . People have to do it because it is salvation, it’s hope. It always saddens me in that the host countries don’t realize that it’s not easy for the immigrants. They are desperate and they’re looking for a way out . . . There’s despair, there’s hopelessness” (McKinney and Marvasti 116). Hence, the American dream represents “hope” and “salvation” for Arab Americans, which requires a journey full of struggle and resolution.

However, the terrorist events of 9/11 turned this American dream into an Arab American nightmare. The entire lives of Arab Americans were shaken, as well as their faith in the American dream. To demonstrate this notion, Hilal invokes the 9/11 twin towers scene where the hijacked planes crashed into the buildings – a devastating literal crash that also implies the shattering of the American dream in the eyes of Arab Americans. On the day of the terrorist attacks, the long-established lives of Arab American dreamers were falling apart before their own eyes:

until a plane carves a path through steel and glass

smoke billowing from two wounded skyscrapers,

the aftermath all too familiar

just the epicenter shifting  
 we know the endless sorrow  
 of life snatched without warning or reason,  
 we seek solace in our neighbors  
 see our own blanched faces  
 reflected back at us. (105)

Arab Americans observed the tremendous tragedy with disbelief, simultaneously sensing the upcoming “endless sorrow.” As McKinney and Marvasti contend, “[w]hile the feeling of shock is similar to what everyone must have felt that day, in the case of Middle Eastern Americans, there was also a feeling of impending doom, the knowledge that their lives would never be exactly the same” (120). Accordingly, the collapse of the New York Twin Towers marked the collapse of a promising future for which Arab Americans had devoted themselves for decades.

Moreover, the destruction reached the texture of American society itself as the 9/11 tragedy tore the country into “Us” and “Them,” with Arab Americans being the undesired “Them.” After “[fading] into the fabric of these united states,” Arab Americans were afterwards denied that belonging, and their Arabness was perceived as dangerous: “it’s us versus them / are you with us / are you with us / are you with us / or against us? (105-06). Because they are perceived as public and national security threats, it is not uncommon for some Americans to demand the killing of “those Arabs”:

*wait, isn't that where you're from?*

let's bomb them back to the stone age

those arabs

never should let them into our country

those arabs

never should let them in

we'll show them

those arabs

we'll teach those turban-wearing, towel-headed,

dirty, motherfucking, camel loving, terrorists

a lesson they'll never forget. (105)

Hilal employed here the technique of stream of consciousness where the speaker expresses non-stop crowded thoughts in his mind. This method also involves sudden shifts in tones and pronoun usage, such as the shift from “we” to “you” and then back to “we” with “we” sometimes referring to “Arab Americans” while other times to Americans in general, as well as the shift of tone from being sincere to being sarcastic. This technique and the general tone of Hilal’s “america” reminds the reader of Allen Ginsberg’s “America,” which he wrote as a critique of America in the midst of the Cold War. Upon reading Hilal’s lines above about “dirty” Arabs, the following lines by Ginsberg about “bad Russians” strongly reverberate:

America it's them bad Russians

Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them

Russians

The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad. She

wants to take our cars from out our garages.

Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red Reader's Digest. Her

wants our auto plants in Siberia. Him big bureaucracy

running our fillingstations.

That no good. Ugh . . . (2307)

The critique of America in both poems is governed by frustration and sarcasm. Americans tend to easily and quickly label others as evils and as threats, but they are unable to see the evils of their own. Ginsberg's America of the 1950s is similar to Hilal's America of the twenty-first century with the difference that its supposed enemy used to be then those "Russians" while now it is "those Arabs."

Arab Americans had to carry the mental burden of living in such an intimidating environment. In an article he wrote a few months after 9/11/2001, the Arab American writer Ibrahim Aoude describes this climate as a "siege" constructed by the public, the media, and the Bush administration:

In such an environment that is conducive to racism, Arab and Muslim Americans feel that they are under siege. The various Arab American and Muslim organizations are under pressure from the media and the government to ‘cooperate’ with authorities in ‘fighting terrorism’ by giving information on ‘suspicious’ persons or activities . . . Even though the war in Afghanistan is not finished by a long shot, the US is contemplating other targets to pursue in its ‘war on terror.’ Iraq is high on the list . . . Arab Americans are being intimidated, by the sheer heaviness of the public environment, not to speak against such a foolish action.

(“Arab Americans and the Criminalization of Dissent” 126)

Hilal’s “america” pictures this mental and psychological “siege” under which Arab Americans have lived since 9/11. This unusually strained life paradoxically contrasts with the promises of salvation and liberation entailed in the American dream they desperately sought to achieve.

As they continued to experience this “siege,” Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 came to realize that their right to the American dream was being taken away from them for actions they did not commit. These moments of awareness were described by an Arab American with remarkable simplicity: “I for one imagine that every immigrant coming to this country comes with at least the impression that this is a country that has laws – laws which are civil. But suddenly to realize, as I have seen it, this is a veneer, a very thin veneer of civility. At the moment that something threatening happens, that

vener is gone . . . So my faith is gone” (McKinney and Marvasti 126). This shaken faith in the American dream is also strongly sensed in the final lines of Hilal’s poem:

we cross from Andalusia to these Pacific shores

we flee fighter jets and darkening skies

escape shrapnel scenes,

for the American dream

for the American dream

the American dream. (106)

Although the lines above reveal a strong sense of disappointment and uncertainty, the repetition of the “American dream” may also indicate an inclination to stay strong. This open ending implies the complexity of the Arab American state of mind following 9/11. While Hilal’s poem reveals the exceptionally hard working character of Arab Americans, it also demonstrates as well the strife of the Arab American community to overcome the negative impact of 9/11 on its perception of the American dream.

### **Between Suspicion and Prejudice**

Arabs and Muslims of America, and many other Americans in general, were deeply disturbed and offended by the post-9/11 policies of the Bush administration, including the PATRIOT Act and racial profiling. Arab Americans, especially those with Muslim and Arab names and appearance, became America's typical suspected terrorists. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad asserts that “[t]he security measures adopted by the Bush

administration are perceived both overseas and among many in the Muslim community in North America not as antiterrorism but as anti-Muslim” (80). Due to such anti-Muslim policies, men with dark skin and beards, as well as women in headscarves, were most likely to be targets of public hostility and harassment on streets, at work, or at schools.

The “US vs. Them” binary perception has dominated political and media rhetoric since 9/11. Moustafa Bayoumi demonstrates that in the face of the American persistent problem of prejudice, “the American creed of fairness” was supposed to mean that a person be judged only by who he is – not by what his religion, color, gender, or country of origin is. However, “[t]he terrorist attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and explosion of political violence around the world have put that dream in jeopardy for American Arabs and Muslims. In the eyes of some Americans, they have become collectively known as dangerous outsiders” (3). Furthermore, this phobia toward Arab and Muslim Americans led some Americans to demand a segregationist law on Muslims: “A *USA/Gallup* Poll from 2006 shows that 39 percent of Americans admit to holding prejudice against Muslims and believe that all Muslims – US citizens included – should carry special IDs” (3).

Post-9/11 political and security policies juxtaposed with persistent negative media representations of Arab Americans left them open targets for daily suspicion and demonization. The following poems by Noura Erakat, a Palestinian American, and Mohja Kahf, a Syrian American, manifest this notion and portray its unjust and oppressive effects on Arab American males and females.



***“Calling all Mohammeds” at US Airports***

Noura Erakat’s “Ode to the INS” sheds some light on the impact of the PATRIOT Act that was enacted in October 2001. This act gave such governmental agencies as the Immigration Naturalization Services (INS) – currently called the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) – absolute authority to arrest, interrogate, spy on, and track Arabs and Muslims in the United State under the guise of preventing terrorist acts from taking place on American soil. Erakat’s poem shows how airport profiling was a means the INS used to serve this purpose, which subjected Arabs and Muslims to exceptional security checks:

Chedly—check

Mehdi—check

Ihsain—check

Akram—check

Anwar—check

Mohammed

Mohammed

Mohammed

.....

Calling ALL MOHAMMEDS. (64, 65)

Beside rounding up “all Mohammeds” and those with Muslim and Arab names at US airports for special security checks, “Marlboro, AT&T, and Nokia privatized the air [they] breathe” (64). Nadine Naber argues that [n]ames signifying an ‘Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim’ identity rendered particular men and boys at once foreign, or alien, to the nation, but at the same time connected, in the most familial and instinctive terms, to ‘the terrorists’” (“Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming” 292). Such police measures terrorize the spirit of Arab Americans and serve as a justification for the public backlash against them. Therefore, the security hysteria that possessed the American public overlapped with the post-9/11 anti-Arab governmental laws, and the two frequently fed on each other.

To show this connection, Erakat portrays Arabs and Arab Americans as the target of public and governmental anger. As they endure a backlash by ordinary Americans because of their Middle Eastern appearance, Arabs are also singled out by airport authorities based on their Arab-sounding and Muslim-sounding names, as well as national origins:

A California Western where cowboys aim, shoot, fire at

brown heads, masabeh, beards, and Qur’ans

bullseye!

Send those terrorists back where they came from

Where we first found them

.....

Abu Bakr

Ali

Massoud

Nasser

Jamal

Jameel

Faysal

Mohammed

Mohammed

Mohammed

Peace be upon you and you and you

line up for your mug shot

waging holy wars

without borders

and infinite justice

just isn't enough

to explain

How did you get into this country anyway? (64, 65)

Many Americans across the United States objected to such policies of racial profiling because they “gave the impression that the US government thought that Arabs and Muslims were a suspicious and dangerous group to whom constitutional rights and civil liberties did not apply” (Kayyali 146). However, these laws still exist, and the INS continues to have no worry about individuals’ civil rights when dealing with names like “Mohammed,” “Massoud,” “Ali,” or “Jamal,” but the case would completely differ if the individual’s name was – for instance – David, Jack, or Thomas. Similarly, the media fuel this anti-Arab discrimination by distinguishing between “domestic” and “foreign” perpetrators of violence:

For the domestic terrorists, their normal appearance softens the gravity of their crimes. They are described as “young” and “foolish.” On the other hand, the foreign terrorists’ normal appearance becomes a ruse, a cause for further alarm. In this way two worlds of violence are constructed. One is the world of the unfortunate young men, like those “we know,” who become tragically involved in reprehensible acts, and the other is that of the sinister men who – though they may look human – are ultimately driven to unspeakable violence that is part of their nature. (Marvastic and McKinney 74)

Following this logic, Erakat demonstrates in her poem the interplay of the media, public opinion, and governmental laws that presents Arabs and Arab Americans as those “brown heads” with “beards” who have to be profiled and “lined up” at airports for a race-determined security check. This description of the person subjected to special security

checks matches the U.S. mainstream media's portrayal of the typical terrorist, including the CNN terrorist version: "He was dark, Middle Eastern, and had a full beard. He was the typical terrorist looking guy – or at least the guy who CNN portrays as the terrorist. Timothy McVeigh is a terrorist, but he is not associated with terrorism because he does not look like the typical terrorist-looking guy" (qtd. in Naber, "Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming" 296). Accordingly, putting the arguments of Naber and Marvasti and McKinney in light of Erakat's poem, one would have to confront the shocking perspective dominating most of mainstream America's imagination: McVeigh is NOT a terrorist because he is just a "young" and "foolish" guy, but the brown-skinned and long-bearded Arab is a terrorist by nature.

However, Erakat's Arab American traveler challenges the White security officer's prejudice. He reminds him that he, too, is an immigrant who is required to prove his legal status, for the "[o]nly non-immigrants I see are Lakota, Navajo, and Cherokee" (Erakat 65). Indeed, speaking up against such race-based checks is "not 'whining,'" as stressed by Marvasti and McKinney, but "part of the struggle against an inexcusable social ill," and "[w]e should not wait until thousands more are mentally, economically, and physically hurt before we engage in social action against these injustices" (Marvasti and McKinney 167). The speaker in Erakat's poem demands an answer from the White American security officer: "So all you claiming American need to special register to prove / your legality / You've overstayed your visa 501 years / So tell me again please, who is the illegal here?" (65). The Arab American speaker here stands against prejudice

and injustice by stressing equal rights and duties, and his voice marks the closure of the poem, but his question remains unanswered.

*Scheherazade's "explosives"*

In *E-Mails from Scheherazad*,<sup>10</sup> the Arab American writer Mohja Kahf defends Arab and Muslim women against prejudice and suspicion. In this poetry collection, she invokes Scheherazade, the heroine of *The Thousand and One Nights* through stories of Arab women in contemporary America that are remarkably told with tolerance and confidence. In *E-mails*, Scheherazade stands for Arab women in general and for Arab female writers in particular. "So You Think You Know Scheherazad" is a revival of Scheherazadian narrative where Scheherazade is a wise and bright storyteller. The following ten lines present the two opposite versions of Scheherazade: the Western version vs the Arab version

So you think you know Scheherazad  
 So you think she tells you bedtime stories  
 that will please and soothe,  
 invents fairy creatures  
 who will grant you wishes  
 Scheherazad invents nothing

---

<sup>10</sup> In this collection, Kahf chose to spell the name of the legendary storyteller "Scheherazad." However, I used the most common spelling, "Scheherazade," throughout all my discussion of Kahf's poems.

Scheherazad awakens  
 the demons under your bed  
 They were always there  
 She locks you in with them. (44)

Kahf asserts here that Scheherazade is not the Oriental female whose role is to “please and soothe,” but she is an intelligent narrator who “awakens” and educates and whose stories are drawn on her knowledge and philosophy. This inspiring portrayal of Scheherazade comes in response to the distortion from which the image of this Arab heroine has suffered at the hands of Western translators. In fact, as Susan Muaddi Darraj contends, Scheherazade was presented as “nothing more than a harem sex kitten” by Antoine Galland, and later Richard Burton, who “introduced the *Nights* [*Thousand and One Nights*] to the European canon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An intelligent woman, schooled in literature, philosophy, and history, reduced to an erotic, shallow, sex-crazed body behind a veil—it happened many times, with many Arab and/or Eastern women, including Cleopatra, Khadija, and Aisha” (“Introduction” 2). In fact, beneath the veneer of this Western image of Scheherazade lies a potential power of imperial structure and representation.

By representing the Arab Scheherazade in their own ways, Western intellectuals have reduced her into a subaltern subject. In her influential essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Spivak criticizes the Western discourse that tends to speak for the subaltern, which reinforces the logic of Western power over the Third World. Spivak

undermines the feminist agenda of the subaltern studies group, pointing out the pitfalls of their representation practices: “[t]he problem is that the subject’s itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual . . . How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?” (80). Spivak’s argument challenges Western intellectuals who paradoxically silence the female subaltern by claiming that they speak for her. The “voice-consciousness” with which Scheherazade is presented in Kahf’s poem as a female who “pleases and soothes” is in fact an imperial consciousness that implies a Western power to speak for those who cannot. In view of this misrepresentation of the Arab female, Barbara Nimri Aziz urges that Arab and Arab American women writers must “assert [their] responsibility, a responsibility [they] once had left to others. ‘Write or be written’” (xii).

In another poem, “Email from Scheherazad,” Kahf chooses to write herself using her own Scheherazadian voice. Here, she is an Arab American Scheherazade speaking with, according to Spivak, “the testimony of the women’s [own] voice-consciousness” (93). Deconstructing her distorted image within Western discourse, Scheherazade here is a woman proud of her history, power, autonomy, and voice:

Hi Babe. It’s Scheherazad. I’m back

For the millennium and living in Hackensack,

New Jersey. I tell stories for a living



You ask if there is a living in that.

You must remember: Where I come from,

Words are to die for. I saved the virgins

From beheading by the king, who was killing

Them to still the beast of doubt in him.

I told a story. He began to listen and I found

That story led to story. Powers unleashed, I wound

The thread around the pirn of night. A thousand days

Later, we got divorced. . . . .

. . . . .

Shahrayar and I share custody of our little girl.

We split up amicably. I taught him to heal

His violent streak through stories, after all,

And he helped me uncover my true call. (43)

Scheherazade's stories are the source of her power; they "save," "teach," and "heal." In the past, she saved women from being killed by Shahrayar, Shahrayar from his own evil, and she saved her own life, too. Today, Scheherazade saves millions of Arab women from Western stereotypes that show them as passive, powerless, exotic, and uneducated. She also stands by her Arab partner and speaks out in support of his cause. This is

manifest in the aftermath of 9/11 when thousands of Arab American men were detained, deported, and intimidated. Nada Elia contends that this difficult situation led Arab American women to become “more vocal,” to stand up in support of their male compatriots: “Suddenly, we are in demand, as our male partners are disappeared. We are asked to speak at political gatherings, at Women’s Month events, and in academic settings, when ‘the Middle East’ is discussed. Without our men, we have become exotic once again, ‘desirable’ for all the wrong reasons” (“Islamophobia and the ‘Privileging’ of Arab American Women” 158). Accordingly, Kahf asserts that the Arab American woman is not a subaltern subject but one who intelligently weaves her stories with politics, literature, history, and philosophy. She is today’s Scheherazade.

The aftermath of 9/11 saw the rise of this misconception of Arab women even within the community of American publishers. Nada Elia contends that Arab female writers are favored over Arab men writers “because publishers deem that what women have to offer the American readership is more interesting than what men may have to say” (“Islamophobia and the ‘Privileging’ of Arab American Women” 158). However, Elia stresses that not any topic by any Arab female writer is easy to sell because “while the West favors Arab women writers over their male compatriots, even among female authors, those denouncing Islam are favored over those denouncing the occupation of their country by Israeli or American troops” (158). Nawal Saadawi’s books are considered controversial within a Middle eastern context, and many there view her as an activist whose writing is influenced by Western discourse and who often tends to have her works confirm prevailing prejudices against Arab and Muslim women. Saadawi’s

books that mostly discuss such topics as clitoridectomy and Arab women's sexuality are "too titillating to pass" in the United States and the West, and their language is "not considered 'controversial'" (158). On the other hand, a fine book such as *Refugees in Our Own Land* by Muna Hamzeh who depicts her experience in a Palestinian refugee camp "is ignored by most American reviewers, critics, and scholars despite the fact that her memoir compares, in its existential angst, its fear, its despair and pain, to some of the best narratives in that genre" (158). Consequently, by challenging the Orientalist defamation of Arab women and Islam, Kahf assures in *Emails* the originality of the Arab heroine Scheherazade and the beauty of her tales, as well as transposing her power into a contemporary context.

Another challenge Kahf took in her *Emails* is to defy the Western misconception of the Muslim woman and her *hijab*. As the anti-Muslim backlash emerged immediately after 9/11, the Islamic *hijab* became a target of suspicion and humiliation. In the poem "Hijab Scene #7," Kahf assures that Muslim women's headscarves are not worn to cover up any ugliness, but, on the contrary, they grant women an additional beauty. Thus, the first line of the poem reads, "No, I'm not bold under the scarf" (39). The speaker sounds frustrated and vexed by having to deny a "boldness" presumed by a listener with an anti-Muslim assumption. The opening of Kahf's poem reflects multiple similar stories of humiliation and harassment that occurred to head-scarved girls and women. For instance, the following incident took place at a U.S. public school in 2004:

. . . a high-school teacher in the Jefferson Parish public school system in Louisiana was suspended on religious harassment charges. In January

2004, the teacher allegedly pulled off the headscarf of a Muslim student, Maryam Motar, saying to her, “I hope God punishes you. No, I’m sorry, I hope Allah punishes you.” According to Motar, the teacher also said, “I didn’t know you had hair under there.” The remarks were part of a number of ethnically charged jokes that the teacher reportedly used in his world history classes, this time directed toward Motar. Although the superintendent of the school district recommended that the teacher be fired, the school board decided to temporarily suspend him, transfer him to another school, and require him to attend and pay for sensitivity training. (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 111-12)

This backlash against the *hijab* has significantly increased since 9/11. This includes cases of harassment and discrimination at schools or workplace to which organizations like CAIR have responded seriously in favor of the Muslim woman’s dignity.

Kahf condemns this unfair and illogical perception that stigmatizes the *Muhajjaba* (the head-scarved Muslim woman) simply because she chose to express her faith and personality in the way she deems appropriate and comfortable. In a short essay entitled “Spare Me the Sermon On Muslim Women,” Kahf, herself a *Muhajjaba*, undermines the misconception of *hijab* as a symbol of oppression and articulates her annoyance at her having to confirm that “[b]eing a Muslim woman is a joyful thing” (2). This joy derives from her strong faith and her ceaseless love for scarves: “Yet even all that gorgeous history pales when I open my closet door for the evening’s pick: teal georgette, pink-and-beige plaid, creamy fringed wool or ice-blue organza? God, why would anyone assume I

would want to give up such beauty? I love being a Muslim woman. And I'm always looking for my next great polka-dot scarf" (2).

To some Americans after 9/11, the Muslim woman's *hijab* became not only the antithesis of beauty but also of peace. In fact, the persistent anti-Muslim and anti-Arab media representations of Muslim woman led some to view the *hijab* as a symbol of terror. For example, the female speaker in "Hijab Scene #7" warns the listener about his wrong "assumption" about her Islamic outfit:

What else do you need to know  
relevant to my buying insurance,  
opening a bank account,  
reserving a seat on a flight?

Yes, I speak English

Yes, I carry explosives

They're called words

And if you don't get up

Off your assumptions,

They're going to blow you away. (39)

Hence, the speaker is in fact a head-scarved Scheherazade whose "words" are her only weapon. And with words, Kahf does "blow away" her readers when she remarkably

denounces the daily terrorism charges associated with the *hijab* by connecting her scarves with a sense of “tranquility”: “These [scarves] create a tent of tranquility. The serene spirit sent from God is called by a feminine name, ‘sakinah,’ in the Quran, and I understand why some Muslim women like to wear their prayer clothes for more than prayer, to take that sakinah into the world with them.” (“Spare Me the Sermon On Muslim Women” 1). With this description, Kahf deconstructs the notion that the *hijab* is a symbol of terror. As a modern Arab American Scheherazade, she will continue to narrate her tales and to “carry the explosives” that “are called words.”

### **Challenging the War on Terror**

Immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush Administration announced its “war on terror” that has been mostly directed to the Middle East. Many American critics believe that the war on terror unleashes unyielding American imperialism in the Middle East previously manifested in the United States’ engagement in the first Gulf War. The Arab American writer Philip Metres, for example, critiques the predominant “US vs. Them” political rhetoric of Bush’s war on terror that, in his opinion, only leads to a cycle of violence:

The U.S. administration officials implicitly embraced the new thinking, coining War on Terror as war in which nations would be either with us or against us in the search for Operation Infinite Justice. The War on Terror, then, became the latest brand name for Pure War – both in its furthering of the national security state at home and in its policy of preemptive strikes

on ‘states that sponsor terrorism’ . . . Rather than seeing the attacks as ‘blowback,’ the CIA’s own term for the consequences of U.S. meddling in the affairs of the nations, the national media tended to repeat ad nauseum the Bush administration’s narrative that the September 11 terrorism was the initiating act in a war that would justify the very actions that might lead to further blowbacks. (*Behind the Lines* 220)

For most Arab Americans, the agenda of this war on terror is solely imperialistic and its officially declared justifications flimsy. Edward Said furthers this critique by asserting that the term ‘terrorism’ has been exploited by the United States to satisfy its hegemonic desires. He contends that terrorism is merely “a sort of screen created since the end of the Cold War by policymakers in Washington, as well as a whole group of people like Samuel Huntington and Steven Emerson, who have their meal ticket in that pursuit” (*Culture and Resistance* 89). This constructed “screen” greatly helps “to keep the population afraid, insecure, and to justify what the United States wishes to do globally. Any threat to its interests, whether it’s oil in the Middle East or its geostrategic interests elsewhere, is all labelled terrorism” (89). According to Said and Metres, terrorism has become a devious instrument used by the world’s superpower, the United States, to achieve its imperialistic goals in the Middle East and to perpetuate its hegemony globally.

However, President George W. Bush presented his war on terror to the American public as a quest for justice. In his first comment on the 9/11 tragedy, he considered the catastrophe as an attack on freedom, and he promised to punish the attackers at any cost: “[w]e are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has

turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done” (“Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation” 1). “Justice,” as perceived by the Bush administration, was assigned to “be done” in Afghanistan and Iraq at the hands of U.S. troops. After attacking Afghanistan in 2001 in pursuit of Osama bin Laden, President Bush decided to invade Iraq in pursuit of Saddam Hussein whom he fallaciously accused of possessing weapons of mass destruction and of having ties to Al-Qaeda. Doing so, Bush, some months after his troops invaded Iraq, assured America and the entire world that his adventure in Iraq would be a huge “success.” In a speech to the United Nations, Bush claims: “[m]illions will see that freedom, equality, and material progress are possible at the heart of the Middle East. Leaders in the region will face the clearest evidence that free institutions and open societies are the only path to long-term national success and dignity. And a transformed Middle East would benefit the entire world” (“Statement by His Excellency . . .” 2).

Bush’s imperialist plan was welcomed by many voices in mainstream America. Perhaps one of the most aggressive voices on this Middle Eastern matter was that of Ann Coulter, who once wrote, “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity” (qtd. in Orfalea, *The Arab Americans* 309). On the other hand, the invasion of Iraq was the topic in a countless number of articles, books, and anthologies by American and non-American authors who strongly opposed the invasion of Iraq, among which was Sam Hamill’s anthology *Poets against the War* that stood out for its remarkable blend of powerful voices addressing diverse issues such as war, resistance, humanity, and imperialism.



Arab American writers were definitely on that same anti-war stage. Observing the immeasurable destruction and unspeakable tragedy endured by Iraqis, they voiced their opinion against what they perceived as an unjust and needless war led by their country against their Arab brothers and sisters. Below is a discussion of poems by Naomi Shihab Nye and Suheir Hammad in which the poets oppose President Bush's war on terror, highlight its imperialistic agenda, and stand with those victims who endure daily violence.

*Against the "war drum"*

Suheir Hammad's "What I Will" criticizes the war announced by the Bush administration against Iraq. War, for her, is a synonym for death, so she will not "dance" to that "war drum" as some people are doing:

I will not  
 dance to your war  
 drum. I will  
 not lend my soul nor  
 my bones to your war  
 drum. I will  
 not dance to your  
 beating. I know that beat.

It is lifeless

.....

. . . Life is a right not

collateral or casual. (60)

Not only does this war endanger the lives of countless thousands of humans, but it also targets Hammad's own people: ". . . I know / intimately that skin / you are hitting" (60). Although the sound of the war drum is loud, it is not louder than memory: ". . . I / will not forget where / I come from . . ." (60). In such difficult times when U.S. troops are at war with Arabs, Arab Americans suffer from an inevitable sort of conflict within themselves. Philip Metres contends that every American war "is a civil war, insofar as we are a nation of all nations" ("Remaking/Unmaking . . ." 1600). That said, "dancing" to President Bush's war drum feels to Hammad like approving the killing of her own people.

Hammad denounces the strategy of hate followed by the Bush administration to pave the way for a fierce war in the Middle East. She juxtaposes hate and killing in a way where the former leads to the latter. ". . . I / will not hate for you or / even hate you . . .," she refutes hatred because of its deadly consequences: ". . . I will / not kill for you. Especially / I will not die / for you" (60). President Bush repeatedly referred to the 9/11 attacks as the result of radical Middle Easterners' extreme hatred for the United States. However, his speeches were often characterized by incautious generalizations of "they" as not hostile individuals but as entire peoples who resent American values. In one of his

early speeches after 9/11, President Bush says, “Americans are asking, ‘why do they hate us?’ They hate what we see right here in this chamber – a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (“Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation” 5). One would wonder who Bush meant by “they”! Did he mean Osama bin Laden’s terrorist group of Al-Qaeda? Or did he mean all Arab peoples residing in the Middle East? Bush’s ambiguous, free-floating “they” very likely sent a wrong message about Arabs and Muslims to his mourning, angry American audience in that September of 2001.

For Suheir Hammad, hatred has become a psychological means used by the administration to persuade the public of the need for a new war. Unfortunately, many have welcomed this conception of an Arab hatred for America, including author Thomas Sowell. Sowell attempts to answer Bush’s question in his own way by arguing that the Islamic world is suffering from “lost greatness,” claiming that, for Arabs and Muslims, “[h]ating the success of Americans is a lot easier than trying to recover their own long lost greatness” (2). However, Noam Chomsky, in an interview a year before the invasion of Iraq, recommends the *Wall Street Journal* survey in the Middle to whoever wants the correct answer to Bush’s question, “Why do they hate us?” Right after President Bush raised his infamous question, the *Wall Street Journal* began investigating opinions inside the Middle East. Chomsky admires the seriousness of this investigation and approves its outcome:

It turns out they're very antagonistic to U.S. policy [in the Middle East]. The main policies they're just part of it – like the international economic policies. But what they object to is the fact that the United States has consistently opposed democracy and independent development, and is supporting corrupt, brutal regimes. Naturally, they're strongly opposed to the unilateral U.S. support for the Israeli military occupation, which is very harsh and brutal, and is now in its thirty-fifth year. They strongly oppose the U.S. sanctions against Iraq, which they understand perfectly well and you know, too, are devastating the population but strengthening Saddam Hussein. (*Power and Terror* 84)

Chomsky's point of view implies that it is natural for Arabs to be critical of the very U.S. policies that have long wronged them, but this does not mean in any way that they hate America, its citizens, or its values of freedom and democracy to which they truly aspire. Hammad, too, challenges the exploitation of fabricated hate between America and the Middle East. She calls for resistance, asserting that she will not dance to the drum of hate but “will craft” her own drum of heart and:

. . . dance

and resist and dance and

persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than

death. Your war drum ain't

louder than this breath. (61).

Hammad often connects resistance with breath as she believes the two notions coexist. She once noted in an interview that there are always “pockets of resistance. That is where you find your breath. That is where you find your oxygen and then you go back out into the world with this puffed up chest and you try to exhale light and try to create” (Brown 6).

Hammad’s “oxygen” of resistance never runs out. In “Beyond Words,” she resists the religious justification for wars, juxtaposing the Israeli occupation of Palestine and America’s imperialist adventures in the Middle East. She wonders how and why aggression against her people in Palestine and Iraq have been blessed by “America’s god”:

For 56 years Israel has legitimized

This type of behavior

Sanctioned violence in the name of a god

Who does not have enough love for us all

A god who chooses sides

A god who has favorites and chosen ones

A god who cuts deals and shuffles souls

The types of god who does not answer prayers

Who understands only one language

A god who does not worry his beautiful mind with

Such ugliness

I am told this is America's god. (5)

One cannot overlook the religious rhetoric that preceded the invasion of Iraq and described implicitly or explicitly the mission as a holy one. Coulter's infamous statement, "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity," clearly views Islam as an unacceptable religion and Muslims as people whose salvation is in the hands of Christians. President Bush himself, who often laced his speeches with religion, reportedly proclaimed to a Palestinian delegation during a 2003 Israeli-Palestinian summit in Egypt that it was God who told him to do what he had been doing. The Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz* obtained a Palestinian transcript of the meeting with a version of President Bush's remarks. It was only a few months after he invaded Iraq when, according to Arnon Regular from *Haaretz*, Bush declared: "God told me to strike at al Qaida and I struck them, and then He instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did and now I am determined to solve the problem of the Middle East" (2). It is this politicization of religion that led the Arab American writer Steven Salaita once to conclude that the "real God" hates him for so many reasons:

The real God hates me . . . He hates me because I'm still attached secretly to mom's God. He hates me because I oppose war in Iraq. He hates me because I teach courses in multicultural literatures. He hates me because I imagine China to be a gorgeous country. He hates me because I don't vote Republican. He hates me because I believe theologically that the God of

Islam is the same God of Judaism and Christianity. He hates me because I respect the ACLU. He hates me because I love Palestine. But most of all, He hates me because I'm Arab. (167).

Like other Arab Americans, Hammad and Salaita have endured the powerful religious-based narrative that has governed America particularly after 9/11, causing more hostility against Arab Americans and suppressing the moderate voices that defied the Iraq war as if, as Hammad states, they are told “this is America’s god.” Hammad’s and Salaita’s words strongly resonate with Martin Luther King’s speeches during the Vietnam War in which he criticized the U.S. disastrous engagement with Vietnam and its tendency to pursue power in the name of religion. In a great speech given at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta on April 30, 1967, Dr. King said, as though addressing Hammad and Salaita, “[d]on’t let anybody make you think that God chose America as His divine messianic force to be – a sort of policeman of the whole world,” stressing that “God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment, and it seems that I can hear God saying to America: ‘You are too arrogant! If you don’t change your ways, I will rise up and break the backbone of your power and I will place it in the hands of a nation that doesn’t even know My name’” (18). Himself a Christian, King proclaimed here that God embraces all nations and that He would never assign a nation to lead a war against another under whatever guise. As in the Vietnam War, the religious rhetoric of Bush’s invasion of Iraq was considered alarming by many. Sam Hamill, editor of *Poets against the War*, in an interview found the language of President Bush and that of Osama bin Laden analogously “dangerous”: “Bush the born-again Christian, bin Laden the born-again Muslim, and

they're both convinced that they have God on their side, and they're both willing to kill countless numbers of innocent people to assert their rightness. Very dangerous, very dangerous" (Cusac 2).

Hammad reveals in her poem her state of mind as an Arab American opposing the war in the suppressive climate of mainstream America. She criticizes the inability of some people to have a constructive dialogue about the war. One obstacle to such a dialogue, according to Edward Said, is the tendency for those people to misunderstand others due to an "unacceptable series of equations." For instance, "[t]errorism has become synonymous now with anti-Americanism, which in turn has become synonymous with being critical of the United States, which in turn has become synonymous with being unpatriotic" (*Culture and Resistance* 111). That is why Hammad has difficulty expressing her thoughts to her fellow American citizens:

If I say nothing I am complicit

If I say something I am isolated as extreme

As a theorist in conspiracy

As if war is ever a coincidence

As if genocide simply happens

This is about oil and land and water

This is about illusion and the taking on of airs

The poor once again the munitions in rich men's cannons. (6)



The Good vs. Evil mentalities dominated the rhetoric of the White House, which also had its impact on a portion of the American public. Instead of listening seriously to moderate voices that objected to the destructive mechanism of the war on terror, the Bush administration acted like deaf ears and chose to move on with its imperialist intentions.

***President Bush and His “EYE-RACK”***

In “He Said EYE-RACK,” Naomi Shihab Nye presents an ironic portrayal of the invaded Iraq through President Bush’s words. In this poem, Bush addresses Iraqis, presenting his war plan to them as a task of a “higher purpose”:

Relative to our plans for your country,  
 we will blast your tree, crush your cart,  
 stun your grocery,  
 Amen sisters and brothers,  
 give us your sesame legs,  
 your satchels, your skies.  
 Freedom will feel good  
 for you too. Please acknowledge  
 our higher purpose . . . (21)

Nye and her fellow Arab American intellectuals undermine Bush’s claimed “higher purpose.” Edward Said, in a straightforward statement, unfolds what he believes to be the

U.S. true motives for invading Iraq: “Iraq is potentially the most powerful Arab state. It has oil, it has water. It has educated population. It has a terrible government with a tyrant at the head of it. It has been decimated by sanctions for twelve years. And now the United States wants to go in and perhaps chop it up so that Iraq is no longer a viable Arab entity arrayed against Israel” (*Culture and Resistance* 142). To cover these motives up, the Bush administration has repeatedly coated its rhetoric with the values of freedom, democracy, and civilization it intends to export to Iraq. President George W. Bush states in one of his speeches, “[t]his is not, however, just America’s fight. And what is at stake is not just America’s freedom. This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom” (Bush, 2001). It would definitely sound ironic to the educated audience when realizing that this “civilization fight” is going to take place in Iraq, the cradle of civilization and the birthplace of the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, one of the world’s oldest surviving pieces of literature. Nye shows the blessings of this civilizing mission conducted by Bush and his pro-war lobbies as nothing but “blasting,” “crushing,” and “stunning” that Iraqis suffer on a daily basis.

Furthermore, the pro-war rhetoric vis-a-vis the Middle East demonstrates a type of America’s “imperative patriotism,” as Stephen Salaita calls it. Salaita proposes that “imperative patriotism both informs and is derived from colonial discourse. Politicians frequently speak about the need to occupy Arab countries and ‘civilize’ them by introducing the natives to ‘democracy,’” and they constantly stress “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” (83). Thus, Bush in Nye’s poem expresses his solidarity with the people of Iraq whose leader is America’s uneasy target:

. . . On St. Patrick’s Day

2003, president Bush wore a blue tie. Blinking hard,

he said, “We are not dealing with peaceful men.”

He said, “reckless aggression.”

He said, “the danger is clear.”

Your patio was not visible in his fame.

Your comforter stuffed with wool

from a sheep you knew. He said, “We are

against the lawless men who

rule your country, not you.” (22)

However, Bush’s “imperative patriotism” is challenged by Samina Najmi who describes his depiction of the Iraqi leaders’ aggression in Nye’s poem as “self-reflexive” and “self-incriminating” (164). Najmi also points out that Bush’s wearing a blue tie on St. Patrick Day – instead of a green one – is a “faux pas” that signifies his “cultural insensitivity and obliviousness,” which Nye remarkably couples with Bush’s “careless mispronunciation” of the country he invaded as Eye-Rack (164). Interestingly, Nye creates irony by putting together Bush’s flattering “Eye-Rack” against the real Iraq being destroyed. While Bush

attempts to map for Iraqis their unknown future, their ruined present tells the story of ongoing miseries. Describing Saddam Hussein as a “danger” and as “lawless” would sound ironic to many. This is because, as Noam Chomsky commented on the 2003 war fever, the United States and Britain had welcomed Saddam “as an ally and a trading partner, well after he had committed his worst crimes – the Halabja gassing, the al-Anfal massacres, and other atrocities” (*Interventions* 3). Undermining the Bush justifications for war, Chomsky adds that “[a]t the time, the murderer Saddam, strongly backed by Washington and London, was more dangerous than he is today” (3). Nye, too, challenges almost every word President Bush utters in her poem, which indicates her complete opposition to the war he launched against Iraq and its people.

In another Bush poem entitled “Letters My Prez is Not Sending,” Nye juxtaposes the destruction of Iraq and Palestine with the destruction of U.S. moral credibility. Sarcastically, she imagines letters President Bush would send to Arab victims of his war on terror. The letters reveal Bush’s awareness of the plight all Iraqis suffer; yet, he keeps idealizing his destructive task in Iraq:

Dear Rafik, Sorry about that soccer game

you won’t be attending since you now

have no . . .

Dear Fawziya, You know, I have a mom too

so I can imagine what you . . .

Dear Shadiya, Think about your father

versus democracy, I'll bet you'd pick . . .

No, no, Sami, that's not true

what you said in the rally,

that our country hates you,

we really support your move

toward freedom,

that's why you no longer have

a house or a family or a village . . .

.....

Dear Daddo, I know 5 kids

must feel like a lot to lose in one swoop

but we can't stop our efforts . . . (14, 15)

Despite all this damage Bush inflicts on Iraq, he insists “we can't stop our efforts,” revealing a sense of arrogance and stubbornness. Each stanza portrays a kind of loss suffered by Iraqis (5 kids, family, house, village, leg, father, and mom), and these losses are also indicated by the missing ending in most of these stanzas and indicated by ellipses. While these tragic facts sound horrible to the reader, Bush lists them in his letters with bizarre indifference, promising more of the very same “efforts” that led to those unspeakable tragedies.

These “efforts” made by the Bush administration in Iraq and elsewhere under the guise of fighting terror have distorted the global image of the United States. As proposed by Noam Chomsky, “[i]n Iraq the Bush administration is pursuing an ‘imperial ambition’ that is, rightly, frightening the world and turning the United States into an international pariah” (*Intervention* 19). So, the cycle of violence continues rapidly as Bush insists on pushing on in Iraq, yet sending another arrogant letter to another of his victims: “Dear Sharif, Violence is wrong / unless we are using it, / why doesn’t that make sense . . .” (Nye, “Letters My Prez . . .” 15). Furthermore, this violence extends to other areas in the Middle East, including Palestine where the Israeli occupation is backed up by American weapons:

Dear Ribhia, Sorry about the heart attack,  
  
I know it must have been rough to live  
  
your entire life under brutal occupation,  
  
we’re just sending a few more bombs over now  
  
to notify your oppressors but someday  
  
we hope for peace in the region . . .  
  
Sorry you won’t be there to see it . . . (14)

President Bush repeatedly declared his intention to establish freedom in Iraq and solve the Arab-Israeli conflict through peaceful means, but his statements are always in contrast to his actions. He often stated the goal of his war on terror to be “a transformed Middle East” that “would benefit the entire world” (“Statement by His Excellency . . .”

2). Nye's poem sarcastically portrays Bush's enterprise of "transformed Middle East" through multiple imagined letters he sends to victims of his war on terror around the Middle East. Her description effectively challenges Bush's claims inasmuch as it shows the real Middle East as an increasingly chaotic and severely wounded world.

### **Arab Voices Muted by Mainstream America**

Arab voices are barely heard in U.S. mass media even when Arabs are the direct victims of Israeli or American aggression. The scandalous torture of Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib prison by American soldiers is a striking example of the U.S. media's deliberate tendency to silence the voices of Arab victims by ignoring their side of the story. The Abu Ghraib photos were first released by the U.S. television news-magazine *60 Minutes II* in April 2004, igniting a global firestorm. Those sickening images display American soldiers sexually abusing naked detainees, covering their heads with sand bags and attaching wires to their fingers and toes and genitals, raping male and female prisoners, forcibly arranging prisoners in various sexually positions for photographing, using military working dogs to intimidate them, and holding leashes attached to the necks of naked detainees. Addressing the U.S. media reaction to the Abu Ghraib crisis, Lila Rajiva argues in her book *The Language of Empire: Abu Ghraib and the American Media* that the media coverage of Abu Ghraib abuses reflects "the unveiled face of American Empire": "[t]o accept this truth means derailing the comfortable locutions in which America is the exceptional, undisputed superpower, an essentially righteous nation, and a force of unmitigated good in the world. It means accepting a darker vision of the country as one corrupted initially by its postwar hegemony and now slowly descending into the

same abyss out of which its twentieth-century enemies have crawled” (181-82). Given the fact that many American journalists and commentators deemed what happened in Abu Ghraib as merely an “aberration,” the voices of those tortured, naked Iraqis remained behind the media scene while their horrifying images continued to be dispassionately displayed with those media commentators sometimes reducing them to potential terrorists or their perpetrators to “a few bad apples.”

Philip Metres connects the Abu Ghraib scandal and the administration anti-Iraq propaganda that preceded the invasion. He notes that “given the absurd administration propaganda that conflated the terrorist attacks of 9/11 with Iraq, Americans could fantasize that Abu Ghraib was just punishment for 9/11” (“Remaking/Unmaking . . .” 1597). This is evident in the fact that Lynndie England, the female American soldier who, along with ten other soldiers, was convicted of abusing Iraqi prisoners, has publicly declared that she feels no regret for torturing the Iraqi inmates because she believes that they got what they deserved.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Salaita argues that the abusive acts committed by England and her fellows soldiers in Abu Ghraib were addressed by the U.S. mainstream media through “weak analysis” that merely focused on “conceptualizing the torture as an aberration having nothing to do with enlightened American values” (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 191). Furthermore, Salaita contends that this media strategy reveals an orientation to mute any deeper examination of the very possibility of “a racialist

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<sup>11</sup> In a 2012 interview with *New York Daily News*, England remarked about the Iraqi inmates she and other American soldiers tortured: “They weren’t innocent. They’re trying to kill us, and you want me to apologize to them? It’s like saying sorry to the enemy.”  
<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/lyndie-england-abu-gharib-prisoners-better-deal-article-1.1047505>



dynamic” behind this scandal, of any honest insight into “how the ethnicity of the victims played a critical role in the torture as well as in the American reaction to that torture” (190). Nevertheless, the images of Abu Ghraib remain a disturbing story in the Arab-American relationship and will continue to raise moral and psychological questions about how and why the American soldiers tortured the Iraqi detainees.

*The Voice of the Tortured Arab*

“--u--r--”<sup>12</sup> by Philip Metres, of Lebanese descent, is devoted to the voices of the Iraqi prisoners who narrate their stories of torture and humiliation at Abu Ghraib. Metres notes that he chose the title of the poem in order to evoke the ancient city of Ur, in Babylon (modern-day Iraq) (“Remaking/Unmaking . . .” 1601). He has also applied to this poem the technique of “postmodern collage” to picture torture as an “unmaking” procedure, one that intends to “destroy human subjectivity” (1601). Indeed, this collage remarkably serves the poem visually and linguistically and gives more depth to the narratives of the torture victims. It also conveys the fragmentation of human person at the hands of his fellow humans:

G            was there

*and let them have*

the chair until the chair was broken

*and breathed*

---

<sup>12</sup> Metres published this poem later in a chapbook he entitled *abu ghraib arias*, which won The Arab American Book Award in 2012.

a miracle I lived

new guard that wears glasses

I saw things no one would see

*then your eyes shall be opened*

father and son

his father naked

into the toilet

“go take it and eat it”

*and your eyes shall be*

dogs

G

brought dogs

.....

They

beat

and they cursed

his head

his head

They brought

and they pushed

G beat

and they took

they took

and they beat

and they hand. (1602, 1606)

G, according to Metres, refers to Graner, a U.S. guard at Abu Ghraib who also appears in some ways like God. The lines above show this torturer and his fellow guards dominating the scenes in the prison, for they give commands of torture, they “curse,” “beat,” “brought,” “push,” and “took,” leaving the tortured prisoners no room for any action or voice. This is also evident in the unfinished sentences and the many spaces within the lines. Since Metres added interstitial lines from Genesis (shown in italics), the collage is enhanced by various disturbing images of the earthly “god,” G, as he performs acts of dehumanization and decreation against the Abu Ghraib detainee.

Reading the lines above in the voice of the Iraqi inmate, one would comprehend their intended message that the Abu Ghraib abuses were not just horrific but were also systematic. This is demonstrated by the repetition of words, phrases, and sentences, which indicates that the Abu Ghraib repeated “beating, cursing, pushing” were rituals held on a daily basis. This testimony of the Iraqi detainees stands in opposition to the U.S. government's declaration following the scandal that denied any institutionalized wrongdoing and simply described the images as exceptional acts of “a few bad apples” who do not represent the U.S.A. In his critique of the Abu Ghraib incident, Salaita expresses his shock and disappointment at the fact that “the racism of the abuses was hardly mentioned” by politicians and media personalities (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 190). Drawing upon the disreputable photo of the soldier Lynddie England holding a leash attached to the neck of a naked Iraqi inmate and forcing him to crawl on all fours, Salaita stresses that this image unfolds a “racial relationship” between England and the Iraqi prisoner that results in an “act of dehumanization” (190). He also extends his

argument to point out another type of relationship between the soldier and the prisoner: a colonial relationship. Salaita argues that this image is “symbolic of colonization” and “the perfect metonym for the invasion of Iraq in total, in which the uncivilized brown people were to be subdued for their own good by their enlightened (and benighted) Western liberators” (191, 190). This degrading way in which a White master treats a dark-skinned man invokes Frantz Fanon’s notion of blackness as a consciousness related to, and constructed by, White racism. To Fanon, the lived experience of the black is governed by conceptions imposed upon him:

I move slowly in the world, accustomed now to seek no longer for upheaval. I progress by crawling. And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare. I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 87)

Fanon’s reflections on blackness is strikingly analogous to the details implied in the Abu Ghraib photo. Racism in both the image and the statement leaves no room for humanity. In Metres’s poem, another Iraqi inmate endures the consciousness that has been constructed for him through daily episodes of torture: “. . . we couldn’t see their faces to wear this under- / *his countenance* / *And from thy face shall I be hid* / I was *nothing else*” (1603). It is this “nothingness” that lies at the heart of the Abu Ghraib victim’s experience, a dehumanizing act of the colonized Arab at the hands of the American colonizer.

Soon after the images were released in 2004, many political commentators and media personalities started pointing to Raphael Patai's 1973 book, *The Arab Mind*, as greatly responsible for the Abu Ghraib torture. Although the book unfolds an untenable belief in an Arab monolithic thinking, its impact on some of its readers was huge. In an article for *The New Yorker*, journalist Seymour Hersh was first to draw public attention to Patai's book by revealing that it was “the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior” that US military officials used the most to teach their intelligence agents about Arab culture (4). This military “bible” was precisely criticized in the book *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator's Dark Journey Through Iraq* written by Tony Lagouranis, a U.S. intelligence agent who served as an interrogator in Iraq after its invasion by U.S. troops. Lagouranis tells in his 2007 book how Patai's book, with all of its overwhelmingly racist stereotypes of Arabs, is a must read in the U.S. military and highly recommended for U.S. officers. Lagouranis highlights the impact of *The Arab Mind* on American officers:

Our instructor wasn't relying on a very large body of research to produce these 'facts.' He essentially borrowed everything he said from a single book, *The Arab Mind* . . . The central problem with *The Arab Mind*, and with the lecture we got, was with the way they both set up the Arabs as distant from and alien to the 'Western mind' . . . We reason – they tell stories. We use facts – they use metaphors. . . . There was no attempt to understand Arabs on their own terms. It was strictly us versus them. And so, while the intention of this lecture was to help us appreciate this alien culture and work with it, the effect it had was to reinforce prejudice and

give many soldiers an excuse to give up on ever understanding or improving Iraqi society. *That's just the way they are. Nothing we can do about it.* (18-19)

This negative view of the Arab also exists outside the military and has been explicitly or implicitly proclaimed by many media and political personalities who refused to denounce the abuses. While Patai and U.S. military officials have reduced Arabs to intolerant uncivilized aliens, some political commentators like Tammy Bruce have reduced them to potential terrorists against whom any abusive practices are legitimate: “I believe when it comes to al-Qaeda leadership and operatives, anything goes. I don't care if you put women's underwear on their heads, or frankly, even pull out a few fingernails of those responsible for mass murder, to unmask their continuing plans for the genocide of civilized peoples” (qtd. in Salaita, *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 193). Such an imperious view as Bruce's and her generalized perception of Abu Ghraib inmates as terrorists – even though the vast majority of them were innocent civilians – represents the pervasive anti-Arab sentiment in the U.S., especially during the Bush administration. That said, the Abu Graib scandalous images do not reflect incidental practices given the facts that those abuses were based on and approved by institutionalized ideologies that represent a long-term discourse of anti-Arab racism in America.

One of the most striking images of Abu Ghraib that Metres portrays in his poem is the one that became known as the Hooded Man, also referred to as the icon of George W. Bush's war on terror. Obviously, this image displays an Iraqi inmate enduring abject



(301-02). Moreover, the hood renders the tortured Iraqi not only faceless but also voiceless: “By blindfolding and gagging the victim simultaneously, one makes it clear that the real point is not to extract a true confession or useful information but, on the contrary, to prevent anything but the speech the torturer wants to hear, while reducing the victim to abject helplessness, ultimately 'breaking him down' so that . . . those things of which he cannot speak, thereof he must talk endlessly” (302). Accordingly, the hooded man's lines above reveal his relationship with G as one defined by brutality and abjection. Although the voice of the hooded man was not adequately heard within the Western media and his story faded away shortly after it had begun, his Arab brothers, especially his fellow Iraqis, rose up and spoke out in his support. Honoring him, the Iraqi painter Sallah Edine Sallat painted a wall mural in Baghdad that vividly illustrates this Abu Ghraib narrative. Mitchell describes this painting as follows:

The picture shows the Hooded Man on his box standing next to the Statue of Liberty on her pedestal. But two details disrupt the mirror symmetry of the composition: 1) the hood of the Statue of Liberty is white and has eye-holes, which transforms her from the victim into a masked torturer or executioner, reminiscent of a Ku Klux Klansman; 2) Lady Liberty's hand is reaching up, not to the torch of liberty, but to an electrical switch connected to the wires on the Hooded Man. The accompanying text, “That Free dom for Bosh,” provides the verbal counterpoint to the visual image, activating the metaphoric transfer between the American icon of Liberty



and the Iraqi icon of abjection like the current flowing through a wire.  
(304).

This juxtaposition of the Statue of Liberty and the Hooded Man in Sallat's painting reveals an implicit relationship between the two similar to the one between G and the Iraqi inmate. One is confronted here with political symbolism of a colonizer-colonized connection established in the name of liberating Iraq and its people. Thus, both Metres's poem and Sallat's painting leave their audience with the striking oxymorons that characterized America's mission in Iraq: an oppressive democracy and sadistic liberators.

Besides its political symbol, the torture practices in Metres's poem carry a religious symbol demonstrated in the Christ-like image that dominates the narratives. The factual details of the abuses that occurred in Abu Ghraib, with their stunningly unobstructed Christian imagery, set the tone for the biblical images and language employed by Metres in his poem. So, beside the G (referring to the guard Graner who sometimes has godly characteristics), the poem echoes other Christian images such as that of Jesus, especially during descriptive moments of intense torture. To many, the image of the Hooded Man, for instance, is a salient parody of Jesus' suffering. That said, and in light of the horrific images released of Abu Ghraib, Metres contends that “the evocation of Christian imagery must come as a shock to those who believe that our nation is doing God's will” (“Remaking/Unmaking . . .” 1598). Metres uses lines from Genesis to vividly describe the sufferings of Muslim Iraqi detainees at the hands of American soldiers:

First the man A  
 stripped cursed  
*the fear of you and the dread of you*  
 pushed the first on top of the  
 others  
 A refused G  
*into your hand are they delivered*  
 ordered to stand  
 pour water  
 testicles with gloves  
 hand-  
 cuffed *into your hand*  
 water  
 G pouring water  
 screaming  
 "my heart"  
*And the waters shall flood all*  
*flesh*  
 all this beating

to stitch          the string          the needle  
 the operation succeeded. (1605)

When collectively looking at the Abu Ghraib images, one discovers how the details of the brutal torture of Jesus strongly resonate. This shocking fact was accented in Metres's poem where the Iraqi detainees use visual and auditory images to reveal the trauma and terror of their Christ-like torture experience, perceived by their torturers as the "operation" that "succeeded." Mitchell describes the Abu Ghraib images as "clones" that "now have a life of their own quite antithetical to the intentions of their producers" (303). These images send messages to the entire world, one of which relates to the terrifying "cloning" of Christianity manifested in most cases, especially in the case of the Hooded Man. Mitchell argues that "the central devotional icon of Christianity" has been "cloned in Iraq, as if through some kind of uncanny prescience, the MPs at Abu Ghraib sensed that their mission was to realize America's Crusade against infidels, its Holy War against the Unholy Terrorists with the staging of an Arab man as a Christ-like sacrifice" (304). Accordingly, the same Christian symbolism implied in the Abu Ghraib images is also present in Metres's poem where the tortured Iraqi prisoners present themselves as the victims of a faulty political project, the war on terror, whose underlying religious agenda had punished them collectively for their Arab origin and their religious beliefs.

***Living in Post-9/11 America . . .***

Prior to 9/11, Arab Americans had been marginalized in a way considered by many Arab and non-Arab American critics as "political racism." However, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have furthered their marginalization and deepened their exclusion from

American society. As fittingly put by Moustafa Bayoumi, Arab Americans after 9/11 have truly become a “strange problem” to the U.S. nation, “a foreign-policy issue, an argument on the domestic agenda, a law-enforcement priority, and a point of well-meaning concern” (6, 5). Although public hostility toward Arab Americans is now less than it used to be, they are still subject to multiple governmental security policies that continue to ignore their civil rights and liberties as U.S. citizens, treating them sometimes as threats to the national security of the United States.

It is barely an exaggeration to say that 9/11 is a lifelong nightmare for Arab Americans. On every one of its anniversaries, they are reminded of the collective guilt and punishment imposed on them by government policies and mainstream media. Nevertheless, 9/11 taught Arab Americans not to hide but to speak out and fight back. Arab American poet Suheir Hammad voiced her fears immediately after 9/11 in a poem discussed earlier in this chapter where she explored her shared nationality with the hijackers, requesting God to let the tragic event “be a nightmare” and to not “let it be anyone / who looks like [her] brothers.” A year after that, Hammad wrote a poem in September 2002 on the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks, revealing a lesson she learned from the 9/11 catastrophe:

leave fear behind  
like smoke like all  
that inhibits us all that limits  
us what hates us what  
makes us hate one another not  
see each other in us. (“September 4, 2002” 1)

This is the landscape of Post-9/11 America where Arab Americans have responded to fear and hostility through a determination to move forward. Their poems demonstrate their collective willpower that has aimed at resisting any attempt to silence them, at speaking loud about their ongoing endeavor, as well as about the America to which they aspire.

## CONCLUSION:

**Hope for a Better Future**

*I keep walking away though it has been an eternity*

*And from each drop of blood*

*Springs up sons and daughters, trees*

*A mountain of sorrows, of songs.*

Joy Harjo – “Equinox”

A few months before his death in September 2003, Edward Said gave an inspiring lecture at the University of Washington entitled “Imperial Continuity: Palestine, Iraq, and U.S. Policy,” which he concluded with a powerful statement. Frustrated by the destructive American invasion of Iraq and the ongoing Israeli offensives against Palestinians, Said stressed that it was every American citizen’s responsibility to seriously stand against the government’s imperialist enterprises in the Middle East: “We must no longer turn away from the world we’ve been a part of ever since over two centuries ago. The obligations of citizenship enjoin upon each American the duty not to pretend not to know when cruelty is visited on others in our name and with our support” (youtube video). Said viewed U.S. hegemonic policy in the Middle East as a threat to the nation’s ethical and moral integrity, against which American citizens must not remain silent. Among his audience that day were the parents and sister of Rachel Corrie, a young American activist who was crushed to death in March 2003 by an Israeli caterpillar bulldozer while protecting the home of a Palestinian family in Gaza from Israeli forces. Corrie’s life and death are a concrete example of an American voice that did not “pretend

not to know” but acted upon her knowledge and observations of brutal Israeli practices against Palestinians with America’s blessings. As the United States was preparing to invade Iraq, Corrie rushed to Gaza fearing an expected Israeli massacre of residents of Gaza.

The urge to break silence, called for by Said, reverberates in a letter Corrie sent to her mother before the daughter’s death where she expresses a feeling of disappointment and shock. Witnessing the systematic destruction of Palestinians' homes and lives, Corrie wonders why the world is silent against such crimes: “Honestly, a lot of the time the sheer kindness of the people here, coupled with the overwhelming evidence of the willful destruction of their lives, makes it seem unreal to me. I really can't believe that something like this can happen in the world without a bigger outcry about it. It really hurts me, again, like it has hurt me in the past, to witness how awful we can allow the world to be” (5). Hence, for Arabs and Arab Americans in particular, Rachel Corrie is a great inspiration that continues to live and echo in their lives and writings despite the “awful” world she left behind.

The mission of Arab American poets is not different from Corrie’s. It is the task of unmasking truths to an audience that is either reluctant to believe or not allowed to hear. Three days after Corrie’s death and just one day before America invaded Iraq, Arab American poet Suheir Hammad published a poem, expressing her grief and her shock at how a sincere voice can be indifferently extinguished and forgotten by a cruel imperial power:

Blair, Sharon, Bush, all have

mothers and no matter what they do,

there is

something they love.

White power, oil, the need to be God's

only chosen, whatever, but they love

something, because

their mothers loved them.

.....

On the brink of war, may our power

come from the people Rachel Corrie

was murdered

defending. On the brink of war, may

our hope

come from one another. On the

brink of – wait – this is not a war.

On the brink of whatever new-fangled

imperialist project this is, may

Rachel Corrie



live in our resistance, in our pursuit

of justice, and in the spirit of sisterhood. (“On the Brink of ...” 1)

Hammad’s poem reveals how a defender of the Palestinian cause in America, even if it was an American white like Corrie, could be condemned even after her death by her country’s media, some of which were arguing ““She should not have been there in the / first place,”” others commenting ““Good riddance,”” and some other calling her ““Treasonous bitch”” (3). Corrie and her short quest for justice demonstrate how difficult the task of Arab American poets could be in challenging the anti-Arab sentiment in mainstream America, as well as inviting its audience to a political argument contrary to the one it receives from mass media.

Arab American poets discussed in this dissertation have mapped the mental and emotional geographies of Arab American lives during times of political crises impacting the American-Arab relationship. Their poems delineate Arab Americans’ inevitable individual and collective tension, as well addressing the complexities permeating the interface between their Arab and American affiliations within a troubled political milieu. The Arab American community views U.S. foreign policy and mainstream media, both heavily influenced by the Zionist lobby, as a challenge to its aspirations due to the anti-Arab bias they provoke within American society. For Arabs and Arab Americans, American politics has undermined their perception of America as the ideal land for freedom and opportunity, the land they adore and to which they remain loyal. Hence, this disparity, as Edward Said notes, generates in one’s mind a “schizophrenic picture of the United States”:

[e]very Arab that I know is tremendously interested in the United States. Many of them send their children here for education. Many of them come here for vacations. Some do business here or come for training. They are perfectly aware of what an extraordinary country this is on the one hand. And on the other, there's the other view which is that the U.S. government is a different thing and is quite impervious to the appeals of conscience and decency and international law. (106)

Arab American poets in the post-1967 period have attempted to draw this “schizophrenic” image of the United States responsible for ongoing conflicts between their Arab and American identities. They passionately articulate in their poetry what it means to be part of a nation that supports wars and injustices against their Arab homelands, and what it means to experience the fear of losing their American half.

The U.S.-Arab relationship has long been complicated by America's interventions in the Middle East and its pro-Israel foreign policies. Americans of Arab descent routinely face hostilities, mistrust, hate crimes, and anti-Arab media stereotypes. The 9/11 tragedy has invited the most backlash against Arab Americans, and its aftermath has been marked by a collective public and media perception of Arabs and Arab Americans as ‘enemies’ of the nation. In light of this anti-Arab sentiment, “[d]ifferent studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago, Harvard, and Purdue have each concluded that the more positively one feels about the US, the more likely one is to harbor anti-Arab feelings” (Bayoumi 6). As before 9/11, Arab Americans in post-9/11 America have to

hold their breaths every time a disaster takes place, hoping the act was not carried out by an Arab. Although Arab Americans are diverse in terms of religion and nationality, each member of the community has experienced those endless moments of fear and prayers. This was evident, for instance, when the attacks at Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, and the Boston Marathon took place. The case of the Boston explosion compelled the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) to condemn a mounting backlash in a statement it issued on April 18, 2013:

ADC expresses deep concern regarding a wave of negative statements and threats against Arab and Muslim Americans that followed the terrorist attack. A few hours after the bombs went off, Muslims were trending on Twitter as a result of the high volume of tweets making mention and accusations against the Muslim community in connection with this attack. ADC members are troubled by statements like the ones made by Erik Rush, a Fox News contributor. When asked on Twitter, "Are you already blaming Muslims?" he replied, "Yes, they're evil. Let's kill them all." ADC is also concerned about apparent cases of discrimination and hate crimes that followed the attack, including the case of a Saudi student who sustained injuries from the bombing. Some media outlets, such as the *New York Post*, ran stories with the victim's personal information and pictures while he was still being treated at the hospital. In a separate incident, an airplane was brought back to the gate at Boston's Logan Airport merely because two of the passengers were conversing in Arabic with each

other. Late last night a Bangladeshi man was jumped and beaten for looking Arab (“ADC Statement ...”)

The above details of the aftermath of the Boston explosion echo the 9/11 backlash endured by Arab Americans and suggest that history seems always to repeat itself when it comes to the Arab American experience. Anti-Arab racism is one part of the daily lives of Americans of Arab descent, although it seems to lie beneath the surface. What frequent political crises do is give it the fuel to burst into flames. Consequently, Arab Americans are destined repeatedly to feel the burden of having to start from scratch after each crisis.

When the 9/11 tragedy occurred, many Arab Americans were afraid to admit or reveal their Arab origin. Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye met a father who expressed to her how afraid he was for his daughter to admit her Arab half. Nye, however, quickly responded, “Never deny it. Maybe Arab Americans are as twice as sad as other people” (“Healing the Nation ...” 14). Stressing her point of view, she added: “But we are still proud of everything peaceful and beautiful that endures. Then speak beauty if we can – the beauty of culture, poetry, tradition, memory, daily life. Because men with hard faces do violent things, because fanaticism seizes and shrinks minds, is no reason for the rest of us to abandon our songs. Maybe we need to sing louder” (14). What the father perceived as a threat to his daughter in the aftermath of 9/11 – her Arab descent – was to Nye a shield against the trauma that struck the Arab American community, a “song” of beauty and peace. Arab American poets such as Nye do sing the Arab identity by various means and at all junctures. Arab American poetic expression, however, is not merely Arab but stuffed with their American identity in a way that fosters a constructive

sort of negotiation that defines who they really are. Steven Salaita values what he calls Arab American writers' "Eastward gaze" and argues that "[it] privileges neither the Arab World nor the United States but rather locks them into a dialectic in which both can be defined only in relation to one another" ("Gazing East from the Americas" 141). Therefore, even when it gazes Eastward, Arab American poetry unveils how the categories of 'Arab' and 'American' impinge on each other and redefine each other. The themes it informs are not theoretical but reflect personal and communal insights into the multiple forces impacting Arab American experience. Arab American poets address such issues as the U.S. policy in the Middle East, political and cultural labeling and indictment of Arab Americans, and anti-Arab stereotypes, but their poetic constitution is based on the strategy of weaving together their Arab and American identities, simultaneously presenting in the same basket their critique of the status quo situation or crisis.

Like Nye, Arab American poet Mohja Kahf believes in the beauty and value of songs during times of political calamities. Despite all the frustration and anxieties resulted from 9/11 and its aftermath, she wrote in the same year the remarkable poem "We Will Continue Like Twin Towers" in which she invokes the popular image of the man and woman who leapt together from the burning towers of the World Trade Center on that sad Tuesday. She compares their dramatic bravery when facing their shared destiny with that of Arab Americans and their fellow American citizens, calling all citizens of America to unite the same way:

I will continue to invite your children  
to play with my children.

Will you continue to want your children  
to come and go with mine?

We will continue to walk the earth  
carrying our small supplies of grace

We will continue to fly even now  
that we have been so harshly reminded

of what we can never forget again:

That our lives have always been as fragile,  
as dependent on each other, and as beautiful  
as the flight of the woman and the man,  
twin towers in my sight,

who jumped into the last air hand in hand. (83)

Kahf's poem exemplifies the core ingredients of Arab American poetry discussed in the previous chapters: trauma, resistance, and hope. She borrows one of the most horribly indelible pictures of the 9/11 catastrophe and creates out of it a song of struggle and hope for a better tomorrow. Kahf and her fellow Arab American poets understand their responsibility to help their community and nation overcome obstacles. Challenges make

them more resolute to redefine themselves and to fight back “hand in hand” with their fellow Americans, hoping the future is holding better and less stressful lives for them and their children.

As they try to look optimistically to the future, Arab Americans observe these present times with deep concerns. The Middle East is engulfed in multiple catastrophes with Iraq left in tremendous chaos after the invasion, violence and political explosion prevailing in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya due to the so-called Arab Spring, and continuous violence and unrest affecting other places such as Palestine and Lebanon. At the same time, they disapprove of the United States’ ongoing intervention in many of these countries as they believe it only aggravates the political situation in the already troubled region. Amidst this dilemma, Arab Americans try first to find their place, examine the whole circumstances surrounding them, and then speak out from there. As finely put by Amin Maalouf, “. . . who does the world belong to? Not to any particular race or any particular country. More than at any other time in history it belongs to all those who want to make a place for themselves in it. It belongs to all those who endeavor to understand the new rules of the game, however bewildering they may be, and try to use them to their own advantage” (124-25). Arab Americans understand the “rules of the game,” but they also realize the complexity of the Arab American experience and the many challenges it involves. The Arab American community is now far more unified than it was four decades ago, its lobby is to some extent growing stronger, and its organizations like the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Arab American Institute are more organized and more engaged in the cultural and political life

of the U.S. Yet, despite the progress they have made so far, Arab Americans still believe that as long as the tense relationship between the United States and the Arab World continues to spiral up because of U.S. foreign policies, their mission could only be daunting.

On the literary level, the task is not easy, either, for Arab American poets. Nevertheless, it is somehow promising with more American authors writing about the Arab turmoil and gaining more awareness of its causes and effects. This is evident, for instance, in *And Not Surrender: American Poets on Lebanon*, which was published in 1982 in response to the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon that took place that same year. This collection included poems by writers such as June Jordan, Kathy Engel, Pablo Medina, Sara Miles, Dennis Lee, Barbara Berman, James Scully, Gabrielle S. Edgcomb, and Chris Llewellyn. In 2007, the book was expanded into an anthology entitled *We Begin Here: Poems for Palestine and Lebanon* following the Israeli assault on Lebanon in 2006. The expanded version contains poems on Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq by a notably longer list of American literary voices, including Adrienne Rich, Dennis Brutus, Gale Jackson, Amiri Baraka, Joy Harjo, Andy Young, Grace Cavalieri, Susan Sherman, Alexis De Veaux, Sarah Browning, Wade Fletcher, Jack Hirschman, and Robert Bagg. The anthology preface was written by Kathy Engel, an American poet and activist, who highlights the poet's conscience in times of wars: "As the bombs shatter vision – voices blurred, ears blocked, homes exploded, history erased – we ask ourselves what we can do" (xiv). Words, for Engel, could be louder than wars, especially when they tell stories of solidarity: "We hold one another through our words. We are writers. Our vocation is to



gather the stories in languages we must keep alive, hoping they can, in some sense, save lives” (xiv). Although Arab American poets were able to make literary allies as they continue their struggle, their poetry still needs to reach a larger audience, and Arab American literature in general is still striving to get the attention it deserves as a significant part of the ethnic landscape of literary America.

Life for Arab Americans in post-1967 America has always been full of challenges that intensify during times of political chaos. Their poetry is a unique narrative of their pain and defiance, a literary record of ongoing anxieties and persistent hope. Arab American poets realize that “the prevailing condition of Arab Americans is complicated and complex,” but they are aware that it is also “a starting point from which Arab American literature, and identity, can be liberated from any encompassing narratives” (Charara xxx). The poetic response of Arab Americans to this “prevailing condition” is a “liberating” process throughout which they interrogate and release the tension between America’s foreign policy and its resulted injustices in the Middle East, between violence ‘over there’ and belonging ‘over here.’ Following the lead of Edward Said before them, Arab American poets seek to enlighten their audience through stories on the Middle East and its plights, urging readers to speak out as American citizens and “not to pretend not to know.” What is needed when injustices occur, according to poet Lisa Suheir Majaj, is a simple “no,” a two-letter word that could be the first step to a real change, to a fair and dignified life for all:

No can’t stop an avalanche.

But No could be a retaining wall . . .

No is steadfast. It knows what it's like

to have nothing in its hands but dignity. ("No" 111)

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