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12/11/08

The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Anthropology

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An abstract of

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Anthropology

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## Abstract

### The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York By Maysoun Freij

This dissertation is an ethnography of Arab American artists and arts organizers working in New York from 2003-2006. During this time period, a vibrant art scene emerged in New York aimed at increasing the exposure of Arab American artists to the general arts and entertainment industries of New York. This scene drew a wide array of Arab American filmmakers, comedians, actors, musicians, playwrights, poets, and visual artists into a network of producers and consumers of creative products aimed at their respective commercial markets, but infused with ethnically identifiable content. Though geographically dispersed throughout metropolitan New York, this community thrived off Internet list serves and events in venues throughout Manhattan. Fieldwork involved participation in the production of artistic events, analysis of performances and exhibits, and interviews with artists and arts organizers of Arab descent over a forty-two month period. It examined both the construction of an aesthetic economy based on the shared ethnic heritage of its producers and audiences as well as the participation of Arab American artists within the general aesthetic economy of New York City.

Though the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may have helped generate public interest in Arab American artists, the most active members of the arts scene during the fieldwork period were second generation Arab Americans in their twenties and thirties who had been working at their careers in the arts for nearly ten years. They came of age with the expansion of the aesthetic economy during the reign of the United States as the hegemonic force within their ancestral homelands.

This study reveals the ways that politics and ethnic identities feed the aesthetic production of this generation, and how worlds of aesthetic production become proxies for involvement in direct political activity. It also demonstrates the way that building a visible ethnic economy is central to the entrance of its participants in the mainstream economy, and how both are sustained by Orientalist fantasies and its most visible contemporary manifestation: the “war on terror.”

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## 1. Introduction

Last night, the Improv Comedy Club was mobbed for the Arab American Comedy Festival. Not an angry mob, but very eager and happy one. They waited in line outside the club for me to open the doors so they could be seated. Most reserved tickets on-line, so two other volunteers and I went through the line asking people's names, checking them against the ticket roster, and giving them a ticket stub. There were dozens of people that I knew, and hundreds that I didn't. Their names all had a familiar ring and I wondered what Smartix must think about all the variations of Arab names collected for this evening's show. At one point running around trying to see if we could open the house, I got trapped in a corner while Maysoun Zayid made her entrance, surrounded by a PBS camera crew. She looked stunning, appropriately multi-tasking on her phone and with festival staff as she walked past the cameras. When we finally opened the house doors and the line started to move, someone asked me if I could introduce him to the comedians because he was doing a paper on Arab Americans for his master's thesis; I tried not to get territorial. When everyone was in, I took some time to breathe and chat with the volunteers. Then, I snuck in to watch the set. I had to wait for my eyes to adjust to the dark space lit only by the stage lights in order to find a seat. It was unreal... not more than ten minutes into the show, and people were nearly falling out of their chairs laughing. Once I found a spot in the back, I watched the performers and the crowd, and kept one eye on that PBS camera in the corner, knowing one day it was going to transmit all of this to living rooms across America.<sup>1</sup>

[From field notes, November 2005]

For over half a century, questions of identity, community, and political engagement have become inextricably linked to the commodification of cultural and aesthetic products in a commercial market. While robust theoretical analysis has developed in relationship to both the center and periphery of the modern capitalist economy, little attention has been paid to how immigrant groups that paradoxically occupy both positions engage in it. This study reveals the interrelationship of mainstream and ethnic economies through the lenses of Orientalist fantasy, the War on Terror, and commodification of cultural and aesthetic products. I found politics and

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<sup>1</sup> *Stand Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age* premiered as part of the Public Broadcasting Station's series *America at a Crossroads* on May 11, 2008.

ethnic identity feed aesthetic production, and the realm of aesthetic production to be a proxy for politics. While the celebration of difference and diversity is considered a hallmark of the postmodern aesthetic of multinational capitalism, this study gives attention to the ways that ‘difference’ enters the mainstream marketplace, the creation of multiple markets in ‘difference’, and the ways that immigrant communities contend with hegemonic cultural forms and notions of themselves when marketing difference. This dissertation looks at Arab American cultural production as not only a form of resistance to hegemonic Orientalist stereotypes, but also as a vehicle for participation in the aesthetic economy and the opportunities for identity construction and political expression through the commodification of cultural difference.

In addition, this study reveals how the ethnic identity of largely second generation immigrants can be understood within the cultural context of their generation as a whole, and how their interests and ambitions contribute to economies at large rather than enclave ethnic economies. Although international migration creates diasporic communities that are heterogeneous in terms of their aesthetic and intellectual affinities and preferences, as collective “minority” populations, they must contend with the homogenizing gaze of the dominant culture, whether individuals ultimately differ in intent toward assimilation or resistance to the dominant culture. In this way, they are often bound together to supplant stereotypical notions of themselves through conventionalized mediums acceptable and palatable to the mainstream marketplace of cultural products.

This examination of the lives and art worlds of Arab American artists and arts organizers in New York between 2003 and 2006 ranges from their macro efforts at integration in the New York cultural landscape to the micro ways that their efforts at

intervention in American narratives of themselves are gender bound. Like other subaltern communities, most Arab Americans are relatively removed from the centers of power within Western society. Yet engaging with dominant Orientalist stereotypes, even in the process of resisting those stereotypes, proves to be a powerful way of playing upon contemporary politics of difference for career advancement, and speaks to the challenges of constructing difference without risking cooptation and normalization of political interests in the depoliticized aesthetic economy.

#### Theoretical Framework:

The following theoretical framework provides an interpretation of the lives and art of Arab American artists in New York during a three and a half year period of fieldwork in the early part of the second millennium. It draws on insights from scholars across several disciplines, and whose work contributes to interdisciplinary intellectual traditions in their own right. Several of these scholars worked contemporaneously and even competitively. While much of this theoretical insight has been applied to subaltern groups throughout the globe, little has been used to critically assess the cultural production of, and by, Arab Americans today. This is largely because, like much of the cultural production by Arab Americans, scholarship on this group tends to originate in defense of a population burdened by negative associations and stereotyping. Therefore placing them in the larger context of, say, the U.S. economy, risks losing the specificity of how and why Arabs are discriminated against in the West, and how the discrimination of this population bolsters oppressive American political and economic rhetoric. This study acknowledges the marginality of Arabs in the United States, but explores the ways

they engage in economic and social processes through the construction of identities and communities common to modern life in the West in the first decade of the twenty first century.

A critical component of this study is the expansion of the aesthetic economy in the last half of the twentieth century as theorized by David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, among others. Both sought out materialist explanations for the proliferation of what was termed “postmodern” culture and ideology in a way that directly linked cultural production to “late capitalism” or capitalism as it is practiced in the contemporary world. The “aesthetic economy” can be defined as:

One in which aesthetics is a key component in the production of particular goods and services within a particular industry, organization, or firm, and one in which aesthetics are central to the economic calculations of that setting. In other words, in aesthetic economies, aesthetics are not something ‘added on’ as a decorative feature or afterthought once a product has been defined; they are the product/s, and as such, are at the centre of the economic calculations of the practice (Entwistle 2002: 321).

Aesthetics are of central importance in such fields as art, advertising, fashion, retail, graphics, architecture, web and interior design as well as in the mass marketed “culture industry” of entertainment, television and film. To some extent, the “aesthetic economy” has eclipsed the culture industry the modernist twentieth century. Not only have the quantity of aesthetic forms and their share of the global economy increased over time, but their quality has changed as well, with ethnic and minority cultural differences having greater purchase in the mainstream economy than previously.

David Harvey (1990) traces shifting aesthetic qualities in the transition of capitalism from Fordism to flexible accumulation. Named after Henry Ford for his 1914

invention of the assembly line and its standardized workday and pay, Fordism relied on mass industrial production that yielded personal incomes for standardized consumption of commodities. Corporate power was thought to yield a “rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society” (126) that created a stable economic base in the United States from 1945 – 1973. The United States and New York in particular, was at the top of a hierarchy in terms of coordinating the financing of production throughout the (non-communist) industrialized world during this time period. Consumer culture was thought to be “bland,” and yet dominating in character, supplanting local and minority cultures with “high modernist” “white” tastes in the U.S. and beyond.

Harvey argues that the recession of 1973 forced a shift from the Fordist economic model to one he terms “flexible accumulation,” allowing discontent from suppressed minorities and critics in the U.S. and beyond to come to a fore in aesthetic and cultural terms. While not wanting to claim a decisive break with Fordism, Harvey identifies several features of the new economic order that break the idea of production as a rigid process producing homogenized products (and people). This new system depends on “flexibility” in the labor market, like greater reliance on temporary and part time workers without benefits who have multiple specialties that can be called upon as needed. It also established new areas for production and financing with respect to labor processes, markets, and patterns of consumption. Innovation commercially, technologically, and organizationally is speculatively driven with credit and financing. Consumption is still as critical to the economic model as it was under Fordism; however the products had changed. Harvey writes:

Flexible accumulation has been accompanied on the consumption side, therefore, by a much greater attention to quick – changing fashions and the

mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation that this implies. That relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodern aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms. (1990: 56).

Harvey notes the expansion of the service industry: retail, distribution, transportation, personal services, finance, insurance, real estate, health and education. Furthermore, flexible accumulation requires a higher turnover of products; products made during the Fordist period lasted five to seven years, while today, products rarely last half of that. This also increased the value of “events” over “products,” for Harvey notes that “events” have “an almost instantaneous turnover time” (1990: 157).

Harvey has elaborated on the development of theories on postmodernism in economic as well as aesthetic terms. He expands upon Ihab Hassan’s (1975, 1985) categorical distinctions between postmodernism and modernism, and accepts Fredric Jameson’s (1984, 1991) position that postmodernism is the cultural expression of late capitalism. Jameson draws on Ernest Mandel’s (1975) distinction of “late capitalism” to be the “third” potent phase of capitalism that emerged since the 1960s in which “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods (from clothes to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (1991: 4-5). While the mass commodification of culture caused anxiety among Modernists from Adorno to Benjamin, it is assumed that such commodification is a standard part of contemporary life. The political economic context of today’s media saturated world provides the base for understanding the interplay of several aesthetic forms and

ideologies among Arab Americans today, and partially explains why the top “problem” identified in a study of Arab American philanthropy is believed to be one of “image” (Checkoway et al 2005).

Before describing how the theories and even aesthetics of the culture of “postmodernism” are highly contested, I believe that there are key insights that fall under this term that are worth preserving when analyzing certain cultural forms at play within the Arab American arts scene. From Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979), the “postmodern” is associated with the end or erosion of master narratives, particularly those that obscured power structures and oppressions among societies. Jameson, who does not relinquish a Marxist grand narrative of history, associates postmodernism with the loss of consciousness of history, a “depthlessness” or flat superficiality that appears as the “waning of affect.” “Schizophrenia” and its fragmented qualities, he argues, take the place of a modernist unifying paranoia, and pastiche<sup>2</sup>, or the copying or appropriation of forms and styles, replaces the satirical impulse of parody. Finally, the distinctions between “high art” and “popular culture” are blurred, with hybrid forms of the two produced and consumed on a commercial market, and mass popular culture being heralded as high art. Jameson elaborates on each of these cases of what he considers symptoms of late, “multinational” (not “postindustrial”) capitalism.

Over time, postmodernism has been reincorporated theoretically into theories of modernism, and scholars no longer seem to remark on its distinctiveness as an ideological or aesthetic category (Knauft 2002). Instead, scholars seek to explain the current state of the aesthetic economy in the United States in different terms. In *Neo Bohemianism: Art and Commerce in the Post Industrial City*, Richard Lloyd (2006) describes the

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<sup>2</sup> “Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” Jameson (1991: 17)

transformation in the use of space and labor relations from the time of Ford till today through the lens of the history and inhabitants of a particular neighborhood in Chicago called Wicker Park. Once home to small scale industrial production, it is now a hip district that thrives off the service economies of restaurants, clubs, galleries, and other accessories to “alternative” lifestyles. He writes, “ironically, former sweatshops are now being put to use in the manufacture of images for an aesthetic economy” (2006:46).

His ethnographic account of “grit as glamour” and “living like an artist” reveals the tensions between popular conceptions of being an “artist” living the “bohemian life” and the physical and social demands of the aesthetic economy. He finds that the returns of on the “bohemian life” rarely match its myth of freedom and prosperity. Arguing against accounts of the aesthetic economy by Florida (2002), Bell (1976), and Brooks (2001) that claim a fruitful and somewhat easy reconciliation between the creative class and bourgeois production and consumption patterns, Lloyd admits the ways that artists aid and abet the growth aesthetic economy even if they are ideologically opposed to it. Today’s bohemianism draws upon its predecessors from late 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Greenwich Village associating artists with anti-market and anti-bourgeois sentiments and social deviance through “licentious sexual activity, a casual attitude toward conventional manners and hygiene, and a propensity to nurture extravagant moods with drugs and alcohol” (2006: 49). Although many of these characteristics of the “eccentric artist” migrated to the mainstream in the 1960s, artists today still distinguish themselves from young urban professionals, or yuppies. Lloyd writes:

In the ideological formulation of neo-bohemia, the yuppie is the imago of the mainstream, playing the role once held by the bourgeois shopkeeper in nineteenth-century Paris or the “organization man” of the Fordist in the United States. The collective construction of the yuppie, characterized by



excessive simplifications, is crucial to the formation of sub cultural distinction among artists and their friends in Wicker Park (2006:119).

The irony of today's "neo-bohemia" is that increasingly, there is no "organization man," and artists often make a living in mainstream sectors such as advertising and the restaurant/ bar industries that leave them little time and energy to actually make art. Yuppies in turn are big consumers of the aesthetic economy, enabling many to lead the illusion that they are artists while working in service industries. Mainstream sectors demand flexibility and creativity, as well as high tolerance for uncertainty and risk, values cultivated by artists that are useful in today's "flexible accumulation" based economy. Citing artists who resist mainstream employment because they fear "corporate culture" and loss of freedom, Lloyd writes:

But the corporate culture to which he refers is derived less from current reality than from the inherited image of the "organization man" that still animates bohemian ideology despite its increasing inadequacy. Rejecting such labor in the 2000s is a gesture very different from what it was in the 1950s, since to a large extent it doesn't exist anymore. In this broader context, the bohemian disposition that makes "living on the edge" a supreme virtue is in fact quite adaptive to labor realities (2006: 241).

Lloyd's convincing argument for the "elective affinity" between bohemian ideology and new capitalist enterprises for the most part leaves aside questions of aesthetics and the multiple identities of the artists he studied in Wicker Park. Participants in the ethnographic portion of his study are largely white males, and he notes the difficulties women and ethnic minorities have negotiating space within this realm, but each in different ways. Women suffer from lack of recognition within the community and larger aesthetic economy. Individuals belonging to ethnic minorities enjoy the neighborhood and the artistic life because it frees them from cultural and social expectations that Lloyd suggests they would otherwise feel obliged to accept. In the case of a young Latino

bartender and poet, he was able to avoid a life of crime, drugs, and prison; in the case of a young woman of Eastern European descent, the coffee shops of Wicker Park allowed her to escape early marriage and overall parochialism and pursue higher education; and in the case of a couple of African American designers, Lloyd suggests that their hip-hop style and minority status led Nike to hire them to produce global recruitment ads. These cases suggest that ethnic identities become subsumed by the overall logic of the Western aesthetic economy to the point of near meaninglessness.

Lloyd's blind spot about how ethnicity and cultural identity intersects with Western cultural production is not without precedent. While Fredric Jameson acknowledges the human cost<sup>3</sup> of "postmodern culture" led by United States, he is frequently regarded as Eurocentric and reductionistic in his assessment of non-Western modern culture. Most egregious was his claim that the United States is somehow past nationalism, but nationalism constitutes the premise of all Third World literature (which he generally also regards as inferior to the "cannon" in the West)<sup>4</sup>. Scholars take issue with the fact that Jameson's "first world" postmodernism is constituted paradoxically in contrast to the "third world," which has allegedly yet to achieve this stage of cultural expression (Colas 1992). Aijaz Ahmad (1987) laments Jameson's "three world" typology, noting the heterogeneity of capitalism, the existence of alternatives to the "nationalism/ postmodernism" dichotomy (i.e. Iran), and the appreciation for postmodernism among so called third world bourgeois nationalists: "they *want* it"

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<sup>3</sup> "... I must remind the reader of the obvious: namely, that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror." (Jameson 1991: 5)

<sup>4</sup> Jameson's "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) was written during the time of debates around "multiculturalism," and although he favored the reading of "world literature" his critique of it set off criticism by a growing body of scholars of "postcolonial" theory.

(1987:8). Ahmad also notes the proliferation of the translation industry, unwittingly pointing to the commodification of post-colonial culture in much the same way Jameson pointed to “postmodern” culture.

In order to understand the marketing of the “postcolonial exotic”<sup>5</sup> within the aesthetic economy, the salience of *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said in efforts to deconstruct hegemonic notions of Arabs and Muslims in the West, as well as the personal relevance of Edward Said himself to my study population, must be addressed. Said was not just a pioneering social theorist in the United States, he was a Palestinian who engaged in political activism that had a practical quality rarely found in his scholarly texts. He was a figure on American campuses during the time many of my participants were in college, protesting the American incursions in Iraq during the first Gulf War, the occupation of Palestine, and that state of the Middle East more generally. He is widely cited as a role model by Arab American artists; and he surely encouraged many to go into academia and try to become well rounded individuals who did not see the need for exclusionary specialization in domains such as “humanities” or “politics”.

Said can be credited with introducing a critic of derogatory stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims and the systems of power premised on the construction of knowledge about the “other” into mainstream academic circles. *Orientalism* is a foundational text in post-colonial studies. Although this field was often at odds with Marxist theorists of postmodernism, such as Jameson and Harvey, as well as other critical scholars of Orientalism such as Aijaz Ahmad, it gave weight to the importance of recognizing bias in the Western academy and the historical impact of such prejudices. Many Arab

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<sup>5</sup> Huggan (2001)

American artists and arts organizers continue Said's path of challenging dominant Western conceptions of the "other".

I find Antonio Gramsci's writings on hegemony to be useful in understanding how popular culture relates to power, and how Arab American negotiations with Western Orientalist culture are a part of the process of hegemony. The process of obtaining a "moment of hegemony" (Gramsci 1988: 194), or "cultural, moral, and ideological leadership over allied and subordinate groups and over marginalized cultures and ideologies" (Naficy 1993:33) considers popular culture to be a critical arena in the struggle for power. Gramsci posits that popular culture is as critical as political and economic activities in the achieving the "moment of hegemony." Hegemony requires consent from its subjects in order for it to continue, and is not achieved by direct domination of the state. It is theorized as "shifting and provisional" power that can be "won or lost" (Sparks 1996:90). *Orientalism* (1978), and its successors, such as the works of art that I studied, can be seen as a challenge to the hegemonic order of knowledge and power about the Orient in the West.

Said defines Orientalism as 1) a Western academic discipline about the Orient; 2) "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (1978: 2); and 3) a set of institutions that deal with the Orient, namely colonial institutions. He argues that the discursive construction of Orientalism provided the West the knowledge and power to dominate the Orient from the eighteenth century to the present. His argument draws upon the work of Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault, and much like the work of new historicists in literary studies (Brannigan 1998), presents a historically situated

account of how both literary and non-literary texts were used to construct and maintain power relationships between different sets of people. Unlike most new historicists, his interpretation of those texts involved an understanding and awareness of the relationships between peoples of different ethnic groups that spanned continents.

Said argues that Orientalism involved a construction of knowledge about the East which does not rely upon empirical evidence of the East, but on imagined, loosely real, or highly biased ideas that form a coherent whole to Europeans and maintain their notion of superiority and power over the people of the Orient. Power is demonstrated by the Western ability to construct this knowledge base without empirical evidence or the consent of the people themselves. In making inaccurate and incomplete observations and documentations of the Orient, Western culture is also able to define itself in opposition to the East. Any knowledge about Eastern languages or cultures is to be interpreted within the framework of Western superiority and is learned to be used against the peoples and territories of the East. Finally, Said acknowledges that the “electronic, postmodern world” has only strengthened the saliency of the stereotypical Orient: “Television, the films, and all the media’s resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So as far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of the ‘mysterious Orient’” (1978: 26). The findings of this dissertation attest to this statement, and how it even affects Arab American views of themselves. In addition to Orientalist legacies, Arab Americans operate in a context in New York today that is shaped by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the War on Terror, and the on-going wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Arabs in the United States are especially called upon to prove their positive exceptionalism in a context in which immigrants are increasingly blamed for misfortunes in the U.S. ranging from unemployment to national security. Working as an immigrant rights advocate throughout my fieldwork period, I found that the refrain “we are not terrorists” rings true to the general undertone of the immigrant rights movement in post 9/11 America.

*Orientalism* has inspired a great deal of subsequent scholarship that examines the role of the colonial encounter on both Western and non-Western populations, the productive cultural space between representations of the self and the other, and the dilemmas of representing “other” peoples and cultures. Mani and Frankenberg (1985) summarize the major reactions to *Orientalism* including whether or not all cultures produce essentializing and/ or hostile stereotypes of one another. The authors note, “despite many reviewers’ preoccupation with the implications of the tendency of all cultures to create self/ other dichotomies, no reviewer questions the basis of Said’s claim that this is indeed the case” (1985: 179-180). This claim is the primary basis of post-colonial theory.

Said hoped to continue to build upon the implications of *Orientalism*, and does so in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). In this work, Said expands his geographical scope to include material from throughout the Third World, including Africa, Latin America, and East Asia, and focuses historically on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In his examination of British and American imperialism of this period, he looks at the experience of Western discourse about “the other” as a more reflexive process. Not only is the colonial officer or the academic constructing their sense of themselves in

relationship to another, but literature of the period is thought to extend the colonial encounter and its subject forming implications to Western populations as well.

Furthermore, Said adds to this sense of reflexivity by including accounts of anti-colonial cultural resistance. Unlike *Orientalism*, colonial subjects are not only misrepresented by Westerners, but also act to define themselves in opposition or in relation to the West.

Culture in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) is defined in “high modernist” terms.

Said understands culture to be 1) “all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure;” (1993: xii) and 2) “a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought...In the second sense culture is a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another” (1993: xiii). In this definition, cultural forms, like novels, are not above the exploits of imperialism, and the knowledge of the involvement of novelists in colonial endeavors should enhance, not inhibit, understanding of the work. Again, Said insists that cultural forms like the novel should not only be understood based upon its formal characteristics, but also within the historical contexts in which they were produced. This study refers to cultural production within this model of “culture,” because I believe this is the form of “culture” that the artists and arts organizers under investigation are concerned. This is not meant to disregard more anthropological or holistic interpretations that view economic, social and political realms as inclusive of the concept of culture, but rather views the ways that the “cultural products” of artists and arts organizers operate within economic, social, and political realms.

Said is making a strong case for connecting language, literature, and national identity. For authors from Western imperialist countries, the imagined world of fiction drew upon the actual realities of military, political, and economic domination of foreign lands and the sense of cultural superiority that was derived from witnessing or participating in their subjugation. For local resistance writers, literature required the ability to imagine an alternative to their subjugated positions in real life. Said identifies several themes of resistance culture that hinge upon the power of the imagination, including a reclaiming of a past, the realization of subjugation, and the construction of alternative national cultures:

Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination (1993: 225).

Expressions of the imagination are understood to be the domain of culture.

Culture, as argued by cultural materialists, can have material effects and change sociopolitical reality (Brannigan 1998). Although culture is understood to be expressed through language, Said takes issue with Benedict Anderson's work *Imagined Communities* (1991) and its reduction of nationalism to the promotion of distinct national languages through "print-capitalism." He argues instead "the concept of national language is central, but without the practice of national cultures – from slogans to pamphlets and newspapers, from folktales and heroes to epic poetry, novels and drama – the language is inert" (1993: 215). Therefore, when writers in colonial and post-colonial settings write in their own languages, not the language of the colonizer, the meaning is



derived not so much from the language itself as from the content of the stories. Similarly, if writers from a colonial or post-colonial setting choose to write in the colonial language, it does not mean that they have succumbed to cultural imperialism. Rather, Said's work emphasizes the need to interpret cultural forms, like literature, within the historical context that recognizes the culturally productive space in the relationships between cultures. This is important to note when looking at Arab American cultural production largely produced in English for a mainstream American audience.

One spin-off of post-colonial studies was resistance studies. Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) is concerned with the popularity of the concept of resistance among scholarly accounts of post-colonial cultural production. She writes, "Unlike the grand studies of peasant insurgency and revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s... what one finds now is a concern with unlikely forms of resistance, subversions rather than large-scale collective insurrections" (1990: 41). She is critical of the "tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (1990: 42). In doing so, scholars lose the importance of differences in forms of resistance. Instead, she argues that scholars should treat the study of resistance as a methodological strategy for the study of power. She uses the example of her fieldwork to demonstrate the complications of blanket interpretations of resistance. When young Bedouin women desire Egyptian weddings and Western consumer products, they are not only resisting conventional non-companionate marriage arrangements and modesty norms, but they are also buying into a whole new set of power relations that tie Egypt to late capitalist economic structures and new forms of Western cultural imperialism. In this sense, they

have swapped one set of power relations for another that may not be any better. Her concern with the dominance of studies of resistance in post-colonial societies may also be read as a call to enrich the range of approaches to the interpretation of local cultural forms. Therefore, to repeat an earlier summary of my work, this dissertation is an attempt to look at Arab American cultural production as not only a form of resistance to hegemonic Orientalist stereotypes, but also as a vehicle for participation in the aesthetic economy and the opportunities for identity construction and political expression through the commodification of cultural difference.

Post-colonial theory has not only made a strong contribution to contemporary academic life and social thought, but Graham Huggan (2001) also describes the development of a market for the “post-colonial exotic” in the West. Much like Jameson’s association of late capitalism with postmodernism, Huggan describes the ways that postcolonialism operates in the age of global commodity culture. His work is not meant as a reactionary critique, as Huggan believes that postcolonialism has “provided a catalyst for some of the most exciting intellectual work to be seen today” (2001:1). Rather, he seeks to tease out the irony that many key features of postcolonial thought, like resistance to imperialism, end up depending on the western imperial economy for its circulation and promotion. Huggan wonders why there is repeated and almost exclusive celebration of a handful of post-colonial writers (Achebe, Naipaul, and Rushdie) and critics (Bhabha, Said, Spivak) in metropolitan centers like London and New York (2001: 4). His arguments speak to the challenge of hegemony in popular culture for those that seek to change it.

Huggan makes a useful distinction between postcolonialism and postcoloniality: “the first concerns largely localized agencies of resistance, the second refers to a global condition of cross-cultural symbolic exchange” (2001: ix). He goes on to write:

Postcoloniality’s regime of value is implicitly assimilative and market-driven: it regulates the value-equivalence of putatively marginal products in the global marketplace. Postcolonialism, by contrast, implies a politics of value that stands in obvious opposition to global process of commodification...It is not that postcolonialism and postcoloniality are at odds with one another, or that the former’s emancipator agenda clashes with the latter’s; the point that needs to be stressed here is that postcolonialism *is bound up with* postcoloniality – that in the overwhelming commercial context of late twentieth century commodity culture, postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products” (2001: 6).

With this distinction in mind, Huggan basically argues that postoloniality is a function of postmodernism<sup>6</sup>, which allows cultural consumption of the “other” to be celebrated.

“Postcoloniality” offers literature and other “cultural” forms identified as “culture” in Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, such as films, plays, music, dance, and (more literally) food up for consumption in a U.S. dominated global market. Huggan coins the term “post-colonial exotic” to describe this smorgasbord of products that turn the exotic “other” into something familiar. Not wanting to dismiss all post-colonial writers as sell outs, Huggan also coins the term “strategic exoticism” to describe how writers knowingly use the allure of the exotic to make properly “postcolonial” attempts at resistance.

Huggan brings non-Western people into play in the commodification of culture in the West. In fact, his distinction of “postmodernism” and “postcolonialism” seems to depend on the geographic origin of the cultural producer. If an artist is raised in a post-

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<sup>6</sup> Huggans writes: “Postcolonialism, in this sense, obviously shares some of postmodernism’s relativistic preoccupations – with textual indeterminacy, the crisis of meaning, the questioning of the unitary subject, and so on. Yet it does not, or at least does not aim to, share postmodernism’s somewhat irresponsible lack of commitment, its self-regarding obsession with play, or its Eurocentric frame of reference.” (2001: 6)

colonial, or as Ella Shohat (1992) calls it neo-imperial, society, then he/ she could be considered post-colonial; if not, then postmodern. Such distinctions make the study of Arab Americans artists today complicated, because they are a mix of both foreign born and U.S. born within roughly same age cohort, and even those who were raised here were raised at a time where post-colonial thought mingled with emergent multi-culturalism. Furthermore, my study demonstrates the interplay of “postmodern” and “postcolonial” cultures in an encompassing aesthetic economy that tolerates difference. I say tolerates because it only accepts difference that can be made understandable to the dominant culture, palatable and comparable to the dominant culture in its difference. There are Arab Americans who are actively committed to producing popular work that is “kitschy,” enjoyable, and decidedly a-historical. Alternatively, there are Arab Americans who would like to “resist” pop culture altogether, whether American or Arab, and who try to showcase works in a more “modernist vain,” yet play upon their “marginal” status in order to get grants to run a non-profit.

Some argue that postmodernism is derived from post-colonialism (Douglass 1998). Stuart Hall (1992), summarizing Cornell West, defined the “current moment,” the time when most of my participants were in college, as deriving from three key histories, combining analysis of theories of both postmodernity and postcolonialism:

The first is the displacement of European models of high culture, of Europe as the universal subject of culture, and of culture itself in its old Arnoldian reading as the last refuge... I nearly said of scoundrels, but I won't say who it is of. At least we know who it was against – culture against the barbarians, against the people rattling the gates as the deathless prose of anarchy flowed away from Arnold's pen. The second co-ordinate is the emergence of the United States as a world power, and consequently, as the centre of global cultural production and circulation. This emergence is both a displacement and a hegemonic shift in the definition of culture – a movement from high culture to American mainstream

popular culture and its mass-cultural, image mediated, technological forms. The third co-ordinate is the decolonization of the Third World, culturally marked by the emergence of the decolonized sensibilities. (1992: 21-22)

In this account, Hall includes the civil rights movement as part of the “decolonization of the minds of the people of the black diaspora.”<sup>7</sup>

Looking at the experience and analysis of black popular culture in the early 1990s, one can see many of the conclusions that I make in this dissertation on Arab American artists in the early 2000s. In “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” Cornel West (1990) writes:

The new cultural politics of difference are neither simply oppositional in contesting the mainstream (or *malestream*) for inclusion, nor transgressive in the avant-gardist sense of shocking conventional bourgeois audiences. Rather they are distinct articulations of talented (and usually privileged) contributors to culture who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action and, if possible, to enlist collective insurgency for the expansion of freedom, democracy, and individuality... For these critics of culture, theirs is a gesture that is simultaneously progressive and co-opted. Yet without social movement or political pressure from outside these institutions..., transformation degenerates into mere accommodation or sheer stagnation, and the role of the “co-opted progressive” – no matter how fervent one’s subversive rhetoric – is rendered more difficult (1990: 19-20).

My study shows that the history of Arab activism in the West has left many with a conception of political and social change, but few institutions to enable it. In today’s not-so-new cultural politics of difference, Arab American art and artists are co-opted by mainstream cultural institutions trading in the aesthetic economy though the political rhetoric of “freedom, democracy, and individualism,” and challenges to political norms are “difficult” indeed.

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<sup>7</sup> As a key figure in the field of cultural studies, Hall does not agree with the distinct term “postmodern,” but feels that the shift from high to popular culture is significant.

Arab American art and art events tend to “distinguish” class status (Bourdieu 1984) by way of identity. Audiences of Arab American artists practice their taste and culture by purchasing tickets to concerts, films, and theater in esteemed American venues that often they would not otherwise patronize. Ornter (2006) convincingly argues that ethnic or other social identities are “the hidden life of class” in America, and her argument could even be expanded to understand those in the West who appreciate “post-colonial” art and culture<sup>8</sup>.

Challenges made to Western conceptions of art through the analysis of non-Western art and its circulation in the Western art market proposed by scholars such as Marcus and Myers (1995) are difficult to make in this study given that fact that most of the Arab American art I examined was produced in English using highly American idioms and conventions for a Western market. However, like those scholars, this study sees art as “the space in which difference, identity, and cultural value are being produced and contested” (1995: 11). Arab American artists and arts organizers developed overlapping “art worlds,” as defined by Howard Becker (1982), in which art is a product of collective labor and work. Art worlds are understood to be “the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art is noted for” (1982: x), and works of art “are not the products of individual makers, ‘artists’ who possess a rare and special gift. They are rather joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world’s

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the rift between cultural studies and post-colonial studies tends to be one between using the popular versus using “higher” forms of culture as a unit of analysis, leaving some to criticize post-colonial studies and writers for being elite “modernists” in their disinterest or even disdain for the “popular” (Bongie 2003), though several post-colonial writers, like Salman Rushdie or Jamaica Kincaid, are quite widely read by mainstream American, making them “popular.”

characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence” (1982: 34). This view of art is consistent with my experience of the Arab American arts scene in New York, and includes room for my largely “non-artistic” participation in it.

Furthermore, when examining art as a way of establishing both professional and cultural identity, one can get at a central feature of what is described as Generation X, namely that identity is largely established through their professional choices. Ornter (2006) came to realize the generational components of class and identity in American when trying to study her high school class and their children. Generation X is typically understood to be all those born between 1965-1976 (New Strategist 2006), however Ornter expands it to all those born between 1961 and 1981. She found that “whatever else Generation X has been about- social problems, ecological disasters, AIDS – it has always been, first and foremost, about identity through work: jobs, money, and careers” (Ornter 2006: 89). Arab American artists are therefore not “alienated” from their labor or society in general through their professional choices because their career choices are in large part a measure of defining who they are as individuals and as members of a community.

As the demographics section below will show, most participants in this study are Generation Xer’s who came to New York to work in the aesthetic economy. Generation X is more diverse than the larger Baby Boomer generation that precedes it, with 37% of it being non-white nationwide in 2005 (New Strategist 2006). In New York State, 44% of the population of Gen Xer’s is non-white. Nationally, more than one in five Gen Xer’s is foreign born, and nearly four out of ten immigrants in 2004 were aged 25-39. Making up only 17% of the overall population of the United States, Gen Xer’s have had to compete

for jobs and livelihoods with the larger Baby Boomers (1946-1954) ahead of them and Millennials (1977-1994) behind them at a time when jobs are in short supply and housing expensive.

Generation Xer's who are children of immigrants are also known as the "new second generation", or the generation of children born to immigrant parents who had migrated to the U.S. as a result of immigration policies adopted in 1965 (Min 2002). Unlike the "mass migration" period (1880-1930) when nearly ninety percent of immigrants came from Europe, the vast majority (85%) of those immigrating post 1965 were non-Europeans from Third World countries (Bozorgmehr and Min 2003). There was also a striking difference in socio-economic status between the early immigrants and those coming post 1965. Whereas most early immigrants were illiterate peasants and unskilled workers, those arriving post 1965 were much more mixed in terms of socio-economic status. Bozorgmehr and Min (2003) write that, "the majority of the Asian, Middle Eastern and African immigrants have professional and middle-class backgrounds, and the majority of the Latino and Caribbean immigrants come from working-class and farming backgrounds" (2003: 20). Since the recessions of the 1970s, they have helped revitalize the U.S. economy and crumbling inner cities by creating jobs and industries and expanding the tax base (Naficy 1993). The "new second generation" is at the core of "post-modern" Generation Xer's.

Given the diversity of this generation strictly in terms of demographics, it is not surprising that scholars of the "new second generation" conclude that becoming American entails the articulation of ethnic identity (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Rather than contrasting theories of assimilation with ethnic pluralism, researchers find that



acculturation among the “new second generation” involves an active process of differentiation from the dominant and discriminatory American culture. Despite adopting English, losing foreign language proficiency, and embracing U.S. fashions and lifestyles, the new second generation also demonstrates “a universal shift from American identities to ethnic ones, increasing perceptions of discrimination against one’s own group, and increasing reassertion of heritage and cultural distinctness” (2001:301). Portes and Rumbaut note, however, that “heritage and cultural distinctness” do not continue parental traditions, but rather are “made-in the U.S.A.” They write:

As such, these reaffirmed ethnicities and perceptions of discrimination are integral parts of the process of acculturation, as it takes place in real life. Second-generation youths who loudly proclaim their Mexicanness or Haitianness often do so in English and with a body language far closer to their American peers than to anything resembling their parents’ culture (2001:302).

This study shows that the same could be said for Arabs in America as well. Furthermore, Arab American aesthetic and creative products do more than create ethnic identity for the mix of foreign born and U.S. born Arabs in the United States, they contribute to economies in which aesthetic and creative production is reified as a value in and of itself. Therefore, ethnic identities not only make Arabs’ into Americans but also into artists through the celebration of “difference” in the aesthetic marketplace.

Several useful concepts within ethnicity studies suggest that Arab American artists and arts organizers are invoking a kind of symbolic or even instrumental ethnicity within their careers. Clifford Geertz (1963) considers ethnicity a “primordial” tie, or the “longing not to belong to any other group” (1963: 109), which is admittedly narrow and difficult to accomplish in today’s world which sees “groupness,” whether ethnicity, race or nation as strategic and contingent rather than fixed and enduring (Brubaker 2004).

Max Weber (1968) views ethnic groups as “groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent,” and this belief in turn becomes essential for the continuation of the group (1968: 389). For Fredrik Barth (1969), ethnicity enables group boundaries to be made and maintained, the boundaries being more critical than the actual cultural and social practices of the group. These basic definitions have been elaborated and expanded upon by numerous scholars spanning several decades (Yinger 1985), and its relationship to other pressing concerns such as nationalism thoroughly explored (Calhoun 1993). Here I would like to point out several key concepts that developed in ethnicity studies that are relevant to this study of Arab Americans. Anny Bakalian (1993) grounds claims about ethnic revival in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century by reviewing broadened definitions of ethnicity that were developed in the 1980s and 1990s. One such concept, “symbolic ethnicity,” is often applied to white ethnic groups in American that have by and large “assimilated” over several generations. She writes:

Later generation ethnics do not need ethnic cultures and institutions in order to conduct their daily lives, be it in the workplace or at home. Instead, the use of visible symbols satisfies their need for belonging, furnishes a differentiating factor in a culturally homogenous society, and for highly (geographically) mobile individuals, it offers a sense of commonality and continuity. Thus, ethnicity becomes expressive, a voluntary affiliation that can be pursued in one’s leisure time. It loses its hold over the individual; becomes an artificial commitment that can be easily reversed when the surrounding environment becomes less tolerant of ethnic differences... The different components of identity: the sacred, the secular, the political, the structural, are more likely to be separated and adapted to individual ends (1993: 44).

Symbolic ethnicity is contrasted with “ethnic militants,” “ethnic manipulators,” and “pseudo-ethnics” whose political and economic goals are rooted in their ethnic identity. It is also associated with the commodification of culture through visible markers of identity, like clothing, food, and other media representations, and appreciation for

celebrity ethnic personalities. In the case of Arab Americans, it involves endless references to the facts that Kasey Kasem (America's Top 40) and actor Danny Thomas are Arab American. Finally, Bakalian notes that "symbolic ethnicity is also expressed through institutions that do not require active participation and combine ethnicity with other interests, such as dance, music, athletic clubs, travel clubs, festivals, and parades" (1993: 45); institutions that require active participation would include political parties and even religion. Those practicing symbolic ethnicity are believed to rarely experience discrimination or prejudice.

The concept of symbolic ethnicity is useful for the study of Arab American artists and arts organizers today. While earlier generations of Arab Americans may have "assimilated" into white American culture, political events of the 1960s in the Middle East, as well as the influx of greater numbers of politicized Arabs from post-colonial countries, the on-going Arab/ Israeli conflict, and the increased appreciation for multiculturalism in the United States has brought about the proliferation of "symbolic" ethnicity among Arab Americans today. In her study of her years as the "cultural arts programmer" for ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) in Detroit, MI, Sally Howell (2000) recounts how she worked with Arabs in the community to overcome transnational notions of identity in order to create the notion of Arab as an ethnic minority in the United States. She found aesthetic tensions between those whose work was oriented toward their homelands in a diasporic sense, and those who directed their work toward the mainstream in order to become incorporated into it as a recognizable ethnic minority. Finding that funders were largely interested in "traditional" and "distinctively" ethnic work, they often were compelled to produce

works of “folklore” and/ or hybrid (Latin with Arabic influence, for example), rather than work that may have been more “modern” or popular among Arabs themselves. She writes:

This compulsion came from our funding sources, but also from the mainstreaming agenda ACCESS so avidly pursued in the 1980s and 1990s, which used “culture” as a way of asserting identity, attracting investment, and proving the existence and vitality of an “ethnic constituency”. Indeed, this “arts agenda” was a key component in the growth of ACCESS from a small neighborhood organization into a regionally based, multiservice center (2000: 77).

Ironically, ethnic boundary formation in the United States today allows for greater inclusion into mainstream industries rather than excluding members from it. Arab American artists and arts organizers, seek inclusion in the world of producers in the aesthetic economy. Both symbolic and strategic, their approach has a secular humanistic streak that intends to show the commonality and universality of humanity, rather than absolute and competing interests.

Finally, I conclude this theoretical overview by returning to my original thesis, that this dissertation demonstrates the overlap in the mainstream and ethnic economies within the aesthetic economy. A comparison of my work with that of another anthropologist of immigrant participation in the aesthetic economy will reveal the limits of the ethnic economy for Arab American artists and the ways that the entrepreneurial spirit of Arab American artists is not particularly ethnic. Ethnic economies are economies within the general economy in which common ethnicity is a central feature, either in terms of entrepreneurship (Portes and Bach 1985), co-ethnic employers and employees (Bonacich and Modell 1980), concentration in ethnic enclaves (Sanders and Nee 1987), or concentration of ethnic groups in particular industries (Zhou and Logan

1989). Light, Sabagh, Bozorgmehr, and Der-Martirosian (1994) distinguish an “enclave ethnic economy” from an “ethnic economy” because an “enclave” economy assumes geographic concentration of businesses owned by people of an ethnic group who employ those in the same ethnic group, whereas the larger ethnic economy includes self-employed ethnically identifiable individuals who may be geographically dispersed. They insist upon this difference to return academic attention to the importance of ethnicity among self-employed entrepreneurs and away from the relative difference wages of the enclave ethnic economy compared to the general economy. This distinction is important when approaching the study of Arab American artists in New York because they are both geographically dispersed and inherently “self-employed” independent artists, though most have “day jobs” in the general economy.

In *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*, Hamid Naficy (1993) argues that American culture maintains its dominance in light of the migration of Third World nationals to its shores through the militarization of the cities and through the cooptation of the threat of the ‘other’ as non-threatening differences or as style. “Differences” he argues, feeds into the fashionable interest multiculturalism, and leads to the creation of new products with an “ethnic gloss”. Naficy writes exiles, in turn:

... employ the host’s popular culture and its mediating institutions to create a symbolic communitas and an economy based on descent and consent relations, in which certain fossilized representations of home and the past are repeatedly circulated and reinforced. Individual and cultural identity is thus preserved for the moment, and the exilic subculture is protected temporarily from the seemingly hostile dominant cultures. For Iranian exiles in Los Angeles, this protection is provided by a symbolic and semiotic enclave rather than a physical one (34).

The bulk of Naficy’s ethnography examines the ways that exilic culture serves Iranian nationalism in exile, as well as the tensions between incorporation into the dominant

culture and resistance for those in occupying the liminal status of the exile. Incorporation is interpreted as a transformation from exile status to an ethnic one.

While Naficy's depiction of the economic aspects and industriousness of exilic Iranian cultural production in Los Angeles bear some resemblance to the Arab American artistic community featured in my work, there are several key differences that are worth examining because they speak to the overall dominance of professional identities over ethnic ones among the Arab American artists, and the importance of understanding how ethnic identities relate to mainstream industries marketing of difference. First, whereas a core component of Iranian exilic culture in Los Angeles is focused on nostalgia and attachment to a national homeland, with the exception of the promotion of Palestinian autonomy and self determination, Arab American artists in New York place greater emphasis on pan-Arab, "universalistic" culture rather than promotion of distinct national identities. There is a sense that the diversity within the Arab community reflects the diversity within the United States itself, and it is celebrated within that light.

Second, while it appears from Naficy's account that there is a robust exilic economy around commercial television production and consumption, the Arab American arts community in New York is decidedly non-profit. The economic viability of Arab American artists depends on integration into the mainstream aesthetic economy. By this I mean everything from attracting audiences to raising funds for cultural production outside of the Arab American community. The Arab American population has neither the size, interest, nor possibly wealth to sustain expensive productions of the scale and scope imagined by Arab American artistic producers. In fact, a major complaint of Arab American artists is that the Arab community does not significantly patronize or

substantially contribute financial resources to the production of art work by those of Arab descent. Arab American artists invest in ethnically oriented showcases in order to achieve one of the most prized possessions within the Western art market, namely exposure. Their “ethnic economy” does not yield monetary profits that sustain livelihoods from within the economy alone, particularly when production costs such as space rentals and publicity are high. Therefore Arab American artists and arts organizers hope to capitalize on the development of an ethnic economy in the arts that will attract investment and enable participation in the general aesthetic economy. As immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurs mining the “ethnic economy” (Bozorgmehr and Min 2003), Arab American artists join the hordes of other artists trying to make careers in the vast New York art world.

Third, in trying to carve a space for themselves in mainstream aesthetic economies, Arab American artists must contend with hegemonic notions of themselves that precede them. Rather than being oriented toward preserving a national identity and culture within immigrant diasporas as appeared to dominate the exilic cultural scene studied by Naficy, Arab American artists work within and around Orientalist fantasies and the U.S. War on Terror that dominate the public imagination in mainstream venues. Though Arab American artists and arts organizers create their own venues to showcase work, there is a sense of an ever-present American audience ready to appreciate more genuine representations of Arab thought and culture. While consenting to the style and structure of various genres within the Western aesthetic economy, Arab American artists try to bargain for more humanistic representations of Arab people than commonly achieved in the public sphere. Their negotiations with hegemonic representations are the

best example of how difficult it is to operate outside of hegemonic popular culture altogether, because to do so risk complete irrelevance and disinterest.

#### Arab Diaspora in New York and Its Artistic Heritage:

New York technically hosts the largest number of Arabs of all cities in the United States. However, given the size of New York City as a whole<sup>9</sup>, Arabs make up less than 1% of the city's population. The American Community Survey indicates that in 2005 the population reporting Arab ancestry in all five boroughs of New York City totaled 85,821. According to the Census of 2000 the Arab American population in the city was 69,985. These numbers are generally considered to undercount the population of Arab ancestry; Zogby International estimates estimated that over 230,900 people of Arab descent live in New York metro area<sup>10</sup> based on the 2000 Census.

While New York is considered the “mother colony” for Arab immigrants because it was the first area settled by Arabs and a transit point for other destinations, it is the fourth largest in concentration of Arabs in The United States. Arab Americans live throughout the United States, yet the largest shares (33%) live in California, New York, or Michigan. Over half live in large cities, with the highest populations in Los Angeles, Dearborn, Detroit, New York, Chicago, and Washington DC (Haddad 2004). Towns such as Sterling Heights and Warren, Michigan, Jersey City, New Jersey, and Allen, Pennsylvania have the highest percentage of Arabs by city in the nation, with over two

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<sup>9</sup> New York City Department of Planning estimates the population of NYC to be 8,250,567 as of November 20, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Includes Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, Staten Island and the Bronx.



percent in each case.<sup>11</sup> Some define Arab Americans as people living in this country who share the heritage of the Arabic language. Others consider anyone whose origin or ancestry is from any of the twenty-two nations in the Arab League to be an Arab, acknowledging that languages other than Arabic are spoken in those countries and that there is religious diversity among Arabs. Using either definition, Arabs in this country range from zero to fourth generation and occupy economic positions ranging from cab drivers and deli owners to doctors, lawyers, and government ministers.

There were two main waves of Arab migration to this country: 1885-1938, and 1947 to the present. The first wave mainly consisted of Christian immigrants of peasant background who were leaving due to economic hardships. The second wave included a more highly educated population of both Muslims and Christians from war torn countries of Lebanon, Palestine, Algeria, and Iraq, as well as from politically oppressive regimes of Syria, Jordan, and Egypt (Naff 1985). Changes in U.S. immigration laws allowed for greater migration of Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa after 1965. However, Muslim Arabs only constitute one quarter of all Arabs and Muslims in the United States<sup>12</sup>. Zogby International estimates the total population of Arabs in the United States to be 3.5 million.

Several scholars describe the “invisibility” of Arab Americans as an ethnic group in the United States (Hentoff 1990; Awad 1981; and Ohanian 1986). More recent scholars testify to their increased visibility, both due to discrimination (Naber 2000) and organizing efforts opposed to it (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). The use of the

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<sup>11</sup> In Sterling Heights, MI Arabs total more than 3.69% of the total population; Jersey City, NJ 2.81%; Warren, MI 2.51%; Allentown, PA 2.45%, according to 2000 Census as reported by the Arab American Institute.

<sup>12</sup> According to the 2000 census as reported by the Arab American Institute and polling conducted in 2004 by the Project MAPs/ Zogby International.

hyphenated term Arab-American is believed to have come about in the 1960s (Haddad 1994; Hagopian and Paden 1969; Kayal and Kayal 1975; Aswad 1974; Abraham and Abraham 1983) as a result of the civil rights movement and increased politicization of the population due to the Arab defeat of the 1967 war with Israel. Like most hyphenated or categorically defined ethnic identities in the United States, like Asian, Latino/ a, Hispanic, African American or Black, the term is deliberately all encompassing in a way that effaces the diversity of the population in terms of history, country of origin, language, religion, and generation in the United States. However, I have chosen to use the term Arab American (minus the hyphen) to describe people of Arab descent and communities or social networks composed of people of Arab descent because it is deliberately broad, and can encompass those who are new, first generation immigrants to those who have been in the United States for many generations. It would be more ethnographical correct to have called everyone of Arab descent in America “Arab,” because the “American” part is assumed for those living in the United States. I chose to include “American” to remind the reader of the important national context of this diaspora population. Most of those participating in this study favor the term Arab American for its unifying, pan-nationalistic quality, though may personally choose to identify by their country of origin first; and there is a vocal minority that is opposed to its vague and homogenizing qualities. However, an organizing principle of this research is that artists and arts organizers self attest to being of Arab heritage, and self select into social groups and networks based on both their professional identities as artists and their ethnic identities as people of Arab descent. The assertion of ethnic identity alongside professional identity is what makes my study about an Arab American arts scene in New

York, rather than some other kind of arts scene. When describing my study population as a whole, I use the term Arab American. When introducing individual participants, I specify the country of origin.

The majority of Arabs in New York live in Brooklyn.<sup>13</sup> The Atlantic Avenue area of Brooklyn Heights was the first neighborhood where Arab commerce thrived and Arabs took up residence at the turn of the twentieth century. Today Arabs from Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, and Egypt have made Bay Ridge the second largest Arab American community in New York City, followed by other Brooklyn neighborhoods, particularly in Prospect Heights, Sunset Park, East Flatbush, Crown Heights, and Brownsville (Cristillo 2002). In metropolitan New York, nearby counties such as Westchester as well as the states New Jersey and Connecticut add tens of thousands more. Arab American arts organizers try to attract these populations as audiences. My experience, as well as that of a fellow researcher named Randa Serhan,<sup>14</sup> suggest that only middle and upper class, Western educated Arabs are interested in, and patronize, artistic events such as the ones described in this study.

New York is a national hub of Arab American creative activity due to its centrality in the national and international aesthetic economy, and the desire for most of the Arab American participants to become professional artists. This is not a new phenomenon. In the 1920's, a group of mostly Lebanese Arab men in New York formed the "Al Rabita al Qalamiyya," or the New Pen League, and wrote primarily in Arabic for

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<sup>13</sup> 116,000 in Kings county alone, according to 2000 Census as reported by the Arab American Institute.

<sup>14</sup> Randa Serhan is a doctoral candidate in sociology at Columbia University. She conducted a study on what she called "regular" Arabs, mostly families of recent immigrants who were working class, and her fieldwork was coterminous with my own. She communicated their knowledge of spaces and events such as the ones I studied, but their disinterest in participation in such events, claiming they felt that they were not for them.

both the Arab world and its diaspora in the United States. The League's now most famous participant was Khalil Gibran (1893-1931), though several exceeded his renown in the Arab world, such as Ilya Abu-Madi (1890-1957). Together, they are believed to have been responsible for helping "modernize" Arabic poetry, releasing it from strict classical and conventional forms and embracing more humanistic impulses. Gibran in particular is known for introducing Romanticism and subjectivity into Arabic poetic verse (Jayussi 1977). His preference for humanistic spirituality contributed to his popularity in the West in the 1960s. In her expansive analysis of trends in modern Arabic poetry, Jayussi (1977) notes:

Perhaps a distinctive and at the same time peculiar quality of the Mahjar [immigrant] poets in North America was that they did not reflect a special social and political environment. They were neither involved as poets in the American environment around them, nor did they actually participate in the developments that were taking place in the political, social, cultural, and psychological spheres in their home countries. Hence the preponderance in their poetry of their particular subject, namely Nature and man in Nature and in the universe, often stripped of its immediate identity in time and place (1977: 139).

Aside from the modernist movement of the "Mahjar" or immigrant poets, most earlier Arab American cultural events took place within the church and sect of the particular Arab communities in New York. In the 1940's and 1950's New York was home to *maharajan*, or community and religiously affiliated Arab cultural festivals that gathered together musicians, and featured food, dance, and poetry for collective consumption (Rashid 2002). It was also home to many Arabic record labels and distributors, one of which exists till this day: Rashid Sales Company off of Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. New York based classical Palestinian musician Simon Shaheen worked with the World Music Institute and the Ethnic Folk Arts festival to develop the Mahrajan Al-Fan (or Arts

festivals) in New York in the 1990s (Bushnaq 2002). Four of them took place during the 1990s, and one more was held during the time of my fieldwork, but expense prohibits it from being a regularly occurring event.

Based on my fieldwork experience, it seems that the growth of Arab nationalist sentiments in the 1950s and the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab Israeli war gave rise to prominent modern Arab artists from the Arab world that still overshadows any work produced by Arabs in the United States from the 1950s-1980s.<sup>15</sup> Om Kalthoum, commonly known as the “voice of Egypt” was a prominent singer throughout Arab socialist experiments of Kamal Abdul Nasser. She was rivaled by “modern” innovators of Arabic music such as Mohamed Abdel Wahab. It was also the Golden Era of Egyptian cinema, and their films circulated throughout the Arab world and even the Americas. The Lebanese singer Fairuz also became very popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and in 1971 she performed at Carnegie Hall. The poetry of Palestinian in exile Mahmoud Darwish was widely read and even converted to lyrics by Lebanese folk singer Marcel Khalife. While there was a proliferation of Arab American civics organization in the 1970s and 1980s (as will be discussed in Chapter Three), there appear to be no attempts to institutionalize Arab culture and arts through independent organizations until the late 1990s<sup>16</sup>. In 1997 a restaurateur in New York named Salam al-Rawi began hosting some arts and cultural events under the name Diwan, or assembly, at one of his restaurants. In 1998, New York also started a chapter of the Radius of Arab American Writers, which began meeting and hosting events at the Cornelia Street Café in the Greenwich Village.

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<sup>15</sup> However there are many Arab American writers who began their careers in this era and are still active today, e.g. Lawrence Joseph and D.H. Melhem. New York based Palestinian visual artist Samia Halaby also falls in this category.

<sup>16</sup> Even the Arab American National Museum in Detroit Michigan only opened in 2003.

Also that year, Alwan for the Arts began organizing film festivals in the city; it had not yet established a physical home.

Traces of this heritage can still be found in New York today. For example, descendants of Ilya Abu Madi held a tribute to him at Alwan in April 2008, and Stanley Rashid or Rashid Records is a proud sponsor of many Arab cultural events. Today, one of Marcel Khalife's sons is a pianist living and working in New York. As this ethnography demonstrates, New York has seen a growth in the number, quality, and overall sophistication of organizations exclusively dedicated to the promotion of arts and cultures of the Middle East in today's aesthetic economy. Though several cultural forms with Arab American pioneers in New York, such as spoken word and comedy, have become staples of cultural performance throughout the many Arab enclaves of the United States, the most highly concentrated group of Arab American artists remains in New York.<sup>17</sup>

#### One Subject To Another: Studying One's Own:

Entering New York as a field site was the reverse of a typical fieldwork experience for me. Instead of feeling different from everyone else around me, for the first time in my life I fit in. I was raised in central Illinois, and received most of my education in predominately elite white academic institutions. My first Arab friends were made in graduate school in my late twenties. To live in a city as diverse as New York, where one was just as likely to have heard my name before as not know how to

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<sup>17</sup> This was made embarrassingly clear to me when I attended the first ever conference for Arab American artists at the Arab American National Museum in Detroit, Michigan in April 2006; three quarters of all participants were artists that I knew from New York.

pronounce it, meant that I had to adjust not to stares and questions about what I was doing there, but to being completely unremarkable and unnoticed.

The cultural familiarity that I had with Arab Americans and Arab immigrants around me actually made it harder to get to know people and initiate my research. Many Arab Americans assumed that I understood where they were coming from and why they did the things they did. Furthermore, conscious of the scrutiny of Arabs after 9/11, I did not want to seem like the scores of other journalists and researchers who were either gauging Arab opinions on the “War on Terror” and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or finding novel ways of showing how Arabs were special, interesting, or just plain different (yet smart, attractive, and funny, no less). News of raids, special registration, hate crimes and harassment in Arabs homes, workplaces, and schools made me wary of posing too many questions, afraid the line between me and other interrogators of Arab identity and intentions would be blurred. Having been in the community for four years, and been witness to fishing expeditions by the FBI on close friends, attempts to sabotage art exhibits by people who feel threatened by the political implications of their representations, and been secretly audio taped by Daniel Pipes at an Arab “town hall” meeting<sup>18</sup>, suspicions of those who pose questions were often justified.

While I was instilled with the fear and expectation of anti-Arab discrimination while growing up in small town the United States, prior to my fieldwork research I hardly felt affected, nor did I know of systemic assaults on Arab American organizations or individuals by the government and other interested parties. Growing up I had no awareness of the media, except for the news, which, judging by the angry reactions of my father, did not represent Arabs or their interests the way he would have liked. The Arabs

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<sup>18</sup> The town hall meeting was transcribed and the audio file posted on Pipeline.org on August 22, 2007.

around me had the privilege of their professional class, the comfort of their families, and the security of surrounding themselves with friends who spoke the same language, debated similar politics, and liked the same food and music. I was also insulated from news about Arabs in the United States because it was not a common topic on mainstream media, and most discussions about their status among my parents and their friends took place in Arabic, a language that I did not fully learn to understand and speak until I was an adult. Probably the biggest assault on Arab culture that I was aware of growing up was the increased intolerance for smoking in public places, which inhibited my father and his friends from continuing the habit, at least publicly, like all health conscious Americans.

Regardless, subtle tactics of self-defense were being employed by the time I reached my teens that I barely understood and did not agree. For example, through the encouragement and example of friends of our family, both my brothers adopted American names before starting high school. I knew that being pro-Palestinian was an unfavorable position, but I was unaware of the spying, imprisonment, and deportation carried out by the government and some Zionist groups, as well as the routine discrimination in the workplace and other commercial venues, such as airports, that other Arab Americans felt. I was told to take solace that maybe my ultra-tanned lifeguard skin would maybe allow me to pass as Italian or even African American.<sup>19</sup> The chapters that follow in part fill in the gaps between the sentiments of feeling discriminated against as

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<sup>19</sup> The mainstream success of the Cosby show was taken as a sign that if African Americans could be seen as bourgeois members of American society, so could Arabs. In addition, my family and their friends were fascinated by Lisa Bonet, who was not only beautiful, but light skinned enough that an Arab could potential pass as African American. Despite their fantasies, even in the realm of television, there are still no Arab American Cosby's on tv.



an ethnic minority and the facts of such discrimination in the past half-century in the United States.

Methods:

I moved to New York in May 2003 and began my fieldwork shortly thereafter. Although I had originally intended to conduct my fieldwork among Palestinian artists in the West Bank, three years of regular visits to New York convinced me otherwise. From 2000-2003 I anxiously watched the news and spoke with family members about the situation in Palestinian territories. The Al Aqsa Intifada had begun in 2000, followed by a brutal reinvasion of the territories by Israel in the spring of 2002. By the time I went to explore the arts scene in the summer of 2002, visits with artists and arts organizers were either impossible due to curfews and checkpoints, or were sharply curtailed due to outbursts of violence on the streets that otherwise demanded our attention. During that same period, I visited New York frequently and met a variety of artists of Arab descent engaged in a vibrant arts scene. By the time I was ready for my fieldwork, I was compelled to shift my focus to New York.

I began my fieldwork in 2003 by attending events that either showcased Arab American artists, or were produced and organized by Arab Americans that I had met during previous visits. This included gallery exhibits, concerts, lectures, and parties. I was also introduced to one of the main modes of promoting and organizing activities within Arab American communities in New York: an electronic listserve called arabny. Arabny is a Yahoo listserve initially started in 2002 to organize political activism around the Intifada. It has grown to be a general announcement and discussion list serve with

around 300-400 members, all of whom must be invited and approved by someone already on the list.<sup>20</sup> Any member can post anything at any time; no permission is required. Generally, postings are uncensored. However, if members complain to the moderator, or the moderator feels something is inappropriate, chiefly in the language or tone of the overall message, the offending party is either publicly reprimanded by the members or the moderator (or both) or is removed from the list by the moderator.<sup>21</sup> Depending on the settings chosen by each member, participants either receive postings immediately, or in one daily batch that includes all the e-mails posted in a twenty-four hour period. There are approximately ten to fifteen postings a day; since joining in 2003, I do not believe a single day has gone by without at least one posting delivered to my inbox.

Arabny is a wonderfully rich window to the Arab American community in New York. Given the semi-private structure of the listserve, and the impossibility of getting consent from every member of the list serve for me to “observe” and record the postings as data, I opted to participate in it privately. Its importance ranges from mobilizing activity and gauging opinion in the community, to socially making conversation with other members of the list when we meet. My participation in it was one of my primary methods of engagement with the Arab American community in New York.<sup>22</sup> Virtually all of the events I attended I learned about through arabny.<sup>23</sup> Many of the important

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<sup>20</sup> I was told that this was primarily to keep out Muslim religious “fanatics,” but also any potential adversarial parties, like right wing Christians or Zionists, who would take issue with political sentiments generally assumed on the list. I was invited to be on the list by a friend I had made studying Arabic at Middlebury

<sup>21</sup> The moderator volunteered for the position as a friend of the list serves’ founder. His presence and role is generally unknown, until he steps in and identifies himself as the moderator.

<sup>22</sup> It was also how I found my first apartment and got my first “no broker fee” lease in Brooklyn.

<sup>23</sup> I was also briefly enrolled in a listserve called “arabartists,” a spin-off group that formed to allow for more extensive debate on issues relevant to artists. However its membership included artists throughout the U.S. and Canada, and the postings relevant to NY artists were largely duplications of those found on arabny. Plus my inbox was too full to read anything closely, so I unsubscribed.

debates regarding politics writ large or politics of a particular event or incident were either started or maintained on Arabny<sup>24</sup>. Instead of systematically analyzing patterns of speech or topics on the list serve, I treated it as an extended private conversation to which I am privy as a participant observer in the Arab American community. Throughout these pages, I may reference debates on Arabny or describe discussions in general terms without any personal identifiers. In situations that the author and text are critical to the reference or incident that I describe, I would write to the individuals, most of whom I know personally, and explain that I would like to use the posting in my dissertation and seek permission to reprint.

Using Arabny as my guide, I embarked on my involvement in the artistic activities of this community. Besides being a vehicle for promoting various events, Arabny also served as an instrument for recruiting volunteers for the organization, development, and management of those events. After just a few short months, I began volunteering with two competing arts organizations: Arte East and Alwan for the Arts. Arte East sought volunteers to sell tickets for its film series at NYU's Cantor Theater; Alwan for the Arts sought volunteers for every imaginable task that an organization could require. For example, after agreeing to help write grants for Alwan, I was given the materials to write a press release for a music/ video/ theater event that was taking place in their space the following week. When that task was then reassigned to someone else, I was given ten more. While I finished out the modest tasks that Arte East assigned me during its Fall 2003 film series, the intensity and depth of the assignments required by Alwan led me to shift my attention to them for the remainder of my study. Through

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<sup>24</sup> Closure of an argument typically occurred when consensus seemed to form around a handful of dogged members, or when enough people complained to the moderator that the conversation was clogging their inboxes and had spiraled into personal innuendo and insult.

Alwan, I worked at nearly a quarter of the events that are the focus of this study, including one writers conference and one film festival. In addition to Alwan, I volunteered for two festivals organized by the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. Through the collective labor of staging events,<sup>25</sup> I learned about the tastes of artists, organizers and audiences, the anxieties about audience reactions and reviews, the ambitions of artists and their promoters, and the resources required to showcase artistic productions in New York City. By working alongside five to fifteen organizers over a couple months at a time from the planning of an event through its fruition, I gained the trust of those I worked with, enabling me to reach out to individuals for interviews and follow up discussions. It is by laboring collectively with artists and arts promoters that I learned of the desires of Arab Americans to succeed on aesthetic and material levels, and to be accepted by mainstream America as a sign that they could overcome hegemonic representations of Arabs in America.

From May 2003- December 2006, I attended over one hundred events that showcased the work of Arab American artists. Of those events, forty percent were produced by non-Arabs, and sixty percent of them were produced by Arabs. Half of those produced by Arabs were produced by Alwan and took place at its loft space in Lower Manhattan. While a quarter of all the events I attended or participated in took place at Alwan, the remainder took place at sixty two other venues in New York City.

All but one of these venues is in Manhattan. The exception to the Manhattan rule, Widdi

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<sup>25</sup> I discuss my assignments and responsibilities throughout this dissertation, but in sum, most of my responsibilities were either administrative and managerial, or physical (setting up and cleaning up after events). I had almost no input into the artistic content of anything being showcased or produced during my study period. The closest I came to being involved in the artistic process was 1) to rehearse and perform in a belly dance showcase where I mocked the vanity of Lebanese women in November 2003; 2) to model for a painter in 2004; and 3) to help develop the concept for a comedic skit about Arab American women in 2006.

Hall<sup>26</sup>, is the only other venue besides Alwan that is owned and operated by Arab Americans. The rest include every major university<sup>27</sup> in New York City; museums such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art; theaters known for political theater such as the Culture Project, Cherry Lane Theater, and the Public Theater, plus one short-lived play on Broadway; mainstream Comedy Clubs; as well as renowned concert halls such as Summer Stage in Central Park, Carnegie Hall, and Lincoln Center.

Space, or occupying and sharing space within mainstream America was of central importance to Arab American artists and arts promoters. One of the main symbols for achieving such space is the actual venue for Arab American arts and cultural events. For Arab American producers, renting mainstream venues provides the opportunity to stage professional productions that suit their aesthetic and material desires. Mainstream venues are also status symbols that can be appreciated independent of the work that is actually being showcased. Despite the fact that anyone with money can rent a venue for a production regardless of its quality or ability to successfully sell tickets, Arab American audiences perceive a mainstream venue as a de facto sign of success, which helps in the promotion of their work. For Arab American artists who are showcased in mainstream venues by non-Arab arts promoters, the venue is also a sign of success, and is widely lauded by the community as an achievement, both for the artist and community that she or he “represents.”<sup>28</sup> Going to such a wide variety of venues throughout the city gave me

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<sup>26</sup> Widdi Hall, a long standing private Palestinian catering and wedding hall in Brooklyn.

<sup>27</sup> The Graduate Center at the City University of New York ranks tops in showcasing Arab American arts, followed by Columbia, the New School, New York University, and Hunter College.

<sup>28</sup> Non-Arab arts promoters seek authenticity when showcasing Arab American artists. Arab Americans, even those who were 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation, authenticate representations by non-Arabs that seek to interpret and interrogate issues of importance for America today, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the War on Terror and its erosions of civil rights and civil liberties.

exposure to the breath and scope of the culture and entertainment industry in New York. The giddiness of community members and artists themselves in participating or attending events in prominent spaces gives the impression that Arab Americans are becoming integral to it.

With such an array of events in a wide variety of places, I chose to focus on the breath of Arab American artistic activity rather than one particular event that may be repeated for a six-week or six month run. While repetition is critical to performance and theories of performance, I sought repetitive patterns across performances, genres, and spaces rather than within a single one. I followed the announcements on Arabny and in mainstream print media such as *Time Out New York* and the *New York Times*, and went to events that were integral to a social life in New York as an Arab American. I attended plays, exhibits, and films with family members and friends who may or may not have been artists, but were typically of Arab descent. I soon discovered that across many genres, and in a multitude of spaces, a consistent crowd of Arab American artists, activists, and audiences acted as consumers of Arab American cultural production. This desire to consume Arab American artistic production led me to thirty one plays, eleven visual arts exhibits, over a dozen musical events, a handful of poetry and book readings, five dance performances, seven comedy shows (including four multi-day festivals), dozens of films, including one festival, and many fundraisers, for the benefit of arts promoters and humanitarian causes.<sup>29</sup> There were also events that are more typical to an ethnographic study, like parties, and one wedding and a funeral. However even these

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<sup>29</sup> Often, but not always, these distinct causes were conflated, resulting in the arts event becoming a proxy for humanitarian relief or political activism. However, distinct fundraisers for humanitarian relief included several for Palestinians in Gaza, one after Hurricane Katrina on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005, and one for the war in Lebanon on July 29, 2006. All of the fundraisers for relief that I attended took place at Alwan.

events carried many references to the artistic Arab American world of which I became part in New York. The couple that married met as volunteers at Alwan and hired a band that played regularly in that space for their reception; the funeral was that of Professor Edward Said, who passed away on September 25, 2003. Said was undoubtedly one of the biggest influences on that community of artists that I studied, both personally and intellectually, and most of the people I ultimately interviewed were found in mourning at the Riverside Church a few days following his death.

Artistic events largely structured my time in the field. After events, I would save playbills, programs, and promotional materials to analyze along with my field notes. I noted my impressions of the work artistically and the quality of the production, as well as a brief synopsis of the content and the reaction of the audience. I would also note discussions I had about the event with those who attended with me. I sought interviews with people that were involved in events I attended, either as artists or as promoters. I also requested and collected plays and samples of comedic recordings for analysis. I ultimately received copies and rights to quote from sixteen plays by Arab Americans whose work was produced in New York, four by men and twelve by women.

Having organized my notes into an Excel spreadsheet that could be sorted and grouped according to a variety of factors, there are two gross observations worth noting here. First, English was the dominant language in most of the events I attended. Out of ninety-two events, sixty of them were English only. Fifteen used both Arabic and English, and fifteen presented material that was only in Arabic.<sup>30</sup> Arabic, and by extension Arab American identity, was largely referenced by fake Arabic accents in English or by a few key words of slang that could easily be translated for an audience,

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<sup>30</sup> In addition, one performance used both English and Spanish, and one Arabic and French.

like *habibi* (my love/ honey/ sweetie), or *yani* (like). The dominance of English in Arab American cultural production can be primarily attributed to lack of linguistic ability in Arabic by the bulk of this community. However, even native Arabic speakers produced work in English and events were nearly all framed by English-only introductions that indicated a desire to pitch events to mainstream presumably monolingual American audiences, even when the audience was typically mostly Arab American.

The second major observation that runs across all of these events is that most of them did not reference any political or historical events. Most of the concerts and comedy sketches, and some visual arts exhibits and writings drew on personal experiences, thoughts, emotions, and desires for their content. For those who choose to reference a historical or political event, the War on Terror was the most popular, followed by *al nakba*<sup>31</sup> (the catastrophe) of 1948 and the occupation of Palestine more generally. Gulf Wars I and II were referenced or discussed in about eight productions, and there were a handful that together referenced topics as disparate as the death of Jesus Christ, the Armenian Genocide, and the Zanj Revolt<sup>32</sup> (9<sup>th</sup> century). Only three productions made direct reference to September 11, 2001, and of the three, one was a poem that Amiri Baraka, an African American poet, read at Alwan. That poem, *Somebody Blew Up America*, had cost him a position as Poet Laureate of New Jersey<sup>33</sup> in 2003. September

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<sup>31</sup> Palestinians and Arabs more generally refer to the war and violence that lead to the creation of the state of Israel as *al nakba*, which means catastrophe. For more information on this history see Abu Lughod (1987); Hourani (1991); Khalidi (1997); Sayigh (1979); Tamari (1999).

<sup>32</sup> The Zanj, a tribe of slaves taken from East Africa to work in Iraq, revolted in the 883 AD, and were led by a poet named Ali Ibn Muhammad. The revolt is poetically chronicled by a contemporary poet from Syria named Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said). New York based Tunisian visual artist Emna Zhalgal developed prints to accompany Adonis' poetry about the Zanj revolt, and showcased them at the first visual arts exhibit at Alwan's loft space for one month starting in October 28, 2003. The entire series was later purchased by the Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, New York Public Library

<sup>33</sup> Baraka was not in fact fired. Instead, after being labeled anti-Semitic for over a year, in July 2003 the New Jersey legislature eliminate the post of Poet Laureate altogether. Baraka refused to resign. Alwan



11<sup>th</sup> remains a difficult and somewhat taboo subject within the American and Arab American arts scene in New York.

Demographic Characteristics:

In conjunction with attending and volunteering with the production of Arab American artistic events, I interviewed<sup>34</sup> twenty-six people who were engaged in the Arab American arts scene. These were individuals who self identified and promoted themselves as artists, or were involved in the production of Arab American artistic events by organizing events, raising funds, doing publicity, or serving on the boards of arts organizations. Fourteen were female and twelve were male. The national heritage of those interviewed was mixed, and reflected the general mix of the arts scene at large. Thirteen were Palestinian (one was half, and one was a quarter). Six were Lebanese (two partially); five were Egyptians (one partially); and there was one Iraqi, one Syrian, and one Iranian<sup>35</sup>. Those that were partially Arab had a parent who had married a non-Arab. Of this group, there were seven native Arabic speakers, five of whom were male. Six spoke no Arabic whatsoever; and six spoke what they would consider to be “kitchen” Arabic, or Arabic that’s used in the home and around family but not to discuss politics, history, literature, or even business. Five formally studied Arabic in addition to what

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chose to honor him and his career at a fundraiser for a writers conference in April 2005. Baraka read the poem to a mostly Arab American audience, and prefaced by saying... “I usually have to leave this country to get this warm of a reception”.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews were generally an hour or two, and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place in a variety of locations like my home, their homes or galleries, or in coffee shops and restaurants throughout the city. Several interviews were also done over the phone due to difficulty coordinating logistics and travel plans, however recordings were still made and transcribed.

<sup>35</sup> Although Iranians are not Arab, and not the subject of this study, this particular Iranian mostly did work on Iraq at the time of the study, was a student of Arabic, and a resident artists at Alwan.

they learned in the home, and assessed themselves as proficient in conversation and when reading or writing.

Of the twenty-six interviewed, five came to the United States as young children or teenagers; I considered them to be generation 1.5. Six were first generation, or immigrants born outside of the United States; thirteen second (U.S. born of Arab descent), and one was a third generation Arab American. All but two were citizens or permanent residents of the United States; the remaining two were on a path to citizenship through family based sponsorship, but lived on student or worker visas during the time of my fieldwork. Overall, this indicates that most of those in the study were both legally and socially “Americans”.

Nine of those I interviewed had lived in New York between six and ten years; four had lived here 4 years, and three less than five. Aside from four that were raised in either New York or New Jersey, there was one that had lived in New York for thirty-one years. Fourteen were Christian and nine Muslim by heritage; two were of mixed religious heritage. The bulk of those I interviewed were in their thirties (18); a few were in their 20’s and 40’s, and three fell across three decades, one in his 50’s, one in his 60’s, and one in her 70’s. Twelve of those interviewed were single and heterosexual; three were single gay males, and two were single lesbians. Four people were married, and one was engaged; all were married to non-Arabs. Overall, the bulk of those I interviewed (10) were female Christians in their 30’s, seven of whom were Palestinian.

Seventeen of those interviewed were involved in a performing art, and nine were not. Most were involved in more than one artistic form. For example, most of the actors also had their hand at directing and playwriting. Two of the comedians were also

playwrights and actors. Three were filmmakers, and a couple of them were also comedians or writers. Two were visual artists. Two were poets (who also acted). Three were not artists in any way, but were patrons of the arts, and arts promoters and organizers.

The only types of artist that I did not interview are the musicians and dancers. This, while glaring, was somewhat intentional. While music was ubiquitous to any art form, whether it was a musical concert itself, or the soundtrack for a film or a play, or the background of music of laboring artists, or the sounds we danced to at a party, it was largely in Arabic, and therefore difficult for me to access linguistically as opposed to rhythmically. Music therefore operated at a non-verbal and non-visual level for me, and I did not know how to compare it with other forms whose meaning was largely communicated through words or images. While musicians are a vital part of the arts community, I decided to exclude them from the interview process. Similarly, dancers relied on a movement vocabulary and Arabic music in a way that did not compare well with other forms. In addition, none of the dancers that lived in New York were of Arab descent. While I attended several performances by visiting Palestinian dance troupes, I did not interview any of the dancers.

Arab American artists came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, and varied in the degree of their economic success as artists. Five of the twenty-six interviewed had parents who were working class; two artists had parents who were merchants. Six had parents who were in business. Two had parents in the diplomatic corps; five had parents who were academics, and two had a parent who was a medical doctor. This suggests that the bulk came from middle to upper class backgrounds. Of

those interviewed; thirteen had received their Masters in Fine Arts; two were either PhDs or a candidate; two were lawyers; and eight had received a bachelors. Only one did not complete college; ironically (even from the interviewee's perspective), that individual was very successful and more widely published than those with far higher education levels. Eleven of those interviewed earned their primary income from the arts, while fifteen did not. While none would characterize themselves as rich, a couple of them are financially secure in their professional lives, either as artists or other professionals. Most, however, are not, and are struggling with day jobs, trying to figure out if they can make it or if they should quit and move on to something else.

#### Chapter Summaries:

In the next chapter, "Occupying Space in the Big Apple: Arab American Visibility and the Ever Present American Audience," I explore how Arab Americans use space to mark and market their relative positions within American society by way of the New York culture industry, and the ways that they negotiate their visibility among Arab and non-Arab Americans. I contextualize their efforts today by reviewing the role that the arts has played in urban renewal efforts in postindustrial cities like New York, and the emergence of the figure of the "independent" artist as both a middle class profession and a symbol of freedom and democracy in the West. My ethnographic account describes how Arab American arts organizers create and manage spaces to nurture and promote artists of Arab descent even as they try to appeal to an imagined ever-present American audience. I also describe the contest over representation of Arab identity that takes place within the mainstream marketplace of cultural production in New York, and how many

Arab American artists channel their tenuous grasp on the Arabic language and cultures to try to improve public perceptions of their heritage.

In Chapter Three, “Battling Censorship (As Opposed to Zionism),” I describe how over the course of my fieldwork, I watched Arab American artists in New York embrace their civil liberties as defined in the first amendment as “free speech,” and learn to advocate for their art work within a nationalistic and legalistic framework in order to have it accepted in mainstream American venues on their own terms. While artists may eschew personal involvement in domestic or international politics in favor of their independence as “an artist,” they are increasingly ready to directly engage the law and political activism when it comes to censorship of their work. In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the “culture wars” of the 1980’s and 1990’s in order to provide a larger context for today’s censorship in the arts and the academy. Next, I provide a historical overview of backlash and suppression of Arab American activism. This history is important for understanding the ways that Arab American art is interpreted as being political, and why the artistic realm is used as a proxy for politics. Finally, I turn to my ethnographic account of how artists developed habits for dealing with routine censorship and their attempts to break them. In the larger context of censorship of the arts in the United States, Arab American artists have adopted the advocacy toward their politicized art that artists of the 1980s and 1990s had to when confronted with accusations of moral blasphemy. Their commitment and increasing advocacy for “free speech” is exemplified over greater concern with the canceling of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, a play about a young American activist who died while defending a Palestinian home in Gaza, than the “cartoon controversy” created after the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed

derogatory images of the Prophet Mohammed associating him and Islam with violence. The United States, once consumed by the culture wars, is now consumed by the War on Terror. Whereas gays and those promoting multiculturalism were the enemies of the culture wars of the 80's and 90s, immigrants and "terrorists" fuel the culture wars of the post-9/11 era, and affect the chances of success for Arab American artists in the aesthetic economy.

In Chapter Four, "The Understudy: Art as a Proxy for Politics," I examine how the repression of Arab American political activism and the expansion of the aesthetic economy have resulted in art becoming a proxy for political activity in many respects. I describe how artists of Arab descent use art as a way to experience and express their ethnic identity and advance their careers. By being privileged to live most of their lives away from the wars and traumas in the Middle East, they use their art to both highlight the commonality of mundane human existence and to embody the suffering from which they were removed and protected. Through the artists own words and work I explore the various ways they use their positions to infuse politics into otherwise apolitical aesthetic realms, and also to inject the aesthetics of everyday reality into hyper-politicized discourses on Arabs and the Middle East. I also explore the ways that Arab Americans use the collective labor involved in the production of art as a proxy for political activity, and how the addition of an ethnic element to their artistic efforts alters their level of commitment to their projects. By building artistic communities around values such as meritocracy and democracy rather than familial, national or religions distinctions, they believe themselves to be models of Arab unity and American multi-cultural pluralism. They prize their role as artists bridging communication gaps between Americans and

Arabs, and emphasize their abilities to move fluidly within these worlds. Throughout, they are scrupulously clear about the position as independent artists not allied with any government or political party. As such, they are engaged in a conceptual model of politics that does not easily render symbolic victories into material ones.

The final two ethnographic chapters address the ways that representations of identity through commodified cultural products are highly gendered and interact with gender specific stereotypes. In the case of Arab American females, the stereotype is the repressed and oppressed virgin and, in the case of males, it is the terrorist. In Chapter Five, “The (Female) Virgin (Not),” I explore how Arab American female artists are self-conscious of their roles as interlocutors between Arab and American worlds, and attempt to balance their willful efforts to disrupt the dominant narrative about Arab women by appearing respectful to what are still valued as elements of being an Arab woman, namely modesty, honor, and pride in one’s ethnic identity. This delicate balance is often played out around the issue of sexuality. Since many artists long to de-essentialize the identity of Arab women as veiled and oppressed, sexuality often becomes the centerpiece for representing a liberated and authentic, albeit conflicted and unfulfilled, Arab woman. At stake in decisions to represent Arab femininity and sexuality are the professional careers of Arab American women as artists. All of the women in my study sought to earn their living from the arts, and all lived on their own rather than with their families. Therefore, they had to reconcile their interest in participating in the aesthetic economy with gender based demands of a Western economy, such as the vision of a woman at once sexually liberated and virtuous. As they pursue their careers in the creative economy, they are also sensitive to conventional notions of family, marriage and career

that have either not materialized or that they have actively decided against. This chapter allows me to explore their lives and their art from the perspective of gender and sexuality in order to demonstrate the ways that they negotiate their identities and work as Arab American female artists in New York.

Chapter Six, “The (Male) Terrorist (Not),” addresses the core stereotype of Arabs in the United States, namely the “terrorist,” and how Arab American male artists negotiate a space in the aesthetic economy underneath its shadow. In this chapter, I review the literature on the figure of the “terrorist” from the perspectives of popular culture and academia. I also describe U.S. government efforts in the War on Terror, as these real life initiatives supply the dramas that are enacted in performance. Drawing on these sources, I move from a discussion on the general association of “terrorism” with “deviance” and “perversity” to how Arab American artists counter these charges with projections of “normal” that deflate stereotypical Arab masculinity and inflate the extent to which Arab metrosexual, artistic males participate in the aesthetic economy. First, by deflecting the association of themselves with Arab terrorists as mistaken, and then by demonstrating their talents as cultural workers, Arab artists seek to embody the alternative to terrorism even as the content of their work depends on the very existence of the construct of the terrorist itself. In order to demonstrate this process, I start by describing some demographic characteristics of Arab male artists in New York, and their career paths in the arts. Next, I describe how they struggle to work around the Arab terrorist stereotype in the mainstream entertainment industry. Finally, I draw on many cases from the worlds of comedy and theater that project the image of the innocent Arab metrosexual artist and intellectual as the foil for the Arab male terrorist.



I conclude this dissertation in Chapter Seven with a summary of the findings by chapter and directions for future research. This includes a more expansive look at the workings of the aesthetic economy in New York, and an exploration of that ways that Arab American artists are received and influence cultural production in the Arab world today. I note that the celebration of Arab American artists in New York often falls within the rhetoric of the civilizing mission of the West in relationship to the Arab and Muslim world. While this may benefit Arab American artists professionally, as Cornell West noted of black artists in the early 1990s, it risks complete co-optation and makes political reform of social inequities “difficult” at best. Therefore, while the “ethnic pride” that results from the accomplishments of many of the artists reviewed in this dissertation is high, more work can be done to build political and social infrastructures among Arab Americans in order to reduce discrimination, inequity, and injustices both in America and abroad.

## **2. Occupying Space in the Big Apple: Arab American Visibility and the Ever Present American Audience**

On the first day that I moved to New York City, I ended up at a party in Williamsburg, a thriving outpost of the arts and alternative living. Climbing the steep steps that ran along the side of an old industrial loft building, I took a deep breath and hoped that the wire fencing meant to keep people from falling into the empty lot below would hold. Positioned to counter the high commercialism of Manhattan, predominately Hispanic Williamsburg became home to a large number of white trendsetters and vanguards of the creative economies in the 1990s and into the new millennium. Knowing it was a party hosted by an Arab American artist, I expected to see many Arabs there. I did not expect it to be so otherwise hip was along the lines familiar to me from experiences in other cities that did not have a strong Arab arts scene. Yet, it was.

Whether in Chicago, San Francisco, or Atlanta, I was always drawn to that fringe of American culture that celebrated its discomfort with the trappings of privilege. Dark, sparse, and raw attracted me more than the comforts of commercial pop culture. In all three cities, mostly white musicians, filmmakers, painters, writers, and dancers made up the scene that I enjoyed. While Atlanta added a dimension of race to the desire to push the aesthetic comfort zones of white America, New York was the first place I lived that ethnicity came into play. Parties like the one on that first night started to make this point more apparent.

In that sprawling loft with industrial windows, unfinished walls, and concrete floors, people danced to Arab pop and drank a great deal of alcohol. No one asked my family name, there was no discomfort with impropriety, and no one was overly dressed up or made up. This scene was repeated in many living rooms, at after parties and going

away parties, and also in spaces that became more institutionalized centers of Arab cultural life in New York. Whether through their social lives or in their professional artistic endeavors, Arabs occupy spaces and share habits with other artists and performers of their generation. They are able to leverage their knowledge of the cultural landscape of New York City toward promoting artistic work that emphasizes their Arab ethnic identity. In turn, they are reciprocally recruited by New York's culture industry to provide authenticity to mainstream productions that comment on U.S. involvement in the Middle East.

In this chapter, I explore how Arab Americans use space to mark and market their relative positions within American society, and the ways that they negotiate their visibility among Arab and non-Arab Americans. I describe how organizers create and manage spaces to nurture and promote artists of Arab descent even as they try to appeal to an imagined ever-present American audience. I also describe the contest over representation of Arab identity that takes place within the mainstream marketplace of cultural production in New York, and how many Arab American artists channel their tenuous grasp on the Arabic language and cultures to try to improve public perceptions of their heritage.

#### Art and Urban Renewal:

New York City is popularly recognized as a cultural capital of the United States and the world. The growth of New York's cultural industry from World War II till today has been tremendous, and reflects the overall importance of aesthetic and creative economies in the post-industrial world and their role in maintaining urban environments

as spaces for both middle class society and capitalist investment. Significantly, the transformation of the art market post-World War II both enabled artists to earn a living as artists, and also to make art and the lifestyles of artists palatable to the middle class. In *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Serge Guilbaut (1983) describes the shift of modern art production from Paris to New York during and after World War II, and how this shift was contingent upon the expansion of the capitalist and geo-political interests of the United States. Whereas artists throughout the Great Depression engaged in a recognized profession and produced works of social realism for the laboring masses, artists post-World War II were celebrated for their independence and freedom of expression, and some were highly rewarded financially. This corresponded to Cold War tactics that associated artistic freedom with democracy, and the government, in due turn, shifted its focus from artists' subsidies through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to stimulating mass consumption of artwork on the private art market. This "market" of galleries and museums sent prices soaring, and created an environment that conflated aesthetic worth with market value, something that confounds appreciation by novice consumers of art till this day. Modern artists were celebrated for their creativity within a domain that was distinctly apolitical yet reflective of the liberal politic and economic environment in which it was produced. Political art, often produced within a Marxist framework became unfashionable and publicly challenged by McCarthy anti-Communist entities such as the House Unamerican Activities Committee. However politics, in the form of anxiety and fear of nuclear attacks or modern life, were acceptably packaged in abstract art. Guilbaut concludes:

It is ironic but not contradictory that in a society politically stuck in a position to the right of center, in which political repression weighed as

heavily as it did in the United States, abstract expressionism was for many the expression of freedom: the freedom to create controversial works of art, the freedom symbolized by action painting, by unbridled expressionism of artists completely without fetters... Expressionism stood for the difference between a free society and a totalitarian one. (1983: 201)

In *Loft Living*, Sharon Zurkin (1989) charts the ascendancy of cultural industries in the 1960s, their influence on middle class tastes in homes, and collusion between the government, commercial real estate and capitalist expansion in the development of lofts as acceptable places to live. She writes, “On the one hand, artists’ living habits became a cultural model for the middle class. On the other hand, old factories became a means of expression for a ‘post-industrial’ civilization. A heightened sense of art and history, space and time, was dramatized by the taste-setting mass media” (1989:15). The transformation of Soho in the 1970s from small businesses and low income artist studios to high end commercial and residential properties became a template for public/ private partnership for urban renewal. Such “renewal” was a response to the lack of investment in cities beginning in the 1950s that accompanied the post-Fordist restructuring of world economies. New York City was nearly bankrupt by the mid 1970s, and, like other cities, had a high concentration of poverty, unemployment, and a poor quality and inadequate supply of housing. William Sites (2003) documents how New York was rescued by coalitions between the public and private sectors, as well as national, state, and local agents, and how, in the process neoliberal economics was born. He writes:

It is important to recall how profoundly conditions had changed since the dark days of the mid-1970s. At that time, confronted by the threat of municipal default, New York was hemorrhaging jobs, investment, tax revenues, residents, and large amounts of civic pride. By the end of the 1990s, the city was enjoying a booming local economy, near-record annual employment gains, a thriving real-estate market, a growing population, falling crime rates, and a budget surplus of nearly \$3 billion...

More than a success story, New York's famous crossroads of the world had become a model of the new city: safe, clean, and prosperous, a place of opportunity where middle-class visitors could feel at home (2003: 31).

Ranking second to Disney land as a tourist destination for Americans in 2000<sup>1</sup>, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 only strengthened America's attachment to New York as a quintessentially modern American city. The tragedy provided renewed impetus for developers to enlist the arts and "culture" as a strategy toward urban revitalization.

In the context of urban renewal, artists are widely recognized as part of the process of gentrification in which higher class residents drive out lower class ones. However, Richard Lloyd (2006) contends that artists are not only pre-cursors to affluence, but contribute to the production of capital in the post-industrial city. In *Neo-Bohemia*, Lloyd studies the transformation of Wicker Park in Chicago from a largely Hispanic neighborhood inhabited by pockets of low income white artists in the 1980s to a trendy home for middle class young professionals and their families by the mid-1990s. He compares and contrasts the centrality of artist's and their spaces in today's economy with the laborer and factories of the industrial era. Artists no longer live in romantic conflict with bourgeois capitalist culture as they once did in early twentieth century Parisian bohemia. Rather than being completely marginalized and opposed to capitalist production, Lloyd portrays today's artists as aiding and abetting the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace in which flexibility and creativity are highly valued, and risk and financial uncertainty are the norm. As described by Thomas Frank in *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), corporate America fundamentally altered its business model in the 1960s to incorporate the aesthetic and even ideological positions of the "counterculture" in ways

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<sup>1</sup> Sites 2003

that have endured till this day. This is matched by consumers that David Brooks (2001) calls Bobo's (bourgeois bohemians): "working like the bourgeoisie and consuming like bohemians." (Lloyd 2006: 67)

Lloyd substantiates Fredric Jameson's claims of the command of aesthetics on the economy in *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) with statistics on writers, artists, and performers in the United States in the twentieth century. He found that between 1900 and 1970, the number of artists in America increased by only 44%; however between 1970 and 1999, the number increased by 237%.<sup>2</sup> "In absolute terms, the number of artists, writers, and performers grew from 791,000 in 1970 to almost two and a half million in 1999" (Lloyd 2006: 65). The Center for Urban Future estimates that in 2005, 8.3 percent of all creative sector workers in the U.S. are based in New York, employing 309,142 people.<sup>3</sup> They estimate that "the city is home to over a third of all the country's actors and roughly 27 percent of the nation's fashion designers, 12 percent of film editors, 10 percent of set designers, 9 percent of graphic designers, 8 percent of architects, and 7 percent of fine artists" (Keegan et al. 2005:3). The New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs also boasts having a larger budget than the National Endowment for the Arts. In New York's 2005 trillion dollar economy, the arts are estimated to have contributed \$25.7 billion.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from the income from artistic production, the arts contribute to the economy through the construction of spaces to accommodate its production and consumption. Capital spending on New York City's non-profit cultural institutions from

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<sup>2</sup> The number of artists, writers, and performers went from 267 to 385 per 100,000 of the U.S. population from 1900-1970; by 1999, it leapt to 900 per 100,000 (Lloyd 2006)

<sup>3</sup> London is the only city in the world that claims a higher number of workers in the creative economies, estimating it to be 525,000. Creative New York. Center for an Urban Future. 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Scanlon (2006)

1992-2002 totaled \$2.4 billion. In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the city and developers agreed that the reconstruction of the downtown space once occupied by the Twin Towers would include venues for the arts. On September 15, 2003, the *New York Times* reported,

When the World Trade Center was conceived in the 1960s, its developers didn't worry much about the absence of museums, opera houses, symphony orchestras or jazz clubs in Lower Manhattan. Yet almost all involved in the planning to rebuild at ground zero have agreed on at least one thing: whatever comes next should include cultural institutions (Salamon 2003).

The next day, the Times<sup>5</sup> reported on the groups that had submitted bids for space to the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), the group tasked to rebuild “ground zero”. They included the New York City Opera<sup>6</sup>, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y<sup>7</sup>, the City University of New York<sup>8</sup>, El Museo Del Barrio<sup>9</sup>, the Wooster Group<sup>10</sup>, and the Soho Repertory Theater<sup>11</sup>; basically every major cultural institution in the city. In addition, bids were accepted from cultural groups from around the country and the world. A total of 70 applications were submitted, and all required a commitment on the part of the applicants to contribute money toward their proposed capital projects.

In June 2004, the LMDC announced that four cultural institutions would be housed at the World Trade Center Site: the International Dance Center, the International Freedom Center, the Signature Center and the Drawing Center. In a press release, Mayor

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<sup>5</sup> Pogrebin 2003

<sup>6</sup> New York City Opera is located at Lincoln Center, next to the Metropolitan Opera in Midtown West.

<sup>7</sup> The 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y is a “proudly Jewish institution” that promotes arts and culture more generally. It is located in the Upper East Side. The preceding quote is from mission statement on website: [www.92y.org](http://www.92y.org)

<sup>8</sup> The City University of New York sponsors several campuses in NYC.

<sup>9</sup> El Museo Del Barrio is on the Upper East Side in historically Spanish Harlem.

<sup>10</sup> The Wooster Group is an experimental theater company whose founders included Willem Dafoe and Spalding Gray. It is located in Soho.

<sup>11</sup> The Soho Repertory Theater is located in Soho, and was founded by a college classmate of mine, Daniel Aukin.



Bloomberg is quoted as stating: "The selection of these institutions is a great step in the revitalization of Lower Manhattan and a significant development in New York's cultural renaissance. Culture is one of New York City's most important industries for our economy, international identity, and future growth."<sup>12</sup> Instead of transplanting landmark cultural institutions in the City, the Corporation went for new projects that could be marketed within American political rhetoric of freedom and internationalism. For example, the not-so-subtle The Freedom Center, "a new organization created expressly for the World Trade Center Site that will include exhibitions centered on humankind's enduring quest for freedom"<sup>13</sup> will someday stand in place of towers that were once expressly on a quest for capital.

In addition to construction projects in Lower Manhattan, the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund was created by The New York Community Trust and United Way of New York City to provide humanitarian relief to victims of the attack, and to support philanthropy related to the attacks. The Fund collected \$534 million from more than two million donors, and distributed it to both individuals and non-profit organizations in the New York City area through 559 grants. The fund acted as a coordinating body for more than 300 non-profit groups, as well as the City State and Federal Agencies. The New York Community Trust writes:

The Fund quickly made grants to nonprofits that were providing health care, legal and financial help, and psychiatric counseling, and paid for meals

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12 June 10, 2004 Press Release: LMDC ANNOUNCES VIBRANT CULTURAL MIX OF DANCE, THEATRE, AND FINE ARTS FOR THE WORLD TRADE CENTER SITE Year-Round Mix of Diverse and Dynamic Cultural Programming Will Spur Cultural Activity Downtown and Create a World Class Cultural Destination.

<sup>13</sup> Quote is from the International Freedom Center's (IFC) website: [www.ifcwtc.org](http://www.ifcwtc.org). Despite its initial acceptance, IFC was barred by Governor Pataki from being housed at "ground zero" in September 2005 due to claims that its exhibits would be critical of the United States (Dunlap 2005). The IFC promptly ended its pursuit to become a museum and went out of business.

provided by relief agencies to rescue workers. ...The Fund's focus then shifted to helping people and neighborhoods with longer-term recovery, including needs that were not immediately apparent after the attacks. Multi-million programs were designed in-house with a set of benefits and a defined class of eligible applicants: job training and placement, mental health and substance abuse treatment, health insurance, financial aid, and case management....When the Fund was closed in December 2004, \$528 million had been paid out. The remaining funds are committed to construction projects in lower Manhattan and to arts and culture groups that will attract people to the neighborhood.<sup>14</sup>

On the scale of needs following the 9/11 attacks, arts and culture may not have been a top priority, but they were not far down the list of things necessary for the city's recovery.

Nearly every non-profit that I came in contact with in four years and a half years in New York received some funding from the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund. This included organizations like the Filipino American Human Services, which used the funds to help day laborers seek health care and workers compensation, or the Arab American Family Support Center, which used it to do outreach and education on mental health and domestic violence, to Alwan for the Arts, which used it to run film festivals of contemporary films from the Arab world. In fact, the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund channeled through grants administered by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council has been largest source of grant funding for Arab American artists in New York since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks that are understood to have been perpetrated by Arabs.<sup>15</sup> Though this may seem ironic, it demonstrates how Arab Americans were able to participate in city wide reconstruction projects that resulted from the attacks by offering services in line with those upheld by the city's developers and planners. Their work also provided a way for city planners to

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<sup>14</sup> New York Community Trust [www.nycommunitytrust.org](http://www.nycommunitytrust.org)

<sup>15</sup> No one has ever objected to Arab American organizations receiving funds from the September 11<sup>th</sup> Funds, not even the highly opinioned Families of September 11<sup>th</sup>, who make frequent comments on the Lower Manhattan Development Corporations' plans.

demonstrate commitment to New York's diversity and inclusion of all its minority populations.

The following sections reveal the readiness of Arab American artists to capitalize on their familiarity with the city's cultural landscape and resources in order to promote their work and their vision of art and culture. Politics remains secondary to their intention of producing and promoting art and culture. While the role of political ideology and activism in art is important (see Chapter Three: The Understudy), in this chapter I will recognize how most Arab American artists played into distinctions between art and politics prominent in American art since the 1950s, emphasizing their independence and freedom as cultural producers instead of their commitment to any nationalistic ideologies. Their work claims detachment from both Arab and American nationalistic ideologies, and is able to be politically and socially critical while being celebrated by both populations as artists. This chapter will describe both Arab American and mainstream American cultural institutions promoting Arab themed art and culture, the contest for authority that often ensues when representing Arabs, and the role of space for each.

#### Arab American Artists Living and Working in New York City:

Despite the geographic concentration of Arabs in distinctive neighborhoods in New York like Bay Ridge, Brooklyn and certain areas of Astoria, Queens, most Arab American artists are scattered throughout Manhattan and the five boroughs. Many live and work in areas that are common to other artists who flock to New York, like Williamsburg, Washington Heights, and Bushwick. Several older artists managed to

secure prime real estate in the 70s and 80s in Soho, and have managed to survive the real estate boom beginning in the 1990s. Between 2003-2006 anyone living in New York was lucky to pay less than one thousand dollars a month for their rent. Those that were even luckier managed to find a studio or one bedroom apartment in one of the outer boroughs or at the far northern end of Manhattan. I visited many apartments in pre-war buildings that seemed to be occupied mostly by ethnic working class families and a random assortment of artists. A few also lived in converted industrial lofts, before they became prohibitively expensive due to rent hikes and their ultimate conversion into high end luxury condominium lofts. Like other artists of their generation, Arab Americans were among the “foot soldiers” of gentrification. Most did not survive in those neighborhoods that ultimately turned towards hosting the middle and upper class singles and families tied to corporate America. Most lived with roommates, even though by their mid-thirties they wished to either live alone or with a significant other. However, the confines of a small apartment generally encouraged people to share larger spaces that they could not afford alone.

All of the artists that I met rented their apartments. A few were in a position to consider buying something, but were unsettled by prospects of a “burst” of the real estate bubble and not certain where exactly their careers would take them. The most successful traveled extensively for their work, touring around the country or around the world, which made it difficult to commit to owning a home. However, few were really in the position to buy their homes, and most worried about whether or not they would be able to even make their rent the next month. One artist even confided that she slept in her grant awarded artist studio one month because she could not pay her rent. Anxiety over

housing is commonly felt and expressed by artists. Surveys conducted by the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University lists housing as a top concern among artists in New York (Jeffri 2007). As most Arab American artists lived independent of their families, their housing depended on their livelihood as artists, which was unsteady at best.

Like their choice to live in neighborhoods that are not distinctly Arab, artists made full use of the multitude of venues in New York for cultural performances. While artists may live in the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens or in the remote northern corners of Manhattan, the venues selected for their performances and productions are centrally located and often renowned showcases of arts and culture in Manhattan. Far from being restricted to ethnic ghettos, Arab American artists, performers, and cultural organizers leveraged their knowledge of mainstream venues to give the effect of inclusion of Arab Americans in New York's cultural landscape. Comedians who performed nightly in the city's comedy clubs trying to get a break at being discovered would in turn use their connections to rent a space for an Arab themed showcase. After 9/11 clubs that attract mainstream comics such as Jerry Seinfeld, Dane Cook, and Dave Chappelle began hosting "The Arabian Nights" or the New York Arab American Comedy Festival with predominantly Arab American audiences. Venues such as The Gotham Comedy Club, the Improv Comedy Club, the Laugh Factory, and Stand Up New York were just as big a draw as the performers themselves. They carried with them the signs of success for their status conscious immigrant audiences.

Similarly, film festivals require venues that have the capacity to hold an audience and screen 35 millimeter films, and be centrally located and established enough to draw

the audience in the first place. Using connections through Middle Eastern studies departments at academic institutions facilitated rental of screening halls such as NYU's Cantor Center or Columbia University for several thousand dollars for a weekend. However, when grants from agencies such as the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council stipulated use of funding in certain areas of the city, i.e. lower Manhattan, organizations were forced to rent spaces like Tribeca Cinema for sums nearing twenty thousand dollars for a week. While it was exciting to have the "New York Arab and South Asian Film Festival"<sup>16</sup> displayed on the marquee normally reserved for the "Tribeca Film Festival," it raised the overall cost of the production beyond what could be reasonably collected from ticket sales alone.



Marquis of Alwan's 2008 Film Festival. Photo by Maysoun Freij

In the visual arts, several prominent galleries and museums now promote Arab American artists. For example, although Emily Jacir, a Palestinian American conceptual artist, had her premier New York solo show in 2003 at a Lebanese owned gallery in Chelsea called Debs and Co., she has since been promoted by non-Arab Alexander and Bonin in Chelsea. In New York alone, she has also been included in exhibitions at the

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<sup>16</sup> Alwan's 2007 and 2008 New York Arab and South Asian Film Festival included the "prestigious" Tribeca as a venue due to grant requirements to showcase its work in Lower Manhattan.

Queens Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Of similar stature is the work of Ghada Amer, an Egyptian woman living in NY; her work is represented by the famous Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea. Those less recognized are content to be shown in any Chelsea Gallery. For example, to view the rich and colorful work of Tunisian artist Emna Zhagal's at the Skoto Gallery in Chelsea, one entered an unmarked building, took a freight elevator to a top floor, then walked down a hallway to the bright but windowless corner gallery hosting her work. I will return to the presence of Arab American visual artists in the larger art world landscape later in this chapter.

Arab American cultural producers play upon the status of particular spaces in order to promote the importance their work and assure its success. For example, it was of capital importance to the producers of the *Made in Palestine* visual arts exhibit to house the work in a prominent location such as gallery district in Chelsea. At first, organizers sought a museum or gallery to host the exhibit for free, and refused to put any of the work in the show on sale, subverting the commercial function of galleries themselves. When all refused, for either financial or political reasons, the organizers managed to secure the lease on a large vacant loft in Chelsea for eleven thousand dollars a month, then recruited a team of volunteers to clean and paint its walls. They opened the exhibit in April 2006, and held onto the lease of the space through the following summer. Following the *Made in Palestine* exhibit, the producers organized another exhibit called *Three Arab Painters in New York*. Despite the fact that the organizers inserted themselves into the Chelsea art scene by paying for space, the exhibit was marketed as if the Chelsea art scene were promoting it, claiming in all its promotional materials that it is

a “historic exhibition of museum quality Palestinian art in the heart of New York City's art world in Chelsea”.

One of the most excessive uses of space for the promotion of identity politics was the dance performance by Firqat El-Funoun from Ramallah Palestine at Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center. The Network of Arab American Professionals managed to make this home to world renown symphonies and orchestras the site for an evening of performance by El-Fanoun. El Fanoun began as a dance troupe in 1979, and is loosely affiliated with the communist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. While being the preeminent dance troupe in Palestine, the dancers suffer from consequences of occupation such as curfews, closures, and arrests that inhibit their full professional development. Under the direction of Omar Barghouti, a prominent, young Palestinian intellectual, the company has expanded its repertoire of folk dance and music to include some modern dance choreography. Their original tour to the U.S. was scheduled to take place at Town Hall, a very large and respectable space, however it was postponed due to the death of Yasser Arafat on November 11, 2004. By the time the fraction of the troupe allowed to enter through U.S. security and immigration services took the stage on November 30, 2005, nearly seven hundred people had gathered to see it at Lincoln Center. Although the audience mostly consisted of Palestinians from New York and its surrounding states, few had heard the original songs or seen the dances that the troupe performed. However, most were gratified by the modest production of both traditional and politically charged modern dances, and all stood and cheered at the end when the Palestinian flag was waved by dancing youth. An American friend who had gone to see the performance admitted



that it was not the quality that one would expect from the Lincoln Center, but that she understood the significance of the event for the Palestinian community.

Galleries, theaters, comedy clubs, and symphony halls all earn profits while most Arab American artistic and cultural production does not. Zurkin (1989) describes the symbiotic relationship between artists, galleries, and museums that developed as galleries and the art market grew in its taste for living artists after World War II. Artists supply galleries, and galleries supply museums; collectors benefit from tax deductions by donating art to museums, and in turn buy art from galleries which they then donate to museums. Galleries provide a mechanism for visual artists to earn steady income, even though most today keep up to 60% of the market price. Similarly theaters, comedy clubs, and symphony halls all earn profits, whether from sales of ticket, merchandise, beverages, or even government subsidies. While a few Arab American artists participate in this market and ultimately earn their living as artists, most arts organizers draw on the status of venues in order to cover the costs of production alone. Despite the financial challenges, several institutions flourished during my fieldwork that were dedicated to promoting Arab American arts.

#### Arab Run Art Spaces:

Today, New York is home to many collective attempts to create spaces that nurture and promote artists of Arab descent. These specialized showcases are in part antidotes to the exclusion and stigmatization of Arabs in mainstream American popular culture, particularly by the news media, political rhetoric, and general Hollywood releases. They are meant as an escape from the structures imposed on the discourse of Arab issues in mainstream venues. Such structures include framing Arabs, particularly

Palestinians, in relation to their opposition, either culturally or politically, and requiring a “balanced” picture as measured in equal time for each position. Instead of participating in this regulatory model of public culture, Arab run spaces open opportunities to dominate discourse and present material on its own terms. Organizers consider this as a way to do justice to Arab social and political causes and to artists struggling for recognition, visibility, and success. Arab run spaces provide a way for audiences to discretely connect or reconnect with their “homelands,” and act as a magnet for random artists of Arab descent drawn to New York each year to try to make it big. Although there is a common interest to communicate with and attract a mainstream American audience, the content and approach differs across Arab American arts institutions. Alwan for the Arts and the New York Arab American Comedy Festival are two institutions that dominated that Arab American arts and cultural scene during my fieldwork. Both will be described to demonstrate the variation that exists among those intending to carve out an Arab American space within New York.

### *Alwan for the Arts*

Alwan plays a critical role in developing community through the arts and cultures of the peoples of the Middle East in New York. In doing so, it provides not only a venue for a better understanding of this often maligned group of people in the United States, but also a safe place for predominantly Arabs to explore both traditional and contemporary forms of artistic and cultural expression from the Middle East and its diaspora. This venture has been undertaken by a passionate and dedicated group of volunteers who have struggled, like all arts and cultural organizations, to carry out their broad minded and far-

reaching vision with little means to do so. They have risked being subject to the stigma and suspicion that Arabs routinely feel, as well as having limited audiences due to the paranoid seclusion that many in their own communities practice as a result of targeted profiling and policing by authorities. Nonetheless, it has endeared itself to the community through its generous space and programming, and has managed to find support from both mainstream and other ethnic community groups.

Alwan began in 1998 as an initiative of Alex Khalil and Ahmed Issawi, both determined to bring Arab and Iranian cinema to New York. Their festivals were landmark events for Middle Eastern audiences, as they brought to the big screen the best of what were becoming internationally recognized art films and combined them with popular features in the Middle East. Although the initiative tried to remain politically neutral, the organizers never shied away from sensitive or politically relevant topics, as could be seen in the 2001 film series, *Islam on Film*. In 2003, the organizers lucked upon a space in lower Manhattan that they hoped would become a hub of activity within the community; and quickly it did.

It was my habit of compulsively cleaning that drew me into Alwan as an organization when it opened its loft in July of 2003. Shortly after tearing out the ceiling and most of the walls of its space, Alwan held its opening party on a hot night in a space with wires hanging off the ceiling (made from the exposed beams of the floor above it) and windows propped open only to draw in moist mosquito ridden air. Even after the party had started, organizers kept running out to buy fans, bags of ice, and drinks. I was instructed to bring toilet paper and paper towels on my way there. By the end of the evening, I was picking up discarded cups and napkins, as well as equipment, chairs, and

anything else that needed arranging or cleaning. Alex Khalil approached me very eagerly to ask, “Why are you helping? Why are you so nice?” Then I was unofficially conscripted.

At that time, Alwan had the sole lease on the five thousand square foot loft. While most Arab artists and arts groups held in their events in mainstream American venues throughout the city, Alwan was the first organization to seek to bring together artists of Middle Eastern heritage in a physical space dedicated for that purpose. Organizers ambitiously sought to draw in random and scattered activities throughout the city under one roof, a roof that was gloriously and generously theirs at first.<sup>17</sup> After slaving away on an installation or a performance or party, they had no qualms about deserting the place for several days before cleaning it up. They had even worked out a deal with a local yogi: he and his students had a free space to practice if they cleaned up beforehand. More than any other organization in the community, I watched Alwan go from a bunch of renegade and haphazard organizers to a market savvy coordinated group. Just as the space provided a showcase for rarely seen performers and performances, it gave its organizers a crash course in non-profit arts management better than any graduate program could.

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<sup>17</sup> After a couple years of barely making rent, Alwan lost half its loft space to a private photography studio. Alwan coordinates its activities with this company, and holds rights to the main loft area in the evenings and on weekends.



Photo of Alwan for the Arts 2006. Courtesy of Berry Behrendt

Looking back, one might consider the disarray of the space at the time it opened to reflect the organizers state of mind when it came to how to develop this space and what it was meant to represent. After 9/11, the general tenor of self promotion in the Arab community fell along the lines of, “look, we’re safe, peaceful, non-violent Arabs who just want peace and to live in harmony with our neighbors”. There was very little reception by the outside world for any other rhetoric from Arabs. Instead of buying into this rhetoric, without really understanding why, organizations like Alwan began programming largely to satisfy their own interests aesthetically and intellectually. Outside sympathizers were eager to support a group that was clearly being stigmatized by the national “war on terror” campaign. Yet there was no clear discourse that suggested anything other than “we exist”.

Defining its mission and its audience proved difficult for organizers who reject most conventional notions of who Arabs are and what organizations and spaces are meant

to accomplish. Feeling politics to be hopeless and divisive, Alwan's organizers hoped that hosting activities that were not explicitly political could unite and possibly do something for people suffering oppression in the U.S. and in the Middle East, North Africa, and possibly throughout the globe. Various iterations of their mission statement reflected this Alwan's affinity for the oppressed universally. While it has been consistently characterized as a "volunteer based, non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of {fill in the blank} arts and culture in New York," *whose* arts and culture ranged from Arabs, Iranians, and North Africans, to South Asians, Afghans, and the occasional peoples of the Middle East. When accused of buying into President Bush's rhetoric about the "Axis of Evil" and all brown people, one organizer agreed, "yes, that's what we are and who we'll serve."<sup>18</sup> Outsiders looking for a convenient way to label the group would claim that it was "Muslim," which infuriated the non-religious secular organizers. Alwan began with no clear direction or purpose, but with the intention to be open to Arab communities and beyond. It primarily hoped to fill the space with people on a regular basis. I would characterize the organizers as post-colonial in their outlook: resistant to American imperialism; aware of the dominant gaze on themselves as the "other"; and eager to promote high quality art out of modernist sensibilities.

Arab communities were so eager for a chance to celebrate their heritage and contemporary culture that people endured a slow renovation process that has ultimately transformed a raw loft into a highly functioning multi-media event space. It surprised organizers that despite its unpainted walls and unsanded floors, Alwan attracted everyone from the elite professionals coming from Ivy League academic posts or Wall Street firms to housewives, shopkeepers, and inner city youth. Organizers hardly had to formally

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<sup>18</sup> Regardless of its intentions, Alwan is mostly run by, and mostly serves people of Arab descent.

program events in their first year in the space because so many people and groups volunteered to organize events for them. Visual art exhibits, concerts, book readings, plays, dances, film screenings, and fundraisers for humanitarian relief both domestically and abroad booked the space constantly, and organizers struggled to keep up with the demand. Programming at Alwan has been heavy on music and film, with some lectures by professors promoting their latest books. Concerts and parties were popular programs that were sure to draw a crowd. Thanks to Taoufiq Ben Amor, a volunteer who is a musician and popular professor of Arabic language and literature, Alwan was filled two to three times a month with concerts by local and visiting musicians. The music was mostly traditional Arabic music from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, some musicians used traditional instruments in more contemporary and multicultural ways. For example, Tareq Aboushi is a Palestinian composer and plays the bouzouq, a banjo-like string instrument. Through his college training in music in the U.S. he began performing with an eclectic mix of musicians, including Hector Morales from Peru, forming a band he called “Shu Ismo” or in English, ‘What’s it called?’ Likewise, Amir El Saffar, an Arab American virtuoso trumpet player received a fellowship to study Iraqi Maqam (traditional note patterns in Arabic music) in Iraq after the latest assault on it started in 2003. He now leads an ensemble of maqam infused jazz. The space usually fills with a mix of Arabs, students of Arabic, and Arabo-philes, or those individuals who for political or personal reasons have an affinity to Arab causes and cultures.

In addition to keeping up with the demand for Arab arts programming, Alwan also struggled to finance a space in Manhattan that generates essentially no revenue. Most of its events are free, or charge only a nominal fee that is intended for the artists or

performers, not the organizers. Alwan aims to provide an accessible space for people from a region that is oppressed by war, violence, poverty, and corruption. While these same people may live comfortably in New York, Alwan touches on the despair that comes from knowing the tragedies that others suffer, and transforms it into a community bonded by intellectual curiosity, aesthetic appreciation, and hope for change.

Given that Alwan has hosted hundreds of events over the past three years, and that I've had the fortune (or misfortune depending on the night) of attending and/ or assisting with scores of them, I will explore the relationship between Alwan and its audiences and communities through its first major film festival since opening its loft space in 2003. The dynamic interplay between organizers and the audiences of a film festival shapes the way that each perceives the other, and in the case of a film festival that is organized by a community-based arts organization like Alwan for the Arts in New York City, it allows organizers to better articulate its intentions while building relationships within its community. The programming and screening of the 2006 Alwan Film Festival made apparent the eclectic mix of resourcefulness, commitment, and creativity required to conduct a film festival meant to gather and unite fragmented Arab communities living in the United States today.

#### Alwan's Programming: Nations Out of Focus

Some time toward the end of February 2006, what had been an idea tossed around in grant proposals was about to become a reality. The dates were set for April 14-23, 2006, making it the longest festival that Alwan had ever planned, and a big test for the organization and its ability to draw an audience.



Working throughout the night to be in sync with the Middle East and barely leaving his house, Issawi managed to ostensibly pull together a committee of academics and filmmakers to select a broad range of contemporary films created by filmmakers from the Arab world, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and South Asia, and filmed in any of these regions or in the West. The vague geographic focus of the films is again the product of a tendency to view the suffering of Arab people as a universal and global condition that truly knows no boundaries. Practically, it was attributed to the different backgrounds of the curators,<sup>19</sup> as well as from a desire to draw out the artistic connections between distinct parts of the world that are increasingly brought together due to political circumstances, particularly by the United States military and political aggressions after September 11, 2001. In fact, one of the intentions of Alwan's festival was to highlight the blurring of national boundaries caused by wars and migration and reflected in the international co-production of the films themselves. As the mission statement puts it:

The festival is restless, showcasing films of a people subject to intrepid scrutiny. As transplants with hybrid identities our intervention lies in solidarity with people who, in spite of threats and turmoil, are rich with imagination, talent, and indomitable intelligence.

Being neither “geographically nor topically bounded,” the festival sought as many contemporary films as it could afford and reasonably program within its nine-day schedule. Bound by its non-thematic mission, it avoided deliberately choosing films based on one particular topic or another, but focused on what were thought to be technically well-produced and artistically-rendered films representing life among the

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<sup>19</sup> The 2006 Alwan Film Festival selection committee included Hamid Dabashi, an Iranian professor at Columbia's Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures Department; Annemarie Jacir, a Palestinian filmmaker; Prerana Reddy, the Director of 3rd “I”(a South Asian film collective) and Director of Public Events at the Queens Museum of Art; Sherif Sadek, an Egyptian filmmaker; Asal Shakeri, a curator of Iranian cinema; and Emna Zghal, a Tunisian visual artist.

people of these diverse regions. Altogether, the festival held twenty-six screenings of full-length films and ten shorts, most either New York or U.S. premieres. Four filmmakers from the Middle East, as well as several filmmakers residing in New York, participated in the festival. Venues included the Anthology Film Archive in the East Village and NYU's Cantor Theater in the West Village.

Fundraising efforts for the Alwan Film Festival were critical.<sup>20</sup> Recent Western attention to films from the Arab and Muslim world like Hany Abu Assad's *Paradise Now* (2005), winner of a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film in 2006, as well as more European investment in the production of such films, have caused a sudden increase in the cost of renting and screening Arab films. "Three years ago when we organized our last festival, we would have paid three hundred dollars for each film, maximum," said Issawi. "Today they're at least a thousand Euro!"

Increased commercial interest in Arab films added another competitive aspect to securing many of the films for Alwan's Festival. Alwan had to compete with the likes of the Tribeca Film Festival and Cannes to obtain several films. Larger, richer, and more established festivals tend to overbook foreign films that they ultimately do not show in order to prevent smaller festivals from booking them first. In this way, large festivals can claim any and all of their screenings as premieres, and foreign directors refuse to give their films to smaller festival in the hopes that their film will actually be screened at the larger festival as a "premier". In fact, often the primary value assigned to a film today is

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<sup>20</sup> Alwan's festival was supported through grants from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Columbia University, and the Mosaic Foundation. The festival also received in-kind grants from sponsors like Aramica Newspaper (Where East Meets West), New York University's Gallatin School Arts Program, the Persian Mirror, Night Hotel, and Rush Graphics. Finally, Alwan received donations from organizations like the Network of Arab American Professionals, the Persian Cultural Foundation, the Afghan Communicator, 3rd "I," Damascus Bakery, Byblos Restaurant, and Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate, as well as donations from many private individuals.

its premiere status rather than its aesthetic quality. These large, well-endowed and celebrity-endorsed festivals also exert tremendous pressure on smaller festivals not to show particular films, as Tribeca did with Alwan's third festival. Once Tribeca realized that Alwan would be screening a film that it had intended as a premiere (*Zaina, Rider of the Atlas* 2005), Ahmed received continuous phone calls and e-mails asking for specifics about the screening, and requesting that they either not screen the film or screen it free of charge. In the end, Alwan, whose festival preceded Tribeca's festival by a week, agreed not to publicize the screening as a premiere. This concession from an all-volunteer organization with barely any budget for marketing was enough to appease a festival that has an enormous marketing budget and pays neither for the films selected nor for its screening venues. Many film festival organizers blame such practices by festivals like Tribeca for destroying smaller ethnic festivals, like the African and Iranian film festivals in New York. Yet ethnic- and community-based festivals remain critical for exposing the public to views that may not be so popular or palatable to mainstream political or cultural tastes.

#### The Screenings: Audiences Focus on the Nation:

With a very small marketing budget and last-minute success at finding a publicist, Alwan relied largely on its e-mail list to advertise the festival. Postcards were distributed throughout the city, and e-mails with the entire schedule were sent weeks before the festival to a group of about three thousand individuals, mostly of Middle Eastern descent living in the New York area. Audiences primarily had to decide to see a film based on their associations with Alwan and the brief synopses included in the schedule. A few

films, like *Bosta* (2005) from Lebanon, about an innovative *dabka* dance troupe, had their own buzz from friends and relatives “back home.” From the first night of the festival, audiences tended to come to films from their own country of origin. For example, the first full-length feature filmed in Yemen (*A New Day in Old Sana’a* 2005) screened to a Yemeni filled audience.

In some ways, this was exciting. Yemenis, usually overwhelmed by the largely Levantine communities that have resided in New York much longer, were elated to have a venue of their own. When Yemeni filmmaker Bader Ben Hirsi, who has lived in England most of his life, described having to import a football stadium’s worth of film equipment and essentially build the entire film industry from scratch, economic “development” in the audience’s home country took on a slightly different meaning. Furthermore, even as they enjoyed seeing the beauty of their historic city, Sana’a, on the big screen, they also had to hear how the filmmaker almost had his film banned in Yemen because there were rumors about sexual impropriety on the set. Seeing films from one’s country of origin and hearing from the filmmakers themselves seemed to both fulfill a sense of nostalgia and complicate any idealized notion of home that audiences may have in mind.

As the week went on, and Algerians came to the Algerian films, Moroccans to the Moroccan, Lebanese to the Lebanese, and Palestinians to the Palestinian, organizers began to comment and complain. Was it because there was no thematic guidance? Should the films have been billed as presenting the “immigrant experience,” “love and loss,” or “war and violence”? Surely there were several films in each category, but did the organizers have to prescribe in what light the films should be seen? For those who went

to films from places other than their country of origin, the experience may have been an escape to a part of the world that they knew little about. The Atlas Mountains may be the last thing that a Palestinian would expect to see, but could be a great experience to watch when captured on film. In any case, few films drew audiences that were not based on national origin; of the few that did, however, two were popular each for its own particular reasons: *Sifaara fil-'Aimara* (“The Embassy in the Building”) by Amr Arafa, and *Bab’Aziz* by Nacer Khemir.

#### *Sifaara fil’Aimara* (“The Embassy in the Building”)

Very rarely does one get a chance to poke lighthearted fun at Israel in the United States, let alone watch a famously hilarious Egyptian actor like Adel Imam do it; but that is exactly what Alwan’s screening of *Sifaara fil-'Aimara* (2005) offered. Imam plays a retired petroleum engineer who finally returns home to Cairo from Dubai, only to find that the Israeli Embassy is now located right next door to his apartment. Israel has not only placed their embassy in the building, but has done so under the high-security protection of the Egyptian government. The mock horror of facing the Israeli flag upon opening his curtains and the embarrassment of telling his friends about this situation gently give way to using the Egyptian security forces as delivery men and chauffeurs, until Imam’s character falls for an attractive young activist who is fighting against *tatbi* (“normalization”) with Israel. Imam later allows his friends to sue the Egyptian government for the hardship it has inflicted on him, and becomes a convincing spokesman for the anti-normalization cause. This description does little to show the ribald and amusing effect of Imam’s antics, which, as scholars of Egyptian popular

culture have claimed, have the power to appeal to bourgeois intellectuals and working class audiences alike (Armbrust 1996). However, what was clear in this film is that all topics are fair game, whether Israel, the Egyptian government, Islamists, or political activists. By the end of the film, after surviving a rocket shot by extremists landing in his apartment (while he is engaged with a prostitute), being nearly sacrificed as a suicide bomber against the Embassy, and being dumped by the woman whose affections he so desperately sought because he was not political enough, Imam realizes that the one true cause is Palestine and that the only solution is to end Israel's occupation of Palestine.

The effect on the audience was electric. From the moment the wide-eyed barrel-chested actor appeared on screen, audience members were laughing; and not just the Egyptians. In fact, Arabs from all over the map attended this screening. For those who are familiar with Imam, his appearance is enough to inspire laughter; but for the younger generation or generations raised in the United States, it was not hard to grasp the humor. The film was technically a very clean and refined production. It parallels a quality found in recent stoner movies like *Friday* (1995) (and there was a good deal of *hashish* smoking in this film as well). Yet what made it so fascinating was the chance to let one's guard down on the topic of Israel. As a whole, the Arab community in New York has not been known to be very cohesive. There tend to be many different groups working for similar causes, but with slightly different audiences that vary by age, religion, national origin, education, aesthetics, or simply even neighborhood. Any group can gather about one hundred people with relative ease, but getting a larger, multinational group together is a challenge. Yet repeatedly, the subject of Palestine and Israel brings people together.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The unifying factor of Palestine in New York has been noted by many contributors to *A Community of Many Worlds: Arab Americans in New York City* (2002) as well as by most of the participants in this study.

Of course, there is also the chance that any Adel Imam film would have drawn the same crowd. What surprised the organizers was the intense amusement the audience shared. New York has been the scene of an active Arab comedy group for the past several years, yet at no time during any Arab comedy festival has an entire audience spontaneously broken out into song. As the popular song “*Ana Bakrah Israel*” (“I Hate Israel”) played in the background of a scene, suddenly everyone was clapping and singing along. Would this same crowd, or even the organizers, ever have imagined that they would do such a thing? It is doubtful. Yet what the dark and private space of the theater provided was a chance to be free to say something that would not be said in the public sphere in the United States, particularly by Arabs. This type of safe space is something that organizations like Alwan for the Arts have been trying to provide for several years. By allowing audiences to laugh at their politics, these spaces open dialogue among people of many nations residing within the United States and may in turn encourage them to share their nuanced views with those in the mainstream America as well.

### Bab’Aziz

In some ways, *Bab’Aziz* (2005) captured everything the Alwan film festival was trying to achieve. Yet it took a film about the past to capture the atmosphere that the festival was trying to attain in the present. The film is a Tunisian, Iranian, French, and German co-production. Its characters speak many different languages and dialects; for instance, one character would speak in Farsi and another would answer in Arabic. The film captures the world in which Sufism reigned and crossed many landscapes. It portrays a time when there were no nations or national boundaries, as we understand

them today, when multiple languages or ethnic identities were subsumed under the ideological grounds of Sufism. The story follows a young girl and her grandfather Bab'Aziz's adventures as they make their way across vast tracts of sand to find al-Hadra, the gathering place, where the grandfather will die and transcend the earthly realm.

The film was difficult for many in its audience to grasp. To an extent, this was the intent of the Tunisian filmmaker, Nacer Khemir. Beautiful shots of sandy landscapes did little to identify the geographic terrain or the time period of the characters. The festival organizers also did their part to obscure the exact subject of the film by not describing it as an exploration of the world of Sufism. The Sufi world had organized into various orders (*silsilas*, literally chains) centered on charismatic Sufi leaders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which remained highly active until the twentieth century across the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa. It was only when the film's characters reached al-Hadra, or the gathering, that the seemingly aimless wanderings of its characters allude to a larger purpose, a purpose further revealed by the contemporary "Sufi" music of the Tunisian troupe led by Fadhel Jaziri.<sup>22</sup>

Even well into the question-and-answer period with the director, people were largely confused about the film's setting and why the characters spoke so many languages. Most of the audience knows that the Middle East did not always look the way it looks today, and that the nations as we know them are largely colonial constructs. What has evaded many, however, is the possibility that there was a time in the Middle East when people related on a spiritual level across vast areas of geography. This film took the audience out of the contemporary obsession with "Islam" as a unifying factor in

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<sup>22</sup> *Hadhra* (2000), a live recording of contemporary Sufi music, is distributed by Universal records and is commercially available in the United States. Fadhel Jaziri tours with a troupe of Tunisian musicians and performers throughout Europe and the Middle East staging Sufi *hadras* or gatherings for its audiences.



opposition to the nation by presenting an alternative and idyllic vision of unity and peace. While audiences were baffled, few could deny the beauty of the film, and the organizers reveled in their subtle critique of the assumptions of a community often divided by national loyalties.

In sum, from the perspective of its ticket sales, the 2006 Alwan Film Festival was a success. Yet from the perspective of its ambitious organizers, there is still much work to be done to convince audiences to truly explore and appreciate the transnational worlds of cinema today. Beyond cinema, it's unlikely that Alwan will achieve the kind of unity that it ideologically espouses for oppressed people. At least, it is an outcome that is unmeasurable and un-reportable within the confines of a final report to a funder.

*Yalla, Laugh!<sup>23</sup>: The New York Arab American Comedy Festival*

Unlike the moral and intellectual ambivalence toward self-promotion and self-definition exhibited by Alwan, the New York Arab American Comedy Festival (NYAACF) was eager to package Arab identity in America in a popular and palatable way. Comedians Maysoon Zayid and Dean Obeidallah seized upon the interest in their work in Arab communities and beyond, and capitalized upon it. They started NYAACF in 2003 with two main goals that were brief, tangible, and could be repeated in sound bites without much thought. By showcasing Arab American performers, organizers hoped to garner positive media attention for the Arab American community as a whole while encouraging Arab Americans to get involved in the arts. Like Alwan, they drew in artists from a variety of backgrounds, from comedy and acting to filmmaking and

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<sup>23</sup> Yalla, Laugh! (Come On, Laugh!) is my tag line for the festival, not the organizers. Their tags included "Got Arab?" for the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual festival, and "Get Your Arab On!" for the 4<sup>th</sup>.

playwriting, and developed a range of material that could get the most number of people involved and also offer something for every type of audience. They also acted as an umbrella for several sponsoring organizations, like the National Association of Arab American Professionals, the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee<sup>24</sup>, and Nibras, an Arab American Theater Collective<sup>25</sup>. However, unlike Alwan, they were certain about the Arab part, and while Arab covers a range of national, religious, and ethnic groups, it does not cover non-Arabs such as Iranians, Pakistanis, and so forth (although a few actors for such descent managed to slip in, too). They organize one main festival a year, with several fundraisers and readings throughout the year to keep people's attention.<sup>26</sup>



Billboard outside Gotham Comedy Club, November 14, 2006  
Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah ©NYAACF Photo by Nigel Parry

The NYAACF approach is not to necessarily educate nor even draw an educated crowd, but to create a type of smash hit phenomena, where people want to see and be seen. I

<sup>24</sup> The ADC is a non-profit civil rights organization based in Washington DC, but with local chapters throughout the country. It was founded by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk in 1980.

<sup>25</sup> Until the creation of NYAACF, Nibras had only produced one play, *Sajil* in 2002. The Festival was the first time any of these dramatic theater artists had attempted to write and produce comedic theater.

<sup>26</sup> The NYAACF is a non-profit festival. All performers, including those with Actors Equity, volunteer their time for the festival. Funding is used to reserve venues and to do publicity. Little to nothing is spent on set design or costumes.

would characterize the NYAACF as a postmodern product: popular, pastiche, and a-historical. Rather than resist American culture, its aim is to relate to it through their ethnic sense of difference.

The success of the first two festivals, as measured in ticket sales and media attention, encouraged organizers to develop an even larger and more sophisticated marketing strategy for their third festival. I participated in both the 2004 and 2005 (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>) annual festivals as its volunteer coordinator and ticket sales manager, arranging for dozens of people to manage the hundreds of people that came to attend each festival's nightly events. This gave me an opportunity to see the workings backstage and observe dress rehearsals as well as interact with audiences as they left each venue.

With hip posters, a sharp new website<sup>27</sup>, a friendly logo<sup>28</sup>, and a playful slogan asking "Got Arab?" the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual 2005 New York Arab American Comedy Festival set the stage to capture media, entertainment industry and community wide attention throughout its five day festival. And it did. The entire festival sold out a week in advance. Over one thousand tickets were sold for 7 live performance events plus a closing party with tributes and film screenings. Television cameras and microphones lined the stages, reporters snuck interviews with performers in the hallways, and entire documentary film crews followed the movements of the festival's co-founders, "Dean and Maysoun". Most importantly, crowds packed the theaters and lined up outside of

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<sup>27</sup> These technical innovations were thanks to Nigel Perry, a web and graphic designer who had recently moved to New York. Nigel was one of the founding members of Electronic Intifada, a web based outlet for news and media about Palestine, and then as things worsened in the Middle East expanded to Electronic Iraq and Electronic Lebanon. The URL for the Electronic Iran has already been reserved.

<sup>28</sup> The NYAACF logo is a smiling camel wearing white scarf with kuffiyah-like black tassels that says "I ♥ New York".

comedy clubs to join in on the fun, and most left pleased and amused at what has become the most popular Arab American performance showcase in New York City.

Each year the Festival seems to receive more media coverage than the last festival. By far, it is the most widely publicized (both paid and earned) local Arab or Arab American performance event. In each report, from an Associate Press article that was picked up across the nation, to BBC radio broadcasts in Arabic and English, to several television interviews like CNN's American Morning and the World Today, organizers demonstrated their charm, humor, and professionalism while calling on Americans to be more sympathetic to Arabs in their midst. For example, when CNN's Soledad O'Brien asked Obeidallah<sup>29</sup>, "did things change for you after 9/11?" he responded:

It did. I mean, I think the whole Arab-American community could use a hug, at this point. We need some kind of aromatherapy, like hummus flavor, just to make us relax a little more. The world has changed. You really truly feel self-conscious or suspicious.

Soledad could hardly contain herself she was laughing so kindheartedly. Given the glowing American flag that formed the backdrop for the interview, Dean couldn't have made his message any more American sounding if he tried. In another interview, Maysoon Zayid more directly makes the plea, "We're not scary. We're not the enemy. We're really funny." The fact that Arabs are doing something that Americans do not typically associated them with, i.e. comedy, has captured the eyes of the media, and the Festival is prepared meet their curious stares with some polished humor. That humor in turns feeds the media more ways to sell their work. In 2006 received coverage from

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<sup>29</sup> Transcript of interview with Dean Obeidallah on "American Morning" on November 15, 2005 can be found at [www.arabcomedy.org](http://www.arabcomedy.org)

every major media outlet in New York, from *Time Out* to the *New York Times*, a few playing with common language in show business to joke, “these Arabs won’t bomb”.

Each year, the Festival succeeds in attracting more Arab and Middle Eastern talent.<sup>30</sup> People of Arab descent who are artists, actors, or models trying to make it in New York, stumble across an article, a poster, or an e-mail, and then come to an audition. For many, it is their first time being involved in any sort of performance or art with an Arab theme. The Festival has grown from a showcase of nearly a dozen performers to one involving over fifty. Most live the metropolitan NY area, and a few come from Los Angeles and Michigan. In 2006 it even attracted an actresses/ singer of Palestine descent from Dubai, and in 2007 it attracted a “legally blind, 18 year old Australian-Italian-Egyptian- Muslim female” whose community raised funds for her to come perform in New York. Maysoon prides the festival on stretching the acting abilities of otherwise dramatic actors. One such example is Ramsey Faragalla, a stage and screen actor appearing in such mainstream films as Sydney Pollack’s *The Interpreter* (2005) and Woody Allen’s *Hollywood Ending* (2002). For NYAACF Faragalla became “Mustafa,” a swarthy Arab salesman.

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<sup>30</sup> One of the biggest accomplishments of NYAACF is the collection of the biographies and headshots of artists of Arab descent in one searchable website: [www.arabcomedy.org](http://www.arabcomedy.org).



Group Photo: NYAACF November 13, 2005  
 Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah © NYAACF Photo by Nigel Parry

What's so funny?

Although some of the material from the Comedy Festivals will be analyzed in subsequent chapters, there are certain patterns that consistently bond the performers with their audiences, thereby expanding the community of individuals involved in the world of Arab American comedy. First, most Arab American comedic writers and performers embrace the awkwardness of being Arab in America. Performers act out their sense of feeling out of place for looking hairy, having weird sounding or meaning names that don't translate well into English, having homemade smelly food in a school lunchbox, having conflicts with parents over who and when to marry, and last but not least, coming from a country that no one has heard of, or if they have heard of it, they have heard nothing good. On top of jokes about the awkwardness of being raised Arab in America, encounters with between Arab Americans and "real Arabs," those who are foreign born

or recent immigrants, result in comedic skits like “Train”<sup>31</sup>, “Love in Las Vegas”<sup>32</sup>, and “And Now a Word from One of Our Sponsors”<sup>33</sup>. These skits show the double awkwardness of being raised Arab in America: one does not fit in exactly among either Americans or Arabs. Throw in a few Arabic words (naughty words preferably) and fake Arab accents and you get overwhelming laughter.

Possibly more than any other Arab performance event, comedy relies on repetition and familiarity with a repertoire of performances, namely jokes. Comics repeat their jokes night after night, experimenting with what works and what does not from the laughs of their audience. A joke that works gets added to the repertoire. Comics may circle around the joke, improvising here and there, but the delivery is not complete until the “punch line” has been delivered. Others can repeat a good joke again and again, thereby entering the popular culture of a community. “Dean and Maysoon” are vigilant about creating a particular image of Arab identity and culture. Their image most often places Arabs at the butt of the jokes. As Dean explained to me once, “comedy is about mocking insults. The genesis of all comedy comes from insults. There’s always a victim. It could be the person telling the joke, or it could be about someone else, but there’s got to be a victim”. The backlash against Arabs after 9/11, which followed a tradition of discrimination against Arabs in American popular culture, make Arabs the natural victim. Obeidallah and Zayid are careful not to invoke politics, yet critiquing Arabs wrongly

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<sup>31</sup> *Train* (2005), by Neil Potter and Bethel Caram, describes an Arab American couple coming to terms with suspicious looking Arabs on a train to DC.

<sup>32</sup> *Love in Las Vegas* (2005) by Jana Zenadeen, is set on the wedding night of what turns out to be a pregnant Arab American woman to a gay Lebanese male.

<sup>33</sup> *Now a Word from Our Sponsors* (2005) by Dean Obeidallah is a parody of a infomercial about 2 Arab men who have created a video called “How to be a Real Arab in 5 Easy Lessons,” which comes with a bottle of lamb shawarma scented cologne. In 2006, Dean reversed the gaze and created a sketch based on a video “How to be an American in 5 Easy Lessons”.

accused of being terrorists in airports is acceptable. Arabs being misunderstood because of their accents is also acceptable.

Israel is never a target of insults among the comedians in public. In preparation for the fourth comedy festival, someone wrote a sketch making fun of Israelis, mocking their aggressiveness and stinginess through an Israeli character who worked for the ironically named “Friendly Israeli Airlines.” While the skit drew upon socially acceptable jokes about the stinginess of Jews, it was not selected for production and was never staged. Comedians grew more careful about their comments on Israel as they became more established in their careers.

Sketches or jokes that deviate from the formula, such as *Next Year in Jerusalem*, may be produced, but get a lot of grief from the producers who try to edit and repackage the work, and are not well received by audiences, either. *Next Year In Jerusalem* (2005) by Marie Therese Abou-Daoud was a musical sketch about an Israeli soldier, a Palestinian freedom fighter, and a born-again American Christian united in harmony in Jerusalem in a drug-induced dream of President George W. Bush.

The New York Arab American Comedy Festival comes off as a huge celebration of Arab American culture. Organizers and performers rejoice in this “Arab” experience and think about ways it can be expanded to a heritage month and combined with other events across the city. Audiences eagerly wait to see if extra tickets will go on sale at the last minute so that they can practically laugh themselves off their chairs. Critics within the community even temper their tongues and resist reporting the Festival to the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee for indulging in too many stereotypes because they appreciate the effort and do not want to dampen their success. But more than



celebrating Arab American culture, it is creating it. By giving people a chance to come together and laugh at how awkward and difficult it is to be Arab in America, people bond over the familiarity of the experience and share in a cultural product of their own. Instead of remembering the last episode of the sitcom *Friends*, the next time they get together, they'll remember that scene in "A-Date" when the mom yells out from her hiding place to her unwed daughter, "It's not too late!" referring to the potential for her daughter to go on a date with a handsome Arab American bachelor. I have actually seen people standing at a bar after a performance telling each other jokes they have heard that evening. Ultimately, organizers hope to penetrate the entertainment industry itself so that it produces programs featuring Arab American actors and actresses who are playing characters who resemble themselves. Then someday it might not be so awkward to be Arab in America because many Americans will be laughing at "Arab" jokes, too. The NYAACF goals are firmly couched in the realm of American culture and attempts to integrate Arabs within it.

#### The Burden of Representation in Mainstream Productions:

During the time of my research, the Middle East and Islam were prominent subjects for mainstream American producers of art, particularly in theater and the visual arts. Arab American art satisfied the fascination of the public with perspectives Arabs, or the "enemies" of U.S. war efforts. Most work carried an anti-war, pro-peace message, though few works really sought to explore root causes of conflict, or the ideologies that perpetuated them. Instead most dramas and representations focus on the effects of wars and conflicts on the everyday lives of individuals, whether soldiers or innocent civilians.

The few that offered perspectives on “terrorists” were generally condemnatory. While work representing “terrorists” will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, here I will provide an overview of the kind of work produced by mainstream theaters and museums, and the tensions that Arab Americans have when participating in those productions.

### *Theater*

New York did not lack plays addressing some aspect of life in the Middle East, or U.S. involvement in that region during the entire time of my fieldwork or after. *Nine Parts of Desire*<sup>34</sup>, by Iraqi American playwright Heather Raffo, ran for ten months between 2004-2005 at the Manhattan Ensemble Theater. By contrast, *Sixteen Wounded*<sup>35</sup> ran for two weeks in April 2004, but on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theater. Betty Shamieh became a popular Palestinian American playwright, having her plays *Roar* (2004) produced by acclaimed New York playwright Tony Kushner<sup>36</sup> at the Clurman Theater in Time Square’s Theater Row and the *Black Eyed* (2005) at the Public Theater. The Public Theater also hosted several plays on the Iraq war by prominent playwrights and celebrities, such as *Stuff Happens* (2006) by David Hare, and *Embedded* (2003) by Tim Robbins. Finally, each year the Fringe Festival picks one or two mostly comedic plays<sup>37</sup> by Arab American playwrights for their summer city wide theater extravaganza. I

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<sup>34</sup> *Nine Parts of Desire* (2002) is one woman play by Heather Raffo, an Iraqi American woman, about nine Iraqi women.

<sup>35</sup> *Sixteen Wounded* (2004) is a play about a Palestinian in Holland who befriends a Baker, and later becomes a suicide bomber. It was written by a Jewish American New Yorker named Eliam Kraiem.

<sup>36</sup> Kushner wrote *Angels in America* (1992/95), for which he won a Pulitzer Prize, and *Homebody/ Kabul* (2001). He also co-wrote the screenplay for the Steven Spielberg film *Munich* (2005), which will be discussed in Chapter 5. .

<sup>37</sup> Fringe Festival productions included: *Pascale and Chantale* by Leila Gazale and Jana Zenadeen at the Greenwich Street Theater from August 13-29, 2004; *Browntown* by Samir Younis at the Lucille Lortell Theater from August 24-28, 2004; and *I Come In Peace* by Dean Obeidallah at the Flea Street Theater from August 11-27, 2006.

will address many of these plays in more detail in later chapters, but I mention them here as examples of how diffuse the theme of the Middle East has been in the New York theater scene.

Even plays that were not originally set in the Middle East were re-interpreted and cast within a Middle Eastern context. For example, *Miss Julie*, an 1888 play by August Strindberg set in Sweden was reset in a futuristic, unidentified Arab country and performed at the Cherry Lane Theater in June and July 2004. Instead of being the daughter of an estate owning Count, Miss Julie became the daughter of an American oil baron who tries to seduce Jean, now Arab, into an affair even in front of his headscarf wearing fiancée Christine. The 2004 version of *Miss Julie* was directed by Scott Schwartz, and produced by Beowulf Borrit and Jessica Neibanck. Needless to say, none are Arab; in fact Schwartz had previously directed *Golda's Balcony*, a play about Golda Meir, the 4<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Israel (1969-1974). None of this registered immediately with theater goers, who like me and my Strindberg-loving Egyptian friend, found our way to the small, comfortable theater in a quaint little alley in the West Village. However, I agree with most reviewers that saw little point to the change in setting<sup>38</sup>. The “Middle East” was captured by a call to prayer at the beginning, some fake accents, and the swarthy and sexy movements of the “Arab” lead, played by Michael Aronov (a non-arab). The new setting simply highlights the contemporary relevance of the Middle East to seemingly everything.

In addition to plays that insinuated the Middle East into the work, there were events that allowed the drama of the Middle East to “naturally” cast itself in theaters. On

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<sup>38</sup> McNulty (2004)

December 13, 2003, Eve Ensler, the creator of the popular *Vagina Monologues*, staged something that she called, “Celebrating Vagina Warriors: Palestinian and Israeli Women Uninterrupted: An Evening of Compassionate Listening” at the Culture Project on downtown’s Bleecker Street. She invited two Palestinians and two Israelis to come to New York and play themselves for a sizable audience of over 200 people. In front of a tightly packed crowd, Ensler proceeded to play the “therapist,” and ask each guest, in turn, to answer questions about their life and their experience dealing with the conflict in the Middle East. The Ramallah-based Palestinian guests included Liana Badr, writer and then Director of the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, and Reema Hammami, an anthropologist and activist. The Jerusalem-based Israeli guests included Yvonne Deutsch, founder of a women’s center and a “body and soul therapist” and Rela Mazzali, founder of the New Profile Movement aimed at demilitarizing Israeli society and bringing about peace with Palestinians.

The event came out of a tour of the Middle East in which Ensler met the women chosen to appear on stage before our eyes. Apparently the meeting was so sensational that out of all her visits with women throughout the world, these women deserved to be showcased and produced for a paying audience in New York. The audience, mostly youngish American women were requested to sit silently and listen. No questions were allowed during the “session,” although people were encouraged to write questions down on pieces of paper and submit them to the panelists for a response afterwards. Together with a couple friends, including an Arab American actress, I sat in the theater for four hours straight, with no intermission, listening.

Ensler did not ask the women to speak about their work. Instead, she asked them to speak about their experience living in Israel/ Palestine and how it affected their everyday lives. Palestinians tried to speak about the experience of curfew imposed during and after the Israeli re-invasion of the West Bank in spring of 2002 through the fall of 2003. Since curfews are essentially about the mass deprivation of life experience, they did not have much to say aside from how it is miserably constraining. The Israeli women spoke of their frustrations with Israeli society, and how they turned to meditation and psychotherapy to try to deal with the anxiety that comes from being among ruling class. My field notes from the time give a sense of my overall discomfort with the process and outcome of the event:

Ensler managed to create a spectacle out of the Palestinian women's tongue-tied frustration at Israeli occupation compared to the Israeli women's practiced inner peace. Ensler claimed to be tapping into some kind of essential, universal experience of pain that can and should be appreciated by others. What is upsetting is not that they were asked difficult questions that made them think, but that their raw emotion became a spectacle for 200+ strangers to see. And if tears, according to Ensler system of healing, are a sign of true understanding then writing about this event has brought me some moment of truth.

The comfort of Israeli women being so publically intimate compared to the Palestinians discomfort depressed me because I sensed that Americans would see Palestinians as foreign compared to the Israelis, and therefore less deserving of sympathy. Because the Palestinians were incapable or unwilling to speak from a completely subjective position, and instead framed their individual experience as minor compared to the larger travesty faced by Palestinians as whole, I felt that they lost their audience. I later learned that my experience of concern about representation as an audience member was a regular feature of Arab American actresses, artists, and playwrights living and working in New York.

An example of how Arab American artists struggle over representation of Arabs can be seen in the production of *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*. In March 2005, the Feminist University Press was set to release a collection of blog entries by the same name by an Iraqi blogger whose screen name is Riverbend. Riverbend (2005) had been keeping an anonymous blog about her life in Baghdad since 2003; it had become well known among bloggers, and as it was highly regarded it was selected and produced for publication. Riverbend identified herself as a computer scientist forced to quit her job and remain at home with her family due to the war. She attributed her good English skills to being raised “abroad” and studying the language in Baghdad, where she, along with the rest of her peers, indulged in Western pop culture. Her blog recounts the early days of the American invasion and the attempts to install an American friendly Iraqi government. A quick excerpt from “Puppet of the Month” reveals how engaging the writing is to those familiar with American discourse, yet how insightful it is of the opinions and predicaments of those living in Iraq:

Today, September 1, 2003, is an important day. Ahmad Al-Chalabi has finally achieved the epitome of his political aspirations. All the years of embezzlement, conniving, and scheming have paid off: he is the current rotating president...To be quite honest, I've been waiting for this. I watch all his interview and read any article I can get in an attempt to comprehend what hidden charms, or buried astuteness, made the Pentagon decide to so diligently push him forth as a potential leader. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was some sort of elaborate, inside joke in Washington: “We're blighted by Bush- you deserve no better (2005: 44).

Though her testimony begins with a sharp sense of humor, her account of days of isolation and witness to violence gradually reveal a life of perpetual mourning.

Since the author could not be present for a typical book release tour<sup>39</sup>, the Feminist University Press decided to hire a theater company to do a reading of the work, and they chose an American theater company that they knew. Leila Buck, an actress of mixed American and Lebanese heritage, received an invitation to participate in the piece. She recalls, “it was definitely very random. It was not a concerted effort to find Arabs, it was kind of a last minute, “oh, yeah, and maybe if we had an Arab, that'd be good”. She went on to explain:

You don't have to be Arab, but I mean, I lived in Iraq for 2 years. I actually personally care about this place. Like, I'm not Iraqi, but I know Baghdad (with Arab accent). Like, you know what I mean? And there's these wonderful, very sweet well meaning white women being like, and in Bagdad (American accent), and you're just like, agh! They were very well meaning doe-eyed, "we're just doing this very important project," and it was great to see that energy, and great that they wanted to do it. But they were admittedly over their heads, and it is incredibly frustrating when there is an Arab American theater company right here in New York. It's one thing, if you're some really political company that's like "we've been doing projects about Iraq, and we really want to see this out there," and it's another thing when, of course you're going to say yes to being the publicity for a book that's being published. But it's sort of irresponsible in my opinion.

I had a chance to see *Girl Blog from Iraq* on its second round of readings with a new cast in August 2005. At that time it included Arab American actress Maha Chehlaoui. Chehlaoui is of mixed descent; her father is Syrian and her mother Filipino. She was born and raised in New Jersey till she was seven years old. She moved with her family to Bahrain till she was twelve, then London through her high school graduation. She returned to the U.S. for college and then graduate school. Though of mixed ethnic heritage and educated in American schools, she explained to me that she always felt

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<sup>39</sup> As reported by a participant in my study. It is unclear whether it was to protect her anonymity, visa/security issues, or expense. I had assumed it was to protect her anonymity as Iraqi “informants” to the West often become targets of militias.

certain of her Arab identity. This made the uncertainty about her identity by casting directors after she completed her Masters in Fine Arts from Columbia University very distressing. At the time I interviewed her, she had just completed *Girl Blog*. She was in between acting jobs and apartments, and worked as a waitress.

When I asked her what it was like being the only Arab American cast member of the staged reading *Girl Blog*, she explained:

Maha: One thing that really scared me was that these were college educated, some of them grad school educated, most of them I imagine very anti-war people. Yet after the first reading they felt very distant from the material, like “wow, this is very foreign to me.”

Maysoun: Even her language? It was so American

Maha: Yeah. And I was like, this is very familiar to me. War, not familiar. Ramadan... I am the Christian family that all the Muslim came to and that over-decorated the house. The things that are the most foreign to them are the things that I kind of miss. That was sort of a revelation. They admit everything they know, and are shocked to see Baghdad is a bustling modern city. And it really made me nervous that these Americans with all their education and all their liberalism, these are the ones mouthing this play. And that made me feel incredibly hopeless. It was as if I had been bused in... I'm the little black kid that's been bused in to teach everyone about diversity.

Chehlaoui struggled to find her place among the cast while constantly feeling the need to correct people's pronunciation of names and places,<sup>40</sup> and to maintain a serious disposition when all the rest eagerly dropped character and joked during the breaks. It was this type of frustration with the process of working with and for American art producers by that motivated groups to form around different forms of art, like theater, film, comedy, and music. Sometimes these unions were project specific, and other times

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<sup>40</sup> Chehlaoui admitted to me that she does not even speak Arabic, but French and Italian, yet she's fiercely defensive of the representation of the language and its accuracy.



they were more institutionally focused, like the foundation of Alwan, the Comedy Festival, or Nibras.

### *Visual Arts*

Although I did not find much institutionalized collaboration among Arab American visual artists, they were frequent participants of group shows that touched upon war, nationalism, and the “Islamic world”. A comparison of two shows demonstrates how artists of Arab descent have been incorporated into the commentary of visual art curators with differing degrees of politicization.

In 2003, the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Study Program produced the exhibit *Homeland*. The exhibit included the work of fifteen artists created between the start of the first and second Gulf Wars (1991-2003). The works included play upon the increased deployment of the rhetoric of “homeland” by the American government post 9/11 while recognizing its roots in the historical conflicts in Palestine/Israel and apartheid South Africa. Two artists of Palestinian descent were included among the fifteen artists showcased at the ground level gallery of the City University of New York’s Graduate Center. The first work seen upon entering the gallery was that of Ayreen Anastas, a Palestinian woman who immigrated to the U.S in 1999. It was a video installation called *m\* of Bethlehem* (2003). In it, Anastas loosely narrates a series of words she associates with her birthplace, Bethlehem, and their definitions over still shots of Bethlehem, including the streets, nearby Israeli settlements, olive trees, and the market place. Disconnecting the words from their definitions, she instills a contemplative yet slightly disorienting effect on the viewer with phrases like, “the bell itself; the time of its ringing; the practice of ringing a bell at a fixed hour each evening (for any purpose)”; or

“The rights, privileges, or possessions belonging to one by birth, as an eldest son, as being born in a certain status or country or as a human being.”<sup>41</sup>

Moving on in the exhibit, visitors could see an array of works that signify a critical stance toward U.S. power. *Storm* (1991), by Hans Haacke involves an old shopping cart that was loaded with small motorized waving American flags. *Statue* (2003), by Olav Westphalen is a life-sized “statue” of a white man in a business suit with his hands handcuffed behind his back. *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E.* (2002 and 2003), by Mathew Buckingham, shows a digitally altered image of Mount Rushmore in the future in which all four faces of U.S. presidents have eroded away, returning the space to nature.<sup>42</sup> In the midst of works that overtly question American authority was a subversive piece by Emily Jacir called *Sexy Semite* (2000-2002). Although I will discuss this piece in greater detail in the context of female sexuality in Chapter 4 (The (female) virgin (not)), I mention it here for its relationship to a mainstream art exhibit in which representation of Palestinian politics was central to the larger scrutiny of the concept of “homeland” within American politics. In the Homeland exhibit, Jacir’s work is a tribute to the unambiguous longing of native people for their stolen land. In *Sexy Semite*, Palestinians in the diaspora mockingly use actual personal ads to try to solicit their land back from their would-be suitors, American Jews or Israelis. Though only one among fifteen artists, Jacir’s politicized piece was chosen as the front and back covers of the *Homeland* catalogue.

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<sup>41</sup> Transcript found in Leighton (2003)

<sup>42</sup> Aside from the triumph of nature over man, the image implies a restoration of land to its rightful owners, the Sioux. According to Leighton, “the Shrine of Democracy- as Rushmore was officially designated- was carved out of sacred land taken illegally from the Sioux by an artist who had been a secret but active member of the Klu Klux Klan” (2003: 19).

In contrast, the Museum of Modern Art held the exhibit, *Without Boundary, Seventeen Ways of Looking* in the spring of 2006. The description that accompanies that publication from this exhibit states, “At a time when the Islamic world is the subject of extraordinary interest in the West, *Without Boundary* explores the work of a number of artists who come from that world but live elsewhere, in cities ranging from Paris to New York to Buenos Aires.”<sup>43</sup> This exhibit was much anticipated, but immediately criticized for being apolitical. In the *New York Observer*, Tyler Green reported that *MoMA Keeps the Walls Clean; Islamic Show Sans Politics* (April 3, 2006). Green criticized the curator for selecting the least politically overt work of each artist, and quoted artists from the exhibit who criticized its lack of political context. Shirin Neshat, and Iranian artist, was quoted as saying “My immediate reaction was, how could anyone today discuss art made by contemporary Muslim artists and not speak about the role the subjects of religion and contemporary politics play in the artist’ minds?”; and Emily Jacir explained “Historically, any Palestinian narrative is regularly censored in this country...it is clear why contextualizing the political situation some of us in the show are coming from would be whitewashed.” Green concludes “Without Boundary often seems more a product of RISD than Ramallah.”

Aside from posting of this article on Arabny, and an announcement for a lecture by several of the artists given the heading “Islamic fandango” there was no buzz about the exhibit on Arabny or among friends. In fact, it received such unenthusiastic reviews that I was slow to visit, and did so discretely on a Sunday afternoon with an American high school class mate visiting from Chicago.

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<sup>43</sup> Back cover, Daftari (2006)

The exhibit was curated by an Iranian woman from the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, Fereshteh Daftari. She began the audio guide by musing about how she finds it fascinating how art "from that part of the world" is perceived in the United States. She goes on to describe how this exhibit is meant to challenge preconceptions of what Americans think of "Islamic Art," a term that she acknowledges as being "invented" in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to encompass art work produced between Indonesia and Morocco. In order to do so she organized the works around central motifs in "Islamic art": calligraphy, miniature painting, carpets, and adds a bonus category she called "identity in question". On display were the works of seventeen artists who have some relationship to the "Islamic world," either through their heritage, or through their aesthetic representation. Fifteen were either born in the Arab world, India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia or to parents from those "parts of the world"; two artists were American.

All the artists in *Without Boundary* live and work in the U.S. or Europe, and were already known for their work in the Western art world before their inclusion in the exhibit. As P.C Smith (2006) wrote the following for Artnet:

Indeed, in *Without Boundary*, one feels the boundaries keenly -- and they circumscribe a contemporary Western art world with an experimental, new-media focus. Many of the artists here have New York gallery representation: Ghada Amer at Gagosian Gallery, Y.Z. Kami at Deitch Projects and Gagosian, Kutlug Ataman and Shirazeh Houshiary at Lehmann Maupin, Emily Jacir and Mona Hatoum at Alexander & Bonin, Shahzia Sikander at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., Raqib Shaw at Deitch Projects, Shirin Neshat at Gladstone. The Atlas Group/Walid Raad recently exhibited at the Kitchen (2006:1-2).

Though presented on bare white (unpoliticized) walls in large section of the newly renovated MoMA building in Midtown Manhattan, I appreciated the exhibit because it

collected samples of work from all of the visual artists of interest to me personally in one place. It is true that there were no declarations against war on the walls or in any of the accompanying materials, or a historical analysis of each artist's country of origin highlighting injustices due to colonialism, imperialism, and fundamentalism. Instead, the works were left to more or less speak for themselves.<sup>44</sup> Small plaques next to each piece stated the artist's name, the title of the work, the year it was created, the materials used in its creation, its size (in inches and in centimeters), and its owner, whether it be the artist, a private individual collector, a gallery, or another museum. After each name is a brief biographical description that situates each artist ethnically and geographically. For example: "Ghada Amer. Born 1963 in Cairo, Egypt. Lives and works in New York." Their age, place of birth, and place of residence together signify the social and political universe of the artist and invoke associations of culture, class and generation in the viewer that are likely meant to make the artist at once both "other" and familiar.

On my visit one Sunday in April 2006, I saw a gorgeous piece by Mona Hatoum, an artist of Palestinian descent (born in Beirut and living in London) called *Keffiyeh* (1993-1999) in which Hatoum constructed the quintessential black and white scarf worn by Palestinians out of human hair on cotton. I saw two pieces by Ghada Amer: *The Definition of Love According to Le Petit Robert* (1993), an embroidery of red text on a square white panel, and *Eight Women in Black and White* (2004), a repetitive embroidery of women masturbating on a square white panel. These pieces were placed next to two sensational black and white photographs of veiled (and armed women) called *Speechless* (1996) by Shirin Neshat. In the "carpets" section, I saw a piece that had graced the cover

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<sup>44</sup> Those wanting further interpretation could read a free glossy pamphlet, buy a book based on the exhibit (both produced the Museum of Modern Art), or read a number of reviews on-line or in print, including one from the Museum Director, Glenn Lowry.

of a high-end arts and culture magazine being produced between New York and Dubai called *Bidoun*. The piece called [*Farsh-01-2004*] (2004) by a woman from Iran named Shirana Shahbazi is a black prayer mat sized carpet with a blond blue-eyed western woman's face printed on it. In the "identity" section, I saw pieces by Marjane Satrapi, also from Iran, from her biographical cartoon "Persepolis."<sup>45</sup> I also saw a piece by Emily Jacir in which she juxtaposed video clips of typical workplaces (grocery stores, hair salons, travel agencies) in Ramallah and New York, bringing to light the similarity of habits and environments created by Palestinians inside and outside of their "homeland."

From the perspective of MOMA's history, the *Without Boundary* exhibit carried on the tradition that MOMA has championed since the post World War II period of celebrating art as an expression of freedom and of individuality (Cockcroft 1992). Whereas in the Post World War II period, modern art was heralded as anti-Communist, and American abstract expressionism the antidote to Communist social realism, today's artists from the Muslim world are congratulated for their ability to triumph over their repressive and corrupt cultures in order to ascend toward individual recognition and success in the free West. In ARTNews, the Director of MOMA Glen Lowry (2006) explains:

Given the conservative nature of many Islamic countries—with their restrictive policies concerning freedom of expression, political activism, nudity, sex, religious debate, and homosexuality, among other social and cultural issues—they offer difficult, even impossible environments for artists who make challenging art, especially art that questions or critiques religious beliefs. It is largely for this reason that all of the artists under discussion live and practice primarily outside their countries of birth.

Displacement due to Western backed wars, occupation, or economic structural adjustment seem to have no bearing on why these artists would "choose" to live in the

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<sup>45</sup> *Persepolis* was made and released as a motion picture in 2007.

West. Yet, their ability to do so is seen as not only as cultural affinity but an economic one. He writes:

Although all the artists under consideration here were born in one world and live in another, they do so from relatively privileged circumstances. They are well educated and come from mostly solidly middle- or upper-class families. ... They are part of a sophisticated and growing population of émigrés from the Islamic world who live in the West. While they form a counterpoint to the disenfranchised, often poorly educated, and marginalized Muslims living in France, Germany, and England (who now make up between 5 and 10 percent of the population in those countries), they share with them a recognition that the traditional boundaries between the Middle East and the West have become blurred and that this has created a confusing and challenging environment.

To further demonstrate his talents as an armchair Orientalist, Lowry adds:

Muslims who have either grown up in Europe or North America or moved to the West and adopted Western values often find themselves both alienated from the Muslim community and, to varying degrees, rejected by Western communities—or, worse, targets of suspicion. Across this range of opinion and experience, the problem of defining oneself in this world is extremely difficult, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks first in New York City and Washington, D.C., and later in Madrid and London, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq... For the artists in “Without Boundary,” this has meant finding a way to express themselves that transcends being identified as “Islamic” to avoid being dismissed or stereotyped. Using the language of contemporary art firmly positions them within the culture of modernity, with its emphasis on self-reflection, criticism, and skepticism.

I give considerable space here to this argument in order to demonstrate the need for MOMA to frame this exhibit of artists (who are already established in the West) as acceptable to American sensibilities of Arabs and Muslims in order to sell it. With the commodification of identity in the expansive aesthetic economy, this discourse not only sells but is politically expedient given that the U.S. is also a place where “restrictive policies concerning freedom of expression, political activism, nudity, sex, religious debate, and homosexuality, among other social and cultural issues” proliferate daily.

While several artists in the *Without Boundary* exhibit critiqued the sterilization of politics in the exhibit, and others wished that it had showcased artists from the “actual” Muslim world as opposed to the latest trend makers in Chelsea, most missed the fact that *Without Boundary* practiced the exact kind of politics that MOMA has historically practiced, that of declaring individual “freedom” through art. Since its inception, MOMA has thrived on close connections between corporate industry and the government. Nelson Rockefeller, son of MOMA’s founder, not only served as President of the Board of Trustees, but during World War II he left that office to become the coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs under President Roosevelt. During World War II, the government contracted with MOMA to tour American art, primarily in Latin America (where Rockefeller also had major oil investments). MOMA founded the International Program and Council in 1952, and through largely private funding, assumed the role of representing the United States government in the international art scene. This was largely due to the fact that Congressmen, like McCarthy, and their constituents, still equated art and artistic expression with Communism, and therefore would not support tax dollars being used on art. With funding from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, MOMA proceeded to cultivate artistic exchange with artists internationally without government support, and to cast its intentions within the Cold War rhetoric of American freedom of expression. This has led to conclusions by scholars such as Eva Cockcroft (1992) that art is in fact an instrument of American power. She wrote:

Freed from the kinds of pressure of unsubtle-red bating and super-jingoism applied to official government agencies like the United States Information Agency (USIA), CIA and MOMA cultural projects could provide the well-funded and more persuasive arguments and exhibitions needed to sell the rest of the world on the benefits of life and art under capitalism (1992: 86).



Although Michael Kimmelman (1994), a historian working for MOMA, disputes particular details of the history of collusion between the government, capital, and the MOMA museum in its promotion of Abstract expressionism, he concedes that “In the general sense that there developed a link between the fortunes of that art and those of the institution, the revisionists [i.e. Cockcroft and Guilbaut] argument is clear” (1994: 52).

The 2006 *Without Boundary* exhibit was sponsored by the same International Council at MOMA, with additional funds from Sheila and Hassan Nemazee.<sup>46</sup> Similar to exhibits at MOMA that preceded it, it insists that “modern” art is an expression of freedom and individuality, and that even “good” Muslims can practice that kind of art. This message is not only a boon to galleries that are selling the works of these artists, but to the numerous political and business interests of the United States in the Middle East and “Islamic” world. The Arab American artists who were selected to participate in this exhibit are at once honored and complicit with this message. Though none of this history was made explicit in conversation about the exhibit, there was deep suspicion in the Arab American arts community about what it means for MOMA to promote “Islamic” art.

### Conclusion:

Although MOMA may require an artist to compromise on the political aspects of their artistic vision, being exhibited at MOMA epitomizes success for an artist. Arab American artists aspire to perform or have their work viewed in prominent and

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<sup>46</sup> Hassan Namazee is a wealthy Iranian-American businessman. He is a supporter of the Asia Society, a museum for Asian art founded by John D. Rockefeller III, and was on its board of trustees in 2003. He founded the Iranian American Political Action Committee in 2003 (IAPAC website), and is a major campaign contributor for the Democratic party, and most recently Hillary Clinton (New York Observer, Horowitz 2008).

prestigious venues within the New York, and by extension American, cultural landscape. The exposure of Arab American art work to mainstream audiences is considered a mechanism for changing negative American beliefs about Arabs and/ or Muslims into ones that are more positive or favorable. It is believed that this could not only lead to the professional and material viability of these artists, which is desirable, but also improvement of the lives of Arabs in America and the Arab world. Success among Arab American artists is therefore negotiated by creating spaces that enable Arab Americans to articulate powerful artistic voices, by occupying spaces within mainstream venues that signify inclusion and success within America, and ultimately, by being promoted by mainstream, prominent artistic institutions as representatives not only of their ethnic identity, but also their identity as accomplished individual artists. This chapter has demonstrated interaction on all three levels in New York City, and the nexus between art, capital, identity, and urban living among Arab American artists and arts organizers.

### **3. Battling Censorship (as opposed to Zionism)**

Despite the proliferation of Arab American arts in New York throughout the course of my fieldwork, there were constant reminders that America is not such a friendly place for Arabs to be. While New York City may have the capital to sponsor the interests and curiosities of American liberal pacifists, positive sentiments towards Arab American artists and their work did not necessarily cross county or state lines. Even within the city, political sensibilities compromised, and at times trumped, artistic license and freedom. Artists in general face many challenges to artistic freedom, financial restrictions on the creation of new work being primary among them. However, Arab American artists are among those who suffer from censorship because their work is perceived to be politically oppositional to the foreign policies of the United States. They are used to it much the same way that artists who created sexually provocative art in the 1980's and 1990's were used to attacks by the religious right and their congressional henchmen.

During the course of my fieldwork, I observed Arab American artists in New York embrace their civil liberties as defined in the first amendment as “free speech,” and learn to advocate for their art work within a nationalistic and legalistic framework in order to have it accepted in mainstream American venues on their own terms. While artists may eschew personal involvement in domestic or international politics in favor of their independence as “an artist,” they are increasingly ready to directly engage the law and political activism when it comes to censorship of their work. Here, it seems that the privatization of today's art world actually allows the artist to hold the government accountable for constitutional rights such as free speech. Furthermore, to those who are discontent with the “War on Terror” and its restrictions on the civil liberties of all

Americans, protecting the “free of speech” of Arab American artists’ amounts to upholding a multi-cultural, democratic nation state.

Within the larger history of government-sponsored activity against Arab political activism in the U.S. and Arab American civil rights advocacy, the steps Arab American artists have taken into the realm of civil liberties are small, but significant. They demonstrate a willingness to engage with a system that has demonstrated complete bias against Arab political and civic engagement, but on “artistic” grounds. Due to the long history of political repression of Arab activism in the U.S., the symbolic and material realms of the arts are often considered the only realms of effective Arab American activism today.

It is the primacy of cultural representation that makes this recent burst of civic engagement different from that of their predecessors. The success of Arab American artists, both in achieving the freedom to perform and present artistic work and to survive as professional artists, is considered a triumph for Arabs in America even while the legal rights to contest the U.S. government are being steadily eroded. Only in the broader context of assaults on the civil liberties of Arabs in America can their modest attempts to advocate for symbolic inclusion in the American cultural landscape under the banner of “free speech” be appreciated.

In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the “culture wars” of the 1980’s and 1990’s in order to provide a larger context for today’s censorship in the arts and the academy. Next, I will provide a historical overview of backlash and suppression of Arab American activism. This history is important for understanding the ways that Arab American art is interpreted as being political, and why the artistic realm is used as a

proxy for politics, as will be discussed in the next chapter (The Understudy: Art as a Proxy for Politics). Finally, I will turn to my ethnographic account of how artists both developed their own habits with censorship, and their attempts to break them. This involved interplay between academic and art worlds after 9/11, and relate to “free speech” on the subject of Palestine. In conclusion, Arab American artists advocate for free speech in order to defend their professions from discriminatory attacks based on their ethnicity and their political sympathies.

### The Legacy of the “Culture Wars”

When most Arab American artists and arts organizers active today in New York were in high school and college, America was engaged in what many call the “culture wars,” or the war between progressive and conservative America. Conservatives argued against moral depravity, elitism, and liberalism in the arts and media, and rallied masses against government funding for the arts and humanities. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities, both created in 1965 by Democrats, became the target of attacks by conservatives determined to make sure that no tax-payer dollars went to fund smut.

Artists had already assumed roles “independent” of politics and government funding with the demise of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the onset of the Cold War. Unlike the WPA, the NEA (NEA) was not meant to support “needy” artists as professionals, but to promote the “highest artistic talent” (Jensen 1995). The budget of the NEA grew from \$28.9 million from its founding, to a peak of \$255.7 million under the Carter administration, with Nixon using arts funding to compete with

Nelson Rockefeller of New York and the educated elite in the East. While New York State has historically received the majority of NEA funding, interest in the arts throughout America grew after World War II. Jensen notes:

Interest in the fine arts grew exponentially after World War II. The NEA claimed credit, but the true reason was the remarkable growth in the potential audience – the number of adults with a college degree doubled and redoubled from 8 million in 1960, to 16 million in 1975, and 33 million in 1990. Arts and museums programs flourished as an affluent and increasingly well-educated public consumed more and more sophisticated arts (Jensen 1995: 18).

Conservatives began to attack the Endowments in the 1980s, and the “culture wars” came to a head in 1989 around several exhibits: *Piss Christ*, a photograph by Andres Serrano depicting a plastic crucifix submerged in urine, Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs, and Karen Finley’s feminist art performance. The Christian Coalition, under the direction of Pat Robertson, rallied members of Congress to condemn the work, and slash funding. On May 18, 1989 Alfonse D’Amato, a Senator from New York stood on the floor of the Senate and while tearing apart a reproduction of Serrano’s image, declared:

If this is what contemporary art has sunk to, this level, this outrage, this indignity – some may want to sanction that, and that is fine. But not with the use of taxpayers’ money. This is not a question of free speech. This is question of the abuse of taxpayers’ money. If we allow this group of so-called art experts to get away with this, to defame us and to use our money, well, then we do not deserve to be in office (Bolton 1992:28).

In 1989 alone, Congress cut the NEA budget by \$45,000, which was the total amount of grant dollars given the institutions that hosted Serrano and Mapplethorpe exhibits (Wallis et al 1999). Funding for the creation of new work by living artists was already minimal, and only 5 to 10 percent of overall funding of the Endowments went to non-profit arts

and humanities groups (Jensen 1995). Even though conservative pundits acknowledged the small dollar amounts, they loudly opposed any amount of government funding for what they considered to be offensive art. Jesse Helms even managed to introduce a law that would prevent NEA funding for obscene or homoerotic arts, or representations of sexual activity. This law was amended because advocates convinced Congress that it violated the First Amendment right to free speech, and instead new regulations were put in place to eliminate supposed favoritism and exert more oversight.

As the arts were being attacked for indecency, academia was being attacked by the same conservative forces for its promotion of multiculturalism and “political correctness.” The National Endowment of the Humanities was criticized for funding historians and other “postmodern” critics who were critical of the United States. By the time Newt Gingrich came to office in 1994, he was ready to lead an “angry white male” contingent against both the NEA and NEH for their supposed trashing of Western civilization. Jensen summarizes the attacks on the Endowments as follows:

The chief reason for the opposition to the Endowments is the belief strong held on the Right that leftists – specifically, the politically correct/ multicultural/ postmodern types – dominate the arts and humanities, suppress conservative dissent, and brainwash students. The government is effectively subsidizing the enemies of the Right (1995: 29)

The “culture wars” gave voice to Christian nationalists in the context of the rise of the AIDS epidemic and the racial and homophobic backlash that the disease inspires.

Christian coalitions managed to target arts and cultural institutions that were celebrated and appreciated by elite liberals and wealthy conservatives alike. Their influence was not only felt in rural American, but even New York City. In the fall of 1999, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to cut city funding for the Brooklyn Museum because he

claimed that the art showcased in the “Sensations”<sup>1</sup> exhibit was anti-Catholic and anti-religious. In addition, he attempted to evict the Museum from the city owned building and replace its board. At the center of his complaints was a painting by Chris Ofili called “The Holy Virgin Mary” (1996), which uses elephant dung and cut-outs from pornographic magazines in its representation of this Biblical figure. The City contributes nearly a third of the Museum’s annual \$24 million dollar budget. The museum ended up winning its case for “freedom of speech” and the First Amendment in a settlement after trying to sue the City. While there are many who believe this was an effort on Giuliani’s part to pander to Christian conservatives in his Republican Party as he prepared for a Senate race in 2000, it demonstrated that New York was not exempt from censorship or the “culture wars.”

By 2000, the NEA’s budget had been cut to \$97.6 million, less than half of what it had been in inflation adjusted dollars under the Carter administration (Jensen 1995). It has been slowly increased to \$124.4 million in 2006.<sup>2</sup> The demise of public funding for the arts has encouraged artists and arts organizations to turn to foundations and private individual philanthropy for the arts. In “Money Talks: The Economic Foundations of Censorship,” Robert Atkins (2006) estimates that \$3.1 billion from foundations and \$4.7 billion from individuals was given towards funding artists and arts organizations. However, Ruby Lerner (2006), the President and Executive Director of the Creative Capital Fund laments that less than five percent of all funding for the arts goes to living artists.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum from October 2, 1999 to January 9, 2000. The exhibit featured 90 works by artists such as Damien Hirst (cross sections of animals displayed in formaldehyde), and Marc Quinn (self-portrait made from eight pints of the artist's own blood). Among the “young British artists” was Beirut born Palestinian Mona Hatoum.

<sup>2</sup> National Endowment for the Arts Annual Report 2006.



The success of Christian conservatives in reducing public funding for the arts has resulted in the normalization of the private art market and limited funding for arts creation and production. Congress no longer lambasts artists for smut and multicultural/political correctness that they believe leads to the degradation of American society and power, in part because the removal of government funding no longer entitles them to do so. Instead they attack immigrants and terrorists, both believed to be intent on destroying America. Despite the shift in focus, the anxiety over white hetero-normative cultural and political supremacy remains. While Arab American artists today may not produce work that would have raised the ire of cultural conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s, they certainly raise suspicion by being from an ethnic minority that is associated with the prime suspects in the U.S. War on Terror and representing their political and ethnic sensibilities in their work. As artists, they are subjected to the kind of censorship that was much more commonly felt by Arab American political activists since the 1960. In fact, not one Arab American artist referred to the dominant forms of cultural censorship of the 1980's and 1990's, and instead would routinely relate episodes of political disenfranchisement felt by Arab political activists from that era. I turn now to that history to show how political dissent by Arab Americans established a paradigm of dissent and its repercussions inherited by this younger generation of artists.

### History of Backlash and Suppression of Arab Activism

When I moved to New York to begin my fieldwork, it was nearly two years after 9/11 and two months after the invasion of Iraq. On the eve of the invasion, I was asked to speak at a teach-in at Emory. As I was the third Arab American approached to speak,

the first being afraid of retribution on her family in Iraq for speaking out in favor of the war and the second being afraid of retribution on her fiancée by US Immigration Services for speaking out against it, I was very aware of the ways in which the environment in the US was squelching speech.

In anticipation of backlash against Arab Americans as a result of the war, I had received e-mail instructions from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) on what to do if I were to be contacted by the FBI. Well practiced in these types of events, they advised:

ADC would like to remind members of the Arab, Muslim, and Arab-American communities that equal protection and due process rights are afforded to everyone, including non-citizens, in the United States. ADC urges anyone who is contacted by the FBI to contact the ADC Legal Department and provide details of the incident by calling (202) 244-2990, sending a fax to (202) 244-3196, or via email to [legal@adc.org](mailto:legal@adc.org).

ADC offers the following guidelines to anyone who is contacted by the FBI or other law enforcement agencies. Please see other valuable information included below.

- 1) Make sure an attorney is present at all times during any voluntary interview the person may choose to attend. It is important to note that everything you say to an FBI agent or other law enforcement representative is recorded, nothing is 'off the record,' including immigration status.
- 2) The interviewee may determine the date, time, location of the interview, and who may attend the interview, including an interpreter if needed. The FBI is required to provide an interpreter if requested.
- 3) Bear in mind that all such interviews are completely voluntary and that no one is obligated to volunteer to speak with an FBI agent or other law enforcement representative or answer any questions without a court-approved document.
- 4) The interviewee has absolute discretion as to what questions to answer in such a voluntary interview. For example, one may choose to answer questions about their neighborhood and yet refuse to answer any questions regarding their immigration status. However, anything and everything you say during these voluntary interviews is 'on the record.'

(ADC Know Your Rights, 2003)

As I worked this announcement into my speech on Emory's campus, quipping that I would invite the FBI agents for coffee at Starbucks, I wanted to draw the audiences' attention to the ways that the US government has long questioned the loyalties of its Arab immigrants and suppressed their rights to dissent on issues of foreign policy in the

Middle East. In fact such practices now have devastating effects on all immigrants to the U.S.

Backlash against Arabs and Muslims in America is not a new experience.

Bozorgmehr and Bakalian (2009) cite many instances pre-9/11 that resulted in both governmental and civilian “retaliation” against the “enemies within,” including “the 1973 oil embargo, the Iran hostage crisis (1979-1981), the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the U.S. Marine barracks [1983], the hijacking of TWA flight 847 to Beirut [1985], the killing of passenger Leon Kinghoffer on the Achille Lauro cruise ship [1985], the first Gulf War (1990-1991), and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing”<sup>3</sup> (2009: 1-2). They argue that this string of events established the stereotype of the Middle Eastern terrorist, and also the pattern of response of both the U.S. government and increasingly Arab and Muslim organizations. In addition to the discrimination, hate crimes and vigilante attacks by civilians against those suspected of being from Arab or Muslim descent, the government typically proceeds to detain and deport similar suspects, effectively creating an environment that censors public self-identification of Arabs or Muslims and any sentiments that would be favorable toward that group. It particularly censors opposition to political policies, both domestic and foreign, by the U.S. government. However, they conclude that 9/11 backlash against Arabs and Muslims was mitigated by the sophisticated level of organizing among Arabs and Muslims, and it also served to further mobilize organizations, communities, and individuals to further integrate into the American mainstream.

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<sup>3</sup> One could add to the list events such as the Palestinian kidnapping and subsequent death of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, and numerous other kidnappings and hijackings by members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization that may not have directly affected Americans, but were widely publicized in the Western media for their impact on Israel.

Arab immigrants, like many other immigrants, actively and/ or vicariously engage in politics in their home countries or try to use their presence within the U.S. to influence the U.S. government's foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Bawardi (2007) has recently described early Arab immigrant organizing related to greater Syrian nationalism<sup>5</sup> that developed into institutions of national significance, such as the Arab National League (1938-1942) and the Institute of Arab American Affairs (1945-1950). From 1890 to the 1950's, various organizations in the U.S. rallied in support for Arab nationalism, and struggled to undermine the colonization of the Arab world by the French and the British, as well as the establishment of the state of Israel. Following World War II and the founding of Israel, pan-Arab nationalism was opposed by the U.S., and the Middle East became grounds for the larger geopolitical battle of the US and the communist Soviet Union.

Major political organizing among Arabs in America did not take place again until after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. The six-day war that resulted in the loss of the West Bank and Gaza to Israel in 1967 is credited with mobilizing a new generation of Arab Americans. This generation, which included more Muslims and more highly educated Arab immigrants than previous generations, was highly politicized by the defeat of Arab armies by Israel and its US backers. Hagopian (1976) claimed that Arabs in America were a prime example of assimilation, until the 1967 war and activity by Zionists in America aimed at disparaging Arab identity and causes forced a de-assimilation of the population. The Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) was

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<sup>4</sup> They also organize for familial and social reasons. In fact, most organizing is traditionally related to familial and village/ town networks, like the Ramallah Club, an annual convention for Christians from Ramallah (Naff, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> A movement to unify the eastern Levant, now Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan and parts of Iraq.

formed in 1968,<sup>6</sup> and became “the first post-World War II national, credible, non-sectarian organization seeking to represent different elements of the Arab and American community and to advance an Arab (as opposed to regional or country) orientation” (Suleiman 1994: 47). Dedicated to increasing information about the Arab world in the U.S. and increasing Arab intellectuals involvement in politics, it aimed its agenda at “political lobbying, attacks against defamation of and discrimination against Arabs and Arab Americans, and activism among Arab Americans in order to get them to participate in politics” (Suleiman 1994: 48). Similar and often competing organizations formed over the years such as that National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) in 1972,<sup>7</sup> the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) in 1980, and the Arab American Institute (AAI) in 1985. In addition to the two remaining national secular organizations (ADC and AAI), several pan-Islamic organizations have also survived earlier iterations of the 1950’s and 1960s: the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) (founded in 1982); the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) (founded in 1963); the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) (founded in 1988); and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) (founded in 1994).

Efforts to organize did not go unnoticed, and in general, were not treated favorably by the U.S. government. Following the Palestinian kidnapping and ultimate death of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, the U.S. began “Operation Boulder,” a campaign of harassment, intimidation, and deportation of Arabs in the U.S. As reported by the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), a publication

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<sup>6</sup> AAUG was the first national Arab organization I joined in the early 1990s. It’s largely now defunct except for the publication of a journal call Arab Studies Quarterly. Competition between it, ADC, and AAI let to attrition of leadership and members.

<sup>7</sup> NAAA later merged with ADC.

founded in 1971 with funding from the Council of Churches, the campaign mobilized the FBI, CIA, and the INS under the direction of Secretary of State William Rogers and utilized the pretense of immigration status checks of “any Arab or others of a suspicious nature” to spy on, arrest, detain, and deport Arabs throughout the country. Stork and Theberge (1973) reported:

“In the two months following September 30<sup>th</sup>, at least 78 Arabs were deported from the US (according to government supplied figures). Hundreds, perhaps thousands more have been interrogated, photographed and finger-printed by FBI and Immigration officials. Some have been jailed and forced to pay high bonds for no reason, or for technical visa violations which are normally excused. They have felt the heavy hand of the state for only one reason: they are ‘ethnic Arabs’, and presently, that’s a bad thing to be in this country.

Other purposes of Operation Boulder [besides visa checks] are to inhibit all political activity of an anti-Zionist character, to compile intelligence dossier of such activity (especially involving “ethnic Arabs”), and to create a wedge of resentment between the Arab American community and the political activists of that community, including the creation of a network of informers.

In the words of George Rosenberg, Director of the Los Angeles Office of Immigration and Naturalization Services: “It may be overkill but it is better to do a useless act than to take a chance on one of them killing the President or blowing up a school or something” (Guardian, 1/3/73) (1973:3).

As Arab Americans became aware of this campaign, they contested it within the legal framework of civil rights. Abdeen Jabara, co-founder and first president of the AAUG, enlisted the support of the American Civil Liberties Union in protesting Operation Boulder, and in 1972 he filed a lawsuit against the FBI for infringing upon his rights to free speech and privacy by spying on him from 1967 - 1975. Although he was never charged with a crime, he was subjected to thirteen wiretaps, his mail was forwarded to the FBI, his bank accounts examined, and his movement monitored by informants and

agents (Fishbach 1985). During the trial, the FBI accused him of acting on behalf of a foreign government, but then later admitted he had not committed any crime, and that all the information that had been gathered on him demonstrated how he simply exercised constitutionally protected rights. It also admitted to sharing the information gathered with seventeen other federal agencies and three foreign governments. After winning his case in a district court in 1979, then losing in a court of appeals in 1982, Jebara settled his case out of court in 1984. By dropping his case, the FBI admitted that he had simply been exercising his rights, and it agreed to destroy their evidence on him and try to retrieve his information from other agencies and governments. Operation Boulder was ultimately deemed to be too costly for its returns, and was terminated in 1975.<sup>8</sup>

Collusion between the CIA, FBI, Israeli intelligence and domestic Zionists organizations was widely assumed and publicly discussed.<sup>9</sup> Arabs, particularly Palestinians, in America became the targets of espionage by Zionist groups, who shared information with the FBI and influenced such action as Operation Boulder. Two prominent groups known for preventing Arab organizing or pro-Arab sentiment are the Jewish Defense League (JDL) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The JDL used physical violence to intimidate and ultimately silence Arabs and Arab sympathizers. Under the leadership of Rabbi Meir Kahane, legions of “nice Jewish boys with bombs” (Friedman 1986) sent death threats, committed physical assaults, vandalism, and murder of Russian and Arab leaders in the 1970s’ and 1980s<sup>10</sup>. By the mid 1980s, Jewish extremists such as the JDL were credited with twenty domestic acts of violence, “or

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<sup>8</sup> Over 150,000 names had been screened due to immigration and visa issues, but the Department of State reported that no Arabs had been denied entry to the U.S. (Fishbach 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Hagopian (1975) and Fischbach (1985)

<sup>10</sup> Kahane organized military operations against Arabs in the West Bank as well as in the U.S. He moved to Israel in the early 1970s (Friedman 1986).

about a quarter of the total terrorist acts committed on the U.S. mainland” (Abraham 1994: 157). Members of the JDL have been linked to the murder of Alex Odeh in 1985. Odeh was a regional director of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC). His body was blown in half by a bomb wired to ADC’s office door on the morning of October 11, 1985.<sup>11</sup> The FBI arrested two members of the JDL as suspects in December 2001, and issued warrants for the arrest of three more now living in Israel<sup>12</sup>. They have yet to prosecute anyone for this murder.

While it did not engage in militaristic violence against Arabs in America, the ADL led efforts to vilify and defame Arabs in what has been called “ideological warfare.” They publicly criticized the ADC, claiming that they were PLO spokesmen, attacked academics for supposedly creating PLO propaganda, and circulated intimidating watch-lists claiming particular professors or researchers are anti-Israeli in ways that reminded many at the time of McCarthy style blacklists. They also used espionage to gather information on Arabs in America, and shared this information with the FBI. Although members of the ADL had boasted of keeping files on Arab Americans and passing them on to the FBI since the mid 1970s, conclusive evidence was not revealed until 1993. Acting on a tip that a local police detective was selling confidential files on anti-apartheid groups to South African intelligence, the San Francisco police discovered that the detective’s accomplice was working as an undercover agent for the ADL and doing the same. It was discovered that for thirty years, an agent named Bullock had

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<sup>11</sup> Odeh had appeared on a local television station the day before his murder explaining that he did not think Arafat or the PLO were behind the hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise liner. Abraham explains that “Odeh’s statements condemning the hijacking and terrorism in general were cut from the interview, possibly contributing to his murder” (1994: 155).

<sup>12</sup> ADC Press Release. FBI Arrests Jewish Terrorists, Suspects in Alex Odeh Murder.” December 12, 2001.



“compiled computer files for the ADL on 9,876 individuals and more than 950 groups of all political stripes, including the NAACP, the Rainbow Coalition, ACLU, the American Indian Movement, the Center for Investigative Reporting, Pacifica, ACT UP, Palestinian and Arab groups, Americans for Peace Now, and anti-apartheid organizations” (Friedman 1993). On behalf of a number of plaintiffs, the ADC sued the ADL. Federal courts ruled in favor of the ADC in 1999, and the ADL is under permanent injunction from any illegal spying on Arab Americans or other civil rights groups. The ADL was also required turn over all materials gathered illegally to a “Special Master” who will destroy them after 6-10 years. The ADC reported that the materials include: “law enforcement surveillance reports and political intelligence, criminal arrest records, fingerprint cards, mug shots, Social Security numbers, driver's license numbers, license plate numbers, vehicle registration numbers, and Post Office boxes not legally available to the public.”<sup>13</sup>

One set of cases that resulted from ADL’s tips to the FBI is that of the “LA 8.” The eight include seven Palestinian men and the Kenyan wife of one of the men, all arrested in 1987 under the anti-communist McCarran Walter Act for allegedly belonging to a Marxist party called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Since charges of preaching communism or overthrowing the government could not be substantiated, all eight were put in deportation proceedings, even though two were lawful permanent residents and the six others had only minor visa violations. Legal action achieved an injunction to prohibit their deportation, claiming that the INS used selective enforcement because the group was pro-Palestinian. The ADC managed to defend the group until it had reached the Supreme Court in 1999. At that point, the court ruled that the U.S. was allowed to deport anyone they view as being suspicious by first declaring

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<sup>13</sup> ADC Press Release September 24, 1999 “Resolution Of ADL Spy Scandal Case” ADC vs. ADL

them “illegal,” and then putting them in removal proceedings without appeal to a district court. In this way, the “LA 8” has had a devastating effect on immigrants’ rights because their case basically set the legal precedent to allow the government to strip immigrants of their protective immigration status for security concerns without room for appeal. None of the “LA8” were ever accused of criminal activity, and in 2001, a federal judge ruled that if deportations were to proceed, they would have to be argued under the defunct McCarran Walter Act, effectively protecting the eight from deportation indefinitely. In 2006, one of the men became a US citizen. However, the government is still pursuing the case under the Patriot Act.

This case set horrible precedent for the treatment of immigrants. Throughout the government said that their rights to free speech would have been protected if the individuals involved were citizens. As the ADC put it during a 2002 letter writing campaign to then Attorney General Janet Reno:

Twelve years after their arrest, the "L.A. Eight" have remained scrupulously within the law, raised families, established homes and businesses, paid taxes and continued to be active in their communities on behalf of Arab American civil rights. Ironically, the views they held at the time of their arrest -- support for an independent Palestinian state and respect for Palestinian human rights -- are now the subject of US backed negotiations and agreements between the Palestinians and Israelis. These views, though considered marginal at the time of the arrest, have since been adopted by the mainstream of both American and Israeli public opinions. Much of the impetus for this change is due to the free speech activities of groups and individuals, such as the LA Eight, who bring a much needed Arab perspective to our public discourse on the Middle East....The silencing of their voices would do incalculable harm to freedom of speech, immigrants rights, and principles of political liberty.<sup>14</sup>

Whether or not the “free speech” of U.S. residents does indeed influence U.S. policies, foreign or otherwise, is uncertain. What is certain is that even while “free speech” is part

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<sup>14</sup> ADC Action Alert August 2, 2002. Brief Extension on ADC Lawyers' Letter to Reno on LA8

of the fundamental logic of U.S. nationalism, cases like the “LA8” established an environment that censored “free speech” on the subject of Palestine and the Middle East more generally, and created context in which artists self-censored their work.

### Post 9/11: More of the Same and Worse

In an article for the *Nation*, Alisa Solomon (2003) highlights some of the features of what she called, the “Big Chill.” She argues that this chapter of state sponsored censorship and its trickle down effects of shaming and intimidating dissent began with 9/11. Bush’s threat, “you are either with us or you are with the terrorists” was backed up by the Patriot Act in October 2001, giving the government the much broader powers to spy, investigate, and detain anyone it sees fit. It allowed indefinite detention of foreign nationals without any process or appeal, new search and surveillance powers with insufficient judicial review, and measures providing for guilt by association. Civil liberties were further compromised through additional measures outside of the Patriot Act such as a suspension of attorney client privilege in cases related to national security; the creation of closed military tribunals, suspension of constitutional rights to due process and appeal in cases deemed to be of national security; police spying on domestic political and religious activities; seizure of assets, including those of Muslim charities, without due process; and the creation of “Operation TIPS” or an incentive program for Americans to spy on each other.<sup>15</sup> Solomon (2003) writes: “When civil libertarians began to protest the curbing of constitutional rights, Attorney General John Ashcroft offered a forbidding rejoinder: ‘To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists.’ These kinds of remarks from our

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<sup>15</sup> Details are described in ADC’s 2003 *Report on Hate Crimes and Backlash against Arab Americans: The Post September 11 Backlash* September 11, 2001-October 11, 2002.

government's top leaders, says Anthony Romero, Executive Director of the ACLU, have granted ordinary people license 'to shut down alternative views.' The Administration has fashioned a domestic arm of its new doctrine of pre-emption."

In addition to the USA Patriot Act, the government revived and resuscitated a form of Operation Boulder called Special Registration. The U.S. already subjects all non-immigrant visa holders, such as students, visitors, and workers from Arab and Muslim countries to special security clearance. After 9/11 the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services began reviewing and interviewing thousands of current non-immigrant visa holders from Arab and Muslim countries, and deported hundreds with outstanding orders of deportation. In 2002, the distinct program called Special Registration required "non-immigrant alien" males over sixteen years of age from twenty three Muslim and Arab countries, plus Eritrea and North Korea "for good measure" to register with federal immigration authorities, be photographed and fingerprinted, and submit to questioning. By the time the program was cancelled in 2003, 82,880 were specially registered by reporting to federal immigration offices, and 127,694 were registered upon entering the country for the first time. Of those, 13,434 were put in removal proceedings for visa violations, although none were charged with terrorism or terrorist affiliations (Cainkar 2004). Special registration generated a high level of denunciation across a broad spectrum of immigrant and civil liberties advocates. As Margie McHugh, then head of the New York Immigration Coalition put it:

Identifying terrorist threats to the country is like finding a needle in a haystack. Yet, the responses of the Justice Department and Department of Homeland Security via programs like Special Registration only increase the size of the haystack and convince millions of immigrants that it is not safe for them to interact with law enforcement authorities. We urge Secretary Ridge and all our elected officials to end their counterproductive

profiling of immigrant communities and focus their resources instead on measures that support our basic democratic values and do not undermine our security goals. That is the only way to genuinely improve our security.<sup>16</sup>

Although Special Registration ended in May of 2003, it was deeply felt by the Arab American community in New York. Emily Jacir, a Palestinian American visual artist, explained that activism post 9/11 dropped dramatically. She said:

9/11 happened, and all of our energies got diverted. First of all, there's a whole segment of our population that can no longer protest or do anything because they might get hauled off to a detention camp, or thrown out of the country, so they have to protect themselves. And the people that are active, now have to deal with the detention camps, people being hauled off, all this new legislation, the fact that all these men had to register from Arab countries, etc. Another front is the media which completely warps and twists everything about our community. So I mean, all of our energies got diverted into focusing on all of these issues. Plus there's just real genuine fear. Everybody was having FBI visits, I mean, no, now, it's just completely changed.

Me: Did you know a lot of people who had FBI visits?

Jacir: Yeah, I did. An ironic moment in all that was that my Palestinian male friends who had visits thought the whole experience was not so bad, because sadly they are used to being abused and tortured by the Israelis. One friend said to me, "They were so nice, they gave me coffee!"

When I asked Abdeen Jabara, the poster-child for success in challenging pre-911 American excesses in domestic intimidation of Arab Americans, if things were truly different in this "War on Terror" versus the ones waged in the 70's and 80's, he said, absolutely.

You want me to tell you what the difference is? Before 9/11 I could have my lawsuit in federal court, and I could have some victories. Today I would never be able to. We're living in what is called the National Security State. And now you get Congress agreeing that the President can authorize the use of torture. All right? I mean, this is a very difficult time

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<sup>16</sup> From May 8, 2003 Press Release titled "Immigrants and Civil Rights Groups Picket City Hall During Homeland Security Secretary's Visit with Mayor; Denounce Counterproductive Security Measures and Erosion of Immigrant Rights and Services Under New Agency."

that we're living through, and it's a totally different situation. Now you do have some victories, some small victories, after 9/11, they're not very many, but here and there you could have a victory. You know, I just interviewed a client the other day, for the last 20 times he's entered this country he's been pulled out for special screening. And this is happening to thousands of people. American citizens. 'Where've you been? Who'd you see? Who'd you talk to? What kind of luggage? What do you have in your luggage?' They go through the luggage. 'What's this? What's that?' All right? And this is just a smattering of what's happened to this country. All in the name of security. They've become Israel West. So, I don't know what's going to happen politically in this country. This country has moved so far to the right that I saw a t-shirt the other day that said, 'I never thought I'd miss Nixon.'

Interestingly, Jebara thinks the only reason anyone finally took is lawsuit seriously was because of Watergate. He had filed the suit against the FBI years before, but because Nixon had been caught spying on political opponents and had resigned in 1974, others were more willing to consider the ways the government lies and deprives citizens of their civil rights. Today, aside from practicing law, he is on the boards of the Center for Constitutional Rights and Alwan for the Arts.

In addition to government policies that targeted Arabs and Muslims after 9/11, there was intense civilian backlash that weighed on people's minds in the Arab American community. The ADC reported that there were over 700 violent incidents against Arab Americans, or those perceived to be Arab or Muslim in the first nine weeks after 9/11, including several murders. There was also a reported increase in violent incidents in the year following 9/11; and that number has not returned to pre 9/11 rates. Nationwide, the ADC documented over 800 cases of employment discrimination, or a four-fold increase over previous annual rates.<sup>17</sup> The city government of New York<sup>18</sup> conducted a survey of

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<sup>17</sup> ADC's 2003 Report on Hate Crimes and Backlash against Arab Americans: The Post September 11 Backlash" September 11, 2001-October 11, 2002

<sup>18</sup> The surveys were distributed in all five boroughs by community based organizations between October 2002 and April 2003, and were completed anonymously by individuals in 6 different languages: English,

659 Arabs and South Asians, 81% of who identified as Muslim, to assess the local impact of 9/11. They found that 69% had experienced one or more incidents of what they perceived to be discrimination or bias related harassment, and 79% felt their lives were “negatively affected” by 9/11. Overall, they reported that this population “felt more afraid and minimized their contact with the general public or made their religion and ethnicity less evident” (NYC Commission on Human Rights 2003: ii). This environment formed the backdrop for my study, and continues to resonate with Arabs in America to this day.

#### Calm in the Midst of a Storm:

In the days following 9/11, Arab American artists either incorporated these sweeping changes as material in their work, or created and converted projects into spaces that unified them and addressed their sense of vulnerability. Although I lived in Atlanta until I formally began my fieldwork in 2003, I had begun coming to New York frequently after September 11, 2001. It seemed that while the rest of the Arabs I knew around the country had gone into hiding, Arabs and Arab Americans in New York were coming together in large numbers and provoking people, including themselves, to deal with their fear of Arabs through their art. At first, there were individual efforts that found surprising and resounding community support. By the time I moved to New York in 2003, there were additional consolidated efforts, such as Nibras, an Arab American theater collective, the NY Arab American Comedy Festival, and Alwan for the Arts. To this day, these three institutions continue to draw new and different crowds into the mix,

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Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Punjabi. Findings were published in a report by the New York City Commission on Human Rights called “Discrimination Against Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians in New York City Since 9/11” in the summer of 2003.

and the arts scene is still growing. While I discuss these institutionalized spaces in earlier chapters, here I would like to talk about some of the seedling activities by individuals that captured the interest, imagination, and effort of Arab communities in the immediate post 9/11 days. Maysoon Zayid and Dean Obeidallah began doing stand up comedy years before 9/11. While Zayid claims to have begun talking “incessantly” about Palestine beginning in 2000 with the outbreak of the second Intifada, Obeidallah attributes his identification as an Arab American directly to 9/11. Zayid saw the opportunity on stage to speak freely about a subject she cared deeply, and Obeidallah saw the stage as a chance to defend those being maligned regularly by the media and on the streets. Both were recruited to perform at a fundraiser for the National Association of Arab American Professionals (NAAP) in 2002. At that time, they were joined by Ray Hanania, a Chicago based Palestinian American comedian who had been censored by being removed from the stage because the veteran comedian and celebrity Jackie Mason refused to perform with a Palestinian. The event was such a success, selling out back to back shows, that they realized the demand for their work and an opportunity for stable audience base. They started doing shows they billed as the “Middle East Bazaar” and “Arabian Nights,” and comics, both from New York and LA toured the country mocking the U.S. War on Terror. In addition to hundreds of jokes about being mistaken for a terrorist, there were poignant jokes about the special programs after 9/11 that disparately affected Arab Americans and drew into question civil liberties overall. For example, Zayid joked:

I love special registration. I think it’s the best thing since Match.com. Basically, what they did for me is they got all Middle Eastern men under the age of 65 in one convenient viewing location. And did, like, the credit check and the background check.



Or Nasry Malak:

So ever since 9/11 my family and I have been going out of our way to be as patriotic as possible. So we're thinking of turning in my father. Not because he did anything, but just to make us look so patriotic.<sup>19</sup>

Or Obeidallah:

The closest thing we get to Arab awareness month is when they raise the terror alert.

Well you know what's going to make us safer, the Patriot Act, right? There's one part that really intrigues me, the part that says any book any American takes out of the library, the government can find out the name of that book. Now let me be honest, I'm very in favor of catching terrorists. It makes our lives more difficult.<sup>20</sup> But let's be honest, do you think Al Qaeda is so short of money they're going to public libraries and taking books out? Are there books that really give them away, like, "I'm al-Qaeda, You're al-Qaeda." or "Chicken soup for the terrorist soul."

These jokes, among others, rallied audiences like no Arab American performers in New York had ever seen. They also rallied the media, which was quick to cast its gaze on this small group of attractive, English speaking individuals who would translate some of the anxieties about being Arab in America and the War on Terror to a wider American audience. They were credited with providing refuge from the storm, catharsis from the hate and suspicion cast upon their lot, and even the ability to gauge and mobilize the Arab American vote in coming elections<sup>21</sup>.

Before Obeidallah and Zayid founded the Arab American Comedy Festival, they were random Arab voices that stood out from a mass of paranoid and fearful people.

They credit the community itself for founding of the Comedy festival, and recognize the reciprocal role that the festival played in the community. They seized upon the freedom

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<sup>19</sup> This joke was later turned into a 1 minute comedy sketch for Comedy Central's "the Watch List." It shows the family collecting evidence against the father, such as books & newspapers in Arabic and a brass teapot.

<sup>20</sup> By "our lives" he's referring to Arab Americans.

<sup>21</sup> Washington Post.com 2004 3 video web-casts: 1. The Arab American Vote; 2. Bush Losing Support; 3. Undecided about Kerry

of the stage and their relative anonymity within the larger entertainment industry to make their careers as Arab American comics, a freedom that is rarely afforded in other venues, such as television, film, and even literature. As a comic, you can always claim, “it was just a joke.” Of course, free speech on stage is also compromised by the artist’s degree of notoriety and fame. Zayid describes the situation as such:

On one level, you almost self edit yourself, because if you don’t edit yourself, your movie will never get made, your tv show will never get made, the book will not get published. So it's like we've been trained to edit ourselves. But on stage, there's no censorship. None. Michael Richards says “nigger,” and its all over the tv so people think comics can't talk. No, famous people can't talk, and my day is coming, and my voice is getting lower and lower because I'm getting more well known. I've had to tone it down. But that's only because I'm waiting to get on Opera, and then I'll open the floodgates. Angelina Jolie can say whatever the fuck she wants, whatever the fuck she wants. But you can't say that when you're the guy who used to play Kramer, you know what I mean. Everyone's at a different level. Comics like me, I can still say whatever I want, because no-body's listening yet. Dane Cooke, can say whatever he wants. Whatever he wants. Dane Cook could do half an hour of Nazi jokes, and it would clear, and it would be on HBO. Because he's Dane Cook. We can't say the word Jihad on TV. I have two friends named Jihad, what shall I call them? Censorship in America is worse than in Palestine. I promise you. Because there's no law in Palestine, you can say whatever the hell you want, wherever you want.

While Zayid may boast that she is not famous enough to be censored (and that those who are very famous are uncensored), Zayid has been asked to stop performing in clubs because of her jokes. For example, when the Space Shuttle Columbia crashed over Palestine Texas with the first Israeli astronaut on board in February 2003, Zayid used to joke, “there is a God.” I remember seeing her tell that joke in a Upper West Side club, and nearly died at her insinuation. When I repeated the joke to my mother from my cell phone while in a public space, she was sure I would be arrested. Although Zayid often performed in that club alongside a raunchy redheaded Jewish American comedian, she

caught the ire of a Jewish audience member for telling that joke, and was asked to not come back.

### Censorship and its habits

Most artists I interviewed in New York were explicitly warned not to mention being Arab, especially Palestinian, if they wanted a career. Others were selective about what audience had the privilege of this information. As Betty Shamieh explains: “Many people ask me if I – as a Palestinian American playwright living in New York in a post-September 11 world – have been facing more censorship in the wake of that horrific event that changed all of our lives. The answer – which might surprise many – is no” (Shamieh 2006: 334). When I interviewed her on this subject, she described coming to her literary Arab American identity in the following way:

Well, one of the main things that I was very concerned about particularly being a Palestinian American was backlash. And I was concerned about it pre 9/11 and I thought it would be better to make a name of myself as a playwright and then talk about hot button political issues. I mean it was almost a neurotic fear, it wasn't a rational kind of way of looking at things, but I don't think it was unjustified given the current political environment that I was working in as a playwright, with no sort of major Arab American writers working in my field.

Also, the black writers and Asian writer were very much pigeon holed as just that, so there weren't even models of other minorities who were able to crossover very easily into mainstream art. I think that one of my things as an Arab American has been to try to model myself on the African American or Jewish American, to some extent, of being a minority whose very much of your own identity but also very mainstream as well. I did want to have an audience. I didn't want to be relegated to a very small off off the center of culture kind of place. It was really important to me that I was heard. So I call it a neurosis in that I spend three years at Yale School of Drama in the best playwriting program not really showing the people the stuff that I was writing about Arab Americans. It's like Tennessee Williams doing a writing program and not writing about Southerners.

Shamieh eventually came to the conclusion that her best work was in fact not the work where she dons the voice African American, as she did at Yale, but where she writes as an Arab American. Her audience, which she recognizes as being mostly white and non-Arab (or “mainstream”), has recognized her through her Arab work and no other. It is through work such as *Chocolate in Heat* (2001) and *Roar* (2004) that she made a name for herself as an Arab American playwright of Palestinian descent. Now, she concludes:

I think the strongest form of censorship is self-censorship. I really do, and that's why I said it's its neurotic. It is very very irrational... “somebody is coming to get me with a gun” kind of censorship, you know. And I do think that that is engrained in many Arab Americans... So I think the society is not as censoring as we are of ourselves you know. I think it's something we have to work on in our community. I think the more people do it and still survive and still be successful the more likely.

Other artists do not think of censorship as a psychological phenomenon, but as one rooted in the history of Arabs in America and the Middle East. Emily Jacir remarked on this history and how it affected her work:

I just feel like we're having is this kind of historical amnesia, no one seems to remember that everyone had FBI visits long before 9/11. I had an FBI visit long before 9/11. We're *Palestinian* [emphasis in original] and they've always targeted us. Remember Operation Boulder? From 1972 or was it 1973, that's what they dubbed it. They totally targeted the Palestinian community in Chicago, Cleveland, all the activists, and they were tapping phone lines...

Me: There was the ADC President who was assassinated,

Jacir: Yeah, exactly, Alex Odeh. And then the LA 8. I mean there's so many things. It's not new, people. Ever since I was 13 or 14, I've known all about the censorship in this country, people who did speak out, what happened to them. People like Vanessa Redgrave, etc, and all the stuff that was happening to Edward Said, so I grew up totally aware of all this stuff, hyper aware of this history, of our narrative being censored, of being unable to speak, things line not being able to say the word “Palestine.” As a student in college in this country I remember getting bad grades on my papers in History if I didn't write it from a Zionist perspective. The professors would accuse me of being one-sided.

As an artist, again, I'd have to say it was a very conscious move to make work that wasn't overtly and directly political about our situation at the beginning of my career. The work, of course, was about Palestine, but people could enter the exhibition and not know that. That was a deliberate move on my part. And I thought as I make my way through these different levels of the art world then I could slowly start getting more and more direct about the Palestinian situation. I actually did that very consciously and very deliberately.

Jacir thinks that she can now do work that addresses Palestinian themes, as the following examples testify.

In 2002, Emily Jacir participated in a group show called the *Queens International* at the Queens Museum of Art. As the Director of the Queens Museum, Tom Finkelpearl, explains to the editors of a volume called "Censoring Culture":

I have to tell you about something that's made me miserable... One of the quirks of our museum is that the U.N. General Assembly met in our building from 1946 to 1950. So the partition of Palestine was decided upon in this building. Emily's mother worked in the World's Fair in 1964 in the Jordanian Pavilion, which was all manned, or rather, womaned, by Palestinian women. So Emily did a piece about the celebratory moment of Israel being admitted into the U.N. and Palestine being partitioned in November 1947. She found in our archives a brochure from the Worlds Fair in 1964, a very pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli propaganda piece, which was given out by the Jordanians. She had it reprinted and, without any indication that it was a work of art, left it in a bin where people were picking it up. They freaked out. So I am trying to figure out what to do.

I thought that the most important thing we could do at this point is to create a moment of dialogue, not to strictly adhere to the idea that the work couldn't be changed. And so we got into a discussion with the artist about the fact that people didn't recognize her handout as a work of art and were simply freaking out because they thought that the museum was distributing Palestinian propaganda. We got into a lengthy discussion with conservative and orthodox Jewish communities; we were attacked in the press by the right. Then we invited Maria Kannry, the founder of the "Dialogue Project," to the museum. The project gives Jewish Israelis and Arab Palestinians and Jews and Arabs the opportunity to sit down and talk to one another. I would say my best moment at the museum came during a panel discussion with 3 Israelis and 3 Palestinians organized by Emily Jacir. We had a Christian Palestinian, an Iraqi Jew, and Ashkenazi Jew,

and so on. It was a whole mix of the two communities. And that came about because Emily did change the piece. She stopped giving out the brochure, though you could still see the brochure, you could read the brochure, and you could even get the brochure if you requested it. However, it wasn't something you just pulled out of an unmarked box. And this, at some level, was censorship. And she felt that even though she agreed to it. I said to a friend of mine, 'Well she agreed to it, it wasn't censorship', and he said, 'It is not necessarily not censorship because she agreed to it' (Finkelpearl et al 2006: 306-307).

This incident reveals how most Arab American artists have to compromise their work due to differences of opinion regarding politics. In a classic way, Jacir had to participate in a "dialogue" to appease those attacking her position and appear to be reasonable, and then change the way in which she showed her work.

When Jacir read a conference paper in which I first cited Finkelpearl's quote, she could not believe that he went out of his way to admit that incident for this new volume called *Censoring Culture* (2006). She remembers the incident vividly, and although she recognized the aspect of censorship, she genuinely believed he supported her and helped her out. When interviewed, she said:

I mean, back when that thing happened at the Queens Museum, Tom Finkelpearl, he supported me, and my work, and it was already HUGE thing that he was letting me have a memorial to all the villages erased by Israel in 1948 in the museum. You know, that's massive! For someone like him to let me have that in the museum. So when that whole thing went down, with the brochure, I felt like I was responsible as an artist to work with him and support him as a museum director. I mean, it's true; it was censorship. But I agreed to it because sometimes you have to support those who are supporting you, and work with them in the way they need to be supported. He was being confronted with a very angry community in Queens protesting my work.

The memorial took the form of a refugee tent; it was created and first exhibited in the spring of 2001. Its full title is the *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated or Occupied*, a deliberate move on Jacir's part to force anyone who referenced the work to state this piece of history as fact. Jacir secured a full scale

refugee tent like the ones distributed by the United Nations and the Red Cross to Palestinian refugees in 1948, and set about stitching the names of 418 villages “destroyed, depopulated, or occupied” since 1948 onto the tent in English.



Emily Jacir (2001): *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Which Were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*. Courtesy of Emily Jacir. © Photo by Kean Wong

Given the labor-intensive nature of this project, she invited community members to join her in her studio at PS1 and sew the names of the villages she stenciled onto the tent. From her description, its creation involved ritualistic readings of the history of each village from Walid Khalidi’s history *All That Remains: the Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (1992) and impromptu descriptions by descendants of those villages who had come to help sew. Its overt political symbolism cannot be missed, and since Jacir had gained access to a mainstream venue such as the Queens Museum for its showing, she compromised on the reproduction of the Palestinian brochure from the 1964 Worlds Fair.

Creating a distinction between “art” and “propaganda” is central to how Arab American artists circumvent censorship. Since most Arab American artists are familiar with how Arabs, and Palestinians in particular, have either been outright censored by the government or by American popular culture at large, they seek ways to operate within those constraints yet remain true to their voice and their experience. Yet, they have sensed shifting of American sensibilities since the Oslo Peace Accords in September 1993, when even U.S. Presidents began publicly supporting the formation of a Palestinian state and engaging in diplomatic efforts to make that happen. Some attribute this event as an opening for a more Palestinian or Arab voice in their work. None recall addressing censorship directly before 9/11, and often times, not even after. The data gathered during my fieldwork indicate that censorship and defamation continue unabated, but the tactics for addressing it have somewhat changed.

#### Organizing for Free Speech Post 9/11:

One group that seized the national climate opposing political dissent is called Campus Watch. Its attack on the professors at Columbia University’s Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures deeply affected the community in New York. Barely six months after Edward Said’s death on September 25, 2003, a group of students presented a short documentary film called “Columbia Unbecoming” which claimed that Jewish students at Columbia were intimidated and made to feel uncomfortable by their professors. Between March and October of 2004 it had reached the highest levels of the University, City government, and even Israel, and had forced an investigation into the treatment of these students by their professors. Long seen as the



bastion of free speech on the topic of the Middle East, these students attempted to undercut the legacy of Edward Said himself. Edward Said's actions and words while tenured at Columbia were frequently challenged and questioned by both the JDL, ADL, and the FBI. Subject to regular death threats and challenges, he continued to be outspoken. Even while under police protection due to threats and episodes of vandalism, he was under surveillance by the FBI (Price 2006).

Columbia professors Joseph Massad, Hamid Dabashi, and George Saliba endured horrible abuse from the students and the general public<sup>22</sup> and their case, like many others throughout the country, sent fear throughout the halls of the academy about what would be next. Congress even proposed legislation to penalize professors who took unfavorable positions. In the fall of 2003, the House of Representatives passed HR3077, which would allow the government to establish an Advisory Board to monitor area studies programs to be sure they support U.S. "national interests." Although it was not matched in the Senate, it fueled vigilante censorship of the classrooms around the country, including at Columbia. Professors condemned the attack for its obvious bias against those critical of Israel, and civil liberties groups circled their wagons around the professors in the name of "free speech." Columbians for Academic Freedom, the Columbia Antiwar Coalition, and Stop McCarthyism at Columbia arranged rallies and debates about academic freedom and censorship on campus, while the professors awaited the verdict by a University review committee. Meanwhile City legislators postured that if the review findings were not good enough, they would move to create legislation to look into the matter themselves. The review did not uphold any claims of intimidation against

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<sup>22</sup> They received death threats on their answering machines, and e-mails and other personal communication rife with violent insinuations; Massad, who is untenured, risks the loss of his job (Personal communication).

the students, but the entire experience left many academics feeling bitter, abused, and defensive.

I believe it was in the local context of what New York Magazine's Jennifer Senior (2005) called "Columbia's Own Middle East War" that Arab American artists began exercising their civil liberties muscles. Columbia is quite integral to the Arab arts scene in New York. Many artists were students there, either of Arabic or of another discipline. Columbia is often a sponsor of arts events providing funds, space, and contacts for film festivals, concerts, lectures, etc., and several of the professors themselves are either artists or scholars of the arts. Therefore, the overwhelming attack on Columbia's Middle Eastern Studies department by politicians, administrators, and kids self deputized to enforce their rhetoric could not be missed by the Arab American community. It prepared artists for when their turn came next.

About the time things were really heating up at Columbia, two cases from the world of visual arts galvanized community efforts to defend free speech. As censorship was not a new or extraordinary phenomenon, these cases represent not some deviation from the norm in terms of the attack, but in the response. As free speech, civil rights, and civil liberties were being eroded by the War on Terror, it created an environment, on college campuses and elsewhere, where Arab Americans could defend themselves not for reasons contingent upon Middle Eastern history and politics, but on principles allegedly cherished by the U.S. government alone.

The first case comes from Westchester County in New York, a county not more than a thirty minute train ride outside of New York City. Organizers there planned a one-day exhibit on November 20, 2004 of work drawn from the *Made in Palestine*

contemporary art exhibit shown in Houston in 2003. This was actually part of the campaign to raise funds and interest in bringing the entire exhibit to New York. I actually had not heard about the Westchester show until it was threatened to be cancelled. Assemblyman Karben, who represents Rockland (not Westchester) county called on the county to cancel the show to be exhibited in a county building because it was “anti-Israel and ‘promotes terrorism and violence’.” This sparked a flurry of activity to keep the exhibit from being closed down. One day I receive this impassioned plea in my inbox from Dean Obeidallah, the comedian. Obeidallah wrote:<sup>23</sup>

This is one of the most important e-mails I have ever sent and I hope everyone will read it and get involved in preventing the censorship of a Palestinian art exhibit.... We must take a stand against this as artists, Arabs and Americans. Regardless of the content, freedom of expression must be vigilantly protected, especially in this post 911 world. This is especially true for artists of Arab heritage because if this Assemblyman is successful, then any art we create in the future, whether it be a play, a movie, a comedy routine, a poem, a painting, etc., could be censored by any person who simply labels it as anti-Israel, regardless of the true facts. We cannot allow this to happen.

As we are all aware, the use of art to explain who we are poses a greater threat than any weapon because it humanizes us and helps to define us in a positive way. We must not sit by quietly as our most basic fundamental right, the freedom of expression, is taken from us because one or two elected officials label it as being anti-Israel. If we do, we risk the continual erosion of our rights that will only end when we no longer have these rights. I cannot stress more strongly that every person who reads this should call the Westchester County Executives Offices and the museum to voice your support for freedom of expression and against censorship... In a time when civil liberties are no longer guaranteed, we, as Arabs and Americans, must take a stand against this attempted deprivation of our constitutional right of freedom of expression. (I also encourage you not to frame this as a Palestinian versus Jewish issue. It’s truly about freedom of expression versus censorship of the arts).”  
*[parenthesis in original]* (Obeidallah 11/14/04).

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<sup>23</sup> E-mails from Dean Obeidallah reprinted here with his permission.

When County Executive Andrew Spano decided to allow the exhibit, his advisor declared, “He is not about to stifle the constitutional freedoms of expression and speech that our democracy is based on.” Dean then posts another note saying, “This is a great victory for freedom of expression, for the Palestinian artists involved and for the entire Arab community. The large number of phone calls to the County Executive office, together with the work of the local ACLU office, made this happen. This proves that by working together as a community, we can make a difference!” (Obeidallah 11/15/05). Less than a month later, another Palestinian artist was accused of being politically biased, and a similar communal response unfolded to save the exhibit.

One month before the scheduled opening of her photographic series “Where We Come From” at the Ulrich Museum of Art in Wichita State University in Kansas, Emily Jacir faced the pressure to censor her work. “Where We Come From” is a series of photographs that came out of requests from Palestinians in the territories and throughout the world for her to carry out certain tasks that she is able to do because she has an American Passport. For example, a young man in Bethlehem asks her to go on a date with a woman he had been corresponding with in Jerusalem since he cannot cross into Israel with his West Bank ID. She does, and takes a photo of the date. The original request is then posted along side the photo in the exhibition. This moving series was featured in many prominent galleries throughout the world, including at the 2004 Whitney Biennial exhibition of contemporary American art. On December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004 Jacir reached out to the Arabny list serve for advice. Her subject line read: “I need help. My exhibit might get cancelled.” She went on<sup>24</sup>:

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<sup>24</sup> E-mails from Emily Jacir are reprinted here with her permission.

In short, my exhibition, “Where We Come From” is to be shown in Wichita, Kansas. But now the Jewish Federation of Kansas has put enough pressure on the University to get what they want. Up until now the museum has been able to resist but they no longer can. What they have insisted on is to be able to place a brochure and a sign in the gallery expressing their views concerning the politics of the Middle-East. The Director of the Museum himself does not actually know exactly what it will say, but says they have permission regardless. My gallery thinks it is so insulting I should cancel. There is no room to fight them in it as they have official permission from the Vice-President of the University. I am not sure what to do. I don’t want to cancel because then it means they got what they wanted...on the other hand having brochures (and we can all guess what they would be about) distributed IN THE SAME ROOM as my pictures is so insulting and disgusting I can’t deal with it either. (Jacir: 12/9/04)

She posts a second note the same day still trying to wrap her tongue around the appropriate language:

Isn’t it an infringement on ‘freedom of speech’ etc to have someone actually INVADE my stage, my space, my installation... There must be some law about this, no? As an artist I am asked to perform in a space and then it is like they let mustawtaneen (settlers) put up a settlement right there.. I know there must be some glitch in terms of the ‘law’. (Jacir: 12/9/04)

By December 13<sup>th</sup>, Jacir had broadened her base of defense and solidified her language around this issue. She wrote :

Though the situation happens all the time and I am totally used to it as is every Palestinian on this list, I cannot accept their terms. Thanks to Kamran<sup>25</sup> who reminded me how completely and totally unacceptable this is on every level, I am fighting them before I make any decision. I have involved the art world. I know that the ADC, ACLU, Coalition Against Censorship, Refuse and Resist, as well as several museums, galleries, and artists are supposed to be calling today. We have to fight! (Jacir: 12/13/05)

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<sup>25</sup> Kamran Rastegar was a graduate of Columbia University’s Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures department at that time. This was also the time of the attacks on the professors by Campus Watch.

Because it was taking place in a university setting, academic freedom and artistic freedom were often conflated or referred to simultaneously as the fight continued. On December 28, 2004, Jacir happily announced:

Dear friends, I am not sure if you heard the good news, but we won in Wichita!! I can't thank you enough for your efforts! ... Thanks to you we have stopped an act of discrimination and also helped to stop the setting of a bad precedent about censorship at the Ulrich Museum of Art... I hope this will encourage all artists to fight when put under these conditions.  
(Jacir: 12/28/04)

She also included an e-mail written by Elizabeth King, the Vice President for University Advancement at Wichita State University which stated: "The University is committed to going forward with the exhibition without consideration or limitations that could be considered to compromise the integrity of Ms. Jacir's work as an artist. The University appreciates the widespread interest in the artist and the exhibition"<sup>26</sup>. In an interview, the Museum's Director David Butler defended his decision not to allow Jewish organizations to put flyers in the exhibit by saying: "The exhibition is not intended to give a complete background and history on the Palestinian –Israeli conflict. This is an art museum. We are presenting this as art" (Shull 2004). Jacir's "art" exhibit opened without incident, and with much love and affection from Arab communities ready at hand on January 26, 2005<sup>27</sup>.

However successful these cases were, all artists have been affected by the state of national security. Reflecting off the glass doors of the South Street Seaport Gallery on the weekend of September 11, 2005 were life sized photographic images of Iraqi people.

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<sup>26</sup> King, Elizabeth. E-mail to Emily Jacir. December 28, 2004. Forwarded to Arab NY and printed here with Emily Jacir's permission.

<sup>27</sup> According to e-mails by Emily Jacir to Arabny following the opening, and relatives of people on Arabny who went to the opening in Kansas.

Their images were touching reminders to those at the opening of an exhibit called “A Knock at the Door” of the presence of the Iraqi people in this post 9/11 “war on terror” world. Kourross Esmaeli, the artist responsible for the collection of portraits he called *Greetings Without Flowers*, described several frustrated attempts to display his photos publicly before joining the exhibit at the Seaport. As an artist in residence with Alwan for the Arts, Kourross worked with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) to find a public space to host his collection near Ground Zero during the weekend of September 11, 2005. The Borough of Manhattan Community College at first approved the use of the college for the space; but then weeks before the opening its President, Antonio Perez, backed out of the exhibit writing, “the photos do not reflect the diversity of the BMCC student body.” Next, Esmaeli approached St. Paul’s chapel, which faces Ground Zero. After weeks of interest and negotiations about whether or not the exhibit would infuriate the families of 9/11 victims, the church’s publicist finally cancelled the opening, claiming it would conflict with another artist work scheduled for the same dates. Even the manager of the South Street Station in Boston, where the collection will travel to next, expressed concern after the London bombings about whether or not it was o.k. to put up photos of Arabs in a train station. Yet, as the full exhibit “A Knock at the Door” showed, artists of Middle Eastern descent are not the only targets in today’s counter-terrorism world.

The entire “Knock at the Door” exhibit grew out of the case of an artist named Steven Kurtz. After calling 911 when his wife had a heart attack in 2004, Kurtz was arrested for what was suspected to be dangerous biological materials. The materials, which he uses in his art, were found to be harmless, yet he stands trial for mail and wire

fraud for buying them. Many other artists in the exhibit had either been subject to the same kind of governmental scrutiny or felt intimidated by the general population and its suspicion of anything challenging American patriotism. Several of the pieces addressed this sense of restriction directly, such as a straight jacket made out of an American flag by Lisa Charde. The exhibit shows how many artists are both victims of national security interests and agents of provocation against those in authority.

### The Danish Cartoon Controversy and *My Name is Rachel Corrie*

As a group that has routinely dealt with censorship in their professional lives, most Arab American artists, arts organizers and intellectuals in New York were stunned by the worldwide reaction to the cartoons originally published by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on September 30, 2005 depicting the Prophet Mohammed as a proponent of violence. The editors of the Danish newspaper allegedly published the cartoons as an antidote to supposed self-censorship in Denmark on the subject of Islam. The case of Danish writer Kare Bluitgen, who could not find an illustrator for a children's book on Islam for fear of retribution by Muslims, was often cited as the impetus for the solicitation for the cartoons about the Prophet Mohammed (Harding 2006). Most of us in the U.S. remained oblivious of the controversy until March 2006 when 50,000 demonstrators took to the streets in Karachi, Pakistan and 20,000 in Turkey. Smaller protests began happening in February 2006 across the globe that ranged from peaceful sit-ins, to mob attacks against Danish embassies in the Middle East and South Asia. Until that time, it had remained largely a battle between the Islamic clerics and Arab leaders, the Jyllands-Posten, and the Danish government, and it played out in various



editorials and reprints of the original 12 cartoons in European newspapers in Denmark, France, and Italy, and Spain, and ultimately around the world<sup>28</sup>. The American media picked up on the story, and kicked into its routine of portraying Arabs and all Muslims as loving violence and hating democracy and free speech, feeding into original claims made by the cartoonist who portrayed the Prophet Mohammed with a bomb in the place of a turban.

Those I knew in New York could not understand why these cartoons had become a center of such controversy. Friends were asking one another, “What’s the big deal? I don’t get it!” It was not that they didn’t get that the cartoons were offensive to religious Muslims, who did not believe the image of the Prophet Mohammed should be portrayed at all, let alone in a way that is not flattering. It was that they saw them as a *cartoon*. They felt that in light of everything that the West has perpetrated against Arabs and Muslims, the defamation of symbols deserved a response, but not to the degree achieved by Arabs and Muslims on the streets, or their governments. They wondered how governments could hold summits about a cartoon and not about ending the occupation of Palestine or Iraq.

The controversy played out in New York in several ways. Alwan for the Arts hosted a panel discussion on March 14, 2006 with a few journalists and one historian. To a packed audience in Alwan’s loft, the panel expressed their dismay over the violence that had erupted, and concern over freedom of speech. A few came expecting emphatic denunciation of the cartoons themselves; they were given space to vent their anger publicly and were heard without interruption. However, they were met with consensus by the panel that the media has the right to publish what it chooses and that it has the

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<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, no mainstream British or U.S. media reprinted the cartoons.

right to offend. They upheld the right of people to protest and object to the media freely as well. The panelists also took the controversy beyond the supposed conflict between free speech and religion to examine the role of English language media outlets in “whipping up” the Muslim masses on the streets four months after the original publication of the cartoons.

At the time of the “cartoon controversy” the Arab Americans I knew in New York circulated articles calling for an end to Western hypocrisy in matters of free speech. They decried governments that would prohibit the defamation of Christianity or denial of the Holocaust but would allow Islam or Arabs in general to be degraded. In one such article Ronald Dworkin (2006), Professor of Law and Philosophy at New York University, argued:

We cannot make an exception for religious insult if we want to use law to protect the free exercise of religion in other ways. Religion must observe the principles of democracy, not the other way around.

Although some groups organized protests of the display of the Cartoons in public spaces in New York, disagreement on the issue of censorship was widely acknowledged. For example, when the Muslim Students Association at NYU issued a call to protest the Objectivist Club’s intention of displaying the cartoons, they prefaced their statement of protest with the disclaimer:

**IMPORTANT:** The difference of opinion on this issue is recognized and respected.

While organizers recognize that there’s little difference of opinion about the offensiveness of the cartoons, there is a difference of opinion about whether or not they

should be censored. Most artists, arts organizers, and intellectuals I knew did not protest their display.

In fact, at the time of the cartoon controversy, most artists were busy protesting the cancellation of the play *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. Rachel Corrie was an American human rights activist and writer killed by an Israeli bulldozer while acting as human shield in defense of a Palestinian home in Rafah on March 16, 2003. Her journals, which she kept religiously since childhood, were pieced together by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner for the Royal Court Theater in London; and the play went on to two successful runs in London. Much to the surprise of the acclaimed production, the New York Theater Workshop (NYTW), which had agreed to stage the production in New York in March 2006, decided to “postpone” the production on February 17, 2006. Apparently the artistic director of NYTW started receiving some grief from Jewish board members and friends after Ariel Sharon had a stroke and Hamas swept the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January of that year (McKinley 2006; Weis 2006).

The reaction on the part of artistic and the intellectual establishment was swift. It promptly labeled the “postponement” as a censorship, and the Royal Court Theater protested loudly and refused to negotiate an alternate date. Activists organized activities throughout the city, including an evening at the Riverside Church, called “Rachel’s Words,” hosted by Amy Goodman and James Zogby<sup>29</sup>. In addition to many Arab American artists based in New York, such as Emily Jacir, Suheir Hammad, and Maysoon Zayid, celebrities such as Maya Angelou, Kathleen Chalfant, Even Ensler, Vanessa Redgrave, Patti Smith and Howard Zinn, all protested the decision as an act of

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<sup>29</sup> Amy Goodman is the host of the radio program Democracy Now; and James Zogby, is the founder and director of the Arab American Institute and Senior Analyst at the national polling company Zogby International.

ensorship. Philip Weiss (2006) of the *Nation* succinctly described the situation as follows:

In this way, Corrie's words appear to have had more impact than her death. The House bill calling for a US investigation of her killing died in committee, with only seventy-eight votes and little media attention. But the naked admission by a left-leaning cultural outlet that it would subordinate its own artistic judgment to pro-Israel views has served as a smoking gun for those who have tried to press the discussion in this country of Palestinian human rights. Indeed, the admission was so shocking and embarrassing that the Workshop quickly tried to hedge and retreat from its statements. But the damage was done; people were asking questions that had been consigned to the fringe: How can the West condemn the Islamic world for not accepting Muhammad cartoons when a Western writer who speaks out on behalf of Palestinians is silenced?

The decision by the NYTW proved to be a public relations disaster. They quickly tried to make amends by hosting panel discussions on the controversy in April 2006, and by the fall were producing short plays by Palestinian American playwrights and hosting readings at the prestigious Public Theater.<sup>30</sup>

The aftermath of the *My Name is Rachel Corrie* debacle highlights the tensions between what I would characterize as the "old" and the "new" way of dealing with routine censorship of Arab and particularly Palestinian issues in the public sphere. The "old" school included Arab American theater artists who felt that the critique of the NYTW was too quick, and actually did more harm than good. They viewed the theater as an ally; one that with some dialogue would have been amenable to a play like *Rachel Corrie*. The group that stood behind the NYTW ultimately benefited by having their plays about Palestine produced by the theater itself. The "new" school of Arab

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<sup>30</sup> *My Name is Rachel Corrie* opened in New York at the Minetta Lane Theater in Greenwich Village on October 5, 2006, and had a successful run. Though I did not find it to be the best piece of theater, like most other mainstream theatergoers, I went to see what all the fuss was about.

American artists called the theater on censorship and many view those collaborating with them now to be traitors.

### Conclusion

Arab American artists have become more aware of the ways in which they self-censor or compromise their work in order to have it accepted in mainstream venues, and more are framing their decisions to defend their work around the subject of censorship and free speech. Instead of holding their ground by defending the rights of Palestinians or Iraqis to exist and live under the conditions of self determination in their own land, or challenging the positions of Zionists or imperialists Western forces, they are defending their right to free speech. For those whose work is a form of political activism, the hope is that by at least getting the work out there, the work itself and not the artists will fight the political fight. By doing so they are invoking their rights as artists and individuals rather than political activists. Given the depoliticized nature of the American art world, they have set their professional identities ahead of their ethnic or political ones in order to have their voices heard in an uncompromised fashion. They let the Museum director say, “this is about art and not about politics.” Finally, by making the arguments using the legalistic and nationalistic framework of “censorship” they are demonstrating their participation and commitment to the “American” values of free speech and democracy.

In the larger contexts of censorship of the arts in America, Arab American artists have adopted the advocacy toward their politicized art that artists of the 1980s and 1990s had to when confronted with accusations of moral blasphemy. Whether moral or political, assaults on free speech stem from a Christian hetero-normative view of

Western, male, white supremacy. The United States, once consumed by the culture wars, is now consumed by the War on Terror. Whereas gays, and those promoting multiculturalism, were the enemies of the culture wars of the 1980's and 1990s, immigrants and "terrorists" fuel the culture wars of the post-9/11 era.

Although much outright censorship by the government or the entertainment industry ends up seeming like a publicity stunt for the artist and the arts institution, the effect of censorship on the production and promotion of work is widely felt by Arab American artists and other who are critical of the government today. While politics fuels much censorship of Arab American art work, artist seek refuge in the figure of the "artist," financially independent of government funding and constitutionally protected under the banner of "free speech." They engage in the arts as a proxy for politics while pursuing their professional lives as independent artists in the American aesthetic economy.

#### 4. The Understudy: Art as a Proxy for Politics

In May of 2003, I walked into a gallery in Chelsea to see an exhibit by an artist I had heard a great deal about and had briefly met at a demonstration against the war in Iraq. I was eager to see for myself the work of someone who was so well regarded by friends in the Arab American arts community, and who was also getting positive critical reviews. I had the luxury of dropping by on a random afternoon; having just moved to New York, my only real occupation was moving my car according to the dictates of alternate side parking. I leisurely found my way over to the seemingly vacant territory housing Manhattan's top commercial art dealers, and entered the bright, white gallery space of Debs and Co. To curb my enthusiasm to match the austere and subdued atmosphere of the space, I picked up the price sheet and press release which began: "Debs and Co. is pleased to present *Where We Come From*, the first New York City solo exhibition by Palestinian artist Emily Jacir." Then I approached the exhibit that lined the walls of the small L-shaped gallery.

Jacir had asked Palestinians via e-mail and local newspapers, "If I could do something for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?"; the responses guided her movements in the Palestinian territories. Using her American passport to go places refugees and other exiles cannot go, she fulfilled the requests, and documented the process with photos. *Where We Come From* (2003) was made from texts of these requests next to the photos of her carrying them out. The walls held poster sized photos mounted to thick boards. Next to the photos hung texts in both Arabic and English printed on pieces of letter-sized paper encased in simple black wooden frames.

Despite the politics of passports and border crossings, most of the requests were disarmingly mundane. For example, an actress who I knew in New York asked, “Do something on a normal day in Haifa, something I might do if I was living there right now.” The text box identifies the actress and reads:

-Marie Therese  
Born and living in New York  
American passport  
Father and Mother from Haifa  
(both exiled in 1948)

Notes: I [Jacir] spent the night with a group of girls living in an apartment in Haifa. We drank coffee and talked about life, marriage, careers. We compared living in Haifa to living in Ramallah and in Jerusalem. We stayed up talking until early into the morning.

The text appears next to large photo of a coffee table strewn with cigarettes, a couple qahawa (coffee) cups, an ashtray full of cigarette butts, and a blue plastic tray with a half glass of water and a pot of Arabic coffee. The coffee table sits on a clean, sand-colored tile floor that I associate with the Middle East, and behind it are the legs of a few people seated on a pink couch.





From the collection *Where We Come From* by Emily Jacir (2003).  
 Courtesy of Emily Jacir. © Photos and Texts: Emily Jacir.

Other requests that Jacir received from fellow Palestinians include playing soccer, take family photos, drink water from an ancestral village, eat fish, pay a phone bill, and go on a date. In the midst of these subversively simple assignments, there were a few more symbolically charged tasks, like pray in the Holy Sepulcher and al-Aqsa Mosque, or find a family home (which was undiscoverable). All were represented as a matter of fact in the artshow with snapshot style photos that were un-staged and not overtly professional or artistic. Yet their effect was profound. I cried the first time I saw them. Many apparently shared my emotional reaction. *The New Yorker* review claimed: “Enormous complexity, of course, underpins the project, but its simplicity could make you weep.”<sup>1</sup> Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* concluded, “An art of cool Conceptual surfaces and ardent, intimate gestures, intensely political and beyond

<sup>1</sup> *The New Yorker* May 12, 2003

polemic, it adds up to one of the most moving gallery exhibitions I've encountered this season."<sup>2</sup> *Time Out New York* explained, "The individual voices requesting Jacir to perform chores, rituals, and pleasures we take for granted coalesce to form an encompassing narrative of restriction and constraint caused by territorial conflict in the Middle East."<sup>3</sup>

A year later, I accompanied my parents through Jacir's *Where We Come From* exhibit at Whitney Museum of American Art. My father's immediate reaction was one of anger. He felt that it presented Palestinians as victims, and he hated the idea of anyone feeling sorry for him or other Palestinians. My mother, on the other hand, felt proud that a Palestinian's artwork would be exhibited at such a prestigious museum, and although she questioned whether Jacir's work was indeed considered "art," she thought it was important. Then my mother encouraged me to finish my dissertation so I could explain why Jacir's work was so important that even the Whitney Museum of American Art would showcase it in its bi-annual survey of contemporary American art.

After three years of fieldwork, I am still not certain why it is important. However, I can say that the content of Jacir's work is typical of Arab American artists who try to balance their professional ambitions and privileged lives with their political sentiments. Across a wide spectrum of genres, Arab American artists portray their desires to lead ordinary lives as a matter of political conviction. Their work is interpreted as humanizing subjects that are too often merely understood through the political lenses of territories, rights, and their abuses.

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<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times*: Art In Review, May 9, 2003

<sup>3</sup> *Time Out New York* May 9-15, 2003

In this chapter, I examine how the repression of Arab American political activism and the expansion of the aesthetic economy allow art to be a proxy for political activity in many respects. I described how artists of Arab descent use art as way to experience and express their ethnic identity and advance their careers. By being privileged to live most of their lives away from the wars and traumas in the Middle East, they use their art to both highlight the commonality of mundane human existence and to embody the suffering from which they were removed and protected. Through the artists' own words and work, I explore the ways they use their positions to infuse politics into otherwise apolitical aesthetic realms, and inject the aesthetics of everyday reality into hyper-politicized discourses on Arabs and the Middle East. I also explore the ways that Arab Americans use the collective labor involved in the production of art as a proxy for political activity, and how the addition of an ethnic element to their artistic efforts heightens their level of commitment to their projects. By building artistic communities around values such as meritocracy and democracy rather than familial, national or religious distinctions, they believe themselves to be models of Arab unity and American multi-cultural pluralism. Throughout, they are scrupulously clear about their position as independent artists not allied with any government or political party. As such, they are engaged in a conceptual model of politics that does not easily render symbolic victories into material ones. An extreme example of this would be that while Palestinian artists win major international prizes in the arts, Palestinians in Gaza starve.

Artists Engaging in Identity Politics Not Party Politics:

Most of the arts organizers and artists I met in New York believe that the best way for them to contribute to Arab or Arab American causes is through their art. Their “contribution” to the “cause” can be summarized in a conceptual model of politics in which their art influences public opinion that thereby allows policy makers to choose policies that benefit Arabs and Arab Americans. Rarely do artists’ advocate for actual policy solutions, such as the Right of Return for refugees and exiles from Palestine, an end the war in Iraq, the enactment of anti-hate legislation, or repeal of the Patriot Act. More often artists invoke a positive image of Arab Americans through intimate portraits of their subjective experiences as human beings moving about their daily lives. Regardless of style and method, artists make choices about whether to be political or not, or to engage in Arab identity politics or not.

Suheir Hammad is a poet in her mid thirties of Palestinian heritage who grew up in Brooklyn and has a history of political organizing and activism. While she contends that she never separates her political convictions from her artistic endeavors, she does not consider herself an activist at this point in time. Before she had published her first book of poetry in 1996, or had received any recognition as a spoken word performance artist, she was an organizer for social and political justice movements. The Arab community discovered her through her work on non-Arab social justice causes such as the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, a journalist and member of the Black Panther Party who is currently imprisoned in Pennsylvania awaiting an appeal of his 1983 conviction and death sentence for murdering a police officer. Barbara Nimra Aziz, an Arab American anthropologist and journalist now in her late 60s, brought her on her monthly program of Arab culture

and politics called Radio Tahrir (liberation) after hearing her on another broadcast at the same radio station<sup>4</sup>. This older generation was eager and enthusiastic about finding and promoting artists with any political sensibilities, let alone ones about Palestine and the Middle East.

As her career as an artist developed, Hammad distanced herself from her work as an activist and an organizer to focus more exclusively on her craft as a writer and performer. A random excerpt of her work testifies to efforts to infuse her poetry with the spirit of social justice:

Taxi<sup>5</sup>:

I  
 Urban warrior            I think we're  
 too used to bottled water and soft ass wipes  
 street soldier not getting taxis and little white ladies  
 claspin purses ain't all it's about

II  
 in my father's city  
 there's a baby girl  
 whose beautiful brown eye  
 (centuries ago inspired poetry)  
 was eaten out by a fat zionist rat

140 miles of 850,00 souls    gaza  
 stripped of humanity  
 the most people in the tiniest place anywhere  
 tired people with no place everywhere  
 open sewers carry the sweat of occupation into  
 the swollen bellies of babies

refugee camps that make you long for  
 the project    these kids grow up bad angry murderous  
 justified        camps are burstin with pictures of  
 murdered children of fire swimming  
 in the tears of a nation        this ain't no  
 boy scout trip            this is the real deal    hell  
 on earth                    what its about

<sup>4</sup> WBAI, New York's "Peace and justice" non-commercial community radio station.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt reprinted with permission of author, Hammad (1996). Spacing in the original.

Yet, when I had the chance to interview Hammad, I was surprised by her modernist distinction between art and politics. She explains:

I used to get into this argument with my cast on Broadway where I was like, “I’m not an activist,” and people used to look at me like, “if YOU’re not an activist, then I can’t be an activist” and I’m like, “I don’t think you’re an activist either.” Like, my friends are getting arrested, my friends with children are up till two or three in the morning phone banking trying to get people out against the war, those are the people that I think are activists and organizers, and I want to be able to feed those people artistically and spiritually. That is the work that I do. And I think I made that decision because I definitely feel I do better work when I allow myself this label, right, under the label of *artist*. I kind of have more space. In many ways it allows you to be more politically engaged, because you don’t have an allegiance to one organization, or even one political ideology necessarily, and so you’re able to question even what you believe. And I think a lot of times when you’re an organizer and your life is on the line, or the planet is on the line, you don’t really get that breathing space, and so I think what happens is a reciprocal relationship. Because the real social justice workers in the world allow me to lead this very privileged life of reading and meeting people and writing and transforming my thoughts onto paper and on stage, and to pay them back, which I believe is only fair, I do think of work that specifically will aid them.

Hammad maintains a romantic notion of the arts as “feeding and sustaining a vision of a more humane world.” What I believe she means by being “more politically engaged” is that artists can remain “above the fray” and true to principles and ideals than people who actually practice politics. By “feeding their spirits,” artists like Hammad believe that they can encourage those who practice politics to endure and to fight for ideals and principles that may be compromised by issues like funding, competition, laws, or elections. This is even something necessary for artists themselves.

Fatigue, or weariness from politics and community organizing, was commonly expressed by Arab American artists and arts organizers. They feel the reluctance on the part of community members to celebrate or support artistic causes, and attribute it to the

exhaustion or psychological implications of just being Arab. Betty Shamieh, a popular Palestinian American playwright from California, explained,

Every time you pick up the paper and the coverage is biased. Every time you have to have to introduce yourself and the reaction is so (mock horror). These are hourly occurrences. Or when you go see a play and suddenly they make some reference to Zionism. That just happened to me today... I was reading a play and I loved it and all of a sudden the character wants to go and live in Israel!... There is so little appreciation (for the arts) and yet how many Alwan events do you go “that’s really interesting and in another life I would really attend that. Right now, I just want to fucking have Chinese food with my friends.” So when you don’t do everything you don’t fault somebody else for not, you’re like, “I am tired.”

Shamieh’s solution to exhaustion is success. “Through stars, role models, that’s how you feel proud of being who you are and less exhausted.” She often cited the late Edward Said as her role model. “Just to be identified with this dashing intellectual. He made you happy to be who you were. You listened to him and you’d relax.” In a similar vein, Shamieh seeks success, and hopes that by her success as a playwright, that she will uplift the Arab cause. She explains:

One of the major things that I’ve come to is that I don’t want to be a pundit. I don’t want to be on CNN arguing about refugees. I’m not good at it. You know? I mean, I am better than some people, but I am not as good as people who do that full time and that’s who they are. I am better at writing plays. So I think one of the challenging things is when you don’t have a voice any sort of voice that you want to use it to scream. I had to really realize that being excellent at being a playwright was the way that I could contribute to the Arab American and particularly to the Arab struggle. Which is something so difficult to realize because you feel you have to do everything all the time.

By “everything” Shamieh primarily means being active in politics and humanitarian relief for Palestine and other Middle Eastern areas experiencing violence, like Iraq. However, even writing or attending plays by Arabs is interpreted by artists as

contributing to the cause. Instead of lobbying, or being a pundit on CNN, Shamieh infuse her theatrical dramas with her political sentiments.

*Passengers* (2004)<sup>6</sup> by Shamieh is a farcical drama that casts a young playwright in the heroic role of saving a hijacked plane from going down. The play begins with the following lines:

Since I was a kid, I've had this fantasy about flying.  
It's totally stupid, okay?  
But you've got to understand,  
I might be Arab-American  
But I grew up  
like any other teenager  
soaking in Hollywood films

So I've got this fantasy  
That I'll be on a flight, okay, and it'll be hijacked  
By people who look like my parents.  
People who look like me.  
Arabs.

The “playwright” character goes on to describe how she overcomes her limited Arabic skills to talk the hijackers about how she understands their plight, but thinks it is unfair to use innocent people who are ignorant of their own country’s abuses to make a political statement. Beyond this, the “playwright” uses the fact that as a proud Palestinian, she convinces them that there are other means by which to achieve recognition for a cause.

She pleads:

I knew I had to synthesize all the signals about who I was  
in a way  
that made me not want to be anything else.  
I knew if I was not proud to be a Palestinian  
I could not live a life with dignity.  
I knew if I did not love my people, no one would.  
I would tell them all this

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpts from *Passengers* (2004) are reprinted with permission from Shamieh.



*Chorus*  
and more

*Playwright*

And, when I tell them about my life, it will seem like it has a relevance, an arc, a grace

*Chorus*  
A worth

*Playwright*

That I didn't realize it had before.  
Those men would realize it too.  
And I would no longer resent being a bridge between my two cultures, or ask myself...

*Chorus*  
What does a bridge ever do except get stepped on?

*Playwright*

Because I was so articulate in my perfect Arabic,  
the plane would touch down safely.  
All the Americans in the plane would listen to the grievances of the men  
Who were willing to kill and die to be heard.  
The passengers would be moved by stories of those they feared.  
In fact, they'll refuse to get off the plane,  
until the Palestinians are given a homeland and basic human rights,  
the Iraqis are allowed to eat,  
and the rest of America no longer buys  
the hypocritical propaganda

For the remainder of the play, the “playwright” envisions being on Oprah for saving the plane and solving the conflict in the Middle East, and finding the man of her dreams. By way of an ending, the “playwright” claims she'll be a hero, “like Dr. King or Ganhdi. But no one shoots me. Did everyone hear that? No one shoots me. That's not part of the fantasy I've had since I was a kid.”

I saw *Passengers* performed on two separate occasions over a two-year period. The first was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Arab American Comedy Festival in 2004 at the Laugh

Factory. As I managed volunteers and ticketing at this event, I sat through rehearsals to watch the entire production, and then snuck into the theater during the actual performances. The audience was mostly Arab American, and I knew the bulk of the crowd from previous events in the community. *Passengers* struck me as one of the most clever skits in that year's festival, and the element of "pride" had a double meaning for me because the actress playing the "playwright," Marie Therese Abou Daoud<sup>7</sup>, was a dear Palestinian American friend from New York who had been struggling in her artistic endeavors. To see her being the cute, sassy "heroine" who saves the day by demonstrating her pride and perseverance was fitting. Although it indicated her ability to persevere as an artist more than anything, Abou Daoud admitted to me as I praised her performance backstage that she had to restrain herself from crying every time she performed the lines about ethnic pride.



*Passengers*: October 10, 2004

L-R: Leila Gazale, Marie-Therese Abou-Daoud, Abir Haddad, Leila Sbitani.  
 Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah ©NYAACF Photo by Zack Memo

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<sup>7</sup> This is the same "Marie Therese" whose request was fulfilled and represented in Jacir's *Where We Come From* (2003).

The second time I saw *Passengers* performed was less enjoyable because it was in the midst of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006. Stunned by the events, I was barely functional from July through August. Instead, I sat reading the news, following blogs, and trying to understand why I was so overwhelmingly sad about events that took place halfway around the world in a country where only a few distant relatives still lived. I consoled myself with friends who felt similarly, and even came to understand the experience as type of trauma. Even though I had never lived in Lebanon, my family has a long history with the country, and I was born there. My father had gone to college at the American University of Beirut. My mother's sister lived in Beirut throughout the Civil War of the 1970s-1991. Memories of the war include anxiously waiting for my *khalti* (mother's sister) to leave Lebanon with my family in Cyprus at the start of the war in the 1970s, and receiving my *aumpti* (father's sister) and her sons in the U.S. in the 1980s. In August 2006, I sought solace from the latest war in Lebanon in one of the only forms of public and communal ritual that I recognize, namely theater, and found my way to the Cherry Lane Theater.

*The Middle East in Pieces* was billed as six short pieces by local theater artists, several of whom were Arab Americans that I knew. Although I had e-mailed the producers for a reservation, as instructed, the event was overbooked. I waited on the sidewalk with young hip Americans who hoped to make the cut. After some time, a tall man with clipboard started calling out names, and directing people to the ticket booth to make a "donation" and get a ticket. I gladly did when my turn came, then headed inside to the theater. I recognized no one in the audience. I sat near the front next to a group of older women. My guess is that the audience was primarily middle-aged progressive

Jewish New Yorkers and young hipsters. The Arabs that gathered at Alwan for the Arts to contemplate political actions and humanitarian relief were nowhere to be found. This time *Passengers* seemed curious and quaint. Instead of being performed by a friend, this production was cast with four non-Arab Americans. As such, it seemed like an even more ludicrous and narcissistic approach to the politics of the Middle East. By that I mean, how many playwrights save people from terrorist attacks? Beyond that, the references to Oprah were not lost on the crowd, and they laughed heartily. Afterwards, I spoke briefly with Shamieh, who was fuming over another piece performed the same evening by Israel Horovitz, a Jewish American, called *Beirut Rocks*. Horovitz portrayed several American college kids stuck in Beirut during the bombing; one was a Jewish American arrogant nerd and the other was a veiled Palestinian American proponent of suicide bombing who despite her radicalism was clearly from a comfortable and privileged background. Shamieh thanked me for coming and told me she had major problems with Horovitz's portrayal of a Palestinian American. Unlike the Shamieh's "playwright" character who longed to save the U.S. through her endearing charm and bi-cultural upbringing, Horovitz had created a Palestinian American character that hoped to destroy it. Shamieh felt it was irresponsible to portray Palestinians in such a way; that the thousands of people dying in Palestine and in Lebanon that summer should not be made to look like aggressors in any way since, in fact, they were the victims. Despite the fact that this was a stage in a small corner of Manhattan, these distinctions were important to be made, and moreover, they were within her realm of control as a playwright to make.

### Suffering Through Privilege:

Given the magnitude of the problems in the Middle East and the lack of control anyone has over them, Arab American artists and arts organizers invest in art projects that allow them to express empathy for those who are suffering and control over the finished product. In this way, they enact a symbolic martyrdom, sacrificing time, money, and piece of mind for their cause, namely art. I always felt much more was at stake than having a full house at a performance or a film screening. I watched organizers volunteer hundreds of hours of physical labor and thousands of dollars to artistic productions, and shared as they celebrated their successes and lamented their failures. Running Alwan on a shoestring budget caused times of great stress and uncertainty. I would sit with its president, Ahmed Issawi, as he searched for answers to questions like “why am I doing this? Why aren’t I just enjoying my life and not giving a damn?” Issawi is an Egyptian who migrated to the United States for college and graduate school in philosophy. He would try to answer his questions by explaining “one thinks that there is a cause, and that somehow by doing something for these oppressed people that it will help, but it’s hopeless.” Yet, the next day he would decide to cover the rent on Alwan’s space for one more month in the hopes that the next month Alwan would break even.

The person who most clearly brought home the tension between wanting to lead an ordinary life and contributing to a political cause was Nadjla Said. As the daughter of the “dashing intellectual” Edward Said, Said found herself in the awkward position of being privileged yet Palestinian. I met Said for the first time after her father died in September 2003. I almost met her when I was in college because a friend told me that she was touring our campus as a perspective student, but it never worked out. Ten years

later we were sitting across from each other at an organizing meeting for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Arab American Comedy Festival. I assumed at the time that she did not trouble herself with politics, and lived comfortably and deliberately oblivious of her father's more weighty concerns. However, I stood corrected in 2005 when I saw her perform a monologue called *Palestine* (2005) at a fundraising event called *Acts for Palestine*. In fact, she helped me realize something that I had trouble articulating for years, namely that privileged people have difficulty relating to the suffering of others and are uncertain about how they can alleviate it, yet they wish to do both.

At *Acts for Palestine*, I sat in the crowded theater of the Blue Heron Arts Center with an unlikely theater crowd. They were mostly Arabs who came for the "cause," that cause being Palestine. The fundraiser was for an upcoming art exhibit in Manhattan called *Made in Palestine*. *Acts* featured four original "one act" plays by playwrights of Palestinian descent; these "one act" plays are intended as metaphoric actions for Palestine, both in spirit and in name. There were two autobiographical sketches, a drama about estranged childhood sweethearts separated by wars and a chance miscommunication, and a satire on spinsters. All of the plays dealt with the ways that Palestine intimately affects people's lives and their notions of themselves. When Said walked into the middle of the sunken stage in the dark theater, she spoke like I had never seen her speak before. She spoke clearly and directly about her life, without using too many American idioms, and described who she believed she was, and how she had suffered. She began by claiming:

Until September 11, 2001, if you asked anyone to spend five minutes with me and try to guess my background, they'd tell you I was a Jew. I realize this may sound rather bizarre coming from a Palestinian-Lebanese-

American Christian woman, but in the standard, stereotypical, cultural sense of the word, I grew up as a Jew in New York City.<sup>8</sup>

She went on to describe her intellectual Upper West Side home, her neurotic “Woody Allen” type behaviors, and her numerous Jewish friends and boyfriends (“all of whom made some comment about making peace in the Middle East by our actions”). When it came time for her “birthright” trip to Palestine, not her classmates’ Israel, issues of her identity and health came to a head. She explained:

All I wanted to do was go to Paris. Or to the beach with my friends. On top of that, I was eighteen years old and I was depressed. I mean really, really, really depressed. I should explain: my Dad had been recently diagnosed with leukemia. And I had stopped eating somewhere between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Maybe it was because I wanted to fit in, maybe it was because I wanted to disappear, but it was definitely because despite the way I talked and behaved and lived, I knew that I was DIFFERENT.

She went on to describe her experience with anorexia and how it played out on her first trip to Palestine in 1990 with her father, who had not been to his homeland for forty years. She describes how she avoided eating by saying she was a vegetarian; and refusing to eat even when her hosts anticipated this preference. She described trying to pick out modest clothes to wear when visiting Gaza, and how she really had no idea what to expect. She explains:

I could not at the time, and cannot now BELIEVE that there are places in the world where people are trapped like caged animals in the filthiest zoo on earth, while I somehow get to prance around in suede shoes and 150 dollar skirts and then get on a plane and go home.

And so it is. I feel guilty. Horrible. Sick. I never want to eat again. More than ever, I want to suffer....

Anger sadness confusion; I want to stop being so conspicuous. I want to go away. I want to scream: WHY IS THIS ALL HAPPENING????? But I have no voice. And so my body becomes my voice. Starvation, more than ever, becomes my language.

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<sup>8</sup> Excerpts from *Palestine* (2005) by Nadjla Said are reprinted with the author’s permission.

After singing the lyrics of a Tori Amos song about crucifying oneself, a song that she listened to over and over again on her trip to Palestine, she explains:

I guess I want to know why I am lucky. I want to punish myself for being lucky. Why don't I have to live here [Gaza]? Why can I pass as a Jew if I want? Why do I go to the best schools in the world and have the best clothes ever? And why despite all this, do I still feel awful?? Why am I BOTH Arab and American? Why can't I just be one? Why do I have to be aware of suffering and tragedy and cancer and poverty and anger? Why can't I just be *normal*?

In many ways, Said *was* a “normal” teenager, experiencing the confusion and anger that many people at that age feel, and suffering from an illness that is quite common among middle and upper class white women in the U.S. What was different was her ethnicity. Americans, as seen in Said's representations of her childhood illness, do not suffer. Americans are perceived to be the oblivious, non-suffering “normal” that the “Arab” is measured against. A few days after the performance, I discussed the play with a colleague named Julie who had seen the piece on a different evening. Julie is a Jewish New Yorker who became a lawyer and works on immigrant's rights issues. When I asked if she thought that Said sounded whiny, she said not at all. She felt that it was an articulate and typical view of life for many second-generation immigrants.

When I interviewed Nadjla Said, I complemented her for being so honest about her experience and sharing it so publicly. As someone who has worked with teenagers most of my professional career (and been one myself), I found the intensity of her experience to be familiar and yet rarely acknowledged. Said elaborated on the illness she described during her monologue:

It was so common it was like, “oh she is just a rich spoiled girl with anorexia.” But when I went to therapy, I realized that it was anorexia, like, you want to disappear, but you also want to fit in, and I didn't like having



boobs and dah, dah dah dah dah. But also there was a level of, why is everything so easy? And I do think that is why it happens to affluent white people because you have everything, so you feel guilty. But when you have everything and you are a Palestinian, and you feel like, why do I...? You know, I could get away with everything. My dad was just like everyone else's dad. He was not a funny Arab man with an accent. He was the best-dressed dad in my class. He had lots of money. I could get away with it. I didn't really have to deal with anything. It was like flying first class...So I have been given all this privilege, and I didn't know how to care about Palestine actually...I was just worried about getting a new dress.

Over time, Said resolved her eating disorder; however, she still struggles with how to relate to Palestine. In her monologue *Palestine* (2005), Said offers a meta-narrative, a performance of her childhood performance of suffering and identification with Palestine. No longer challenged with using her voice, she uses it *and* her body physically to perform. She claims:

I never ever *ever* wanted to be political and I never thought I would be. On the one hand you're like, "I just want to be an actress," and on the other you're like, "I am an intelligent person with a heart and a passion about something and I can't get work because of my ethnic background." You start to be like, "this isn't fair!" So you sort of get active about it and all of a sudden you are an activist! Everyone says like, "how did you become an activist?" I'm like, "I've never been to a protest don't call me an activist!" I get nervous, you know. But I guess I am. I just do it in my own way.

In her "own" way, Said uses the representational power of art to humanize Arabs and the Middle Eastern conflict. She prefers art that is "polemic and not didactic...that's not teaching you a lesson, but just presenting sides." She also hopes that there would be more opportunities to play non-politicized Arab roles as an Arab American. She recognizes the heightened awareness and increased attention to Arab Americans since 9/11, and sees opportunities acting in roles that did not exist before. However, she still finds the politicization of all Arab roles, frustrating.

I would love to see a play about just a Palestinian girl and whatever happens to her. It is funny that the minute you put an Arab character in anything it makes a political statement. And I think that's what's frustrating for us, and what we are trying to all do is put ourselves into situations where we are just having regular experiences. You know, like a family drama that's a *family* drama, that happens to take place with a Palestinian family. As opposed to like, you know, the Israelis and should I blow up the plane, like, because if you think about it... I can't speak for you, I can't speak for other Palestinians, but like I know hundreds of Palestinians but I don't know one terrorist.

Over the course of three years of fieldwork , I saw Said, among others, trying to create non-political dramas. The results often involved a conflict of identity as the central crux of the drama. For example in *Layla's Sahra* (2004) by Lena Rizkallah, Said plays "Samar," a woman who helps her sister Layla get ready for her *sahra* or party the night before her wedding. Dressed in a 1970's sexy red evening gown, "Samar" teases her sister's hair as she teases her about horrors of marriage. On hand is Layla's senile and hearing-impaired grandmother; her "Guido"-type cousins ready to demonstrate the latest dance moves in their chest hair bearing fancy shirts and gold chains; her anxious mother who has filled five refrigerators with food; and her gay hairdresser brother-in-law. Yet the real source of drama is that "Layla," an Arab American, is marrying an American. Questions revolve around the implications of choosing a husband on one's own, making one's own decisions in life, and whether the American will be able to handle her ethnic family. When politics arise, they are treated in an ultra-light fashion. For example, when the grandmother reminisces about her history she explains:

We went from Palestine, to refugee camp, to Lebanon. And now we are in America and America is a great country! There is Wal-Mart here - I love Wal-Mart! And Costco - they always have the leg of lamb on special.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from *Layla's Sahra* (2004) reprinted with permission of author, Lena Rizkallah.

The grandmother goes on to advise her soon to be wed granddaughter that it does not matter whether she marries an Arab or an American, as long as she's proud to be an Arab.

In *Expiration Date*,<sup>10</sup> by Abla Khoury, Said appears on a video as a stressed out actress waiting for an audition. Khoury is a playwright and actress from Lebanon, who resides in Beirut. She came to the U.S. to complete a residency at La Mama Experimental Theater Club (e.t.c). I was eager to see the play of a playwright based in the Middle East, and Khoury's specifically, because I had met her father in Beirut when scouting out field sites. Her father, Elias Khoury is an accomplished writer who regularly teaches at New York University. He suggested that I do fieldwork in New York, given my interest in performance, and may have even mentioned his daughter. However, I do distinctly recall him saying that he decided to move back to Beirut because he did not want his children growing up American, or to have the kinds of identity crisis that so many Arab Americans seem to have. When he asked me if it was hard, I responded that life is hard regardless, and who knows any differently. He laughed.

*Expiration Date* was surprisingly and refreshingly abstract. The setting was an audition, with various women of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds sitting and waiting for the actual audition to begin. A camera on a tripod pointed at the waiting room, where the potential actresses sat, and none seemed sure if it was on or recording anything. Through choreographed movement and sparse speech, the actresses played out their anxieties through camaraderie and betrayal of each other. Said was cast as a "Palestinian" actress; Khoury coached her on how important her identity was to the character that was to appear on video during the live staged production. Yet, from the

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<sup>10</sup> *Expiration Date* (2004) ran from February 13-29, 2004 at La Mama e.t.c. in the East Village.

perspective of the audience and even Said herself, the character was simply a random woman waiting nervously for an audition. Said fidgeted, scratched her ears, and looked around the room puffing out air periodically. The whole “ear scratching” technique came about because she had eczema at the time; Khoury liked it when she scratched her ears, and told her to keep doing it as she gave her the back story about being a Palestinian. Despite publicity materials which framed the play as a modernist, multinational production that seeks to “illuminate essential questions about loneliness and diaspora,” the staging translated the piece into one that was essentially quirky and interesting, but not politically or socially engaged. The diversity of the cast, and the implications of multi-nationalism and diaspora may have been lost on the audience because such diversity is commonplace in New York City. The fact that the staged “casting call” looked like the passengers on a random subway car in the City diffused much of the meaning of the play. Had the piece been performed in Lebanon, the casting may have seemed more striking and noteworthy.

While *Expiration Date* may have been subtle about its politics of identity, Arab identity is frequently portrayed as a source of inconvenience for individuals trying to go about their “regular lives.” For example, the comedic skit *Dear Joan*<sup>11</sup> by Maysoon Zayid portrays the chaos that ensues when a woman tries to mail a package of cookies home to her family in Palestine. The cheery American post-office attendant Joan becomes increasingly anxious and defensive as she interacts with Dania, an Arab American without much time to explain where on earth Palestine is. As Dania quickly explains the difference between Pakistan and Palestine, other customers become

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<sup>11</sup> *Dear Joan* (2005), was written and performed by Maysoon Zayid in 2005 for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Arab American Comedy festival.

disgruntled over the extended wait. In contrast to the mock stand-off between an Arab American and a random American customer service provider, comedian Dean Obeidallah often jokes that he tries to ingratiate himself with suspicious and potentially hostile shopkeepers by saying that he is from the same country as the Disney cartoon character Aladdin.

While much artwork by Arab Americans is focused on quotidian experiences and the injustice of inconvenience, some works more explicitly criticize American policies and politics vis-à-vis the Middle East. In *Truth Serum Blues*,<sup>12</sup> Ismail Khalidi wrestles with not only the guilt of being privileged, but also the guilt of being associated with those who are called terrorists. I will return to the aspects of “terror” and “terrorism” in Chapter Five (The Male Terrorist (not)); here I want to focus on the fact that in the midst of a play that is both physically and rhetorically directed against American sponsored militarized violence, room is made to represent all-American “regular” experiences.

Khalidi wrote and acted in this one man show about an Arab American who turns himself into Homeland Security for vengeful thoughts upon the murder of his cousin in Palestine by a missile dropped from American Apache helicopter. As a detainee in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, “Kareem” is tortured and made to confess his sympathies for Palestine. Khalidi physically acted out the torture, as if he were being kicked, punched, drugged, shocked, and submerged in water. While the pain of the actions appear real, “Kareem” mocks his interrogator, and explains that he is simply sending money to his cousin, who, incidentally, is an American trained doctor and an U.S. lawful permanent resident, not a member of Hamas. In the midst of the torture, there are flashbacks to

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<sup>12</sup> *Truth Serum Blues* (2005) was written by Ismail Khalidi in collaboration with Bassam Jarbawi. Selections from the play are reprinted here with the authors’ permission.

“Kareem’s” previous life as a student that works part time in a diner and secretly as a taxi cab driver. In one such moment, he is working in the diner when his cousin, Abu Ali, calls from Palestine. The audience hears the cousin’s voice, and his face appears on a screen above the stage. As they are catching up, “Kareem” is distracted by a baseball game on TV and tries to rush the conversation:

Kareem:

Habibi (buddy), gotta go... isma’a (listen), I’ll call you tomorrow from the house, you can talk to my moms too, she’s been askin bout you a lot these days, worried like mammas and aunties do...shit, shit, swing the bat you asshole, how much to they pay you... Yo Walter!

Abu Ali

Don’t call me Walter.

Kareem:

They pay this fool the GDP of Bolivia, Bulgaria, and Burundi combined... times 10 and he can’t even hit a lousy ass curve ball... tell me that shit don’t make your blood boil...

Abu Ali:

Man, you and baseball K, you’re so hopelessly American...

After they hang up, Kareem dons a baseball cap and picks up a bat, and addresses the audience directly about his childhood:

We were always the weird names on the roster.

But it was our home, and then my Pops took to coaching...

He called pitches from the dugout..

In Arabic.

No need for signs.

Suspicious... Right?

Such moments give the audience a chance to fully appreciate the character’s innocence, not to mention the actors’ versatility and skill in his art. The message is that there is a fragile and tenuous connection between Arabs in America, and those considered to be enemies of the state in Guantanamo Bay. However, despite this overt message, the way

that I read Khalidi's play is that the connection is only actualized on stage. Theater, performance, and art allow artists a chance to enact what they imagine to be real, but have no way of practicing or experiencing in their everyday lives. Like Said who performed her suffering, first through anorexia and then on stage, Khalidi enacts and embodies on stage the suffering that he has only read about in newspapers and seen on television.

Khalidi is the son of Rachid Khalidi, a famous historian of the Middle East. Professor Khalidi<sup>13</sup> was one of my professors in college and faculty advisor for our Arab Cultural Club; I first met his son Ismail when he was no more than six years old. For those of us who know the Khalidi family, the performance was like a rite of passage of the young boy into an accomplished man. As I entered CUNY Graduate Center's Segal Theater in May 2006 to watch this play, I ran into Muna Khalidi, Ismail's mother. We greeted each other, and she rushed me inside so that I could get a good seat. She was going to sit this one out having seen it on the previous evening. I happened to sit across the theater from Professor Khalidi, and watched him beam with pride and delight as his son moved around the stage changing between the characters of "Kareem," the interrogator, several pundits and television personalities as if he were changing shirts. I imagined that it must have been impressive for him to see his child take the sentiments and history of his ancestors and the Middle East and present it in such an innovative way. Professor Khalidi may have a choice of words when writing or giving a speech, but he does not have music, lighting, sets, props, and video projections at his disposal like his son. Most importantly, he does not have the luxury of acting out fictionalized accounts

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<sup>13</sup> Professor Rachid Khalidi moved from the University of Chicago to Columbia University the year the Edward Said passed away (2003) to hold the Edward Said Chair in Arab Studies.

of suffering as if they were real. Other prominent Arab American actresses and performers were also in the audience that evening, including Nadjla Said, Suheir Hammad, and Leila Buck. We gathered like proud relatives after the show, and I enjoyed watching Ismail Khalidi blush upon remembering me when I thanked him for the performance afterwards.

Most interesting to me was the presence of Abdeen Jabara, a senior activist in Arab American communities in the U.S. During the question and answer period, in which Khalidi and his friend and collaborator Bassam Jarbawi described their creative process and inspiration, Jabara asked a critical question. He claimed that since 9/11 he had seen a lot of art that seemed to be all about venting. Then he asked, “To what extent are you trying to engage in a larger discourse?” He might have asked: “what are you going to do about any of the problems you have identified?” Khalidi responded that the piece is like blues music, it is a lament; through this lament he hoped to reconnect and unify people through the experience of theater so that they will act. He explained that the play is often “preaching to the converted, but the converted are not doing shit. What are people doing about Bush being the most criminal president in American history?” Khalidi then confessed that the scenes where he was beaten were “real,” because he even hurt himself a few times. This confession was his way of saying that although the piece is in the tone of venting, it is real. I highlight this somewhat slip of the tongue because it stresses the importance of embodying and representing pain and suffering for otherwise privileged Arab American artists. Khalidi may have realized his short-sightedness in arguing that individually embodying pain speaks to a larger discourse of social and political justice because he concluded by saying that he believes cross-cultural or multi-



ethnic mobilization will avoid “destructive forms of identity politics” in which each group just looks out for themselves and not others.

When I interviewed Jabara, I revisited the question he asked Khalidi that night. I asked if he thought there is any connection between the symbolism and rhetoric of politics as seen in such plays as *Truth Serum Blues* and politics as political and legislative advocacy, and he said “none, whatsoever.” He spoke of one artist of Arab descent that worked on the Iraqi War Crimes tribunal for the World Court. He found it very exciting that Emna Zghal, a visual artist in her late 20s who had recently emigrated from Tunisia, would spend her time working on a legislative project. Otherwise, he tried to soften my criticism when I asked, “How did we go from holding conventions and draft constitutions for a potential Palestinian state in the 1960s and 1970s to having an art exhibit as a form of politics today?” Jabara described a complex set of factors that all essentially pointed to the defeat of Arab nationalism as a project. The lack of coherent political organizing among Arabs in New York; the disparity of resources when compared to its enemies; the compromises Arab American social service organizations make to receive U.S. government funds, and the lack of U.S. government support for populist Arab causes all contribute to the lethargy in Arab American activism. However, Jabara reserved his harshest criticism for Arab governments themselves. He explained:

I want to say one other thing, and this is on the record, doubly on the record. The Arab world, between quotes, and Arab society, and Arab leadership has been so deficient, I'm talking about in the Middle East and North Africa, that it has a reflection on us here. We can't be more Catholic than the Pope. I've had to deal with Arab governments and I've traveled there, and I've traveled around, um, they are as much a part of the problem as Israel is. Because they're not really responsive, they just want to stay in power. Look at the wealth in the region. They're building these ski slopes in buildings so they can go skiing! It's just crazy what they're doing! And

that's what produced this terrorism. It's because these countries are rotten to the core, and I really mean that, very strongly.

Therefore, he understood why symbolic expression of politics through the arts was a last bastion for political engagement. Politics itself is completely defunct.

#### Arab Americans Seeking and Building Arts Communities:

Arabs in New York can be characterized as many fragmented and overlapping groups. Groups come together to emphasize their national origin, political ideology, religion, professional affiliation, gender, or artistic discipline. Ethnicity is enacted at certain times and places. In addition to ethnic identity, in large cosmopolitan areas like New York City, individuals can find commonality around other aspects of their identity, like their gender or their professional affiliations. The cases that follow demonstrate what Brubaker (2004) refers to as “groupness” or group structures that are “variable and contingent rather than fixed and given,” which allows one to take into account, “phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity, without implicitly treating high levels of groupness as a constant, enduring, and definitionally present” (2004:12). Thus, artists of Arab descent come together to network as a group and fulfill both their creative professional goals and ethnic aspirations.

Having chosen careers in the arts, many found the arts to be a vehicle for building relationships with other Arab Americans and the Arab world. Most often, artists formed groups around their specific art form, i.e. visual art, theater, comedy, and music, etc. However, there is the sense that they belong to and serve a “small” ethnic community, regardless of how loosely organized and competitive it may be. Artists tend to participate in each other’s events regardless of personal expertise in the particular form of art that is

showcased in an event. For example, I worked as the program coordinator for an Arab American writers' conference<sup>14</sup> that attracted filmmakers, visual artists, playwrights, and actors, as well as poets, novelists, and journalists. I witnessed prominent visual and conceptual artists attending comedy festivals, and then publicly praise and promote the work. The tendency for overlap among artists, arts groups and audiences led me to drop any intention of choosing artists working in a particular medium or genre, and instead redirect my attention to concepts more central to traditional anthropological inquiry, i.e. communities and society.

Artistic production was paramount in the social organization of Arab American artists in New York as an ethnically identifiable community. Leila Buck is a thirty-year-old playwright and actress. She is the daughter of an American father who worked as an American diplomat and a Lebanese mother. She spent much of her childhood studying in American schools in Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, and Iraq. After being evacuated from Baghdad during the first Gulf war, her family returned to the U.S. where she completed her last three years of high school. Busy with her studies and theater, she focused more on fitting in than worrying about being Arab. By the time she went to college at Wesleyan, her parents were living in Saudi Arabia. It was at this time that she became aware of what she perceived to be a conflict between her American and Arab identity. With the encouragement of her professors, she began incorporating this theme into her work. In June 2001, having lived in New York for several years trying to be an actress,

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<sup>14</sup> The Radius of Arab American Writers, Inc (RAWI) Conference, Kalimuna! took place from June 3-5, 2005 in New York. I worked as a program coordinator on this national project for close to six months with its outgoing Director Barbara Nimra Aziz, a senior member of the Arab writers/ cultural community in New York.

she was invited to a meeting of Arab American actors. She recalled the invitation and her initial reactions:

I distinctly remember someone sent out an e-mail on the Arab drama listserv, and it was like, “hey, if there’s any Arab American theater people in New York come to my apartment. I think it was at Maha’s, and I missed the first meeting, and I went to the second one, and there were like seven of us in the room. And we were all so excited that there were that many of us. And I remember distinctly being like, there are other Arab Americans who do theater? It’s so specific! It’s really cool!

Seven actors decided to form a theater collective called Nibras<sup>15</sup> (*lantern*). Its mission is “to create a network for Arab-American theater artists to share their talent, experience and passion by staging imaginative and articulate productions that increase the positive visibility and creative expression of Arabs and Arab-Americans. It is our belief that by fostering an understanding of the Arab experience in America, we can begin to create a greater understanding between all the communities that form the rich and intricate web of American culture.”<sup>16</sup> Nibras’s first theater piece was *Sajill* (to record). Written in the form and style of documentary theater, actors performed interviews with people about what the word Arab meant to them. Many of the characters were first generation Arabs talking about their adjustment to life in the U.S. Although they began the piece before September 11, 2001, the attack reshaped the project, and ultimately, the 9/11 backlash was incorporated into the play. The characters in *Sajill* gave voice to Arab American reactions and concerns in the post 9/11 period. Through their work, the company and the play served as a way for these theater actors to connect with part of their identity that was

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<sup>15</sup> From the Nibras website ([www.nibras.org](http://www.nibras.org)): “Nibras means lantern in classical Arabic. Over time the word has also come to represent truth, enlightenment, inspiration, civilization, wisdom and justice. Because it is a hand-held lantern, Nibras symbolizes a source of light which travelers themselves carry to illuminate their path and guide them on their journey.

<sup>16</sup> From Nibras website ([www.nibras.org](http://www.nibras.org))

infrequently acknowledged outside the context of their families. Buck described the benefits and challenges that this situation had on the functioning of a theater group.

A theater company is complicated enough. In the beginning, right after September 11<sup>th</sup>, it was kind of like a support group. You know, we'd come in, and we'd read these interviews we'd done with Arabs, but it was almost like a cathartic experience to voice those voices. Because at that time, it was very new to just have a group of Arab Americans that we were working with, and even that we were friends with, for some of us. And I think now that's less so, but I do still think that there is a loadedness to the culture dimension because there's this feeling that you should have good relationships with everyone, and that there should be a cohesiveness and that the cohesiveness ...it's not just like, [in valley girl intonation] "oh yeah, I have this bunch of people that I run a company with and, oh, I don't work with them any more because I didn't like this and that person." These people are a part of a community that you're a part regardless of the theatrical aspect, and there's a sense that we should stick together.

Overtime, the number of people involved with Nibras grew. They also began collaborating on the Arab American Comedy Festival by organizing theater sketches. Over thirty actors of Arab descent gathered to read submissions for the 2005 Comedy Festival. Auditions brought in at least a dozen more. Omar Metwally is a classically trained actor born to an Egyptian father and Dutch mother in the U.S. Arguably one of the most successful of the bunch, he has appeared on Broadway and in two major Hollywood productions. When I interviewed him about the Arab American arts scene, he said:

I definitely see it as a community. And it was interesting to watch it grow. I think that really that happened after 9/11. And I don't think there was really an Arab American community or arts community before 9/11. I mean I think people knew each other, but not the way it is now where with Nibras and with the Comedy Festival you have more and more people getting connected into this network of artists every year. I think it's really pretty amazing. People keep appearing.

Backlash and the fallout from 9/11 heightened the need for Arab Americans to come together, perhaps as Leila Buck implied, to support one another. However, the demand for Arab arts by the larger society helped the “group” endure beyond the immediate period.

Although most Arab artists in New York would agree that there is a community of sorts, they also recognize that there are boundaries between that world and other worlds in which they live. They may have Arab American friends today, but they also have other friends from other periods of their lives. Several are married to non-Arabs. They also do not assume that they will all get along simply because they are all Arab. Nathalie Handal, a Palestinian poet and academic raised in the Dominican Republic, explains that there is a special kind of intimacy among Arab American artists, but that their lives are not completely intertwined. She pointed out that although I invited her to be interviewed in my home we had never been to each other’s homes before. We had known each other for a couple of years, and even lived within ten blocks of each other. She explained:

I think I know everybody as intimately as I could know people because I’ve worked in the community for so long and I’ve also worked across different types of art, you know, like visual arts, etc. etc. I know people. I feel like I have a family of artists that I’m close to, and like Najla and Leila, you know, they’re like sisters. We adore each other, but we don’t necessarily go out for the afternoon. And how many times have I met Leila’s husband and eaten with him? Like maybe once, like I see him, but I don’t know him. In other words, we’re intimate, but our lives are not intimate with each other.

To demonstrate the point further, Handal counted all the different kinds of Arab worlds she was in: the artists, her family in Bethlehem, her Latino Arab friends, her friends and family in the Dominican Republic, her life in Paris, and her

friends who work in the world of business and finance. Of the latter she explained:

These people are going to Nobu<sup>17</sup> and this has nothing to do with my artist life. Very, very different! It's really navigating into a different world. So when I go to New Jersey and I go to an event there I'm like, "Oh my god," they're living something that the artist community and these noble people are not living at all.

This brings up the issue of class. Many artists discussed how bonds with other Arabs are made around class status as well as cultural heritage. While some felt that they could move fluidly between classes, others did not. One of Buck's complaints about the project *Sajill* was that it highlighted artists' involvement with "elites." There were a number of reasons why Nibras interviewed affluent Arabs. She explained that at the beginning of the project, when they were still shy and unfamiliar with how to approach people, they only interviewed people they knew. Like themselves, they approached people who were highly educated, well traveled, and affluent. Additionally, Buck conjectured that the language barrier between the Nibras artists and more recent immigrants who spoke Arabic was part of the problem. Only one of their cast members spoke Arabic fluently and could approach people like deli owners or taxi drivers. Furthermore, they were worried it would seem suspicious to approach random Arabs after 9/11 and ask them questions. She also found that the group's secularism put a distance between themselves those who were religiously observant. In the end, Buck embraced their ability to communicate with an American audience, even if they could not fully communicate with other Arab audiences.

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<sup>17</sup> Nobu is an expensive Japanese restaurant in Manhattan.

Suheir Hammad explained that while she sought out Arab authors as a child, what she found felt totally foreign to her. Hammad was raised in Brooklyn in a working class neighborhood. Her father was a shopkeeper and her mother a housewife. She described her household as being very religious, conservative, and Muslim. She grew to rebel and question everything, yet she is proud of her background and regularly mentions the role of the Quran in her upbringing and aesthetic development when doing presswork. As mentioned earlier, she became an artist alongside her work on broader social justice issues. These characteristics alone make her quite different from Arab American artists of a previous generation who were mostly middle class, Christians embedded in white America. Hammad noted:

When I was growing up, and I've said this a lot in my work, sometimes I wish I could say something else, but you know Naomi's work and Lisa Suheir Majaj's work and Diana Abu Jaber's<sup>18</sup> work, which is really wonderful and powerful, did not resonate with me. Because I grew up in the "hood" (laugh)...I grew up Palestinian period. I did not grow up Arab American. My hybrid identity was because of my economic reality, and the economic reality of this country meant that my neighbors were these people, the music we listened to was this music, you know, so I could never, so I really did not have an Arab American voice, and especially a woman's voice, as I molded myself into a reader, as a child... There were Latino writers and black writers that I could relate to more because of the environment that I was raised in.

By saying she did not grow up Arab American, Hammad means she did not grow up middle class in an all white town or suburb where her family was the only minority.<sup>19</sup>

Although Hammad did not relate to the work of an earlier generation of Arab American

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<sup>18</sup> These are three successful Arab American writers in the U.S. who are a decade to two older than most of the participants in this study, and do not reside in New York. I met all of them at various points in New York.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, as Hammad became successful in her career, she was able to travel more outside the U.S. to Europe and the Middle East. It was when she left America that she was able to recognize herself as an "American" in the way she views the rest of the world. She commented on the perils of privilege and the need to overcome the "American narrative" that everyone who lives in the U.S. inherits.



authors, she and her work have been embraced by Arab Americans. She has become an iconic figure, and moves fluidly between multiple Arab worlds, from young to old, and rich to poor. She has also inspired a younger generation to engage in the arts. By using the genres of spoken word, adopting a hip-hop style, and by making explicit connections between minority populations with titles like “Born Palestinian Born Black”, Hammad has sensitized the language of Arab Americans to issues of race and class in America within discourses of ethnic identity

Hammad was not alone in being aware of class when interacting within the larger Arab American arts community. While she did not seem to be resentful of her class position, some lamented the resources and family supports that presumably more affluent Arab families were able to give their artistic children, and attributed much of the success of these children to their class position. When I first met Maysoon Zayyid in 2002, one of her favorite ways to tease the Arab American artists that she had befriended was to point out their easy lives and bourgeoisie tastes in music, film, and politics. Zayyid’s parents are Palestinian; she grew up in New Jersey. Her father was a merchant, and her mother, after having children, decided to become a doctor. They subsequently divorced, and Zayyid’s life was split between the upwardly mobile in terms of education and resources, and the less affluent immigrant enclaves of New Jersey. She began studying dance as a form of physical therapy because she was born with cerebral palsy. This opened the door for her exploration of the arts, and she ultimately studied theater in college. She also had aspirations of doing human rights work. She feels that her background sends a message of hope to younger Arab Americans whose families may not understand their interest in pursuing art. She explained, “I wasn’t born into some chic

chic - fru fru family that like sends us to play piano and went to debutant balls. I'm like a ghetto Palestinian that spent every summer in a war zone.” This distinction is important to her claims of authenticity when speaking from an Arab’s perspective, at times implying that her identity is in fact based more on her ethnicity than her class.

Although there is a shared sense of ethnic identity that enhances personal relationships among individuals in the community, the main thing that brings people together is their artistic work. This work allows people to grapple with and at times transcend their class positions and familial affiliations to project something larger than themselves about their cultural identity in their art. What matters is one’s contribution to the cause, the cause being the artistic production at hand.

#### Artists and Arts Organizers Perform Politics:

With the artistic product as the central focus of their endeavors, Arab American artists and arts organizers are concerned that the process of production reflects their political and social values. It is not enough that the content of the work symbolically convey Arab political, social, and cultural sentiments, but that the labor and resources involved in the creation of a project further reflect their political, social, and cultural ideals. These ideals include unity, secularism, collectivism, and democracy. In this way, the creation of art is both a practice of and a substitute for structures and organizations that do not exist in their ancestral homelands in the Arab world, and are frequently compromised in the United States.

Artists feel the need to overcome problems they associate with the Arab world in the way they organize and produce their work. As Buck explained, “We're all very aware

of the Arab fragmentation tendency, you know, so there's a pressure" to not divide along the lines of religion, nation, family, or even class. This is not to say that they do not recognize distinctions, but that they do so under the unifying rubric of Arab identity that celebrates its diversity. For example, at the beginning of most stand up comedy shows, the host "warms up" the audience by asking which countries people come from: "Who here is from Lebanon? Egypt? Palestine" etc. This adaptation of the mainstream American practice of asking which states the audience members come from has the audience of Arab immigrants clapping and cheering when their country is called. Comedians usually insinuate a competition for the most number, but there is an overall celebration of the total number of "Arabs" in the room, as opposed to non-Arabs. Non-Arabs are also asked to shout out their origins; the host usually asks something like, "so, are you afraid, being in a room with so many Arabs?" to the delight of the rest of the audience basking in their short lived majority status.

Sam Younis is an actor and playwright who earned a Masters of Fine Arts at Columbia University in classical theater. He was drawn into the Arab arts scene after feeling so stereotyped as an actor looking for work. He was pleasantly surprised by what he found.

There was a Pan Arabism, that I found really exciting, you know, it's not everywhere that Lebanese, Jordanian, Palestinian, Saudi, whatever, um, Christian, Muslim, Sunni, Shia, whatever, are sort of trying to identify together. I don't think my parents would understand that, I don't think my parents' generation fully gets that. I think it's because we're also all Americans. We have a lot of solidarity, you know, the way we identify ourselves with this culture.

As "Americans" they see "Arabs" in ways they would not if they lived in the Arab world. They see a shared heritage with superficial differences of dialect, dress, and cuisine.

Despite their efforts in to educate “Americans” about the diversity of the Arab world, they engage in the same homogenizing practice that they are critical of when it comes to organizing. Some are even proud of it. Maysoon Zayyid made the following bold claim:

I've told people in Palestine this, I really really really think that the cure for the actual Middle East lies in the expat community, because it's almost like you need the distance to get the perspective. There's such division back there, there's just such division. And here, I've never met a Palestinian here and been like, “So are you Hamas or Fatah?” You know what I mean? It's more like, “Oh my God, you're from Falastine, have you ever been there?” And that's why I think that like whatever is going to be cured over there has to be cured over here. Because we're rational and removed. I'm telling you.

By overcoming differences in the production of aesthetic projects, Arab artists and arts organizations hope to model what a productive, functioning Arab society should be like. That model invokes a picture of the Arab nation that is secular and democratic; that is ruled by laws; and that provides opportunities for all.

Advancement for individuals and society would be based on merit and playing by the rules, and not “wasta” (connections) that are usually based on familial associations or bakshish (bribery), both thought to ultimately corrupt Arab governments and societies.

Opposition to these practices can be seen in the way that arts groups organize and promote their events. For example, the New York Arab American Comedy Festival regularly solicits entries for their sketch comedy nights. A two-hour show usually consists of about six or seven short skits. The selection of skits involves several components. Upon receiving submissions, the producers organize an event in which actors read the pieces, and then the audience “votes” for its favorite. In addition to the symbolic reference to electoral politics, the

process also references pop culture phenomena, such as American Idol. It also generates attention and community participation months ahead of the actual

Festival. One announcement that circulated on Arabny explained:

Submissions Sought for NY Arab Comedy Festival Reading Night. The New York Arab-American Comedy Festival is seeking submissions of original short comedic plays and one acts for a comedic theater reading night and playwriting competition which will be held on Thursday, May 5, 2005 at Alwan Arab Arts Center. Based on audience response at the reading, we will pick one piece which we will produce and will be featured in the 3rd Annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival which will be held November 13-16, 2005. This is a great opportunity to have your writing heard by a live audience. Even if your piece is not picked on May 5, you can re-submit it again when the Festival is seeking submissions in the fall.

Submission Guidelines: The comedic pieces should be no longer than 30 minutes in length. (We welcome very short pieces as well.) All submissions must be written or co-written by an Arab-American. The theater pieces do not have to be "Arab themed," they simply have to be comedic.

The night of the reading, I helped distribute ballots for voting. The authors' of the skits were not identified verbally or on the ballots. Merit was meant to be the sole deciding factor. Actors who participated in the reading could vote, which was significant considering there were nearly thirty of them. The night that I volunteered, the announcement said that they would read as many as they had time for, and they read about ten pieces. The evening stretched on for hours, with the dozen non-actors in the actual audience starting to doze off by the last act. In the end, a play called "A"-Date, by Lameece Issaq, was selected. It was about a dating service for Arab Americans, along the lines of "J" Date, a dating service catering to Jews.

In the fall, the Festival solicited more sketches. A friend of mine, Marie-Therese Abou-Doud submitted something for the first time: a musical sketch about an Israeli

soldier, a Palestinian, and a born-again Christian who all fall in love with one another, in Bush's mind. I spoke with Obeidallah, one of the founders of the festival shortly after it was announced that her play was selected, and he made a point of telling me that they did not know that it was hers. They read the plays blind of the authors; he said everyone was very surprised and happy that it turned out to be hers. Obeidallah always made a point of telling me that what matters is whether it is funny or not, suggesting that this is an objective criterion.

There were other small ways that Festival organizers tried to work against what they viewed as pervasive and negative tendencies within the Arab community at large. Zayyid used to close her announcements about advanced ticket sales with a warning: "there will be no *wasta!* (favours due to connections)" If a person who wanted to attend did not have a ticket, they would not be allowed to get into the show because they knew someone. This tendency is quite pervasive in Arab communities, and can be extremely difficult for organizers who must not over-book spaces and account to the fire codes in the mainstream American venues. Even in venues that do not have such rigid restrictions, like Alwan, it becomes exhausting and financially draining to the organization to have "regulars" who expect to receive free admission or drinks.

Competition between producers of cultural events is also generally frowned upon. When I first moved to New York, there was a dramatic proliferation of activity among several different arts organizers. Occasionally events, such as a film screening or a visiting artist's lecture would be scheduled on the same night. Alarmed organizers would wonder if they had done anything to offend the other organizer causing them not support their events. One such incident, on the closing night of the first Arab American Comedy

Festival, even raised charges of “bad blood” between the groups, drawing strongly on a classical Arab metaphor for feuds. The organizers would generally try to placate one another explaining why they may have had no choice about when to schedule an event, and assuring that there is a sufficiently large audience of Arab Americans that having choice of events would not diminish the size of the audience. Over time, this proved to be true. I recall one evening in June 2005 when there were four different events taking place in the city at the same time: the gala for an Arab writers conference, a fashion show of Arab designers, a film screening, and a party. I attended the writers’ conference gala while friends went to several of the different events. Apparently all were well attended. Despite the diversity of events and the ability to fill most to capacity, there is still the perception of the Arab community as being small and intimate. Organizers generally strive to support one another, at least in principle even if scheduling conflicts often happen.

Material resources are considered an ultimate indicator of support for an artistic project, and by extension, its underlying political sentiments. Substantial amounts of money are required to cover rent for facilities, marketing, equipment and costumes for performances. Across all Arab arts organizations, labor is voluntary. Only a handful of artists make enough money as artists to make a living wage after covering the production costs of their work. Such artists generally produce and exhibit their work within mainstream American institutions. However, most of those producing work for largely Arab American audiences depend on volunteer labor. Any funding generated from events barely covers the production costs or is saved for future productions. This leads

those artists successful at generating funds to feel they have succeeded not only in the producing their events, but also in their imagined causes.

Alwan for the Arts is an organization that is constantly struggling for funds, in part because it has the ambitious goal of offering year-round programming in its own space. It has operated with a deficit since it was founded, and has been working towards achieving financial security ever since. As described in the second chapter, Alwan has made aesthetics a priority, and has shied away from framing its work within nationalistic rhetoric. Its organizers believe that their highly politicized audience would somehow benefit from purely creative and artistic programming. They feel they educate their audiences about Arab and Middle Eastern history and culture by hosting concerts of classical music or poetry. Occasionally they present something just for the sake of being different, like a performance by an Armenian Lebanese artist who paints watercolors based on the epic of Gilgamesh to the tunes of live experimental music. Programming is open to the public; anyone can approach the organizers with an idea for a project or performance. If the work is technically feasible and is within the parameters of what they consider to be “good art,” then Alwan is likely to host the event. To their credit, they have the largest operating budget of all Arab American arts organizations in New York to date.

Despite its fiscal deficit, Alwan has been successful at raising funds from foundations and government sponsored arts councils. However it has been unsuccessful at raising money from its mostly Arab patrons. By representing itself as an arts organization, and not making explicit connections to larger political and social causes, it has not been able to tap into the community’s limited sense of philanthropy. Whereas



people would turn out to contribute to earthquake victims in Iran or the war in Lebanon, they have not donated generously to Alwan. Ahmed Issawi, the President of Alwan, believes that it is very difficult to bring Arabs towards some larger sense of themselves as a community. In our interview, he explained:

Alwan is almost like an impossible project...I've grown sympathetic to various people who tried to manage organizations before me who were autocratic. Because, you have an extremely politicized community on the one hand that talks quite a bit, but given the sort of hectic nature of life in the city, they can't really afford pulling off what they say, or put what they say into practice. They don't see that in the advancement of the community they are going to be advanced. I mean I know people who would rarely contribute to Arab organizations; however they would contribute to American institutions and things like that. They could be philanthropic in some sense, but it would be very difficult to convince them to contribute to an institution of their community, that is meant to nourish their culture and history. I think it comes from being part of Arab society, where people are generally aloof from institutions. You know, I mean, people in our societies just don't want to deal with institutions. Institutions, on general principle, are just oppressive. And corrupt. And so it's very difficult to get them involved in institutions. They think, "why would I have to give to other people." Particularly people who are Arab, a culture that has generally not proved itself to be successful.

When I asked if he thought there was any difference between Alwan and other Arab cultural organizations in New York, Issawi said no. He believes that the differences are minor, and that ultimately the groups should be working together for a larger purpose.

It's very important not to lose sight that Palestine is not only about Palestine that Iraq is not only about Iraq. That's not the end of it. So one would hope that our community would see that. You could just be religious or you could be of an Islamic persuasion or a Christian persuasion but nonetheless you still belong to a community and your effort really should not only be focused towards your particular community as much as they should have some sort of universal appeal that can go beyond your own locality. I mean, one of the interesting things that one learned from Hegel, just to digress for a moment, is that he says, a nation is never a nation unless it at once appeals to appeals to its people, but its people can appeal to the rest of the world universally. So I mean, we need to nourish within us an educational function that can help us create a narrative we all will share, to bring us together. And I think this could be one of the functions of a space. Not necessarily Alwan, it could be

anything else, I mean, the Arab American Museum [in Dearborn MI] is one example of this. I mean it's a space where you consolidate your ideas and thoughts and history and heritage and once you do that consolidation you build on it. You interpret...you represent it.

In contrast to Alwan, the *Made in Palestine* exhibit managed to raise over \$100,000 over a couple of years of direct solicitation among Arab Americans. The exhibit first appeared in Houston, Texas in 2003, and includes the work of twenty three contemporary Palestinian visual artists living in the the West Bank, Gaza, Israel, or the diasporas. Then for two years, Samia Halaby, a senior Palestinian painter living in New York, recruited every imaginable artist and activist to raise funds for the exhibit, including the renowned musician and composer Simon Shaheen. There were monthly events throughout the city such as *Acts for Palestine*, art auctions at Alwan, film screenings, concerts, dinners, etc. At some point during each event, Halaby would bring out an easel with images of Palestinian art and talk about the history and importance of resistance art. She is a retired art history professor, and an active scholar on the subject of Palestinian art. She would also give a sales pitch that blatantly conflated the cause of Palestine with the art exhibit. She claimed that museums and galleries in New York had rejected the exhibit because of racism and discrimination toward Palestinians. She said they feared being labeled pro-Palestinian by their Zionist-loving funders and trustees. I am very dubious of this claim. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, there were several prominent galleries hosting Palestinian and other Arab artists, and the museums hosted many exhibits by Arabs as well. Anthropologist Aseel Sawalha,<sup>20</sup> who studied the production of the exhibition, reports that the *Made in Palestine* organizers wanted a space for free, with complete curatorial

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<sup>20</sup> Aseel Sawalha delivered the paper, "Displays, Displacement, and Diaspora, Palestinian Art Exhibit and the International Social Justice Movement" at the Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern American Center at CUNY's Graduate Center on March 7, 2008 and at the Middle Eastern Study Association's Annual Meeting on November 25, 2008.

control, and did not intend to sell any of the work. I believe that these reasons pose a more likely explanation than the political differences between organizers and a gallery or museum's staff and board of trustees. A hosting organization would have been donating the space "for the cause" and any good feelings that may be derived from such philanthropy.

In the end, the *Made in Palestine* organizers succeeded in raising the money to rent a vacant gallery space in Chelsea for three months at \$11,000 a month, and host the work of nineteen artists from the original exhibit. Halaby frequently made the analogy that putting an exhibit of Palestinian art in the Chelsea gallery district was like putting Palestine on the map of the earth. Organizers held the exhibit for two months, and then had enough money to host a second exhibit called, *Three Arab Painters in New York*, for one month.

What is remarkable is that funds for *Made in Palestine* were primarily raised in \$20 increments. When I interviewed Halaby in the gallery space during the time of the exhibit, it was the one point in our conversation in which she expressed deep pleasure. She explained:

We collected our money in very small quantities, and this gave us freedom. I've always been unenthusiastic about foundations. I mean if someone had given us a bunch of money, you know, money always comes with a string. When we had width and breadth in the donations, we had freedom. And the freedom we took is to do what we were really going to do, because that's what people were supporting. So it was like a vote. You gave us twenty for a ticket you were voting - "I like what you're doing."

Like the Comedy Festival which included the actual practice of "voting" for its programming decisions, Halaby constructs similar metaphors through ticket sales. She carried out her populist theme throughout the interview. She felt that people should feel

very good about the exhibit, because they contributed to something very “serious.” With the extra funding Halaby and her team raised, they planned to create more exhibits whose content would depend on community interest. Halaby certainly has a strong curatorial eye for art, and is very critical of art that is overly personal. However, her vision demonstrates the nexus between funding, communities, and the Palestinian cause.

### The Israel Test:

The final and ultimate example of the way that Arab American artists engage in politics is through their decision to recognize and work with those representing the state of Israel. Like the interpretation of funding as an endorsement, this largely focuses on artists sponsored by the Israeli government. For most artists of Arab descent, decisions on how to treat subject of Israel in their work is highly sensitive. Aware of the overwhelming biases in favor of Israel in the United States and the eagerness of certain American Jewish advocacy organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League, to decry its opponents as anti-Semitic, most Arab American artists believe that by directly challenging the state of Israel in the content of their work they risk being shunned and doomed to failure within the American mainstream. Humanistic portraits of Palestinians suffering or inconvenienced by the state of Israel allows an implicit critique of Israel, but does not directly challenge Israel’s right to exist or the Israeli people. There is strict avoidance of publicly disparaging Israeli or Jewish people even while there is a public critique of Israeli policies and practices, such as land confiscation, home demolition, and military occupation.

Yet, the question of how to address Israel is a pervasive problem facing all Arab artists and arts organizers. Leila Buck captured the dilemma facing the Nibras Theater Collective by saying:

When we're talking about Israel, and how we handle Israel, you know, people feel very differently. Even within five people, one person will be like, "fuck it, we should say what we think, it's a free county," or "well, we don't want to get labeled as the Arab American theater company that's anti-Semitic," you know, because we're already going to be in danger of that. And then other people will be like, "well, I think we should do it, but I think as long as we do it this way. And we have to make sure it's balanced."

The Arab Comedy Festival holds a strict policy about not including material that discusses Israel. Organizers warn participants against discussing their political views with the media, and deftly avoid political controversy with messages focused on their goals of empowering Arab American actors and comedians, and dispelling stereotypes. However, they did allow a skit by Dean Obeidallah called *And Now a Word from our Sponsors: How to be a Real Arab* (2005) to mock the alleged way that Arabs blame everything on Israel.



*And Now a Word from Our Sponsor: How to Be a Real Arab* (2005)  
L-R: Ramsey Faragallah as "Mustapha" and Waleed F. Zuaiter as "Marwan."  
Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah © NYAACF. Photo by Nigel Parry

In this mock infomercial, M&M (Mustafa and Marwan) explain to the audience how to be a “real” Arab. Their advice, “which can be purchased on DVD or video cassette,” includes wearing a shirt with its buttons open to expose chest hair (and inserting fake hair when necessary), using “Shawarma” or roasted lamb scented cologne, and blaming everything that goes wrong on Israel. This joke follows the standard formula of making Arabs in the audience the butt of the joke, or its victim, and not Israel. While somewhat apt, several members of the audience that I spoke with afterward were critical of it. They thought, “we don’t do that, and Israel is to blame for a great deal.” They attributed the jokes to Obeidallah’s very “American” sense of humor<sup>21</sup>. It is noteworthy that this was the only joke Israel or Israelis staged in five consecutive years of the Festival.

Alwan’s organizers also feel that its biggest obstacle to remaining an apolitical organization focused on arts and culture is the problem of Israel. Issawi was continuously solicited to participate in joint exhibits with Israeli artists or to screen films with Israeli filmmakers. The offer is always under the rubric of celebrating peace and coexistence. The offers stopped after Alwan got a reputation for being unfriendly to Israelis. This came about when a Moroccan musician scheduled to perform at the Alwan’s loft invited a band of Israeli musicians to join him. When the organizers at Alwan found out, they cancelled the concert. Backlash ensued from other Jewish Americans who previously performed in the space, and they testified to the musician in

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<sup>21</sup> Obeidallah was raised in New Jersey by an Italian American mother and Palestinian father. He only began learning some spoken Arabic during the time of my fieldwork, and routinely claims he only became an Arab after 9/11. His comedic background includes working nightly stand-up Comedy Clubs for years, and as a lawyer for Saturday Night Live.

questions' good politics and intentions. However, Alwan defended its decision at the time by saying that it has a strict non-collaboration policy.

Artists generally fall into two camps on the issue of collaboration with Israeli artists. Some, like Obeidallah, engage in "dialogue projects" that demonstrate the ability of Arabs and Jews to work together. The "work" is of a creative nature, such as a comedy show or a concert. Obeidallah participates in something called, "Standup for Peace" with a Jewish-American comic named Scott Blakeman. Their show, which mostly tours college campuses, is "a way of bringing Arab and Jewish-Americans together to laugh as well as to help encourage a dialogue in support of a political, peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as foster understanding between Arab and Jewish-Americans."<sup>22</sup> Before his death in 2003, Edward Said formed the East West Divan Orchestra with Argentinean-Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim. The orchestra brings musicians from Israel and the Middle East to study, rehearse, and perform classical music on an annual basis. While it disavows itself of any political motives, the orchestra, and the foundation that was subsequently established in the founders' names in 2004, works "to promote the spirit of peace, dialogue and reconciliation, primarily through music." After each annual workshop of several weeks, the orchestra tours internationally, bringing and modeling its message of peaceful co-existence with it.

My final example of the "collaboration policy" concerns controversy surrounding the cancellation of the play, *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*, in the spring of 2006. Although this incident was addressed as it relates to censorship in Chapter 3 (Battling Censorship), I mention it here because of what came after for local playwrights in the context of the

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<sup>22</sup> From Dean Obeidallah's website: [www.deanofcomedy.com](http://www.deanofcomedy.com).

“collaboration policy.” The play, which dramatizes the life of a martyred American peace activist for Palestine, was “postponed” by the New York Theater Workshop (NYTW) after it appeared to receive pressure from Jewish constituents to cancel it. Ultimately the originally scheduled performance was cancelled out of protest by its creators at the Royal Court Theater in London. Months later, the NYTW tried to redeem its image as a progressive and liberal theater company by collaborating with Nibras and the NY Arab American Comedy Festival on a series of readings at the Public Theater called the “Arab/ Israeli Festival” in the Fall of 2006. This program featured work by playwrights of Arab and Israeli descent, like Betty Shamieh, Nadjla Said, and Joshua Sobol, in highly contextualized performances that included post-performance talk backs with the playwrights and area experts, and in one case, a town hall meeting.

I attended Shamieh’s play, *Again and Against - the Art of Hoping Indefinitely* (2006), which pitched an Arab American male FBI agent against an Arab American female college student who had staged a “theatrically” violent demonstration on campus resulting in the injury of an innocent college student. After the performance, I had the pleasure of attending dinner with Shamieh and several of her friends. She was thrilled by the reading. She asked for my ticket stub as a keepsake for her first performance at the Public Theater, something she never dreamed would happen. Delicately, I tried to ask how she felt working with the NYTW after the way they handled the *Corrie* play. She said that her reading happened because of that catastrophe; she was happy to bear their guilt through the production of her play. Presenting her work in the context of an Arab/ Israeli festival posed no problem for her.



Alternatively, there are those who maintain a strict non-Collaboration policy with Israelis, including artists. This generally does not extend to Israeli artists who have “good” politics by actively working to raise awareness of Israel’s transgressions through their art. However, it does extend to “dialogue projects” such as those mentioned above, even with “good” Israelis. There is the belief that such projects create a false impression of equal responsibility for the perpetuation of the conflict. They suggest conflicts over land, property, and the inalienable rights of citizens of nations are a simple misunderstanding, and that each party has equal opportunity to resolve the problem adequately. I first became aware of the differences between those who do and do not share this policy through a debate on Arabny that was sparked by a fundraiser in New York in December 2004 for an exhibit called “Three Cities Against the Wall.” The “Wall” refers to the concrete barriers being built by Israel to not only keep Israelis and Palestinians apart, but also to separate Palestinians from each other and further deprive them of their land. The exhibit was to take place in Tel Aviv, Ramallah, and New York and feature artists from all three cities. While the exhibit was explicitly “against the wall,” artists in New York were skeptical of it, and publicly (on-line) challenged a Palestinian poet who was scheduled to read at a fundraiser for the exhibit. The exhibit gave an opportunity for artists such as Samia Halaby, who has no qualms about stating that she would like “Israel to come to an end as soon as possible,” to relate their non-collaboration platform, and others to concur and furthermore insist that if any collaboration were to occur, there must be a recognition for the right of return for all displaced Palestinians. In addition to holding such policies and practices privately, artists and activists have organized boycotts of artistic and cultural production sponsored by the

state of Israel. In keeping within their chosen professional domains, namely art, artists and arts organizers want to challenge those within their professional sphere to condemn Israel's anti-Palestinian politics as well.

The latest effort to organize a boycott by artists began in August 2006, after the Israeli invasions of Lebanon and Gaza. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), which was established in Ramallah in 2004, began by circulating a sign on letter among artists and filmmakers. The Campaign was founded by New York based activist Riham Bargouthi, and many of its initial signatories were artists and academics based in New York, such as Dahna Abourahme, Emily Jacir, Samia Halaby, Susy Salamy, as well as other artists with international recognition, such as Elia Suleiman, Kamal Bullatta, Hany Abu Asad, and Michel Khleifi. After a brief introduction citing statistics on the violence in Lebanon, Gaza resulting from the summer invasions, and the illegality of the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights, the letter entreats its readers as follows:

We, the undersigned Palestinian filmmakers and artists, appeal to all artists and filmmakers of good conscience around the world to cancel all exhibitions and other cultural events that are scheduled to occur in Israel, to mobilize immediately and not allow the continuation of the Israeli offensive to breed complacency. Like the boycott of South African art institutions during apartheid, cultural workers must speak out against the current Israeli war crimes and atrocities.

We call upon the International community to join us in the boycott of Israeli film festival, Israeli public venues, and Israeli institutions supported by the government, and to end all cooperation with these cultural and artistic institutions that to date have refused to take a stand against the Occupation, the root cause for this colonial conflict.

Just as Arab artists seek to gain recognition and legitimacy for their cause, as represented through their artwork, they hope to prevent the legitimacy of their enemy by blocking

their path through boycotts. Since 2006, Israeli artists and filmmakers have been affected by negative international sentiment towards Israel. For example, Israeli filmmaker, Juliana Mer Khamis, was boycotted by the Egyptian Ambassador in Sicily and by the Palestinian community of Hungary, even though he had signed the PACBI and produced films designed to build support for the end of Israeli occupation of Palestine. PACBI is still active in recruiting organizations, artists, and celebrities to join.

By December 13, 2006, it had received ninety four international signatures including author John Berger, musicians, Brian Eno and Leon Rsselson, and writers Arundhati Roy and Ahdaf Soueif. Their signatures were advertised in a letter published in the Guardian that explicitly condemns the ongoing Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, supports the ceasefire in Lebanon, and once again makes analogies to South Africa. In his own letter, Berger offers advice on how to apply the boycott. He writes,

I'm convinced, in any case, that its application should not be systematized; it has to come from a personal choice based on a personal assessment. For instance. An important mainstream Israeli publisher today is asking to publish three of my books. I intend to apply the boycott with an explanation. There exist, however, a few small, marginal Israeli publishers who expressly work to encourage exchanges and bridges between Arabs and Israelis, and if one of them should ask to publish something of mine, I would unhesitatingly agree, and furthermore waive aside any question of author's royalties.<sup>23</sup>

Although this campaign was the most organized effort on the part of artists opposed to Israeli policies during the time of my fieldwork, it generated little discussion outside of brief e-mail exchanges on ArabNY. It operates along the lines of a traditional political campaign, using sign on letters identifying a specific course of action for those who sign

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<sup>23</sup> Excerpt from PACBI Press Release: John Berger and 93 other authors, film makers, musicians, and performers call for a cultural boycott of Israel. December 15, 2006. Published on Electronic Intifada.

on, and aims to achieve a political end, namely to end the Occupation of Palestine and the Right of Return of all displaced Palestinians.

In the Spring of 2008, the Theater Communications Group published twelve interviews with Palestinian and Israeli artists on their views on cultural sanctions. The interviews are framed in the context of the issue of “freedom of expression,” and whether or not cultural boycotts actually restrict “free expression.” However, one could also look at the issue from the economic standpoint of the artists. Those who are making a living collaborating with Jewish Americans and Israelis are not opposed to boycotts; those who stand a chance of making a living within an entertainment industry heavy in Jewish Americans who sympathize with Israel are ambivalent about the boycott, but lean toward being against it; those who have no chance of making a living as an artist in the West, such as those based in the Palestinian territories, are for it. Among Arab artists in New York, the boycott does not have much resonance because these artists are primarily trying to make a career out of being artists, and have made clear distinctions between art and politics.

Conclusion:

Arab American artists live in New York in order to work as artists. They seek professional growth and recognition that comes from working in a world capital of arts and culture industries. As such, politics is secondary to their pursuit of being a professional artist. Political can be used as an adjective when describing their work, but not politics as a noun.

In this chapter, I described how artists of Arab descent use art as way to experience and express their ethnic identity and advance their careers. By being privileged to live most of their lives away from the wars and traumas in the Middle East, they use their art to both highlight the commonality of mundane human existence and to embody the suffering from which they were removed and protected. The rendering of everyday joy and pain in art takes on political significance when the artist is of Arab descent and the art is being showcased in the West. Any other outward markings of politics, such as party affiliation, flags, or national anthems, would be considered propaganda and outright dismissed by the art world as not art. Humanistic interpretations of ethnic identity are considered appropriately political art.

Most Arab American artists uphold a distinction between art and politics, but use their art as a proxy for the political world they wish to inhabit. By building artistic communities around values such as meritocracy and democracy, they downplay familial, national or religious distinctions, and cast themselves as models of Arab unity and American multi-cultural pluralism. They prize their role as artists bridging communication gaps between Americans and Arabs, and emphasize their abilities to move fluidly within these worlds.

Political causes become embedded in artistic productions, and success is judged by ticket sales, audience turnout, and financial contributions. Popularity is judged as support for the cause, both artistic and political. Many resist attempts to directly politicize their work as artists by avoiding political campaigns, such as boycotts. Were they to use their art to raise funds for political parties, or they themselves join political parties, then there would be a direct connection between the art of representation and the

art of diplomacy. However, to do so would inevitably compromise their vision of the artist as politically neutral and independent, operating in entirely different economic and social realms from politicians. As such, they are engaged in a conceptual model of politics that does not easily render symbolic victories into material ones.

## 5. The (female) virgin (not)

*Stage Directions: Each “audience member” shouts their 2 questions at the “panelists” creating a cacophony:*

Is there a feminist movement in the Arab world?  
 What about sexual harassment over there?  
 Can Arab women see each other naked?  
 Do you wear a veil at home?  
 Are you a virgin?  
 Do you swim with your clothes on?  
 Isn't it true most of these procedures take place in secret?

*Broken by:*

Journalist: Can I SEE your vagina???

Excerpt from *The Panel* (2006)<sup>1</sup>

*The Panel* (2006) attempts to comically capture the frustration that Arab American women feel when confronted by Western stereotypes of themselves. For those who choose “women” as the subject of their work, the desire to battle stereotypes imagined by Western audiences, as well as those internalized through their families and communities fuels much of the drama that plays out in their art. Lila Abu- Lughod’s (1989) commentary on historically dominant academic analysis of Arab women could apply to artistic representations of Arab women by artists of Arab descent in New York as well:

The irony is that nearly every anthropological study of Arab women is intended, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to undermine stereotypes of the Middle Eastern women...How many books and articles begin with the same trope...:the grossly misleading conceptions of the harem and of the idle or submissive, veiled Arab women. This rhetorical ploy- conjuring up an imagined or intended audience of those who hold

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<sup>1</sup> *The Panel* (2006) was written by Leila Buck and Rania Khalil with Sarena Kennedy and Brook Wilensky-Lanford and conceived by Nissa: Arab American Women’s Collective. It was performed at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual New York Arab American Comedy Festival (November 14-19, 2006). Excerpt reprinted with authors’ permission.

views that are about to be corrected- risks degenerating into the sole *raison d'être* for the study (1989: 289-290).

A woman's presence on stage, screen, page, or canvas breaks what is perceived to be the primary stereotype, that of a secluded and isolated woman whose sole domains are home and family. It speaks to her agency as an individual but also as a representative of a marginalized social category. While the world of academia may have identified agency in all sorts of activities by women throughout the Middle East over the past two decades, the construct of the veiled and oppressed woman within popular culture in America is so engrained and titillating that it creates a demand to hear from female artists of Arab descent who presumably can explain and/or dispel these myths. In the twenty first century, the simple deconstruction of that "silenced woman" sells: an ultimate motive for Arab American female artists.

As the ethnographic details presented in this chapter show, Arab American female artists are self-conscious of their roles as interlocutors between two worlds, and attempt to balance their willful efforts to disrupt the dominant narrative about Arab women by appearing respectful to what are still valued as core elements of being an Arab woman, namely modesty, honor, and pride in one's ethnic identity. This delicate balance is often played out around the issue of sexuality. Since many artists long to de-essentialize the identity of Arab women as veiled and oppressed, sexuality often becomes the centerpiece for representing a liberated and authentic, albeit conflicted and unfulfilled, Arab woman. At stake in decisions to represent Arab femininity and sexuality are the professional careers of Arab American women as artists. All of the women in my study sought to earn their living from the arts, and all lived on their own rather than with their families.



Therefore, they had to reconcile their interest in participating in the aesthetic economy with gender-based demands of a Western economy, such as the vision of a woman at once sexually liberated and virtuous. As they pursue their careers in the creative economy, they are also sensitive to conventional notions of family, marriage and career that have either not materialized or that they have actively decided against. This chapter will allow me to explore their lives and their art from the perspective of gender and sexuality in order to demonstrate the ways that they negotiate their identities as Arab American female artists in New York.

Background:

While feminists have debated the extent to which sexual expression and sexual freedom are critical to self-actualization and a feminist agenda (Willis 1992), it is clear from the work of Arab American female artists that sexuality is at the heart of identity construction and subjectivity. In this regard, Arab American artists are like many artists of the Arab world who represent liberal and “civilized” notions of freedom and democracy through metaphors of sexual gratification and pleasure. In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad (2007) studies the lingering effects of nineteenth century Orientalism on the increasingly global discourse of sexual freedoms in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Orientalists view the “Arab” as the inverse of themselves, the depiction of Arabs from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century became reversed. Whereas the 19<sup>th</sup> century restricted and repressed Victorian age Europeans perceived Arabs to be debaucherous, sexually liberated and licentious, 20<sup>th</sup> century sexually liberated Westerners perceived

their Arab counterparts to be sexually repressed and oppressed. Honor and shame are alleged to be the keys to checking the Arab sex drive.

Massad writes, “It is in the realm of the emergent agenda of sexual rights that made its appearance in the United States and other Western countries in the late 1960s and began to internationalize in the 1980s and 1990s that talk of sexual practices in the rest of the world, including the Arab world, would be introduced to the international human rights agenda and would be coupled with notions of ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized behavior’” (2007: 37). Arab elites, including artists and intellectuals, became caught up in the logic of sexual freedom and civilization, often espousing such views in the face of censorship from both the conservative State and Islamists. In this regard, Massad argues that Arab intellectuals are guilty of internalizing the Orientalist critique of Arab sexual repression, thereby perpetuating notions of their own inferiority to the West.

While the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s may have made pre-marital sex common in America, this behavior poses a challenge to Arab American women whose immigrant Arab parents expect them to remain chaste until marriage. In her book *Bint Arab<sup>2</sup>: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*, Evelyn Shakir (1997) notes that the one of the prime difficulties Arab women face in America is the tension between parents’ and peers’ morality around sexual activity before marriage. She also acknowledges that this puts Arab women in a defensive position with regard to feminism, which seemed to regularly condemn patriarchal Arab males and their attempts to control female sexuality. Unlike the intellectuals from the Arab world who espouse Western sexual liberalism, as Massad describes in *Desiring Arabs*, Arab American women are in a

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<sup>2</sup> Bint Arab means Arab girl. Women are generally referred to as “girls” until they are married. The term implies virginity, and is used to describe any unmarried female from a newborn to teen to an unmarried middle aged or elderly Arab woman.

double bind, at once accepting of Western sexual practices equating liberation and freedom with sexual experience and yet defensive of Orientalist (and their parents') critiques of their alleged sexual repression.

Nadine Naber explores the tensions that arise among Arab families in America when daughters seek to explore sexuality outside of a heterosexual marriage. In *Arab American Feminities: Beyond the Arab Virgin/ American(ized) Whore*, Naber (2006) argues that sexuality takes on nationalistic significance, particularly among Arab parents who view "good Arab girls" in opposition to "bad American girls." Dating, sexual activity before marriage, and even homosexual activity are viewed as being "American," whereas being chaste until marriage to a person of the opposite sex is considered "Arab." This standard is acknowledged to be stricter for women than men. Naber does not deny the desire for Arabs in America to assimilate into American society; however, she highlights the ways that the quest for "re-authenticity" among Arabs in America often centers on idealized notions of Arab female sexuality. Young women are seen as being caught between attempts at "re-authenticity" and "hegemonic U.S. nationalism," desiring both to remain connected to their ethnic culture and community, and to freely express their sexuality with whomever they choose. Naber found that among her second generation Arab American female research participants, there was general agreement that "virginity, followed by heterosexual (ethno-religious) endogamous marriage were the key demands of an idealized Arab womanhood that together, constituted the yardstick that policed female subjectivities in cultural nationalist terms" (2006: 92-93). The ideal marriage favored religion, class, village of origin, national origin (Palestine, Egypt, etc), and racial/ ethnic identity (Arab/ vs. non-Arab or American). Naber argues that although

these demands for a daughter's marriage are often posed as counter to assimilation or Americanization, they in fact help perpetuate an American racial system that privileges white heterosexual marriages.

Interestingly, census based research has found that by 1990, over eighty percent (80%) of U.S. born Arabs had non-Arab spouses (Kulczycki and Lobo 2002). Both Arab American men and women tend to marry outside their ethnic group, and research indicates that the higher the education and income levels, the less likely the marriage will be endogamous. While both foreign and U.S. born Arab women were more likely to marry an Arab than both foreign and U.S. born Arab males, U.S. born Arab women were 76% more likely to marry a non-Arab than a foreign born Arab woman in the U.S. These findings indicate that the tensions Arab American women experience within their families around issues of sexuality and marriage are consistent with a disconnect between cultural ideals on marriage and the empirical reality of upwardly mobile, educated, middle class Arabs.

Before turning to the ethnography of Arab American female artists and their lives in New York, two contemporary ethnographies of Arab women reveal the importance of conventionalized performance in the expression of sexualized emotion or identity. In *Veiled Sentiments*, Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) describes the social context of performed poetry among the Awalad 'Ali Bedouin of Egypt. Abu-Lughod, herself an Arab American, went to study this tribe in rural Egypt between 1978 and 1980. Abu-Lughod played up her half-Arab identity in order to enter the foreign world of rural Bedouin life. In her first chapter, she describes how she allowed her father to introduce her to this tribe in order to assure them that 1) she came from a good family that cares for her and

protects her; 2) she is a good woman even though she is living on her own away from her family. As a result of this introduction, she felt that she became both her host family's "daughter" and their "guest." She also found that she was restricted to women's company of the Bedouin camp, yet in the awkward position of being an unmarried adult. She was reluctant to ask questions about sexuality, and writes, "I was assumed to be ignorant, and I had no intention of disabusing people of this view, as I wanted to protect my reputation" (1986: 17). Despite this handicap, Abu-Lughod found that within the sphere of the home, women were deeply expressive of their emotional and physical desires, if not explicitly, then implicitly through lyrical poetry.

Throughout *Veiled Sentiments*, Abu-Lughod emphasizes the distinction between male poetic genres of the public sphere and female genres of the private sphere. She chose to study *Ghinnawas*, which she describes as a poetic form that allows women to express emotional sentiments in a formulaic and conventionalized way without losing their honor. Honor is kept by maintaining *hasham* (modesty) and *aql* (reason) as opposed to being *qawya* (wilfull) or *qhaba* (slutty). Ordinary talk among women is comprised of discourses that fit within the honor/modesty system and involve feelings of anger, blame, denial of emotion, and stoicism. Poetic discourse, Abu-Lughod argues, falls outside the honor/modesty system and allows for the expression of vulnerability, weakness, dependency and feelings of pain, love, romance, and attachment. The Bedouin women allow this because of the speaker can claim to be simply reciting a conventional poem as opposed to expressing a personal statement. Abu-Lughod pays attention to the form of *ghinnawas* as well as their reception. Responses to performed poetry depends upon "the hearer's knowledge of the person reciting the poem, the life circumstances to which the

poem is a response, and the general contour of social relations in Bendouin society.

Awlad 'Ali perceive poems as personal statements, even when they know the poems to be conventional and formulaic" (1986: 177-178). The primary concern of Abu-Lughod's work is the gendered experience of honor in a hierarchical social structure, particularly within the family. Abu-Lughod offers an elaborate and intimate picture of Arab women's lives, and how they find the freedom to express themselves in the poetic private sphere as opposed to the public sphere which is dominated by men. However, even within this private sphere, performance conventions allow speech that would otherwise be scandalous. Arab American female artists in the West also take advantage of conventional performance styles to express their sexualized subjectivities in ways that may otherwise be inconceivable in the public realm as Arab Americans. Standup comedy, spoken word, theater, and even conceptual art are all conventionalized genres that allow Arab American women to say things publically that they may only otherwise say in private.

In *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (1996), Deborah Kapchan breaks down the male (public)/ female (private) dichotomy of poetic genres in the Arab world by describing verbal performances of women in and on the market. She argues that hybrid genres emerge with the increased presence of women in the public sphere and the gendered commodification of life in present day Morocco. Kapchan is specifically interested in how women's performances can be used as an indicator of "how marketplace culture and the relations of commodity are both experienced and interpreted in the process of their political emergence" (1996: 3). Performances, namely marketplace oratory, herbalist rituals, body-marking, gossip,

storytelling, and live entertainment, are seen as sights for the hybridization of the traditional and the modern in contemporary society. Kapchan is interested in not only genres of performed speech but also in the body, specifically habitus, of women in this emerging public sphere. Her primary concern is to use performance as an indicator of social change. She concludes that “if the embodied words of marketplace women are still somewhat shameful, their discursive practices are nonetheless creating an honorable position for women in the general marketplace by stretching the limits of the permissible in the public domain” (1996). Kapchan is suggesting that traditional notions of “honor” are changing to meet the demands of the contemporary marketplace by favoring public as opposed to private performances by women. Kapchan’s ethnography brings us closer to the situation for female Arab American artists working within the aesthetic economy. These artists reconcile their more “Arab” notions of modesty and honor with an interest in expressing their sexualized subjectivities as commodities in the public sphere of the aesthetic economy. Performance and art gives them the discursive space that may not be publicly acceptable otherwise, and better enables them to achieve their goals of being professional artists.

#### Being a Single Adult and an Arab American Woman Artist

Of the fourteen women I interviewed for this study, only three are married, and none of their spouses are Arab. One married an Italian, the other a Jewish American, and the third, a Brit. Of the eleven single women, at least two are lesbians. One is divorced, and now lives with her boyfriend. The rest were for the most part single. Being single Arab American women in their late twenties or early thirties, they expressed anxiety over finding a partner, and stress from their expectations (and their parents) that they find a

suitable mate. These feelings were featured prominently in their work, and also in personal conversations.

However, the decision to become an artist involved a commitment to a lifestyle that socially sanctioned single life and a sexual experience. While it may have been inconceivable to most of the single female artists to admit their sexual experience to their parents, it was assumed that within the community of artists, all were sexually active unless they publically claimed otherwise. Although not necessarily desirable, being single was a common feature of being a female artist, one that signified a break with family values and conventional professions such as a doctor, nurse, accountant, etc. It bonded Arab American artists together in a community through their professional and personal identities in ways that sometimes made artists feel estranged from the conservatism of their natal communities.

Although sex and sexuality were prominent themes in the work of Arab women, I remained wary of directly questioning women about their personal sexual lives throughout my fieldwork. Learning such delicate information was a line that I only crossed with close friends, primarily ones that knew the men I dated. Only a couple of Arab American women felt comfortable enough to talk with me about the trials and tribulations of their sex lives, usually on some health related matter. I generally assumed that if a woman had a boyfriend, that they were having sex. I believe that others made the same assumption of me, and in our public encounters, it was not discussed. Most artists would not gossip about each others' sex lives, fear that such information would ruin their reputation, or even jokingly espouse abstinence before marriage in their personal lives. However, many women would turn their anxieties and insecurities about



being sexually active adults into dramas for public consumption. Among the artists who make a huge issue of their sexuality, or lack thereof, and I never had the courage to break their public persona to ask them whether or not they were actually virgins (or sluts, for that matter). Similarly, those that made an issue of their sexual experience, I was only able to discuss it within the context of an artists' work, rather than their personal lives. I suppose we shared a cultural pattern of privacy in these matters; whether that pattern is Arab or American, I am not certain. In conducting my fieldwork, I was always, and remain, clear that I am more interested in the representation of sexuality and the meanings that such representation carry in the context of their professional lives as artists, than in their actual sexual habits.

Before I explore how several artists came to terms with the artists' lifestyle and profession, and what it means for their future possibilities of family, I will start with an excerpt of a poem by Suheir Hammad that succinctly captures what so many artists expressed to me. The poem, *manifest destiny*, comes from Hammad's first collection of poetry called *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996). Hammad describes herself among four friends and what each "should've been" instead of being a poet. As portrayed by Hammad, one should have been a neo-nazi or a gay basher; the second should have been either a missionary or a commercial dancer; the third should have been a real estate investor or a corporate mogul. Then comes Hammad's turn:

And me  
 Who should've been a doctor of western medicine  
 Or married at least engaged but always obedient  
 Me searcher of truth lover of humanity and a poet

missing my family  
 who couldn't understand  
 we four all missing family who wouldn't understand

creating a family  
 we struggling to understand  
 we were where we needed to be  
 we are who we have to be<sup>3</sup>

This work was completed when Hammad was in her early twenties. I chose to quote this poem here because Hammad's youthful thoughts seem to haunt many Arab American female artists into their adulthood. Given the limited chances of success as an artist, many often struggle with what they "should've been" in both their professional and personal lives.

The case of an artist:

Dina Habib<sup>4</sup> is an Arab American actresses, comedian and poet who was raised in New York. She became one of my closest friends, and helped me settle into a new life in New York. She introduced me to her temp agency so I could get a "day job," and for the first six months in New York I worked in the same office that she once did: Victoria Secret Beauty. This easy job with internet access and little responsibility was a perfect transition from sitting in my pajamas studying for my comprehensive exams to the busy life of a glamorous New York woman. Plus, it was air conditioned and had a 360 degree view of the city from midtown Manhattan.

Dina invited me to dinner, movies, and parties where I met many other artists and her interesting and kind friends. We discussed our dramas with men, and comforted each other through break-ups. When I first moved to New York in 2003, she was a relative outsider to the Arab American art scene, having mostly acted in her American friends'

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<sup>3</sup> Reprinted with permission of the author, Hammad (1996). Spacing in the original.

<sup>4</sup> Not actual name. Name changed to protect confidentiality.

theater pieces. With her interest in being an artist/ actress and my interest in studying Arab American arts, we found good company in each other at art openings, plays, and concerts, often critically discussing what we saw for hours afterwards. Our lives were so much in synch that when I tried to transition from being a participant in the Arab arts scene to being a researcher who interviewed people, I found myself asking her questions as we primped and prepped in the bathroom mirror before going out for the evening.

Dina prides herself on being a self-made, independent woman: one who broke from her family in order to pursue life on her terms, not her parents. While she endured great pressure as a child from her conservative parents to excel in school (which she did), she decided she would rather be disowned from her family than major in anything other than English literature in college. Having decided at the early age of eighteen that she would rather study literature and theater than become a doctor or an engineer, she was left to support herself and pay for the remainder of her education. Tied to this decision was a desire to be free of her parents' control. While both parents had expectations for her, which she seemed unwilling or unable to fulfill, it was her mother with whom she most sympathized and identified. Her life choices seemed to highlight the rupture between her mother's life as an Arab woman and her own. She explained:

I think she [Dina's mother] expected me to stay at home until I got married, and be by her side. I basically ran away when I was 18. I think I was just choking, so I ran away. She was very very upset with me for many years. But she will even say to me now, as an adult, "it's good you don't live here, you have *rahtic* (your peace)." She realizes that I have so much freedom that she never had.

Though her mother married in her early thirties instead of early twenties like most women of her generation in the Middle East, she lived with her family until she married, and then she lived with her husband and children till each moved on to their own

households. Dina felt that she had to choose between living on her own by her own resources, or stay with her parents to help them in their lives. Though she's made the choice to be on her own, she still feels conflicted about the decision. She explained: "I'm choosing to follow what I want to follow. That means avoiding my father, and that means avoiding her (my mother). I'm always struggling with it because she feels that I'm neglecting my duties to her."

One of the benefits of being on her own is that she can date men. It would have been impossible to have boyfriends while living with her parents. She even joked that her father became angry if she played too physically with boys as a child, let alone tolerate any notion of her being a sexual young adult. Even though she lived on her own, she still kept her boyfriends a secret, and did not introduce her parents to anyone she dated. She claimed: "my parents still don't really know I've had boyfriends. I think now they're regretting it, like, 'oh shit, she's 34 and single,'" implying maybe they should not have discouraged it so much. So when a young Egyptian filmmaker asked Dina to star in his student thesis film about an Arab American woman who has to balance her Egyptian parents' ambitions to arrange a marriage for her with her secret lifestyle, including a sexual relationship with an American boyfriend, she happily accepted thinking "this film is about me."

Written as an exploration of public versus private lives, the film offered material that Dina could easily portray, since it captured her own life experiences. For example, there is a scene where Dina changes from a modest loose fitting shirt and jeans into a more tight fitting and revealing pair in the public bathroom of the café where she is meeting her boyfriend. Scenes where the parents argued with Dina's character for

staying out late, calling her a “slut” and charging “what will others think,” also reminded her of scenes from her rebellious youth. Although Dina had achieved considerable distance from that past, she still dressed modestly when she returned home for visits, and she still worried what her parents would think if they saw the film’s closing scene which captured her sitting quietly and contemplatively on her bed, wearing only a bra. Though I watched her agonize over whether or not to do the scene, her comfort with the directors and their overall good taste and respectfulness ultimately helped her to overcome her fears of what her parents would think and do the scene. We celebrated when the film was finally screened publically.

#### Representing sexuality in public”

Dina’s distress over choosing to represent sexuality was a common sentiment among Arab American women. As we began our long awaited official interview after years of friendship, I introduced the topic of representation of Arab American sexuality and the ideal of virginity. She stated, “On the record, I am a virgin.” She went on to explain:

As an Arab woman, there’s always this issue of how open are you about your sexuality. I’m always wondering when am I going to feel free to talk about what I want to talk about. Is it when my parents pass away? I feel bad saying that, but is it only when they pass away that I can talk about sex very openly, not just with my friends? Not that you want to get up and get raunchy or anything, you just don’t want to feel like you’re hiding something. Especially when you’re a woman in your 30s.

Dina sees sexuality as part of being an adult, and explained that “maybe it was just the way I am, and because I’m an artist, I think I was more open to the choice of being sexual, and not judge others for making that choice.” In fact, her identity as an artist provides a world where her lifestyle as a single Arab woman is accepted.

Similarly, Betty Shamieh, a Palestinian American playwright in her early thirties, feels that the expectation that women remain virgins until marriage is an oppressive aspect of Arab culture. In trying to create work that could be presented to both Arab and “white” communities without pandering to either one, she explains:

It’s very difficult because things make me furious about the Arab community. Like the way women are treated, the huge emphasis on sexuality...virginity. You are trying to control her education, her access to travel, her ability to do all things. It all stems from the desire to keep a woman a virgin until you transfer her to another owner.

As a single woman who left California to go to college at Harvard, and then live and work in New York as a playwright, she has struggled with herself to prove that she is a “good girl” even though she lives alone so far from home. She is concerned that there are many who assume that she is not a virgin because she lives on her own, and that this will affect her chances of marriage. Like Dina, she strongly claims, “I will never write a poem that says I’m not a virgin. I will never. I won’t.” However, as I will explore in the next section, Shamieh is one among the many single Arab American women who explore sexuality and its consequences through her characters on the stage.

Female Arab American artists are not only careful about what they say in public about their sex lives, but also about what they choose to wear in public. Suheir Hammad experienced difficulties growing up in a conservative Arab American household, and finds that conservatism can extend to the entire community. For example, she recalled with indignation that her friends in a large Palestinian community in Patterson, New Jersey, “were not allowed to walk on the main avenue because the neighbors would call their parents and say, ‘your daughter’s a hooker walking on the main avenue.’ Why can’t a woman walk down the street there and not be harassed?” Having fought her parents to

be allowed out at night where there would be members of the opposite sex, she is aware of how she represents Arab and Palestinian women on stage, and chooses to be respectful of Arab audiences through her mode of dress, at least for the sake of the younger generation of Arab girls in America. She explained:

I made a real decision as a grown ass woman to always dress conservatively when I'm in the public sphere as a poet because I know that my father would have looked at me dressed in a tank top and said 'you cannot do that.' And that's ok for me because I dress as I want in my personal life. I don't want to de-sexualize myself, but I'm aware... that if every time I stepped on stage and I was in a short skirt and a low top, that those girls would not feel the same confidence to get up on stage, whether it's a muhajiba (veiled woman) or not.

Although no longer beholden to her father's standards in her private life, she upholds his standards in solidarity of women like her whose fathers may prohibit their movement and activities based on immodest dress. It seems that immodest dress and dark, late night venues signal pre-marital sex to some Arab fathers.

#### Inspiring Other Single Arab American Female Artists

Successful single Arab American female artists often mention the effect that their work and their presence on the stage has on future generations of Arab American women. Hammad finds that young Arab American women cannot even believe that she is Arab because she is a successful performer who swears and speaks her mind in public. Yet after ten years as a professional artist, she finds that girls who have watched her perform for years are now writing and performing their own poetry. Perhaps many also strive to achieve her professional accomplishments by appearing on TV, on Broadway, and the on silver screen, in addition to their local community event.

Similarly, Maysoon Zayid, Palestinian American comedian and actress, receives fan mail from Arab American girls that express their gratitude for her paving the way to better relationships with parents and American peers. Zayid began taking art lessons and dance as a child as part of therapy for her cerebral palsy. By the time she went to college, she majored in theater. I find her to be among the few in this scene that is a consummate performer, whether on stage or off. She explained:

I have so many young Muslim girls that write me. They thank me for shouting out the hijabi's (veiled women). They're like, "whenever you shout us out, I feel so cool, and so proud." I have girls that write me and they're like, "I'm so glad you talk about being a virgin because everyone thinks I'm a loser that can't have sex, but I can, but I'm not, and it's so nice to hear you." And a lot of girls are just like, "My parents are letting me take theater because I'm going to be like Maysoon, and I'm going to do what Maysoon does." And a lot of girls have written me and asked me like, "how do I convince my parents to let me do art? What's the best way?" I'm really backwards and bad, and I'm like, get a job that makes enough money so they don't care what you're doing the rest of the time.

Her comments reveal that parents not only worry about their daughter's reputations, but also about their ability to make a living. Therefore, her presence on stage as a professional artist addresses both concerns of parents.

### Marriage and Family?

While the community of artists may provide a home away from the parental home and ancestral community free from the judgment around sexuality, Arab women artists have problems finding a martial home within the Arab American community. Maysoon Zayid blames men for this. She explains:

The men in our community are still going back to the motherland to marry seventeen year old girls, and I just don't get that. I don't get how the old school mentality can reign supreme here. I don't get how you can go out



dancing, and go to comedy clubs, and go to the ADC<sup>5</sup> convention, and be up till 4 o'clock in the morning chatting, and then the next summer you fly back to Palestine and marry Bahiya<sup>6</sup>, who your Aunt picked for you. How does that work? I don't get it!

Meanwhile, the women are completely advanced. They're like, "hey, I'm not going to marry the guy who saw me on the wedding video, because that's insane." I'm just saying there's a huge gap in our community.

When I asked whether or not it was question of respect, Zayid responded:

I can't say that they don't respect us, because I've been treated with nothing but respect from all the Arab brothers. I think they would respect us, but they wouldn't marry us. They respect us as human beings, not as life partners. They're like, "ah, *ahsan binit* (the best girl), she's so good, she helps the kids<sup>7</sup>, but no she's too old." You know, there's that whole idea of independence and strength not being a good thing for a wife. That serves its purpose for something in the world, but that's not the kind of girl you want to marry. That's not the kind of girl you have kids with, a successful, smart, independent woman. It's insane.

Therefore, Arab American women artists often choose to be single, professional adults at the expense of marriage to someone of a similar ethnic or cultural background during a time of life where there is a high expectation of marriage. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, of the three Arab women artists in my sample who are married, all are married to non-Arabs. Many of the female artists I knew professed to dating Arabs for the first time in the late twenties and early thirties, and of yet, have not married. There is no telling how long this particular cohort of Arab American female artists will be single or producing work that highlights their anxieties over this stage of their lives. However, during the time of my fieldwork, the arena of cultural production was rife with representation of the sexual dilemmas of single Arab American adults.

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<sup>5</sup> ADC stands for the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee.

<sup>6</sup> Bahiya is a random Arab woman's name.

<sup>7</sup> Maysoon Zayid runs a charity in the West Bank called "Maysoon's Kids" where she helps disabled children by coordinating medical relief services and theater workshops.

Typecasting:

Once most crossed or negotiated barriers imposed in their households to become Arab American female artists, they were at a loss to find representations that they could relate to in the mainstream entertainment industry. Some artists suppressed their identity and attempted to pass as another ethnic minority, like Italian or Latina. Nadjla Said, an actress/ playwright of Palestinian and Lebanese descent, laments that fact that although “Middle Eastern” is now a “type” on a casting call, that role is very limited:

As an Arab American actress if I am called in as an Arab it’s generally to play the wife or the sister and to wear a *hijab* (headscarf) and to speak Arabic because that is what they need. I was asked in a radio interview if they came to me from like 24<sup>8</sup>, and offered me a part, would I take it, and I was like, ‘probably’, you know I have to make money.

She highlights a common dilemma that both actresses and actors feel, which is that they can only get hired to play stereotypical characters.

Heather Raffo, an actress/ playwright of Iraqi descent, explained that she was motivated to write and perform her own work on women because upon learning her background, people always asked her two questions: “1) What does your family think of Saddam Hussein? and 2) What do you think of the veil?” She felt both questions provided pretty poor indicators of what it meant to be Iraqi.

Playwrights even joke about the easy path to success through clichés about Arab women. Betty Shamieh explains:

I am an Arab woman. If I were to write a play I really honestly 100 percent believe about this woman named Fatima who gets her ass beat by a guy named Mohammad, and tries to be saved by a white woman next door neighbor, and then she refuses to leave Mohammad and then she dies, you know, he beats her to death, that would be on Broadway. It’s true

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<sup>8</sup> 24 is a television series on the Fox network that began airing in November 2001. It follows the activities of a fictive Los Angeles based Counter Terrorism Unit. Most of the terrorists represented are of Arab or Muslim descent.

that there are those cases, but if you're tapping into what the culture already believes about your subculture, then people eat it up because it is so much easier to be reinforced.

Instead of trading in stock notions of abused and repressed Arab women, Shamieh feels challenged to deal with the oppression of Arab women by Arabs without "taping into" the dominant narrative about Arab women.

Hammad expressed her frustration over how Arab and minority women more generally are perceived and approached by average Americans through the poem "exotic"<sup>9</sup> which she performed in 2003 on Broadway as part of Def Poetry Jam:

don't wanna be your exotic  
     some delicate   fragile   colorful bird  
     imprisoned    caged  
     in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings

don't wanna be your exotic  
     women everywhere are just like me  
     some taller    darker   nicer than me  
     but like me but just the same  
     women everywhere carry my nose on their faces  
     my name on their spirits

don't wanna  
     don't seduce yourself with  
     my otherness   my hair  
     wasn't put on tip my head to entice  
     you into some mysterious black vodou  
     the beat of my lashes against each other  
     ain't some dark desert beat  
     it's just a blink  
     get over it

don't wanna be your exotic  
     your lovin of my beauty ain't more than funky fornication   plain pink perversion  
     in fact   nasty necrophilia  
     cause my beauty is dead to you  
     i am dead to you

not your  
     harem girl       geisha doll       banana picker  
     pom pom girl    pum pum shorts    coffee maker

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<sup>9</sup> Reprinted with permission of the author, Hammad (1996). Spacing in the original.

town whore      belly dancer      private dancer  
 la malinche      venus hottentot      laundry girl  
 your immaculate vessel emasculating princess

don't wanna be  
 your erotic  
 not your exotic

Hammad is careful to draw connections between her experiences as an Arab American woman with other women of color in the United States, emphasizing how their otherness is fetishized by the dominant male gaze. She is quite unique among Arab American artists for doing so, and thereby draws support from a wide range of audiences for her work.



Suheir Hammad at Alwan for the Arts, September 9, 2005  
 Fundraiser for Katrina: *Refugees for Refugees*  
 Photo by Maysoun Freij

While Arab American women artists may be quite prolific and articulate interlocutors of their identities, many in the Arab American arts community in New York are not convinced that their representations of “Arab” identity are genuine or escape neat

archetypes common in Western conceptions of Arab women. Instead, Arab American women artists are judged negatively for trying to become rich and famous. Before going into details of this critique, I offer descriptive samples of work by Arab American female artists. I have organized the first two sets of examples through the starkly contrasting figures of the *sharmouta* (whore) and the “virgin<sup>10</sup>.” Next, I note the ways sexually explicit language is used to mark “liberation” and “independence” within an American context, if not actual sexual activity. I then describe broader approaches to Arab female sexuality and desire in the work of two playwrights, one professionally successful and the other not, yet both seeking to break the stereotype of the sexually repressed and oppressed Arab woman. Finally, I present the work of a visual artist who plays with the notion of political victory through seduction. Throughout, I weave the professional achievements or consequences of the artists’ work, since, at the end of the day, this is work done within the expansive aesthetic and creative economy of New York.

### Sharmouta (whore)

If the reader of this heading were an Arab in America, just the phrase *sharmouta* would draw a laugh or a giggle. The *sharmouta*, or whore, is a derogatory term used for not only actual prostitute, but more generally for anyone who exhibits “slutty” behavior in terms of dress, speech, and public demeanor. It is also a popular insult for a woman regardless of any sort of behavior whatsoever. Within the experimental environment of a comedy club in which a joke is registered as funny or not by a laugh, pretty much any mention of the word *sharmouta* brings a laugh. Yet, rarely is anyone represented as an

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<sup>10</sup> The Arabic word for “virgin” is not commonly used. Typically, a virgin is just called a *bint* or girl. Basically, anyone who is unmarried is called a *bint* until she is married. On the other hand, I use the word *sharmouta* because it is a commonly used term to refer to someone as a “whore” or “slut,” even among English speaking Arab Americans. .

actual *sharmouta*, and if they engage in acts that may be considered slutty, there's basically no reaction from the audience whatsoever. For example, Nadjla Said, who happens to be the daughter of Edward Said, joked at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Arab Comedy Festival:

Yeah, I went to Beirut this summer, and it was great. I got to make out with all the boys, because the girls there are all "virgins." You'll hear more about that later in the show... "virgins" (hand gesture making quotes). Yeah, I'd go out to these places, and my typical MO in a bar, "hey, you want to make out?" and that worked SO well. So then I'd make out with these guys, and then we'd talk for a little while and they'd be like, 'hey, what's your name?' ... and then they'd be like, "Oh my god you are Edward's Said's daughter! I must be respectful (with Arab accent) I must respect you. I am very sorry, we should not be making out." and I was like, "Oh my god, this is so cool, I never got respect before." I always heard about respect. It was awesome, but there was, like, this problem... Then they wouldn't make out with me anymore. So I don't really get it, why is that so good. Respect. I don't really want that any more. (*Mild laughter*)

Another Arab American comedian from Cleveland appearing at the comedy festival for the first time stated very frankly, "Yeah, I have sex," and was met with dead silence. The response to her was so poor that the MC, the much respected but not comedic Suheir Hammad, got up on stage after her skit and chastised the audience for not being more supportive. She applauded the girl for how difficult it was to get up on stage and say those things, knowing that people in the audience would think she was a "sharmouta," at which point, the audience laughed. Backstage, I explained to the festival's co-director Maysoon Zayiid how Hammad had changed from being an MC at a comedy festival into a feminist proselytizer. She responded, "it's a great word, "*sharmouta*." It's like "*linoleum*.'" Moments later in her next set she said, "I know how to make you guys

laugh.” Then, like George Carlin’s *Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television*,<sup>11</sup> she rolled out a string of swear words in Arabic, like *khara* (shit), *zib* (penis), and *sharmouta* (whore), to the great delight of the audience.

Betty Shamieh explores what she imagines to be the lot of the Arab woman who has sex before marriage in several plays. In nearly all cases, her characters have been forced into having sex against their choice, and then are committed to a less than perfect life. In the *The Black Eyed*<sup>12</sup> she creates “Tumam,” a Palestinian woman who was raped by Israeli soldiers while in jail, and then suffers the scorn of her family for no longer being a virgin and marriageable. The play itself is named after the supposed myth that when martyrs enter heaven, they will be blessed with black eyed virgins. “Tumam “is among three female martyrs awaiting entry into the afterlife, she being one for having to give her virginity to Israeli soldiers. Not only does she essentially lose her life by losing her virginity, Shamieh portrays “Tumam’s” afterlife was one of great uncertainty as well.

In *Roar* (2004), Shamieh intentionally adapts *A Street Car Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams to the Arab experience and creates “Hala,”<sup>13</sup> a woman who was raped by Jordanian soldiers as a young Palestinian woman in a refugee camp in Jordan during Black September.<sup>14</sup> Hala rejects her family’s scorn over her loss of virginity, and runs away to become a singer and seductress. She spends years in Kuwait as a mistress

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<sup>11</sup> George Carlin, *Class Clown 1972: Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television*, refers to words banned by the FCC from television.

<sup>12</sup> I watched two readings of the *Black Eyed*, including one at Alwan in the Winter of 2004. *The Black Eyed* ultimately had its New York run at the New York Theater Workshop from July 17-August 19, 2007. The description here is based on her early script.

<sup>13</sup> Hala was played by Annabella Sciorra when this play premiered on Theater Row in April 2004. The sister was played by Sarita Choudhury, the star of Mira Nair’s Hollywood release *Mississippi Masala*. Having non-Arab celebrity actors was considered a huge score for this Arab American production.

<sup>14</sup> Black September took place in September 1970 when the Jordanian Army confronted the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Palestinian civil society in Jordan. It is estimated that between 2,000-3,000 Palestinians died as a result of the conflict (Cobban 1984; Lunt 1989).

to a wealthy man. Then, when Palestinians were forced to leave Kuwait in the First Gulf War (1991),<sup>15</sup> she sought refuge with her sister in Michigan. She explains to her teenage niece that she did not marry: “because I could not be held responsible for the consequences. If I chose one man over another – world wars, destruction, mayhem, would ensue. I love my fellow men too much to be the cause of all that suffering .” Such cavalier claims are followed by playful banter with her sister about her “loose” ways. Only as tensions build between “Hala” and her sister over her prospects for the future does the audience learn that the real reason “Hala” never married was that she did not remain a virgin. Worse than being unmarried, “Hala” is penniless and completely at the mercy of men to support her. Ultimately, “Hala” runs off with her sister’s husband and all their savings.

In *Chocolate in Heat: Growing up Arab in America* (2001), Shamieh wrote and performed the character of “Aiesha,” an Ivy League Arab American scholarship student with an undesirable sexual history. “Aiesha” was fondled as a child by an Arab deli store owner; she rid herself of her “hateful virginity” in order to unsuccessfully seduce an older dance instructor as a teen, and she is date raped by a classmate in college and subsequently drops out. Shamieh represents coming of age as process rife with danger of the complete loss of the ideal Arab self through the loss of virginity. Her characters speak to the playwright’s personal frustration as an Arab woman, and to her critique of sexuality as a tool of oppression that determines women’s lives. She, like many other Arab American artists represent sexuality before marriage as a betrayal of the Arab ideal, charging it with conflict, violence, and drama. The casting of such anxieties to the stage

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<sup>15</sup> Palestinians were forced to leave Kuwait in 1991 because Iraq invaded Kuwait, and Saddam Hussein declared his allegiance to the Palestinian people.



has begun what appears to be a promising career for this aspiring Palestinian American playwright.

### Virgins



Maysoon Zayid at Gotham Comedy Club November 14, 2006  
Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah. © NYAACF Photo by Nigel Parry

“I’m a Palestinian Muslim Virgin with Cerebral Palsy from New Jersey.”

This is the notorious opening line of comedian Maysoon Zayid. While its veracity is open to much speculation, what is agreed upon is that this utterance serves multiple functions for both Arab and American audiences. First, seeing or knowing an adult is a virgin is strange within American popular culture.<sup>16</sup> Second, it is meant to mark her as a single, honorable, and honest Arab woman, because it is still believed that ideally Arab women are not supposed to have sex before marriage. Third, it shocks the audience much the same way that the graffiti style billboard campaign of the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property proclaims “Virgin: It’s not a dirty word.” This campaign also attempted to seize upon celebrities, such as Jessica Simpson, who

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<sup>16</sup> Forty Year Old Virgin (Universal Pictures 2005)

claimed that they would save themselves until they were married. By claiming she is a virgin, Zayid is also tapping into the “celebrity” of those who have marked their pop careers as virgins as well. Fourth, the positive, innocent connotations of the word “virgin” creates a backdrop which offsets her raunchy humor yet presumably preserves her honor and integrity as an Arab woman. For example, Zayid generally inserts into her skits somewhere that being a virgin is far from desirable.

I need to get fucked at this point. I’m not actually convinced I have cerebral palsy at this point. I think I’m just frustrated.

Finally, Zayid is always clear that she remains a virgin to appease her father, who she claims would kill her if she were not, thereby reinforcing the stereotypical perception of patriarchal domination over Arab women’s sexuality.

While Zayid may be among the most explicit among comedians about her desires and frustrations as an unmarried Arab woman, there is a near obsession among Arab American performance artists about the dilemma that virginity poses to one’s identity as an Arab woman. Comedy sketches ranged from Lebanese female talk show hosts giving advice to callers on how to hide their indiscretions, to an Arab American woman duping a Lebanese (gay) male into marrying her when she discovers she’s pregnant, with an interracial baby. One skit went so far as to invent a product that women could use to simulate the breaking of the hymen on their wedding night.<sup>17</sup>

The mocking pretense of what appear to be 1950’s ideal American morality in today’s Arab American families resonates most strongly with comedic artists themselves. They see this as an attempt to create clean, family-values, mainstream Arab American humor. Conflicts continually arise during the production of the New York Arab Comedy

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<sup>17</sup> A Word from Our Sponsors (2005), by Dean Obeidallah

Festival due to fear by the producers that the sketches will offend what they perceive to be the conservative sensibilities of their audiences. For example, in preparation for a skit that would tour Los Angeles, producers cut a scene that involved heavy petting by a couple on a train. The artists thought that this part of the performance was critical to setting up the absurdity of what was to follow, namely that the sex crazed Arab American couple would become paranoid that Arab looking terrorists were going to take over their train to Washington DC. It was also meant to as an indication of how this couple really favored the “American” side of the hyphenated identity. Nadjla Said,<sup>18</sup> who played the part of the girlfriend, explained:

It [making out] set up that we were totally American Arabs and that just because we are Arab does not mean we had any connection with our culture’s idea of modesty. We were totally American. Not that Americans will necessarily do that, but I think that Americans will be less worried about propriety in public.

When the play was actually performed in LA, Said felt that by cutting out the sexual content of the scene, audiences did not laugh when the couple suspected the dark skinned passengers wearing argyle sweaters were terrorists.<sup>19</sup>

Audiences, particularly those from the Arab world, find the alleged sensationalism around sexual scenarios to be silly. Furthermore, they find the ways that the producers pander to perceived conventional norms of their audiences to be insulting to the intelligence of their audiences. One artist from the Comedy Festival explained:

They think the Arab audience is retarded. That they’ll be offended. They’re not all 60 year old *teta*’s (grandmother). And even if a 60 year old *Teta*’s came, they’d probably laugh.

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<sup>18</sup> Said recalled that her fellow actors asked her if it was weird to be making out with someone on stage in front of her mother. She said she felt completely comfortable with it, claiming 1) that she was acting, and 2) that her family was not conservative when it comes to sex.

<sup>19</sup> I would argue that racial profiling is simply not funny to an Arab American audience, particularly at a time when such profiling in airports and in public spaces is common.

Aside from the Comedy Festival producers' conservative estimate of their Arab audiences, most Arab American female artists recognize the conservatism within American society as well. Nadjla Said finds parallels between the ways young Arab and American women deny their sexual life in order to appease societal and possibly religious norms. She claims, "In Lebanon, it is actually funny how many girls pretend to be virgins around their family but they are not, and I can't tell you how many Catholic girls are exactly the same, you know!" When discussing the difficulties of representing sexuality through art, Dina Habib argues that "America is very puritanical and repressed, and the messages you get here are so conflicted. American culture makes sexuality perverse and amoral. The whole culture here says sex is bad." Therefore, she feels that her own dilemmas as an Arab woman are compounded by mainstream American conservatism.

#### Lady-like Language... What the fuck?

All of the artists under consideration in this study write and perform in English. One comedian occasionally tells jokes in Arabic, and has performed in Arabic in the Middle East. Few speak Arabic well enough to even write or perform in it. Therefore, the issue with language is not one about translation from one language to another. Rather it is about the translation of the morality of language from one tongue to another, namely the type of language is appropriate for a woman to use. It almost goes without saying that being an articulate and eloquent speaker is highly admired. However, women are often criticized for swearing, or are at least paranoid about being criticized for swearing. For example, Betty Shamieh believes that her audiences allow her characters to swear

because she handles more important topics, such as politics, well. Others are spoken about behind their backs, such as when an Arab American comedian performed in Lebanon and audiences thought that it was inappropriate for a woman to use vulgar language when discussing politics. Some are even challenged directly by their audiences. Suheir Hammad described one such incident that reveals the extent to which she has had to wrestle with this issue throughout her career.

Upon arriving for a performance arranged by an Arab student group in Patterson, New Jersey<sup>20</sup>, Hammad is greeted by a panic stricken student organizer who says, “I want to warn you, there are parents here.” Hammad is baffled. She says to the girl,

‘Oh my God, are you asking me to censor myself?’ And she was like, ‘no, its just he brought his friends.’ So then I’m sitting there and now I have to answer to her father and his friends. And then it gets better. So then I go in, and she brings me her father, and leaves me with her father, who then says to me in Arabic, ‘you have some heavy words, you know, words which land heavily.’ And so he means *motherfucker* and *shit* and all this stuff, because I don’t really use sexually graphic language in my work, so I’m thinking... this smile pasted onto my face, I have to perform in like an hour, and I’m there by myself. I’m sitting there really hurt.

This is not the first time she is confronted by a male audience member. After performing once at an annual banquet for the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee, an older Palestinian American doctor from Florida suggested that she not curse, claiming “it lessens your art.” Suheir explained that in a six page poem, there was “one ‘fuck’, and it was ‘what the fuck’, not even ‘I was’ ... ‘I want’ ...” When she challenged the doctor by asking if he would have said that to her if she were not a woman, he defended himself by saying yes, and that in any case he was not giving his own opinion but was expressing that of “the community.”

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<sup>20</sup> Patterson is well known for its large and conservative Arab community.

Back in Patterson, Hammad decided to recite her poems as she had written them. She prefaced the poem in which she would swear by saying, “You know, there’s nothing more obscene or profane than the situations we live in, there’s nothing more obscene or profane than the illegal occupation of al-Iraq and Falastine, and there’s nothing more obscene and profane than censorship.” Hammad explained to me that she had “gained freedom” on the subject of language when she had convinced her father that there was no equivalent in the English language for the word “motherfucker.” She argued that “motherfucker” was the perfect word to describe a racist, for example. Once that was settled with her father, than she could speak freely in front of anyone’s father.

Hammad feels that the whole criticism of women using such language is an attempt to undermine women’s presence in public. Claiming that it is fundamentally difficult for some men to even listen to a woman, Hammad goes further to explain the micro-techniques of male attempts to dismiss female artists. She explains: “they kind of infantilize you, especially if you do it well. If you’re up there and you’re struggling, and they can like relate to you, like, “oh I would be really nervous,” then they actually give you more space. But if you’re up there and you look completely natural and forceful in your trajectory of it, in your performance, then they look for the chink in the armor.”

Women of Arab descent in the arts balance artistic and aesthetic sensibilities with the public persona of an “Arab” woman. Often these sensibilities are derived from being from a particular American generation in which swearing and sexually explicit language are common. Rather than completely indulging in that trend, artists of Arab decent tend to combine the language of their times with the political and social sensibilities of their parents generation. For some, like Maysoon Zayid, the stereotypical character of the

Arab woman is used as a backdrop to then shock the audience with raunchy humor. For others, it is something that is honored through deliberate choices of dress and modes of speech. Women often rationalize choices in language by weighing the importance of what is being said against the manner in which it is said. If they perceive the message to be of significance politically or socially, then they take more liberties to be graphic or vulgar in their language or style of presentation. Ones who chose sexually graphic language for the purpose of being sexually explicit may not be well received, and few do so without raising an explicit critique of the sexual subordination of Arab women.

#### Exposing Desire:

In contrast to the humor that allows Arab American women to voice their sexual desires within the safety of sarcasm and irony, there are others who attempt to genuinely portray sexual desires of Arab women. During the time of my fieldwork, two plays were staged exploring the lives of Arab women that involved an Arab American interlocutor: *Nine Parts of Desire* (2002), by Heather Raffo, and *Details of Silence* (2005), by Nathalie Handal. The former is a great success commercially and is being licensed for production throughout the country; the latter was panned at its single performance at the *Mahrajan al Fan* (Arts Festival) in New York in 2005 by its Arab and Arab American audience. I will consider both here for the sake of comparison in order to explore how one artist captivated the American imagination and media industry with her frank yet poetic tales of Arab women's desires, while the other generally offended her audience for what were considered sensationalized portraits of her alternately free and repressed Arab female characters.

“God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men.” This quote is found in the playbill for *Nine Parts of Desire*, and is said to have come from “The 100 Maxims of Imam Ali<sup>21</sup>, by Ali ibn Abu Taleb, husband of Fatima and forth leader of the Islamic World after Mohammed.” Although the quote sets a context that is both Islamic and ancient,<sup>22</sup> *Nine Parts* is an exploration of contemporary Iraqi women’s lives primarily in the context of war as understood by an Arab American female actress/ playwright.



Heather Raffo in *Nine Parts of Desire*  
 Courtesy of Heather Raffo. Photo by Irene Young

Heather Raffo was born and raised in Michigan to an Iraqi father and an American mother. Most of her father’s family still lives in Iraq, and she has visited them in Iraq twice in her life, once in 1974 and again in 1993. Having chosen the career of an actress, much to the dismay of her parents, she felt determined to bring the Iraqi perspective to the theater, since that was her profession. In a newspaper interview, she

<sup>21</sup> 100 Maxims of Imam Ali is a title recognized by Amazon, but was unavailable as of February 17, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Ali ibn Abi Taleb lived from 600-661 AD



explained, “I love being an actress. I was determined to be and do that. I think I came to writing simply because I felt there was something about Iraq that needed to be expressed. I wanted to express it in theater because that's where my work is” (Jones 2006). She developed her characters largely through interviews with exiled Iraqi women in London and the U.S., and through interactions with her Iraqi family and friends. When grilled by Riz Khan in a televised interview on Aljazeera English on how she could really know what it felt like to live in Iraq if she only visited twice, she replied:

Why these Iraqi characters have been able to come through me is just because I'm an artist. That's just what we do. We so put ourselves in someone else's shoes, and capture their story so fully that the audience can have a journey as if, as if I've been living somewhere for some time. That's just the nature of the work.<sup>23</sup>

Raffo first performed the play in Edinburgh in 2003, and then performed it in London to great reviews. It was further developed as part of the New Work Now festival of the Public Theater in 2004, and then premiered at the Manhattan Ensemble Theater in September 2004. The play had a ten-month run at that theater, and then began to be licensed for performances by Raffo and other actresses in other theaters throughout the country.

Promotional materials for *Nine Parts* are heavy on the veil motif. The post card shows a pair of heavily made up eyes framed in black shadows behind a metal chain-linked fence. The heading reads “The women of Iraq have not been heard from... UNTIL NOW”; the flip side reads “this solo work lifts the veil on exactly what it means to be a woman in the age-old war zone that is Iraq.” These sorts of details completely obscure America's contemporary and ongoing involvement in that “age-old war zone.” Yet as a performer, Raffo is stunning. Although her text is filled with equally cliché

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<sup>23</sup> May 2, 2007

allusions, the overall effect of the staging and her versatility as an actress is captivating, heart wrenching, and even thought provoking. When performed in Washington D.C., Raffo told me that she was relieved to find that audiences did not just see it as theater. They engaged her in a political discussion about the quagmire in Iraq and potential solutions during the question and answer period after the play.

The primary motif alluded to in Raffo's play is that of Scheherazade. As explained by Heather in her "Glossary of Arabic Terms and Songs," Scheherazade is "the Persian name of the main narrator and heroine in *One Thousand and One Nights* who saved herself and the women of her country from death at the hands of King Shaharyar by weaving a story so compelling night after night for one thousand and one nights." The King was basically entertained enough to spare her life and that of other women so that he could hear more stories. Raffo describes Shaharyar as the "Name of the king in *One Thousand and One Nights* who would wed a virgin each night and then kill her the next morning to assure she would never betray him with another man."

In *Nine Parts*, Heather herself becomes like Scheherazade by telling stories of Arab women that may prove to be so sympathetic and engaging that hopefully these women and women like them will be spared regimes of abuse like that of Saddam Hussein or the American military. Nine women take shape through monologues of speech presumably directed to Raffo herself as the playwright, but by extension to the audience. Each of her monologues allows the audience to empathize with the character on stage and even imagine being that character. Raffo takes on the roles of eight Iraqi women; the ninth woman is an Arab American of Iraqi descent, like herself.

The characters include “Layal,” a promiscuous visual artist who was a favorite under Saddam’s regime; “Amal,” a Bedouin who had married twice and left each one only to be puzzled by unrequited love to a third; “Huda,” a scotch drinking Iraqi exiled in London who bashes Saddam yet refuses to return; a homebound teenage girl reflecting on N-Sync and Saddam in the same breath; and “The American,” a woman glued to the TV news, horrified at what she sees happening in her father’s home country. She explains:

I should get out, get something to eat. I’m fat. I should just go to the gym and run. God I’m so stressed out. Maybe I should take a yoga class instead? Anyway I can watch it at the gym. People work out to the war on 3 channels. They drink beer at the bar to the war. I mean, I’m blonde I hear everything people say. I can’t stop I wake up and fall asleep with the tv on holding a rosary watching- I know I should just turn it off but I won’t I hate it when people say I don’t watch it anymore it depresses me. Yeah, it depresses me. I can’t breathe.<sup>24</sup>

Interspersed among these characters is an old lady vendor, a doctor who can cite the genetic defects resulting from uranium tipped bombs, a woman who gives tours of bombed bomb shelters, and a mourner. Throughout is the frustration of those whose lives have been disrupted by war, either directly or vicariously.

*Nine Parts of Desire* has been reviewed by every major media outlet in America. Heather’s website is cluttered with quotes from the media and icons of American intellectual and popular culture.

- ✓ "POWERFUL, IMPASSIONED, VIVID, MEMORABLE! - Charles Isherwood , NEW YORK TIMES
- ✓ "A TRIUMPH! THRILLING! AN EXAMPLE OF HOW ART CAN REMAKE THE WORLD!- John Lahr, THE NEW YORKER
- ✓ “A BEAUTIFULLY SHAPED ONE-WOMAN PLAY! IT IS PERSUASIVE PRECISELY BECAUSE IT IS BEAUTIFUL. SEE IT SOON! SEE IT TONIGHT!-Terry Teachout, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
- ✓ “The female half of Iraq has come to America . That's the feeling you'll get as you watch the chameleon body, heart, mind and artistry of Heather

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<sup>24</sup> Excerpt from *Nine Parts of Desire* reprinted with permission from the author. Raffo (2002).

Raffo in Nine Parts of Desire. Don't miss this amazing theatrical experience!"—GLORIA STEINEM

She is featured in the September 2006 issue of the magazine *Oprah*, and the Arab American arts community lauds her for her abilities as a performer and a writer as well.

In contrast to this immensely successful play is the not so successful play entitled *The Details of Silence* (2005) by Natalie Handal. Handal is of Palestinian descent, raised in Latin America, and living in New York (when she isn't in Europe, the Middle East or Latin America). She is an accomplished poet, playwright, and academic, having published two volumes of literature by Arab and Arab American women. Her play premiered at the Symphony Space in New York on November 11, 2005 to an audience of mostly Arab and Arab Americans, and was billed as a "sensual, political, and daring new play" that explores Arab women's worlds through their sexuality.

The play is set around the character of "Azza," an Iraqi-American writer on assignment from the UN. "Azza" has decided to do a piece on Arab women's sexuality and has opened her studio for women to drop by for an interview. Throughout she is haunted by thoughts of her sister who has recently disappeared in Iraq. *Details* featured a cast of Arab American and non-Arab actresses. Many of the Arab American actresses were well known for their work as part of Nibras, an Arab American Theater Collective. All, with the possible exception of a Latina actress who plays a Latina/ Arab photographer and "Azza," used fake Arab accents. "Azza," being raised in America did not need an accent. Characters being interviewed range from "Diva," a Lebanese woman who proudly exclaims, "My happiest moment is when I keep him inside of me... I don't let him come, so that he does not go"; to "Amal," a Palestinian who is raped by her father following an invasion by the Israelis and subsequently contracts herpes from him; to

“Blanca,” a Latina-Arab photographer who watches her best friend be murdered by a man she picked up in a bar. The man, who turns out to be a general under Trujillo, then kills himself and she goes to jail for murder. “Alia,” a French Algerian woman speaks of wanting a lover, but chooses to stay faithful to the husband she does not love; her daughter reveals her father has been unfaithful with her best friend’s mother. “Alia’s” best friend tries to convince her to have an affair by explaining, “Listen, since when did sex have anything to do with love. Just because we’re women that doesn’t mean we can’t have sex, want another man without loving them.”

Audience reacted somewhat hostilely to this play. A few thought it did not go far enough and was not that shocking or sensational. Others resented what they saw as a sensationalist portrayal of Arab women. One audience member told me: “All of these women were victims, not one of them overcame her problems and went on with her life. It was awful. Even as a man watching, I was offended.” Several commented that the character of the woman raped by her diseased father was too much. “Don’t shove it down my throat,” one woman explained. They did not understand why sexuality had to be portrayed so negatively or associated with violence in any way. A friend of my family, an older Palestinian male who came with his wife from Philadelphia to see the play, expressed shock upon hearing Arab women talk in such a way in public. He claimed, “aiib” (how shameful). Handal defended the play to all who would listen. She explained to me:

I even had this one girl who said, “oh, it was superficial,” and I thought, you know, I could deal with difficult, but superficial?... As an artist, the only way to progress is to look at the criticisms and try to think constructively because the idea is how to help change and evolve, the idea is not to criticize... But I understand that as an Arab who lives in America, America criticizes the Arab community so much that their community is

defensive when someone addresses a problem such as domestic violence or rape or whatever.

She felt that her harshest criticism came from the Arab American women, and not from Arabs who emigrated to the U.S. as adults.

From the perspective of an anthropologist, it is hard to say what exactly went wrong. The actors were not the most talented; the staging was really sparse; there were no reviews in the *New York Times* to hype up the play. However, I believe that fundamentally this play lacked an aesthetic quality in the language that did not click with English speaking audiences. The language was too frank; it lacked subtlety, nuance, and metaphor. The poetry seemed spacey and not completely connected to the narrative of the play. There were too many moments spent pondering concepts like “happiness” and “freedom” and ultimately linking sexual expression with both. Whereas *Nine Parts of Desire* used language to express longing of a fragile and often silent humanity, *Details of Silence* used it to allegedly break the silence with some attempt at capturing “the ultimate truth.” It ultimately seems language in its poetic and linguistic senses makes or breaks a woman’s representation of the ideal Arab woman rather than the concepts of who and what that woman should be.

Sex as Political Commentary:

YOU STOLE THE LAND. MAY AS WELL TAKE THE WOMEN!  
Redheaded Palestinian ready to be colonized by your army. You: Jewish,  
Hot, Strong. U take me home + I’ll let you win. 9553

Petite shapely Palestinian F seeks fellow Semite Jewish M to salsa our  
way into Israel, already have house and lands. Love art, indy films, dance  
& hikes. Waiting 4 U 9565

Shalom Baby! Hot Palestinian Semite Gal Hoping to find my perfect Israeli man Let's stroll the beaches of Akka & live and love in Jerusalem. No fatties. 9562<sup>25</sup>

By the time I came across these personal ads, they were circled in red and on display as a piece of art titled *Sexy Semite* (2000-2002) in the exhibit *Homeland*<sup>26</sup> at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. Still sensational in their audacity, they were safely confined within the art world as models of desire for home within Diaspora communities. However, when conceived and executed by artist Emily Jacir and sixty of her friends, they mocked both the fetishism of personal ads and their racial overtones. From 2000-2002, Jacir and her friends periodically submitted bundles of personal ads such as the ones above to the free weekly newspaper *The Village Voice*. They ran discretely along side such ads as: "BLACK FEMALE PREFERRED Blue eyed male (39) sane & reliable sks friend, sharp-minded/ warm hearted to match wits, create sparks. Serious and sensual fun. 9909." The *Sexy Semite* ads play on many contradictions inherent in the Palestinian Israeli conflict in just a phrase. For example, both Arabs and Jews are Semites, yet Arabs are typically excluded from this category, and furthermore, are often accused of being anti-Semitic due to their anti-Zionist inclinations. Second, both Palestinians and Jews consider today's Israel to be a homeland, yet only people of Jewish heritage are allowed the right of return. Jacir subversively taps this irony through her ads, and also plays upon the demographic threat of Palestinians residing within Israel. The location of her commentary in personal ads draws on the analogy of seeking home with seeking an intimate partner. While this desire is considered natural and

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<sup>25</sup> Excerpts from *Sexy Semite* (2000-2002) reprinted with permission of the artist Emily Jacir.

<sup>26</sup> The *Homeland* exhibition (May 23-June 29, 2003) was organized by the 2002-2003 Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellows of the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program. *Sexy Semite* appeared on the cover of the exhibit brochure. Reprinted with permission from Emily Jacir.

understandable, as is the language of desire employed in the texts, the reader is left to wonder the intent given the political barriers impeding such common assumptions.

The ads in *Sexy Semite* largely went unnoticed until 2002, when Jewish groups and the media began to speculate that it might be linked to a terrorist plot. The Anti-Defamation League and the Israeli consulate issued warnings, referencing a case of a Jewish teenager who was murdered in the West Bank after being allegedly seduced online. The media promoted their own theories through headlines such as “Fear Factor: Palestine Valentines - or Ambush?” (Bedard 2002) and “W. Banky Panky in Personal Ad Blitz” (Soltis 2002). The hysteria that surrounded the hoax art project highlights the transgression of publicly soliciting sex in exchange for political rights to one’s homeland or using the vulnerability of individual desire for a larger cause. The newspaper articles further the impact of the ads as art when exhibited alongside the ads themselves in the gallery.

Although not all the ads are by women seeking men, the suggestion that Arab or Palestinian women could use their sexuality for political gain defies common stereotypes of an Arab woman. In contrast to veiled women who need saving by the West, the fictional women of the *Sexy Semite* ads play upon American notions of sex as a marketable commodity. They exhibit agency in a context in which they are expected to be subservient, that of the domestic relationship, and yet are quintessentially Palestinian (or Semitic) in their single-minded focus on the land. In addition, by posing ads as an art project, the artist, a Palestinian American woman, is doubly demonstrating her agency and integration into mainstream American life, first by placing the mock ads, and second by calling them art.



“This is what sells”

It is my understanding that Arab American women artists chose to represent their Arab identity through their art as a way of producing their best work. By “best,” I mean art work that resonates with their fullest understanding of themselves and that can be appreciated by their audiences as genuine, interesting, and understandable. As discussed in Chapter 3 (Battling Censorship), some artists came to their “Arab American” voice by trying on the voices of other ethnic minorities in America, such as Latino or Black, out of fear of being discriminated against or marginalized because of their Arab ethnicity. When they decided that those voices did not quite fit, they found a way to integrate what they understood to be Arab into their work. For women, this largely involved concerns with prohibitions on women’s lives outside of marriage. They learned about restraints on women’s lives from their conservative families as well as from the Western media, always eager to highlight the repression of women by Arab states, families, men, and even religions.

While I doubt that any of the female artists in my study had any intention of perpetuating stereotypes in their work, not all who viewed their representations of Arab women were particularly satisfied with the outcome, or so generous in interpreting of their motives. Ahmed Amer, an Egyptian filmmaker living in New York, shared the following views on the work of Arab American women artists that he has observed:

I actually attended several of the one-actor shows written by these women, I’m not going to mention names. They call themselves Arabs, but I mean from my perspective there’s so little Arabness about them. And suddenly, they all just want to write about women’s issues in the Middle East. I watch these shows, and they’re all fake. They’re not real at all. I don’t see any women I know in these shows. I don’t see my mother; I don’t see my aunt. No woman that I met in my life is represented in these shows. I

think people in the West in general, and not just in America, are willing to listen more to Arab women, or Muslim women, because they see them as oppressed, as suffering, as blah blah blah. “We are the people from the West who are bringing this woman from her oppressive country, to be free and liberated, and talking in the West.” I think that if you’re a female artist in New York, and you want to make it big, and you want to get attention, that’s what you write about. Virginity, being oppressed, these kinds of issues, being forced into marriages, being abused. *This is what sells.*

While I have Amer on record with this statement, many others in the community, including the artists themselves, have this bottom line perspective on their work. If a woman writes something and then she is asked and paid to perform around the country at universities, in diplomatic circles, at advocacy conferences, and at small progressive theaters, then she has found a market for a product that works. This enables her to be and live like an artist, and to produce more work. Over and over again, artists would indicate the way money influences their artistic decisions, stating things like, “I have to pay the rent,” “I need to eat,” “I’ve got to get paid,” etc. However, none of the women I interviewed would ever even suggest that they’ve sold out, that they are pandering to mainstream American stereotypes of the Arab, or that they are somehow less than authentic representatives of Arab and Arab American culture. Instead, they feel that they are defending Arab women from being maligned by the media and American popular culture. They believe that they embody the idealized Arab woman who is liberated, intelligent, and free, who has the autonomy to speak for herself, her community, and her society, and who has the authority to represent this community and society with honor and dignity.

### Conclusion: Unveiling Sentiments on the Market

In the marketplace of ideas and culture in New York today, Arab American women are seen trying to balance some idealized sense of honor with public expressions of sexuality. The art market in all its forms has a large appetite for explicit and direct descriptions of sex and sexuality. Arab American female artists can satisfy this aesthetic demand through fictionalized characters on stage, in poems, in films, and on canvases (or Village Voice ads). Even stand-up comedy, which presumably allows comics to speak directly to audiences about themselves, allows performers to develop a persona that may or may not be true to real life. In return, they may be rewarded professionally by being paid and sometimes paid well. They are promoted by mainstream magazines and other media outlets. They may be commissioned to produce work by theater companies, museums, galleries, and television. In addition to their own personal career development, they take credit and are credited with being the voice of the Arab community in general and Arab women in particular. Their increased visibility is interpreted as increased visibility for Arabs in America, and an improved type of visibility than is normally offered through the mainstream media. As Arab American women unveil their sentiments in the artistic public sphere, they are finding mainstream American audiences ready to pay for the chance to watch.

## 6. The (male) terrorist (not)

My, he speaks so very well. His English is really so good for one of THEM... So how did I end up here [Guantanamo Bay U.S. Detention Camp]? I, whose mechanics with a bat or a ball outshine my mechanics for submission to a higher power. Well, I don't know... maybe it is my name. My beard!?! Or perhaps in the end the answer can only be that sometimes terrorism is just... a state... of mind... a state of guilt we can't escape.

Excerpt from the play *Truth Serum Blues* (2006) by Ismail Khalidi<sup>1</sup>

When choosing a research topic for my dissertation, I wanted to choose a topic that would dispel pernicious stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists by focusing on a group of Arabs who clearly did not engage in acts of violence. This along with a desire to find alternative representations of Arabs in America led me to study artists. In conducting this research, I discovered that the artists themselves shared my naïve motivation, and that ultimately our careers were premised and even depended on (dismantling) the dominant narrative of the Arab terrorist. This is especially true for male artists, who are often personally and professionally inhibited from outwardly expressing Arab identity due to its limited and negative association with terrorism. By studying Arab American artists, I was forced to face the stereotype of the terrorist over and over again through their eyes. Instead of getting me farther from the dominant association of Arabs with terrorism, I was actually brought closer to it. I came to feel what it was like to live day to day with the specter of the terrorist and how durable an association it is, even for Arabs in America. I also came to appreciate the “artist” as the alternative to the “terrorist” in a more literal way.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from *Truth Serum* (2006) reprinted with permission of author, Ismail Khalidi.

For Arab American artists, the antidote to the stereotype of the Arab male terrorist is the cultured “metrosexual” artistic male, as if being an artist and a terrorist is mutually exclusive. As I had originally assumed, an artist’s work itself is a product of cultural and intellectual aspirations as opposed to militaristic ones. In addition, the work intends to project the image of an Arab American male artist/ intellectual that is well educated, well rounded, well spoken and well dressed, and who struggles to work within the culture and entertainment industry in America confronting Arab stereotypes. It is simply not enough to live the life of an artist and create work on topics unrelated to the stereotypical Arab terrorist. Instead, Arab American artists choose to challenge the images and characteristics of Arab males and masculinity that are commonly and routinely imposed on them by the nexus of entertainment, academic, media, and government industries. At least, they do so when they are not caught up in perpetuating stereotypes by working as an artist in the mainstream entertainment industry. Either way, many capitalize on America’s obsession with terrorism and create vehicles to promote themselves and their work within the entertainment industry.

In this chapter, I review the literature on the figure of the “terrorist” from the perspectives of popular culture and academia. I also describe U.S. government efforts in the War on Terror, as these real life initiatives supply the dramas that are enacted in performance. Drawing on these sources, I move from a discussion on the general association of “terrorism” with “deviance” and “perversity” to how Arab American male artists counter these charges with projections of “normal.” “Normal” deflates stereotypical Arab masculinity and inflates the extent to which Arab metrosexual, artistic males participate in the aesthetic economy. First, by deflecting the association of

themselves with Arab terrorists as mistaken, and then by demonstrating their talents as cultural workers, Arab artists seek to embody the alternative to terrorism even as the content of their work depends on the very existence of the construct of the terrorist itself. In order to demonstrate this process, I start by describing some demographic characteristics of male Arab artists in New York, and their career paths in the arts. Next, I describe how they struggle to work around the Arab terrorist stereotype in the mainstream entertainment industry. Finally, I draw on many cases from the worlds of comedy and theater that project the image of the innocent Arab metrosexual artist and intellectual as the foil for the Arab male terrorist.

#### The “terrorist” in Popular Culture and the Media:

The “terrorist” is a predominantly male archetype. Throughout his career as a professor of communications, Jack Shaheen, an Arab American, has cataloged the consistency with which Arabs are negatively represented by Hollywood. Although Shaheen analyzes some common representations of Arab women on the silver screen, his books could more accurately be viewed as compendiums of representations of Arab males. In *Reel Bad Arabs: Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Shaheen (2001) reviews and rates over nine hundred films produced by Hollywood between 1896 and 2001 that feature Arab characters. After a brief introduction, each film is reviewed one by one in alphabetical order. Shaheen offers a guide to the characters noting their type in capitals, such as VILLAINS, SHEIKS, MAIDENS, EGYPTIANS, and PALESTINIANS, and also notes whether he recommends the film or whether it is on his “worst list.” His thesis is that stereotypes of Arabs endure through repetition, and that awareness of its existence is the first step towards its elimination. The stereotypes are summarized as follows:

What is an Arab? In countless films, Hollywood alleges the answer: Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women...Black beard, headdress, dark sunglasses. In the background – a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels. Or perhaps he’s brandishing an automatic weapon, crazy hate in his eyes and Allah on his lips. Can you see him? (2001: 2)

Without quite intending it, Shaheen has created “cliff notes” on the Hollywood Arab male. He has methodically documented the regularity with which these stereotypes are reinforced in the American media, noting that since the 1980s television viewers get to watch recycled movies showing dehumanizing caricatures of Arabs on a weekly basis, including : “*The Sheik* (1921), *The Mummy* (1932), *Cairo* (1942), *The Steel Lady* (1953), *Exodus* (1960), *The Black Stallion* (1979), *Protocol* (1984), *The Delta Force* (1986), *Ernest In the Army* (1997), and *Rules of Engagement* (2000)” (2001: 5).

Shaheen also documents what he calls the “cameo.” The “cameo” is a gratuitous insertion of discriminatory imagery or language about Arabs in plots that have nothing to do with Arabs or the Middle East. He counts 250 out of 900 films in which this takes place, and notes that even highly regarded filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, and Ridley Scott do it. For example, in Robert Zemeckis’ *Back to the Future* (1985), the “plutonium” that fuels the time-travel vehicle that a high school student (played Michael J. Fox) uses to go back to his parent’s past in high school comes from a scam that a scientist played on a “Libyan terror group.” When the Libyans realize they’ve been tricked out of their stolen plutonium by the scientist, they kill him in the parking lot of a mall and before they ineptly go after Fox, who disappears in the said time-travel vehicle to the past<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This scene, along with dozens of others, is captured by New York based Arab American filmmaker Jackie Salloum in a short video called *Planet of the Arabs* (2005). Based on Shaheen’s research in *Reel Bad*

In his second book, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, Shaheen (2008) comes to the same conclusion as in his first book, namely that “Arabs remain the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood” and the “Arab = Muslim = Godless Enemy.” (2008: xi). Beyond adding volume of stock negative Hollywood imagery on Arabs, such as the Sheik, he also describes a new post- 9/11 character that has become prominent on all major TV networks: “Arab American Neighbor as Terrorist” (ANT). Not only are foreign Arabs intent on destroying America, but now Arabs and Muslims born or living in America are too. All the major networks carry shows portraying Arab Americans intent on killing other Americans. Shaheen writes:

They present Arab Americans as backward, religious radicals who merit profiling, imprisonment, torture, and death. Series such as *The Practice*, *Judging Amy*, *The District*, *Sleeper Cell*, *The Agency*, *Threat Matrix*, *Sue Thomas F B Eye*, and Dick Wolf's *Law & Order* – have displayed stock caricatures and repeated these negative images over and over (2008: 47).

Among the most popular of the post - 9/11 counter-terrorism shows is *24*, produced and aired on Fox TV. In three out of six seasons, FBI agent Jack Bauer tracks and intercepts Arab, Arab American and Muslim American “bad guys” including suicide bombers and nuclear terrorists. Shaheen explains that “we heard U.S. government officials spewing out anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slurs, which were uncontested, and we watched Bauer's violent actions justify the torturing and killing of numerous Muslim and Arab ‘fanatics.’ I stopped counting after 100 or so dead bodies” (2008:49).

Despite the perpetuation of negative imagery from pre-9/11 days, Shaheen is pleased to note that over 29 films show what he considers to be “worthy Arabs and

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*Arabs*, Salloum edited a montage of “terror” shots demonstrating the pervasiveness of Arab male stereotypes.



decent Arab Americans” after 9/11. Among them he counts *Rendition* (2007)<sup>3</sup>, *Babel* (2006)<sup>4</sup>, *Yes* (2005)<sup>5</sup>, *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005)<sup>6</sup>, and *Munich* (2005)<sup>7</sup>. Offering radically different plots from one another, each film adds a touch of the “normal,” or humane, to the characters trapped in ever present Arab stereotypes and narratives. In *Rendition*, an Arab American actor plays an Arab American engineer who is mistaken for a terrorist and is forcibly separated from his American wife and their child in a process called rendition to be tortured in an unnamed North African country. In *Babel*, actual Moroccan villagers play Moroccan villagers (including boys, doctors, and housewives) who get mistakenly and accidentally caught up in a terrorism scandal involving the shooting of an American tourist. The film, which features four interrelated vignettes from across the globe, aptly describes the heavy handedness political rhetoric when making meaning of random human tragedy. In *Yes*, an Armenian Lebanese Arab actor plays a former Lebanese doctor turned exiled cook who falls in love with a female British microbiologist. The film casts their love affair on the silver screen in iambic pentameter. The *Kingdom of Heaven* is set in the time of the Crusades, and casts a Syrian actor to play a positive depiction of Saladin as he battles to save Jerusalem from the invading Christian armies. I will describe *Munich* later in this chapter. In addition to these films, Shaheen notes distribution of Arab-Israeli co-productions by mainstream Hollywood studios, such as *Paradise Now* (2005), *Rana’s Wedding* (2002), and *The Syrian Bride*

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<sup>3</sup> *Rendition* (2007) New Line Cinema. Directed by Gavin Hood. Starring: Reese Witherspoon, Meryl Streep, Alan Arkin, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Omar Metwally.

<sup>4</sup> *Babel* (2006) Paramount. Directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu. Starring: Brad Pitt, Care Blanchett, Said Tarchani, Boubker Ait El Caid, Abdelkader Bara, and Mohamed Akhzam (in Moroccan segment).

<sup>5</sup> *Yes* (2005) Greenstreet Films. Directed by Sally Potter. Starring Joan Allen, Sam Neill, and Simon Akbarian.

<sup>6</sup> *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) Twentieth Century Fox. Directed by Ridley Scott. Starring Orlando Bloom and Ghassan Massoud.

<sup>7</sup> *Munich* (2005) DreamWorks. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Starring Eric Bana, Geoffrey Rush, Daniel Craig, and Omar Metwally.

(2004). An important part of these “good Arab” depictions, which Shaheen himself notes, is that post 9/11 Arabs are being played by actual Arabs. I argue that while this does little to actually alter the dominant narrative about Arabs, it gives the illusion of consent, authenticity, and political accuracy or astuteness to the otherwise highly stereotypical plots and portraits of Arabs.

In my interviews with Arab American actors, all confirmed Shaheen’s (2008) observation that TV and movie producers are paying greater attention to the details of post 9/11 Arab characters even though the fundamental role of “terrorist” is unchanged. Directors hire consultants to get everything from the particular regional or class dialects correct, as well as the style of dress and bodily movements. For those directors who are concerned about creating an accurate and authentic portrayal, the more they can match the actor’s ethnicity to the character, the better. For example, Steven Spielberg used Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass to coach actors on Arab accents and customs for his film *Munich*. An Arab American actor in that film explained to me, “It seems to me that he took great pains to make everything feel authentic. And to that end, he wanted Arab actors there. He really wanted everything to be real.”<sup>8</sup> However, directors and actors must play around national labor laws that prohibit discrimination based on national origin by actually asking actors about their ethnicity. If an actor volunteers his ethnicity, or lets his agent tell a director his ethnicity, then it can come into play. Otherwise, Arabs and South Asians are often interchangeably cast as Arab Muslim terrorists.

The associations of Arabs and Muslims with terrorists did not spring from the minds of Hollywood producers alone. There is a symbiotic relationship between political

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly no Israeli actors were used in the filming of *Munich*.

history and the worlds of entertainment, academia, and government that have led to the creation of what appears to be a coherent and comprehensive picture of Arabs in American. I turn now to academic/ governmental perspectives on terrorism before exploring the ethnographic details of Arab American artists in New York, and how these general patterns personally affect their daily lives.

Terror in the Academy:

The association of Arabs with terrorism is not a new phenomenon in America. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said credits America for taking over Orientalist imperialism from Britain and France after World War II, inheriting two centuries of academic fantasy about Arabs and Muslims that accompanied these preceding forms of colonialism. Orientalism's "Latest Phase," as he calls it, is heavily invested in representations of oil rich Arab sheiks who hate Israel. At the time *Orientalism* was written, basically the time most of my participants were children, Said could trace virulent anti-Islamic rhetoric in most academic and public intellectual writings on Arabs in his day to the Middle Ages and Renaissance. He references the following examples:

The 1975 course guide put out by the Columbia College undergraduates said about the Arabic course that every other word in the language had to do with violence, and that the Arab mind as "reflected" in the language was unremittingly bombastic. A recent article by Emmett Tyrrell in *Harper's* magazine was even more slanderous and racist, arguing that Arabs are basically murderers and that violence and deceit are carried in the Arab genes (1978: 287).

Said also cites a survey called *The Arabs in American Textbooks* that claims that the only thing tying Arabs together from across different nations is their "hatred" towards Jews and Israel. These kinds of thoughts about Arabs infused all shared knowledge about

Arabs, from children's books through Ivy League academic institutions in the U.S. in the late 1970s and possibly till this day.

Beyond its role in the pursuit and reification of knowledge about the Orient, the association of Arabs (particularly men) with violence is also part of a larger process of studying and defining terrorism and terrorists within the Western academy. Jaspir Puar and Amit Rai (2002) cite a history of terrorism studies stretching back to 1968. Through citations and references to articles from the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, they acknowledge that "terrorism" is the topic of an immense body of research and writing generating an academic discipline linked to state power. In Richard Falkenrath's (2001) estimation,

Most of this work focuses on the practioners of terrorism, that is, on the terrorists themselves. Different strands within terrorism studies consider, for example, the motivations or belief systems of individual terrorists; the external strategies or ... internal dynamics of particular terrorist organizations; or the interaction of terrorist movements with other entities, such as governments, the media, or social subgroups (2001:162).

Another article in the same journal summarizes a variety of common psychological interpretations for "terrorism." In *"Talking to Terrorists,"* Brannan, Esler and Strindberg (2001) write:

Models based on psychological concerns typically hold that 'terrorist' violence is not so much a political instrument as an end in itself; it is not contingent on rational agency but is the result of compulsion or psychopathology. Over the years scholars of this persuasion have suggested that "terrorists" do what they do because of (variously and among other things) self-destructive urges, fantasies of cleanliness, disturbed emotions combined with problems with authority and the Self, and inconsistent mothering (2001:6).

Puar and Rai (2002) add to this list of frailties the notion that terrorists are accused of suffering from failed heterosexuality. The argument, as made by "terrorism studies"

experts, claims that Muslim males are sexually repressed and frustrated, yearning for the rewards of virgins in heaven after martyrdom. As failed heterosexuals, terrorists are also associated other “perversities” or “abnormalities” such as homosexuality. Puar and Rai therefore argue that the perverse, “failed heterosexuality” of the “queer” terrorist elicits an aggressive heterosexual patriotism from American males (2002:117). They point to examples of posters showing a caricature of Osama Bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State Building accompanied by statements suggesting, “So you like skyscrapers, huh, bitch?” or websites where viewers can choose weapons to torture Bin Laden and include the option of sodomy. They write,

What these representations show, we believe, is that queerness as sexual deviance is tied to the monstrous figure of the terrorist as a way to otherize and quarantine subjects classified as ‘terrorist’, but also to normalize and discipline a population through these very monstrous figures (2002:126).

In other words, they are arguing that aggressive heterosexual American patriots envision punishing terrorists through forced acts of homosexuality because they already believe them to be less than true heterosexuals, and that through punishment and discipline of forced homosexual activity they are demonstrating their own “morally superior” heterosexual national character.

In *Queer Times, Queer Assemblages* (2005), Puar takes this argument further by saying that it is the false knowledge of Muslim sexual preferences that enables the U.S. to see itself as exceptional, and also sanctions sexualized abuse of Muslims as particularly culturally salient. The U.S. is exceptional because it accepts homosexuality as part of public life and society, whereas the Arab and Muslim world do not; Arabs and Muslims allegedly feel shame at being called a homosexual. Puar argues that the U.S. has constructed a queer terrorist corporeality:

The depiction of masculinity most rapidly disseminated and globalized through the war on terrorism are terrorist masculinities: failed and perverse, these emasculated bodies always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction and are metonymically tied to all kinds of pathologies of the mind and body- homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness, and disease (2005: 127).

Such interpretations of the terrorist, combined with anthropological knowledge of the Arab and Muslim male and Arab society, are used within counterterrorism discourses, strategies, and techniques.

The prime example of how this has played out during the time of my fieldwork was the torture scandal at the U.S. detention facility of Abu-Ghraib prison in Iraq. The photos of U.S. soldiers torturing Iraqi detainees were released in early May 2004. The public was later to learn that the Army had been complicit in allowing the torture of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib to continue, and that both the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Army itself had issued reports detailing the nature of the abuses and violations of international law. Major General Antonio Taguba conducted a month long investigation of the Abu Ghraib prison, and released a report at the end of February 2004 that detailed the following abuses by military police personnel:

- 1) "Punching, slapping, and kicking detainees [, and] jumping on their naked feet";
- 2) "Videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees";
- 3) "Forcibly arranging detainees in variously sexually explicit positions for photographing";
- 4) Forcing detainees to remove their clothing and keeping them naked for several days at a time";
- 5) "Forcing naked male detainees to wear women's underwear";
- 6) "Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped";
- 7) "Arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them";
- 8) "Positioning a naked detainee on a ...Box, with a sandbag on his head, and attaching wires to his fingers, toes, and penis to simulate electric torture";
- 9) "Writing 'I am a Rapist' (sic) on the leg of a detainee alleged to have forcibly raped a 15-year old fellow detainee, and then photographing him naked";
- 10) "Placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee's neck and having a female Soldier pose for a picture";
- 11) A male MP [military police] guard having sex with a female detainee";
- 12)

“Using military working dogs (without muzzles) to intimidate and frighten detainees, and in at least one case biting and severely injuring a detainee”; and 13) “Taking photographs of dead Iraqi detainees” (American Society of International Law 2004: 595).

It was also discovered that there were forced acts of sodomy among the detainees, and that U.S. soldiers used canes to sodomize their prisoners. Despite minimizing rape to “having sex” and not including sodomy, it is clear that General Taguba’s report revealed egregious violations of international law, including the 1949 Geneva Convention which prohibits the torture of prisoners of war, requiring that they be treated humanely and respectfully. I have quoted the entire list of charges, all verifiable by the public in the photos described as being key instruments in the torture, because without being tried in a court, the Iraqi male and female detainees were convicted of being terrorists, and as such, subject to punishment by their captors.

The media tried to temper the scandal following the leaked Abu Ghraib photos through Orientalist justifications suggesting what the American soldiers did was not torture by American standards, but only by Arab/ Muslim standards. Puar (2005) ties two major theorists together that aptly explain the criminally ridiculous notion that Muslim feel more pain upon being called or even insinuated that they are “homosexual” than being tortured. She writes:

In the uncritical face-value acceptance of the notion of Islamic sexual repression, we see the trenchant replay of what Foucault termed the “repressive hypothesis”: the notion that a lack of discussion or openness about sexuality reflects a repressive, censorship driven apparatus of deflated sexual desire. While in Said’s *Orientalism* the illicit sex found in the Orient was sought out in order to liberate the Occident from its own performance of the repressive hypothesis, in the case of Abu-Ghraib, conversely, it is the repression of the Arab prisoners that is highlighted in order to efface the rampant hypersexual excesses of the U.S. prison guards. (2005:125)

More incredibly, the U.S. is able to celebrate its exceptionalism in its public sanctioning of homosexuality, whereas the Muslim world does not. The terrorist as a sexual deviant, one who denies or represses expression of their sexual identity, is then tortured through sexual abuse in a way that validates both American patriotic heterosexuality AND their socially sanctioned homosexuality. Of course, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and President George Bush were quick to denounce the torture techniques as “un-American.”<sup>9</sup>

In years since 9/11, scholarship on terrorism has not abated. There are, however, attempts to place less emphasis on the deviant/ perverse psychology of terrorists, and more emphasis on the rational choices that both terrorists and terror organizations make. In August, 2003, Robert Pape of the University of Chicago released the results of a survey study on suicide terrorism called, *The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2003). His study is based on 188 suicide attacks between 1980-2001, a time when suicide attacks became the larger share of an overall decreasing trend in terrorism worldwide. Noting that most studies focus on the irrationality of the act of suicide terrorism, Pape sought to dispel two myths: 1) that modern suicide terrorism is linked primarily to religion, namely Islamic fundamentalism; and 2) that suicide terrorist are “uneducated, unemployed, socially isolated, single men in their late teens and early 20s” (344). In the first case, he points out that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a Marxist/ Leninist Hindu Tamil population in Sri Lanka, conducted the most number of suicide terrorist attacks. In the second case, he notes,

Now we know that suicide terrorist can be college educated or uneducated, married or single, men or women, socially isolated or integrated, from age 13 to age 47 (Sprinzak 2000). In other words, although only a tiny number of people become suicide terrorists, they come from a broad cross

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<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Reveals Iraqi prisoner deaths as scandal grows.” Reuters May 4.



section of lifestyles, and it may be impossible to pick them out in advance (2003: 344).

Through his study, he concludes that suicide attacks are strategic, not random or isolated, and that they are part of an overall attempt to achieve definable and specific political goals. These goals are usually nationalistic and are directed at coercing contemporary democratic regimes into making territorial concessions. Suicide attacks are conducted by the weaker party in order to coerce the stronger party to concede on stated objectives. Finally, he argues that suicide attacks are on the rise because terrorist groups have learned that they are a successful strategy, or in Pape's words,

It pays. Suicide terrorist sought to compel American and French military forces to abandon Lebanon in 1983, Israeli forces to leave Lebanon in 1985, Israeli forces to quit the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1994 and 1995, the Sri Lankan government to create an independent Tamil state from 1990 on, and the Turkish government to grant autonomy to the Kurds in the late 1990s (2003: 344).

Those who engage in terrorist acts share the same goals as other members and other political factions of their society. However they may differ in opinion about whether violence is the correct means to achieving those ends. This point is critical in understanding debates about terrorism within the Arab American community in general and the arts community in particular, as I demonstrate further in this chapter.

Finally, Charles Tilly (2004) argues against the use of the terms "terror," "terrorism," and "terrorist" altogether. He writes that they are too non-specific and imprecise, enabling the reification of misinformation about acts of violence that should be understood in fuller contexts. He seeks to expand the notion of terror by calling for further delineation of acts. For example, he writes:

Terror as a strategy therefore ranges from 1) intermittent actions by members of groups that are engaged in wider political struggles, to 2) one

segment in the modus operandi of durably organized specialists in coercion, including government-employed and government-backed specialists in coercion to 3) the dominant rationale for distinct, committed groups and networks of activists. Despite the publicity it has received recently, variety (3) accounts for a highly variable but usually very small share of all the terror that occurs in the contemporary world (2004:6).

Instead Tilly seeks to substitute words such as “Militias,” “Conspirators,” “Autonomists,” and “Zealots” to more accurately describe the range of activities that fall under the use of coercive violence by weaker parties against opposing stronger parties. Importantly, Tilly also notes the extent to which “terrorism” is credited with attracting attention and building an audience.

#### Feeling the Weight of Hegemonic Representations of Arabs:

The nexus of media, academic, and government rhetoric is felt in the daily lives of Arab Americans, and often causes much debate. For artists, it is a source of great emotion, and artwork is often a means to try to articulate the pain, confusion, anger, frustration, or even sorrow that results from breathing the air of hostility toward Arabs that permeates America.

Even as the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were falling, commentators were quick to speculate that Arabs were responsible and rumors began to fly that the hijackers were Palestinian or Saudi Arabian. Within three days of the attacks, the FBI released a list of nineteen individuals accused of hijacking four planes, crashing two into the World Trade Center in New York City and one into the Pentagon. All nineteen were Arab males, mostly from Saudi Arabia with a few from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Lebanon, and it is believed they were operating under the guidance of Al-Qaeda, a multinational, armed Islamist organization.

Like most Americans, Arabs living in America were quick to jump to the conclusion that the attacks on September 11th involved Arabs. The assumption was often quickly followed by a plea similar to Suheir Hammad's in this excerpt from *first writing since*<sup>10</sup>:

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.

*first writing since* was written ten days after the attacks and quickly spread across the internet reaching Arabs and their sympathizers around the globe. It was read by professors and activists across the country, and by Hammad herself as she began her tour with Def Poetry Jam in the years following 9/11. It was published as part of her second anthology of poetry *Zaatar Diva* in 2005.

The weight of living under the charge of guilt by association is felt by Arab Americans in many ways, from outright discrimination and hostility to simply poor self esteem and paranoia that plagues their careers and social lives in America. 9/11 sharpened the knives, so to speak. As Edward Said (2001) wrote in the Egyptian based online newspaper *Al-Ahram* weeks after the attacks:

For the seven million Americans who are Muslims (only two million of them Arab) and have lived through the catastrophe and backlash of 11 September, it's been a harrowing, especially unpleasant time. In addition to the fact that there have been several Arab and Muslim innocent casualties of the atrocities, there is an almost palpable air of hatred directed at the group as a whole that has taken many forms.

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<sup>10</sup> Excerpt of *first writing since* is reprinted with permission of the author, Hammad (2005).

The backlash against Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. and around the globe both politically and individually has been profound.<sup>11</sup> From vigilante murders and violence by Americans on those perceived to be Arab or Muslim after the attacks, to Special Registration and the deportation of thousands of Muslim males, to the reduction in the number of visas for students and visitors from the Arab world, and to extra delays in naturalization for Arabs seeking U.S. citizenship, there is less presence of new Arab foreign nationals in America, and less security for those who are already here. There is some activism, however, by Arab American organizations around civil rights and civil liberties. However, the War on Terror domestically and by extension internationally leaves little room for action outside the symbolic realms of arts and culture.

I can remember how each new revelation about in the War on Terror impacted my life and those around me. I remember waking up to an interview with Pape on National Public Radio the day his article on the logic of suicide bombing was released. I remember countless occasions where I read the headlines about some wanted terrorist suspects over the shoulders of a passenger on the subway. The *New York Post* and the *Daily Sun* regularly sell papers with phrases like “Mastermind of Evil” splashed across images of Arab looking people on the front page. I learned about the atrocities that were happening at Abu Ghraib from Ahmed Issawi, the President of Alwan for the Arts, while riding in a taxi after a party. He said, “Did you hear the news?” I said, “no.” He went on to explain how there were photos from a detention facility in Iraq that show U.S. soldiers piling Iraqi men naked on top of each other, of making them give each other blow jobs, of attacking them with dogs, and of tying electrical wires to their penises. I could not

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<sup>11</sup> See Bakalian and Bozormehr (2009, in press). I also consider the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq to be further examples of backlash from the attacks.

believe that he could have actually seen such graphic photos, and kept pressing him on how he saw these photos. When I got home, I checked the internet, and there they were. Complete with the smug and satisfied smiles of U.S. soldiers in command.

Aside from postings of news articles and human rights reports, there was no discussion on Arabny of the events at Abu Ghraib. One posting, an essay by Alexander Cockburn claimed: “So there were WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) after all. They’re called digital cameras” (Cockburn 2004). Columbia Professor Joseph Massad (2004) wrote for *Al-Ahram*:

To add insult to injury, some American experts (and ready and willing Arab native informants) are volunteering information about Arab culture and its allegedly strange taboo against nudity! As for the taboo on nudity that is allegedly exclusive to Arab culture, it remains unclear why all of America went into moral panic a few weeks ago when singer Janet Jackson voluntarily exposed only one of her breasts to television viewers.

In person, people admitted shock and disgust, but there was no outpouring of sympathy, no litanies against U.S. imperialism, no need to affirm that this was in fact truly an egregious abuse of power because that fact was readily acknowledged by anyone and everyone who publicly commented on the abuse. Further, unlike the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and the continuous military incursions in Gaza, no one personally knew anyone at Abu Ghraib. There was simply empathy for the prisoners and renewed disgust with the U.S. army.

The subject of terrorism generates much debate within the community. As the Pape (2003) article points out, while terrorist tactics may receive support for their goals from the broader community, they do not always receive support for the means through which they aim to achieve those goals. One challenge that those engaged in “terrorism” face is the alienation of their own community through their actions, and therefore loss of

support for their efforts. One such challenge came in the form of a public letter from Naomi Shihab Nye, an established mainstream Arab American children's book writer living in the Midwest. In *To Any Would-Be Terrorists*<sup>12</sup> she wrote:

I am sorry I have to call you that, but I don't know how else to get your attention. I hate that word. 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. If that's what they wanted to do, please know the mission was a terrible success, and you can stop now.

Because I feel a little closer to you than many Americans could possibly feel, or ever want to feel, I insist that you listen to me. Sit down and listen. I know what kinds of foods you like. I would feed them to you if you were right here, because it is very very important that you listen. I am humble in my country's pain and I am furious.

Although written immediately following the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, this letter started a debate on Arabny in the spring of 2004. In her open letter she talks about the decency and generosity of her Palestinian father, American mother, and all her relatives; the political activism of Americans for the cause of Palestine and against war; and the way she and her family have opened Americans up to the *peaceful* [emphasis mine] nature of Arabs and Muslims. She concludes, as any “good” Arab American artists would do, by emphasizing the importance of poetry in this world as opposed to violence. She writes:

I beg you, as your distant Arab cousin, as your American neighbor, listen to me. Our hearts are broken, as yours may also feel broken in some ways we can't understand, unless you tell us in words. Killing people won't tell us. We can't read that message. Find another way to live. Don't expect others to be like you. Read Rumi. Read Arabic poetry. Poetry humanizes us in a way that news, or even religion, has a harder time doing.

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<sup>12</sup> This letter can be read by the public at: <http://godlas.myweb.uga.edu/shihabnye.html>, the Islamic Studies, Islam, Arabic, and Religion website of Dr. Alan Godlas of the University of Georgia.

She ends her letter with a plea that “any would-be terrorists” speak with words, not arms, and love those who are different. “Make our family proud,” she writes.

The letter circulated with the subject line: “Naomi Shihab: Fluffy liberal melodramatic clichés.” I’ll admit that I inadvertently started the debate by asking who added the subject line, and why. When questioned about the editorializing and judgmental comment in the subject line, a vigorous debate erupted about the nature of debate and disagreement within the Arab American community. Interestingly, no one directly stated that they condemned or supported terrorism, but all agreed that it was worth a free and open debate. Members of the listserve strongly criticized Shihab Nye’s letter by charging it catered to mainstream American views that universally condemn terrorism. Furthermore, they defended their right to be brutal in their critique, using slang, vulgar speech, etc, since it was an Arab listserve designed to shelter them from having to take what are perceived to be self-hating stances like Shihab Nye’s. In other words, even if you condemn terrorism, you should not do so publicly because it facilitates and reifies the perpetuation of stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims as terrorists.

This debate suggests that attempts to distance oneself from acts of terrorism ultimately reinforces the association of Arabs with violence, as well as removes attention from on those who carry out acts of violence and discrimination against Arabs. Since even artists are discriminated against for being Arab or Muslim, or are accused of aiding and abetting terrorists through the success of their work, then works that do not challenge the overall conceptual framework of what is a terrorist and who are Arabs within the American context are considered soft and pandering to the American mainstream.

Examples of how artists are accused of assisting terrorists abound. In November of 2004, an exhibit of contemporary Palestinian visual arts called *Made in Palestine* in a municipal building in Westchester County was nearly cancelled because NY state Assemblyman Karben claimed that it was “anti-Israel and promotes terrorism and violence” (Fitzgerald 2004). Also in 2004, visual artist Emily Jacir nearly cancelled her exhibit at the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University in Kansas because the Jewish Federation of Kansas wanted to place a brochure and sign in the gallery expressing their views and politics of the Middle East. In response to this incident, an article appeared in Frontpage.com, a pro-Israeli on-line magazine, called “Terrorism and Art” by Frimet Roth (2005). He writes:

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then an art exhibit is worth a thousand times that, as is a documentary film. These truths have been internalized by the Palestinians who exploit them energetically. In Israel, across Europe, and in the United States, they and their supports are pummeling Israel in galleries, museums, and movie theaters...How much longer will it be before our public relations pundits wake up and smell the coffee. The truth about the Israel-Palestinian conflict has got to reach the art battlefield. Or our military gains against terrorism will have been in vain.

One popular response to the label of the terrorist came from a Palestinian hip-hop group *Dam*<sup>13</sup> (eternity). Following the outbreak of violence known as the Al-Aqsa intifadah in 2001, a song by *Dam* quickly spread across all Arab diaspora communities throughout the globe called *Meen Irhabi? (Who's a terrorist)*. It asks how can those who use the military force of the U.S. or Israel have the right to call anyone else a terrorist?

*Meen Irhabi* speaks to the sentiment that America's and Israel's claims to be

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<sup>13</sup> New York based Arab American director Jackie Salloum features *Dam* in her documentary *Slingshot Hip Hop* (2007). *Slingshot* was screened at the Sundance Film Festival and New Directors/ New Cinemas Festival in New York in 2007. I saw it in New York in 2007, and was impressed by the use of the medium that is accessible to Western youth, Hip Hop, so show the devastation and destruction wrought by the Israeli army and its ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Street.



victims of terror are a shameful double standard using a contemporary hip hop rhythm and does not resort to academic attempts to qualify or redefine the term ‘terrorism’ itself. While America was banging its war drum, Palestinians and the million or more people who downloaded this song from the internet in 2001 were banging out a beat of their own to counter it. Sounding somewhat like the popular American hip hop group, Cypress Hill, three young men from Lod, a town inside of Israel proper with a large Palestinian population, sang rhymes of frustration that translated as well in English as they sounded in Arabic. The refrain sings:

Meen Irhabi?	Who’s the Terrorist
Ana Irhabi?!	I’m the terrorist?
Keef irhabi lama aish fi biladi	How am I the terrorist when I live on my land
Mee Irhabi?	Who’s the terrorist?
Inta Irhabi.	You’re the terrorist
Akhad kulshi lama aish fi biladi	You’ve taken everything I own while I’m living in my homeland

Nowhere in the song is Israel named as the aggressor; that role is played by “you,” making the song a sort of anthem for Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. The song goes on to mock calls for legal recourse and claims of democracy. It concludes, “No, my blood is valuable, and I will continue defending myself, even if you call me a terrorist.”

This song was like a theme song for my fieldwork in the Arab American arts community. I heard it being played in most social gatherings, and enjoyed its irreverence. Despite its popularity, Arab American artists tended to engage in aesthetic forms that were less militant and angry in tone than this song. Instead, they projected an image of the hard working Arab male artist as the counter to the terrorist.

Arab Male Artists in New York:

Arab males were active participants and leaders within the Arab American arts community, and all worked closely with Arab American women to promote Arab arts in New York. Twelve men active in the Arab American arts scene in New York agreed to participate in interviews for this study. One came as a teenager (generation -1.5); five were first-generation, mostly coming for college or graduate school; and six were second-generation Arab Americans. Only the five first-generation men spoke Arabic fluently. Two of the men I interviewed were in their twenties, six were in their thirties, two were in their forties, one in his fifties, and one in his sixties. At least three were gay, and two were married, both to non-Arabs. Five are technically Muslims, four are Christian, and two are of mixed religious heritage; religious life did not factor into their work at all, and rarely into conversations. Nationally, they were pretty much equally split between Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon, with one artist coming from Iran. Only two were born and raised in the New York area (Brooklyn and New Jersey), while the others were all transplants ranging from one to 20 years.

Three have professional degrees (MFAs) in the arts from the American Conservatory Theater and Columbia University, while two are lawyers, and one a doctoral candidate in the humanities. Aside from the three with MFA's, the rest did not anticipate seeking a career in the arts, or making arts promotion a significant portion of their professional lives. Two of the three who have advanced degrees in the arts are professional artists, and two more who did not are as well.



Dean Obeidallah.

Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah ©NYAACF. Photo by Nigel Parry

One of those successful non-professionally trained artists is Dean Obeidallah. Obeidallah was raised in New Jersey to an immigrant Muslim, Palestinian father and a Catholic Sicilian American mother. His father ran a diner, and was the only Arab (and one of few non-Italian immigrants) in his hometown. As a young man, Obeidallah tended to identify as an Italian American, participating in the Italian American club in college. After college, he became a corporate lawyer and married an American woman who worked in the corporate world. By the time I met him in 2004, he had been divorced for many years and was pursuing a career in comedy. He left his career in law in order to study comedy and to pursue it more seriously, and he felt that his interest in comedy was a reason for the divorce, believing that his wife expected a certain life style that depended on his income as a lawyer and him not spending every night working comedy clubs.

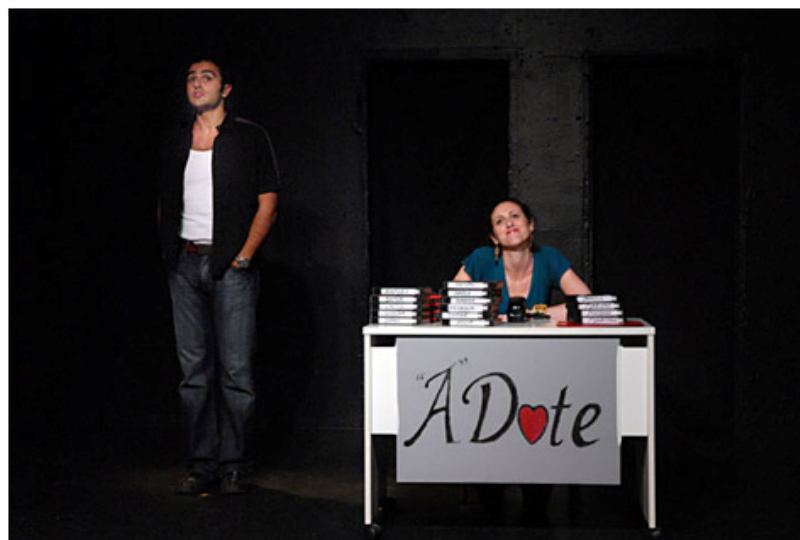
Obeidallah earned his primary living as a lawyer for Saturday Night Live until 2007, when he became busy touring with the *Axis of Evil*<sup>14</sup> comedy tour. He never really thought he would become a professional comedian; he just started it because he thought it would be fun, and claims to have become addicted to the life style. Like most Arab American men active in the arts, Obeidallah experience of being an artist conflicted with more traditional expectations of being a middle class, married, suburban professional. While a few men acknowledged their parents' complaints about their choices to become artists or arts promoters, none to my knowledge faced the total lack of support from their families or communities as did Arab American women artists.

Obeidallah is key figure in the Arab American arts scene. He was eager to expand the attention and popularity that comedians began receiving in 2001-2002 with other artistic efforts, such as theater and film, in order to bring more participants into the Arab arts scene, and create more visibility for the artists altogether. After doing a few sold out shows with Maysoun Zayid for the National Association of Arab American Professionals, the two decided to create regular comedy performances called the Arabian Nights. Once Obeidallah and Zayid realized the potential to draw real audiences, they expanded their reach by collaborating with Nibras, an Arab American Theater Collective and organizing an annual comedy festival involving sketch theater, stand up, and film in New York that drew in top performers from throughout the country for years. Far from being a patriarchal, misogynistic male, Obeidallah is regarded as being a kind and highly supportive male figure. When I asked Zayid what being female in a male dominated

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<sup>14</sup> The Axis of Evil Comedy tour was the brainchild of three L.A. based male comedians, two Arab Americans and one Iranian. Obeidallah toured as a special guest, largely in an attempt to preserve his "name brand" as independent.

comedy world is like, she said “There’s Dean, and then there are all other men. Dean is a true gentleman.”



*A-Date* (2005): L-R: Sam Younis as "Maher" and Lameece Issaq as "Inass."  
Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah. ©NYAACF Photo by Nigel Parry

In fact, most Arab American male artists fit what appeared to me to be the “ideal type” of Arab male: handsome, well dressed, well educated, into the arts, and professional. For a portrait of the ideal Arab male, I turn to a short skit called *A-Date* (2005)<sup>15</sup> by Lameece Issaq. “A-Date” is a play on “J-Date,” a popular Jewish dating service. In it, an immigrant character named “Miriam” runs a dating service for Arabs in America, and the primary person that she wants to fix up is her Arab American daughter, “Lamia.” “Lamia is an artist. She plays in a band, wears all black, and is 32 years old and unmarried, much to her mother’s chagrin. For her birthday, “Miram” tries to set “Lamia” up with “Maher,” the ultimate dream man. From the mother’s perspective, Arab American “Maher” is ideal because he is a lawyer, good looking, and comes from a good family. He even plays an Arabic instrument called the ‘oud’. The skit involves a series

<sup>15</sup> *A-Date* performed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Arab American Comedy Festival.

of comical encounters in the office of the dating service that feature several more stereotypical Arab male characters before we meet the charming “Maher,” like the narcoleptic Imam who needs a young wife to care for his older wife because he keeps falling asleep, and a “fresh of the boat” bi-polar Arab engineer who falls in madly in love at the drop of a hat. When “Maher” finally meets “Lamia,” they realize that know each other from their American lives as American musicians. “Maher” goes by “Matt,” and “Lamia” goes by “Louli”; and both are enamored by each other’s American music and their budding appreciation of Arabic music and culture. The skit ends with them making plans to get together after a gig. This bittersweet comedy lays out the rough sketch of the ideal male: educated, Arab American male who is sensitive to his culture and artistic. It is a rare sketch because it projects an ideal type as opposed to defending “the real” artists against the “imagined” terrorist, as most other representations of Arab males do.

“A-Date” also plays into a notion of manhood that became popularly acknowledged in America around 2003 as the “metrosexual.” A “metrosexual” is a heterosexual male who lives in a city, spends money on fashion and beauty products, and is perceived to be sensitive and romantic. The television show *The Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which began airing in the summer of 2003, offered a team of gay men to help fashion and taste challenged straight men become better “metrosexuals,” not only for the betterment of humanity or the environment, but to catch women. The rise in men’s fashion magazines and beauty products for the metrosexual allows straight men to express themselves in ways previously interpreted as gay. For straight Arab American males, the public sanctioning of the creative, sensitive life for men creates an even yet another foil for the “evil terrorist.”

Mistaken Identity:

No group of artists or performers has played upon the stereotype of the Arab terrorist more than Arab American comedians. The material draws upon the awkwardness of being Arab in America. Performers act out their sense of feeling out of place for being of the same ethnic group as the “terrorists,” and having similar names, hair, food, and countries of origin. Audiences pack comedy clubs throughout the city to hear jokes about trying to fly, shop, and just exist in a country that is suspicious of people that share Arab ethnicity. In the year following 9/11, the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee documented 80 cases of passengers who had been removed from aircrafts, or not allowed to board, based on perceived Arab identity (Ibish and Steward 2003). This follows a trend in disproportionate profiling of Arab Americans noted in ADC’s previous report on hate crimes from 1998-2000. At that time, ADC reported receiving hundreds of complaints about airport profiling that total 24% of all complaints reported to its offices annually. Bias against Arab and Muslim travelers has risen since the implementation of the Computer Assisted Passenger Pre-Screening System (CAPPS), an airport profiling system implemented in 1998 as a result of the crash of TWA Flight 800 in 1996 due to mechanical failures. Ismail Khalidi, whose play *Truth Serum* (2006) begins this chapter explained:

I consider myself very political and very aware and very proud to be Palestinian and to be Arab and to be Arab American but I found that there was this kind of guilt, this kind of self identification as a terrorist or whatever that seeps into the way that we think everyday. How can it not be, we're bombarded with it every day I mean there's no positive images of Arabs or Muslims. None whatsoever!

Living in the shadow of suspicion appears to be ripe with cause for humor as the following examples can attest:

### On flying:

“More people would rather fly with snakes on a plane than Middle Eastern people in this country.” – Dean Obeidallah

“All you white people have it easy. You guys get to the airport an hour.. two hours before your flight. It takes me a month and a half. Security’s gotten so bad now I just show up to the airport in a g-string.... ‘turn around’ ...no problem. ‘Bend over’ ... ok. By the time that they’ve searched me I’ve made enough money in tips I can pay for my fuckin’ airplane, man.” - Ahmed Ahmed

### On Names:

“If you go to Google.com and type Ahmed Ahmed it comes up on the FBI’s most wanted list... twice” – Ahmed Ahmed

"If I were to have a child and if he's a boy, I'm definitely gonna name him Al. Al Kader," - Aron Kader.

### On Identity:

“I’m half Egyptian, but I’m adopted. My parents didn’t tell me till I was like 13.. they wanted to see if I would turn Egyptian, like I was a werewolf or something.” Joe Derosa.

“I’m Lebanese but my husband’s Irish.. our kids are going to grow up to be drunken terrorists” -Kerri Louise

### On being watched:

“I’m happy to have all these Arabs here [in the audience]. Makes me proud. But I’m also scared because the FBI’s outside, taking good look at everyone.” – Ahmed Ahmed

Arab Americans joke about things other than their predicament as an ethnic minority, but the jokes about being Arab in America resonate most with their Arab American audiences. No group of Arab artists or performers has been subject to as much media attention as the comedians. Mainstream news channels from CNN, BBC, ABC, NBC and the like, as well as Democracy Now, NPR, print media such as the *New York Times*, *Time Out New York*, the *Village Voice*, and other smaller papers running



Associated Press news stories all carry the message that Arab Americans are trying to dispel stereotypes through humor, and that this is a worthwhile cause given the amount of prejudice heaped upon Arab Americans in the post 9/11 world. All find the combination of Arabs and comedy to be intriguing and ironic before anyone opens their mouth. The fact that this is a group of professional artists who all more or less have careers within the entertainment industry itself deepens the interest in the material. As much as the performers and artists appreciate the coverage, most lament the fact that few casting agents, producers, writers, and directors from the production side of the entertainment industry come to watch. After four years of expanding the comedy festival to bigger venues and receiving better publicity, one show is being produced as a pilot for Comedy Central's internet channel Mother Lode called "The Watch List." It cuts from stand up sketches to dramatization of the comedians in their everyday lives as Arab Americans. This show is being produced by Max Brooks, son of veteran director/ comedian Mel Brooks. Daniel Powell, a producer at Comedy Central, explained: "Obviously our foremost consideration is, is it funny? And the answer is yes. And secondly, there was this loud, very clear, and cool idea that was politically relevant" (Marks 2006).

However much Arab American artists critique the general attitude of discrimination and suspicion that Arab Americans face, they are careful not to invoke politics that could alienate a non-Arab audience. The subject of Israel is pretty much taboo on stage. One comedian was kicked out of a comedy club on the Upper West Side of Manhattan for joking around about the fact that an Israeli astronaut died over Palestine, Texas showed that there is a God. Prominent non-Arab colleagues in the entertainment industry counsel them that they'll go no-where if they mention the word

Palestine. So comedians stick to themes of mistaken identity, and in case it is not clear enough from their routines, they even spell it out for the press. For example, an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* explains: “While all the comedians and actors involved are trying to give their careers a boost, Obeidallah says the festival would be a failure if they didn’t find new audiences. (Brace yourself: here’s where he turns earnest.) ‘It’s so important to reach out to non-Arabs,’ he says. ‘They’re the ones we need to humanize ourselves to and tell people that we’re not all terrorists, we have no sympathy to terrorism, we’re just like the other ethnic minority or immigrant groups in America. We’re just trying to find our way’” (Haupt 2006). Often, that way is directly through representation of “the terrorist.”

I’m not a terrorist, I just play one on TV:

The media is often credited with perpetuating stereotypes in the U.S. The perseverance of stereotypes depends upon their integration in every aspect of the media industry, from writers and directors, to editors, casting agents, and the actors themselves. Actors are cast to fit a prescribed role, to embody a character as envisioned by the writer and director and perhaps imagined by the audience, and to portray that role as if it were real. The dilemma for Arab American actors is whether to play into them or not.

As Arab American activism is largely aimed at challenging stereotypes of Arabs, it is ironic that Arabs and Arab Americans often audition and are cast as terrorists. As Arab American actors struggle to make it in the entertainment industry, they are caught in the dilemma of playing into the stereotypes that limit their career options and contribute

to discrimination or having no career at all. This dilemma is often explored in the context of the Arab American arts scene itself.

An example that premiered at the first New York Arab American Comedy Festival in 2003 was a short play called *Browntown* (2003) by Sam Younis. Written in response to an audition experience that did not quite sit right with the Lebanese American actor, *Browntown* explores the tensions Arab and South Asian males face when dealing with scripts and casting directors intent on portraying Arabs badly. Sam describes the creation of his play:

In grad school we did a lot of classical stuff. You're kind of sheltered from the reality of the business because you tend to feel like, oh yeah, I can play whatever I want. And then I kind of started realizing that I was consistently being auditioned for roles that had as their foundation some situation in relationship to terrorism, whether it was like the guy who in a novel way was anti-terror, or the guy who was a straight up terrorist or um, you know it was impossible to talk about Arab identity without talking about terrorism, which I found to be really upsetting...

Then I went into this audition for this play that I actually kind of liked. It was to play a Middle Eastern guy who was a terrorist, and I really liked this scene. It was really a domestic dispute scene, and it wasn't particularly exploitative in terms of the writing. But when I auditioned the casting director's adjustment to me was along the lines of, "ok, well keep in mind the part of the world you're from here, you wouldn't be so nice and respectful to your wife"...And he was saying it in the most sort of trying to be helpful kind of way... He didn't really have any venom about what he was saying he just had such a simple minded vision of that part of the world, and I had to sit there ...I had to walk that line of like, standing my ground, and also just trying to execute direction and bite the tongue, and *do your job* [emphasis added] you know, and I walked out feeling a little demeaned.

I don't think it's all about um some Zionist or white super structure that's suppressing Arab voice. I don't know, I mean I don't want to kind of make some huge hypothesis about it like that. But all I know is that in my own experience I am repeatedly asked to audition for or embody a lot of bad qualities in a character based on being Middle Eastern and very rarely are there other things that are out there.

What this casting call demonstrates is not a Zionist plot, but the way in which Westerners wield knowledge about Arabs as power. In this case, it was the alleged knowledge about how an Arab man should treat his wife. It is interesting that what bothered Younis was not that he was asked to play a terrorist, but that he was asked to play a patriarchal, misogynistic terrorist. This incident became one of the central scenarios in Younis's first play: *Browntown*.

*Browntown* is set in a Manhattan casting office that has open auditions for a film called *The Color of Terror*. In it, two Arab American actors compare notes on their careers and lament the lack of more realistic roles for Arabs. When one tries to point out that several scripts had portrayed the terrorist as heroic or explicitly called the character a "freedom fighter," the other rejected any sense in justifying violent actions. Instead, he calls for more "normal" roles: "Why can't I be the brown John Cusack<sup>16</sup>? Some dude who's just chillin'. Or maybe even a *normal* bad guy!"<sup>17</sup>

A "normal" bad guy would be one that is not ethnically or religiously distinct. The conflation of action, identity and religion is partly why Arab characters cannot be "normal." It is not just that the common character is Arab, it's that he's a Muslim Arab. Younis reports that the fact that "terrorists" are always Arabs and Muslim draws only Arabs and South Asians to the casting calls. Although similar in appearance to Arabs, Greeks, Italians, and Spaniards do not usually fall within the same casting call as Arabs and South Asians. Casting directors look for visual representation of Islam in the characters themselves, because Hollywood - Arab terrorists are always Muslim. As Younis puts it:

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<sup>16</sup> For a good example of a "brown John Cusack" movie see *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. (2004) New Line Cinemas

<sup>17</sup> Excerpt from *Browntown* (2004) Reprinted with permission of the author, Sam Younis.

You basically have to invoke the name of Allah in some way, invoke some kind of a cause related to radical Islam, or related to the destruction of the West, and tie it in with Islam somehow. And my friends who are Muslim, I feel for them a lot because they feel it on a really deeper, very deep moral level that I have solidarity with, but I don't, it's not exactly the same for me, because I'm not actually Muslim. But I have a friend who's Indian Muslim, and he's always tormented by these roles.

In *Browntown*, one actor called Malek (played by Younis) is seeking the part of Mohammed, a terrorist who is being tried in court by someone called “Prosecutor Jenkins.” The play shows the audience the audition of Malek for the part of Mohammed, and the scene that is played out is the trial. During the course of the trial scene the character Mohammed learns that he has been betrayed by his third wife, Jumana, who called the police and provided them with documents about the explosives he used to carry out the attacks. When he learns this in court the following dialogue ensues:

Mohammed (Malek): I feed and take care of my wives, but I never tell them where I am going. ... Jumana would not dare deceive me, for she knows that such betrayal would cost her her head.

Ann (casting director): Ok, hold for a moment please, Malek. Really good work. Great intensity. I just wanna give you one small adjustment. Keep in mind that this guy who has probably spent most of his life in some Arab country—like Afghanistan or Pakistan. In other words, he's crazy! We're dealing with a backwards moral code. When you talk about women, there can't be any sense of reverence or love. We need to see that you're gonna go back home and show them who's boss. You know?

Malek: Yeah, ok. It's just that...

Ann: Those wives are not even supposed to talk to anyone other than you. Much less cooperate with the police! You know?

Malek: Ok, I was just thinking that..

Ann: It's great! It's great! What you're doing is great. But you don't need to be so respectful. When you say “I take care of my wives,” you mean, “If they cross me, they die,” you know? Just keep in mind that this guy is a devout Muslim. You know what I'm saying?

Malek: Absolutely, for sure. Yeah. Can I try again?

Writer, director, and actor Sam Younis has captured the entire Orientalist conflation of terrorism, patriarchy, misogyny, and (obviously) stupidity by casting directors and Hollywood that has been dominant for so long. The confidence of the casting director in alleged Arab behavior and psychology is glaringly obvious in her American idioms like, “show them who’s boss,” and the poor actor “Malek” is left to feel like he is not actually a competent or capable Arab male (actor) by not living up to or playing out these fabricated standards. Instead of being a fanatical Arab male, the character Malek is a sensitive soul who just wants to act in something that is not demeaning to his self image as an Arab. Yet, as an actor looking for work, Malek (and his real life creator Younis) continues to audition and act in such roles.

*Browntown* ends with an Indian American man being cast as the lead terrorist by using a British accent while the Arab American man tries to throw the audition by using an Indian one. This satirical portrayal of a routine audition can be contrasted with a short film by Hesham Issawi and Dick Grunert called *T for Terrorist* (2003), which screened at the first NY Arab American Comedy Festival. After being tormented by a hot headed American director during a film shoot, the Arab actor playing the terrorist hijacks the film set making the director play the terrorist and he the hero.

Most Arab American actors do not go to such an extreme, and must weigh playing into the stereotype with other gains that could come from a project. As an “actor” explains in *Browntown*: “I’d prefer not to play these terrorist roles, unless they’re really high paying.” Whether high paying or not, two New York based Arab American

actors jumped at the chance to perform in Steven Spielberg's *Munich*,<sup>18</sup> a three hour film about Israel's retaliation for the Palestinian kidnapping and ultimate death of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. They had no idea what the final product would really look like because when auditioning and even filming, the actors were given only their scenes and not the complete script. Omar Metwally, a half Egyptian/ half Dutch Arab American actor played a Palestinian Liberation Organization operative named Ali. When describing the audition process to me he explained:

I had no context, I didn't know what the whole movie was going to do or what it was going to try to say. But I was fortunate because I was familiar with Tony Kushner's work... So I had a pretty strong feeling that the script was not going to be this one sided thing, and that it was going to be a pretty nuanced and sensitive and thought provoking piece of work. Which I think it is.<sup>19</sup> I didn't really hesitate, not to mention I was thrilled to have the opportunity to work with Steven Spielberg. Of course, growing up Arab American and as an Arab American actor I've always been very aware of and concerned about the presentation of Arabs in popular culture because we're so often demonized. So that's something I try to avoid, any kind of role like that. I just didn't think that was going to be the case in this film. And I think that's how it's borne out.

Metwally's character is the single "Palestinian" with a speaking part, and in his speech he expresses a Palestinian's longing for his homeland and defends his right to return to it. He is, however, killed in the end in a street fight with Israeli Mossad agents. Mousa Kraish, on the other hand, played one of the Palestinian men who kidnapped unarmed Israeli athletes in their underwear, did not speak a word in the film. Yet he felt exactly the same way about acting in it. Arab American actors take roles playing terrorists because they are available, and because within the general environment of the

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<sup>18</sup> *Munich* is based on George Jonas's 2006 book "Vengeance: The Truth of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team" and adapted to the screen by Eric Roth (Forrest Gump) and Tony Kushner (Homebody/ Kabul). It also stars Eric Bana, Daniel Craig, and Geoffrey Rush.

<sup>19</sup> Not all share the sentiment that *Munich* was not one sided. See Joseph Massad's *Munich or Making Baklava (Electronic Intifada)*. February 3, 2006). Massad argues that *Munich* sends the messages that the problem with Palestinians is that they make Israelis into something that they are not proud of being (murderers), and suggests that a good Palestinian is a dead one.

entertainment industry, the character of the terrorist is so normalized and depoliticized that to play a terrorist well, particularly if that terrorist has some kind of historically or politically accurate motivation, is perceived as doing ones part to tell a story that is inevitably going to be told with or without Arab participation.

### Terrorists as Humans:

With nearly constant invocation of “terrorists” as the cause for war, the reason for failed democracies, and the threat to all things decent and an honorable in the world, the years following 9/11 saw a few mainstream attempts to portray the logic behind acts of violence directed at civilians within the context of the individual lives of those who carry them out. In contrast to Arab American political, social, and cultural organizations throughout the country that universally condemn acts of terrorism, both generally and at each specific incident, several artists, both Arab and non-Arab, have chosen to portray “terrorists” as something other than an evil stock figure in a overall tale of American virtuosity. Their work often sparked debates within the Arab American arts scene about the value of such representation in advancing the visibility of Arab American artists as well as the political and social causes of Arabs more generally.

Before appearing in *Munich* as the sympathetic PLO operative, Omar Metwally made his debut on Broadway in *Sixteen Wounded*. This short lived play opened at the Walter Kerr Theater on April 15, 2004 and closed after 12 performances on April 25, 2004. Even though it was written by Eliam Kraiem, a Jewish American playwright, the portrayal of the suicide bomber by Metwally, an active member of a New York based Arab American theater collective called Nibras, produced quite a buzz within the Arab



American performing arts community. Announcements for this play on Arab list serves began months before it opened, as did debates about its merits. To summarize, it portrays the life of “Mahmoud,” a Palestinian exiled to Amsterdam in the early 1990’s after carrying out a bus bombing inside Israel. During his hidden existence in Amsterdam, he is literally thrown (through a shop window) into the life of a baker named “Hans” played by Judd Hirsh. “Hans” is a Holocaust survivor who has become a secular, a-political sort of recluse with the modest ambition of being a good baker. Despite the integration of the lives of the arrogant yet endearing Palestinian, the mild and tolerant Jewish baker, and the romantic relationship that results in the pregnancy of the baker’s shopkeeper by “Mahmoud,” in the end, “Mahmoud” is still compelled to blow himself up along with a synagogue in Amsterdam for the Palestinian cause. Sixteen are wounded in the incident, and he is the only one to die, highlighting the ultimate futility of his attempt to attack his displaced enemy.

Metwally’s performance on Broadway was almost universally appreciated in the Arab American community. The fact that one’s friend, who performs in community centers, Arab American political conventions, and the first Arab comedy festival, was on Broadway co-starring with Judd Hirsh and Martha Plimpton, gave the play a certain blanket acceptance. In addition, everyone was pleased that for the first time ever anything about Palestinians, let alone a main character that was Palestinian, was presented on Broadway. However, agreement about the play basically stopped there, and two main points of debate about the play emerged. The first was over the claim that this play presented a “balanced picture” of the Palestinian/ Israeli conflict. The idea that “equal time” should be given to both sides of the conflict, which is a common convention

in the mainstream media and the basis for what is often considered unbiased and objective reporting, is actually thought by many to be a way of minimizing the disparities in power and losses in the conflict. To give equal time to a Palestinian and a Western Jewish man downplays the fact that the sides are inherently unequal, and the conflict is not between equals. When examined closely, even in this well intentioned play, giving equal time does not mean that the narrative is the same. The audience is asked to accept the premise that the treatment of Palestinians today is like the treatment of Jews in the Holocaust, yet the playwright represents a pacifist, humanistic Holocaust survivor alongside a Palestinian who fled his country after bombing Israelis, including children, only to do it again, this time including himself. While both “Hans” and “Mahmoud” lost their parents to hateful enemies, “Hans” does not seek revenge whereas “Mahmoud” does.

The second debate that emerged in response to the play was whether or not representations of suicide bombers play into stereotypes of Arabs or help to dispel them. Given that many Arabs, including Arab artists, view the bombings as a legitimate military strategy and do not believe a non-violent end to the conflict is possible, the representation on Broadway basically gave voice to what some view as a legitimate symbol of Palestinian resistance. A popular Arab American performer was even said to have served as a “consultant” on the script. Others, including both those who accept suicide bombings as a legitimate strategy and pacifists who reject all uses of violence outright, believed that the portrayal of a suicide bomber on Broadway simply played into common stereotypes about Arabs and did nothing to advance any understanding about the situation in Palestine and Israel, or in the Diaspora. Despite these debates, it was the star-struck factor of *Metwally* on Broadway that gave the play support within the community.

By the time I caught up with Metwally at a party for another member of Nibras, he had received a Tony award nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Mahmoud. He explained that he had to put all of his doubts about the role aside so that he could ultimately commit to it. He wanted to move people emotionally to consider the possibility of this character and the “option” of being a suicide bomber. When I expressed concern that the Palestinian nationalist movement was represented as if it were a mob, with the brother of Mahmoud ultimately coming to his door in Amsterdam and threatening the lives of his siblings in Palestine if he didn’t carry out the operation, Metwally explained that it was represented much worse at first, really “godfather like.” The Director was Irish, and had a sense of that nationalist movement and was not particularly interested in presenting a picture of the Palestinian nationalist movement so much as a drama about this particular individual. When I explained that the writer and director could have even invoked more of the culture of martyrdom, Metwally thought that would have “put people off as too fanatical.” He pointed out that even the word “Allah” had been said in translation as “God” to downplay any religious association with the character’s actions. His comments highlight the fact that the overall point of representing terrorists within a context that is sympathetic to their suffering is to show their humanity as individuals struggling with choices and options in life.

Another example of the art of humanizing terrorists comes from director Hany Abu Assad from Palestine. *Paradise Now* (2005), which opened in New York in October 2005, allows a day in the life of two would be suicide bombers to unfold on the big screen. In contrast to the fast paced trailer set to folk/ pop music and lots of action (including kissing) the actual film leaves one to ponder the quite rationalizations of how

one man ultimately takes his life. Set against a backdrop of bombed out buildings, dead end jobs, and futile romantic interests, the day has arrived when “Kaled” and “Said” have their turn at their chosen path of being suicide bombers. The film does not explore how the two young men were recruited or decided to become suicide bombers. Instead, it goes through the “routine” preparations of their bodies for the operation. According to the filmmaker, the men are shaved, stripped, fed, and dressed in a style reminiscent of the morphing agents in the film *the Matrix* (1999). Once processed, the two men are left to deal with their anxieties and emotions with moderate prayers and pats on the back for their efforts. However, their anxieties are compounded by a mishap in the operation when the two become separated and one is left to wander around trying to come to terms with the bomb nearly irreversibly strapped to his belly. At this point, the action is entirely psychological: can “Said,” the son of an executed collaborator, carry out the task he has chosen for himself or will he back down and return to the shame of his family name and refugee camp home? The other characters, who appear as vehicles for expressing different points of view, grapple with his decision and his increasingly detached determination.

Despite numerous reviews that unanimously point out that Abu Assad has humanized the suicide bomber for Western audiences, the film is replete with criticism of the act. When “Khaled” is forced to repeat his videotaped martyr’s farewell due to mechanical difficulties while his “mentor” eats his mother’s sandwiches, besides being strikingly funning to a Western audience, it is a commentary against the logic of the entire act. Perhaps most telling is when “Said” is asked, “Why did you burn down the cinema?” as if the cinema can redeem the life of those who are oppressed. Humanization

seems to occur because two people in attractive, hip 20-something human form appear on the screen joking with relatives, falling in love, being frustrated at work, and feeling hopeless about their futures, until any chance of a future is put to the test of the political machinery surrounding them.

Although backed by Warner Independent Pictures, an international distributor, the Palestinian director personally promoted his film as most independent film directors from Palestine must do out of necessity. In addition to a screening at the New York Film Festival and other big publicity showcases, his publicist arranged a private screening for the Arab community at Alwan for the Arts, and arranged an interview with me for my dissertation and more importantly, for an article in a local Arab American newspaper called *Aramica*. The Arab American community was eager for the film's release, and impressed that it would receive such attention. Already well known among filmmakers and film enthusiasts for *Rana's Wedding* (2002) and *Ford Transit* (2002), Abu Assad's *Paradise Now* (2005) has received the biggest Palestinian film release to date. It went on to win the Golden Globe award for best foreign language film in 2006 and was nominated for an Academy Award that same year. The Academy nomination generated its own controversy because although Abu Assad lives in Europe and is from Nazareth, an Arab town located in Israel, the filmmaker listed his country of origin as Palestine. *Divine Intervention* (2002) by Elia Suleiman was snubbed in 2002 because the Academy did not recognize Palestine as a country (although it recognizes Puerto Rico and Taiwan); *Paradise Now* was ultimately listed as coming from the Palestinian Territories.

The reaction in the Arab arts scene in New York when Abu Assad won the Golden Globe was electric. Abu Assad's acceptance speech hit the Arab list serves

immediately, and artists were calling each other with congratulations. He said that he hoped the award serves as “recognition that the Palestinians deserve their liberty and equality unconditionally.” A local Palestinian American filmmaker explained her happiness at the award as follows: “Just like when stupid-ass Bush said ‘Palestine’, now people use the word all the time. He’s a trailblazer so that if another good film comes out...who would have thought that a Palestinian film by Palestinian man about suicide bombers would have made it... I mean, that’s pretty amazing.” She went on to say:

I heard that they did a screening in Ramallah and they hated it. I heard things like, ‘it doesn’t really represent what we’re actually like’... but at the same time, he’s a storyteller. I don’t take away any of that, any of his ability and right to tell a story.

Interestingly, telling a good story, not solving the Palestinian/ Israeli conflict, was the point that Abu Assad stressed in my interview with him. He said, “As filmmakers, we’re not going to save the world, yet if we didn’t think this way, we wouldn’t create anything important.”

Success in the case of art that humanizes terrorists is measured on many levels. First, it is judged whether or not the characters are represented as politically justified and morally complex. Second, it is viewed aesthetically for its accuracy in representing a time and a place and artistically in its style and overall appeal. Third, its success depends on its ability to engage non-Arabs, and possibly even persuade them to see another point of view. Finally, there is a conflation of the artist with the cause, so that popularly people assume that success of the artists could lead to success of other artists, and ultimately to success of the cause. The practical benefit of success in terms of rights or territory is not truly assessed.

Sensitive Artists, not Terrorists:

Two plays by Yousef El Guindi<sup>20</sup> demonstrate the ways Arab American artists use the figure of the “artist” as a foil for the “terrorist. In *Back of the Throat* (2006), El Guindi portrays Arab American Muslim U.S. citizen being interrogated in his home by two U.S. intelligence agents. The character, named “Khaled” (the “kha” sound is pronounced correctly from the back of throat) begins by welcoming two agents into his home and offering to be of assistance. As the encounter develops and it is clear the agents are examining his belongings and questioning him about his life as a way to entrap him in the 9/11 plot, he becomes uncomfortable and asks them to leave, citing his rights for an attorney and claiming he had done nothing wrong. Ultimately, the agents do leave, but not before physically assaulting him as they spell out the suspected plot, which involved sharing library books with a 9/11 hijacker and meeting him in a strip club. El Guindi was careful not to use the word “terrorist” anywhere in the play, explaining “I don't think I ever used it. Because it's such a loaded word I just didn't want to use it.” However he did want to explore how Arab Americans had become trapped in this story of suspicion, which they cannot really escape.

With regard to the character “Khaled,” El Guindi explained to me, “In my mind he was always innocent, but now he has been woven into these narratives and he can't get out of them, so he's on their list. He's been woven into the narrative that, plural narratives, that have been swirling around him, the narrative of the story of the library, the story of his girlfriend, you know, the story the agents are concocting around this

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<sup>20</sup> Yousef El Guindi is based in Seattle, WA. He is a prominent Arab American playwright whose work has been produced in New York by Arab Americans and non-Arabs alike. *Back of the Throat* premiered in New York at the Flea Theater in the spring/ summer of 2006 and was performed by its non-Arab resident company the Bats.

information they're getting, and weaving "Khaled" into it." The dominance of this narrative not only entraps innocent people, but it creates a sense of paranoia and suspicion of the self so that it ultimately involves the innocent as well. Given the overwhelming quality of the War on Terror, and the way it seems to cast suspicion on everyone of Arab or Muslim descent, writers are compelled to confront this image. As El-Guindi explains, "certainly there's so many facets of being an Arab, being an Arab American, being an immigrant that are worth exploring. But it's sort of in your face. I mean, you'd have to work really hard not to tackle this subject in some way."

At the heart of El-Guindi's character, "Khaled," is the fact that he is an Arab American writer. He is an Arab American who does not speak Arabic and is not religious; and he is a writer with writers block who has dozens of half finished stories on his computer that he wants no one to see. He has books on every imaginable topic, from tattoos and guns, to the Communist Manifesto and the Koran. He also had an American girlfriend, who broke up with him after 9/11 because she found him too hard to read, too difficult to understand. She would mis-read his guardedness about his writing and his clandestine meetings with a writing group to be a sign of an affair, or worse, and claimed that he gloated after 9/11 happened. He felt that he was just asking for her to understand that there may have been political motives behind the attacks and that they may not have been the random product of crazed lunatics, like the media (and the history of terrorism studies) would have her believe. He also has pornography. The presence of pornography allows the interrogators to call into question "Khaled's" sexuality, much the same way that people questioned why one of the 9/11 hijackers, Mohammed Atta, frequented strip clubs and regularly received lap dances. It is also the same way that



terrorism studies have historically has pondered the sexual lives of terrorist, suggesting deviance. Finally, he allegedly had been to a strip club the night of before 9/11, at least according to the officers who claim to have found a receipt in one of his jacket pockets.

As the two officers start to draw out all of this information, “Khaled” becomes increasingly uncomfortable. As they discuss his writer’s block, the following dialogue<sup>21</sup> unfolds:

Bartlett (officer): What inspires you, if I can ask?

Khaled: I never know ahead of time, that’s why it’s an inspiration.

Bartlett: We know some of your interests, right, politics, sex.

Khaled: Not even that. But then, doesn’t that cover most people’s interests?

Bartlett: I wouldn’t say that. No. You wouldn’t find these books in my house.

Khaled: Still, they’re pretty basic, whether you have a direct interest in them or not.

Barlett: They are basic if you consider them important, otherwise they’re not.

Khaled: To be an active, informed citizen? And to have a healthy interest in, in – sex, that’s not normal?

Bartlett: No. No. This isn’t normal. I have to tell you Khaled, none of this is normal. Right about now I would place you a few feet outside of that category. To be honest, you are shaping up to be very unnatural. I am frankly amazed at just how abnormal everything is in your apartment.

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<sup>21</sup> Excerpt reproduced with permission from the author. Youssef El Guindi. *Back of the Throat*. 2006.

The contrast of the normal and the abnormal, the concerned citizen and the terrorist, and the fine line between each is highlighted in this play. When “Khaled” claims that he became a U.S. citizen because he believes in the U.S., Bartlett responds:

You became a citizen so you could indulge in your perverted little fantasies, you sick little prick. Come here, wrap the flag around you and whack off (He picks up a porn magazine). Well I don't particularly want your cum over everything I hold dear!

Again, the Agent associates “Khaled” with sexual deviance, and by extension, terrorism and violence. At the same time that “Khaled” is being harassed by the U.S. officials, his memory is being teased by an Arab male character called “Asfoor.” “Asfoor” is the alleged suspect who “Khaled” may or may not have met. “Asfoor” offers to help him break his writers block, and teach him Arabic in exchange for English. It is suggested that the writer and the “terrorist” have crossed paths, and that they may have mutual interests in imagining the world. However, in the play the writer is seen actively denying the “terrorist,” telling him he is too busy to speak in the library and avoiding communication with what appears to be just an Arab foreign national. The play ends with “Asfoor” trying to communicate with “Khaled,” who ignores him. He explains how he wants to use this the colonial language of English, and write a book that will change the way English is spoken. Finally, “Asfoor” says:

I can help you find your voice too... You're stuck. I know you are.  
You've lost your way. I can feel it. I can help. Most of all...above all  
else, Khaled... I know how to inspire... I know how to inspire.

Once again, being a writer is an alternative to violence. However, El-Guindi may also be referring to the ways that the image and concept of the terrorist inspires English speakers to write. As this chapter began, the writing on terrorism is voluminous. Even for an Arab

American writer, there is no escape. Even for El-Guindi, writing is an alternative to violence.

For a more humorous look at art as opposed to violence, El-Guindi also wrote *Grenade* (2004). This short skit was staged in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arab American Comedy Festival in 2004.



*Grenade* (2004) L-R: Maysoon Zayid, Musa Kraish, and Jacob Kader in *Grenade*  
Courtesy of Dean Obeidallah ©NYAACF Photo by Memo Zack

In *Grenade*, a woman named “Linda” is trying to break up with her boyfriend, “Starks,” because she found a grenade in his glove compartment. “Linda’s” brother “Craig” is put up to the task of telling “Starks” that she no longer wants to see him, and he doesn’t believe it. Not accepting that it was the grenade that really turned her off, the boyfriend “Starks” presses brother “Craig” for a better explanation:<sup>22</sup>

Starks: That and what else?

Craig: She said that you... (nervous laugh). It sounds so stupid saying it, but – that’s my sister. In my humble opinion, you’re way better off without her. (Starks looks once again and urges Craig to continue). She said you had no appreciation for the arts.

Starks: You’re making this up.

<sup>22</sup> Excerpt reprinted with permission from the author. Yussef El-Guindi. *Grenade*. 2004.

Craig: Those were her exact words

Starks: No woman makes a decision on something this important on account of my not appreciating a stupid painting. It's something else, what?

Craig: I swear it's what she said.

Starks: That's it? The hand grenade? And I didn't like that bowl-of-flowers painting? Painted by some ear-slashing whore lover who wised up and shot himself? Does that sound like a sane reason to dump someone to you?

Craig: Culture has become very important to her.

Linda ultimately confronts Starks, and she argues (in an appropriate New Jersey accent), that she no longer wants to date thugs, and that she wants to make pottery. In the course of the argument, Starks pulls out the grenade and her brother Craig faints. Linda yells: "You see! That's what puts me off you. You terrify people." Ultimately, Starks convinces Linda to take him back, and he agrees that he will not bring any more lethal weapons on their dates.

I found this piece to be my favorite among all the Arab American sketch comedy pieces I have seen. As a dark satire, it played upon the character of the American gangster. The names of the characters were not necessarily Arab, and yet the farcical dilemma of a heavily armed man being told he should appreciate art mocks what so many Arab American artists themselves espouse. Art as an alternative to violence is the Arab American equivalent of "make love, not war." The burden of reform lies with the male, who must give up violence and take up art.

Conclusion:

Arab and Arab American artists constantly wrestle with character of the terrorist as it dominates the American political and social imagination of Arabs. Whether they participate in mainstream constructions of that image, or they challenge it by redefining, humanizing, or mocking it, artists articulate their art as an alternative to violence. For example, film director Hany Abu Assad explained to me that unlike the suicide bomber who chooses to liberate himself or herself from the pain of injustice, poverty, and oppression of occupation by turning into a human bomb, “I have the same desire to be free, but have made a different decision. I survive through films.” He expresses the same goal (to be free) as a “suicide bomber” but chooses a different means. Abu Assad may have developed this position as a way of explaining why he’d chosen to make a film about suicide bombers as opposed to another vehicle for a thriller. However, if he had made another choice, he may not have been so successful.

Part of the dilemma of representing the terrorist as opposed to some other type of Arab character is that it resonates. The power of the association can be used to grab the attention of others. It is a stock thriller, and to choose to represent something else risks being ignored. As Youseef El Guindi explains,

Other stories are being written, but they're not necessarily being staged or getting the interests of theaters because that's what they want to hear, they want to hear the story of the Arab guy being interrogated... its a bit like within the black community, sometimes people complain ‘why is it whenever we're depicted its always as rappers or loose women or prostitutes or something like that’... it's because that's where the mainstream slots come in. Those are the stories that sell, those are the stories that will perhaps guarantee an audience, the mainstream becomes open to only certain narratives.

Arab American artists try to reframe discussions about terrorism by highlighting the invasiveness of the War on Terror on innocent people and by trying to “humanize” terrorists, pointing out their socio-political motives, as opposed to pathological ones. They counter the image of the evil terrorist with the wholesome, sensitive professional artist. While embedded within Western discourses on terrorism and other Orientalist fantasies, Arab American artists seek to break the association of Arabs with terrorism by replacing it with art. In doing so, the artists are promoting their careers within an aesthetic economy circumscribed by war.

## **7. Conclusion: The Ubiquitous Terrorist and the Palatable Consumption of Arab American Culture**

On August 9, 2008, days before I began to write this conclusion, a prominent Palestinian poet named Mahmoud Darwish died. At sixty-seven years of age, he died just three days after open heart surgery at a hospital in Houston, Texas. Although he lived in Ramallah, he had come to the U.S. for medical treatment, and had given his family and friends instructions not to resuscitate if it did not go well.

Mahmoud Darwish was a revolution-era poet who outlived the revolution and ultimately declared his allegiance primarily to his art. He was born in 1941 in Haifa, which soon after became part of Israel. In high school he joined the Israeli Communist Party, and was jailed several times by the Israelis for political activism. Since he was not allowed to continue his education as a Palestinian inside Israel, he went to the Soviet Union. He left one year later to join the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), first in Egypt, then in Beirut. From the 1960s until 1995 he lived in exile from Palestine. His poems were widely read for both their nationalistic themes and their artistry, and several were turned into songs by the Lebanese folk singer Marcel Khalife in the 1970s and 1980s. Several volumes of his poetry have been translated into English as well as other European languages.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Darwish was not only active as an artist, but also in politics. He joined the Executive Committee of the PLO, and helped draft its Declaration of Statehood in 1988. He wrote speeches for the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, including a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in 1974. However, by 1993, he resigned from the PLO in protest over the signing of the Oslo

Accords; and although he resided in Ramallah, he refused to be named the Palestinian national poet laureate by the Palestinian Authority. Instead, he chose to maintain and widely publicize his independence. In 2002, days before the Israeli army re-invaded the West Bank, he invited eight world renowned authors to visit Ramallah and witness the occupation of Palestine, including two Nobel Prize winners, Wole Soyinka and Jose Saramago. Darwish had just given a poetry reading in Ramallah two weeks before he died. Although he had renounced political life, he was honored with a State funeral, and treated like a national hero.

In the many articles and obituaries I read following the announcement of his death, one quote struck me in that it captured what has become the seeming futility of art as a political project. In an article by his friend and fellow poet Mourid Barghouti (2008), cynicism appears from Darwish himself:

The story of the Palestinian people since their nakba is a story of unfulfilled desires: the desire for normal life, for justice, for national independence and freedom, but even Mahmoud had to come to this cheerless conclusion: 'I thought poetry could change everything, could change history and could humanise, and I think that the illusion is very necessary to push poets to be involved and to believe. But now I think that poetry changes only the poet.'

Barghouti tries to salvage his friend's assessment by concluding: "This time he was wrong. This man's poetry has changed the language of Arabic writing and shifted readers' conceptions of resistance poetry." In essence, poetry not only changes the poet, but other poets as well.

My Arab friends in New York were devastated by the news of Darwish's death. My cousins in Ramallah e-mailed me details of the funeral like how sad but beautiful it was to see thousands of people honoring him. My father was saddened, especially given



their proximity in age. People on Arabny wondered if any memorial services or events would be held in New York to mark the event. Most shocking though, people began to promote their work related to Mahmoud Darwish. One woman posted the link to her book about Darwish on Amazon.com, and another promoted sales of an edited volume that included poems by Darwish. Darwish was clearly a tremendous influence on Generation X artists and activists. Even in the diaspora, Darwish was held up as a model, both as an artist and as an activist. However, the crass attempts to capitalize on interest in the man at the time of his death only emphasized the extent to which artists and intellectuals increasingly function exclusively within an aesthetic economy.

I began my conclusion with this example because it captures the depoliticization of artists through the growth in the aesthetic economy in the last half of the twentieth century, and the extent that politics and ethnic identity operate within that realm. For the remainder of this chapter, I return to the theoretical implications of this ethnographic research, blending the research findings into a comprehensive narrative for summary purposes. This study involved an examination of the lives and art worlds of Arab American artists and arts organizers in New York from 2003-2006, ranging from their macro efforts at integration in the New York cultural landscape to the micro ways that their efforts at intervention in American narratives of themselves are gender bound. It involved systematic empirical research into the operation of several arts organizations, participation in the production of artistic events, analysis of performances and shows featuring Arab American artists, and interviews with twenty five artists and arts organizers of Arab descent.

This dissertation sought to discover if Arab American artists could create representations that resist American hegemony and alter political reality in favor of Arabs in the U.S. and abroad. By hegemony, I draw upon Gramsci's theory of the construction of political power through the consensual participation of populations in cultural, moral, and ideological leadership. Popular culture is considered terrain for negotiating and contesting hegemony. My conclusion, like Cornell West's writing about African American artists in the 1990s, is that it is difficult at best to challenge hegemony and the dominating culture when ethnic "difference" is co-opted by the aesthetic economy and political institutions are not engaged to create systematic change. Instead of combating hegemony, Arab American artists risk reifying notions of the independent artist in a commercial market and validating the elevation of the "cultural" realm as a means of achieving freedom and democracy at the expense of Arabs not participating in political and civic realms. The great discrepancy between the professional achievement of Arab artists in the West and the political and economy reality of Arabs in the Arab world suggests a tenuous and perhaps non-existent connection between cultural production and political reality today. A Palestinian American artist wins major international art prizes while Palestinians starve in Gaza; an Iraqi American playwright and actress has a twelve month run off Broadway and her play produced throughout the world while hundreds of Iraqi's die each month. This cynical conclusion may suffer from the myopia of the present and the relatively short study period, yet trusts that within theories of hegemony, time is a critical factor to consider when measuring social and political change.

Instead of proving the direct influence of the arts on politics, this study reveals the interrelationship of mainstream and ethnic aesthetic economies through the lenses of

Orientalist fantasies and the U.S. War on Terror. I found that politics and ethnic identity in this environment feed aesthetic production, and the realm of aesthetic production to be a proxy for politics. While Jameson (1991) and Harvey (1990) point to the celebration of difference and diversity in the postmodern aesthetic of multinational capitalism, this study gives attention to the ways that ‘difference’ enters the mainstream marketplace, the creation of multiple markets in ‘difference’, and the ways that marginalized communities contend with hegemonic cultural forms and notions of themselves when marketing difference. By hegemonic cultural notions I refer to the legacies of Orientalism as traced by Said (1978) and compounded by the War on Terror renewed after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 that render Arabs in a largely negative and stereotypical light. Furthermore, this study reveals how the ethnic identity of second generation immigrants can be understood within the larger context of their generation as a whole, and how their interests and ambitions contribute to and even depend upon economies at large rather than enclave ethnic economies.

Most of the Arab Americans in my study were born during the shift in global economies from Fordism to flexible accumulation, and came of age during its post-modern, multicultural peak. They are part of what is commonly known as Generation X, or the generation born between 1965 and 1976 (New Strategist 2006). This generation is more diverse than the larger Baby Boomer generation that precedes it, with 37% of it being non-white nationwide in 2005. Generation Xer’s who are children of immigrants are also known as the “new second generation”, or the generation of children born to immigrant parents who had migrated to the U.S. as a result of immigration policies adopted in 1965 (Min 2002). Unlike the “mass migration” period (1880-1930) when

nearly ninety percent of immigrants came from Europe, the vast majority (85%) of those immigrating post 1965 were non-Europeans from Third World countries (Bozorgmehr and Min 2003). There was also a striking difference in socio-economic status between the early immigrants and those coming post 1965. Whereas most early immigrants were illiterate peasants and unskilled workers, those arriving post 1965 were much more mixed in terms of socio-economic status. Since the recessions of the 1970s, they have helped revitalize the U.S. economy and crumbling inner cities by creating jobs and industries and expanding the tax base (Naficy 1993). Therefore, the “new second generation” is at the core of “post-modern” Generation Xer’s, and joins the ranks of those active in the expansive aesthetic economy of the early part of the twenty first century.

Given the diversity of Generation X strictly in terms of demographics, it is not surprising that scholars of the “new second generation” conclude that becoming American entails the articulation of ethnic identity (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Rather than contrasting theories of assimilation with ethnic pluralism, researchers find that acculturation among the new second generation involves an active process of differentiation from the dominant and discriminatory American culture. Despite adopting English, losing foreign language proficiency, and embracing U.S. fashions and lifestyles, the new second generation also demonstrates “a universal shift from American identities to ethnic ones, increasing perceptions of discrimination against one’s own group, and increasing reassertion of heritage and cultural distinctness” (2001:301). Portes and Rumbaut note that “heritage and cultural distinctness” do not mean a continuation of parental traditions, but rather are “made-in the U.S.A.”, using American idioms and

cultural forms rather than ones inherited or learned from their parents. This study shows that the same could be said for Arabs in America as well.

Arab American artists and arts organizers practice a form of “symbolic” or instrumental ethnicity (Bakalian 1993), and work to form an ethnic aesthetic economy by way of entry into the mainstream aesthetic economy. By creating venues that showcase Arab American artists and artwork, they invest resources generated by economic participation in the general economy to create an ethnic aesthetic economy that does not generate profits or revenue, but exposure, in the hopes of launching careers in the general aesthetic economy and challenging hegemonic notions of and policies towards Arabs.

While Naficy’s (1993) depictions of the economic aspects and industriousness of exilic Iranian cultural production in Los Angeles bear some resemblance to the Arab American artistic community featured in my work, there are several key differences that are worth examining because they speak to the overall dominance of professional identities over ethnic ones among the Arab American artists, and the importance of understanding how ethnic identities relate to mainstream industries marketing of difference. First, whereas a core component of Iranian exilic culture is focused on nostalgia and attachment to a national homeland, with the exception of the promotion of Palestinian autonomy and self-determination, there is a greater sense of pan-Arab culture than promotion of distinct national identities. Arab American artists come together first and foremost through their professional interest in the arts, and secondarily because of a shared cultural heritage. There is a sense that the diversity within the Arab community reflects the diversity within America itself, and it is celebrated within that light.

Second, while it appears from Naficy's account that a robust exilic economy developed around commercial television production and consumption, the Arab American arts community is decidedly non-profit. The economic viability of Arab American artists depends on integration into the mainstream aesthetic economy. By this I mean everything from attracting audiences to raising funds for cultural production outside of the Arab American community. The Arab American population has neither the size, interest, nor possibly wealth to sustain expensive productions of the scale and scope imagined by Arab American artistic producers. A major complaint of Arab American artists, in fact, is that the Arab community does not substantially or significantly patronize or contribute financial to the production of art work by those of Arab descent. Arab American artists invest in ethnically oriented showcases in order to achieve one of the most prized commodities within the Western art market, namely exposure. Their "ethnic economy" does not yield monetary profits that sustain livelihoods within the economy alone, particularly when production costs such as space rentals and publicity are high. Therefore Arab American artists and arts organizers hope to capitalize on the development of an ethnic economy in the arts that will attract investment and enable participation in the general aesthetic economy. As immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurs mining the "ethnic economy" (Bozorgmehr and Min 2003), Arab American artists join the hordes of other artists trying to make careers in the vast New York art world.

Third, in trying to carve a space for themselves in mainstream aesthetic economies, Arab American artists and arts organizers must content with hegemonic notions of themselves that precedes them. Rather than being oriented toward preserving

a national identity and culture within immigrant enclaves as appeared to dominate the exilic cultural scene studied by Naficy (1993), Arab American artists are forced to work within and around Orientalist fantasies and the U.S. war on Terror that dominate the public imagination in mainstream venues. While consenting to the style and structure of various genres within the Western aesthetic economy, Arab American artists try to bargain for more humanistic representations of Arab people than commonly achieved in the public sphere. Their negotiations with hegemonic representations are the best example of how difficult it is to operate outside of hegemonic popular culture altogether, because to do so risk complete irrelevance and disinterest. This ethnography looks at Arab American cultural production as not only a form of resistance to hegemonic Orientalist stereotypes, but also as a vehicle for participation in the aesthetic economy and the opportunities for identity construction and political expression through the commodification of cultural difference.

Most of the Arab American artists in my study came to New York to become successful professional artists in the mainstream aesthetic economy. The expansion of the aesthetic economy from World War II to the present inspired many otherwise middle class kids to invest in their looks and their talents and head for the world's cultural Mecca to seek their own fortunes. Given the shrinking industrial economy and the middle class as a whole since the middle of the twentieth century, those artistically inclined must have sensed that there were few options besides the possibility of becoming a famous artist by way of a career. Furthermore, the 1960s through the 1980s marked the mainstreaming of bohemian culture and the privatization of the art market, along with all other markets across the globe. Art became central to urban renewal and the growing national service

economy. While immigrant parents may balk at the riskiness of the undertaking by their U.S. educated children, their children are buoyed by the similar pursuits of their peers.

By the 1990s, when most of the Arab American artists in my study were finishing college and entering the workforce, not only were they primed for careers in the aesthetic economy, but geo-political forces had changed to make the Middle East the center of U.S foreign policy. This provided both challenges in the form of anti-Arab discrimination and censorship for political beliefs, as well as opportunities for attention and recognition from those who saw information about allegedly “evil” Arabs as important. The U.S. had already inherited the Orientalist legacies of Britain and France along with its hegemonic position as a new global superpower following World War II (Said 1978). Following the Cold War, the next big enemy became Iraq and by extension the Muslim world. Though Palestinians had long been associated with troublesome “terrorism” worldwide, the first Gulf War in 1990 managed to awaken the Western world to the Palestinian intifada and the injustices of Israeli occupation. The resolution of the Gulf War brought about the Madrid Peace talks and then the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, making being Palestinian and the concept of a Palestinian state an acceptable and recognized condition in the United States.

This is the world in which most of the artists in my study began their careers. Whether Palestinian or not, the Gulf War and the Palestinian/ Israeli conflict, raised awareness of Arab ethnic identity within the American cultural landscape. Their sense of dual identity, or being Arab American, was fostered by the growth of multiculturalism as a critical intervention in American cultural life and ideology for liberal progressive living. Arab American artists began to produce work that met the conventional artistic



standards of their times, incorporating political and cultural sensibilities derived from their international experiences as individuals of Arab descent.

Over time, the resolution of the Palestinian Israeli conflict faltered, the creation of two neighboring states was stalled, and interest in Islamic extremism grew throughout the Middle East, the United States and Western world. Then 9/11 happened, putting the U.S. on a trajectory of war in the Middle East and Islamic world that lasts till this day. Arab American artists who were a decade into their careers suddenly met intense interest from Anglo-Americans and Arab Americans alike. By 2003, they were organizing spaces to nurture their talents and identities, and leveraging their knowledge of the mainstream cultural landscape to project an image of Arab American integration in the aesthetic economy. Spaces include Alwan for the Arts, Nibras Theater Collective, and the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. Alwan and the Comedy Festival engage a variety of artists across multiple genres, from performers, comedians, visual artists, and filmmakers to musicians, poets, and writers. Artists reciprocated attendance at each other's events and performances, creating a stable community of artists that influenced each other's lives and work for over three years during the time of my fieldwork. Creation of Arab American venues and showcases was meant to pave the way for greater integration or appreciation of Arab American artists and perspectives in mainstream cultural arenas.

Beyond their self declared spaces of artistic production, Arab American artists were recruited into mainstream productions at prestigious venues in order to authenticate American interpretations of U.S. interventions in the Middle East and Islamic World. Given domestic opposition to the second U.S. led war in Iraq, NY was host to many

prominent productions highlighting the many scandalous outcomes of this effort, including Guantanamo Bay and Abu-Ghraib prison. Arab American artists were forced to reconcile their desires for work and recognition with opportunities in mainstream venues that lacked the subtle sophistication they strove to produce in their own domains. Many achieved great visibility with exhibits at the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, readings at the Public Theater, and comedy shows on the nationally televised Comedy Central.

Despite their participation in prominent mainstream cultural affairs, Arab American artists are not exempt from the issue of censorship, in New York or elsewhere. While artists in the 1980's and 1990's suffered from governmental and private censorship due to the ways that their portrayals of sexuality and religion offended nationalistic Christian sensibilities, Arab American artists suffer from censorship that is derived from both a longstanding bias against pro-Palestinian and Arab politics as well as renewed zeal to combat terrorism in the post 9/11 world. In fact, most Arab American artists expect to be censored for identifying with Arab and/ or Palestinian causes. They struggle to circumvent this tendency from American cultural establishments through the humanizing, as opposed to propagandizing, aesthetics of their work and by negotiating a "balance" of opposing political viewpoints. As in the culture wars of the 1980's and 1990's, conservative elements today are ready to attack both artistic and academic realms; this time it is for alleged terrorist sympathizing.

During the time of my fieldwork, I witnessed artists and academics alike draw upon skills, language and experience of "free speech" advocates to defend their rights to adopt positions unfavorable to the American government or mainstream sentiments. As

such, Arab American artists became strong advocates for “free speech”, defending the construct of the independent artist that had evolved since World War II, beholden to no one and nothing but the art itself. This is exemplified over greater concern with the canceling of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, a play about a young American activist who died while defending a Palestinian home in Gaza, than the “cartoon controversy” created after the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten printed derogatory images of the Prophet Mohammed associating him and Islam with violence. As independent artists free of government financing and constitutionally protected by the first amendment, Arab American artists are free to infuse their work with their political and cultural sensibilities, and distinguish themselves from other American artists by doing so.

Given the repression of pro-Arab political activism and the growth of the aesthetic economy in the U.S., art has become a proxy for Arab American politics in many respects. The artists in my study were conscious of their decision to become artists as opposed to political activists. Most felt that it was a question choosing a profession that best suited them, not out of a lack of respect for others. In that way, most viewed their art as a vocation or calling, one that was distinct from other professions in its methods and intent. For many, art provides an opportunity to introduce a human element into the political rhetoric that surrounds their ancestral homes. By portraying the effects (or lack thereof) of wars, occupation, and militarized violence on individuals going about their everyday lives, they politicize the mundane and perform their own participation in systems of power that they are normally exempt. Leading relatively privileged and safe lives away from the suffering in their home countries, many are at a loss about how to contribute to the cause, and thereby turn to their art as a way to embody their empathetic

suffering. In that way, creating a piece of art or an evening of performance carries much greater meaning than the content of the art or performance itself. The success or failure of an event, piece of work, or performance, comes to represent the success or failure of the political causes that they implicitly support. Artists engage in a conceptual model of politics in which their artistic interventions shape public opinion, which in turn could influence actual politics. There is no direct engagement with the political or legal system, except, as previously discussed, to uphold their rights to free speech as artists in cases of censorship.

Aside from the creation of art that embodies their empathetic suffering, the way artists organize themselves signifies allegiance to Western models of political organizing, namely secular democracy and meritocracy. Ticket sales and popularity are equated with “votes”, decisions about programming are based on what is “good art”, not whom one knows or who is related to whom, and national and religious preferences are practically non-existent. The topic of Israel provides a litmus test for how “politicized” an artist will be about their art. Those who hold “non-collaboration” policies and engage in boycotts on Israeli art and artists hope to leverage their art to raise awareness about the need for political solutions. Those who do not have such policies hope that dialogue could lead to greater understanding and potential solutions, but are much less optimistic about the effects that organizing in the arts can have on actual politics. Instead, typical organizing among Arab American artists reifies models of both Arab unity and American multicultural pluralism through their collective work.

This study found that aside from questions of art and politics, being an artist entails circulating highly gendered articulations of identity in the marketplace of art and

culture. For women, this generally involves questions of sexuality and sexual representation. Arab American women tend to battle stereotypes of sexually repressed and oppressed femininity that they inherit both from their families and the preponderance of Orientalist archetypes in the public sphere. For single women who live on their own and socialize in a world that sanctions sexual experience, this places them in a bind when representing sexuality. Arab American female artists at once want to seem like sexually liberated and knowledgeable Westerners and yet chaste “good” Arab women. The results are often ambiguous portrayals of sexuality, loaded with negative outcomes for the future. While the American public appears eager for such representation, Arab Americans often find it false and part of a strategy of self-promotion by the artist. Representations of sexuality therefore become central to whether and how an Arab American female artist makes her career.

Arab American male artists are burdened with the most dominant stereotype of the Arab, namely that of the terrorist. The nexus of entertainment, academic, media, and government industries creates an environment of hostility towards Arabs and Muslims based on the association of Arabs with terrorism. This association implies deviance in multiple ways, including sexually. Sexual repression and homosexuality are often associated with the “abnormal” psyche of the terrorist; and both concepts fuel both fictionalized and real counterterrorism efforts, as demonstrated in the abuses at Abu Graib prison.

Most representations by and for Arab American male artists relate to this dominant construct. Whether playing a terrorist on TV, doing stand up comedy about being mistaken for a terrorist, or sympathetically portraying a terrorist, Arab American

artists are often trapped within the stereotypical association that they are desperate to break. Their antidote to the terrorist is the artist: sensitive, creative, loving, intelligent, and articulate (in English). Arab American male artists themselves embody what they believe to be the perfect foil of the terrorist. Their work often reflects their lives as struggling artists trying to dodge bullets of association with the most hated figure in America today. Because the terrorist is such a potent character within American popular culture, work that incorporates a challenge to the stereotype still benefits from its resonance with what captures public imagination. Beyond being narcissistic, this approach provides an entry into a highly competitive aesthetic economy for Arab American males.

Artists of Arab descent are often symbols of exceptional civility against all odds. They form the basis of human-interest stories, and are signs of hope that all is not lost to the evil other. Celebrating Arab American artists becomes a by-product of a war against Arabs and Muslims, the silver lining that indicates that this is all worth something. They are also sought out to explain the other in a sensible way. As artists, they therefore interpreted, by themselves and their audiences, as the alternative to the hegemonic construction of the Arab terrorist. Some artists see this as an incredible opportunity to be heard, and in such cases there is a mutual conflation of recognition of the individual with recognition for a political cause.

While Arab Americans combat the association of the ubiquitous terrorist with palatable cultural products, I argue that Arab Americans need to question the importance of representation in mainstream America as a vehicle for political change. Without organizing within the structures of political change, namely developing an active

constituency that can be mobilized to influence electoral politics and elected officials, then the achievements in the aesthetic realm will remain symbolic rather than material. Acceptance and promotion of Arab American artists will remain tokens of liberal tolerance and multicultural understanding.

Though this research proved to be a fruitful exploration of Arab American participation in the aesthetic economy, there are several areas that could have been expanded in order to achieve greater understanding of this economy and its international reach. First, with greater time and resources, I would have liked to interview curators and programmers at major mainstream cultural establishments such as the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney, prominent galleries, theaters, publishers, and film and TV producers. Though these institutions have the means to publicize their curatorial decisions directly to the public, it would have been interesting to hear insider stories about the trials and tribulations of mounting exhibits or performances by Arab American artists. I would like to know if programming Arab American material proved to be exceptionally challenging relative to other ethnic minorities or non-ethnically identified art, or if there were any benefits from showing such work, like greater funding opportunities, audiences, or critical acclaim. Such information would speak to the actual currency of Arab American art within non-profit and for profit art worlds.

The second area for future research would be to explore the interrelationship of Arab American artists with the Arab world. Though raised and educated in the West, most of the artists in my study produced or performed work in relationship to the Middle East. Materials for conceptual art exhibits are collected; films are shot with Arab and Arab American casts; comedy is performed; plays are screened; choreography shared and

developed. The artists live and contribute to the lives of Arabs in the Middle East by teaching in universities, hosting other international artists and curators, and even engaging in humanitarian relief. While the bulk of their income comes from the sale of their work in the West and other international art markets, there is burgeoning interest in their work in the Middle East. For example, the *Axis of Evil* comedy troupe now tours the Middle East. King Abdullah of Jordan is a huge fan and invites the comedians to his palace. Dean Obeidallah says that everyone in the Middle East thinks they're famous because they had one taped show that was aired on multiple occasions on Comedy Central, and that he could simply do three or four shows there to earn enough money to live on for the year in New York. On a more surreal note, a Palestinian woman working for the U.N. in Iraq reported on Arabny that a play by Betty Shamieh at the Public Theater was reviewed in a local paper in Baghdad. I believe it would be fascinating to know what Arabs in the Middle East make of their Arab American counterparts, both artistically and otherwise. At this point, it seems that they appreciate Arab Americans for connecting them to the Western world in a lighthearted and commercial fashion. Arabs in the Middle East already consume so much American culture that Arab American artists are even palatable to them.



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