The Politics of Legibility: Writing and Reading Contemporary Arab American Women’s Literature

by

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on contemporary literature produced by Arab American women authors. My study utilizes the works of Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Laila Halaby, to raise questions about the processes, methods, and practices of writing, publishing, and reading Arab American women’s literature. Influenced by developments in contemporary Arab American studies, postcolonial, and reception theories, this dissertation examines, from an interdisciplinary perspective, novels, poetry, prose, and online articles that these authors produced in the aftermath of the First Gulf War until today (1993-2007). A study of this literature, I argue, facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the history of Arab American literature, its recent trends, and possible futures.

Chapter Two focuses on the work of Diana Abu-Jaber, one of the most important Arab American women authors today. Tracing literary developments, shifts, and alterations in the author’s work, I argue that Abu-Jaber uses her writing to humanize Arab Americans for her predominantly western audiences. Focusing on what I see as shifts in the author’s political commitments and ideals, I analyze her large body of works in order to understand how they are influenced by the western publication industry, marketing strategies, reader demand, and literary fame.

Chapter Three deals explicitly with the works of Mohja Kahf as I examine the author’s attempt to reconfigure Islam’s negative status in the United States by defying the politics of literary representation and challenging the restrictive cultural, racial, and religious boundaries of the Muslim ummah or community. I argue that the author’s work
challenges both the mythologies of representations surrounding the figure of the Muslim woman in the West and the gendered and sometimes exclusionary parameters of the Muslim ummah in the United States.

In Chapter Four, I shift my focus to the writings of Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hammad, and Laila Halaby. I examine how these authors negotiate the national trauma of September 11, 2001 and state of emergency ensuing in the wake of the attacks. I assess how these authors render legible Arab American and Muslim American encounters of 9/11 and its aftermath.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Contextualizing Arab American Women’s Literature

In 2007, the Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI)\(^1\) issued a call for a conference entitled, “Writing While Arab: Politics, Hyphens, and Homelands.” The conference, comprised of Arab American writers, bloggers, performance artists, and academics who study their works, sought to address the challenges facing Arab American writers in the post 9/11 climate. Held in Detroit, Michigan, one of the largest Arab communities in North America and home to the Arab American National Museum, conference organizers solicited papers that examined the relationship between national and international politics and contemporary Arab American literature. Panelists were asked to address, among other things, two central questions in their submissions: “Are some Arab American writers benefiting from self-commodification and perpetuating Arab stereotypes? What kinds of narratives receive wide circulation and which do not?” The conference aimed to develop a theoretical understanding of the political, economic, and social factors guiding the rising interest in Arab American literature after the September 11, 2001 attacks. While a focus on gender was not directly stated, panel presentations predominantly

\(^1\) The Radius of Arab American Writers was developed largely out of the perceived need for Arab American writers to connect with one another. Frustrated with American media’s coverage of the Gulf War, Arab American writers discussed how they could use their craft to support one another’s literary careers. Mohja Kahf was among the first writers to join the collective in the early 1990s and is credited with the naming of the group. Interestingly, the acronym RAWI also denotes storyteller in the Arabic language. Today, the organization represents more than 250 established and aspiring Arab American artists, providing professional and literary resources for its members. See “About Us” at http://rawi.org/CMS/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=51
examined the works of Arab women writers and discussed their rise in literary fame and recognition. A salient feature in the discussion was an implicit understanding of the connection between the writing of Arab American literature and the political environment in which this literature is written, published, and consumed. Influenced by developments in contemporary postcolonial and reception theories, and ethnic studies, the conference generated fruitful discussions about the history of Arab American literature, its recent trends, and possible futures. In more ways than one, the questions and ideas guiding the RAWI conference shape and infuse this dissertation project.

*The Politics of Legibility* examines the processes, methods, and practices of writing, publishing, and reading works by Arab American women writers. While drawing from the important questions and ideas emerging from the RAWI conference, this dissertation engages critically with recent scholarship on Arab American and ethnic literatures in the United States. Guided by this growing body of scholarship, this dissertation project takes seriously, for example, Salah Hassan’s and Marcy Knopf-Newman’s criticism of the “disabling disconnect between the political determination of Arabs in the US, their cultural production, and the academic study of Arab Americans” (5). To redress this “disconnect,” Hassan and Knopf-Newman encourage the reading of Arab American literary production through a critical race studies lens. They write, “This disconnect can only be overcome through an unrelenting critique of the racialization of Arabs in the US and at the same time a thoughtful scrutiny of the political and cultural self representation of Arabs” (5). The insistence on the importance of placing the study of
Arab American literary works within a study of the history, politics, and culture of “racialization of Arabs” in the United States is one that I consider throughout the writing of this project. This dissertation thus attempts to bridge the study of literary production by Arab American women with a sustained critical race analysis. Analyzing works by first generation Arab American women writers like Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hammad, and Laila Halaby, my project places this literature within a contemporary political, socio-economic, and historical context. Raising questions about the practices of writing and reading Arab American women’s literature, my dissertation places the stunning growth in this body of works within a useful and theoretically complex critical and historic framework. I agree with Lindsey Moore who argues that “despite a relatively short literary history, we should by now have progressed beyond patronizing admiration that Arab Muslim women write at all” (4). Throughout this project, I will purposely move away from a simple appreciation of Arab American women as producers of literature and provide, instead, a gendered critique of their literary works. In what follows, I offer a brief discussion illuminating the scope, emphasis, and purpose of this dissertation project.

Global Markets and Orientalist Designs

Recent developments in Arab American literary studies, including the publication of Amal Amireh’s and Lisa Suhair Majaj’s groundbreaking collection of essays, Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers in 2001, have
greatly benefitted from the insights of postcolonial, ethnic, and multicultural studies. In making this claim, I agree with Waïl S. Hassan who argues in an essay on the relevance of postcolonial theory to contemporary Arabic literature that “Postcolonial studies and Arabic literary studies have much to offer each other. Postcolonial studies can add valuable dimensions to Arabic literary scholarship—interdisciplinary inquiry, theoretical sophistication, and historical contextualization” (59). Their work epitomizes Hassan’s belief in the usefulness of postcolonial theory for Arab literary studies, demonstrating the value of contemporary multidisciplinary theorizations for the study of third world women writings in western contexts. Utilizing postcolonial, feminist, and multicultural theories, Amireh and Majaj discuss increased academic interest in third world women writers. Their work offers an academic inquiry into and critique of the incorporation of third world women writers into feminist studies and literary studies in the western academy. Benefitting to a large extent from the work done by postcolonial and feminist literary critics like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravotry Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Amy Kaplan, they argue that this incorporation operates as a corrective measure to a predominantly “Eurocentric feminist movement” that had not – in the past – made room for “Third World women” and their experiences (1). In the field of literary studies, the incorporation of third world texts, including the positive accounts of migratory ethnic experiences, challenges the heavily Euro-centric literary canon. While important, this incorporation operates, as Amireh and Majaj demonstrate, to reify western conceptions of
the other, buttressing the marginality of third world women.² While Majaj and Amireh are not the first literary critics to study the reception of third world women writers, they are pivotal figures in the study of the reception of works by Arab women authors.³

Analyzing the movement of literary works from third world to first world contexts, Amireh and Majaj question in their work the processes through which texts become available in global markets, arguing for the importance of studying and analyzing how “literary decisions come together with marketing strategies and assessments of audience appeal (ranging from interest in the ‘exotic’ to feminist solidarity) to foreground certain texts and repackage or silence others” (4). Although Amireh and Majaj are critical of the western publication industry and the politics of reception of third world women writers, they are careful not to revoke the agency of these authors, or deny their own participation in the complicated processes of marketing and commodification. In other words, Amireh and Majaj do not posit third world women writers as victims of the publication and reception industry. Instead, they call on literary critics to question and

² Amireh and Majaj are not the first critics to make this important point. In her highly influential “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Mohanty addresses the reliance of western academic inquiry and knowledge on the production of the Third World Woman “as a singular monolithic subject” (17). Mohanty’s essay interrogates the “process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World” and the exercises of power that occur through this process (20).

³ The number of critical studies dedicated to analyzing the reception and publication of Arab American women’s literature in the past decade alone, and utilizing some of the critical frameworks laid out by Amireh and Majaj, is indicative of the popularity and importance of this area of study. These works include Lindsey Moore’s Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film (2008), Amal Talaat Abdelrazek’s Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings (2008), Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon’s The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology (2005), Anastasia Valassopolous’ Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing: Cultural Expression in Context (2005), and Suad Muaddi Darraj’s edited collection, Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing (2004).
examine the processes of both foregrounding and silencing third world women’s literary voices, arguing for the importance of further academic study and inquiry into this area.

Although Amireh and Majaj focus on the movement of literary works from third world to first world contexts, their study offers Arab American literary critics a significant understanding of the theory, history, and politics at stake in the reading of Arab literary works in western and non-Arab contexts.

To develop their argument, Amireh and Majaj use the case study of the continuing translation, positive reception, and somewhat deceptive packaging of the writing of the famous Egyptian writer, feminist, and medical doctor Nawal El-Saadawi. The contemporary reception and continued celebration of El-Saadawi’s work draws attention to the myriad operations of power at play in the western production, reception, and consumption of literary texts by third world women writers. Repeatedly invited to speak on university campuses about the oppression of Arab and Muslim women, El Saadawi’s transportability from local to global contexts dehistoricizes many of her legitimate feminist concerns, including her passionate and dedicated work against the practice of Female Genital Cutting. El Saadawi’s literary corpus, as Amireh and Majaj show, is often deployed to “[reinforce] existing stereotypes about Arab culture in the West, with the result that Arab women were harmed more than helped” (7). Her acceptance and acclaimed status in the west has led many Arab critics to discredit her works, arguing that “El Saadawi was writing for a Western audience, not for them” (7). This tension between the author’s local and international receptions is certainly worth literary analysis and
critique so that we may come to a better understanding of the consequences of literary fame in global markets.

In an excellent and detailed case study of El Saadawi’s work, Amireh describes the “rewriting [of] both the writer and her text according to scripted first-world narratives about Arab women’s oppression” (“Framing Nawal” 269). Amireh discusses, for example, the mistranslation of El Saadawi’s Arabic work from Al-Wajh al-ari lil mar’a al-’arabiyyah (1977), literally the “Naked Face of Eve,” to the English version, The Hidden Face of Eve (1980). Amireh demonstrates how El Saadawi’s Arabic work, which historicizes the oppression of women under both patriarchy and capitalism, and asserts the author’s socialist leanings, was translated into a veritable account of the oppressed and denigrated status of Arab women. El Saadawi, a celebrated and acclaimed author in the west, is one of the most controversial Arab women writers; the example of the literary and mainstream reception of her writing provides critics with important insights into the interplay of the categories of ethnicity, race, gender, and religion in the western reception of Arab women writers. The curious western literary embrace of El Saadawi’s many works is integral for any critical study that concerns itself with the politics of reception.

Nowhere is the evidence of the intricate publishing and marketing dynamics and practices of Arab women’s writing more apparent than in the packaging of Jordanian Palestinian writer Fadia Faqir’s first novel, Nisanit (1987). The novel, a work of fiction exploring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the viewpoint of Shaheed, a young Palestinian fedai, or guerilla fighter, grapples with the politics of occupation, exile, pain,
and torture. Determined to oppose an oppressive and colonizing military regime, very much resembling the contemporary Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Shaheed engages in a failed military operation that leads to the death of his brother and his capture and imprisonment. As Shaheed languishes in prison, the novel provides an account of the life of his torturer, David. Told from multiple viewpoints, the work portrays the complex psychology of occupied and occupier, tortured and torturer. It does not offer a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor does it purport to redress the gendered impact of occupation and war. Instead, it seeks to explore the dangers of heightened military, nationalist desires and aspirations. Having received very little critical attention for its literary qualities and merit, Nisanit is continually drawn upon as an example of misleading marketing and packaging of a work by an Arab woman author. Published during her tenure as a doctoral candidate in the Department of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, Nisanit is the only novel of Faqir’s to be published by Penguin Press.

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4 Amireh and Majaj briefly discuss the cover of Nisanit, arguing that it “reflects none of the political themes of the novel, however, but taps instead into audience assumptions about Arab women” (5). The problem, Amireh and Majaj state, is the cover’s “[bearing] virtually no relationship to the actual novel, in which women and men live their lives within a complex weave of political, social, and economic pressures that are not reducible to a unidimensional ‘Islam’ or ‘patriarchal’ oppression” (5). Similarly, Lindsey Moore objects to the wielding of “expectations…which have nothing to do with a novel that focuses on the Palestinian intifada (uprising)” (6). Although I agree with these authors’ readings of the problematic rendering and packaging of Nisanit, the three critics ignore the politically useful strategy utilized by marketing and publication industries to veil the content of a novel that is so explicitly critical of the Israeli occupation.

5 Faqir’s other works include the critically acclaimed novel, Pillars of Salt (1996), and The Cry of the Dove: A Novel (2007), neither of which was published by a major publishing house such as Penguin. Surprisingly, both works have received more critical attention than her first novel which deserves further literary inquiry and study, especially for the unique insights this novel may yield into representations of Palestinian masculinities.
Nisanit’s book cover reveals some of the major dilemmas of contemporary practices in western marketing and publication of fiction by Arab women.

The ubiquitous and iconographical image of a woman in a black burqa on the cover of Faqir’s novel invites readers into the mysterious and exotic world of Islam. Wielding the assumption of Arab and Muslim women’s oppressions, the cover presents a lone woman, shrouded in black. The novel, readers are encouraged to assume, is a work of fiction about an isolated and perhaps even alienated Muslim woman. It is a cover that reifies the Muslim or Arab woman as an ethnographic subject whose life is always and already constituted and defined through her gender and religious positionings, thus limiting the possibility of seeing her life as also, and mutually, structured by class, politics, race, nation, and nationality. While my dissertation does not examine Faqir’s novel, I am
interested in this work because of what it tells us about the western publication industry, its shaping of global markets, and consumer demand.

In her discussion of memoirs and life narratives of Afghani women, Gillian Whitlock argues that many Muslim women’s narratives saturating the North American market today “draw on the burka metonymically” (58). For Whitlock, this configuration allows both publication industries and readers to “[tap] into a fantasy of illicit penetration of the hidden and gendered spaced of ‘the Islamic World’” (58). Although Whitlock does not discuss Faqir’s novel, her reading of the Orientalist imperatives guiding recent memoirs by Afghani women aptly describes the representation, packaging, and marketing of Faqir’s fictional work. Drawing on the work of Gérard Genette in *Paratexts*, Whitlock reminds literary critics of the multiple and intersecting functions of “peritexts” or “liminal devices that mediate the relations between text and reader” (57). These devices, which include a book’s cover, title, reviews, and endorsements, as Whitlock argues, enact a relationship between the reader and text and therefore warrant particular study and consideration. Following Whitlock’s example, then, it becomes also important to analyze the blurb on the cover of *Nisanit*, which celebrates the text as an “ambitious

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6 Gérard Genette writes, “I give the name publisher’s peritext to the whole zone of the peritext that is the direct and the principal (but not exclusive) responsibility of the publisher (or perhaps, to be more abstract but also more exact, of the publishing house) – that is, the zone that exists merely by the fact that a book is published and possibly republished and offered to the public in one or several more or less varied presentations. The word zone indicates that the characteristic feature of this aspect of the paratext is basically spatial and material. We are dealing here with the outermost peritext (the cover, the title page, and their appendages) and with the book’s material construction (selection of format, of paper, of typeface, and so forth), which is executed by the typesetter and printer but decided on by the publisher, possibly in consultation with the author” (16). Genette’s desire to read the construction and presentation of text in a material way is one I find useful for my discussion of works by Arab American women writers.
solution to a perhaps impossible task: seeing the Arab-Israeli conflict whole.” Not only
does this politicized blurb, taken from *The New Statesmen*, appear to contradict the
book’s cover, but it also places upon the writer and text the difficult task of representing,
resolving, and even curing the “Arab-Israeli conflict whole.” Veiling its explicit and very
courageous criticism of occupying states such as Israel, the novel’s packaging presents a
work of fiction that promises an ambivalent relationship to the Palestinian struggle and
guarantees an even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Overlooking the
text’s worth as a fictional work, *Nisanit* is presented as a social and historic document.
What literary and creative license the author has in the packaging and marketing of her
own works is of course a complex question, warranting an understanding and an
appreciation of the global and local operations of literary supply and demand.

To be sure, the question of whether works by postcolonial and ethnic writers are
commodified, read, or even published at all is not a new one. Literary scholars have
analyzed the ways in which the writings of racialized and postcolonial authors become
saleable products as they move (and are moved) from third world to first world contexts.
Scholars such as Graham Huggan have discussed how material differences between
authors and their works are erased through commodity fetishism or “the veiling of the
material circumstances under which commodities are produced and consumed” (18).
Postcolonial critics have enhanced literary and critical understanding of the politics at
play “in the process of consumption” (Huggan 19). Benefitting to a large extent from the
insights of other critics such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravotry Spivak, Sara Suleri,
Stuart Hall, and Arjun Appadurai, Huggan’s seminal work, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), urges literary critics to view commodification as neither a naïve nor innocent process. Operating from the confines of what he terms “the alterity industry,” Huggan refuses to posit postcolonial and ethnic writers as objects of this process. He suggests, instead, that these writers simultaneously participate as subjects and objects of “exoticist codes of cultural representations in their works” (20). For Huggan, postcolonial authors are embedded within the process of their own commodification and thus contribute “to varying degrees, in the production, transmission and consumption of postcolonial literary/cultural texts” (20). Huggan’s work is crucial to understanding the implications of the global circulation of literary texts from one place to another; his work elucidates the process of “cultural translation through which the marginalised other can be apprehended and described in familiar terms” (24). Huggan’s insistence on simultaneously analyzing both the opportunities for, and the restrictions on, ethnic writers in global markets is crucial for my understanding and analysis of Arab American women’s literary production.

Because Arab American women’s literature is today a valuable cultural and literary commodity, it offers literary critics new insights into familiar questions: How is contemporary Arab women’s literature shaped by recent literary trends in a globalized market? How is this growing body of literature responding to this political and historic moment of American Empire? What role can this literature play in negotiating Arab American identity, history, and future? If Arab Americans are America’s cultural others,
how is literary self-representation used to enact the American promises of social justice, racial equality, and economic prosperity in the United States? And perhaps even more importantly, how does the rising growth in Arab American women’s literary production prompt a rethinking of the contemporary history of the United States?

**Literary Criticism and Arab American Women Writing**

The publication in 1994 of Joanna Kadi’s edited collection, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, is often cited as a “landmark” moment in Arab American literary history (Majaj, “Arab-American Literature” 8). The edited work, which includes essays, short stories, poems, and reviews of writings by Arab women and feminists, grapples with questions of race, racial configuration, belonging, and naming of Arab experiences in North American societies. Writing on this collection, Majaj commends Kadi’s efforts to delineate – in complex ways – “the conjunction of personal, communal and historical concerns shaping Arab-American experiences” (9). Influenced by anti-racist, feminist, and anti-colonialist agendas, the project offers literary scholars “landmarks, signposts, names, and directions not only for Arab-American and Arab-Canadian communities but for other communities of color and our allies” (Kadi xvii). What is striking about Kadi’s impressive collection of works by Arab American and Arab Canadian women is the difficult questions she asks about Arab identity: Kadi does not assume Arabness as a predetermined or inert racial
category. Instead, she recognizes the limits of this term and comments on both its inclusionary and exclusionary potentialities. Of the “problems” with the term “Arab,” Kadi writes,

It does not link us to larger groups of people of color, that is, Asians and Africans, but rather sets us apart and in isolation. This problematic dynamic already exists, because few other groups of color know much about or care much about Arabs. It feels important to me to disrupt and change that pattern. Second, ‘Arab’ excludes those three countries with whom we share so much – Armenia, Turkey, and Iran. (xviii)

Kadi’s identification of these problematic aspects of the word “Arab” is relevant to my discussion of the past and new racial configurations and constructions of Arab American identity in North America today.

Kadi’s struggle to find an appropriate and sufficiently encompassing category of identification for people of Arab origins informs many of her introductory critical insights. Kadi asserts that the difficulty of naming Arabs as a group of people in the American and Canadian contexts is caused by a conspicuous absence of Arabs from sites of political, social, and racial resistance. This absence makes Kadi describe the Arab community in North America as “The Most Invisible of the Invisibles” (xix). Her criticism is not necessarily directed “only to white people who refuse to see us” but also to “other people of color—Latinos, Africans, Asians, Natives—who do not acknowledge our existence” (xix-xx). In other words, Kadi laments the absenting of Arabs from

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7 Writing on the use of “diaspora” to imply identity in Kadi’s collection of works, Iman Mersal comments in an issue of PMLA, “The writers in this collection recount their discovery of their identities, of being who they are. Life-story narrative is the main genre here: identities are interrogated, and discoveries are based on such diasporic experiences as racism, the image of Arabs in the media, and reading biased historical accounts” (1582). Mersal questions the use of diaspora as a simple search for identity and wonders whether diasporic identities become hegemonic means of reducing very complex and varied racialized experiences.
communities of color. This concern with the racial identification of Arabs has received much literary attention and discussion from Arab American writers. In fact, the question of race and racialization emerges very clearly in all of the works that I study in this dissertation.⁸

While recent historic events may have rendered inaccurate Kadi’s labeling of Arab communities as “Invisible,” her conceptualization of race as a changing and shifting social and political phenomenon is particularly relevant for this study of Arab American women’s literature. Focusing on the issue of race, Kadi’s collection also addresses questions of gender and gender oppression in relation to Arab women. Food for Our Grandmothers is simultaneously concerned with articulations of race and gender. In many ways, Kadi’s collection of works responds to what Majaj describes as “the stereotypes of gender oppression within so-called inherently misogynistic Arab societies and communities” (“Arab American Literature” 9). This desire to problematize western representations of gender relations in Arab communities and analyze them from Arab American and Arab Canadian women’s perspectives is evident throughout the works in Kadi’s collection. This collection’s emphasis on the importance of reading both gender and race as primary concerns of Arab American women’s literature is one I too recognize as an imperative for any study of Arab American literary production.

⁸ In her useful historic account of Arab American literature, Majaj makes a similar claim about the importance of race in Arab American literature when she argues that “perceptions of race have always shaped Arab-American literature, whether directly or indirectly. As we saw, early Arab-American writers, realizing that ‘American’ meant Christian, European, western, and white, consciously tried to write themselves into these categories. Contemporary Arab-American writers, in contrast, increasingly interrogate and challenge U.S. racial categories” (“Arab American Literature,” 10)
In making an argument about the importance of analyzing both race and gender when studying Arab American women’s literature, I am drawing on the theoretical insights laid out by many Arab American scholars, including the recent works of Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Sultany. In their introduction to a special issue on Arab American women entitled, *Gender, Nation, and Belonging: Arab and Arab-American Feminist Perspectives*, the three authors aim “at disrupting the dichotomies (private/public, fact/fiction, oppressed/liberated, us/them) that have long marked the study of gender and sexuality regimes and dynamics in the Middle East” (7). Their edited collection of essays, poems, and autobiographical accounts of Arab American women’s experiences grapples with “sexism, racism, and exile” (19). The editors’ intersectional approach to these issues provides “situated and contextualized readings of a slice of the complex gender sexuality regimes that have circumscribed and empowered [Arab American women’s] lives” (19). Throughout my dissertation, I utilize this situated and intersectional critical framework in my discussion of Arab American women’s literary production. I do not analyze patriarchy as a singular site of Arab American women’s oppressions and do not posit Arab American culture as a monolithic, static entity. Like Abdulhadi, Naber, and Sultany, I employ a gendered critique in order to study how the “multiple, intersecting axes of power, privilege, and oppression shape identities, as well as the sites and methods of resistance” (19) utilized in literary works by Arab American women writers. This means that my dissertation, while concerned with the shaping of Arab American identity, simultaneously engages with the use of literature as an important
means for contesting dominant narratives of Arab American otherness and marginality. The works studied in this dissertation raise important questions about how Arab American women writers utilize literature to challenge assumptions of their gender and sexual oppressions.

In another edited collection of works by Arab and Arab American women focused on the importance of writing their own literature, entitled *Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004), Barbara Nimri Aziz acknowledges the fact that “many committed Arab American personalities and experts have dedicated themselves to challenging erroneous and dangerous stereotypes” (xiv). Although she lauds and appreciates their efforts, she concedes that this work cannot on its own undo these misrepresentations or sufficiently redress their sources and outlooks. Aziz’s questioning of what literature can offer to “help … rebuild a fragmented, uncertain identity” (xxiii) is often echoed in the subject matters of the works I study. Concerned with the influence of stereotypes on popular understanding of Arab American identity and its future, the authors I discuss are invested in challenging, rewriting, and undoing the prevalent discourse of misunderstanding surrounding Arab American women and their experiences. The problem with this goal, however, is that it can structure Arab American women’s literature in limiting ways, rendering it curative in its content, form, and aesthetic.

This curative approach to the study of Arab American women’s literature is epitomized in Amal Talaat Abdelrazek’s short essay on the use of literature as resistance.
In her essay, Abdelrazek offers a positive reading of this literary desire to revoke stereotypes which frequently appears in Arab American women’s literature:

Like Scheherazad (sic), Arab-American women writers are telling their stories over and over again, using them to change the dominant configuration of their identities. In telling their stories, contemporary Arab-American writers take a stand against both the Orientalist and Islamic or Arab fundamentalist streams. (141)

While I agree with Abdelrazek’s general belief in the value of self-representation, I question the singular ability of literature to “change the dominant configuration” of Arab American women’s identities and experiences. Caught between “the Orientalist and Islamic or Arab fundamentalist streams,” Arab American women’s literature is continually posited as responding to and grappling with dominant modes of representation. This approach locks Arab American women’s literature into a cycle of defensiveness. More importantly, it renders difficult the reading of Arab American women’s literary production on its own terms. Although optimistic in its critical outlook, Abdelrazek’s reading overextends the ability of fiction to undo systemic and legislative forms of racism and discrimination.

Although heavily invested in the politics that shape and influence Arab American women’s literature, I specifically resist in my dissertation a type of reading that ignores its status as literature. This position is influenced by Amal Amireh’s cautionary note to literary critics who read works by Arab women writers as “sociological documents.” In a short but highly influential article on Arab literature in western markets, Amireh writes,

We need to encourage a vigorous critical discussion about Arabic literature and culture in the West – one that does not limit itself to the academy. The debate
should go beyond ‘appreciative’ criticism that condescendingly praises Arab women writers for ‘daring’ to put pen to paper. Serious debates about fiction will remind readers that they are reading not documentaries, but ‘literature,’ which draws on particular conventions and emerges from specific traditions. (“Publishing in the West”)

Amireh’s emphasis on the importance of moving beyond a simple and patronizing appreciation for Arab American women’s literary production is noteworthy. It is not enough, Amireh asserts, to admire Arab American women for the act of putting pen to paper. This type of appreciative scholarship often reinforces dominant social, cultural, and political orders. More importantly, her call for scholars to engage in “serious debates” that eschew the use of literature by Arab women as sociological and ethnographic cultural artifacts is one I have kept in mind throughout the writing of this dissertation.

The growing body of scholarship on Arab women’s writings, including Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature (2008) by Lindsey Moore, Brinda Mehta’s Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing (2007), Anastasia Valassopoulos’ Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context (2007), and Suzanne Gauch’s Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism and Islam (2006), provides examples of important critical engagements with Arab women’s literature. In different ways, the aforementioned works foreground the study of Arab women’s literature within an existing and ongoing tradition of literary criticism. In her introduction to her book, for example, Valassopoulos questions the “reluctance to study and interpret the writing [of Arab women] alongside a tradition of criticism that we
seem to be accustomed to performing with other literary traditions” (3). Her study of Arab women writers performs the important task of reading this literature while simultaneously showing “how feminist, queer, postcolonial and cultural theories can all play a part in the negotiation of these texts” (3). This attempt to read Arab women’s literature through relevant theoretical frameworks and critical lenses can yield a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Arab literary production as a whole, as well as its interactions with other ethnic literatures.

Veiled Desires and the Writing and Reading of Arab American Women’s Literature in the Era of the War on Terror

In a 1990 essay entitled “Embargoed Literature,” Edward Said lamented the lack of academic interest in the study of Arabic literature in translation. In his article, Said questions the scarcity of Arab literary works in western markets “when tastes here for the non-European are more developed than ever before and, even more compelling, contemporary Arabic literature is at a particularly interesting juncture” (278). At the time of its publication, Said’s essay incited much critical debate among scholars who questioned and refuted Said’s blanket dismissal of serious and even encouraging developments in the study of Arabic literature in translation.9 His brief article – while

9 As my dissertation is not concerned with the study of Arabic literature in translation, I will not rehearse these debates here. For more information, see Peter Clark’s Arabic Literature Unveiled: Challenges of Translation, Richard Jacquemond’s “Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation” in Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology, and Mustapha Ettobi’s essay “Literary Translation and (or as?) Conflict between the Arab World and the West.”
polemical– has facilitated the questioning of the critical silence over Arab literary production in the west. A perhaps less explored aspect of Said’s essay, however, is its invocation of the significance of reading, understanding, and circulating Arabic literature in a time of war. Writing on the brink of the first Gulf War, Said’s essay decries the “horrific waste and potential violence of today’s gulf crisis” (280). In his somber conclusion, Said asks, “Is it too much to connect the stark political and military polarization with the cultural abyss that exists between Arabs and the West?” (280).

Conceding the “pathetically utopian” impulses guiding his investment in reading Arabic literature in western contexts, Said’s article posits the act of reading Arabic literature as an essential and urgent act in times of war.

Said’s question about the relevance of Arab literature to an American state on the brink of war has been answered through a stunning market demand for literature by women of Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim backgrounds and descent. Recent literary trends tell a story of a nation hungry for a glimpse ‘behind the veil’ of Arab and Muslim difference. The popularity, for example, of Iranian author and academic Azhar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) is a testimony to the complex web of reader desire, market demand, and contemporary world events and politics. In her excellent analysis of the popularity of Nafisi’s memoir in women’s book clubs in the United States and Canada, Catherine Burwell argues that the celebratory embrace of this work can be attributed, in part, to “the presence of framing structures that simultaneously promise white readers reassuring familiarity alongside ‘exotic’ difference, which reinforces
notions of First World centrality and superiority” (290). Burwell supports her argument by analyzing what she calls the “framing” of this work in western markets. Focusing on the packaging and marketing of this memoir, Burwell provides a sophisticated reading of the relationships between author, text, and readers, arguing for the importance of historicizing both the acts of writing and reading works by third world women. The by now familiar story of the unusual literary success of Azhar Nafisi is an issue I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. What I find compelling about Burwell’s analysis, however, is her emphasis on reading the popularity of this novel within a context of “war, invasion and increased militarism” in the United States (290). Burwell does not simply assume the western interest in this work as emerging from Orientalist desire, but contextualizes it within the contemporary exploitation of “stereotypes of oppression and the scripts of ‘global sisterhood’” in the service of Empire (291). The questions that Burwell uses to guide her analysis of the relationship between the act of reading and the fact of war are compelling for my analysis of the functions of literature by Arab American women in this contemporary historical and political conjunction.

Although none of the works I discuss in this dissertation has enjoyed the level of popularity that Nafisi’s memoir enjoys in the western literary market today, the growing interest in these works should raise critical alarm and concern. What, one might ask, motivates this academic and popular attention? What role do Arab American women writers play in speaking for and on behalf of the Arab American community at a time of war? Why has the increased interest in Arab American women’s writing coincided with
the events of September 11, 2001 and the ongoing American War on Terror? These are some of the questions that have guided me in selecting literary works for my study.

*The Politics of Legibility* is divided into three chapters. In Chapter Two, I investigate how the Arab American author Diana Abu-Jaber uses her writing to humanize Arab Americans for her predominantly western audiences. Focusing on what I see as shifts in the author’s political commitments and ideals, I analyze her large body of works in order to understand how they are influenced by the western publication industry, marketing strategies, reader demand, and literary fame. Chapter Three focuses on the works of Mohja Kahf as I examine the author’s attempt to reconfigure Islam’s negative status in the United States by defying the politics of literary representation and challenging the restrictive cultural, racial, and religious boundaries of the Muslim *Ummah* or community. In Chapter Four, I explore the racial and ethnic politics of writing and reading Arab American literature on 9/11. This chapter focuses on three major Arab American women writers: Suheir Hammad, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Laila Halaby. In all three chapters, I utilize the theoretical framework laid out in this introduction to understand and analyze Arab American women’s literature. In my conclusion, I examine briefly some of the tropes and ideas guiding this study and explore further areas of inquiry in Arab American literature.

The texts that I analyze throughout this dissertation project are particularly relevant because of both the place and period of their publication. Produced within the last decade and a half, the works that I have selected engage the historically vexed
political relationship between the United States, the Middle East, and Arab Americans. Published between 1993 and 2007, these works are – to a large extent – shaped and influenced by American military interventions in the Middle East from the First Gulf War to the present. Legibility is of course a two-edged sword: as Arab American women’s works become readily available in the western market, they are being read, deciphered, and analyzed. They are receiving today the critical attention and literary accolades that they deserve. The flipside of this increased visibility is that these works can simultaneously be misread, misinterpreted, and misused. Understanding and problematizing the role of both writers and readers in these complicated processes is the ultimate goal of this dissertation project.
Interest in Arab Americans over the past few years has led Arab American writers like Diana Abu-Jaber to address questions about the political aims and motivations of Arab American literature. Unlike Arab women authors who sometimes downplay the political, socio-economic and literary significance of their roles as spokespersons for Arab culture and experience to western audiences, Abu-Jaber believes her writing can positively contribute to the project of humanizing Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. Abu-Jaber’s works, which include three novels, entitled Arabian Jazz (1993), Crescent (2001), a memoir, The Language of Baklava (2005), and Origin (2007), reveal her

10 This chapter will not address Abu-Jaber’s second novel, Crescent. Although pertinent to the overall argument I make in this chapter, I have chosen not to include a discussion of this work because it has continually received more critical attention than any of Abu-Jaber’s other works. This uneven critical attention, as I will demonstrate, is largely due to the shift in Abu-Jaber’s political and literary commitments as outlined in this chapter. My position is that Crescent’s popularity stems from Abu-Jaber’s embrace of liberal politics and her celebration of notions of multicultural difference.

11 Abu-Jaber’s works also include the newly published mystery novel Origin (Norton). The novel marks a departure from Abu-Jaber’s past fictional works as it is concerned with a crime investigation of sudden infant deaths. In a recent interview about this work, Abu-Jaber discussed her decision to move into the mystery genre: “I just love to play and experiment and challenge myself. I’m a great believer that reading and writing should bring us joy and pleasure – not just serious struggle and intensity all the time. I’d never written anything like a mystery before and I really wanted to see if I could do it!” (http://www.curledup.com/intabuj3.htm). While this chapter will not examine this work, it is important to note the distinction that the author imposes here between her previous works with their “serious struggle and intensity” and her new novel. It is interesting that the reception of her latest novel has been lukewarm at best. In a review of the novel published in The New York Times, Brian Hall chides the author for “[trying] her hand at a thriller, leaving behind the casual culture of students and cafes to venture into the workaday world of crime labs and detectives.” Hall quickly and dismissively asserts that the reader “senses early on that she’s at sea” with the writing of her detective story. He encourages the author to return to writing on more familiar grounds; specifically, he encourages Abu-Jaber to write “the personal detective
commitment to describing the political challenges of Arab identity for the Arab American writer and immigrant. Her works seek to illuminate the humanity of Arab Americans by invoking traditional literary tropes of love, loss, exile, memory, and food. The works bring attention to the lives of Arab Americans who are torn between their desire to fully belong in the United States and their passion for an Arab identity, a home, and a history consistent with the imperatives of American national identity post 9/11. While Abu-Jaber acknowledges the moral and ethical dilemmas of representing Arab American experiences in legitimate and authentic ways, she believes her writing may “help start conversations, get people examining preconceptions or asking questions” (“Interview with Luan Gaines”).

I begin my dissertation by analyzing Abu-Jaber’s works because, in the words of Marcy Newman and Salah Hassan, who write on the rising popularity of ethnic women writers and the “gendering of ethnic literatures in the U.S.,” Abu-Jaber has emerged “as the central figure in Arab American literature” (11). By charting the thematic, political, and literary shifts and transformations in Abu-Jaber’s literary works, my aim in this chapter is to underscore the consequences of new-found literary fame. The chapter raises questions about the publication industry’s demands on ethnic writers of Arab American descent, focusing on Abu-Jaber’s encounter with and response to these demands in her story that we all share: the desire to understand where we come from.” This problematic pigeonholing of ethnic American writers and the insistence that they continually produce works about their “experience” is one that this chapter will examine and problematize.
first novel, *Arabian Jazz*, her shorter fictional pieces, and her personal memoir, *The Language of Baklava*. In particular, this chapter is invested in studying some of the politics of literary production, marketing, and consumption that underpin the act of writing and publishing Arab American fictional works in the United States. My chapter focuses on Diana Abu-Jaber’s encounter with both the consumerist demands of her mostly American readership and the political/ethical limits of liberal literary representations of Arab Americans. Focusing on a chronological account of her writings, I will demonstrate how Abu-Jaber’s political commitments are significantly altered by literary fame.

**Between Arab and American: A Profile of an Author**

To elicit “moment[s] of understanding and connection” between her western readers and her mainly Arab and Arab American characters and plots, Abu-Jaber’s works are heavily shaped by what she perceives as the realities of life for Arab Americans in the United States (Gaines). As a self-identified Arab American author living in the United States, Abu-Jaber writes with the purpose of influencing “communal misrepresentations” of Arabs in general and Arab Americans in particular (Steven Salaita, *Anti-Arab Racism* 106). Abu-Jaber’s novels represent Arab Americans as an integral part of today’s multicultural United States while insisting on the inherent Americanness and humanity of this maligned community.12 Abu-Jaber’s subject matter reflects her position as a self-

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12 Arab American literature has overwhelmingly struggled to assert the Americanness of this community. For example, the works of the authors studied in this dissertation suggest that contemporary Arab American
proclaimed multicultural and liberal-minded mediator who successfully straddles her mixed Arab and Irish-Catholic backgrounds. Her reviewers enjoy asserting her “in-between” status, deliberately focusing on her physical appearance as a white woman with an Arabic last name. Abu-Jaber sometimes endorses attentions paid to her physical appearance, asserting that “Growing up, I was given very mixed messages … I had my father, who said, ‘[Being Arab] is absolutely who you are.’ Then I had all these other people who were extended family – and also in the Arab community – saying, ‘No, no, no. This is much better. You want to look American; you want to be American.’ It was very confusing” (Cureil, “An Arab American Writer”). Although Abu-Jaber’s statement reifies the imaginary and problematic distinction between the racial states of being Arab and being American, her fiction attempts to reconcile these two states.

In an essay on the role of Arab American fiction, Gregory Orfalea explains this familiar humanist imperative in the following way:

Because humanity has been so lacking in American novels that treat Arabs in English … the Arab American novelist has indeed a mission beyond the normal one of making art. The Arab American novelist is giving birth to images of humanness … The closer he gets to what is real, the closer he gets to justice and redemption. The novelist’s aim is revelation, the ultimate clarity of the real. (117)

Orfalea’s articulation of the aims and struggles of the Arab American writer is an important one – despite the troubling birthing imagery he associates with this process. Indeed, Arab American authors often write and speak about their imperative to represent authors are preoccupied with attempts to negotiate a presence for themselves within the United States’ literary, political, and socio-economic milieu, a task that has gained particular importance and immediacy after the events of 9/11.
Arabs in humanizing ways to western audiences. With the difficult – if not altogether impossible – task of pleasing both a readership hungry for “authentic” and “real” accounts of ethnic life and experience in the United States, and an Arab American community that seeks just representations of itself, Abu-Jaber’s subject position as an Arab American writer, who seeks to redress negative representations of Arabs, is worth discussing here.\textsuperscript{13}

Abu-Jaber’s father immigrated to the United States from Jordan in the late 1960s. His family, having fled Palestine shortly after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, settled in Amman, Jordan’s largest city and capital. Unsatisfied with the limited economic opportunities of his new country, Ghassan Abu-Jaber immigrated to the United States. In Syracuse, New York, Abu-Jaber’s father met his future wife. The author’s mother is an Irish-Catholic American woman whose background, history, and racial identification Abu-Jaber was often compelled to ignore in favor of an assumed inherent connection – by virtue of paternal lineage – to her Arab ethnicity and culture.\textsuperscript{14} In an essay on Arab American writers’ identifications with “Communities of Color,” Andrea Shalal-Esa writes, “Growing up, [Abu-Jaber] and her two sisters were encouraged, even forced, to identify with their Arab heritage, but their relatives were also constantly

\textsuperscript{13}I am not suggesting that Arab Americans do not constitute a portion of Abu-Jaber’s readership. I am arguing, however, that Abu-Jaber’s readership is mainly constituted by mainstream, non-Arab American readers who seek her works precisely because of their potential to render Arab Americans visible, human, and real. Readers choose Arab American authors because they seek stories that can help corroborate their own pre-existing notions of ethnic experiences in the United States.

\textsuperscript{14}The romantic encounter between Abu-Jaber’s father and mother is described in the author’s memoir, The Language of Baklava. Shortly after her father’s arrival in the United States, Ghassan Abu-Jaber (or “Bud” as he is referred to in her memoir), is so struck by Abu-Jaber’s mother that he engineers an encounter between them, offering her a grilled cheese sandwich. See The Language of Baklava (46-48).
exhorting them to stay out of the sun to protect their milky white complexions so they could pass as white.” The conflicting messages about her racial identity feature heavily in Abu-Jaber’s works. For example, the three main characters in Arabian Jazz and Crescent, Jemorah, Melvina, and Sirine, are all products of marriages between Arab men and white, American women who struggle to locate themselves between these two identities. In fact, for Abu-Jaber, the theme of racial mixing often signals a promise of reconciliation and fulfillment for Arab immigrants in the United States. As Ruba Turjman argues, Abu-Jaber’s work focuses on the “perspective of individuals of mixed background,” relying on depictions of “inter-ethnic relations to bring two worlds together” (23).

Despite the family’s privileging of her physical “whiteness,” Abu-Jaber adamantly insists on “[identifying] herself as a woman of color, even choosing to keep the Arabic family name that caused her so much grief and misery as a child, and still requires tedious explanations, especially since the post-September 11 backlash” (Shalal-Esa). Abu-Jaber’s religious background and upbringing have also contributed to her understanding of herself as a person of color in the United States. Although raised a Syrian Orthodox Catholic, Abu-Jaber’s father converted to Islam while living in the United States and raised his family on an eclectic blend of faith and faithlessness. Of her religious upbringing, Abu-Jaber says,

My dad is quite secular … what he used to tell me and my sisters growing up is that it was important for us to have some kind of faith. He didn’t care what it was. I went through all sorts of stuff. I did the born-again Christian thing. I studied Islam and the Koran. I got confirmed as a Catholic. A lot of Muslims I grew up with in Syracuse went to the Greek Orthodox functions, because that was the
great social clearinghouse for the Arab community. So I was very comfortable in
that setting. (Cureil, “An Arab American Writer”)

Abu-Jaber’s “comfort” in these religious and racialized spaces has led critics to see in her
life and work a continual “existential balancing act,” one that she employs “to negotiate
her median identity located in the interstices of her Arab-Americanness” (Brinda Mehta
233). It is precisely this in-between status that has rendered her position so vulnerable to
criticism from the Arab American community.

With the publication of her critically-acclaimed novel Arabian Jazz in 1993, a
novel which addresses the experiences of Arab American immigrants in the United
States, and one which was mistakenly claimed by some literary critics as the first Arab
American novel, Abu-Jaber quickly came under scrutiny and even attack. Of her
misrecognition as a literary pioneer, Abu-Jaber writes, “I don’t know if this is actually
true, but the claim alone seems to convey a great weight of respon-

The Language of Baklava 319). Abu-Jaber’s literary engagements with the difficulties of the
in-between status of Arab Americans have compelled the author to shoulder a great
burden. Writing from a similar ethnic background, novelist Mohja Kahf describes as
“merciless” the attitudes of Muslim readers towards Muslim women writers who succeed
in the west: “Critics in Muslim institutions tend to equate the Muslim woman writer with
the [publishing] machine, even if she is trying to keep her work from being mangled by
its gears. ‘Brown memsahibs!’ they call Muslim women writers who have ‘made it’ to
mainstream trade publishing, seeing them as in bed with the stereotypes’ agendas” (“On
Being a Muslim Woman Writer” 82). The responses to Arab-American fiction, like those
created by Abu-Jaber and Kahf, highlight the precarious position Muslim and Arab writers inhabit in the United States, both within their own communities and outside them. Often viewed as sellouts and traitors to their own communities, and welcomed as literary pioneers and visionaries in western literary circles, Arab American women writers struggle against the containment of their voices in what Amal Amireh and Lisa Suheir Majaj label as “predefined spaces” (1). According to Amireh and Majaj, these “discursive, institutional, and ideological structures” shape Arab American “discourse,” determining both what these authors can say and whether they will be heard (1).

Like other Arab American authors, Abu-Jaber must grapple not only with the contained discursive spaces created by the publishing industry but also with the criticisms of Arab American reviewers and readers. In The Language of Baklava, a personal memoir about the difficulties of growing up Arab American, Abu-Jaber bemoans the fact that she became a “punching bag” for many Arab Americans who objected to what they saw as stereotypic and problematic depictions of their experiences in her works. Abu-Jaber attributes this “backlash” to the common perception that Arab Americans are unfairly depicted in media and print:

It seems that a great lament rises up from the Arab-American world and runs in the living room: the sense of being unfairly cast, unrepresented, their unique stories and voices (aside from only the most extreme, violent, and sensational) unheard and ignored. In retrospect, I think that this lament was already in the air but by publishing a novel I just happened to provide a name and an address to mail it to. I am their disappointing American child – the one who didn’t speak Arabic, who didn’t sound or dress or behave in any way as an Arab is supposed to. And I understand why so many readers felt so betrayed, alone in America, where the only media images of Arabs are bomb throwers and other lunatics. (319)
Here Abu-Jaber places her community’s anger and frustration within a contemporary context of Arab American isolation, loneliness, and betrayal. Abu-Jaber’s reference to Arab American pain reveals what is at stake in writing fiction about this group’s experiences. She is cognizant both of the anguish felt and expressed by her readers, and the history of contemporary racist and stereotypic representations of Arab Americans within the United States. As someone who has first-hand experience with negative representations of Arab Americans in mainstream American media and culture, Abu-Jaber does not dismiss her readers’ anger or frustration, nor does she seek to isolate their concerns and dilemmas; rather, she reads their struggles through a collective (as opposed to an individualistic) lens, emphasizing the communal sense of disappointment, isolation, and anger. In fact, her assessment is further complicated by her own personal, political, and literary entanglements with a community desperate for recognition and acceptance and an audience in pursuit of “authentic” representations of Arab Americans.

In an essay on the mixed reception of Abu-Jaber’s novel Arabian Jazz, Pauline Kaldas portrays the difficulties of the position forced upon the “ethnic” writer whose works are read as “authentic” representations of culture (I will discuss the mixed reception of this work at a later point in this chapter). Kaldas argues that it is unrealistic of readers to expect that ethnic writers express all-encompassing “truths” about any one culture, and she insists this expectation curtails writers’ right to create fictional accounts and stories which may or may not encompass Arab American realities:
There is much at stake here: the representation of Arab Americans, the censorship imposed on minority writers by their community’s expectations, and the way the novel itself is defined. Surely the expectations we place on anthropological and social texts should not be applied to novels. A novel is a place where the writer can take fictional leaps and re-imagine reality. By judging Abu-Jaber’s novel on how accurately it reflects the reality of Arab and Arab American culture, we miss what the novel attempts to show us through its fictional story. (168-9)

For Kaldas, situating Arab American writers as anthropological interlocutors for western readers poses a number of interpretive problems – which I have raised briefly in my introductory chapter. Kaldas’s caution against reading literature as “truth,” and in consequence overlooking its “fictional story” and power, is important. By invoking Kaldas’s essay, I seek to highlight the pertinence, confines, and meaning of the concept of “fiction” when applied to ethnic women writers. Specifically, I am interested in examining how readers’ search for ethnic “truths” can actually compel writers like Abu-Jaber to become “representatives” of their marginalized communities. Does the tenuous line between fiction and “truth” hold when the Arab American woman writer chooses to write about her own experiences or those of her community to western audiences?15 And,

15 The nebulous boundary between fiction and non-fiction is a matter of contemporary literary concern. The publishing of James Frey’s “fake” memoir A Million Little Pieces (and Oprah’s humiliating public confrontation of the author regarding the “truth” of his experience) speaks to readers’ continued investment in and search for literary truth. The quarrel over the distinction between truth and fiction takes an even more incendiary form when it is directed towards examining – or verifying – the truth of works authored by self-identified ethnic women writers. Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and the controversy surrounding her memoir/novel serves as an obvious example of this. More recent examples can be seen in the reception of the works of contemporary authors like Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat who, faced with criticism from the Haitian community about her novel’s negative representations of Haitian culture, was compelled to include an “Afterword” to her first novel, Breath, Eyes, Memory. In this afterword, ostensibly addressed to her heroine, Danticat emphasizes the individual nature of Sophie’s difficult life experiences. Danticat encourages readers not to collectivize Sophie’s experience or draw from it misinformed conclusions about the life of Haitian women in general: “I have always taken for granted that this story which is yours, and only yours, would be read as such. But some of the voices that come back to me, to you, to these hills, respond with a different kind of understanding than I had hoped. And so I write to you now, Sophie, as I write it to myself, praying that the singularity of your experience be allowed to exist, along
perhaps even more importantly, how does reader demand shape ethnic writers’ representations of their communities?

In her capacity as a writer whose works are predominantly directed towards western audiences in search of “authentic” Arabs, Abu-Jaber has sometimes been received by Arab American communities with frustration and anger. Abu-Jaber’s disappointment and feelings of disillusionment at the negative critical reception of her work are allayed by her appeal to a grander ideological agenda: namely, Abu-Jaber believes her literature can subvert conventional understandings of Arab Americans and challenge negative representations of this ethnic and racialized group. The fact that Abu-Jaber’s fictional and autobiographical works have the problematic potential of rendering Arab Americans visible in light-hearted and comedic ways to predominantly western readerships remains an issue which she does not directly address in her works or her interviews. Abu-Jaber’s continual insistence on and celebration of aspects of the Arab

with your own peculiarities, inconsistencies, your own voice” (236; italics in original). This example is emblematic of what is at stake for contemporary ethnic women writers whose audience is predominantly located in the West and whose literary works are seen as speaking for women of racial and ethnic minority groups.

It is interesting that only one of her novels Crescent has been translated into Arabic (Al Hilal, 2005) and is readily available in Arabic bookstores. Abu-Jaber admits, however, that the reception of this work from Arab audiences has been lukewarm. In an e-mail exchange with the author, she writes, “I really don't know what the Jordanian reception of Crescent was – unfortunately it was a fairly limited print run and I suspect that only an elite class of Jordanians can afford new books. And the great irony is that the Jordanian elite class also tends to have an international education, so most of them would end up reading the book in English anyway. I don’t read or write Arabic nearly well enough to evaluate the translation or attempt my own. I understand there was a bit of a fiasco with the translation, in which the original translator had to be replaced! But I don’t know all the details on that score.”

Although Abu-Jaber does not deal with this directly, her reviewers and critics have examined the use of humor in her work. In an essay that deals explicitly with humor in Abu-Jaber’s Arabian Jazz, Pauline Kaldas suggests that “the humorous depictions of Abu-Jaber’s characters draw the American reader into the novel by minimizing the threat of reading about a minority group that is heavily weighed down by negative stereotypes” (172). Although this is a likely possibility, Kaldas’ essay does not address the troublesome
American community and experience which make them, as she says, “accessible, human, and familiar” to her readers, provide important insights into the political circumstances, motivations, and restrictions under which Arab American women writers produce their literary works (Alice Evans 43-44).

**Confronting Anti-Arab Racism**

*Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber’s first novel, was published in 1993. Mistakenly “thought to be the first novel published about the Arab-American experience” (Evans 42), it debuted to wide critical acclaim.\(^{18}\) Winner of the Oregon Book Award\(^ {19}\) and finalist for the National/PEN Hemingway award,\(^ {20}\) Abu-Jaber’s work explores the lives of an Arab American family called the Rammouds, who live in 1990’s Euclid, New

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18 In a review of Abu-Jaber’s works, Alice Evans extolled *Arabian Jazz*’s many virtues as a first novel in an important genre of fiction dealing with the “Arab-American experience.” Evans even declared *Arabian Jazz* the first novel dealing explicitly with the issues facing the Arab American community in the United States. In an essay entitled, “Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam: Cultural Negotiation in the Fiction of Joseph Geha and Diana Abu-Jaber,” Steven Salaita admits the difficulty of naming the first novel on Arab American experience, but he questions Evans’ evaluation of the work and asserts that “it is inaccurate to bestow this accolade on *Arabian Jazz*” (434). The obsession with naming the “first” Arab American novel continues to dominate many of the discussions about Arab American fiction. Although it is important to name Arab American literary predecessors, this impulse further marginalizes Arab American fiction and often relies on essentialist understandings of the history of Arab American racialization in the United States.

19 The Oregon Award is given annually to contributors whose works are considered to represent “the finest accomplishments by Oregon writers who work in genres of poetry, fiction, literary nonfiction, drama and young readers’ literature.” Past winners have included the following writers: Chang-rae Lee for *Native Speaker* (1992) and Chuck Palahniuk for *Fight Club* (1997).

20 The National/Pen Hemingway Award is bestowed upon American authors whose first novels are considered to be significant literary accomplishments. The aim of the National/Pen Organization “is to advance the cause of literature and reading in our region and to defend free expression everywhere.” Although Abu-Jaber’s novel was not selected for the Award, its short-listing as a finalist extends significant literary recognition upon this work.
York. The novel narrates the story of Moutassem Rammoud, an immigrant Jordanian father who marries an Irish-Catholic American mother and who is left, upon her sudden death, with the responsibility of raising their two daughters, Jemorah and Melvina. The affable, but absent-minded and sometimes clueless, father splits his time between playing jazz with his band and working in the maintenance office of the Euclid hospital. Without the guidance of a parental figure, the sisters must negotiate painful memories of their mother’s death and gradually discover their place as Arab Americans who just do not “seem right” (*Arabian Jazz* 328). Throughout the novel, the author draws upon her own experiences to find what she views as a “cultural balance between ancestry and America,” like “many first-generation writers” (qtd. in Simons).

The novel traces the Rammoud family’s search for a better understanding of itself by delving into both their Jordanian ancestral lineage and their contemporary American experiences. In his essay on the dilemmas of “Arabness” in the United States, as explored in the author’s second novel *Crescent*, Nouri Gana argues, Abu-Jaber does not seem to have a taste for squabbling over philosophical and intellectual privileges and alleged pleasures of exile, which many postcolonial writers and critics boasted about and then derided. Instead, she delves into the real, everyday experiences of Arabic Americans as they incessantly find themselves arched in what Marwan Hassan calls the ‘eloquent vulnerability’ of being Arab. (“In Search of Andalusia” 242)

These “real, everyday experiences” that Gana speaks of manifest themselves in *Arabian Jazz* through the author’s focus not on the seductive qualities of otherness but on a desire to expose her characters’ encounters with instances of labeling, dismissal, and racism in the United States. With its focus on the categories of race and ethnicity and the harsh
realities faced by ethnic others in the United States, Abu-Jaber’s first novel – like other “ethnic” literature in the United States – attempts to undo the problematic American ideal of citizenry which relies on the false juxtaposition of “real” and “ethnic” Americans. How this novel engages this troubling – and often racist – binary is an issue this section attends to by examining the dilemmas of both representation and reception. This section also claims *Arabian Jazz* as an example of the author’s early resistance to totalizing and liberal American narratives of economic prosperity, ethnic acceptance, and inclusion. In this section, I will primarily focus on Jemorah Rammoud’s encounter with these narratives.

Motivated by a personal interest in the politics that shape and inform the lives of Arab Americans in the United States, Abu-Jaber discusses (in many interviews) the difficulties of writing about Arab Americans’ racialized realities and experiences. In an audio interview with Ramona Koval for *Radio National*, Abu-Jaber describes the complicated racial and cultural predicaments of Arab identity:

> It’s so confounding when you deal with race and cultural identity, and that’s a big question mark for a cultural entity like the Arabs because there is so much fluidity and there are so many different strains of identity and cultures that make up the Arab peoples. We tend to think of race as being a definitive marker of identity but you find out that you can look different ways. My dad says that the Arabs are neither black nor white, they’re wheat-coloured, so that was this idea that there’s a way that you can be multi-identified and you can look many different ways, you don’t have to look a certain way. But if you don’t look a certain way it makes people very uncomfortable, and that’s something that I’ve encountered a lot with my own writing and with my own sorts of experiences in my family.
Abu-Jaber’s recognition of the ambiguous racial identity of Arabs reveals her discomfort with the use of race as a “definitive marker of identity” because of its inability to accurately portray or encompass myriad Arab experiences and realities. Abu-Jaber insists, therefore, on the “fluidity” of Arab identity and the existence of “many different strains of identity and cultures” amongst “the Arab peoples.” She explains that Arabness cannot be determined simply by looking “a certain way” and suggests that this ambiguity often “makes people uncomfortable.” Abu-Jaber’s discussion here resonates with Majaj’s argument that Arab American racial identities occupy a “contested and unclear space within American racial and cultural discourse” (“Arab Americans and the Meaning of Race” 320).

In her important article, Majaj traces conflicting historical constructions of Arab American ethnicity, preceding and leading to the United States Bureau of Immigration’s 1899 policy of distinguishing immigrants of Syrian and Palestinian origins from Turkish immigrants and effectively classifying Arabs as “white.” The official legal assignment of the ‘white’ racial category upon Arab Americans meant that Arab Americans were granted rights and opportunities that other racial minorities in the United States were not. This status, which was won through Arab Americans “suing for the right to naturalize as Arab Americans,” often meant that Arab Americans had to distinguish themselves from other racial minorities and closely align themselves with Christianity over Islam (Hartman 148). Although this official designation of Arab Americans as racially white still holds today, its “probationary” and precarious nature is clearly exemplified in
moments of national crises like that of 9/11 which brought about the questioning of the allegiances and alliances of this group. Majaj’s work expands upon the serious repercussions of this misleading classification, including its masking of instances of institutionalized and systemic anti-Arab oppression and discrimination in the history of the United States. Like Abu-Jaber, who is uncomfortable with fixed and monolithic racial classifications because of their inability to describe myriad realities and states of being, Majaj’s article outlines the shortcomings of a classification that renders Arab Americans as “conspicuously absent from discussions of white ethnicity” while simultaneously creating “contradictions for dark-skinned Arab Americans who are not socially perceived as ‘white’” (“Arab Americans and the Meaning of Race” 320).

Obviously, this limited racial classification, which delineates Arabs as racially white, creates similar kinds of “contradictions” and limitations for other minorities in the United States. In an essay on the politics of race and belonging in the United States, Ella Shohat, herself an Iraqi Jew, asserts the limitations of the United States’ census categorization:

The multi-layered history especially common to postcolonial displacements ‘exceeds’ the misleadingly tidy five-part United States census categorizations of ‘race.’ The census is in fact heterotopic, mingling issues of race (Blacks), language (Hispanics), and geography (Asians) as if they were commensurate categories. (291)

Shohat’s assessment of the faulty American census categorizations, which confuse issues of race, language, and geography, is especially important when seeking to understand the role that Arab American fiction can play in narrating heterogeneous, multivalent, and
even contradictory Arab American realities and experiences. Majaj is also aware of these limiting classifications and is therefore sympathetic in her work towards “the growing search among Arab-Americans for categories of identification able to account for their realities” (“Arab Americans and the Meaning of Race” 331). Abu-Jaber’s first novel, Arabian Jazz, is likewise preoccupied with this search; it attempts to locate a category of identification for its characters which accurately reflects what its author perceives as Arab Americans’ multiple identifications and states of physical, racial, cultural, political, and religious differences.

Set in the economically disadvantaged community of Euclid where everything “was virtually the same as it had been one hundred years ago when two roads intersected and that point was named” (88), the novel explores Moutassem Rammoud’s disoriented state of being. Moutassem awakens each morning to a state of disbelief; he is unable to come to terms with the fact that his wife has died: “His wife’s face was imprinted on his consciousness. He thought of her as he drove to work in the mornings through ice and rain. His sense of loss was sometimes so potent that he became disoriented” (1). Moutassem attempts to regain conscious control of his life through his drumming and music (1). His youngest daughter, Melvina, identifies her father’s “displacement … [as] a feature of his personality” (98). Moutassem’s state of loss and disorientation is not singly experienced, however; his daughters suffer as well. The loss of their mother dominates the daughters’ interactions with members of their family, such as their Aunt Fatima, and their community at large. Like their father whose “awkward relationship with American
society” (Kaldas 169) is manifested throughout the work, Jemorah and Melvina struggle to understand their place within a predominantly white society, especially after losing their maternal connection to it.

Jemorah and Melvina, both born and raised in the United States, lead lives that revolve around the small community they serve through their work at the hospital. Jemorah, who is a credit clerk, appears dissatisfied with her circumscribed lifestyle and is hungry for more meaningful interactions with others. Melvina is a head nurse for whom the nursing profession is a lifetime commitment and passion. Despite their personality differences, the sisters find themselves othered by their community and unable to come to terms with being Arab Americans. Faced with an unwelcoming neighborhood and a difficult childhood, the Rammoud sisters understand, at an early age, their positioning as racial and cultural others in Euclid. Through Jemorah’s and Melvina’s childhood recollections, readers of Arabian Jazz are asked to recognize the contradictory and often impossible task of achieving “authentic” Americanness.

As a young schoolgirl, Jemorah is taunted and teased by her classmates. These episodes in her childhood mark Jemorah, making her aware of her difference:

The other children taunted Jem because of her strange name, her darker skin. They were relentless, running wild, children of the worst poverty, the school bus the only place they had an inkling of power. She remembered the sensation of their hands on her body as they teased her, a rippling hatred running over her arms, legs, through her hair. They asked her obscene questions, searched for her weakness, the chink that would let them into her strangeness. She never let them. She learned how to close her mind, how to disappear in her seat, how to blur the sound of searing voices chanting her name. (92-3)
The experience of being labeled and dismissed marks Jemorah for the rest of her life. Unable to defend herself, except by shutting out her tormenters’ voices, Jemorah is stunned by her unwillingness to “let herself remember” the pain inflicted upon her by the children on the bus (93). Jemorah’s ability to identify her “strange name” and “darker skin” as markers that set her apart from the other children on the bus familiarizes readers with the ways in which racism is experienced by minorities in the United States. Jemorah’s inability to face her tormenters leads to her recognition that there “was no one to bear witness” to her pain (93). Instead of confronting her tormenters, Jemorah chooses to accept the truth of the children’s claims and comes to the conclusion that “those children had been right. She didn’t fit in even with them, those children that nobody wanted” (94). Jemorah’s insecurity over her position (even within this group of economically disadvantaged children) influences her decision to bear the pain in silence. Her internalization of their declaration of her otherness reveals how racism operates at the individual level.

While this social exchange may appear to suggest the existence of a homogenous category of “real” Americans whose approval the ethnic other continually desires, Abu-Jaber’s work exposes the artificiality of this category:

As Jem moved toward graduation and college, her tormenters scattered. The kids on the bus dropped out or got pregnant, went to juvenile homes, foster homes, penitentiaries, turned up poverty-stricken, welfare-broken, sick, crazy, or drunk. After a while, no one was left to remember the bus. (93)

The sad fate of the children of Euclid, who are themselves the sons and daughters of working-class Americans, destabilizes the power of white Americans over racial others.
By subjecting Jemorah’s tormentors to the harsh realities and conditions of life in poverty-stricken Euclid, Abu-Jaber deftly bridges the gap between Jemorah and the abusive children on the bus. In this way, the once powerful children’s naming of her difference is short-lived as it is undermined through their own struggles with socio-economic oppressions and mental health challenges.

Jemorah’s feelings of unbelonging and of being an outsider in the small city of Euclid continue into her adulthood. As her life moves forward, seemingly without purpose, she longs for meaning. Her unfulfilling job at the hospital under-utilizes her gift for understanding people as “a natural listener” and as someone interested in “reading about emotion and motivation,” and bears heavily on her soul (137). As a hospital clerk with the difficult job of securing timely payments from delinquent patients, “Jem felt guilty every time she told a weeping patient not to worry, that everything would be ‘just fine’” (141). Unlike her co-workers, who “clamped down on late payers, trapping [patients] in debt, threatening ruined credit, dispossession, and general devastation,” Jemorah is unable to detach herself from the suffering and worries of those around her (141). Her dissatisfaction with her job and general lack of direction lead her to romanticize the idea of being a “professional student” (136). Jemorah’s discomfort with her job even makes her eye the hospital custodians who “were almost always African American or Cuban” and wonder if she too were “meant to be out swabbing the floors with the others” and thus fulfill “her legacy” (144).
Abu-Jaber’s not so subtle comment on the American economy and its reliance on ethnic others for the fulfillment of menial tasks and demands is markedly absent from her later works. Here Abu-Jaber understands that class divisions in the United States are neither arbitrary nor short-lived. In fact, Abu-Jaber portrays Euclid’s stagnation in relation to the limited work opportunities available for most people and the general oblivion that characterizes many industrial cities in the Eastern United States. So many of these cities have become, like Euclid, “lost to the rest of the world” (260). In contrast to The Language of Baklava (which I will address at a later point in this chapter), where Abu-Jaber appears more at ease with the liberal American dream of upward mobility, Arabian Jazz portrays – and even insists upon – the futility of this dream for most.

In his important book, The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret, Michael Zweig argues, “The possibility of upward mobility has often been taken as a sign that classes don’t exist in the United States, or that class position is at most temporary and unimportant in such a fluid situation” (40). Unlike a conventional immigrant novel of success through perseverance and hard work, which can mask rigid class divisions in the United States and romanticize the notion of upward mobility, Abu-Jaber’s story repeatedly challenges and attempts to undo this myth. Zweig argues this myth continues to dominate American culture:

The myth of a classless society endures nonetheless because of individuals who have risen from modest beginnings to own their own business or lead a prosperous, respected professional life. The American Dream of upward mobility is promoted relentlessly in the popular culture. It has captured our imagination far beyond its reality. The Dream becomes the Myth when we focus only on the one who makes it rather than the many who do not. (41)
Interestingly, in Abu-Jaber’s first novel, the American Dream is not elevated to the status of “Myth.” In this work, not only do the main characters, Jemorah and Melvina, have very little hope of escaping Euclid or radically altering their lives, but the lives of the other characters confirm the virtual impossibility of achieving the American Dream. Contemplating the situation of the women who work in her department, for example, Jemorah has “the impression the office didn’t allow its staff to retire; they preferred that employees keel over on their keyboards” (135). The over-worked women, who were “aged eighteen to eighty-eight,” had little hope of ever finding other sources of employment, and “the rumor was that once an employee got in, she never got out again, not voluntarily” (135). Jemorah’s representation of the employees as imprisoned and the hospital wing as “the land time forgot” (135) distances her from a simplistic endorsement of individual success. Indeed, Jemorah calls into question the notion of reward for hard work and diligence, the very notion which fuels the American dream and characterizes its desire-driven economy. Instead, what we have are employees who “either died in office or [were] sucked into the murky water of Portia’s office” (135). These thinly-veiled condemnations of capitalism reveal Abu-Jaber’s early literary divestment from the liberal narrative of economic prosperity.

Abu-Jaber does not construct a racialized American heroine whose material and ethnic realities are rendered obsolete or irrelevant through hard work and sheer luck. In fact, Jemorah’s struggles make her even more aware of the concrete challenges barring acceptance and inclusion in American society. Without neither a solid plan nor a
“husband,” Jemorah’s indecision spills into her day-to-day interactions, and she begins to believe that resigning from her job may be her only chance for a better life and a different future: “[Jemorah] knew she would have to do something herself to change her life. She was going to quit her job” (133). Although Jemorah’s decision to resign is made early on in the novel, she is reluctant to inform her boss, Portia Porschman, about it. Jemorah’s fear of Portia’s anger immobilizes her. Portia, who is described as a foreboding woman of “about five foot two and [weighing] in the neighborhood of 250 pounds,” is also presented as “one of the toughest women Jem had ever seen” (134). Portia’s inexplicable control over Jemorah’s life – and the lives of the other women who work under her supervision – resembles capitalist America’s hold over workers. Steven Salaita too recognizes this hold and comments on the metaphor of the hospital as prison:

Throughout the novel, the hospital acts metaphorically as an imprisoning social environment for Jemorah. She has tried numerous times to quit but has hopelessly bent to the intimidation of Portia, noting each time that the entire clerical staff seems eternally bound to the machinery of the office, under Portia’s thumb. (“Sand Niggers” 436)

Salaita’s acknowledgement of the hospital’s “imprisoning” environment can be supported by Jemorah’s emotional state at various points in the novel. While important, Salaita’s focus on the social aspect of imprisonment is limited by its omission of the economic and physical aspects of Jemorah’s psychological and emotional confinement. The fact that Salaita attributes Jemorah’s metaphoric incarceration only to social oppression is problematic, for it ignores her cultural, socio-economic, and racial alienation, which are exacerbated by Portia’s iron rule at the hospital.
By describing her desire to escape her job and her boss, Jemorah sets the scene for the novel’s most severe and compelling scene, directly confronting anti-Arab racism in the United States. After months of deliberation and consideration, Jemorah is finally able to confront Portia with her decision to leave her job, and readers are faced with anti-Arab racism in its rawest and most ugly form:

Your mother used to be such a good, good girl. She was so beautifully white, pale as a flower. And then, I don’t know. What happened? The silly girl wanted attention. She met your father in her second year [of college] and she just wanted attention. We just weren’t enough for her. I’ll tell you, we couldn’t believe it. This man, he couldn’t speak a word of our language, didn’t have a real job. And Nora was so—like a flower, a real flower, I’m telling you. It seemed like three days after she met that man they were getting married. A split second later she was pregnant. I know for a fact her poor mother—your grandmother—had to ask for a picture of the man for her parish priest to show around to prove he wasn’t a Negro. Though he might as well have been, really, who could tell the difference, the one lives about the same as the other. (293-294)

Through this encounter, Jemorah discovers that Portia had known her mother when she was in college and Portia uses this knowledge to spew hate towards both Jemorah and her mother. Nora’s need for “attention” from a man who “couldn’t speak a word of our language” (my emphasis) befuddles and infuriates Portia. To justify her racist feelings and attitude towards Jemorah’s father, Portia claims ownership of the English language and Nora’s “beautifully white, pale” body. Her depiction of Jemorah’s mother as a “flower, a real flower” posits Nora as a fragile white woman who is in need of protection from predatory ethnic men. It is important to note here that Portia assumes Moutassem’s identity as black and dismisses him as yet another “Negro,” whose ways of living are
considered appalling by the white, supposedly enlightened, independent, and successful Portia.

Portia’s unprovoked racial attack on Jemorah and her family contains the classic elements of racial misrecognition and epistemic violence that characterize contemporary attempts to racially classify Arab Americans according to their skin color. Commenting on this American need to classify people according to skin color, Andrew Shryock writes,

‘Arabs are not uniformly light or dark in their complexions. Indeed, Arabs ‘look like’ a wider variety of people… Compare this to the relative ease with which Americans sort each other – or think they can sort each other – into black, white, and Asian categories. Then consider the odd fact that a third-generation American whose ancestors came from Syria might identify (and be identified) as ‘white,’ a Sudanese immigrant might identify (or be identified) as ‘black,’ and a Yemeni who migrated to the United States from India, where his family has lived for three generations, might identify (and be identified) as ‘Asian,’ yet all can simultaneously and credibly self-identify as ‘Arab.’’ (92-93; italics in original)

Shryock convincingly portrays the limits and banality of the shallow American preoccupation with sorting, classifying, and labeling one’s identity according to skin color, particularly in relation to Arab Americans.

Unable to dismiss Jemorah as simply the daughter of a “Negro” and a silly white woman whose attraction to dark skin condemns her – and her family – to a life without “any ambition” (294), Portia desires to change Jemorah and perfect her:

‘You know, it is not too late for you. Oh, sure, you’re tainted, your skin that color. A damn shame. But I’ve noticed that in certain lights it’s worse than in others. Your mother could have made such beautiful children – they could have been so lovely, like she was, like a white rose. Still, it could definitely have been worse for you, what with his skin. Now, if you were to change your name, make it Italian maybe, or even Greek, that might help some. I’m telling you this for love of your mother … You can come under my wing and let me educate you, really

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Portia’s racialization of Jemorah’s body and her reference to her “tainted” and impure color and dirty skin harkens to an American history of racial discrimination based primarily on skin color. By positioning herself as mentor to Jemorah, Portia is able to define and inscribe the limits of Americanness. What does it mean to be American?

Portia’s statement allows for some difference (Jemorah could – with the proper assistance – be Italian or Greek). However, Portia seeks to alter Jemorah and make her difference more acceptable by lightening her hair color and adding “pink lipstick.” Essentially, what Portia demands is assimilation. Her suggestion portrays a comfort and familiarity with dominant American racial codes and classifications that utilize skin color and the ideals of hegemonic femininity\(^\text{21}\) as bases for determining and drawing the limits of national affiliation and citizenship.\(^\text{22}\)

Although Portia is allowed to articulate vehemently her desire to “save whatever of [Jemorah’s] mother’s clean blood is left” and to “scrub all the scum right off” Jemorah

\(^{21}\) Drawing on R. W. Connell’s seminal work in constructing the term “hegemonic masculinity” to theorize power relations among men and further understanding of gender dynamics, I am utilizing the debated term “hegemonic femininity” to refer to the privileging of whiteness as a feminine ideal. I use the term to describe Portia’s privileging of white skin and cosmetic beautification as standards for American beauty. See Connell’s *Masculinities* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

\(^{22}\) The passing of the first American nationalization law in 1790, which guaranteed naturalization for aliens who were classified as “free white persons,” best exemplifies this national ethos. It is important to note that this law remained in effect until 1952 and has therefore had serious consequences on the racial makeup and classification of the population of United States. For more on this issue, see Clara E. Rodriguez’s *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2000). While this law’s long-term effects on population distribution have been widely discussed, the law’s consequences on contemporary American race relations have been less so.
(295), her irrational hatred is met with an angry – but assertive – Jemorah who responds to Portia’s racial tirade:

‘My father’s mother *was* black.’ The statement came from the back of Jem’s throat, so sudden she hadn’t known she was going to say it, the words like iron. Jem leaned back on her elbows, locking them against her shaking. ‘Yeah, a former slave. She married her master who had twenty-six other wives. They were black, brown, and yellow, and some didn’t even *have* skin.’ (295; italics in original)

Jemorah’s refusal to engage Portia on her terms overthrows Portia’s equating of whiteness with Americanness. Not only does Jemorah confirm Portia’s assumption of her father’s black lineage, but she appears to take pride in it as well. Moreover, Jemorah defeats Portia’s assimilatory invocations that she change her name and alter her appearance to fit better into American society by exposing potentially even more troubling facts about her non-white parental lineage. Refusing to accept Portia’s simplistic moral and racial dicta, Jemorah appears to celebrate and embrace her mixed background, emphasizing her family’s “brown, and yellow” skin; her final assertion that some of her family members “didn’t even *have* skin” negates the privileged position Portia usurps for white skin, thus rewriting the very relationship between skin color and dominant American discourse and ideologies of race. As Michelle Hartman writes, “Rather than negotiate an in-between status, Jemorah here claims a black identity. Jemorah does not try to explain the complexities of who she is as an Arab American to her racist and ignorant boss, but rather proudly declares her heritage as ‘black’” (155). Hartman’s representation of this exchange, while mindful of Jemorah’s refusal of an “in-between” identity, falsely juxtaposes Arab American and black identities as diametrically opposed, an opposition
that Jemorah adamantly rejects in her confrontation with Portia in the first place. Jemorah’s response to Portia goes further than a simple refusal of singular categories of identification and exposes what Shryock refers to as “the instability of ‘color’” as a means for racial identification for Arab Americans (92). Jemorah not only accepts black identity and makes it her own; she sees no contradiction between blackness and Arabness.

What is perhaps most striking about this culminating – and much discussed – scene is that it predates the anti-Arab backlash of 9/11 and its aftermath. As such, Arabian Jazz, while certainly not the first Arab American novel (as some critics like to maintain), remains one of those most openly critical of the liberal myths of the American melting pot, racial and ethnic harmony, and socio-economic opportunity in the United States. Even more significantly, however, Arabian Jazz espouses a notion of solidarity between people of color in the United States and thus engages a question that the Arab American community has been grappling with in earnest in the aftermath of the 9/11 events. As Nadine Naber writes in an article on Arab invisibility from American political and public discourse (published in 2000), “A heated issue being currently debated by Arab American scholars and activists is whether Arab Americans should seek minority non-white status or remain classified as whites/Caucasians. But the question of Arab Americans’ racial/ethnic classification is no simple matter” (50). Naber discusses in her work Arab Americans’ identification with people of color:

While many Arab Americans phenotypically (that is, hair texture or dark skin) pass as white, some live racially marked lives. Others are racially marked by
choice, because they consciously decide to self-identify as ‘non-whites’ or as ‘persons of colour’ to distinguish themselves from European American whites and to align themselves politically with other racially marked groups, such as blacks, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and/or Chicanos(as)/Mexicans. They employ the label ‘non-white’ or ‘people of colour’ as a political strategy for claiming their rights in the face of racial/ethnic or religious discrimination. (“Ambiguous Insiders” 51)

Naber’s assertion of the self-conscious and determined aspects of Arab American identification with people of color is significant as she is describing what is primarily a post 9/11 phenomenon among the Arab American community in the United States. In Arabian Jazz, this question is firmly answered: Abu-Jaber’s Arab American characters identify as people of color who stand in solidarity with other marginalized communities in the United States. By making Jemorah willingly identify as black, Abu-Jaber simultaneously affirms black identity and buttresses inter-ethnic solidarity between people of color in the United States without having 9/11 act as an additional contemporary political catalyst or motivation to establish such connections in the first place.

That Abu-Jaber is capable of unapologetically depicting Portia’s racist tirade sets this novel apart from her other works, which sometimes foreground the principles of peaceful co-existence between racial minorities and dominant groups and communities at the expense of genuine analysis or portrayal of racial, religious, and socio-economic differences and divides in the United States. Commenting on Abu-Jaber’s expositions of racism in her works, Salaita writes that Arabian Jazz reveals “the deep contradictions in American stances toward difference” through “direct and candid” textual moments
Salaita maintains that Abu-Jaber is not afraid of portraying racism in the United States at its ugliest. In Arabian Jazz, Abu-Jaber links instances of individualized racism to histories of American imperialism and colonialism; she does not render racism as simply a solitary act committed against an individual who is perceived as other and constituted as a threat, thus eschewing liberal understandings of racism as individual manifestations of ignorance and hatred. Instead, Abu-Jaber interweaves instances of oppression with actual histories of systemic American racism towards Native peoples and other racial minorities to showcase the institutionalized, collective, and historical nature of racism in the United States. Salaita writes,

"The commonalities between Arabs and other minorities are powerfully represented [in Arabian Jazz] and serve to counter the commonplace of tolerance in the dominant culture. Abu-Jaber portrays this culture from the perspective of its subjected citizens; in her analysis its underpinnings contradict the descriptions offered by the popular media and by ‘common sense.’" (“Sand Niggers” 438)

Her work thus brings to light experiences of oppression by racial and cultural others in the United States with an attention to historic specificity and detail, a commitment markedly absent from her later works.

It is clear that the experiences of racism shaping Arabian Jazz are influenced by the author’s own encounters with contemporary American racism. When asked about these experiences and how she chose to represent them in her first work, Abu-Jaber has the following to say:

When I look back on Arabian Jazz, I feel like there are probably subtler ways of representing some of those encounters. I probably could have handled it more deftly. But by the same token, I was so angry. I felt so betrayed by Americans that I really wanted to put it out there and say, ‘You know what? People really did
come up to us and call us sand niggers. This happens all the time, in fact, in most blatant ways, and there is nothing subtle about it. (Field 215)

Although Abu-Jaber is self-conscious about the use and value of subtlety, she is not apologetic about her “‘heavy-handed’” representations and portrayals of racism. Her first novel and this interview make apparent Abu-Jaber’s anger over the treatment of racialized others in the United States. In her earlier writing, Abu-Jaber’s work is highly influenced by experiences of pain, anger, and frustration and what she sees as America’s betrayal of ethnic minorities. To date, Arabian Jazz remains Abu-Jaber’s strongest and most poignant exposition of racism against Arabs in the United States, especially in its ability to connect this to Native American peoples’ struggles in the United States. As Salaita explains:

Abu-Jaber deliberately crosses cultural boundaries in order to situate the concerns of Arab Americans into a more generally comprehensible framework… The recognition [of the similarities between the Palestinian experience and the Native American one] becomes integral to Arabian Jazz when Jemorah and Ricky Ellis, a half-Onondagan gas station attendant, become lovers. Both have been made marginal by their community and first found solace in one another as children, without conversation. Although they never solidify a relationship, their intercourse symbolizes the entrance of one ethnic movement into the fold of another. The intercommunication provides comfort amid surroundings where Arab and Indian are often represented as being subhuman. (“Sand Niggers” 435-436)

Abu-Jaber’s “crossing” of these ethnic lines is important in showcasing solidarity between Arab Americans and other marginalized and oppressed minorities. Salaita’s analysis, nevertheless, overextends the role and possibilities of a heterosexual union to challenge racial and ethnic biases; thus, he risks conflating sexual encounters between racialized others with actual solidarity and understanding between them.
It is important to recognize, however, that Abu-Jaber is breaking new ground by forging these alliances and creating this romantic encounter in her novel. By imagining the possibility of this connection, Abu-Jaber invites her readers to recognize the similarities between Jemorah’s and Ricky’s histories of oppressions without homogenizing or erasing the particulars of either’s history. Pauline Kaldas similarly supports this view: “Through Ricky and Jemorah’s relationship, Abu-Jaber again pushes the reader to see beyond the surface, revealing the connection between the Native American and Palestinian loss of land and culture” (179). As such, Abu-Jaber’s first work signals the author’s early refusal to endorse liberal manifestations and portrayals of racial othering and discrimination in the United States which rely on deliberate erasures of the United States’ acts of genocide, land usurpation, and control of Native peoples.

How does one reconcile Abu-Jaber’s first novel in its challenges to American history and culture with her short works and her latest memoir? Given Abu-Jaber’s earlier resistance to liberal narratives, how does one explain these later works in light of Arabian Jazz’s ability to invoke skillfully, without reliance on subtlety, the harsh and irrational reality of racism in the United States? How can readers account for the alterations in political commitments that seem to occur in Abu-Jaber’s later works? The following sections address some of these questions, mapping the political and literary transformations in Abu-Jaber’s work and alluding to the significant pressures and demands placed on Arab American writers by the western publishing industry. I will also address the shifts in Abu-Jaber’s work by raising questions about readers’ desire for
multicultural works which adhere to liberal notions of difference, making them readable, nonthreatening and consumable.

**Humanizing the Political**

While attending a conference hosted by Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies in 2002, Abu-Jaber addressed the post 9/11 publication (and censorship) climate in the United States. Speaking about her inability to find a publisher for her second novel, *Memories of Birth*, which focused on the expulsion of the Palestinian people from their historic homeland in 1948, Abu-Jaber describes the rigorous editing process her novel was forced to undergo. At the conference, Abu-Jaber relayed to her audiences how she was asked to rewrite her novel’s plots and characters and how she had to supply historical proof and evidence of the crimes perpetrated by the Israeli state against the Palestinian people. Unable to bring her novel to publication, Abu-Jaber was forced to give up and begin working on her third novel, *Crescent*, which came out in 2003, ten years after the publication of her first novel. Reflecting on Abu-Jaber’s publication dilemma, Shalal-Esa writes, “[Abu-Jaber] presented her story as a case study of the problems facing Arab-American writers and said the climate was simply not conducive to publishing a book about the expulsion of the Palestinians after the creation of the state of Israel.” Shalal-Esa adds that the author “still doesn’t know if the problem was her prose or the results of racism and politics.” Despite the resistance she encountered while attempting to publish *Memories of Birth*, however, Abu-Jaber is
reluctant to attribute this setback to an American climate hostile to Arab American writers, specifically those whose works narrate the expulsion of the Palestinian people. Instead, she concludes her discussion by asserting that “The only response to silencing – besides our paranoia – is to keep speaking” (qtd. in Shalal-Esa). Abu-Jaber’s optimism about the power of “speaking” and challenging a censorial, suspicious and hostile publishing climate reverberates in all her works.

Although Abu-Jaber chooses for her fiction provocative topics that have the potential to challenge American self-narratives and historic myths, Abu-Jaber’s works, with the exception of Arabian Jazz, appear to be informed by humanist desires and liberal paradigms which circumvent the possibilities of real political change. In an interview conducted after the publication of her second novel, Abu-Jaber registers her discomfort with explicitly political literature. Asked about her decision to write about people in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, Abu-Jaber explains how her fiction seeks to put a “human face” on a people who have been dehumanized: “I feel like the best political work I can do is to try to put a human face on people who are culturally erased. Rather than try to be didactic, or deliver some kind of message, I just try to go for the human element, and try to be really personal and intimate” (“Crescent: Author Q and A”). Abu-

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23 It is important to note here that Abu-Jaber never reveals the name of the publishing company that refused her work. While Abu-Jaber’s assertion regarding the difficulties of publishing fictional works on 1948 and its catastrophic consequences for Palestinians may indeed be true, the publication of a number of works by Arab American authors in recent years contests the legitimacy of this claim. In 2006, for example, Arab American author, Susan AbulHawa, was able to publish her controversial novel The Scar of David. This work, which narrates the story of a Palestinian family from a fictional village named Ein Hod, has received much media attention for its depiction of the forcible removal of Palestinians from their historic homeland in 1948. See http://www.nysun.com/new-york/visiting-scar-of-david-author-is-criticized/55144/.
Jaber’s prejudice against the “didactic” qualities of political messages renders her works reliant on the emotional connections that readers form with politicizing – but often depoliticized – issues and concerns (emotional connections that may never be forged in the first place). Informed by the desire to describe the “human element” of politics, Abu-Jaber’s later works examine difficult historic realities through an abstracted and distanced lens and thus contribute to the naturalizing of histories of violence, oppression, and occupation. Her short works may be considered in terms of their scant attention to historic realities, their insistence on the universality of the experiences of immigrants in the United States, their endorsement of acculturation and assimilation to the United States, and the celebration of the basic humanity of all. Analyzing an excerpt from Abu-Jaber’s unpublished novel, *Memories of Birth*, and her untitled short story of a family’s escape from Afghanistan to the United States will help uncover these particular facets of her work.

Published in *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999), an anthology of works by Arab American writers, seeking to challenge “the American imagination” by bringing “the image of the Arab-American … under the control of Arab-American authors” (xi), Abu-Jaber’s short excerpt “The Way Back,” offers readers a glimpse into the life of a Palestinian immigrant couple living in the United States. The excerpt portrays the story of a young woman named Alia who, having recently arrived in the United States to live with her husband Kalim, experiences a dream vision of her mother who still lives in a fictional Palestinian refugee camp called “Beit al Salaam.”
Unable to hold on to her mother’s ephemeral presence, Alia confronts the fact that she is unlikely ever to see her mother – or her home – again: “I’ll never see her again, will I? My home is all gone, there’s not another like it, is there?” (3). To alleviate Alia’s obvious tensions, Kalim decides to take her for a drive through southern New York state to visit the Onondaga Nation reserve. Once there, Alia is visibly shaken by the similarities she sees between the reserve and her camp:

Every woman there wore grief the size and shape of my mother’s grief wrapped tightly about their faces, cutting into their skin like netting. I was back in Beit el Salaam refugee camp, my mother’s face wavering behind the skin of the women there, turning again and again to look at me. (4)

Stunned by the obvious parallels between the life conditions for inhabitants of the Onondaga Nation reserve and those of the Palestinian refugee camp where she grew up, Alia begs Kalim to get her out of there: “Enough, my God, Kalim, what place is this?” (4). Alia’s apparent unwillingness or inability to fully acknowledge (and/or critically examine) the shared histories (of expulsion, territorial and cultural appropriation, and oppression) between the Native people of Onondaga and the Palestinians leads her to universalize (and thus depoliticize) the moment: “Every woman there” bears the palpable grief that “[cuts] into their skin like netting.” Alia’s final interpretation appears to sanction the reality that the struggles of marginalized natives, while difficult, are simply part of the human condition. Through their visit to the Onondaga Nation reserve, Alia and Kalim become witnesses to a reality of pain and suffering devoid of historic context. They are portrayed as passersby who can only lend the Onondaga people their emotional support from afar but have no collective responsibility or agency through which to
question the common devastation experienced by both groups. By omitting confrontation with the historical, political, and material conditions that have created Native struggles in the United States, Abu-Jaber’s short excerpt invites readers’ sympathies for these dispossessed populations but undercuts, through Alia’s aversion, the potential for solidarity and resistance between and amongst these two oppressed groups. In other words, the potential for acts of agency and resistance is undercut.

In his important work, *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan*, Salaita examines various literary explorations by Native American and Palestinian writers that posit and foster solidarity between these two peoples. Salaita argues that Native and Palestinian authors employ similar mechanisms of resistance in their literature and draw strength from their analogous struggles and shared histories of colonization and oppression. He describes the similarities between Native Americans and Palestinians in this way:

As the incidental Others who had the misfortune of living in lands promised at their expense to superior beings by a God to whom neither subscribed, a connection among these two groups, even at the shallowest level, is obvious. Beyond their construction in colonial rhetoric as invisible, unimportant, or savage (usually when their physical existence could no longer be denied), Natives and Palestinians have broad histories of militant and cultural resistance to occupation, continued attachments to the lands from which they were displaced or that are no longer under their control… and comprehensive Indigenous histories that challenge erroneous Western conceptions about their existence (or at times nonexistence). (14)

Salaita’s description above touches only very broadly on the similarities between these two peoples; his work, however, explores Native American and Palestinian people’s literary and political struggles with more attention and care to the particulars of their
histories. While Salaita is aware of the intellectual and political challenges this
comparison may pose, especially in light of its potential to erase each group’s distinct
histories, stories, and narratives, he nonetheless insists that Palestinian and Native
scholars and writers have much to gain from the construction of “contrapuntal
alternatives to jingoistic narratives that delegitimize Indigenes as owners of land that has
been commoditized for economic or ideological purposes” (19). Abu-Jaber’s aspiration to
establish the kind of literary “alternatives” that Salaita speaks of – where the similarities
between Native and Palestinian people’s histories, struggles, and resistance are narrated
and emphasized – is evidenced in this short excerpt and in her assertion in one interview
that “the experiences of Native Americans were so similar to what was happening to
Palestinians, the way they were slowly phased out or pushed back, how there were
moments of violence, [and how] native peoples were always constituted as savages or
barbarians” (Evans). In her tentative invocations of an unnamed perpetrator of genocidal
policies and practices towards native peoples, however, Abu-Jaber manages to condemn
the mistreatment of Native Americans and Palestinians, while simultaneously evading the
real history and resistance movements upon which her narrative relies.

Similarly, in “The Way Back,” Alia’s invocation of Palestinian dispossession as a
result of the creation of the state of Israel is similarly detached from any specific or
named perpetrator of war crimes against the Palestinian people:

My mother’s family was from a small village outside of Bethlehem. My mother
was of a line of women as tall as the wind and brilliant as Shahrazad. At 18 she
married, but only a few years later, she told me, my father was killed by the White
Eyes. I was four years old; a year later we were driven out of our village. (5)
Alia’s recollection of her family’s “small village outside of Bethlehem” hints at the destruction of other Palestinian villages in the process of creating the Israeli state. It is interesting that Abu-Jaber chooses to reference the city of Bethlehem in this fictionalized account. Her choice, influenced by the city’s privileged positioning in Christian and western imagination as the birth place of Jesus Christ, appeals to a western audience apt to sympathize with a Palestinian people, and their struggles, when those Palestinians are assumed to be uniformly Christian.\(^{24}\) Abu-Jaber’s quick reference to the city is juxtaposed with a focus on the subsequent reference to an unnamed village outside of Bethlehem. It is highly significant that readers are not given the name of the city from which Alia’s family really comes, however, because such vague references can be seen as enhancing Zionist myths. As is well known, vague geographic and historic references play a role in denying the existence of a rich and vibrant Palestinian history prior to the arrival of Jewish colonizers in 1948.\(^{25}\)

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\(^{24}\) This focus on the Christian population of Palestine in discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is evidenced in other works by Arab American authors, artists, spokespersons and filmmakers. For example, in the critically acclaimed documentary *Occupation 101: Voices of the Silenced Majority*, Arab American directors Abdallah Omeish and Sufyan Omeish begin their film by portraying the restrictions of movement imposed on Christian Palestinians who are prevented from visiting holy sites in Bethlehem in Jerusalem. Although Muslim Palestinians face similar restrictions on their movement and religious practice through the discriminatory practices and policies of the Israeli state, policies that are indiscriminately imposed on both Christian and Muslim Palestinians, the film directors chose not to portray this particular facet of occupation in their documentary. In a screening at Queen’s University in Fall 2007, attended by one of the directors, I asked Sufyan Omeish about the politics of his choice. Omeish explained that the film was specifically geared towards Christian audiences in North America.

\(^{25}\) Steven Saliata addresses the use of these myths in the following way: “Zionist myths rooted in selective readings of history are by no means unique. They are, of course unique in their own peculiar features but not as a political phenomena” (76). Commenting on Zionism’s distortion of historic reality, Salaita writes, “manipulation of historical reality is precisely the phenomenon at play regarding Zionism’s claims to Palestine… It is not enough simply to interrogate and challenge Zionism’s claims to Eretz Israel based on human rights, international law, and political conduct” (77).
Alia’s reference to her father’s death by the “White Eyes” gives rise to a number of questions and concerns: Did her father succumb to a particular illness? Was he a casualty of a widespread epidemic, a natural disaster, or war? Was this an individual killing or a mass murder and genocide? This ambiguity allows readers to inscribe upon the death of Alia’s father a number of possible – but undecidable – scenarios. The reader is allowed to speculate on the nature of the “White Eyes,” for instance, without ever reaching definitive conclusions about the identities of the actors or the murder they have committed. Further, Alia’s memory of forced exile – “a year later we were driven out of our village” – demands that readers confront the deliberate expulsion of Palestinians from their historic homeland. However, the sentence’s passive construction releases both narrator and author from the responsibility of assigning responsibility to the Israeli forces who ethnically cleansed and forcibly removed numerous Palestinian cities and villages in 1948. By placing blame for the predicament of Alia’s family on the “White Eyes,” Abu-Jaber encourages readers to understand and sympathize with the condition of Alia’s family without requiring that readers place the family’s situation in the context of a contemporary and ongoing Palestinian struggle against an oppressive and colonizing Israeli state. Instead of bringing the question of Palestine to bear on Arab American literature and consequently mainstream American readers, Abu-Jaber’s narrator

26 See, for example, Illan Pappe’s *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: One World, 2006), Rashid Khalidi’s *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), and Nur Masalha’s *A Land Without People: Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997). These works are of course significant because of their willingness to question the Zionist narrative of Palestinians choosing to leave their homes of their own accord.
emphasizes a purely personal chronology of events. Her references to her father’s murder when she was four years old, and to being driven out of their village “a year later,” provide chronological references which lack actual historical specificity or useful and necessary geographical and political details.

“The Way Back” provides readers and critics with limited insights into the political agendas, desires, and motives shaping Abu-Jaber’s unpublished manuscript. In another interview with Robin E. Field, Abu-Jaber was asked about the possibility of ever publishing her unpublished work:

I don’t know when it might be published. A few small presses have asked for it; but if I am going to publish it, I want it to be in as mainstream a location as possible. But so much time has passed since I wrote it that it’s hard for me to revisit it. I actually wonder if it might work as a collection of stories or fragments of some kind. So I am looking at reconceptualising the structure of it to see if there isn’t some way to distil it and publish it. (214)

Abu-Jaber’s answer exposes her desire for a “mainstream” audience for her works, a desire that is likely buttressed by her ability to publish one of her novels with Norton Press. Although she still believes in the possibility of publishing this work in its entirety, Abu-Jaber accepts that she must reconfigure certain parts and “distil” potentially troubling messages. Despite its short length, this excerpt from *Memories of Birth*, and its author’s resignation over her inability to publish the work without significant alterations to its message, structure, and content, gesture to a complex system of power which the Arab American author must constantly negotiate. One could also argue that this excerpt’s careful wording participates in a continued Israeli (and world-wide) refusal to recognize that the creation of Israel was accomplished through the commission of serious crimes.
against the indigenous population of Palestine. Although this may seem to be a non-controversial point for some, it is important to note that Abu-Jaber is certainly taking some political, personal, and creative risks in voicing this unpopular historical reality—however apolitically. Her inability to publish her completed manuscript reveals the tremendous pressures placed on Arab American authors and western publishing industries and may elucidate (though not excuse) their complicity in the limited publishing, marketing, and circulation of works with political messages and agendas. It further gestures to a complex system of power that the Arab American author must constantly negotiate.  

Sanctioning Empire

In another short work published in 2002 in the American edition of the October issue of *Good Housekeeping*, Abu-Jaber brought to American households the story of a family of Afghan refugees who flee Afghanistan, settling in the United States after the rise of the Taliban. Feeding what has by now become an obsessive interest in the figure of the docile, oppressed, and powerless Afghani woman, an interest obviously

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27 This censorial atmosphere extends also to academic works that condemn Zionism as a racist ideology. The most recent example of this is the tremendous amount of pressure being placed on MacMillan Reference, a branch of Gale Publishing Industries, for its inclusion of a chapter on Zionism in a forthcoming title: *The Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*. On October 10, 2008, The American Jewish Committee called on the publishing house to withdraw the chapter, claiming that “the chapter is littered with serious errors and deliberate distortions” and that “what is being marketed as scholarship actually is propaganda.” See http://www.jta.org/cgi-bin/iowa/breaking/110745.html. Whether Gale Publishing Industries caves in to this demand or not remains to be seen. However, the attack on both the publishing house and the questioning of the author’s academic credentials and qualifications serve as evidence of the influence of readers and interest groups on publishing industries and shed light on the difficulties of publishing works in the United States which question the legitimacy and moral superiority of the Israeli state.
compounded by the events of 9/11 and the push for the American occupation of Afghanistan, Abu-Jaber’s story appears to satisfy *Good Housekeeping*’s mainly middle-class, white, and female American readers with a compelling story about the dangers faced by women living outside of the United States. In an e-mail exchange with the author, I asked her about her decision to write this story. She responded,

The fiction editor at *Good Housekeeping* emailed and said they were looking for stories from a Middle Eastern or Afghan perspective. I’d become friends with a family of Afghan women who’d emigrated to Oregon, and I thought it would be a good way to talk about their experience – they were my inspiration for the story. My research consisted of interviewing them and a few other Afghan students. (“Personal Communication”)

Abu-Jaber’s interest in depicting the life experiences of her Afghani friends adds yet another story to a burgeoning literary genre focusing on the representation of non-western women’s lives that has flourished dramatically in the years leading up to and following the American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Commenting on the post 9/11 American obsession with stories confirming the “plight of Muslim women” in Muslim countries, Lila Abu-Lughod writes, “There was a consistent resort to the cultural, as if knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of religious ritual would help one understand the tragic attack on New York’s World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon” (784). Abu-Lughod reminds readers of the “minefields” involved in the anthropological impulse to *know* Afghani and other Muslim women. Her discussion relies on the work of transnational feminists like Majaj and Amireh who argue that stories about imperilled third world women have the problematic potential to reify schisms rather than foster solidarity between and amongst women,
because they are marketed through the exploitation of “Third World difference.” Amireh and Majaj insist that such stories are predicated on assumptions of others’ “exoticism” and moral “difference” and thus serve “the interest not of transcultural communication, but of profit” (6). Abu-Jaber’s short story, a story essentially about the plight of Afghani women living under the Taliban regime, risks collusion and identification with what feminists such as Leila Ahmed, Amireh, Majaj, and many others have described as the project of “colonial feminism.” 28 My analysis of Abu-Jaber’s short story aims to underscore and highlight this dangerous connection and liaison.

The untitled short story, narrated through the voice of a teacher of English as a Second Language who encounters two Afghan female students in her class, is prefaced with the following head note: “They’d fled from Afghanistan, a mother and her two daughters, barely escaping with their lives. While I taught them English, they taught me about the power of hope” (230). Having taken an interest in the two sisters, Habiba and Mahtab Amin, the teacher inquires about their lives before their arrival in the United States; she discovers that they had settled in Portland, Oregon after escaping from

28 In her important book Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), Leila Ahmed describes how British colonialists in Egypt took up the banner of feminism to “liberate” Egyptian women from Egyptian men. Ahmed maintains that veiling – as the sign of Islam’s backwardness – became a target for the British colonizing mission “and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies” (152). For Ahmed, the connection between British imperialists and the feminist cause is epitomized in the actions of figures like Lord Cromer, who championed the cause of feminism in Egypt through calls for the unveiling of Muslim women while rallying against feminist causes within their own societies. Ahmed writes, “the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, and in particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society…. perfectly exemplifying how, when it came to the cultures of other men, white supremacist views, androcentric and paternalistic convictions, and feminism came together in harmonious and actually entirely logical accord in the service of the imperial idea” (152).
Afghanistan with their mother, Rabia. As a result of living in the United States without her husband, the girls’ mother’s health deteriorates, and she is unable to resume daily activities. Her inability to speak English further limits her parental role and confines her to an apartment in a building with other refugees from Afghanistan, Kuwait, and Iran. The teacher is touched by the plight of the newly-arrived immigrant family, and she offers free English language lessons to the mother who is described as a sad “short, plump woman” who “wore a flimsy veil on the back of her head” (231). When the teacher arrives at the Amins’ apartment for the first time, she is offered a luxurious Afghani meal and given further insights into the family’s life and history by the two sisters:

‘Our father ran a small medical clinic; he was in demand all over town. Because we were living in Mazar-E-Shareef (sic) in North (sic), we were not under Taliban rule yet. Taliban had taken over Kabul, the capital, in 1996. We know they are there, but somehow …’ She glanced at her sister.

‘We never think they come to our town!’ Habiba interjected. ‘It’s not their place. They are Pashtun tribe, from religion schools in Pakistan.’

‘We didn’t think the (sic) would,’ Mahtab said. ‘We heard about their rules, the heavy burqa, the veil that covers all the woman’s head, just a mesh piece to look through …’

‘You can’t see through it,’ Habiba added. ‘You crash into walls! And they wouldn’t let the women wear white shoes because that is the color of the Taliban flag!’

‘But you couldn’t wear shoes that made noise, either,’ Mahtab added, holding up one hand. ‘Houses with women have to paint windows black, so no one can see inside. Women can’t go to see man doctors…. But none of this was in Mazar-E-Shareef yet. Our schools were open. I graduated high school.’ (234)

Mediated through Mahtab and Habiba’s personal accounts, the plight of the Amin family is explicitly attributed to the Taliban forces whose arrival in Mazar El Shareef necessitates the Amins’ escape from Afghanistan. Asserting their family’s middle-class
and professional background, Mahtab and Habiba offer their compassionate American teacher their view of the suffering caused by the Taliban. They recount the Taliban’s slow rise to power and stress that the Taliban did not belong in Afghanistan because of their ethnic affiliation as members of the “Pashtun Tribe” who were educated in “religious schools in Pakistan.” The sisters’ truncated account of the Taliban, which exonerates through omission the role played by the United States in bringing this militant group into power, offers American audiences evidence that confirms their perception of the aberrant nature of this fundamentalist group. Because their stories are narrated through the eyes of “native” witnesses, they are placed beyond the pale of doubt or suspicion. As Dohra Ahmad writes in her critique of the popularity of oppressed Muslim women narratives in western markets,

As a group, these ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ narratives are marked by significant sins of omission: most notably, a reverberating silence on the connections between U.S. foreign policy and the existence of the misogynistic regimes they document. Taken together, they create an understanding of the world as divided into separate spheres of barbarism and civilization, darkness and enlightenment, female oppression and female emancipation. (111)

Ahmad’s reading of the characteristics of narratives such as the one I discuss in this section offers an astute critical lens and insight into some of main characteristics and features of Abu-Jaber’s short popular fictional piece.

In light of their ability to recognize, understand, and narrate instances of injustice and oppression through their personal experiences, the two sisters are immediately positioned as political and moral authorities on the Taliban. As subjects with the power to distinguish between good and evil, the sisters occupy what Dana Nelson posits as the
“disembodied, objective, and universalized standpoint” often granted to white men (10). However, despite their alterity and difference, and readers’ remoteness from the realities that the story describes, Habiba and Mahtab’s fictional account is posited as truth. Because of the sisters’ positioning as powerful native informants, readers are encouraged implicitly to esteem the Amin sisters and endorse their account of life under the Taliban. In fact, Habiba and Mahtab’s ability to tell their story and bear witness to painful memories and experiences elevates them to the position of local feminist heroines.

This privileging of native subjectivity or voice, and in particular the voice of the other as an oppressed, misrepresented, and silenced being, is often intended to change entrenched cultural views about them. As Abu-Jaber notes in one of her interviews, her work aims to forge connections between cultures and give voice to the voiceless:

Part of the problem is that nobody sees Afghan people on TV. We don’t get to see the culture. We need to have some stories from within. ... It’s set in America, but it’s really about a family of Afghan women and their experience. You learn to provide editors and readers with a bridge to your subject. That is something that has taken me quite a while to learn how to do. But if you provide the bridge, if you provide the connection … that’s the way to … make it accessible. (qtd. in Shalal-Esa)

Abu-Jaber’s narrative seeks to provide readers with authentic Afghani subjects. Yet this insistence on subjectivity, on accessing the other whom we do not know, often reinforces the very images the narrative seeks to challenge. Ironically, the bridge between cultures

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29 In National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men, Nelson traces the influence of Enlightenment ideas on the construction of nineteenth-century American masculinity. She argues that the construction of white American citizenship was based on a “rationalist model” which gave American men “an experience of citizenship as fraternity in the abstracted space of universalizing authority over others” (11). From this vantage point, American men are able to understand and comment upon histories, landscapes, and experiences they have never themselves witnessed (10).
that Abu-Jaber imagines becomes yet another way dominant cultures reify notions of themselves through the writing and reading of others’ differences. As Rey Chow maintains,

One of the most important enterprises nowadays is that of investigating the ‘subjectivity’ of the other-as-oppressed victim. ‘Subjectivity’ becomes a way to change the defiled image, the stripped image, the image-reduced-to-nakedness, by showing the truth behind/beneath/around it. The problem with the reinvention of subjectivity as such is that it tries to combat the politics of the image, a politics that is conducted on surfaces, by a politics of depths, hidden truths, and inner voices. The most important aspect of the image – its power precisely as image and nothing else – is thus bypassed and left untouched. (29)

Chow’s claim, that deep and truthful renderings of “subjectivity” cannot combat “the politics of the image,” is one I take seriously and is applicable to my reading of Abu-Jaber’s inability to either engage with or interrupt the problematic imaginings of Afghani women and their lives in the aftermath of the United States’ occupation of Afghanistan.

Coinciding in its publication date with the beginning of the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Abu-Jaber’s short story plays a role in confirming common perceptions of the Taliban as a fundamentalist, Islamic group that deliberately circumscribes women’s rights.30 Intended for Good Housekeeping audiences with little or 30

By describing this understanding as “common,” I do not intend to deny the frequent occurrences of such abuses and atrocities. I am arguing, instead, that these perceptions and stories, if not carefully delineated, written, and read, can be utilized in a way that advances the imperialist political agendas and motives of the United States. The liberal feminist response to the stories of abuse, torture, and oppression of women under the Taliban was especially useful in providing a moral imperative for the Bush Administration’s war plans. As Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, in an essay on the War on Terrorism, state: “Now suddenly condemning the Taliban for their treatment of women, Bush’s administration has in essence occupied the space of default global feminists in an uncanny continuity with Western liberal feminists, who also have been using Afghan women as an ‘easy icon’ in need of feminist rescue … The Feminist Majority (headed by Eleanor Smeal), along with first lady Laura Bush and the former duchess of York Sarah Ferguson, represent liberal feminist human rights practices that are complicit with U.S. nationalism as well as older
no knowledge of Afghanistan, the story does offer details of the serious abuses of women’s rights committed by the Taliban regime. The Amin sisters’ frequent descriptions of the veil, for instance, as a confining religious practice (“‘You can’t see through it!’” and “‘You crash into walls!’”) can be used to support popular misconceptions of Islam “as innately oppressive to women” (Kahf, “Packaging” 149). Like the many reports of the Taliban’s abuses of women’s rights that were circulated with fervor in the months preceding the American invasion of Afghanistan, Abu-Jaber’s story provides literary “evidence” of the abuses personally experienced by the two sisters and other Afghani women.

In an essay addressing the growth “in genres of life writing” promoting a global human rights agenda in the twentieth century, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue that the popularity of personal narratives addressing (and sometimes even inventing) contemporary suffering and pain must be understood through a historicized lens that marks the “global transformations, both cataclysmic and gradual, that have occurred in the decades since the end of the World War II” (1). Schaffer and Smith remind critics that personal narratives depicting stories of “suffering and survival” are “saleable properties in today’s markets” (11), and while these authors recognize the power of personal narratives in enlisting western readers’ sympathy and support, they also acknowledge that such narratives can also be read to “reconfirm national myths and forms of colonialist missionary feminist projects” (127). Abu-Jaber’s short story can be read as contributing to and providing moral justification and impetus for this colonizing mission.
heroic fictions” (13). Thus, the personal and sentimental qualities of the particular genre Abu-Jaber adopts for the narration of this story, and its blurring of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, serve to buttress American imperial missions which have been packaged, marketed and sold as benevolent – and imperative – humanitarian interventions.

Forced to live under difficult and life-altering conditions for women, the Amin sisters recount that “about one month after [the Taliban] come to our town, something terrible happens” (234). They explain that an “exceptionally kind, as well as beautiful” woman named Azeeza stopped attending the secret classes organized by her English teacher upon the closure of women’s schools in Afghanistan. When this teacher inquires after Azeeza’s whereabouts, she discovers the following:

Apparently, Azeeza had left one corner of her bedroom window unpainted so she could still see a little sun. One of the Taliban, who was snooping around her house, saw her through this small space. He came to their house and told the father he wanted to marry Azeeza. Her father was put on the spot: If he said no, the men might kidnap the girl and murder the family. So her father agreed but asked for a day to pack her things, thinking he might find a way to hide her. Azeeza, however, was overcome with hopelessness and was frightened for her family. That night, she slipped out of their home, went to the tallest building in town and threw herself from the top. (234)

As a trespasser on private property, the Taliban voyeur forces Azeeza’s father into a difficult position: either he accepts giving away his daughter’s hand in marriage or he places his whole family in mortal peril. Faced with the prospect of marriage to a man she has never met and aware of the dangers her refusal would pose for her family, Azeeza chooses death. This matter-of-fact description of Azeeza’s sad fate offers readers a
glimpse of the Taliban’s flagrant abuses of power. This glimpse is undercut, however, by the author’s tendency to sentimentalize historical events. Azeeza’s story, which sensitizes readers to her own – and other Afghani women’s – experiences of oppression, does so without providing what Marina Lazreg describes as “the institutional context within which ‘oppression’ becomes meaningful” (34).

In her excellent essay on the role of feminism in defining and constructing “Other” women, Lazreg discusses the concept of “theatrical indigenization” whereby women from the Third World are given the opportunity to speak to a western audience and are thus assumed to represent a whole nation, a people, or a religion. In such spaces, the speaker’s expertise on a subject matter, if she possesses any, is ignored in favor of a focus on her assumed racial background and place of origin. Audiences attend such events with the expectation that the speaker will provide “information about ‘oppression’” without any actual discussion of the historical realities in which these oppressions are constituted and committed (34). In Abu-Jaber’s story, readers see a reflection of this “theatrical indigenization” in the story’s insistence on narrating instances of oppression without the slightest reference to the American war on Afghanistan and its catastrophic consequences on the country and its people or the American government’s funding of the Taliban. Which audiences, one is forced to ask, can sympathize with Azeeza’s unfortunate demise? Which readers have the ability to validate Azeeza’s (and the Amins’) narratives of oppression? Who is the intended
audience of their stories and what are the ideological paradigms these readers employ to make sense of their instances of oppression?

Abu-Jaber’s short story does not offer immediate answers to these questions; its ending, however, does suggest a likely answer. After giving the Amin sisters’ mother a number of language lessons, the teacher becomes inundated with her busy life and work schedule and is unable to resume Rabia’s lessons. When she does return to the Amins’ house, however, she finds that the previously downtrodden mother has completely transformed herself:

I barely recognized Rabia – she was dressed in a stylish blue sweater and skirt, her hair combed back. I’d prepared a long apology, but she threw her arms around me. ‘Welcome, Teacher!’ she cried.

Astounded, I barely managed to hug her back. I realized that Rabia’s head was bare. She saw me looking and her hand went to her hair selfconsciously. ‘I now … working.’ (238)

The recent discovery that her husband may still be alive helps Rabia overcome her depression and enjoy life in Portland. The swift alteration in the mother’s physical appearance, which is characterized by her donning of a “stylish blue sweater” and the removal of her veil, is rationalized by the fact that she is “now … working.” Rabia’s uncritical embrace of mainstream American cultural values and attributes, signaled by her willingness to alter her appearance or more specifically to remove her veil in order to acquire employment, is not questioned by her teacher. In fact, the teacher’s silence in response to Rabia’s self-conscious explanation for her new appearance and uplifted emotional state naturalizes a troubling reality that requires immigrants, hungry for
acceptance in the United States, to submit both to the American ethos of resemblance, belonging, and community and to acceptable western social codes and mores.

As Sherene H. Razack argues in her critical work *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, the Muslim woman’s body is often used to write western women’s independence and freedom:

> Women’s bodies have long been the ground on which national difference is constructed. When the Muslim woman’s body is constituted as simply a marker of a community’s place in modernity and an indicator of who belongs to national community and who does not, the pervasiveness of violence against women in the West is eclipsed. Saving Muslim women from the excesses of their society marks Western women as emancipated. (86)

For Razack, the western obsession with unveiling Muslim women constitutes a desire for unlimited access and possession. In a political moment in which the demand to know Muslim women is both heightened and accentuated, the act of “unveiling the Muslim woman, rendering her body visible and hence knowable and available for possession, renders the Western woman as the colonial, observing, possessing subject” (86). The removal of the veil facilitates western constructions of Muslim women as existing outside of national boundaries.31 In Abu-Jaber’s story, both narrator and readers are given the ability to observe, judge, and, finally, to admit the unveiled (and thus “liberated”) Rabia into the American collective.32

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31 Nowhere is this imaginary relationship between modernity and the veil more acutely articulated than in the contemporary veil debates or “the affaires foulards” taking place in France. Writing on these debates in her book *The Politics of the Veil* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), Joan Wallach Scott comments, “in French eyes, the veil has long been a symbol of irreducible difference and thus the inassimilability of Islam” (45). I will return to this controversy in the next chapter.

32 This impulse to unveil and beautify Afghani women has also dominated reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. In 2002, the *BBC News* service reported the intention of a number of major cosmetic
Abu-Jaber’s story, which ends by gesturing to the unlikelihood of Rabia’s husband’s return, compels readers to see the possibilities offered to the Amin family by life in their new hometown of Portland:

A light drizzle started and made the air pale and mysterious as smoke. We could have been anywhere in the world at that moment. But we weren’t – we were in Portland, Oregon. We were safe. And, for the time being, that was enough. (239)

The depiction of the “mysterious” but “safe” world of Portland reinforces the image of a tranquil and peaceful United States set in stark opposition to a litany of dangerous and troubled places located “anywhere in the world.” This ending functions as a reminder to its American readers of the dark and menacing world existing outside the borders of the United States, a world where women’s independence, identity, and freedom are threatened by the imposition of the veil and dangerous brown men. Who are the intended audiences of Abu-Jaber’s story? Abu-Jaber’s readers are citizens of the United States and members of the American collective who have the power to collect, affirm, and substantiate instances of others’ oppressions. They are positioned outside of history and are able to reproduce themselves as members of civilized communities who remain unmarked and protected by the safety of places like Portland, Oregon. As Schaffer and Smith remind us, personal narratives focusing on women’s oppression provide readers with “ways … to imagine the security of a common past or common future in the midst of fragmentation and the pace of change of the present” (13). Abu-Jaber’s story offers

companies in the United States to open a “beauty parlor” in Afghanistan. Supporters of the plan urged critics of the effort to recognize that “[having] other women work on [Afghani women] and touch them is a wonderful thing to achieve.” See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/2336303.stm.
Good Housekeeping’s readers the ability to inscribe onto a fragmented American present a false sense of safety, comfort, and harmony, which obfuscates the disintegrative and destructive effects on American society of American military intervention in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

Let us step back for a minute and ask a few key questions. How critical should readers be of Abu-Jaber’s short work? How seriously must we consider its potentially dangerous political messages? What is at stake when, in an attempt to describe circumscribed realities, authors inadvertently enforce the status-quo and simultaneously appear to legitimize oppressive tactics and measures? How do Abu-Jaber’s portraits of Arab American life, as well as the lives of others, shape popular perceptions of these communities? How should we read Abu-Jaber’s fiction in the contexts of American historical, social, and political machinations, myths, and fabrications? And what are the functions and consequences of her later fictions and narratives? A critical reading of Abu-Jaber’s autobiography, *The Language of Baklava: A Memoir*, offers some deeper insights into charged questions like those above which highlight the author’s understanding of the possibilities and limitations of life in the United States, especially for its historical, political, and racial others.

**Eating Cultural Difference**

The willingness of the American consumer to venture into the gustatory unknown and to digest exotic foods has repeatedly been lauded as a sign of American openness to
difference. Food critics, like Sidney W. Mintz, maintain that Americans “tend to try new food, seeking novelty in eating, as we do in so many aspects of life” (28). Mintz’s account depicts the American penchant for eating the foods of others as a characteristic of modern day life in the United States, a fact that is experienced by all Americans equally and with the same zest. Wrenching the act of eating others’ foods from specific material and cultural contexts of production and consumption, Mintz delineates the coveted position of “culinary adventurers” for American consumers eager to eat “novel” foods (28). Similarly, Donna Gabacia attributes to American food adventurers, open to eating heterogeneously or “multiethnically,” the positive qualities of “tolerance and curiosity” (40). Mintz and Gabacia’s optimistic readings of culinary adventuring leave unquestioned the operations of power that render invisible the other whose national foods are produced and consumed in the United States.

Similarly, in an essay on the practices of multicultural eating, Lucy M. Long argues,

Foodways may be one of the fullest ways of perceiving the Other. Sightseeing is only a partial engagement with the Other, whereas culinary tourism, utilizing the sense of taste, smell, touch, and vision, offers a deeper, more integrated level of experiencing an Other. It engages one’s physical being, not simply as an observer, but as a participant as well. (182)

This privileging of the individual and sensory aspects of eating, which conceals the material conditions surrounding the making and eating of others’ foods, also serves to mask the ways in which foods of others become “displaced and deterritorialized artifact[s],” functioning primarily as sources of pleasure that nourish and revitalize North
American palates (Turgeon and Pastineli 251). Within this context, others’ foods become popular in the U.S. when their connection to certain geographies and particular peoples are concealed, denied, and severed. Addressing the material inequities shaping the act of eating others’ foods, Uma Naryan writes,

No amount of concerned reflection alone can undo the fact that mainstream eaters would remain privileged consumers, benefiting from the structural inequalities and unpleasant material realities that often form the contexts in which ‘ethnic food’ is produced and ‘attitudes’ or ‘stances’ towards Others. They involve relationships between groups that are embedded in historically constituted relationships of power between different groups and different ‘cultures,’ relationships that will change in fundamental ways only with large-scale changes in these power relationships. (Dislocating Cultures 14)

As Narayan argues, eating others’ foods cannot undo unequal power relations and dynamics. In fact, the choice of eating others’ foods often reifies already-established power structures, enacting consumers’ privilege over the other whose food is being consumed. Though generally well-intentioned, theory that insists upon celebrating food adventuring and the general commodification of otherness runs the danger of obfuscating the often fraught relationship between American consumers and cultural, ethnic, and religious others in the United States.

In contrast with the aforementioned critics who, with the exception of Narayan, register their belief in the notion that the eating of others’ foods can facilitate acceptance and recognition of others into the American melting pot, bell hooks’s essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” offers another viewpoint. In her essay, hooks argues that the commodification of others, makes of their ethnicities, cultures, and ways of being “new delight[s]” that spice up mainstream, white American culture. hooks explores the
ways in which otherness is employed in the service of commodity culture through fashion, music, film, literature, and the day-to-day exchanges between individuals. She argues that although this exploitation may bear the imprints of a liberatory desire to recognize and empower others, it manages to constitute them as “alternative playground[s] where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (23). hooks’s essay explores the ways in which mainstream culture’s embrace of otherness reinscribes the status quo and preserves the legitimacy of dominant races and classes. Central to hooks’s argument, however, is the idea that the process of commodification can occur only with the other’s consent. In hooks’s analysis, the other is not powerless over her use, representation, and positionality; rather, the other is configured as an active, willing – but often beguiled – participant in her own commodification. hooks writes: “marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, [and] rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation” (26).

I begin the last section in this chapter with these opposing theoretical frameworks in order to delineate the contradictory position occupied by writers like Abu-Jaber who, on the one hand, invite readers to participate in the celebratory act of multicultural eating and consumption and, on the other, become complicit in the very act of constituting themselves and the others their works represent – in the words of bell hooks – as “spice” and “seasoning” for mainstream American readers. Published in 2005, Abu-Jaber’s
personal memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, gives readers a taste of Arab American life and experiences through insights into her life as an Arab American. The memoir, which interlaces stories from Abu-Jaber’s life with recipes of what the author calls “quintessential” Arab dishes like *hummus*, *baba ghanouj*, *mansaf*, *fatayer*, and *waraq*, extends readers the opportunity to feast on simplified recipes of food items from Arab cuisine. Relying on the cookbook-story format which, as Parama Roy argues, “is the product par excellence of an age of mechanical reproduction, one that streamlines procedures, calibrates time and ingredients precisely, universalizes a gastro-etiquette, and reaches a mass audience,” Abu-Jaber is able to further her interest in the use of food as a metaphor for multicultural recognition, acceptance, and reconciliation (488).

In an essay on nostalgia in food memoirs of Middle Eastern women exiles, Carol Bardenstein explains recent developments in the cookbook genres. She argues that the cookbook memoir is a new genre of writing and a literary development of the twentieth century. Bardenstein maintains that this literary genre invokes “collective affiliation and identification through the preparation and consumption of food and the transmission of food knowledge” (356). The cookbook memoir, then, provides new ways of connecting food with memory, permitting the act of reminiscing and the invention of tradition and connection with home. She writes,

> Among the plethora of cookbooks lining the shelves of bookstores these days that take the traditional form of providing recipes for a particular cuisine or type of cooking, new sections of the recently burgeoning genre or subgenre of the cookbook-memoir, or ‘memoir with recipes,’ have begun to appear adding to the corpus of works in which the relationship between food and memory finds
pointedly explicit and conspicuous expression and providing new and rich sources for exploring these issues. (356-357)

Bardenstein’s exploration of the ways in which the cookbook memoir connects both its exiled author and her new community with one another offers important insights into the growth in the popularity of this literary genre. In her analysis, moreover, Bardenstein eschews a focus on “authenticity”, refusing to endorse simplistic accounts of food history that espouse a notion of its purity or inalterability. Instead, Bardenstein analyzes the functions of this genre and its usefulness for the creation of new and complex negotiations of identity for exiled persons in adopted homelands. Bardenstein is interested in the “reconfigurations of food-knowledge transmission created in the wake of displacement” (361). Her essay thus explores how Middle Eastern authors use the food genre to forge new identities and enact alternative collective formations along racial, ethnic, and class divisions and lines. Although Bardenstein does not examine Abu-Jaber’s memoir in her essay, the theoretical framework she sets up is useful for exploring this work and its preoccupation with the food trope as a panacea for individuals and their complex negotiations of their place, privilege, and power in multicultural communities.

Contemporary examples of works that adopt the cookbook memoir genre are too many to enumerate here: Like Water for Chocolate by Mexican author Laura Esquivel published in 1986 is perhaps the most well-known one. Arab American women writers have adopted this genre to articulate their simultaneous connection to both Arab and American culture and cuisine. Some contemporary Arab American examples which utilize this genre are May S. Bsuis’ The Arab Table: Recipes and Culinary Traditions (New York: William Morrow-Harper Collins, 2005); Anissa Helou’s Mediterranean Street Foods: Stories, Soups, Snack, Sandwiches, Barbecues, Sweets and More from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East (New York: William Morrow-Harper Collins, 2002); Pauline Kaldas’ Letters from Cairo (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Janet Kalush’s Kibee ’n’ Spice and Everything Nice: Popular and Easy Recipes for the Lebanese and American Family (Haslett: J. Lorraine, 1999); Nawal Nasrallah’s Delight from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine (Bloomington: 1st Books, 2003); and Linda Dalal Sawaya’s Alice’s Kitchen: My Grandmother Dalal and Mother Alice’s Traditional Lebanese Cooking (Portland: Linda Sawaya Design, 2005).
In an interview, Abu-Jaber explains her investment in food metaphors:

Food is such a great human connector, it’s so intimate. And Middle Eastern food, when it’s done well, is amazing. I thought ... let the food be a metaphor for [Arab American] experience. And I want people to relate to it through the beauty and the passion of the senses, the sensory joy of the novel and the beauty of Arabic cooking… To me, [food is] one of the most immediate and powerful ways of creating the metaphor of the hearth and a gathering place, a place where the collective forms. ("Crescent: Author Q and A")

By equating the eating of “Middle Eastern” food that is “done well” with a knowledge of Arab American experiences, Abu-Jaber reinforces the popular liberal assumption that interaction with certain foodways can elicit automatic identification with, and understanding of, a particular group of people. Abu-Jaber’s hunger for the admittance of the Arab American experience into the “hearth” of the American “collective” reveals her investment in the discourse of cross-cultural respect and understanding, a discourse often enacted through what Ashley Carruthers describes as the seemingly “benign pursuit of multicultural consumption” (403). I use Abu-Jaber’s memoir here to raise questions about the commodification of Arab American experiences for American audiences. I am interested in articulating questions about the desire for ethnic foods and the connections between American gustatory (and literary) consumption and tolerance towards ethnic others in the United States. In other words, does the making and consumption of Arab food items, as described by Abu-Jaber, further the chance for an American society that is more accepting of Arab American citizens? Or does *The Language of Baklava* simply
promote the unthinking consumption of ethnic foods and cultures?\textsuperscript{34} Does the genre of the cookbook memoir facilitate dialogue and understanding for ethnic others in the United States? Or does it enact what Stanley Fish describes as the contemporary liberal trend of “boutique multiculturalism” or convivial ethnic consumption (56)? To address these questions, I will analyze Abu-Jaber’s work while juxtaposing it to what I argue were her early literary critiques of the United States’ historic myths of economic prosperity and racial and ethnic harmony.

The story of the Abu-Jabers, a family composed of an American mother of Irish Catholic descent, a Jordanian-Palestinian father with Muslim background, and three daughters, is developed through detailed renditions of childhood memories that are based on food. Abu-Jaber introduces her memoir as a recollection of stories that “were often in some way about food, and the food always turned out to be about something much larger: grace, difference, faith, love” (unnumbered). Identifying as an insider to Arab American culture and cuisine, Abu-Jaber utilizes the trope of food to articulate ideas, questions, and concerns about the spaces that immigrants occupy in the United States. This insider positioning lends credence, power, and authority to Abu-Jaber’s knowledge of Arab food in general and her assertions about Arab American experiences in particular. As Lisa Heldke notes, “Identifying as an insider gives one almost immediate authority in the eyes

\textsuperscript{34} In her important work on eating ethnic foods, Dislocating Cultures, Narayan encourages a positive view of eating foods of others. She maintains that in spite of the problematic associations between food and culture formed by the consumer of ethnic foods, the popularity of ethnic foods in western countries must be attributed to “the agency of shrewd ethnic immigrants helping to create, and cashing in on, the ‘western’ desire for culinary novelty” (12-13). My distaste for this trend does not reflect a slighting of the contributions and success of immigrants in marketing and selling their own foods against tremendous assimilatory market pressures and consumer demand. See also Narayan’s “Eating Cultures.”
of an outsider audience” (106). Abu-Jaber’s memoir thus simultaneously serves as an exploratory autobiographical work about Arab American life and a Middle Eastern cookbook which includes recipes that carefully – and strategically – balance the American desire for speedy, but rich and colorful, dishes and meals. As one reviewer of Abu-Jaber’s memoir asserts, “A memoir that is both pungent and sweet, The Language of Baklava, is as rich and full-bodied as the recipes peppered throughout the book, a spicy peek into bi-cultural life” (Gaines).

Set in Syracuse, New York, where the young author finds herself alienated from American culture, and reminiscing about a home and a country she had not yet known, her memories of food permit the author to bridge the gulf between her two homes: the United States and Jordan. Abu-Jaber’s food desires, memories, and tastes reflect the author’s embrace of her multicultural background: “I learn early: We are Arab at home and American in the street” (5). This rupture between the family’s state of being “Arab at home” and “American” outside of it, un masks the author’s internalization of the struggles of being Arab American in the United States. Abu-Jaber’s memoir, however, constructs of this socio-political and racial split a communal strategy for Arab American survival. In the first chapter of her work, “Raising an Arab Father in America,” Abu-Jaber narrates how members of her family, including her Jordanian American uncles, have subscribed to a model of living that tacitly transforms Arab identity and Arabness for a new-found homeland:

Those aren’t their real names: Uncle Hal is really Uncle Hilal, Jack is actually named Jaffer, Danny is Hamdan, and Frankie is short for Qadir. They are the
uncles, who, along with my father, came to America. Somehow, after they bought their new winter coats at Robert Hall in downtown Syracuse and changed the part in their hair, they all seemed to have new American names as well. Almost everyone I know has two names – one from Before and one from After. (5)

Here, the author sketches what are by now the familiar markers of the classic immigrant story: the departure from home and arrival to the United States, the shock of the new climate, the genuine desire to belong, evidenced in the willingness to alter physical appearances and change given names – all are combined to permit the transformation of self for the sake of nation and national belonging. The process of these transformations, and the reasons for her uncles’ radical decision to alter their appearances and abandon their Arabic names in favor of the Anglo names Jack, Danny, and Frankie, are described only by the use of the adverb “Somehow.” What, readers might wonder, are the conditions which preceded the adverbial “somehow,” leading to their physical and cultural transformations? What stories does the author elide when the difficult and costly process of immigration is simply contained – rather than explored – within the untold vicissitudes of her uncles’ “Before” and “After”?

Although Arab American literature has sought to establish Arabs as a people with a particular history, identity, and politics, Arab American authors have often found themselves compelled to fit the Arab American experience into a dominant American narrative of immigration and assimilation. Critical of this tendency among Arab American writers, Salah Hassan and Marcy Knopf-Newman urge Arab American writers to challenge assimilationist narratives of Arab immigration to the United States. They write, “a critical understanding of Arabs in the US must move beyond the unifying story
of migration, and the concomitant stories of assimilation and acculturation, which place so much emphasis on cultural particularisms and neglect the political determinations of Arabs both in terms of US domestic racial policies and racial affairs” (5). Abu-Jaber’s memoir does not fulfill Hassan and Newman’s lofty goals. In fact, the Abu-Jaber family’s embrace of a multicultural United States, where individual identities are transformed at no cost to the American collective, accounts – to some extent – for the popularity and favorable reception of this work. As one reviewer of *The Language of Baklava* asserts, “The memoir thus both recreates the feelings of disorientation that often accompany a bicultural upbringing and offers possibilities for harmonizing the seemingly disparate elements of a bicultural background” (Vinson, “Cooking and Writing”). At what expense, however, is this desire for harmony sought? And how, according to Abu-Jaber, can accord and agreement between people from multicultural backgrounds be achieved while maintaining recognizable representations of Arabness for Arab American communities? 

While it is clear that Abu-Jaber’s memoir invests in the ideals of multiculturalism, like respect, tolerance and peaceful co-existence, *The Language of Baklava* also demonstrates Abu-Jaber’s willingness to transform Arab American identity so that it may more readily comply with these multicultural ideals and expectations. In a chapter

35 Addressing Abu-Jaber’s novel *Crescent*, Nouri Gana poses a similar question about the possibility of transforming Arab identity for the goal of multicultural living, while simultaneously preserving a recognizable sense of one’s self: “The question – which is perched on a paradox – is how to transform those structures of recognition without running the risk of becoming unrecognizable to oneself or, by implication, to the dizzying number of overlapping connectivities that sustain both the continuums of becoming and contingencies of selfhood” (“In Search,” 241). Gana comes to the conclusion that the reconfiguration of Arab identity in multicultural societies cannot be achieved without the conscious and unconscious transformation of Arabness in the first place.
entitled, “Hot Lunch,” a young Abu-Jaber bemoans her introduction to industrial, mass-produced cafeteria foods at her Catholic school:

The cafeteria is my first exposure to truly awful food: its rotting, industrial stink permeates the room, and I come to think of this smell every time I hear the nuns speak of penance. I see for the first time foods dropped on molded plastic trays, items with names like tapioca, tuna casserole, and rice pudding. These trays all hold a congealed, mealy gray mass that gazes sadly up at the ceiling. Every noon I recoil at the first whiff of the cafeteria. (22)

Abu-Jaber’s aversion to cafeteria foods allows her to claim gustatory preferences that set her apart from her peers. Unfamiliar with foods like “tapioca, tuna casserole, and rice pudding,” Abu-Jaber takes pride in homemade lunch bags “filled with garlicky chicken kabobs, crunchy falafel, or fresh spinach pies” (22). Her superior knowledge of and access to these Arab and Middle Eastern food items, which were virtually unknown to most Americans in the early 1970s, portray Abu-Jaber as a discerning food consumer with access to cherished, healthy, and ethnic food tastes and preferences. As such, Abu-Jaber’s food choices do not simply register her cultural, ethnic or racial difference from her peers; rather, it is precisely her exotic food items and choices which make her difference more appealing to her friends, teachers, and lovers.

Unlike the Greek protagonist of the extremely popular movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding whose lunch bag sets her apart from her schoolmates and confines her to an early life of exclusion and melancholy, Abu-Jaber takes pride in the contents of her lunch bag. In fact, it is the young Abu-Jaber who feels pity for her peers’ lunch menus: “My stomach tilts in sympathy for the children who must eat the cafeteria food. These so-called hot-lunch children seem like another breed – a lost, forlorn tribe,” she writes (22).
Attuned to recent eating trends that celebrate ethnic foods and promote food tourism among Americans, Abu-Jaber’s distaste for homogenized cafeteria foods is not surprising; however, it is her embrace of Arab and Middle Eastern foods items which one may find perplexing if considered without an understanding of the racial, economic, and political ramifications of “the emergence of [a] global capitalism that encourages the circulation of cultures and commodities” (Roy 483). Privy to exotic food items, and willing to share comfortably her recipes with others, Abu-Jaber makes of Arab American gustatory difference a desirable, appealing, and saleable commodity; her comfort with her lunch menus comes with an understanding of the value of her marginal status as commodity in a multicultural United States. Commenting on what he describes as “the value of marginality,” Graham Huggan argues that “in contemporary cultural theory, marginality is often given a positive value, being seen less as a site of social exclusion or deprivation than as a locus of resistance to socially imposed standards and coercive norms” (20). Viewed from this angle, marginality becomes a means through which difference is articulated as a challenge to imperial hegemonies. While Huggan sees in this an attempt to “[recuperate] marginality in order to challenge, and work toward dissolving, imperial structures, modes of vision and habits of thought,” he ultimately appears to accept the limits of such an endeavor, especially because of capitalism’s ability to absorb difference into its center, thus reducing its threat and potential for challenging the status quo.
That Abu-Jaber utilizes her gustatory knowledge to perform and circulate an acceptable – and palatable – version of Arab American difference is repeatedly evidenced in this work. As a student at Saint Mary’s Catholic school, Abu-Jaber recounts her interactions with Sister John who, upon discovering that Abu-Jaber was indeed a descendent of the “Holy land” and thus a relative of “the baby Jesus,” showers her with special attention and care (27). To return the favor, Abu-Jaber begins to collect for her teacher “bits of stuffed grape leaves and diamonds of baklava from family meals to bring to her” (26). Sister John accepts these offerings as “Food from the Holy Land!” (26). In exchange for the foods that the young Abu-Jaber offers Sister John, she is allowed to set the crown of daisies upon the Virgin Mary in the school’s pageant. Sister John’s fascination with the Abu-Jabers’ assumed proximity to Christ, and their descent from Christ’s distant and cherished birthplace, constructs Abu-Jaber as a cultural insider who is given a position of privilege, responsibility, and authority. To fulfill her role, Abu-Jaber accepts the Christian-centered narrative of her history and life readily assumed by Sister John, and participates in the troubling deployment of her cultural heritage and foodways as resources for her teacher’s consumptive and gustorial pleasure. Writing on the phenomenon of “eating the world” in the ethnic restaurants of Quebec City, Laurier Turgeon and Madeline Pastineli argue, “Eating can create difference and distance, but it can also reduce these identity markers and turn them into sameness and nearness” (251). Through its many silences, including the omission of her family’s conversion to Islam,
The Language of Baklava facilitates the transformation of Arab American difference into sameness, thus reducing the threat of Arabness.

Nowhere is the transformation of difference into sameness more evident than in Abu-Jaber’s use of recipes to describe Arab and Middle Eastern food items. In her review of the work, Vinson argues that the recipes in Abu-Jaber’s memoir “undergo a type of transformation that distances them somewhat from their Arab regional locales while incorporating them into a more hybridized American setting” (“Cooking and Writing”). Thus, rather than referring to common Arab food items with their Arabic names, Abu-Jaber unproblematically opts to apply their popular and already-accepted Greek names. Thus, Baklava, the Arabic name for the delicious pastry, is referred to as “Baklava.” And instead of using the politically charged term Khobz Arabi (which translates simply to Arabic bread) to describe what is commonly known as Middle Eastern pocket bread, Abu-Jaber uses the non-Arabic word “Pita” and thereby eliminates the potential threat of difference posed by the bread’s Arabic name and origins.36 As Huggan maintains in his critique of the commodification of difference for mainstream cultures, “The easy assumption that cultural rejuvenation can be brought about merely by the influx of new commodities is worrying enough; more worrying still is the tacit acceptance that these commodities be politically disarmed so as not to damage the dominant system” (22). In opting to apply Greek names for Arabic foods, Abu-Jaber circulates Arab food items for

36 I am not making here a claim for Arab “ownership” of this food item. Rather, I am simply raising the critical point that utilizing the Greek names for these food items contributes to the erasure of Arab connections from the American mainstream.
the consumption of mainstream American consumers while consciously removing these items from what is commonly seen as their contentious political origins, ties, and connections. The circulation of these food items, which expands ethnic food offerings in the United States, also facilitates their easy and comfortable absorption into mainstream American culture.

In presenting her recipes, moreover, Abu-Jaber’s memoir relies on the imparting of condensed and timesaving recipes of Arab food items for the benefit of a multicultural United States. For example, a recipe for Hummus is depicted in this way:

“Start the Party” Hummus

1 can (15 ounces) chickpeas  ½ cup tahini
2 tablespoons olive oil  ½ teaspoon paprika
Juice of 2 lemons  Salt to taste
3 cloves of garlic

This recipe, like many others in this memoir, appears after a story or an incident; the consumption of the described food invokes the author’s memories of home, homeland, and family. In this case, the eating of Hummus is prefaced by the arrival of Abu-Jaber’s large, extended family into their home: “They arrive like mad. Everyone’s in the living room and kitchen and everywhere, drinking, crazy laughing, and the air has turned Arabic, a few degrees warmer” (124). The description of the family’s coming together as a joyous occasion grants readers touristic access to an example of Arab life in an environment where the climate is “a few degrees warmer.” The catchy and sentimental title, as well as the precise measurements and easily recognized ingredients, help
facilitate the consumption and appropriation of this staple into everyday American diet. Abu-Jaber’s use of timesaving recipes, adjusted to the American demand for quick – but exotic – meals, further extends the mainstream gustatory and literary appeal of her memoir. Her recipes satisfy western food adventurers’ desire for “the ‘quick fix’ meal; the food that will enable … a kind of authentic relationship to a tradition immediately – without any of the mundane, laborious work of growing up in that tradition” (Heldke 57).

Because Abu-Jaber’s memoir caters to audiences that seek representations of depoliticized and non-threatening versions of difference, it also attempts to undo clichéd representations of Arabness in the United States through the construction of compliant and trustworthy Arab Americans. In a chapter entitled, “Magloubeh and the Great Diplomat,” Abu-Jaber articulates this desire for belonging and acceptance through the character of her uncle Yahya, who asserts his discontent with negative depictions of Arabs in the United States. He says,

‘The TV says [Arabs] are oil sheikhs or fundamentalists or terrorists or all three at once. It’s all stereotypes! We have no charm or texture! When do we get to have homes and parties and jokes and children? We need a strong national identity! We’re held hostage by ideology, by things like Hollywood and politics and Palestine.’ (129)

Yahya’s objections to problematic representations of Arabs, as disseminated through American television and Hollywood, showcase what Lisa Suhair Majaj describes as Arab Americans’ positioning “between an ethnic identity defined largely through familial relationships, and an intense engagement with Middle Eastern political events” (“New Directions” 70). Yahya’s desire for “textured” representations of Arabness that describe
their familial relationships, property, and humor betrays his comfort with the American model of the bourgeois, nuclear family. Yahya seeks to counter the negative images of Arabs by celebrating Arabs who “have homes and parties and jokes and children.” Rather than challenging the very foundations on which Arab stereotypes are based, Yahya endorses a simplistic – and troubling – reversal of hierarchies whereby the figure of the Arab terrorist is replaced with the textured and charming Arab who embraces capitalist notions of living, fulfills the American dream, and discounts “politics and Palestine” all in the name of national belonging. Yahya’s solution for the malaise of marginalization and othering experienced by Arabs in the United States sanctions a distressing political reality in which, as Sally Howell and Andrew Shryock explain, Arab Americans are

… compelled, time and again, to apologize for acts they did not commit, to condemn acts they never condoned, and to openly profess loyalties that, for most U.S. citizens, are merely assumed. [They are forced] to distance themselves from Arab political movements, ideologies, causes, religious organizations, and points of view that are currently at odds with U.S. policy. (444)

Yahya’s call for an Arab American “national identity” – freed from the stronghold of “ideology” – further presents Arab American identity as inconsistent with the American national ethos.

While Abu-Jaber’s earlier works may have sought to reconcile the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Arab Americans and mainstream American citizens without euphemizing Arab American experiences in the United States, The Language of Baklava repeatedly undermines this goal. Abu-Jaber’s first novel’s ability to portray the difficult, uncomfortable, and ugly aspects of multicultural living in the United States for Arab
Americans appears at odds with the celebratory and consumptive outlook of her memoir. Commenting on the multicultural outlook of her second novel, *Crescent*, which utilizes literary strategies that are similar in their approach and politics to those utilized in her memoir, Gana celebrates the value of convivial multicultural representations for the reconstitution of Arabness:

Abu-Jaber’s novel might bring upon itself the reproach of promoting a superficial form of multiculturalism and of failing therefore to encourage the deep understanding of the Arab culture that it seeks to reinvent through the rhetorical powers of Andalusian conviviality. In other words, cuisine multiculturalism might help invent Arabness for Arab Americans, but might as well convert American customers into cuisine multiculturalists – that is, into a breed of multiculturalist who would only entertain a fetishistic and consumerist relationship to the culture that furnishes them with the dishes they love. However, Abu-Jaber’s restaging of everyday Arabness by conjuring up Andalusian cultural and culinary diversity constitutes perhaps a demand for the impossible that nevertheless aims at expanding the horizon of the possible. (‘In Search of Andalusia’ 244-245)

Although Gana appreciates how Abu-Jaber’s work can lend itself to the aid of a superficial type of multiculturalism – one ridiculed and critiqued by Stanley Fish – he accepts that Abu-Jaber’s convivial multiculturalism can register “a demand for the impossible that nevertheless aims at expanding the horizon of the possible.” Staged as such, “culinary diversity” can expand the very limits of Arabness and thus reconstitute and redefine its meaning in the contemporary United States. Gana’s optimism in the literary possibilities of Abu-Jaber’s work overextends the capacity of liberal multicultural representations of Arabness to challenge or disrupt seriously the politics on which these representations are founded; Gana, therefore, underestimates the capacity of mainstream
culture to convert difference into sameness and reproduce Arab American experiences in its own image.

What, then, are the limits of liberal representations of Arabness which genuinely seek to elicit concern and care for Arab Americans? And how do the works contribute to the further ghettoization and neglect of Arabs in general and Arab Americans in particular in the contemporary United States? I want to argue that Abu-Jaber’s works help buttress and facilitate what Kim Middleton Meyer describes in her essay on the consumption of multicultural texts as the “anxiety of ignorance” experienced by mainstream American readers of “ethnic” literature. She writes, “the explosion of popular fiction rife with non-European cultural markers denotes a sincere desire in reading groups to learn about the unfamiliar Other” (91). This desire, which is fulfilled through selective interactions with the other through his diet and dress, conceals serious social inequities and political injustices. Because these interactions are founded primarily on a self-serving understanding of certain aspects of culture, they negate the possibility of reconstituting and challenging the meaning of America and the foundations on which this identity is materialized. As Middleton argues, “The danger, however, is the mechanism through which this unfamiliarity is represented and consequently digested by the reading public” (91-92). The unusual success of The Language of Baklava, and Abu-Jaber’s subsequent literary transformation from a relatively unknown Arab American woman writer to a celebrated literary figure, are telling examples of the politics at work in publishing Arab American fiction. If writing celebratory, conformist, and lighthearted
works is deemed necessary for the publication and circulation of Arab American works, what are we to make of Abu-Jaber’s participation in this process? While a recognition of the enormous publication and marketing pressures placed on Arab American authors is a must for any literary analysis of their works, it is highly important that we examine and even scrutinize the role of the Arab American author in fulfilling market and consumer demands in the United States.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Abu-Jaber’s literary career and her more recent pursuit of authentic representations of Arab Americans have been seen to participate in the promotion of an uncritical stance towards Arab American experiences and realities. Her work not only naturalizes the process through which immigrants are fitted into prescribed and limited notions of American identity and the American dream, but also provides readers with liberal, familiar, and accessible representations of Arab American otherness. By perpetuating the myth that to be recognized and accepted in America others must deploy their culture in the service of a multicultural United States, Abu-Jaber is unable to recuperate Arab American identity from distortion. Instead, her works raise alarming questions about the process by which Arab Americans in particular and ethnic minorities in general come to be consumed, eaten, and forgotten in post 9/11 United States.

In the next chapter, I will examine the role played by author Mohja Kahf in bringing to attention Arab American and Muslim experiences. By examining her works, I offer Kahf as an example of an alternative model of literary engagement with the United
States and its conception of Arab American and Muslim otherness. Because Kahf is acutely aware of how her writing may influence how people conceive of Muslim Americans, she is better able to negotiate the complex and staggering demands of the publication industry, utilizing strategies that differ from those utilized by Abu-Jaber. Without succumbing to the liberal discourse evidenced in Abu-Jaber’s works, Kahf’s writing provides insight into the difficulties of negotiating the categories of race and religion in the United States. Her writing, as the next chapter will demonstrate, serves the double purpose of challenging the Muslim American community’s conception of itself and dismantling some of the troubling – and damaging – stereotypes regarding this community.
Chapter 3

The Politics of Racializing Islam:

Mohja Kahf and the Reconstituting of the Muslim *Ummah*

Recent reviews of Mohja Kahf’s works have identified this Muslim Arab American author as a compelling literary voice – one that could serve as an example for progressive Muslims everywhere. One favorable review of her most recent novel, *The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), appearing in *The New York Times*, asserts that Kahf’s choices as a writer are sometimes shaped by the “knowledge that her work might be one window that outsiders use to view Muslim Americans” (MacFarquhar). Similarly, an issue of *The Arkansas Weekly Newspaper of Politics and Culture*, dedicated entirely to celebrating Kahf’s accomplishments, highlights the author’s multifaceted abilities and rising literary fame: “Novelist, poet, sex columnist – [University of Arkansas] professor Mohja Kahf is changing minds about the lives of Muslim women” (Koon). These reviews simultaneously affirm the wide audience for Kahf’s works and label the author as a role model for young Muslim American women. As a practicing Muslim and an American citizen of Syrian descent, the author herself places her writing within a growing field of “Muslim American literature” which includes works like Khalid Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*37 (Kahf, “Teaching Diaspora Literature” 44). With a literary corpus focused on

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37 An international bestseller, Hosseini’s first novel has been translated into many languages and released in more than thirty countries. Most recently, *The Kite Runner* has been made into a movie, capitalizing on audiences’ interest in Islam and Afghanistan. Writing on the success of this film, Matthew Thomas Miller argues that it contributes to “the New Orientalist narrative of the Islamic Middle East.” Miller’s critique of
constructions of Muslim women in the west, including an academic monograph entitled *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to the Odalisque* (1999), numerous online articles, a book of poetry called *E-mails from Scheherazade* (2003), and her recent novel, Kahf’s writing is a part of an unfolding body of works portraying an increasingly diverse Muslim *ummah* or community. Unlike Diana Abu-Jaber, whose works are mostly read outside of the Arab and Muslim communities, Kahf’s audience is primarily Muslim. Her work aims to establish Islam as part of the collective American narrative while showing and embracing the diversity of Islamic practice within Muslim American communities. In doing so, Kahf engages the difficult political and socio-economic predicament Muslim Americans find themselves facing in the United States. While my first chapter focused on exposing the limits of liberal representations of Arab American identity in the works of Diana Abu-Jaber, this second chapter examines Kahf’s multifaceted attempts to reconfigure the negative status of Islam in the United States by defying the politics of literary representations and challenging the restrictive cultural, racial, religious, and sexual boundaries of the Muslim *ummah*.

The notion of the Muslim *ummah* or community is formulated through Islamic theology; the *ummah* draws its guidance from Islamic doctrine. The *ummah* provides the

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38 Hosseini’s novel is based on his belief that the work demonizes Islam and the Muslim world and glorifies the West and secularism, including the American occupation of Afghanistan. See http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/01/05/6192.

38 I will not be discussing this academic work, in which Kahf engages with the image of the Muslim woman in western imagination from 1100 to the late eighteenth century by studying various texts from these periods. In her introduction, Kahf writes, “The narrative about the Muslim woman is so diffuse as to be part of the conventional wisdom in the western world” (1).
space necessary for Muslims to both practice their religion and conform to Islam’s moral, ethical, and social codes. In an important study on modernity and secularism, Talal Asad argues that the Muslim ummah “is ideologically not ‘a society’ onto which state, economy, and religion can be mapped. It is neither limited nor sovereign … it can and eventually should embrace all humanity” (198). Asad urges scholars to distinguish between the Muslim ummah or community and the nation, as in Benedict Anderson’s words, an “imagined political community” (15). For Asad, what is particularly significant about the concept or notion of the Muslim ummah is not how it is imagined, but rather, how “what is imagined predicates distinctive modes of behavior and acting” (197). By invoking the concept of ummah in my study of Mohja Kahf’s work, I am alluding to the Muslim community and or peoples who are guided by the principles of Islam as they are derived from the Quran and the hadith. My goal is to examine the mechanisms used by the author to negotiate and redefine the borders of the Muslim community in the United States. As Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad argues, “The American experience forges as well as forces a new Muslim identity that is born out of both the quest to belong and the experience of being permanently depicted as ‘Other’” (29). In this chapter, I will argue that Kahf promotes an egalitarian notion of the Muslim American community, one that is attuned to this community’s growing racial, ethnic, and political difference and diversity.
Writing Muslim American Literature

Perhaps more than any other contemporary Arab American woman author, Kahf is constantly speaking about (and even against) the demands of the American publication industry. She refuses to be labeled as a “liberal” representative of Muslim American women or even a “Progressive Muslim,” and argues that such labels reduce the complexity of the Muslim community. She is firm in her opposition to American foreign policy and rejects any notion that her writing, and the writing of other Muslim American authors, may be invested in some of the same ideological assumptions underwriting American military interventions in the Middle East. In a post entitled, “Why I am not a Progressive Muslim,” Kahf writes, “A US soldier said my stories on Sex & the Ummah were doing to tradition what his gun was doing to Iraq. Ugh. Get that sentiment away from me. I hate US foreign policy. I love Islamic traditions.” In addition to this opposition, however, Kahf’s investment in the idea of an emerging corpus of fiction by Muslim American writers portrays a growing awareness of the changing parameters of the Muslim ummah in the United States. Her assertion that there exists a distinct and significant Muslim American literature, poses a challenge to the American literary canon, which has been reluctant to absorb into its fold works by Muslim Americans.

In her essay on Muslim American literature, Kahf seeks to impose a theoretical and literary order on a number of wide-ranging works authored by Muslim Americans that have received some critical and popular attention of late. In a preliminary discussion on the existence of this category, published in 2007, Kahf asks: “Is there such a thing as
Muslim American literature?” (“Teaching Diaspora Literature” 42). By posing this question, Kahf opens the possibility of grouping together texts which “voice a cultural position identifiable as Muslim” (42). Importantly, Kahf’s argument is staged in a way that invites readers to question the usefulness and/or need for this seemingly new category:

Many of the works that I would put together in this category can and also do get read in other categories, such as African American, Arab American, and South Asian Literature, ‘Third World’ women’s writing, diasporic Muslim literature in English, and so forth. While the place of these works in other categories cannot be denied, something is gained in reading them together as part of an American Muslim cultural landscape. (42)

Kahf’s understanding of the limits of literary categories is apparent in her tentative discussion of the emerging field of Muslim American literature; she recognizes, for example, the fluid, imagined, and invented aspects of literary categories, and acknowledges that literary works can exist in a multiplicity of “other categories.” She is quick to concede, moreover, that the category of Muslim American Literature may only be useful “as a foothold, a means of bringing a tentative order to the many texts authored by Muslims, one that should be challenged, and maybe ultimately dropped altogether” (42). Yet she continues to defend the merits of thinking about literature authored by Muslim American writers as constituting a unique, singular, and culturally relevant literary body of works. What does the category of Muslim American literature mean for contemporary authors of Muslim backgrounds living in the United States? And how does Kahf utilize this category to question the parameters of the Muslim community in the United States and the politics of literary representations of Muslim Americans?
Kahf’s criteria for the selection of Muslim American literature are ostensibly “flexible” (45). They include “Muslim authorship” or clear evidence of an author’s cultural connection to Islam. Kahf writes, “I am not interested in level of commitment to practice, but in literary Muslimness” (46). How do Muslim authors express Islam through literature? And how might these criteria operate as inclusive – rather than regulatory and exclusionary – categories of identification? Kahf’s reliance on an author’s Islamic background as a prerequisite for inclusion in Muslim American literature may lend itself to accusations of censorship and an intolerance towards works which are critical of Islam. An even more challenging issue, however, is that using Islam as a means for determining literary affiliations can pose a serious obstacle for authors of Muslim origin who may not wish to identify – or be identified as – Muslim. These authors may privilege in their writing other categories of identification, including race, nationality, and origin, over religion. However, Kahf assures readers that the use of this category is legitimate in so far as it “[prevents] widening the scope [of Muslim American Literature] to the point of meaninglessness” (45). To achieve this goal effectively, Kahf articulates two more principles of determination: works that utilize a Muslim “language and [an] aesthetic of writing,” as well “themes or content” that are relevant to the experiences of Muslim Americans (46). These two categories, while crucial, are difficult to ascertain and may serve to further homogenize or limit Muslim American authors in the public imagination.
While creating a category of Muslim American literature is a useful endeavor, Kahf’s principles of literary inclusion pose a number of further dilemmas for literary critics. For one thing, Kahf’s criteria for Muslim American literature do not allow for a distinction between contemporary literary works that are ideologically opposed to Islam and may be rendered in the service of empire and ones that challenge homogenous representations of Muslim peoples or protest oppressive government policies and measures in the United States. The preliminary list created by Kahf includes, for example, works whose authors seriously engage with, question, and problematize exclusionary and racist state policies, such as like Marvin X’s *Whose Fly to Allah* (1969), Amiri Baraka’s *A Black Mass* (2002), and Suheir Hammad’s *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996). However, Muslim American literature – as Kahf imagines it – contains (due to the fact of Muslim American authorship) works by writers like Hosseini and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003). These authors have published two works, one a highly popular novel and the other a memoir, coincide in their publication dates with American military invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and with the continued threats of future military attacks against Iran and Syria. What is more, the ideological frameworks employed by Hosseini and Nafisi are explicitly critical of Islam and serves to reify the imaginary binary of east versus west.39

Writing on the ideological and political ramifications of Nafisi’s semi-biographical novel, Hamid Dabashi argues,

The publication of Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* coincided with the most belligerent period in recent US history, the global flexing of its military muscles, and as such the text has assumed a proverbial significance in the manner in which native informers turned comprador intellectuals serve a crucial function in facilitating public consent to imperial hubris. (3)

Dabashi traces “the ideological foregrounding of American empire” promoted in Nafisi’s novel/memoir through its appealing and uncomplicated form, content, and message (4).

Dabashi warns of the “crucial function” played by ethnic authors who are transformed into “comprador intellectuals.” These authors, Dabashi argues, provide the cultural and ideological impetus for American “empire-building” through the mass publication and global circulation of their literary texts (6). He writes,

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, comprador native intellectuals were actively recruited to perform a critical function for militant ideologues of the US Empire. Their task is to feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge and thus to inform the US public of the atrocities that are taking place throughout the world, in the region of their native birth in particular, by way of justifying the imperial design of the US as liberating these nations from the evil of their own designs. (4)

Dabashi’s argument reveals some of the inherent dangers of constructing a category of Muslim American literature that does not employ further literary qualifications, as well as ideological restraint, in its scope and impact. How, for instance, does the creation of Muslim American literature avoid the risk of reducing the very real ideological, cultural, and political differences among both readers and writers of texts by Muslim American

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40 Both Marxist and psychoanalytic thought shape Dabashi’s use of the term. Dabashi relies on Frantz Fanon’s discussion in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the rise of the “comprador class.” Fanon sees this class as contributing to and benefiting economically from colonialism. As Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt write, “Informed by both Marxism and Psychoanalysis, Fanon ultimately developed his concept of the ‘comprador’ class or ‘intellectual native bourgeoisie’ which was comprised of an elite, privileged class whose black skin became masked by their desire to engage in the economic and socio-cultural practices of white colonialism” (20).
authors? More importantly, does this literary category risk conceptualizing in limited ways the ideological, political, and religious differences among Muslim American authors? And how do gender and racial configurations further complicate the notion of a unified and cohesive body of Muslim American literature?

This debate over the existence, usefulness, and meaning of the category of Muslim American literature spilled into a 2008 issue of the *PMLA*, wherein Khaled Mattawa questions the meaning of “Writing Islam”:

Who would want to read an essay titled ‘Writing Christianity’? ‘Writing Judaism’ might by now sound a bit dated, given that Jewish subject matter is the domain of some of this country’s greatest novelists and poets. ‘Writing Buddhism’ still has an appealing ring to it. ‘Writing Islam’ as a topic would not sound interesting to most Muslim authors in Muslim societies. In fact, ‘writing Islam’ could sound like a fundamentalist ploy to corrupt the thoroughly secular world of literature in contemporary Muslim societies. (1590)

Mattawa’s timely essay articulates yet another dilemma that arises as we consider the creation of a category of Muslim American literature. For Mattawa, imposing religion on what is essentially “secular” literature may be interpreted as a “fundamentalist ploy,” undermining the secularity of literary production in Muslim communities around the world. Mattawa’s essay, detailing how three Muslim authors (Mohja Kahf, Daniel Moore, and Agha Shahid Ali) articulate Islam in their poetry, makes the important point that these authors’ works exist outside of traditional western literary canons. Mattawa writes that “the authors of this body of literature are outside two folds: Western Literature per se and the literature of their Muslim societies of origin” (1590). This isolated position
may explain Kahf’s interest in fashioning a literary genre that recognizes the imperatives of both race and religion for works authored by Muslim Americans.

Kahf’s desire to have literary critics read works authored by Muslim Americans as existing “under the rubric of Muslim American cultural narrative” is significant, in spite of the many shortcomings and pitfalls of this emerging body of works (46). By foregrounding Islam as a guiding factor shaping the growth of Muslim American literature, Kahf contributes to the naturalizing of Islam and Muslim American authors as important contributors to the contemporary American literary canon. As Mattawa writes, Muslim American authors like Kahf seek to “make the Muslim visibly and audibly recognizable in, and thus native to, the West” (1591). This attempt to nativize Islam and establish its rootedness in the United States destabilizes the privileging of racial identification through skin coloring in American public discourse. By grouping together this growing body of works, Kahf simultaneously refashions the discriminatory parameters of the United States that exclude – through omission – Muslims from its collective narrative.41 Her work challenges the publication industry’s politically motivated celebration of the works or “oral diatribes” of Muslim American authors who “cast a picture of Islam as patriarchal and tyrannical and of Muslim women as submissive victims or rebellious escapees” (Gana, “Introduction” 1578). While my first section

41 In Al’America: Travels Through Arab and Islamic Roots, Jonathan Cureil urges scholars to question the ostensible binaries between East and West and recognize a long and ongoing history of “a continuous pattern of give-and-take between America and the Arab-Muslim world – a pattern that has incorporated wars, threats, misunderstandings, and, yes, acceptance” (xv). While this long history may have been recognized for a long time, Cureil argues that it has been “hidden” and “ignored” in favor of a “[focus] on the ideological (and military) divisions between East and West” (xv).
addresses the problems involved in fashioning the category of Muslim American literature, the following section attempts to uncover some of the advantages this category may provide Muslim American women writers who strive to deconstruct the “Victim/Escapee” dictum imposed on the publication and critical reception of their works in the west (Kahf, “Writing on Muslim Gender Issues” 2). Additionally, this section examines how Kahf’s poetry and her understanding of the western publication machine constitute a challenge to the continued homogenization of Muslim women and Islam in public discourse.

Poetic Inscriptions of the Muslim American Woman

Continually seeking to undo the problematic binary of “the Muslim woman as Victim; and its flip side, the Escaped Muslim woman” without sacrificing her struggle for gender justice and equality, Kahf’s collection of poetry *E-mails from Scheherazad* articulates some of the challenges faced by Muslim women living in the United States (“Writing” 1). In her analysis of Kahf’s poetry, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek argues that Kahf’s collection highlights “hybridity and diaspora rather than roots as a primary means of resisting essentialized identity politics” (*Contemporary Arab Women Writers* 68). Kahf’s poetry collection emphasizes Muslim American women’s material relationships with the present day United States. To confront the homogenized image of Muslim women in the west, Kahf’s poetry resists essentialist constructions of Muslim identity. These constructions, troubling as they may be, still lurk beneath her poetic defense of
Muslim women, especially in her portrayals of heteronormative, Muslim female sexuality. In this collection of poetry, Kahf utilizes her knowledge of Islam and personal experiences in the United States to write both the Muslim American woman into popular imagination and pierce the Orientalist discourse surrounding the figure of the “Muslimwoman” which Miriam Cooke describes here:

Veiled or not, the Muslimwoman has become the cultural standard for the umma [sic], or collective Muslim society worldwide. Whereas before it was men who represented the umma, today the Muslimwoman stands in for it. (92)

Before analyzing Kahf’s poetic response to this configuration, however, it is important to understand how Cooke uses this term, as well as her reasons, for constructing it.

In an article on the construction of the “Muslimwoman,” Miriam Cooke explains the ideological purpose of combining the two terms “Muslim” and “woman.” She writes,

The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity. A recent phenomenon tied to growing Islamophobia, this identification is created for Muslim women by outsider forces … Muslimwoman locates a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ (91)

For Cooke, the figure of the Muslimwoman stands for the Islamic ummah and community. The figure of the Muslimwoman, Cooke argues, is singular; it is constructed on behalf of the Muslimwoman in an environment of intense Islamophobia and paranoia over the place of Islam in the west.42 The Muslimwoman, via her gendered and religious

42 While the term “Islamophobia” continues to be ideologically questioned – with some scholars and academics even debating its actual existence – I use the term to describe both the discursive and material discrimination and racism against Muslims in contemporary North American societies. Seen from this context, Islamophobia is not simply about the utilizing of “visual and physical cues” to delineate Muslims and passively discriminate against them. Islamophobia is systemic discrimination against Muslims,
identifications, demarcates the lines between those who are configured as existing within the boundaries of the west and those assumed to be ideologically, as well as racially, outside of it. This construction erases the diversity of Muslims and projects both “Islam and Muslim women as foundational and fundamentalist entities” (Cooke 92). Cooke’s use of the term sheds light on how this category circumscribes and delimits Muslim women’s agency. While the Muslimwoman “affirms the inextricable bond between gender and religion” (93), it also reduces and homogenizes differences between Muslim peoples in general and Muslim women in particular. It assumes that both gender and religion inscribe static meanings upon Muslim women’s bodies; this term functions, then, not simply as a “heuristic tool” but comes to denote and demarcate an “ontological status” for Muslim women (Jasmin Zine, “Lost in Translation” 114).

The fact that the neologism ‘Muslimwoman’ cannot fully account for the varying manifestations of Muslim identity is only one of the problems plaguing this contemporary construction. Discussing the epistemic limits of the term Muslimwoman, Margot Badran writes:

When she fuses the words *Muslim* and *woman* to create the *Muslimwoman*, Miriam Cooke abruptly brings to attention the practice of collapsing two components of identity – religion and gender – into a ‘singular identity.’ The Muslimwoman is a composite identity constructed, not by Muslim women but by others, mainly neo-Orientalist Westerns and Islamists or proponents of political Islam… If others created the Muslimwoman, it is Muslim women who must *be* The Muslimwoman. They must play the part. Herein lies the trouble – and the potential. (“Between Muslim Women” 101; italics in original)

buttressed by the imposition of policies, measures, and laws that actively cast Muslims as others. See Rana Junaid.
Badran’s analysis draws attention to the contemporary political practice of reducing religion and gender. For Badran, this construction necessitates that Muslim women perform and practice Islam in ways that are sanctioned either by “neo-Orientalist westerns” or “Islamists.” In other words, the Muslimwoman pits women of Muslim background between the competing binary of east and west. Jasmin Zine agrees with Badran’s sentiment:

The [Muslimwoman] industry has historically been dominated by colonial cultural producers – the European Orientalist writers, artists, travelers upon whose accounts contradictory depictions of the veiled and oppressed victim or hypersexualized Oriental Muslim woman were circulated, consumed, and canonized. Patriarchal Islamic religious authorities have also exerted their providence over the moral, physical, spiritual, and ontological status of Muslim women in equally narrow and limiting terms that have relegated us to positions of gendered subordination and public exile into domestic harems and political forms of purdah. (110-111)

Zine goes even further than Badran by refusing to view the “Muslimwoman” as a manifestation of a benign practice of imagining Muslim women in certain ways; rather, Zine insists on recognizing this construction as the conscious product of an industry that actively depicts Muslim women as either oppressed victims of Islam or over-sexualized oriental women. The systemic nature of this identification and the effects it produces are significant as they thwart efforts to read contemporary perceptions of Muslim women in more sophisticated and insightful ways. Whether through patriarchal religious authorities or through the discursive and epistemic efforts of Orientalists, when Muslim women are positioned as subordinate to men, they are publicly silenced. Both Badran and Zine emphasize the systemic nature of these images. It is from this perspective that Cooke’s
“Muslimwoman” emerges as a useful category through which to analyze the efforts of Muslim women to achieve gender equity and to rearticulate their own political, religious, racial, and sexual differences in western societies.

The nexus of religion and gender outlined above is central to Kahf’s poetic engagements in *E-mails from Scheherazad*. As Mattawa writes, “the poems of Mohja Kahf are primarily concerned with demystifying Muslim lives and practices in the United States and in altering misconceptions about Muslim women” (1590). How does Kahf present gender and religion to bring about an understanding of the experiences of Muslim women in the United States? And how does she utilize these two categories to defend the right of Muslim American women to their own bodies, voices, and ways of being? Kahf’s poetry collection addresses these questions by educating non-Muslim Americans about the experiences of Muslim Americans in the United States. As Abdelrazek argues, “The different speakers in Kahf’s poems seek to challenge the dualism or opposition between self and other by questioning stereotypes that constitute Arab women as different from American women” (*Contemporary Women Writers* 68).

In one of the early poems in the collection, “*Hijab Scene #3*,” Kahf challenges the division between Arab and American women in this way:

“Would you like to join the PTA?” she asked, tapping her clipboard with her pen.
“I would,” I said, but it was no good, she wasn’t seeing me.
“Would you like to join the PTA?” she repeated.
“I would,” I said.
but I could’ve been antimatter.
A regular American mother next to me

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shrugged and shook her head.
“I would, I would,” I sent up flares,
beat on drums, waved navy flags,
tried smoke signals, American Sign Language,
Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax,
Lt. Uhurra tried hailing her
for me on another frequency. (25)

In this poem, Kahf describes a common scene at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting. In search of new members for her association, a woman character, presumably a fellow parent, extends a general invitation to the attendees of the meeting. The narrator quickly volunteers to join the PTA. Her desire to become a member of this organization is ignored, as the woman in charge is unable to “see” her (“she wasn’t seeing me”). The question is then repeated, emphasizing the narrator’s presumed inability to understand or adequately respond to the woman who asks the question in the first place. The scene is further complicated through the presence of “a regular American mother” whose physical gestures indicate both her ambivalence and unwillingness to intervene on behalf of the veiled, Muslim woman sitting beside her. The veiled Muslim woman, however, refuses to give up, and continues to attract the attention of the woman who posed the question by repeating her answer and reiterating her desire to join the PTA in English (“I would, I would”); when her fourth verbal attempt to join the PTA fails, she exhausts all methods of communication available to her. Here she shifts to fire signals, sign language, and Morse code, as well as other communication means (“Western Union, telex, fax”), repeatedly trying to bring attention to herself. When all literal and figurative communication methods are exhausted, the Muslim woman employs the services of Lt.
Uhurra, from *Star Trek: The Original Series*, who intervenes on behalf of the Muslim woman by using “another frequency” to bring the two American women to both see and hear the Muslim woman who desperately desires to join the PTA. The Muslim woman’s appeal to Lt. Uhurra, a fictional *Star Trek* character originally played by African American actress Michelle Nichols in 1966, signifies the Muslim woman’s presumed affinity and solidarity with black people in the United States. Lt. Uhurra’s inability to compel the other American women to see and hear the narrator highlights the similarities between the African American and Muslim American struggles for respect and recognition in the United States.

In “*Hijab Scene #3,*” Kahf emphasizes the tension between the senses of sight and hearing. The failure of communication experienced by the Muslim woman is attributed to the unwillingness on the part of the two other “regular” American women to recognize the Muslim American woman either visually or audibly. Her presence amongst them is deemed and experienced as foreign (“I could’ve been antimatter”), and her speech – despite repeated statements that she wants to participate in the PTA – is easily ignored. The poem continues in this way,

“Dammit, Jim, I’m a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!”
– but the postironic force field of hijab jammed all her cosmic coordinates. (25)

As the scene unfolds, we witness the Muslim American woman’s growing frustration and anger that are registered through comic means, including the hyperbole of using Morse code to grab people’s attentions. In spite of the repercussions of her religious
identification, the woman purposely identifies as a “Muslim woman” and refuses to accept the American women’s act of othering and silencing. And while she may recognize that the American women’s reaction to her hijab has “jammed” their “cosmic coordinates,” she continues to assert her humanity: “Dammit, Jim, I’m a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!” Commenting on this aspect of the poem, Abdelrazek writes, “The ‘hijab’ that the speaker wears represents the main reason for … conflict because one culture reads it as other. Instead of understanding and accepting others’ differences, a ‘cosmic’ jam, a clash of ignorance, occurs” (98). Abdelrazek’s analysis of the hijab as cause for “conflict” in this scenario is accurate; however, her reading renders the hijab as precipitating, and thus wholly responsible for, the cultural conflict or “clash” occurring between the women. Abdelrazek’s reading therefore ignores the obvious imbalance of power between the Muslim woman and the American women who willfully ignore her. In Abdelrazek’s view, what occurs in this “Scene” is attributed to a mutual “clash of ignorance” displayed proportionately by both sides.

Allusions to the idea of “cultural clash” surface in Abdelrazek’s essay, conjuring Samuel P. Huntington’s highly controversial essay, “The Clash of Civilizations?” which was published in 1993. Huntington’s essay envisioned cultural conflicts in the post Cold War era as directly shaped by “the fault lines separating … civilizations from one another” (22). First in this essay, and later in his influential and best-selling work, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order, Huntington argues that cultural or civilizational “fault lines” would soon replace “the political and ideological
boundaries of the Cold War as the flashpoint for crisis and bloodshed” (29). Huntington also maintains that “the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics” and that future conflict will “occur between nations and groups of different civilizations” (22). It is important to note, however, that Huntington’s essay relies heavily on a false juxtaposition between the two broadly defined categories of “Islam” and “West.” As Edward Said notes,

> The personification of enormous entities called ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’ is recklessly affirmed, as if hugely complicated matters like identity and culture existed in a cartoonlike world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly, with one always more virtuous pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary. (“The Clash of Ignorance”)

Because Huntington’s essay is so clearly shaped by the rhetoric of “West versus the rest,” it is not surprising that his essay has played a significant role in discussions of current world affairs and politics (Said). In the aftermath of 9/11, Huntington’s vision of an inevitable and apocalyptic civilizational clash was quickly converted from an obviously weak and unreliable formulation of world affairs into a solid and uncontested “geopolitical fact” (Harvey 191). While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to debate the merits or faults of Huntington’s argument, it is important to note that Abderazek’s reference to Huntington’s argument lends credibility to this troubling formulation. Homogenizing cultural differences among Muslim peoples, a position which Abdelrazek’s reading risks doing, also obscures the significance of existing power inequalities between dominant groups in the United States and Muslim American minorities. Kahf’s poem, however, manages to avoid this pitfall precisely because it does
not ignore the material (and perhaps even racial) differences between the Muslim woman who seeks admittance to the PTA and the American woman who has the power to admit or deny her this privilege.

Kahf’s Muslim and veiled woman does not, in fact, see her self as at all different from the two other women. She recognizes, however, that her wearing of the veil causes the other women to view her as a lesser being and not as someone who could potentially join and be an active member of their organization. At the end of the poem, the Muslim woman does not appear to begrudge the women who refused to recognize her. Instead, the poem ends on a sad and poignant note:

Can we save the ship we’re both on,  
can we save  
the dilithium crystals? (25)

The Muslim American woman’s concern for her future and that of the two “regular” American women, along with her belief in their shared humanity and fate, is plainly evidenced here. Her question, which presupposes the need for collective action, unity, and solidarity among women, is indicative of her strong sense of her self as an active part of the United States or, as the metaphor reveals, a passenger on the same “ship” as the two women. As Abdelrazek argues, “The question with which the poem ends implies that this jam or clash could end if both parties tried to understand that, despite their difference, they both share one ship and live in one homeland” (98). Kahf’s ending makes another reference to Star Trek, invoking the possibility of a better and more equitable future. The dilithium crystal, a rare element combining both matter and antimatter
elements, promotes the author’s vision for coexistence in the multiethnic United States. In “Hijab Scene #3,” Kahf’s Muslim American woman accepts the demands of coexistence and engenders an appreciation for racial, cultural, and religious differences.

In two other short poems entitled “Hijab Scene #1” and “Hijab Scene #2,” Kahf similarly affirms the importance of recognizing and accepting difference. In both poems, Kahf names visual difference as a site of oppression for Muslim women. In Kahf’s poetry, outright racism against Muslim Americans is never named; rather, the refusal of dominant segments of American society and culture to recognize and accept Muslim American women’s difference is highlighted as the cause of public unrest. In “Hijab Scene #1,” Kahf explores the notion of a Muslim woman’s difference in this way:

“You dress strange,” said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom, his tongue-rings clicking on the “tr” in “strange.” (41)

This poem opens with the tenth-grade boy’s declaration of the Muslim woman’s strangeness and otherness, a declaration that is neither affirmed nor questioned by the narrator or the Muslim woman in the poem. The tenth-grader names the woman’s “dress” as the cause of her difference and strangeness. The narrator describes the “Muslim girl” as a newly arrived student who wears “the headscarf.” The absurdity of the young boy’s comment is rendered obvious when the narrator reveals some information about the speaker’s own choice of dress, including his “bright blue hair” and “tongue rings.” His difference, while never verbally claimed, is certainly implied. Readers, then, are encouraged to rethink their definition of difference: Why is wearing the hijab different or
stranger than having blue hair? Why is covering one’s hair more odd than piercing one’s tongue? These questions, while important, confine difference to the act of seeing; in other words, difference remains limited to the domain of the visual. Difference, however, cannot be fully understood unless its meaning and implications are complicated through an understanding of entrenched material inequities and power imbalances. What’s more, as Sneja Gunew argues, “the notion that we can somehow trust the visible remains a privileged register” (79).

Gunew’s significant study examines codified and state-sponsored multiculturalisms, especially in the cases of Australia and Canada. Throughout her works, Gunew argues for the importance of “situated” analyses of multiculturalism (3). For Gunew, the emphasis on seeing or “the register of the visible” in accounting for racism has the dangerous potential of rendering racism as primarily about the meanings assigned to certain physical markers or denotations (81). Gunew contends that “the visibility of ‘difference’ is itself registered via … markers of normative racialization” (80). In “Hijab Scene #1,” the young boy’s declaration of the Muslim woman’s difference and strangeness privileges his own normalized assumptions about American teenagers’ ways of dressing and racial classifications. The boy’s construction of his way of dressing as normal and thus invisible is significant. Dress, however, is a social matter (and is not merely individual), highly influenced by socio-economic conditioning, as well as physical, racial, and religious configurations. By granting the teenage American boy the right to pronounce the Muslim woman’s difference (and by extension assert his
normality), Kahf seems inadvertently to promote the idea of racism as simply an encounter with the visibly strange and unfamiliar. Commenting on the dominance of this idea in contemporary British society’s attitude towards British Muslims, Arun Kundnani writes, “Racism was no longer ‘institutional’ but defined instead as a prejudice arising from unfamiliarity” (34). In this poem, it is the young boy’s unfamiliarity with the Islamic headscarf that fuels his prejudice against it. Rather than being situated within the broader context of American Islamophobia and racism against Muslims, the boy’s attitude becomes a matter of individual opinion, secured through erroneous readings of the 1st American Amendment as legally guaranteeing the right of American individuals to an unabridged form of freedom of expression.43

In “Hijab Scene #2” Kahf returns to the idea of visible or conspicuous religious dress as a sign of difference. While in the previous poem Kahf’s main characters are adolescents of different genders, her second poem is an encounter between two adult women. Kahf draws attention to the prevalence of negative ideas and assumptions about the Islamic practice of veiling and their perpetuation within an adult American population, whether male or female. She writes,

“You people have such restrictive dress for women,”
she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and party hose
to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day. (42)

43 The actual 1st American Amendment or Bill of Rights states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” See http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am1.
In this poem, Kahf juxtaposes two women’s choices of dress. On the one hand, we presumably have a veiled Muslim American woman and on the other, we have an American woman of working class background who is possibly also racially white. The American woman’s recognition of the Muslim woman’s difference is verbalized in the opening sentence of the poem. Her statement not only addresses the Muslim American woman she’s speaking to, but also makes broad and sweeping generalizations about all Muslims. Referring to Muslims as “You people,” the American woman expresses her discontent with the “restrictive” dress applied to Muslim women in general. While she does not provide further qualifications to her statement, the power of her declaration lies in her unquestioned ability to make broad, uncontested generalizations about both Muslim women and men. The protectionist impulse conveyed in the opening statement is important to note: What gives the American woman the right to assume this knowledge in the first place? Is her concern for Muslim women’s apparel legitimate? The poem does not provide answers for these questions but the narrator offers more details about the American woman and her own choice of dress. In the second line of the poem, the American woman’s view of Muslim women’s dress as “restrictive” is contrasted with her own choice of dress, including her “three-inch heels and panty hose.”

This juxtaposition again highlights the irony of the comment the American woman casually hurls at the Muslim woman. How can a woman whose choice of dress is so highly influenced by a heteronormative and masculine fashion industry preach to anyone on the restrictions of Muslim women’s dress codes and choices? In both poems,
Kahf pushes her readers to question the normalization of certain dress codes, ideas, and assumptions about Muslim women’s dress. Examining these two poems, Mattawa writes,

“If the American woman is acquiescing to a condescending form of male taste, and the punk teenager is conforming to a fad, why is the hijab-wearing woman not their equal, and why is she not equally tolerated? The poet anticipates the answer her generally tolerant poetry-audience will give her, which is, Yes, by all means, the hijab-clad woman is their equal and should be equally tolerated. (1590-1591)

For Mattawa, Kahf’s poems aim to dismantle inequalities between the Muslim American women, the teenage American boy, and the American woman – who are the subjects of the two poems. Throughout his essay, Mattawa’s assumption that poetry by Muslim American authors is simply intent on remedying cultural attitudes and behaviors permeates his entire argument. As such, his use of the word “tolerance” to describe Kahf’s poetic goals and aspirations is simultaneously interesting and troubling. Does Kahf’s poetry really aim to secure mutual respect, understanding, and recognition for the Muslim American woman, or is she simply seeking a superficial form of tolerance on her behalf? Do the aforementioned goals require the type of tolerance problematized by multicultural theorists like Wendy Brown who sees tolerance as “an internally unharmonious term, blending together goodness, capaciousness, and conciliation with discomfort, judgment, and aversion” (25)? Before attempting to address this question, I will briefly examine the problematic notion of tolerance by looking at the Headscarf Controversy (or the *affaires des foulards*) that has unfolded in France over the past decade.

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In a significant study on the French controversy over the veil, Joan Wallach Scott examines the limits, as well as the dangers, of the concept of tolerance for multicultural or multiethnic societies like the United States and France. Scott resists the use of the word “tolerance” or its derivative “toleration” to speak about difference because she believes that “toleration implies distaste … for those who are tolerated” (19). Drawing on the work of Brown who sees tolerance as a form of “managing the presence of the undesirable, the tasteless, the faulty – even the revolting, repugnant, or vile” (Brown 25), Scott’s analysis of the French official position on the banning of veiling in public schools portrays how tolerance becomes a form of racial management and containment. That the politics of tolerance can affirm established power structures and extend greater power and authority to dominant persons and communities, renders it a deeply problematic concept that occludes – rather than undoes or disrupts – racial and class differences. Brown elucidates this point in this way: “As a practice concerned with managing a dangerous, foreign, toxic, or threatening difference from an entity that also demands to be incorporated, tolerance may be understood as a unique way of sustaining the threatened entity” (27; italics in original). In other words, the politics of tolerance are intended to protect the interests of dominant groups rather than to encourage difference or even incorporate it into mainstream culture and society.

With this theoretical background in mind, it is clear why Scott encourages readers to examine notions of difference in a critical way that pillories the politics of tolerance as a means of understanding issues of race and racism in multicultural societies. She writes,
I want to insist instead that we need to acknowledge difference in ways that call into question the certainty and superiority of our own views. Instead of assimilation we need to think about the negotiation of difference: how can individuals and groups with different interests live together? Is it possible to think about difference non-hierarchically? On what common ground can differences be negotiated? (19)

Scott’s unwillingness to utilize the concept of tolerance is significant, especially as it may relate to ongoing discussions of the “place” of Muslim American women in the United States. In her discussion of the French banning of the veil in public schools, Scott examines how attitudes towards the practice of veiling are shaped by France’s “public uneasiness about the place of North African immigrants and their children in French society” (22). That French Muslims of North African origin are still referred to as “immigrants” to France decades after their settlement in the French Republic is one of the issues underlying the French attitude towards the veil. Viewed as foreign and irreconcilable with the French Republic’s non-sectarian and universalist civil codes, Islam “came to stand not only for religious difference but for a ‘culture’ that caused the social marginality of these ‘immigrants’” (40). With the passing of the 2003 regulation banning the presence of “conspicuous religious symbols” in French public schools, French Muslims, and in particular French Muslim women, bore the brunt of the unrealistic, assimilatory, and racist demand that all French peoples conform to France’s “existing cultural norms” (80).

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44 Although the French law banned a number of other religious symbols from public schools, including Christian crosses, Jewish yarmulkes, as well as Sikh turbans, it is clear that the law, as Scott argues, “was aimed primarily at Muslim girls wearing headscarves” (1). The actual 2003 law states the following: “In public elementary, middle and high schools, the wearing of signs or clothing which conspicuously manifest
In order to be considered French, veiled Muslim women were compelled to give up any signs of their religious differences. The practice of veiling became a matter of cultural compulsion; French Muslim women were not perceived as true agents of their own choices to veil. In fact, the passing of the law and its official implementation in 2005 rendered the practice of veiling effectively as a matter of non-choice. The French inability to accept French Muslim women’s veiling as a manifestation of choice – even an intolerable one – signified a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Muslim women’s agency and desire to veil. The following questions underlie this position or stance: Why would any individual, and in particular a citizen of modern-day France, embrace such an antiquated way of being? Are veiled Muslim women truly autonomous citizens of the French Republic? How does Muslim patriarchy influence and compel French Muslim women’s veiling practices? These are some of the questions that dominate the terms of the debate regarding the right to veil for French Muslim women. At the heart of the debate was the implicit acceptance of the idea that “the headscarf could only be an imposition of [Islamic] culture; its removal a sign that liberty and equality had prevailed” (Scott 129). This troubling opposition between liberty and oppression is important, especially in relation to how it manifests itself in both principle and practice – often with the aid of the law. Its continued influence on popular conceptions of Muslim women, particularly in representations and conceptions of Muslim women’s sexualities,

students’ religious affiliations is prohibited. Disciplinary procedures to implement this rule will be preceded by a discussion with the student” (qtd. in Scott 1).
encourages us to examine our construction of notions of individuality and choice when speaking about Muslim American women.

In Kahf’s poetry, the notions of Muslim American women’s individuality and choice are central to her message. While the two previously discussed poems contribute to a general silencing of Muslim women via the omission of their voices, Kahf’s “Hijab Scene #7” very consciously affirms Muslim women’s ability to use both their voices and their own words to resist cultural homogenization of their experiences. The poem reads as follows:

No, I’m not bald under the scarf
No, I’m not from that country
where women can’t drive cars
No, I would not like to defect
I’m already American
But thank you for offering.
What else do you need to know relevant to my buying insurance,
opening a bank account,
reserving a seat on a flight?
Yes, I speak English
Yes, I carry explosives
They’re called words
And if you don’t give up
Off your assumptions,
They’re going to blow you away. (39)

The poem opens with the Muslim woman’s clear objections to readers’ assumptions about her. She refutes the implication that she may be covering her head because of her baldness, and she rejects her association with Saudi Arabia or “that country / where women can’t drive.” The Muslim American woman has not “defected” from somewhere else but, rather, asserts her status as an “American” citizen. Her answers, which are given
in response to questions never uttered, privilege the voice and assertions of the Muslim woman in the poem. While one may wonder whether her answers portray defensiveness on the Muslim woman’s part, the first five lines of the poem gesture toward the Muslim woman’s repeated subjection to this highly offensive – and Islamophobic – set of questions. Her defensiveness – if one may call it that – is warranted in light of the ridiculousness of the questions repeatedly posed to her. How, the Muslim woman asks, do any of those questions and the information they solicit bear on her desire to buy insurance from an insurance broker, open a bank account with a bank consultant, or reserve a seat on an airplane from an airline representative?

In the second half of the poem, Kahf’s Muslim American woman expresses her ability to “speak English.” Addressing unstated questions about her knowledge of the English language and her acquisition of explosives, the woman’s answers are all stated in the affirmative: she does have both. Kahf utilizes the stereotype of the Muslim woman who hides explosives in her veil to expose the stereotype’s bizarreness and absurdity. Her explosives, she asserts, are in fact “words” which she will use against those who are unwilling to forgo their inane “assumptions” about the Muslim American woman. In fact, the Muslim woman confirms the assumptions and asserts that her words – used in lieu of explosives – may successfully “blow you away.” What is striking about Kahf’s poem is its willingness to expose stereotypes of Muslim American women and repeatedly challenge them. In her poem, the Muslim American woman is not constructed as a victim of stereotypic understanding and normative cultural standards that deprive Muslim
women of their right to personal expressions. Instead, the Muslim American woman is presented as acutely aware and actively resisting her representation in contemporary American society. Her determination to overcome the confines of her representation is what is at stake in Kahf’s poem. As Abdelrazek notes, “The speaker uses her published poetry to resist negative assumptions and stereotypes and to tell her own story of fighting two fronts: the Arab and the American, defining herself and naming her own experience” (100). While I agree with Abdelrazek’s assessment of the speaker’s role in “Hijab Scene #7,” I am troubled by her false juxtaposition of the speaker’s struggle on the “two fronts” of Arabness and Americanness. Kahf’s poem refutes this division when her speaker asserts that she is in fact an American: “I’m already American.”

Although Kahf’s poetry may not be able to fully disrupt the stereotypes surrounding Muslim American women, it does function as a powerful mechanism of resistance to Orientalist discourse. As Gana argues, “While it is understandable that Kahf’s poetry, for instance, can be seen as less informative about Islam than the American reader might expect, this problem has to do less with poetic substance than with poetic form itself” (1579). Whether or not the poetic form successfully conveys Kahf’s message though, I am alarmed by the pressures placed on Arab American authors to continually make available to the “American reader” information about Muslims and Islam. As it stands, this task can only address stereotypes about Muslim American women (as we witnessed in Diana Abu-Jaber’s attempt to undo American stereotypes of Arabs) and thus it produces abstracted and nonmaterial knowledge about the worlds
Muslim American women inhabit and occupy. While I enjoy reading Kahf’s “Hijab Scene” poems and see in them important acts of resistance, I am not sure that this type of poetic challenge can undo conditions of oppression or give rise to actual and effective social change for women of color. What is needed is a type of sustained critique that goes beyond a simple refutation of prejudice and assertion of voice. Kahf’s poem “Affirmative Action Sonnet” comes closer to addressing these goals and questions.

In this poem, Kahf appears to favor a material and situated understanding of social relations and power that are necessary for undoing women-of-color’s oppressions:

So you think I play the multiculture card and sign up for affirmative action verse, slide into print with poetry that’s worse? So you think I get excused from being good by throwing in Third-World saffron and some veils? Now is the summer of minority malcontent They have no Idea of Order in the West— But I do not insist on difference. Difference pales beside the horrors facing our race —the human one: hunger, HIV, genocide, the unconscionable global market Where is the salve? We write. We recognize – we must – each other in millennial glow or we will die from what we do not know That’s all these smoke-and-mirror poems do I came across the world to write for you. (92)

Although this poem engages once more an unidentified speaker, it is distinct from the previously discussed poems in a number of important ways. First, the poem is not a straightforward celebration or assertion of the Muslim woman’s difference. In fact, the
poem questions the politics of difference that ostensibly grant racial and ethnic minorities in the United States undue privileges and rights. By engaging an unnamed character who appears to question the poet’s ability to write poetry worthy of publication, Kahf refuses any definition of “difference” that may have “excused” the ethnic woman writer from “being good.” What is at stake for the speaker is her self-earned merit or ability to write good poetry. Second, the poem is critical of the pursuit of exotic Muslim American women who are allowed – in exchange for the publication of their works and the assertion of their difference – to write inferior poetry. The speaker ridicules the idea of a “multiculture card” used to “slide into print with poetry that’s worse.” Third, the poem is highly critical of minority women writers who are published simply because they “[throw] in Third-World saffron and some veils.” Borrowing and slightly altering the opening line of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of King Richard III* (“Now is the winter of our discontent” [1.1.1]), the speaker registers her discomfort with the use of carefully selected props for staging the Muslim American woman’s exoticism and marginality – a phenomenon that Graham Huggan describes as “staged marginality” or “the process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their ‘subordinate’ status for the benefit of a majority mainstream audience” (87). In this poem, Kahf’s speaker voices her condemnation of this tactic and asserts her refusal to take part in the act of staging her “difference” for the benefit of readers.

The debate over affirmative action continues today with many in the United States arguing that with the election of the first African American president there is no longer a need for Affirmative Action laws. This argument is of course inspired by Obama’s repeated attempts to portray the United States as beyond racial politics and divisions. For more information on this ongoing debate, see: http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/03/18/affirmative_action_foes_point_to_obama
While critical of the notion of difference, she does not consent to its wholesale undoing and invokes difference in order to bring attention to “the horrors facing our race.” The speaker discourages the reader from imagining these “horrors” as only affecting a particular race or group of people. She is quick to add that difference “pales” in relation to the horrors that confront “the human.” In this poem, the speaker values writing as a means of bringing about awareness of various peoples’ struggles, including ongoing struggles against hunger, HIV, genocide, and the capitalist market place; for her, these global oppressions are not at all separate from the oppression of Muslim American women. In fact, writing is posed as panacea to an impending death: we must “recognize / … each other in millennial glow / or we will die from what we do not know.” The Muslim American woman is posited as an émigré, a subject who has traveled the world with the purpose of writing poetry “for you.” Kahf’s poem, especially its second half, produces an understanding of Muslim American women’s difference and rejects her stereotype. What we have is a poem that balances the narration of personal experience with the broader social, cultural, and historical outlook, both essential for change.

Throughout this section, I have argued that Kahf’s poetry inscribes the Muslim American woman into a collective American imagination. Each of the poems I have discussed poses a counter-narrative to the dominant figure of the victimized and oppressed Muslim woman, especially the figure of the Muslim woman Cooke describes, a woman who is essentially being more written about than writing her self. While Kahf’s portrayals may be charged with essentializing Muslim American women and reducing
their multiple sites of oppression, they reveal the poet’s investment in the power of narration. Kahf’s poetic engagements in *Emails from Scheherazad* render legible the complex and contradictory positions occupied by Muslim women in general, and Muslim American women in particular. Although her poems may target the American reader who ranges in Kahf’s view from “Booker leftists” to “conservative young Christians,” “White suburbanites” and “the children of immigrants,” the works also address Muslims who are most affected by the stereotypes in the first place (Davis 385). In an interview about her intended audience and her writing goals, Kahf says,

> There is no forgetting that the stereotypes – and the bigotry behind them – dog us. They have real-life repercussions, often enough, on Muslim lives, on the safety of our mosques and the Muslims who are in them. How can that not be on the mind of a conscientious Muslim writer in the Western book industry? (388)

Kahf’s awareness of these “real-life repercussions” of stereotypes is what makes her works stand apart from other Arab American women authors studied in this dissertation.

In the next section, I will examine Kahf’s important challenge to the restrictive and gendered parameters of Muslim *ummah* through her depiction and celebration of Muslim women’s sexualities.

**Welcome To “Sex and the Ummah”: Online Negotiations of Muslim American Women’s Sexualities**

In January 2003, Ahmed Nassef and Jawad Ali launched a website called *Muslim Wakeup!: Prayer is Better than Sleep*. The two, self-proclaimed, progressive American Muslims, sought to provide the growing Muslim American community with an online
space to debate Islamic doctrine and promote a reformist vision of Islamic practice. Boasting about 70,000 hits per month in the first two years of its inception, the website attracted “young Muslims” who “grew up inside dual – and dueling – cultures: conservative Islam and socially liberal America” (Weaver). Perpetuating the dichotomy of a conservative Islamic faith opposed in principle and practice to the egalitarian mores of “liberal America,” the site examines “difficult” ideas and issues affecting Muslim Americans (Weaver). The now defunct website,\(^{46}\) which includes essays, poems, blog posts, calls to action, and press releases, covering wide-ranging topics such as “anti-Semitism, Islamist extremism, women’s rights, and homosexuality,” attempted to provide Muslims with a “holistic idea of what being a Muslim is about” (Weaver). Yet, as journalist Teresa Watanabe notes, the “most shocking” and perhaps also most popular aspect of the Muslim Wakeup! website was its “Sex and the Umma” section, where American Muslims could find “racy fictional works about a single, pregnant Muslim woman living with an alcoholic non-Muslim, Islamic love poetry and articles by scholars urging Muslims to celebrate the sexual impulse.” In this section, I will examine Kahf’s views on Muslim female sexualities as presented in a number of blog posts on this website. Because of the site’s popularity among Muslim youth, especially in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, I will argue that Kahf’s ideas about sexuality – although conservative in their heteronormative outlook – pose a challenge to stereotypic

\(^{46}\) The website was hacked in December 2004 by a group that called itself the “Islamic Challenge Brigades.” Declaring members of the Muslim Wakeup! site as apostates, the group warned the contributors of the site against the slandering of Islam and its Prophet. More interestingly, however, the group demanded that “perverts” like Mohja Kahf be banned from speaking on Islam and that there be a stop to her “warm fluid fantasies” (See http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/5/5a/HackedMuslimWakeup!.jpg).
representation of Muslim women’s sexualities as repressed, and question the gendered (and often insular) parameters of the Muslim American ummah.

In her introductory remarks to her online readership, Kahf explains her reasons for breaking what is sometimes considered a cultural taboo on discussions of female Muslim sexualities:

My Islamic education included positive teachings about sex from the beginning … We also learned that a Muslim can talk about sex without shame, that sex can be a form of ibada [worship] like any other human act, and that sex is not tolerated just for the purpose of procreation the way it is in some other religions (or so we learned), but as a good and natural act that God made humans love to do. (qtd. in Mack)

Preempting any criticism of her discussion of sex as going against the principles of Islam, Kahf places her writing on sex and sexuality within the Islamic commandment for worship or ibada. As such, her decision to write about sex and Islam is rooted within her own practice and application of the Islamic faith. To further the appeal of her work to Muslim readers, Kahf shows an appreciation for the Islamic view of sex. While she does not address – nor take issue with – the confining of sex and sexuality to marital relationships, Kahf installs Islam as more progressive than a number of other, unnamed religions that restrict sex to procreation. Sex, according to Kahf, is a “good and natural” act of “love,” sanctioned by “God.” Essentially, Kahf supports the act of speaking about sex within the parameters of religiously sanctioned sexuality.

On the origin of her “sexually themed stories,” Kahf explains that they “spring from my Islamic values and my particular experience of Arabic culture” (“The Sweetness of Written Intercourse”). Kahf rejects the suggestion that her ideas on Muslim women’s
sexuality may be “Western-inspired” (“The Sweetness of Written Intercourse”). She writes,

Far from being Western-inspired, my stories come from a sensibility that is aghast at the often casual, crass, and soulless attitudes toward sex portrayed in the mass media, including on the HBO program *Sex and the City*, whose name nevertheless helped name the column and whose storylines I raptly watched. (“The Sweetness of Written Intercourse”)

Kahf determinedly places her discourse on sexuality outside of a “Western” framework that, to her mind, perpetuates “casual, crass, and soulless attitudes toward sex.” In expressing her knowledge of the popular television series, *Sex and the City*, Kahf conveys her familiarity with contemporary American culture. In fact, in choosing the title “Sex and the Ummah” for her section on sexuality on the *Muslim Wakeup!* site, Kahf’s own column may be seen as riding on the tremendous success of this show. While familiar with the show, however, Kahf views her own sexual politics as different than, and perhaps even morally superior to, the sexual politics reflected in *Sex and the City* in particular and western “media” in general. The show’s “almost exclusive focus on sexual relationships and consumption” is established as being at odds with Kahf’s own religiously inspired discussions of sexuality (Arthurs 86). Kahf also appears uncomfortable with the flexible attitude towards sexuality portrayed by the four main characters on the show.

While Kahf’s approach to Muslim women’s sexuality is embedded in a very contemporary and modern – even global – discourse of women’s liberation and equal rights, her sexual politics, as they are expressed in many of her posts, do not represent
any major break away from traditional readings and interpretations of Islamic law and practice. In an article on Islam’s attitude towards sex education, J. Mark Halstead writes that

Islamic law provides clear guidance about what is acceptable and unacceptable for Muslims in the area of sexual behavior. The only forms of sexual relations permitted in Islam are those between a husband and wife, and the aim of such relations is physical satisfaction, the growth of love and kindness between husband and wife[,] and procreation. (320)

Halstead’s reading of “Islamic law,” and its attitude towards sexual education is reductive of the diversity of Islamic views on sexuality. Throughout his article, Halstead, an expert on Islam and early childhood education, homogenizes “Islam” and assumes agreement amongst all Muslims on sexual education. The views he represents, however, are similar in their outlook to Kahf’s own attitude towards sex as it is portrayed in a number of stories appearing on Muslim Wakeup!. These views do not contradict in their spirit or outlook what Kecia Ali describes as the Quran’s discussion “in scathing terms” of topics like “sex outside lawful bounds” (56). Ali adds that “Zina, sex between man and a woman who is neither his wife nor his slave, was the most serious of sexual transgressions described in the Qur’an (sic)” (56-57).

In another interview, Kahf asserts her belief in the sanctity of marriage and her firm stance against premarital intercourse “on the grounds that sex is sacred; our bodies, including our sexual organs, should be treated with respect” (qtd. in Mack). Kahf’s audience is the Muslim ummah whose views on sexuality have been influenced by a newfound Islamic conservatism, resulting from the absorption of Orientalist (and racist)
characterizations of Arab sexuality as both decadent and morally degenerate. I will return to the challenge that Kahf poses to the conservative elements of her Muslim audience at a later point in this section, but for now, it is important to note that Kahf too believes her work is relevant to the Muslim community at large. Kahf says, “To whom else but a readership versed in the Quran does a question such as ‘Do we get dick in heaven? Men get pussy. Do we get dick?’ make perfect sense?” (qtd. in Mack).

With the aforementioned shocking question as its opening, “Lustrous Companions” is one of Kahf’s most popular and controversial posts on the Muslim Wakeup! site. Narrating the frustration of three Muslim women whose question about Muslim women’s female right “to sex in paradise” is abruptly dismissed by a Muslim cleric, the story is simultaneously serious and playful in its tone and positionality. Maryam, the woman who asks the question, is a married American Muslim woman who has been with her husband “Hamudy” for thirteen years and “follow[s] the rules all the fucking time”; Maryam simply wants to know if she’ll have a chance at sexual activity with someone other than her husband in the after-life. She says,

‘So, it’s not that I am complaining about what I am getting. But, you know, I just wonder. Like, how many different ways can you do it with just one guy? Is this

47 In his groundbreaking study, Desiring Arabs, Joseph Massad makes an inextricable link between expressions of contemporary Arab and Muslim sexualities and nineteenth-century Orientalist attitudes towards it. Massad writes, “While the premodern West attacked the world of Islam’s alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern West attacks the world of Islam’s alleged repression” (37). Massad also maintains that during the nineteenth century, Arab and Muslim scholars, academics, and clerics appropriated a Western attitude towards decadent Arab sexuality and began to perpetuate and impose a more conservative and hegemonic outlook on Arab sexuality which they associated with the “true” teachings of Islam. Their aim, according to Massad, was to extend “this [sexual] hegemony to the [Arab] population so that their sexual practices, identities, and most of all, desires would accord with the hegemonic Western views” (48).
the only dick I’m ever gonna get? In my life? This is all I’m getting?’ (“Lustrous Companions”)

Maryam’s question – posed at a religious halāqa⁴⁸ or a circle – is received by a solemn Muslim cleric who assures Maryam, and the other Muslim women convened to hear the cleric’s thoughts on the after-life, that “any woman who wants such a thing is not likely to make it to paradise.” The cleric’s dismissive answer to the Muslim woman’s legitimate question is used to end the discussion and the women quickly disperse from the mosque. His refusal to address this question, except by trivializing it, signals the cleric’s discomfort with the implicit challenge the question poses to androcentric readings of the Quran and the Hadith.

Although the conservative cleric puts an end to Maryam’s illicit question, she continues her discussion with her friends Reyann and the narrator. The narrator describes herself as a newly married, Palestinian Muslim woman from Gaza. The women’s conversation is carried out at Hoda’s Hookah House and Café where the three friends discuss sex openly and fantasize out-loud about Muslim, Arab, and non-Muslim men they sexually wish to encounter in the after-life. The women’s desires are framed as “just for fun” and part of their own “fantasy time.” Maryam adamantly asserts that they are, in fact, “GoodFuckingMuslim Girls” who follow prescribed Islamic behavior by not drinking alcohol and never engaging in premarital or extramarital sexual intercourse.

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⁴⁸ Halāqa is the Arabic word for circle or gathering. The word is used to denote a gathering for the explicit purposes of gaining knowledge about Islam through a discussion and question format. A Halāqa is often a gender-segregated gathering but women may choose to invite a male Muslim scholar or cleric to attend certain sessions.
They simply are Muslim women with healthy sexual appetites who, the narrator suggests, are not opposed to masturbation, oral sex, or the fulfillment of women’s sexual pleasure through orgasm. The women’s assertions of their sexual desires are posited as part of their every day conversation and a normal occurrence in their frequent gatherings.

In fact, the Muslim women’s conversations are not very different from the discussions that the four characters of *Sex and the City* engage in during each episode of the show. As Jane Gerhard writes,

*Sex and the City* is structured by two major overlapping themes, both of which testify to the entanglement of postfeminism and queerness. The first, which is potentially the most disruptive to heterosexual allegiances, is that of the committed friendships between the women. The second is the bawdy talk the women engage in about their sexual partners. Explicit sex talk is the feature of the show most celebrated by critics. (43)

Gerhard’s description of *Sex and the City* can easily be made to apply to Kahf’s story: the women discuss their views on sexuality openly and honestly, without undue regard for propriety or false modesty. Instead of meeting in hip and trendy New York cafes, the Muslim American women meet in Arab-owned coffee shops where they can still smoke. Both sets of women are equally committed to one another in their friendships and to the institution of heterosexuality. They seek sexual pleasure and fulfillment within heterosexual parameters sanctioned either by mainstream capitalist society, as in the case of the women on *Sex and the City*, or by God, as in the case of the Muslim women in Kahf’s story. In Kahf’s story, both Maryam and the narrator love their husbands and Reyann, the only virgin among them, wants to marry a “good” Palestinian Muslim man. Like the women on *Sex and the City*, their discourse on sexuality is not on its own
transgressive or revolutionary. Both groups of women seek sexual fulfillment within heteronormative confines and express both desire and pleasure as deriving from heterosexual relationships sanctioned by fidelity, monogamous relationships, and marriage. What is shocking, however, is the women’s positionalities as practicing Muslim American women; that these Muslim women openly discuss sexual relationships in ways that are so familiar to readers is what is surprising and out of the ordinary in this narrative. More importantly, it is readers’ assumptions about Muslim women’s sexualities as repressed which render the characters’ openness about their sexual desires so illicit and unconventional. Kahf’s story simultaneously aims at two audiences with particular ideas about Muslim women’s sexualities: readers from her religious ummah and readers outside it.

Kahf’s posts are marked by a fervent desire to bring together expressions of Islamic religiosity with modern-day living. In another controversial entry on female menstruation, entitled “Lost Pages from Sahih al-Bukhari’s Chapter on Menstruation,” Kahf challenges conventional Islamic readings and applications of the prohibition against engaging in sexual intercourse with menstruating women. Framing her story as a conversation between various religious and knowledgeable Muslim women, Kahf undermines the assumption of menstruating women’s uncleanness and argues, instead, for a positive view of menstruation. In Kahf’s story, all characters are religious and practicing women and some are even historic figures known to readers familiar with the three Abrahamic faiths: Hawwa (Eve), the Mother of Cain, and the sister of Abel all
make some contributions to the narrative. The women characters discuss their views on the religious edicts governing Muslim women’s lives. Their engagement in this religious exchange or debate, framed similarly to a religious Hadith, implicitly questions and undermines the authority of men who have, historically, been primarily responsible for the narration and interpretation of the Hadith. The title of the story invokes the authority of Abu Abdulllah Muhammad Ibn Sa’ad (d.845) and also known as Sahih al-Bukhari, the revered Muslim scholar most famous for the collection and transcription of more than 2,600 accounts of religious Hadith that continue to have broad consequences for practicing Sunni Muslims. Al-Bukhari’s 9-volume collection, entitled Al-Jaami Al-Musnud Al-Sahih or Sahih, is considered the most authentic written version or account of Hadith known to Muslims today. That Kahf utilizes Al-Bukhari’s name in the title of her early online submission to the site establishes her familiarity with and knowledge of

49 Fatima Mernissi defines the Hadith as such: “All the ‘pertinent’ information … attributed to the Prophet. It is the recording in writing of everything that he is supposed to have said or done. His opinions, his reactions to events, the ways in which he justified his decisions had to be put in writing so that they could be drawn upon and referred to later, in order to distinguish what is right from what is wrong, whether it be with regard to the practice of power or something else” (34).

50 A notable exception to this historic trend of gendered omission is the role played by Aisha, the youngest of the Prophet’s wives, whose knowledge, authority, and memory of the Prophet’s sayings and doings have significantly contributed to the transmission and preservation of numerous accounts of Hadith. Aisha was able to contest the narration, as well as the authenticity, of the narratives reported by the Prophet’s friends and other witnesses. Leila Ahmed writes, “‘Aisha’s (sic) testimonies on the way Muhammad prayed or the way he recited a Quranic verse settled points regarding prayer and the correct reading of the verse. An eminent traditionalist herself, ‘Aisha transmitted hadith to several of the foremost early Muslim traditionalists. Some 2,210 hadith are attributed to her” (73).

51 Even Fatima Mernissi, a self-avowed skeptic regarding the authenticity of the Hadith, lauds Al Bukhari’s method of collecting and recording the Hadith. Mernissi writes, “Al-Bukhari, methodical, systematic, was able to interview 1,080 persons and collect 600,000 Hadith. His main objective was to be true to Muhammad – that is, to avoid having him say something that he had not said” (44). Al-Bukhari, Mernissi adds, came to the conclusion that “less than two centuries after the Prophet’s death, there were already 596,725 false Hadith in circulation” (44).
the Islamic Sunni tradition and her willingness to question the authenticity and value of significant and even authoritative religious works.

In her study on the importance of the Hadith on Islamic political history and contemporary practice, Fatima Mernissi writes,

A Hadith (tradition) is no small matter. The Hadith collections are works that record in minute detail what the Prophet said and did. They constitute, along with the Koran (the book revealed by God), both the source of law and the standard for distinguishing the true from the false, the permitted from the forbidden – they have shaped Muslim ethics and values. (1)

While the Hadith regulates every aspect of daily living for Muslims today, its authenticity and veracity continues to be subject to personal interpretation and constant intellectual and religious debate. What is at stake in these religious discussions is “not only … putting the content of the Hadith at the disposal of believing readers, but also in furnishing them with information about the informants” (Mernissi 35). The Muslim reader or believer has the right to learn about both the subject of the Hadith and the biography of its transmitter “so that he or she can continually judge whether they are worthy of credence or not” (35). For Mernissi, this latter attribute encapsulates the progressive nature of Islam, and showcases its openness to reasoning and scholarly debate. In questioning the authenticity of the Hadith and its predominantly male transmitters, Mernissi usurps for herself the authority to question and interpret religious doctrine, while reifying the power and importance of the Hadith.  

52 A similar point is made in Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon’s *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology.* Zayzafoon writes, “Through her writing, Mernissi presents her reinvention of early Muslim society and the ideal of gender equality in Muhammad’s time as the truth that
story challenges male narration and interpretation of religious doctrine, conferring upon Muslim women the power to reinterpret traditional Islamic viewpoints and attitudes towards women from a womanist perspective.

Kahf’s short story begins with an excerpt from the Quran on women’s menstruation:

They ask thee concerning menses. Say: They are a hurt. So withdraw from women in menses and do not go near to them until they purify. When they purify, go to them as God has commanded you. Verily God loveth the returners and the purifiers. (The Holy Quran, al-Baqara, 222)

In this excerpt, God addresses the Prophet Mohammed in response to his followers’ questions on the issue of sexual contact during menstruation. God instructs men to “withdraw from women in menses.” Although the verse does not ascribe uncleanliness to the bodies of Muslim women, it establishes their bodies as “impure” during menstruation. Men are “commanded” to return to women only “when they purify.” This Quranic verse plays a key role in upholding the prohibition on sexual contact during menstruation. Kahf challenges this verse by introducing a number of authoritative Muslim women characters who have positive relationships with their bodies and their menstrual cycles and who use their knowledge of Islam to question and criticize the exclusionary and androcentric biases of the tradition. Kahf’s Muslim women characters enact the contemporary tradition

has been hidden or ‘veiled’ by the Muslim male elite. Mernissi’s reauthentication of the hadith – a strategy within the very same system she opposes – paradoxically endorses the notion of truth from which the hadith derives its authority and hence reinforces the power of tradition to reinscribe and perpetuate itself” (22).
of Islamic feminism by balancing their desire for gender equity with their appreciation for the Islamic faith. The narrative begins by establishing the authority of the Companion of the Woman Who Loved Her Period, Bibi Monia the Truthstteller. The woman’s account of her relationship with her body and her menstrual cycle is directly juxtaposed with the Quranic verse from Surat al-Baqara quoted above. As Martina Nosková writes, “what follows [the Quranic verse] is Kahf’s sura, her own version of the holy chapter” (117).

Kahf’s familiarity with the formality of the Quranic style, its tone, and form of addressing readers is evident in the Companion’s words:

Behold, my period comes. I start feeling soft and melted and sexy a night or two before, and want to be held tenderly and protectively and made love to mightily, and then I want to be covered gently and left to sleep a bonus sleep that is off the clock, no babies crying no kids homework no dishes no phone calls let my partner take care of everything for a few hours. And that is how I know it is coming, and it feels like an old, familiar friend whose face I love. For behold, I love my period (She said this latter three times.)

In this narrative, the Muslim woman appears both resigned and reassured by the reappearance of her menstruation. Comforted by its repeated presence in her life, the Companion’s ease and familiarity with her body is evident. Constituting a break with a general culture of shame and silence surrounding menstruation, Kahf’s Companion

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53 While there is much contention over the definition of the term “Islamic Feminism” and its current use and circulation in contemporary feminist discourse, those who adhere to the Islamic feminist label generally accept the definition provided by Margot Badran on the meaning of the term. In her work, Badran identifies as Islamic feminists any person who “employ[s] the Islamic methodology of ijtiḥad to realize the full potential of Islam, which they see as guaranteeing social justice, including gender justice and equality” (50). By the practice of “ijtiḥad” Badran means the seeking of religious knowledge on contemporary phenomena through the personal study of the Quran and the Hadith. Similarly, Shahrazad Mojab argues that while “the concept of ‘Islamic feminism’ is of recent origins, used for the first time in the 1990s in the growing western literature on ‘women and Islam,’” there is a growing number of feminists who use the term and “treat Islam as the only authentic, indigenous road to gender equity and justice” (124, 130). Those feminists, Mojab maintains, “advocate the compatibility of Islam and feminism” (130).
shares much with contemporary women and feminists who espouse more positive relationships with women’s bodies and menstrual cycles. The Companion’s fondness of the menstrual cycle and open expression of “love” towards her body conveys a willingness to break cultural and even religious taboos surrounding menstruation. The Companion welcomes her menstrual cycle and greets it as a “familiar” friend whose “face [she] love[s].” The Companion’s attitude is described by one of the story’s multiple narrators as an example of “what it feels like to have a tradition that includes words of love for women.” Kahf’s statement highlights her understanding of the negative effects that the traditional Quranic edicts against sexual contact during menstruation have on Muslim women. Instead of accepting the authority of the text and the Islamic tradition on this issue, Kahf’s Companion offers an alternative tradition of Muslim women’s self-love and bodily acceptance.

Because the prohibitions on Muslim women who are menstruating regulate both their sexual lives and their application and practice of the Islamic faith, Kahf’s characters question the prohibitions against women’s entry into the mosque, prayer, and fasting during menstruation. Listing the prohibitions imposed on menstruating women in a final and official manner, Kahf writes,

54 In their by now classic work, The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation (1988), Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth argue that negative cultural attitudes towards menstruation are not simply confined to “primitive” cultures but also extend to and dominate the discourse surrounding women’s menstruation in the United States. Delaney, Lupton, and Toth’s work, which was highly influenced by second wave feminist theory, examines broad cultural attitudes toward menstruation, focusing on the construction of the discourse of shame surrounding women’s sexualities, mental abilities, and physical capacities during menstruation. In their introduction, they write, “In our own culture, specifically twentieth-century America, women continue to suffer the taboos of centuries. Law, medicine, religion, and psychology have isolated and devalued the menstruating woman” (3).
And the authorities of the Days of Rejection said: Here is a list of things you are forbidden to do. Pray. Fast. Make love. Make tawaf. Enter a mosque. With first blood comes first ban. (“Lustrous Companions”)

This list of things forbidden to the practicing Muslim woman is provided without reason or justification. The rules are absolute and they are used to justify androcentric viewpoints on religion, securing the assumption of the superiority of Muslim men’s faith and practice over that of Muslim women. Kahf’s narrative labels Muslims who accept these views as “Those Who Reject Women” and are motivated by fear and the desire for control. Kahf’s religious characters do not, however, accept these decrees, questioning their usefulness and applicability to their life and practice of their faith. Kahf writes, “And She (MGSHQ–May God Strengthen Her Questioning) said: Why does God hold me at bay? Now when I feel like prayer most? Why does He reject me? I am in despair.”

Here the woman’s desire to pray – even during her menstruation – registers the frustration felt by some Muslim women who uphold the prohibition against women’s prayer during menstruation. It is significant that Kahf explicitly questions the limits on Muslim women’s relationship with God placed by the Hadith requiring menstruating women to refrain from prayer for specific periods of time throughout adulthood. The Companion poses a challenge not only to the contested process of reporting and recording the Hadith; it also questions the androcentric bias inherent in the Hadith’s very message. If religious Muslim women cannot converse with God through prayer, how are they to overcome their feelings of alienation and despair? Why must they forgo their religiously mandated right and duty to pray and be in touch with the deity? These
questions, while expressing a Muslim woman’s desire to fulfill traditional religious
duties, reflect a serious commitment to the tradition of “skepticism that guided the work
of the founders of religious scholarship” (Mernissi 45).

Commenting on the sexual politics portrayed in Kahf’s columns, Nosková argues
that Kahf “puts religion side by side with physical attraction or sex in general” (116). In
Kahf’s posts to the site, there is no distinction between sexual desire and religious
practice; in fact, sexual desire and intercourse – when expressed through the institution of
heterosexual marriage – are presented as manifestations of religious practice. Kahf’s
utilization of religious text and principles to promote healthy attitudes towards sex among
the Muslim American ummah is viewed as a form of her own “literary jihad,” a struggle
against dominant notions of Muslim women’s sexuality (Nosková 5). While Kahf’s style
relies on some exaggeration and bombast, her posts on “Sex and the Umma” are effective
in so far as they undermine and challenge both Muslim and non-Muslim readers’
assumptions about Muslim women’s sexual repression.

So endemic is the belief in Islam’s regulation of Muslim women’s sexuality that
opponents of the aforementioned French ban on the veil in public schooling regularly
report the protection and liberation of Muslim women’s sexuality as prime reason for
their support of the application of this discriminatory law. The assumed juxtaposition
between the repressed sexuality of Muslim women – encapsulated by the imposition of
the veil – and the liberated sexuality of French women lies at the heart of the debate over
the French law banning the veil in public schools. A cartoon appearing in a French newspaper during the affaires des foulards captures this distinction well:

![Cartoon by Catherine Beaunez](image)

**Figure 2.** Cartoon by Catherine Beaunez

In this cartoon by Catherine Beaunez, which is taken from Joan Wallach Scott’s work on the politics of veiling in France, the image of the veiled and burqa-clad French Muslim woman’s body is contrasted with the image of the scantily dressed, white, French woman’s body. Standing side by side, both women appear to be thinking the same thing about the other: “I would not want to be in her place,” reads the caption. The two women, when juxtaposed with one another in this way, come to symbolize the two poles of the debate over the veil and Muslim women’s sexuality, which I discussed previously in this chapter. On the one hand, we have a woman whose bodily contours are hidden and who reveals only her eyes to the viewer. On the other, we have a woman who covers only her

genital area and appears content with the high visibility of her body. That neither woman wishes to physically, mentally, or even emotionally embody the other conveys just how divisive the issue of the veil continues to be in contemporary western society. On the representations of French women’s sexuality during the headscarf affair and the French feminist response to this contentious issue, Joan Scott writes,

> Until their ideological confrontation with Islam, many French feminists saw the sexual exhibitionism of their society – particularly as it applied to women – as demeaning to women because it reduced them to a sexed body. But in the heat of the headscarf controversy, those concerns were set aside and equality became synonymous with sexual emancipation, which in turn was equated with the visibility of the female body. (156)

This equation of equality with sexual freedom and the visibility of women’s bodies regulates societal attitudes towards veiled Muslim women. In championing sexual liberation through uncovering women’s bodies, the veil is viewed as a material obstacle to women’s equality and gender liberation. Throughout her many entries on the Muslim *Wakeup!* site, Kahf refutes the idea that Muslim veiling practices contribute to the repression of women’s sexuality. Kahf does not see a distinction between gender equity and Islam. Instead, she constantly seeks to historicize the practice of the veil and its relationship with Islam, asserting Muslim women’s right to veiling.⁵⁶

Kahf’s internet posts, a major component of her literary accomplishments, demonstrate how some Muslim American women writers shape and inform public opinion about Muslim American life. While Kahf’s online posts have received scant

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⁵⁶ In a recent academic and theoretical essay, Kahf discusses the history of the veil and the adverse affects of forced removal of the veil on Middle Eastern women. See Kahf’s “From Her Royal Body the Veil Was Removed.”
critical attention, they have engendered wide public discussion and debate – with her first online post receiving more than five hundred comments on the Muslim Wakeup! site. I use Kahf’s posts on Muslim Wakeup! to draw attention to the ways that Kahf contributes to the opening up of spaces for resistance of dogmatic interpretations of Islam from both within and outside Muslim American communities. As Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen Moore argue in their book on the changing societal and public roles of Muslim American women, a growing and sizable number of Muslim American women are “working to challenge the patriarchy that they see as dominant in Muslim societies through centuries” (150). In more ways than one, Kahf’s posts to Muslim Wakeup! allow us to explore some of the various strategies used by Muslim American women authors to challenge common misconceptions about the Muslim American woman, her body, sexuality, culture, and even religiosity. Questioning prevalent ideas of Muslim women’s passivity and servility, Kahf brings forth more nuanced and complex understandings of Muslim women. This understanding, while helpful in its challenge to the limited assumptions of Muslim women’s agency and sexuality, unfortunately continues to operate from within the confines of the institutions of heterosexuality and marriage.

Kahf’s online contributions, however, are timely and tactical interventions in the politics of Muslim women’s sexuality and must be read, as Gillian Whitlock encourages critics of weblogs to do, in “synchronic and dialogic” ways (41). What real political change or influence such virtual contributions may have on the Muslim American community continues to be up for debate. However, I believe that their effects and
influence are significant and must not be overlooked. Such virtual and online interventions, as this section has demonstrated, are shaped by a specific and very particular historic moment, one that is influenced by global and technologically-savvy readers, connected to one another through “the transnational circuitries of images and narratives that are a feature of contemporary culture” (Whitlock 8). Analyzing the relationship between these works and their virtual readership is a necessary step toward understanding the global reach of weblogs. Kahf’s online posts are part and parcel of a larger network of images, ideas, and stories about the Muslim woman. In the next and final section of this chapter, I will examine the impact of the publication of Kahf’s first novel, *The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf*, which articulates in profound ways the effects of contemporary American culture and politics on the racializing of Islam and the shaping of the Muslim American ummah post 9/11.

‘Racializing’ the Muslim (American) Umma: Writing and Reading *The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf*

The publication of Kahf’s first novel, *The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf*, in 2006, brought about the author’s first article-length review in *The New York Times*. The favorable article, which lauds American readers’ openness to racial difference and their embrace of free speech, claims the author as a role model for the Muslim American community: “Her audience say Ms. Kahf embodies what they strive for, in that she is someone who both respects her own faith and yet uses the advantages offered by being an
American” (MacFarquhar). MacFarquhar’s presumptive grasp of what Muslim American audiences’ “strive for” is furthered by the claim that the novel has “turned Ms. Kahf into something of an idol among Muslim American women, especially young ones, struggling to reconcile their faith with a country often hostile to it” (MacFarquhar). These assertions, which stake for the author a similar position to the one accorded Diana Abu-Jaber, have two additional characteristics worth noting: first, the author is assumed to be a role model for her own Muslim American community; that is, her views on Islam, American identity, and even the War on Terror warrant attention, respect, and emulation from her ummah. She is, according to MacFarquhar, an “idol” to her readers, especially the young Muslims who follow her works closely. Second, her audience is configured as predominantly female and religious. Her work, The New York Times suggests, is read and consumed by a young generation of Muslim women (MacFarquhar).

While there may be little evidence backing either of these two claims, The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf’s ability to portray a historicized coming of age narrative of growing up Muslim American, a narrative attuned to the complexities of religion, race, and gender, makes this work of contemporary relevance and appeal. The novel’s heroine’s constant search for a Muslim community and her desire to reconcile the tenets of the Islamic faith with the American experience are significant factors that contribute to the novel’s growing popularity within the Muslim American community. Its semi-autobiographical approach to the issue of how “‘Islam makes you this other race’”

57 It is worth noting here that the use of the term “idol” to refer to Kahf’s work is problematic, especially because the following of idols is explicitly prohibited in Islam.
resonates well with contemporary debates on the racialization of Islam in the era of the War on Terror (Kahf; qtd. in MacFarquhar). In more ways than one, Kahf’s first novel redraws the Muslim ummah and resignifies its political, racial, and gendered boundaries.

Premised on the life of an adult Muslim American woman named Khadra Shamy, whose visit to her hometown brings back memories of her childhood and coming of age in the American “heartland” of Indiana, the novel offers a deep look into Muslim immigrant life in the United States (The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf). This return to the Muslim community she left, after a failed marriage, a divorce, and an abortion, is rife with difficult questions and scenarios. Juxtaposing recollections from her childhood with encounters from her return, Khadra’s narrative encapsulates many of the struggles faced by Muslim Americans today. The novel’s main question is deceptively simple: How do Muslim Americans reconcile their complex racial and religious positioning with life in the United States? This question mirrors the larger concerns of the Muslim community living in the United States today. As John O. Voll writes,

[These concerns include] what might be thought of as the ‘classic’ issues for Muslim minorities everywhere… Here the basic issues are maintaining Islam as a way of life in a context where that is difficult, and deciding the meaning and implications of community-faith concepts. (205)

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58 Kahf’s choice of a Midwestern American state like Indiana as the setting of her novel is not coincidental. As Jane I. Smith notes in her work on the development of Islam in the United States, Midwest America was home to one of the first Muslim American groups. Smith writes, “In Michigan City, Indiana, an Islamic Center of sorts was established as early as 1914, its members primarily Syrians and Lebanese who worked in the mercantile trade. They soon began to attract other Muslims from around the area in 1924 and reorganized under the name The Modern Age Arabian Islamic Society” (56). Smith also sees President Lyndon Johnson’s historic decision in 1965 to repeal the system of immigration quotas “based on national diversity within the United States” as contributing to the rise in numbers of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East. Khadra Shamy’s family’s immigration from Syria was likely facilitated by this historical moment.
Khadra’s story of her adult departure from Indiana and abrupt break with her Muslim community offers readers insight into Khadra’s own struggle with these questions and represents her desire to embrace both the Muslim American *ummah* and the world outside of it, a world she is suspicious of, angry at, and sometimes extremely fearful of.

Khadra’s return to her home and Muslim community as a reporter for a Philadelphia-based magazine named *Alternative Americas* is laden with difficulties. The visit is prompted by the magazine’s decision to publish a feature on “minority religious communities in Middle America” (48). This assignment brings to the fore complex feelings for the young woman:

> She cringes at the thought of putting her own community in the spotlight. She doesn’t think she herself can take one more of those shots of masses of Muslim butts up in the air during prayer or the clichéd Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil. (48)

Resisting her participation in the production and circulation of formulaic and stereotypic representations of her community, Khadra finds her assignment difficult to accept, especially when her boss, Sterling Ross, discovers her connection to the Indiana Muslim community and hopes for a look “Behind the veil! Wow! A keyhole view of the hidden, inside world of Muslims” (48). Assured of her “creative control” over the project, Khadra reluctantly accepts the contentious assignment and readers are granted entry into her portrayals and understanding of the Muslim American community and its experiences with issues of race and racism.
Khadra’s return to Indiana is marred by memories of her sudden departure from her community. She is, from the outset, at odds with the geography, scenery, and culture of her hometown. The novel opens in this way:

‘Liar,’ she says to the highway sign that claims ‘The People of Indiana Welcome You.’ The olive-skinned, dark-haired young woman drives west on the old National Road. A small zippered Quran and a camera are on the hatchback’s passenger seat in easy reach, covered by an open map – *States of the Heartland*. Khadra Shamy spent most of her growing-up years in Indiana. She knows better than the sign. (1)

Khadra’s feelings of being unwelcome and unwanted in her hometown portray her vexed relationship with the “People of Indiana.” Khadra braces herself for the “unbearable flatness of central Indiana” from the moment of her arrival (1). She is not tempted by the beautiful scenery around her of “silver silos and pole barns, tufts of goldthread on the meridian” (2). None of it matters much to her because as she contemplates it all, she knows that “it is not mine … None of it is for me” (2). So extreme are Khadra’s feelings of alienation and unbelonging that she is certain that her screams would be unheard and that “some Indiana mute button would be on, and no one would hear” her cries (2). In fact, Khadra’s body appears to physically reject her return and she is forced to purchase antacids to “calm the panic that coming back to Indiana brings to her gut” (3). Khadra’s feelings about her home are made explicit to readers as she constantly states that she is “returning to this ground that didn’t love her” (17); she knows that she is not a welcome member of this community and presents her memories of Indiana from this vantage point. Compelled to speculate on Khadra’s life experiences, readers are reminded over and over again of the effects of racism and Islamophobia on Muslim Americans.
Thinking about her childhood, Khadra recalls being a member of one of the few Muslim families living in Indiana. Her memories of growing up Muslim in Indiana are painful and appear to have left an indelible mark upon her understanding of her community and her positionality in American society in general. She recalls, for example, how she and her brother, Eyad, played with Hanifa and Hakim, two black Muslim children in the 1970s: “They were four Muslim children of the heartland – two Arab, two black – flying in the blue-and-gold world on their bikes, right through the middle of the 1970s” (5). She recalls how the Lott boys often interrupted their innocent playtime and how they picked on the four children and called them “raghead[s]” (5). These memories evoke Khadra’s insecurity and sense of imminent danger while living in the United States. In fact, danger appears woven into the fabric of American society. In many ways, the novel showcases how Khadra negotiates her identity as a Muslim in a new homeland. Her family shares Khadra’s fear of things un-Islamic in the United States; they too worry about their faith and their ability to maintain Islamic practice and preserve their Muslim identity in their new country. Her father’s position as a Coordinator of a Dawah Center compels him to make his family a role model for Muslim immigrants living in Indiana.

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59 *Dawah* is the Arabic word for call; its contemporary usage is primarily religious in its meaning and connotation and therefore signals a call to Islam. Dawah centers in North America operate as spaces where immigrant Muslims receive guidance on the tenets of their faith and convene to perform their religious duties. Dawah centers also function as spaces that offer support to Muslim converts and others attempting to understand Islam. In his historical study of the Dawah movement in North America, Larry Poston argues that Dawah centers in North America act as spaces which not only maintain “Islamicity” through the building of mosques but also by “establishing organizations that reflected the ethnic backgrounds and religious convictions of the Muslim population” (35). The fictional Islamic Dawah Center at the center of *Kahf*’s novel functions in ways similar to those described by Poston. See his *Islamic Da’wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*. 

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Struggling to maintain Islamic guidelines on food consumption, Khadra’s family fears everyday American supermarket products like “Jell-O” and “Wonder Bread” (12). On her family’s fear of contamination through consumption of pork, the narrator says,

Danger abounded. Pork was everywhere. At first the young couple thought it was merely a matter of avoiding the meat of the pig. Soon their eyes were opened to the fact that pig meat came under other names and guises in this strange country… Pig meat was filthy. It had bugs in it, Khadra’s father said. That’s why God made it haram, her mother said. If you ate pig, bugs would grow and grow inside your stomach and eat your guts out. Always ask if there is pig in something before you eat anything from kuffar hands. (12-13)

Khadra is introduced to the concept of haram, warned against contaminating her body by eating the forbidden meat of the pig. She is taught not to accept food from nonbelievers who may have placed “pig in something.” In accepting a dichotomy between the community of believers in Islam and those outside of it, Khadra’s family draws distinct boundaries between the Muslim community and the community of non-Muslims surrounding them. At first glimpse, it appears that these boundaries are firmly drawn and nonnegotiable. However, Khadra’s encounters with Muslim and non-Muslim others, as well as her personal experiences, compel her to reassess her understanding of the notion of community and the criteria she uses to define the Muslim community. In a revealing exchange with Kacey Thompson, the young Khadra questions whether Kacey, who became known as Khadija Al-Deen after her conversion to Islam, was in fact a “real Muslim” (23). Khadija responds to Khadra with her own question: “‘What is a real

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60 The term haram indicates that which is religiously forbidden. The concept can at times impose certain dietary restrictions (including the forbidding of the consumption of pork, and alcoholic beverages) and at others it may impose particular physical restrictions (for example, the regulating of sexual behavior). Halal is the antonym of haram and it indicates that which is religiously permissible or allowed.
Muslim? ’” (24). Khadra’s response is detailed: “‘When you do the Five Pillars,’ Khadra shrugged, ‘you know, and follow the Quran and the Prophet and wear hijab and follow the Islamic way of life’” (24). While Khadra’s answer asserts the need to practice the tenets of the faith in order to be considered a “real” Muslim and a member of the ummah, Khadija corrects the young woman’s ideas and gently asserts, “‘Shahada. That’s all. Belief that God is One. When that enters your heart and you surrender to it, you are a Muslim’” (24). Khadija’s assertion complicates Khadra’s notion of what constitutes a Muslim. As an African American convert to Islam, Khadija does not accept Khadra’s search for “real” Muslims; Khadija reminds Khadra of the true tenets of the faith in its admittance into its fold of any person who accepts the Oneness of God, regardless of that person’s race, creed, or gender.

What is noteworthy about this exchange is its decentralizing of ethnicity as claim for superior social status within the Muslim American ummah. Khadra’s exchange with Khadija destabilizes Arabocentric assertions of natural or biologic connections to Islam and emphasizes instead the importance of piety as the basis for membership in the Muslim community. 61 Khadra examines evidence from the history of the Prophet to show that this contradiction between principle and practice is political and not religious. Khadra is not afraid to point her fingers at members of the Muslim ummah who

61 In Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), Edward E. Curtis IV explains that the association of Islam with Arab identity and culture has had a long-lasting influence on Islamic thought. Curtis argues that the Arabocentric thrust of this position, which usurped for Arab culture a special connection with Islam due to the Prophet’s own Arab lineage and the Quran’s revelation in the Arabic language to the Arab tribe of Quraysh, clashed with the egalitarian principles and spirit of the new faith.
discriminate against black Muslims, and she even singles out her family for their racist position against black members of their Dawah Center. When Khadra’s brother, Eyad, asks his parents to propose marriage on his behalf to Maha Abdul-Kadir, an American Muslim of Sudanese background, who is also “a real beauty whose color was rich and dark” (137), the reader is faced with Arab and Muslim racism against black Muslims. The reaction of Eyad’s father, Wajdy, to his son’s request is shocking and inexplicable to his two devout children: “But for heaven’s sake, she’s black as coal” (139). This racist reaction to Maha, a devout Muslim, due to her black skin color, perplexes Wajdy and Khadra, who see an apparent gulf between what their parents had taught them about Islam and their position on Eyad’s desire to propose to Maha. Maha’s “impeccable character,” her native knowledge of the Arabic language, activity in the mosque, and donning of the hijab, further demonstrate the illogic of her parents’ position (138). If her parents cannot agree to a future bride with proper Islamic education and background, who will they accept? “Piety, character, beauty, brains, the right language, the right home culture – what more to ask in a bride?” (138).

The narrator spells out her thoughts for readers on this subject and calls racism within the Islamic community for what it is. She is not coy about her stance and questions the effectiveness of a community that is not willing to deal with its own prejudices and racial and ethnic hierarchies.

‘We’re all one thing: Muslim.’ This was the Dawah Center line: No racism in Islam. Meaning, none is allowed; a commendable ideal. But it was also a smokescreen of denial that retarded any attempt to deal with the prejudices that existed among Muslims. (137)

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Here the narrator poses a challenge to the Muslim American community and how it defines and organizes itself. If the Muslim community refuses to recognize prejudice and racism within its own membership, how can it effectively deal with the racism and Islamophobia it collectively faces in the United States? By articulating an opposition to such apparent discrimination and prejudice, the narrator bursts the myth of a unified Muslim American community standing in solidarity with one another. What the narrator highlights, instead, is the tensions between the principles or “ideals” of the faith and their troubling applications. In bringing attention to this disconcerting occurrence within the Muslim American ummah of Indiana, Kahf breaks the silence and insularity surrounding Muslim Americans and gestures toward important debates taking place between Muslims regarding the strength – and viability – of concepts like the Muslim ummah.62

Khadra’s criticisms of the Islamic community and Muslim practice extend beyond the borders of the United States. Not only does Khadra question the racism and Arabocentrism inherent in the Islamic American community, but she is also equally critical of Islamic practice in the holiest city in the Muslim world, Mecca. When granted the opportunity to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, known as Haj, Khadra is again

62 In an essay on pluralism within the Muslim American community, Fachrizal Halim argues that it is vital that Muslim Americans confront issues between themselves as members of the same religious community. He writes, “It is crucial for Muslims today to think about how to deal with their fellow Muslims in order to reduce sectarianism” (241). Halim’s essay, while cognizant of the different political and economic commitments of the various members of the Muslim American ummah, recommends that “a continuing process of communication is the answer to how to bridge the diversity brought about by the various cultural and theological backgrounds of Muslim” (241). See Halim’s “Pluralism of American Muslims and the Challenge of Assimilation.” Halim’s call for better communication amongst Muslim Americans is mirrored in Kahf’s work through her characters’ constant engagement with issues of racial and ethnic diversity amongst the Muslim American community, including their negotiations of sectarian divides.
confounded by the inherent contradictions between Islamic teachings and their contemporary manifestations. Elated by the opportunity to fulfill the fifth pillar of Islam by visiting its most important city, Khadra believes that by landing in Saudi Arabia she has finally arrived at “someplace where we really belong” (159; italics in original). Khadra is not discouraged by the demanding rituals of Haj and feels inspired by the masses of Muslims gathered to complete this important pillar of their faith. While Khadra is at peace with the multitude of Muslims around her, she notes the irony of billboards advertising “Seiko” and “Panasonic” being plastered over the holiest city in the Islamic world. Kahf writes, “‘Give praise to God, the Lord of the World,’ flashed another highway sign, and beside it, brilliantly lit, a picture of a VCR with the Sony logo” (161).

Although Kahf does not comment directly on the mass marketing and influence of capitalism on the sanctified city of Mecca, her remarks are important insofar as they bring to light the alignment between contemporary political Islam and capitalism. As Samir Amin in his essay on the connections between political Islam and imperialism writes, “political Islam aligns itself with the camp of dependent capitalism and dominant imperialism. It defends the principle of the sacred character of property and legitimates inequality in all the requirements of capitalist reproduction” (2). Amin’s piercing criticism of the state of political Islam today renders obvious political Islam’s reliance on a form of “dependent capitalism.” Amin establishes how the dependence of political

63 The five pillars of Islam that are incumbent on every Muslim are the Shahadah, or the belief in the principle of oneness of God, prayer (Salat) which is performed five times a day, Alms (Zakat), Fasting (Sawm), and pilgrimage (Haj).
Islam on capitalism serves the United States’ imperialist motivations and endeavors in the Middle East and Afghanistan. This relationship, as Amin portrays it, contradicts emancipatory Islamic politics and aspirations and fundamentally works against egalitarian practices.

While Kahf does not comment on the relationship between capitalism and Islam in direct ways, her criticisms of the practice of Islam in Saudi Arabia are poignant and clear. When Khadra is seduced by the beauty of the sound of the *Adhan*, or the call to prayer, and decides to respond to its call by visiting the nearest mosque to perform the *fajr*\(^{64}\) prayer, she is faced with state-legislated, anti-women bigotry in the form of an encounter with the *matawwa* policemen “with big round black beards and billy clubs belted over their white caftans” (166). The *matawwa* police, or the religious morality police, are given the power to monitor people’s public performance of religious duties. They are ever-present in Saudi society today and exert much pressure and power over the ruling monarchy. As Michael Cook writes in his study of the historic development of the Saudi policing system:

The Saudi conquest of the Hijaz, with its juxtaposition of Wahhabi Puritanism and the laxer attitudes of the wider Muslim world, was a prescription for trouble. It was here, it seems, that the current Saudi system of religious policing took shape, in an effort to give Wahhabism its due without gross disruption of the valuable traffic of hajj. The key was the establishment of a new institution in 1926. This was the “Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong.” Contemporary resources show that its job was to impose prayer-discipline, curb foul language and the like. By the 1920s, the committee was well-established. (126)

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\(^{64}\) *Fajr* is the first mandatory prayer in the day and takes place before the break of dawn.
The phenomenon of religious police of Saudi Arabia today is a direct result of the furthering of the mandate and governing power of the “Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong.” While its initial mandate may have been to monitor and impose prayer-discipline, its efforts at “commanding” religious rights and wrongs have often been gendered in their outreach and consequence. The matawwa police are responsible, for example, for ensuring women’s adherence to a strictly-defined code of modesty in dress. In bringing attention to this phenomenon, Kahf questions a principle facet of the Wahhabi state of Saudi Arabia and thus undermines the structure of political and social governance in this prominent Muslim state.

Khadra’s encounter with the religious police is described in detail. When Khadra is brought back to the house of her family’s host “thirty minutes later, with a tearstreaked face” and “escorted by two burly matawwa policemen” for attempting to “get into a mosque,” she is shocked and severely dismayed by the exclusion of women from religious practice in Saudi Arabia. Forced to address her mother’s questions about her reason for leaving the house “without telling anybody,” a crying Khadra explains: “‘I—just—wanted—to—pray—fajr’” (167). When Wajdy explains to Khadra that she could have just prayed in the house, Khadra retorts, “‘But I didn’t want to pray in the house, Baba. The mosque is so near – the adhan was so beautiful – and it was calling to me, to me’” (167). Khadra’s assertion of her ability to both hear and physically respond to the

65 The religious police in Saudi Arabia continue to receive negative media attention in both western and eastern contexts. They were again brought to the spotlight, for example, in March 2002 when fifteen Saudi schoolgirls perished due to a fire at a Meccan school. The religious police reportedly disrupted the rescue of the young girls, banning them from leaving school premises without proper Islamic attire. See “Saudi Police ‘Stopped’ Fire Rescue” at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1874471.stm
Islamic call to prayer is important; what she makes apparent is her agency as an able-bodied Muslim woman who can respond to the call to prayer by performing it in the house of God and not simply in close proximity to it. Khadra’s faith allows her to believe that the call for prayer was, in fact, intended for her ears, asserting a special connection between herself and the religious duty to pray. Upon discovering that Saudi Arabian women are simply not allowed to attend the mosque for prayer or any other social or religious event, Khadra says,

‘But, Baba, how can women not be allowed?’ Khadra had never heard of such a thing. No mosque she had ever encountered hadn’t had a place for women. Not even the tiny Kokomo mosque that ran out of a Motel 6. ‘Then where do they pray?’ (167)

Khadra utilizes her religious education and background to contest the validity of this prohibition on Muslim women’s religious duty to participate in their Islamic community. Angered by her parents’ apparent distrust of her action and genuine desire to pray at the nearby mosque, she says,

‘But you said – you said –’ she whirled here to include her mother, ‘you always said [prayer at the mosque] was part of Islam. What about Aisha? What about how Omar wished his wife would not go to the mosque for fajr but he couldn’t stop her because he knew it was her right? What about the Prophet saying ‘You must never prevent the female servants of God from attending the houses of God? I told the matawwa that hadith and he laughed – he laughed at me, and said ‘listen to this woman quoting scriptures at us!’ (168)

Here Khadra relates her exchange with the matawwa police who mock her account of the Prophet’s upholding of Muslim women’s right to attend mosques. To support her own right to pray at the nearby mosque, Khadra narrates to the two religious police, and in turn to her parents, the story of the second Muslim Caliph, Omar Ibn Al Khattab (reigned
from AD 634-644), who was displeased with one of his wives’ attendance of the mosque for morning prayers. As is well known to most Muslims, Omar’s wish to ban his wife from the privilege of praying at the mosque was denied by the Prophet, who supported Muslim women’s right to attend all prayers at the mosque if they so wished. What upsets the matawwa police is not the actual veracity of the hadith that Khadra narrates; in fact, the hadith’s authenticity appears to be a non-issue for the two religious men. They do not question, or challenge Khadra’s narration. What they contest, however, is the gender of the bearer of “scripture.” Khadra’s implicit questioning of their authority by quoting scripture to the two policemen is alarming; they see Khadra’s knowledge of scripture as a challenge and thus frame it as her “quoting scripture at them” (my emphasis) rather than engaging in a conversation with them. Shaped by an androcentric understanding of the faith, the two officers’ condescending attitude towards Khadra appears to be influenced by a general distrust of women who memorize, understand, and dare to quote scripture for the purposes of religious argument or even discussion. Her parents’ silence and inability to support their daughter further aggravates Khadra. Angry, and railing against questionable Islamic interpretations that are used to prosecute women, Khadra is glad to leave the holiest Muslim country and head “Home” to the United States (179).

66 Sahih Al Bukhari recorded this hadith confirming this story in this way: “2.22: Narrated Ibn `Umar: The Prophet (p.b.u.h) said, ‘Allow women to go to the Mosques at night.’” See http://muslimonline.org/cgi-bin/hadith.cgi.
Khadra’s inability to find serenity and calm amongst her fellow Muslims in Saudi Arabia signals a shift in her political and religious affiliations. Rather than accept a ‘natural’ or inherent connection with the broader ummah and its interpretations of Islam in Saudi Arabia, Khadra recognizes the reactionary nature of political Islam, especially on issues of gender. As Amin writes: “Political Islam is not only reactionary on certain questions (notably concerning the status of women) and perhaps even responsible for fanatic excesses directed at non-Muslim citizens (such as the Copts in Egypt) – it is fundamentally reactionary and therefore obviously cannot participate in the progress of peoples’ liberation” (2). Khadra’s failure to locate “home” in Saudi Arabia, a predominantly Muslim country that purports to apply Islamic law in daily life and practice, challenges readers’ assumptions of affinity, homogeneity, and agreement amongst Muslims the world over. Similarly, her small – but disastrous – outing with Afaaf, her host family’s daughter, whose wild ways shock and appall Khadra’s piety, prods her to redraw the boundaries that mark her understanding of and affiliations with the Muslim American communities in general.

Khadra’s search for a Muslim community that adheres to liberatory politics runs through the novel. Having failed to locate this community in Saudi Arabia, she launches an individual quest for community within the United States. Her admittance into Indiana University at Bloomington provides an opportunity to explore religious texts and address questions about the tenets of the Islamic faith. A member of the Campus Muslim Council (CMC), Khadra prods herself into the study of the “traditional Islamic heritage” (194).
Unable to pursue her study at the famous and influential Islamic University of Al-Azhar in Cairo because of her gender and her family’s unwillingness to allow their female daughter to travel alone,\(^{67}\) Khadra is given the chance to study with a Mauritanian Muslim scholar who holds progressive views on women’s study of religion. When other male scholars object to Khadra’s presence amongst them, the sheikh “reminded the halaqa that the Prophet had taught women with no curtain between them, and that the first mosques of Islam had no physical barrier between men and women” (197). To the highly trained religious leader, mixed-gender meetings were an acceptable “continuation of tradition” as long as they remained “circumspect and respectful” (197). The encounter with the religious scholar leads Khadra to discover the beauty of *tajweed* or the recitation of the Quran. The experience transforms her relationship with the Quran from a simple association between a worshipper and her holy text to a personal romance; Khadra “was in love with [tajweed]. She practiced constantly” (197). So real is the connection between Khadra and her beloved religious text that she feels the “treasures of Quran recital were unlocked for” her (197). Encouraged by her “nearly flawless” recitation of the Quran, Khadra agrees to perform regularly at public university events and CMC meetings by reciting passages from the Quran (199).

When Khadra’s brother, Eyad, asks her to stop Quranic recitations for fear of arousing young Muslim men with her “sultry voice,” Khadra is confounded by the male-

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\(^{67}\) While it is not clear what year Khadra sought an education at Al-Azhar, it is important to note that Al-Azhar officially admitted women students and faculty in 1961. Khadra would have been able to pursue an Islamic education at the institution based on this significant development under Jamal Abd El Nasser’s regime.
imposed limits on women’s participation in public religious places in the young Muslim American community (204). Although Khadra capitulates to Eyad’s request, she stops attending “CMS meetings altogether for a while, in disgust” (204). Her experience, once again, portrays Khadra’s discomfort with the gendered parameters of the Muslim American community and her quest for a truly inclusive religious space that does not adhere to exclusionary and sexist principles that sanction the circumscribed role of women in religious spaces. As the Muslim scholar and activist, Amina Wadud, writes, “Gender separation in the mosque also reflects gender disparity through space and the opportunities that limit women’s access to participation in mosque activities and especially in decision-making” (175). Wadud sees in these contemporary practices an attempt to maintain a gender-hierarchy alien to Islamic concepts of congregation and communality.

Khadra’s alienation from the Muslim community, and her dissatisfaction with its gendered practices, are aggravated by her brief marriage to Juma Tashkenti, a Muslim graduate student from an affluent Kuwaiti family. While her gender-segregated wedding, which is held at the Dawah Center, felt like “a natural culmination of Khadra’s girlhood,” their union does not last long (213). After a brief spell of happy marriage, Khadra begins to notice how “things came up in their marriage. Little things at first. Like Khadra’s bike” (227). Juma’s objection to Khadra’s riding of her bicycle around town is backed up by his interpretation of Islam. Juma says, “It’s unIslamic. It displays your body” (228). To support his position, Juma quotes a Quranic verse regarding women’s modesty, “Say to
the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty, that they should not display their beauty and ornaments’” (228; italics in original). Here Juma uses his interpretive powers and privileges to delimit Khadra’s choice to ride her bicycle. His quoting of the holy text affirms his right, as her husband, to contain what he sees as Khadra’s “unIslamic” behavior. The Quranic verse finalizes Juma’s stance on the issue and operates as a strategy of marital control. That Khadra is not able to contest the Quranic verse, in spite of her grasp and knowledge of it, confirms Wadud’s suspicion that “the idea of alternative interpretation of the Qur’an (sic) from a female-inclusive perspective is by itself insufficient to bring about all gender reforms necessary for the multiple dimensions of Muslim men and women’s lives” (188).

While brief, Khadra and Juma’s marriage serves an important function in the novel, solidifying Khadra’s objections to religiously-sanctioned gender hierarchies. When Khadra chooses, for example, to enact her right to an abortion, she utilizes a particular understanding of religious doctrine to support her controversial stance. Faced by strong opposition from both her husband and her family at large, Khadra performs numerous “Consultation Prayer[s]” in order to receive godly guidance on the issue (244). Khadra’s strong religious belief and conviction guide her decisions to finally have an abortion and seek a divorce from Juma. Kahf writes,

[Khadra] offered Juma a khulu’, or wife-initiated divorce… She was well versed on khulu’, thanks to Dawah Center seminars. Popular Islam mostly buried khulu’, and Muslim women the world over did not know they had this right. (251)
Khadra’s offer of a divorce to Juma establishes her ability to invoke religious doctrine and utilize it to guide her decisions. Rather than succumb to the authority of the men in her family, and her mother’s prodding, who encourage her to bear Juma’s child and accept her duty as a Muslim woman and a wife, Khadra challenges Juma’s, and in turn her community’s, privileging of masculine power and authority. While Khadra wonders if God will punish her for her act “‘by not letting [her] have babies later,’” she is confident that her decision to abort her child is the right one for her (250). Khadra’s strong stance and desire to retain control over her body raise issues that resonate with the Muslim American community today. In writing about the Islamic stance on abortion, Kahf embeds this fictional story with a compelling realistic focus, challenging conservative viewpoints on this divisive issue.

From these examples, it is clear that Kahf’s novel is meant to challenge the Muslim American community’s understanding of itself. The novel seeks, through its focus on difficult issues like religious practice, gender segregation, and women’s rights in Islam, to press Muslim Americans to interrogate manifestations of their faith and practice. In doing so, however, Kahf does not release nonMuslim American readers from the responsibility to question and interrogate their own stance toward Muslim American peoples and their religious practices. The narrative that Kahf constructs is rife with examples of religious intolerance towards Muslims. Recalling her experiences of growing up in the Muslim community of Indiana, Khadra details for readers the treatment her community received from “The American Protectors of the Environs of Simmonsville”
(42) who took it upon themselves to call the Immigration and Naturalization authorities, “charging that the [Dawah] Center harbored illegal immigrants” (43). The “Protectors” also “invoke[d] zoning ordinances” (43) against the Center in an effort to safeguard the “character of [their] town” (42). It is significant that Khadra draws readers’ attention to these examples of civilian vigilante efforts that curtail the political growth of the Muslim American community and curb its integration into the United States. Her detailing of these experiences serves the double purpose of reminding Muslim American readers of the long and ongoing history of discrimination against Muslims and simultaneously raises the question of how race, ethnicity, and religion are deployed as markers of difference in the United States.

The novel’s account of incidents of vandalism and hate crimes against Khadra’s fictional Muslim community of Indiana, including the murder of a charismatic young Muslim woman named Zuhura, is also a testimony to the challenges that the Muslim community’s religion poses to American identity. Throughout the novel, attacks against Khadra’s community are recurrent. Vandalism against the Dawah Center occurs frequently and racial “markings” and epithets, including “FUCK YOU, RAGHEADS. DIE… KKK, 100% USA,” are often left as reminders to the Muslim community of its religious and racial foreignness and difference (82). These attacks become even more aggressive nature in 1979, during the Iranian Hostage Crisis when “revolutionaries in Iran blindfolded American embassy workers and took them hostage” (118). The narrator
describes the increased attacks against the Dawah Center and the Muslim community during that time in this way:

[The Iranian Hostage Crisis] made America hopping mad. America was mad at Khadra, the Shamy family, and all the other Muslims of Indianapolis. Simonsville residents who didn’t know the Shah of Iran from Joe Schmoe yelled ‘Long Live the Shah!’ as their Muslim neighbors got out of their cars and went into the blue house on New Harmony Drive. Vandalism of the Dawah Center with soap and white spray paint was something the police couldn’t seem to stop; they only came and took pictures everytime it happened. (119)

While the narrator homogenizes the American response to the Iranian Revolution (1979) in this passage, she is able to capture the sentiment of ordinary Americans who fail to distinguish between Muslim Americans living in the United States and Iranian Muslims.

The narrator describes how fellow Americans flaunted their support of the Persian monarchy’s rule and automatically positioned themselves as opposed to the Islamic revolution. Perhaps more importantly, however, this account registers government agencies’ unwillingness to investigate properly or put a stop to the vandalism of the Dawah Center. In highlighting this irresponsible and nonchalant government stance, Kahf brings to light the complicity of American state apparatuses in the sanctioning of racism against Muslims and in turn their construction of Islam as a racial category of difference. This process, according to Khyatti Y. Joshi, occurs by “[blurring] the boundaries between race and religion” (212). The problem with this phenomenon, Joshi argues, is that it can “[exacerbate] the ethnoreligious oppression of the minority group. Yet at the same time, the essential nature of the discrimination – racial or religious – becomes disguised or lost entirely” (212).
Writing on the emergence of Islam as a racial category following the events of 9/11, Moustafa Bayoumi argues that the current political climate in the United States facilitates the process of creating “a race out of a religion” (275). While focusing on the aftermath of The War on Terror and its effects at the policy level on Muslim Americans, Bayoumi traces the historical evolution of this process, arguing that “the relationship of Islam to racial definition in the United States is not new” (278). Bayoumi explains how this process affects Muslims living in the United States by expanding on the “political and racial logic of the United States” which creates of religion in general, but Islam in particular, a racialized identity (278). Bayoumi describes how recent government policies employed after 9/11, like the Special Registration Program,68 were designed with the implicit purpose of regulating the Muslim American community. Bayoumi’s essay demonstrates how the racialization of Islam is not simply based on a superficial or passing assessment of cultural markers such as language, dress, and practice; it is, in fact, based on an active resort to cultural – as well as biological – stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. Put differently, the racialization of Islam functions through a careful ideology of

68 Also known as “The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System,” Special Registration was initiated in September 2002 as part of the Bush administration’s War on Terror. In a section of his essay “Racing Religion” entitled, “What’s So Special About Special Registration?” Bayoumi writes, “What exactly was special registration? It was a government-mandated system of recording and surveillance that required all nonimmigrant males in the United States over the age of 16 who are citizens and nationals from select countries to be interviewed under oath, fingerprinted, and photographed by a Department Justice official” (271). The program, which targeted mostly citizens and nationals from predominantly Muslim countries, has had lasting effects on the Muslim American community. See also Louise Cainkar’s “Post 9/11 Domestic Policies.”
inscribing racial difference upon Muslims. On the ideological and political origins of
racism, Bayoumi explains,

Racism ... should not be seen as something that is necessarily irrational or is a
consuming hatred. While these are certainly historic realities, racism must also be
understood as careful ideology that is, unfortunately, politically useful,
particularly in circumstances where one is called upon to define oneself against
another. It determines the other, and it does so through various institutions, the
law being a primary one among them. (276)

Bayoumi makes the compelling argument that racism – in whatever way it manifests
itself – is an ideologically useful tool, maintained through state institutions, including the
law.

Throughout her novel, Kahf demonstrates a firm grasp of the process, as well as
the implications, of racializing Islam as theoretically outlined by Bayoumi above. The
fictional world she creates questions the gendered and racialized parameters of the
Muslim American ummah and simultaneously examines how religion operates as a
category of racial difference for Muslims living in the United States. The emphasis on
Muslim Americans’ racial and religious difference is maintained throughout the novel to
enact a realistic representation of the contemporary positions and dilemmas of this
community. Through describing Kahf’s literary examination of these issues, I have tried
to suggest in my brief discussion of her novel how she breaks new literary ground by
writing the story of a Muslim female heroine whose search for an authentic and personal
connection with the Muslim American community signals a shift in contemporary Arab
American literary engagements. Where Arab American authors have tended to focus on
the racial difference of the Arab American community, Kahf’s work complicates readers’
understanding of race and embeds constructions of race and racism in the United States with an important and contemporary focus on religion. Her resolve to show the ramifications of the racialization of Islam opens up possibilities of further study for critical race theorists. Her work poses a significant challenge for the study of Arab American ethnic identity as it colludes with religious identification. How readers grasp this new conceptualization of the racing of religion remains to be seen.

Although I allude to the impact and influence of 9/11 on the works of Kahf throughout this chapter, I do not examine or trace the connection between 9/11 and Kahf’s work in detail. In the next chapter, I will explore the impact of 9/11 on Arab American literature, especially in relation to the first Arab American interventions written after the attacks. While focusing on Laila Halaby’s novel, I will also contextualize her novel in relation to what literary critics have termed “9/11 Literature.” Beginning with a brief discussion of two Arab American literary responses by Naomi Shihab Nye and Suheir Hammad, I explore the political motivations behind Arab American responses to the attacks.
Chapter 4

The Politics of Writing 9/11: Mapping Arab American Literary Responses

How do authors use literature to confront national catastrophe, how do they remember and narrate the grief, pain, and confusion ensuing in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? These questions surfaced repeatedly in the aftermath of 9/11, and in their introduction to the first edited collection dedicated to the study of “Literature After 9/11,” Anne Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn present a pertinent version of it: “Is it possible to speak in a voice that exceeds the personal, the use a public voice, to launch a political critique in literature?” (5). Keniston and Quinn’s 2008 collection of essays draws on a number of literary and artistic works appearing after 9/11. They argue that this literature raises questions about the ways in which Americans choose to interpret and represent 9/11. The two authors read the wide-ranging literature of 9/11 as causing “challenges to political discourses that seek to simplify or fix the meaning of 9/11” (3). Although their collection does not include any Arab American works, their introduction is important insofar as it posits literature as a means of contesting fixed, often Manichean, readings of the tragic events. Drawing on Keniston’s and Quinn’s important contribution to the emerging field of 9/11 literary studies, this chapter will showcase in explicit ways how 9/11 and its immediate aftermath have informed Arab American women’s literature, its production, messages, and content.
In my previous chapters, I demonstrated how both Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf challenge readers’ understanding of Arab Americans. Often writing on the political and social environment created in the aftermath of the attacks, these authors urge audiences to move beyond the binary of “us” and “them” in formulating their views of Arab America. Although I did not explicitly link my study of these authors to 9/11, my final chapter makes this link visible by focusing on the first novel dedicated entirely to the repercussions of 9/11 from an Arab American perspective. Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*, published in 2007, raises important questions about the role of literature in negotiating complex historical events and mediating personal, political, and national conflicts. This chapter attempts to understand the Arab American literary impetus to respond to and narrate the events of 9/11. Examining a number of interventions by Arab American women authors alongside Halaby’s, including the works of poet Naomi Shihab Nye and performance poet Suheir Hammad, I examine how Arab American women authors negotiate the trauma of 9/11. How do they negotiate the complexities of national and ethnic belongings as they are further compounded by the War on Terror? In my account of Nye, Hammad, and Halaby, I attempt to understand both the broad implications of these difficult questions and the ability of Arab American authors to move beyond the imperatives of response in light of national crisis.

The immediate aftermath of the attacks produced an environment that silenced American women. This environment was especially hostile to women who opposed and
questioned the urge to launch war on Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{69} With the exception of Condoleezza Rice, the major political players devising a response to the attacks were men.\textsuperscript{70} Similarly, the major literary figures articulating a response to the horrific attacks were also men.\textsuperscript{71} This has led some feminist critics to observe that in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, what we have is “a story about men, told by men using traditional masculinist narrative frames”\textsuperscript{(Jansen 139)}. With few exceptions, women were featured as victims, survivors, and nurturers of a wounded American nation, leading many feminists to

\textsuperscript{69} Susan Sontag’s response to the 9/11 attacks generated much controversy and public debate. Recalling America’s foreign policy in the Middle East and its military attacks on Iraq, she expressed her anger at “the disconnect between last Tuesday’s monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators”\textsuperscript{(Updike, et al., 6)}. Critical of the unthinking behavior of the Bush administration, Sontag urged Americans to move beyond “reality-concealing rhetoric.” It is important to note that Susan Sontag and Rebecca Mead, a writer for \textit{The New Yorker}, were the only two women featured in this edition of “The Talk of Town” on 9/11. Deemed unpatriotic, Sontag quickly became a target for right wing commentators and critics who questioned her allegiances to the United States at a time of national crisis. Blogger Andrew Sullivan even created the “Sontag Award,” mocking authors who question the effectiveness of the War on Terror. See http://www.tompaine.com/articles/sizing_up_sontag.php

\textsuperscript{70} In an article entitled “Sex, Gender, and September 11,” Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin write the following: “As the events first unfolded, women were invisible, except as victims alongside men. Men made all of the crucial decisions involved in the hijackings and the responses to them”\textsuperscript{(600)}. Examining the limited role of women in initiating government response to the attacks, they write, “The major White House players devising a response to the hijackings have also all been men. President George Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Attorney General John Ashcroft have been presented publicly as the crucial decision makers and spokespersons. The one woman in a publicly prominent position, Condoleezza Rice, head of the National Security Council, has played a relatively limited overt role in response to the hijackings and the war in Afghanistan”\textsuperscript{(600)}. Charlesworth and Chinkin are not the only scholars who bring attention to the limited role of women in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Their article does a good job, however, of linking this absence of women to the specter of wounded American masculinity haunting representations of the attacks.

\textsuperscript{71} Some of the major early literary responses to the attacks include John Updike’s short article in \textit{The New Yorker’s} “The Talk of Town” section. The special discussion of the national tragedy also included contributions from Don DeLillo, Jonathan Franzen, and Amitav Ghosh. Each author was granted the opportunity to reflect on the attacks in less than 1,000 words. DeLillo also published his article “In the Ruins of the Empire” in the December 2001 edition of \textit{Harper’s}. Both Updike and DeLillo went on to write novels specifically about 9/11. Paperback editions of both Updike’s \textit{The Terrorist} and DeLillo’s \textit{Falling Man} were published in 2007 and have received much critical discussion and attention. I will not examine either of these works in this chapter as my intention is to focus on Arab American women’s responses to the 9/11 attacks.
inquire about the “virtual disappearance of women” (139). While men dominated mainstream American literary response, an opposite phenomenon took place in the Arab American literary scene: it was Arab American women writers who took the lead in responding to the 9/11 attacks. Their writings became a necessary means of recording and remembering the national tragedy.

In a significant article on the “privileging” of Arab American women’s voices in the United States, Nada Elia questions this trend and addresses some of the issues I grapple with when studying contemporary works by Arab American women writers. Elia writes,

The silencing of Arab and Arab American men – through ostracization, intimidation, imprisonment, or deportation – has led to Arab American women becoming more vocal. Suddenly, we are in demand, as our male partners are disappeared. (158)

Echoing Elia’s suspicious stance with regard to the favoring of Arab women in the United States post 9/11, I inquire into the ways that this sudden interest constitutes and shapes Arab American women’s writing. Whether or not Arab American and Muslim American women conformed in their writing to this view is certainly an issue worth further literary discussion. In this section, I will examine this motivation – or the gendered imperative of response – in more detail, especially as it pertains to the short works of some Arab American women authors, produced directly after the events. In analyzing these works, which vary in form, style, and content, I examine how these responses are influenced by the changing political realities for Arab Americans post 9/11. The next section will focus on Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Letter to Any Would-Be Terrorist”
in order to show how this author represents her reactions to the attacks and utilizes literature for the sake of bridging cultural and racial difference and creating national harmony.

**The Imperatives of Response: Arab American Literature and September 11**

In an important article on the resurfacing of Arab Americans into public view following the 2001 attacks, Steven Salaita analyzes the political and racial dynamics dominating academic and public discourse post 9/11. Salaita’s article posits “imperative patriotism” as a haunting and prevailing feature of contemporary American citizenship and notions of affiliation. His article uncovers the xenophobic and colonial contexts of this term, defining it in this way:

> Imperative patriotism assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory. It is drawn from a longstanding sensibility that nonconformity to whatever is at the time considered to be “the national interest” is unpatriotic. (“Imperative Patriotism” 154)

Salaita’s definition of patriotism as an “imperative” is important in so far as it denotes both urgency and obligation. These two additional characteristics appear central to any critical study of the American approach to patriotism after 9/11. In Salaita’s essay, patriotism is configured as an immediate and indispensable feature of the American national response to crisis. The obligation to repeatedly pledge allegiance to the State, sing its praises, and support its chosen courses of action are all part and parcel of the discourse of “imperative patriotism.” Although detailed in its account of the exclusionary, racist, and sometimes violent facets of “imperative patriotism,” Salaita’s
article portrays Arab Americans as always being on the receiving end of American patriotic impulses. Salaita’s article does not envision Arab Americans as taking part in this discourse; in doing so, Salaita inadvertently installs Arab Americans as constituted outside of national American configurations.

Rather than looking at Arab Americans predominantly as recipients of vitriolic American patriotism in the aftermath of the attacks, I examine how Arab American writers chose to participate in what Douglas Kellner describes as “an orgy of patriotism such as the country had not seen since World War II” (149). This section examines how the atmosphere of unthinking patriotism of 9/11 and The War on Terror demands, evokes, and influences literary responses from Arab American authors, such as Naomi Shihab Nye. In expressing their grief and anger over the national trauma, were these responses colluding with the discourse of imperative patriotism as Salaita defines it above? In other words, did these responses emerge out of a perceived necessity for immediate Arab American denunciation of the attacks? These are some of the questions that this section will examine.

Author Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Letter to Any Would-Be Terrorist” was among the earliest Arab American literary responses to the events of September 11, 2001. An influential Palestinian American poet who has published many poetry collections, including 19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East (2002) and The Flag of Childhood: Poems From the Middle East (2002), she has been named the “outstanding American poet of Palestinian origin” (Orfalea 56), and appears often on television and
radio programs, speaking about Arab culture and the Middle East. So influential is Nye’s work that Marcia G. Kutrieh writes, “Nye has emerged in recent years as a leading Palestinian spokeswoman presenting an American perspective of Palestinians and Palestinian causes colored by her close family relationships” (3). Whether or not Nye claims herself a spokesperson for Palestinian people living in the United States and in the diaspora is of course an interesting question, one that can be raised in relation to the authority with which Nye speaks in her “Letter to Any Would be Terrorist.” Circulated widely through the Internet, and on various Arab and Muslim websites, in the days after the attacks, Nye admonishes the 19 Arab terrorists for their “terrible success” in killing and wounding Americans and for creating much pain and anguish around the world. Marked by its earnest message, its informal tone and approach, and a sense of urgency, Nye’s “Letter” represents a type of Arab American literary response that reconciles Arab Americans with the immediate need “for a period of mourning, rumination, and reflection” (Fadda-Conrey 172).

Resting on her reputation as a relatively well-known Arab American poet of mixed lineage, the writing, as well as the circulation, of Nye’s “Letter” deserves critical attention and inquiry, especially for scholars seeking to understand Arab American literary reactions to the September 11th attacks. In more ways than one, Nye’s impulse to address the terrorists in this piece reveals a desperate desire to dissociate Arab Americans from the charge of disloyalty to the American state. Earnest in its desires and politics,
Nye’s piece performs, in the name of imperative patriotism, the good Arab American national, an issue I will return to in more detail below.

Addressing the terrorists as “distant Arab cousin[s],” Nye asks them to consider the ramifications of their actions on Arab Americans who have struggled to undo the automatic connection of the Middle East with terrorism. She writes,

I am sorry I have to call you [terrorists], 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.

In this piece, Nye assumes the role of an intermediary between the Middle Eastern and Arab terrorists and the United States. Identifying herself as an Arab American of Palestinian descent, Nye utilizes her multiple national and racial positionalities to signify the importance of writing as a member of “a huge community of people” scarred by the attacks. Over-burdened by the extra “work” that she and others must now take on to sever associations of the Middle East, and by extension people of Middle Eastern descent and origin, from the charge of terrorism, Nye’s “Letter” is melancholic and irate. Enraged by the terrorist attacks, the author takes it upon herself to address the terrorists, command their attentions, and question their motivations and intent. In doing so, Nye positions herself as a member of a nation in the midst of national trauma requiring immediate conciliation and cure.
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.

Nye’s personal pain – and the collective American pain she appears to encapsulate – necessitates a promise from the terrorists that they will refrain from violence. They must, she reminds the terrorists, “tell us in words” why they are bent on “killing people.” They must “find another way” because Americans simply “can’t read” the “message” of terrorism. Nye’s plea paints the terrorists as nonhuman, unable to communicate through recognized forms of language, and who act instead through committing violence and murder.

Characterized by logic and reason, Nye’s “Letter” eschews a central message or thesis. Instead, it repeatedly urges the terrorists to “listen” to her call. Nye feels a certain proximity to the terrorists that grants her the right to speak to them:

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.

Invoking a connection with the terrorists based on consumption of similar food items, an association that is reminiscent of Diana Abu-Jaber’s use of food as metaphor for connection and identity in The Language of Baklava, Nye’s feelings about the attacks are made clear. Ostensibly targeting Middle Eastern terrorists, from past, present, and future, Nye is eager to assert to American readers her patriotic feelings and anger at the national catastrophe. Nye’s understanding of her rhetorical positioning as a daughter of an Arab
father and an American mother legitimizes her efforts at addressing both sides and their concerns insightfully: “Sometimes I wish everyone could have parents from different countries or ethnic groups so they would be forced to cross boundaries, to believe in mixtures, every day of their lives. Because this is what the world calls us to do. WAKE UP!” Bearing striking resemblance in its tone and approach to the liberal impulses characterizing Diana Abu-Jaber’s works that I discuss in Chapter Two, Nye’s “wish” for interracial mixing claims hybridity as a natural site of tolerance and understanding. This lauding of ethnic mixing is preceded by a pathologizing of the terrorists as possible members of unloving families.

Writing on her adoring Palestinian father, Nye says, “I am sorry if you [terrorists] did not have a father like that. I wish everyone could have a father like that.” This impulse to interpret the terrorists’ actions through a psychoanalytic lens reflects an inability to accept actual material disparities and political frustrations as motivations for the attacks. Discussing a similar phenomenon she witnesses in liberal feminist writings on the Taliban and third world patriarchies, Jasbir Puar writes, “Here we see the overreliance on a type of heteronormative psychoanalytic explanatory framework of patriarchy that evacuates politics, global capital, even poverty, from the range of potential original narratives” (57). What we have in Nye’s short piece, then, is a reproduction of the charitable American who is confounded by the hate and jealousy motivating the terrorists’ atrocities. Nye asserts herself, and in turn the United States, as subjects whose values and ways of being are representative of an ideal state of humanity. Nye’s response
to the 9/11 attacks, while cognizant of the harms of American foreign policies, appears to render September 11 as a unique catastrophe, wreaking havoc and destruction on a nation and a people morally opposed to violence against others.

What I find interesting about Nye’s response to September 11 is her belief in the power of literature and words in promoting a better understanding of both selves and others. She reminds her readers of the ability of words to bring worlds together: “We believe in the power of the word and we keep using it, even when it seems no one large enough is listening.” Her message to the terrorists is to join the human “family” and “find another way to live.” We must, Nye tells us, learn to “read one another.” Her belief in the importance of writing as therapy and an opportunity for bridging differences extends also to her work, *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, where she writes,

> I kept thinking, as did millions of other people, what can we do? Writers, believers in words, could not give up words when the going got rough. I found myself, as millions did, turning to poetry … We need poetry for nourishment and noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name. (xvi)

Encapsulating the dilemmas of Arab Americans who felt compelled to respond to the 9/11 attacks, Nye’s “Letter” signals a shift in Arab American literary commitments and concerns. The “Letter” implicitly addresses this question by acknowledging the weight of this responsibility and the need to bridge the political aims of writing literature post 9/11 with the aesthetic goals of literary representations of the events. The problem, however, is that Nye’s “Letter” colludes with some of the dangerous and troubling sentiments and messages of American patriotism after 9/11.
In a significant article on the production of “docile patriots” in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Jasbir Puar and Amit S. Rai cite the example of a number of Sikh organizations in the United States who, in response to attacks on Sikh Americans, “discovered various counternarratives of respectable turban-hood” (137). In response to the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, Puar and Rai describe how many Sikhs chose to forgo their right to wear their turbans and how others “have contributed to the current fervor of American patriotic/multicultural exceptionalism by donning red, white, and blue turbans” (137). Providing examples from organizations such as the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (SMART), Puar and Rai show how some Sikh Americans sought to distance themselves from Muslims by explaining the “differences between ‘those’ turbans and Sikh turbans” (137). These examples, among others, are understood by Puar and Rai as “strategies of resistance” on the part of ethnic minorities in the United States, perpetuating the model of “the ‘good psyche’” (138). In their explanation of the term “docile patriotism,” what Puar and Rai contest is the impulse of Sikh Americans to grasp at “the attention of white America,” their desire to perform a respectable type of mourning for 9/11 (138). As the writers show, this appeal for American acceptance and recognition goes hand in hand with some Sikhs’ “intent on renarrating themselves through American nationalism as respectable, exemplary, model minority citizens who have held vigils, donated blood and funds to the Red Cross, and were quick to cover their gurudwaras in American flags” (138). What is interesting about this modeling of
patriotism is its staging of an acceptable Sikh American identity as both a political and defensive strategy.

The desire of members of the Sikh American community to belong and be approved of as model minorities in the aftermath of 9/11 is echoed in Nye’s “Letter.” In many ways, Nye’s short message is addressed to “The Terrorists” as much as it is meant for American readers whose anguish the author shares:

We will all die soon enough. Why not take the short time we have on this delicate planet and figure out some really interesting things we might do together? I promise you, God would be happier. So many people are always trying to speak for God – I know it is a very dangerous thing to do. I tried my whole life not to do it. But this one time is an exception.

The hope for a better future is the main message of Nye’s “Letter.” Not only does Nye wish to share her feelings of communality with fellow Americans, she also intuits the future, speaking for God in the conclusion of her piece quoted above. Nye informs American readers that Arab Americans feel their pain and anger; that they too share in the national frustration, shock, and anguish felt after the attacks. Like other “normal” citizens, Arab Americans are affected by the attacks and seek a better future for humanity through peace and non-violence, the “Letter” suggests. Nye’s “Letter” serves as yet another example of the ways in which Arab Americans, like other ethnic minorities in the United States, felt compelled in the wake of the attacks to repeatedly “enact their own normalization – in the name of patriotism” (Puar and Amit 136). In her motherly tone, Nye envisions a more peaceful plan for “this delicate planet.” Confirming her desire to be viewed as a member of a wronged American culture and peoples, Nye’s short piece
upholds an uncritical strand of American patriotism that serves to undercut, rather than foster, understanding between others.

As an example of a different literary response to the attacks, the following section focuses on Suheir Hammad’s poem, “First Writing Since.” Hammad’s body of works includes the critically acclaimed *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996) and *Zaatar Diva* (2005). Her poem, which is an independent publication, written and first performed in the weeks after the attacks, is an important contribution to Arab American narration of 9/11. In juxtaposing Nye’s “Letter” with Hammad’s performance, I offer “First Writing Since” as a type of literary response that encapsulates the precarious position of Arab Americans after the 9/11 attacks.

**Performing and Reading 9/11: Suheir Hammad’s “First Writing Since”**

Without uncritically succumbing to the demands of imperative patriotism, Hammad’s poem narrates pain and anguish at both the local and international levels. She does not hesitate to politicize the attacks, to extend the use of metaphor for the purpose of politics. Her performance ponders complex world realities. As Fadda-Conrey notes, Hammad’s poem “starkly depicts the fresh wounds of the nation’s collective trauma, albeit from an Arab and Arab-American perspective, which was automatically held under suspicion by a grieving and angry US majority” (181). While I agree with Fadda-Conrey’s analysis of Hammad’s merging of Arab American experience with American collective trauma, the poem is significant precisely because it is able to move beyond the
personal goals of Arab American therapy and conciliation. In other words, what is striking about “First Writing Since,” is its ability to convey both the personal and political ramifications of trauma and grief for those who witnessed the 9/11 attacks.

“First Writing Since” was first performed a week after September 11 to an audience in Hammad’s hometown, Brooklyn, New York. As a member of Russell Simmons DEF Poetry Jam collective, Hammad’s work has received a wide audience due to the large and ethnically diverse following of this collective of slam poets.

Figure 3. Suheir Hammad performing “First Writing Since” on September 21, 2001

The collective, consisting of a number of young, multiracial American poets, has held various performances, including a show on Broadway and repeated broadcasts on the independent, advertisement-free channel HBO. Author Jill Dolan, who uses the collective as a case study for her work on utopian performances, views DEF Poetry Jam’s work as a performance that addresses audiences as citizens of the world and models political critique and engagement as well as affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love … for other people, for a more abstracted notion of ‘community,’ or for an even more intangible idea of ‘humankind.’ (164)
Dolan’s reading of the collective’s ability to reach out to audiences as politically engaged “citizens of the world” is an apt description. Because DEF Poetry Jam, as Dolan notes, “presents its poets in direct address to an audience filled with young people, many of them people of colour” (168), the performances are often presented as a dialogue between poets eager to invoke audience-response, compassion, and political responsibility, and audiences keenly aware of the transformative power of slam poetry.

![Poet and Audience at an event for the DEF Jam Poetry Collective](image)

In what follows, I will discuss the literary and political characteristics of “First Writing Since,” focusing on the challenge it poses to conventional notions of American patriotism and its unique ability to rally inter-ethnic support and solidarity. I am interested in examining how Hammad’s poem ponders the international impact of 9/11 without privileging, as universal, the American experience of grief.

Boasting more than 416,817 views on YouTube, Hammad’s “First Writing Since” has made the poet a minor celebrity in leftist circles and the Arab American literary
Hammad’s poem, “First Writing Since,” has received critical literary attention from a number of scholars, including many studies on the recent growth of the Palestinian Hip Hop movement. The poem consists of seven parts, each with its own message and tone, recording Hammad’s initial feelings after the attacks. The poem has been translated into Arabic, French, Italian, Urdu, and Korean, showcasing the global reach of Hammad’s poetry and performance. The entire poem is written in lowercase, with very few punctuation marks. The verses are written in short, prose-like language. Rapidly moving from one thought to the other, each verse registers a sense of literary and material loss, confusion, and immobility. Highly personal in its message and its portrayal of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the poem is embedded in a discourse of linguistic insufficiency and limitation. Hammad writes,

1. there have been no words.
   i have not written one word.
   no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.
   no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.
   not one word (139)

While claiming the loss of language and metaphor after 9/11, Hammad’s poem also records her loss of “words.” In the face of death, she cannot find “words” for “poetry” or “prose.” No words appear capable of recording the tragic accumulation of “ashes,” “debris and dna.” In his reading of Hammad’s work and its connection to trauma,

72 This was the latest number of internet views from YouTube on July 16, 2009.
73 See Sunaina Maira’s “We Ain’t Missing’: Palestinian Hip Hop – A Transnational Youth Movement” and Hisham Aidi’s “Verily, there is only one hip-hop Umma’: Islam, Cultural Protest and Urban Marginality.”
74 Asked about the wide-reach of her poem, “First Writing Since,” Hammad responds: “I have been blessed with the experience of having the poem ‘First Writing Since’ being translated into more languages than I ever dreamed…Are the translations exact? I doubt it” (Olson, 177).
Michael Rothberg argues that “the poem begins by locating itself in a tradition that questions art’s ability to respond adequately to historical trauma” (153). Rothberg’s astute analysis of the work records the poem’s emphasis on “both the gap between language and bodily remains (ashes, DNA) and the attempt to saturate language with materiality” (153). This eloquent opening claims for the dead of 9/11 a status beyond language, emphasizing language’s inability to suture the victims’ disintegrated bodies or collect “the ashes south of canal street.” With this opening, the poem complicates the debate over the representability of 9/11. The issue here is not whether 9/11 is too enormous an event to be adequately captured in words as some American writers insist. Clearly, Hammad recognizes that “there is no poetry” in the attacks (143); she sees no beauty and no linguistic coherence in the shattered towers and mayhem she witnesses in

75 Seeking to comprehend how 9/11 changed Americans, Don DeLillo, for example, asks whether it is in fact too early for writers to fully grasp the magnitude of the events. He asks, “Is it too soon?” (39; my emphasis). DeLillo’s essay also raises questions about the appropriateness of writing about 9/11 immediately after the attacks, going as far as to assign the horrific incidents a status beyond language: “the event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile” (39). In making my assertion about the importance of moving beyond such confined and limited thinking about the representability of the 9/11 attacks, I agree with Marco Abel who writes, “The point here is not to assert the impossibility of speaking, writing, or knowing… We do not adequately interrogate the event by wondering whether or not to write or speak about it” (1245). This question about whether events of tragic nature can be appropriately represented in language and literature is of course not a new one and has been frequently used to speak about the impossibility of adequately representing the Holocaust. “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Theodor Adorno famously wrote (see Prisms 34). The argument here is that language cannot truly represent the extent and magnitude of the horrific violence incurred during the Holocaust. The magnitude of the Holocaust is too great to be captured by analogy, simile or metaphor. Writing on the “Rhetoric of the Unspeakable” which dominates Holocaust writing, Naomi Mandel argues, “Auschwitz, in particular, and the Holocaust, in general, are commonly referred to as unspeakable, unthinkable, inconceivable, incomprehensible, and challenging … the ‘limits of representation. The more we speak about Auschwitz, it seems, the more prevalent and compelling our gestures toward the limits of our speech, our knowledge, and our world” (204). Although the debates surrounding the representability of 9/11 are not as intense as those surrounding Holocaust writing, in both cases the argument regarding unrepresentability is used to posit these two very different historic occurrences as tragedies beyond language. This status, when assigned to the 9/11 attacks, is one that the writers featured in this chapter do not accept.
New York City. But what the poet laments is not simply the magnitude of the attacks or their immediate consequences. She is at pains to convey and record the failure of words to bring back the dead and undo the awful and long-term consequences of the attacks.

While the lament of language’s inability to heal the wounds of 9/11 is an important aspect of “First Writing Since,” the poem quickly shifts its focus from language in order to narrate the poet’s futile hopes that the attacks were a “mistake.” The first section is voiced through an autobiographical “i” speaker. As Heather Marie Hoyt writes, “While the speaker of the poem is a constructed, first-person narrator, the correlations to Hammad’s personal life are clear enough that readers/listeners may find her work more convincing because it reflects her life outside the poem” (139). Whether or not the poem’s speaker bears a striking resemblance to the author is not critical to my argument. The feelings the poem’s speaker conveys, however, are important because they gesture towards the shock, anger, and helplessness experienced by Arab Americans after the attacks. Imperiled by the feelings of shock and suspicion of Arab involvement in the attacks, Hammad writes,

    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. (139)

In one stanza, the poet records her changing impressions of the attack from a simple “mistake” to a premeditated and successfully executed “nightmare.” Although the poet initially hopes the first plane’s crash into the North Tower of the World Trade Center is
due to technical error, this hope is shattered “after the second plane” hits the Center’s South Tower. Desperately appealing to god, the poet’s shifting emotions inform readers of her hope that the perpetrators of the attacks do not resemble her “brothers.” In this stanza, Hammad writes of a singular experience that provides insight into some of the experiences, fears, and concerns of an Arab American collective. Her realized fears and dashed hopes of Arab innocence and noncomplicity alert readers to the shock and desperation experienced by this community after the attacks.

Writing on the status of the Arab American community after 9/11, Edward Said recorded a similar sentiment in his “Thoughts About America” (2002): “I don’t know a single Arab or Muslim American who does not now feel that he or she belongs to the enemy camp.” Although Hammad’s poem does not accept this designation of being a member of the “enemy camp,” it is painfully aware of the “unpleasant experience of alienation and widespread, quite specifically targeted hostility” that Said described. In expressing the complex positionalities of Arab Americans, and in its attempt to dramatize this to the American public at large, the poem presents the attacks from an alternative viewpoint, taking as its focus an interest in public rather than individual concerns. This focus is one that is often ignored in the literature claiming to represent and interrogate the effects of 9/11 on the American collective. Instead, some of this literature jettisons the
international and far-reaching political impacts of the attacks in favor of a focus on the
national, local, and individual effects of 9/11.76

The poem’s tone shifts once more when the author asks important questions about
the motivations of the perpetrators. Without identifying with the attackers, Hammad asks
profound questions about the material conditions and inequities that lead people to
desperation and violence:

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill.
i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger
i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen.
not really.
even as a woman, as a palestinian, as a broken human being. (139)

Hammad does not presume an understanding of the life conditions that lead people “to
kill.” She refuses to provide psychoanalytic explanations for the behavior of those who
were responsible for the attacks. She does not demonize them or rationalize their anger as
hatred towards the West. Without empathizing with the hijackers, Hammad writes of
their broken lives, hunger, and anger. In so doing, she presents herself and the 19 Arab
men who launched the attacks as “broken” humans. Hammad does not excuse the
violence the men committed; rather, she attempts to contextualize its origins. In spite of
this attempt, the author is careful to say that her understanding of their true motivations

76 In an important article on American literature post 9/11, Richard Gray recognizes that “the cataclysmic
events of 9/11 and their aftermath … are part of the soul, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the
literature of the American nation” (129). While making this argument, Gray is careful to point out that
much of the American literature that emerges after the attacks shows very little willingness to examine the
effects of 9/11 beyond their impact on Americans and therefore concern themselves with the writing of
9/11 as a singular national and American trauma. He argues that this literature has thus “[retreated] to
domestic detail” (134) and shows an interest in the study of life from an individual lens: “all life here is
personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely in terms of their impact on the emotional
entanglements of their protagonists” (134).
and life experiences is limited and cannot actually be achieved. By insisting on the unknown characters and motivations of the attackers, Hammad overturns attempts to paint the terrorists as emasculated Arab men, threatened by encroaching western influences, an explanation seen to some extent in Nye’s “Letter.”

Throughout her poem, Hammad brings the audience back to the stories of families in search of loved ones. The heartbreaking scene of confusion unfolding on September 11 is described vividly as the poet interweaves stories of mothers in search of daughters and sons, siblings attempting to locate sisters and brothers, and partners in search of husbands, wives, and lovers.

3. the dead are called lost and their families hold up shaky printouts in front of us through screens smoked up.

we are looking for iris, mother of three. please call with any information. we are searching for pritti, last seen on the 103rd floor. she was talking to her husband on the phone and the line went. please help us find george, also known as adel. his family is waiting for him with his favorite meal. i am looking for my son, who was delivering coffee. i am looking for my sister girl, she started her job on monday. (140)

In this section, Hammad underscores the humanity of both the victims and the survivors. Iris, Pritti, George (Adel), and “sister girl” are all missing, presumably dead. While the families address their lost ones through “shaky / printouts,” readers contemplate what they “are looking for” in the aftermath of the attacks. The narrator of the poem tells us that she is looking for “peace,” “mercy,” “compassion,” and “evidence of life”:

i am looking for peace. i am looking for mercy. i am looking for evidence of compassion. any evidence of life. i am looking for life. (140)
Foreshadowing the grave acts of vengeance that are likely to follow the attacks on American soil, Hammad repeatedly asserts her desire for “life.” Refusing to embrace imperative patriotism, the narrator looks instead for “evidence” of life and humanity. Hammad does not accept the use of 9/11 as excuse for further American military attacks and interventions. Instead of putting the responsibility for a different future on those who committed the attacks, as Nye does in her “Letter,” Hammad assigns the responsibility to all of us, especially those who have witnessed and experienced the trauma of 9/11.

This refusal to commit to one side and to embrace the rhetoric of us versus them has led Rothberg to view “First Writing Since” as a deeply “unsettling” poem (154). Rothberg writes, “[The poem] unsettles us by refusing to provide easy explanations or exoneration for the violence of September 11, by declining to take sides in the ‘us or them’ logic of the dominant political class” (154). While I agree with Rothberg’s analysis, it is important to note that the poem not only refuses to takes sides but also renders the taking of sides a morally and ethically impossible and reprehensible task. Although Rothberg is right in suggesting the poem rejects “the logic of the dominant political class,” I would go further to argue that the poem seeks an alternative political logic altogether. In Hammad’s poem, sides are not as clear-cut and oppositional as the logic of imperative patriotism delineated by Salaita appears to demand. In fact, the refusal to take sides appears to guide the poem and infuse it with energy and resistance.
Hammad does not accept the arguments of those who cite American foreign policy as a just rationale for the attacks; in thinking about American aggressions, her speaker does not wish to be conceived of as outside of the American collective:

yet when people sent emails saying this was bound to happen, let’s not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second i felt resentful. hold up with that, cause i live here, these are my friends and fam, and it could have been me in those buildings, and we’re not bad people, do not support america’s bullying. can i just have a half second to feel bad? (153-154)

In spite of its complex racial and national positioning, the persona’s allegiance is not split: she values the United States as her home; she recognizes that with all its “transgressions,” it is where she, her friends, and family live. She needs time, she asserts, to reflect on the attacks and mourn the dead. She also knows that as a New Yorker, she could have been a target of the attacks. She asks readers to distinguish between the politics of the American state and the American people who “do not support america’s bullying”: “we’re not bad / people,” she writes.

Although the poem’s persona is configured as American, she adamantly rejects appeals to an American collective that ignore the particular or the local. The poem deplores attempts to privilege the victims’ American citizenry over their humanity:

i have never felt less American and more new yorker – particularly brooklyn, than these past days. the stars and stripes on all these cars and apartment windows represent the dead as citizens first – not family members, not lovers. (142)

Here Hammad explicitly confronts insignias of imperative patriotism. First, her poem’s persona identifies as a “new yorker” and more specifically as a Brooklynite, thereby
undercutting constructions of a hegemonic and unfragmented American identity on which imperative patriotism is founded. Second, the speaker is not impressed by the abundance of “stars and stripes” or the efforts to claim for American citizenry a special position or location in mourning the dead. Third, what the poem’s persona desires is a reversal of collective memory whereby the victims of the attacks are remembered primarily as “family members” and “lovers” and not as American citizens. For Hammad, ultimately what matters is the portrayal of the extent and magnitude of the human trauma and suffering experienced on September 11; she is less interested in the victims’ geographical and national characteristics and origins. On this particular point, Rothberg notes, “Hammad’s articulation of a complex vantage point as Arab and American, as New Yorker and Palestinian, poses difficult and timely questions about the links between disparate geographies and histories and about the too often taken for granted opposition between trauma and home” (155). Rothberg is of course correct in suggesting the poem is enacted from a complex and complicated “vantage point.” He runs the risk, however, of assuming a political or ethnic disjuncture between the two vantage points of “Arab and American,” a disjuncture that Hammad repeatedly undercuts in her poem.

In her attempt to humanize the American victims of 9/11, Hammad is not afraid to also humanize those who are constituted, through the discourse of imperative patriotism, as America’s enemies. Confrontational in its tone, approach, and content, section 5 of “First Writing Since” is worth quoting at length:

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

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

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

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

if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is
feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip. (141)

In the first part of this long section, Hammad’s persona expresses her anger and dismay at
those who wonder if she has any personal connection with the hijackers and – by
extension – if she knew or had any information about the attacks prior to September 11.
This part of the poem is addressed to American readers and audience members who may,
on occasion, question the allegiances of Arab Americans to the American state. Even
more importantly, however, the anger and frustration recorded here appears directed at
various American government agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigations
(FBI), that took 9/11 as a clandestine opportunity to suspend civil liberties and constitute
Arab Americans as a “new fifth column” in the United States (Salaita 100). Hammad’s poem undercuts constructions of her poem’s persona as a representative of a “people” who embody “evil.” Her words are stern, meant as a warning to anyone who dares to homogenize her speaker’s individual experiences or question her national belongings; the repeated phrase “one more person” emphasizes the warning Hammad is issuing to readers and audiences alike. In this too, Hammad’s poem differs from Nye’s “Letter.” The poet does not solicit American acceptance, admittance, and recognition for her Arab American persona. Nye’s “Letter,” on the other hand, desperately clings to her American identity, seeking – above all else – national belonging and admittance for Arab Americans who are seen as guilty by association after the terrorist attacks.

Seen from this viewpoint, the anger portrayed above is a response to actual and material “domestic legislative, administrative, and judicial measures” implemented by the United States’ government “in the name of national security” (Cainkar, “Impact” 1). In her study of the impact of 9/11 on Arabs and Muslims living in the United States, Louise Cainkar writes,

Most of [these measures] were designed and have been carried out by the executive branch of government, with little a priori public discussion or debate. These measures have included mass arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, prolonged detention of ‘material witnesses,’ closed hearings and use of secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney-client, FBI home and work

77 In his collection of essays, entitled Anti-Arab Racism in the United States, Salaita argues that Arab Americans are now seen as constituting a “fifth column” that is used as an excuse for the implementation of restrictive policies on American university campuses. His point is that this constitution of Arab Americans as outside of the American national collective is utilized as a “rallying point for all sorts of proposed restrictions on academic freedom or to pressure university administrators to hire conservative faculty to implement patriotic curricula” (100). Salaita stresses the importance of understanding this construction in order to fully confront its power and hegemony in academe and by extension in American society at large.
visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removal of aliens with technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration. (1)

The extensive legislative measures outlined by Cainkar above are important to note and discuss because of the wide reaching effect they have had on the Arab American and Muslim American communities. Cainkar estimates that “at least 100,000 Arabs and Muslims living in the United States have experienced one of these measures” (1). The effects of these measures on the individual and collective American experience deserve further investigation and critical study. The anger and disappointment in Hammad’s poem is warranted in so far as no real effort has been made – on the part of the American government – to apologize and to acknowledge the anti-Arab and Islamophobic sentiments guiding the government’s initial and even ongoing response to the attacks.

In her poem, Hammad questions the process that allows Americans to construct Arab Americans as a homogenous entity. Like Nye, she is disturbed by the projection of evil and terrorism onto the Arab American collective and in particular the Arab American male body. Hammad writes, “one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people. / or that a people represent an evil…” Here Hammad’s poem presents her understanding of race and racism as constructed, social, and political phenomena.

78 While there are many critical studies examining the effects of these regulations on the general erosion of American civil liberties from legal and sociological perspectives, there are only a few studies that explore the effects of these legislative measures on Arab Americans from a literary viewpoint. A notable exception to this trend is Moustafa Bayoumi’s work How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?

79 In spite of former President George W. Bush’s repeated efforts to dissociate the War on Terror from the charge of Islamophobia, it is undeniable that the administrative and legal policies that took effect after the attacks targeted Arabs and Muslims in the United States. In speaking of an unforthcoming apology, I do not mean to suggest that such an apology would undo or lessen the impacts of the legislative measures detailed above.
Hammad’s comprehension of race and racism in the United States is further complicated by her questions about the erasure of whiteness as a racial category from the American imagination. She asks why “we did not vilify all white men” after Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995. Although it is unclear who Hammad’s “we” encompasses, one could argue that the poet is referring to Arab Americans in particular and people of color in the United States in general. Hammad’s question requires no immediate answer; it simply posits in her readers and audiences the recognition of the political repercussions of white people’s exemption from racial associations, definitions, and constructions.

In her important work on the social construction of whiteness, Ruth Frankenberg defines whiteness in this way:

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (1)

For Frankenberg, the three crucial characteristics of structural, perspectival, and cultural advantage make whiteness into a non-race. The naturalizing of whiteness into a non-race makes it a site against which others are measured, judged, and classified. In Hammad’s work, the assumption of whiteness as a nonracial category is undone. Hammad presents

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80 It is significant that the immediate suspects of the Oklahoma City Bombing were believed to be of Middle Eastern descent. In his analysis of the history of Arab Americans and contemporary American politics of inclusion and exclusion, Michael W. Suleiman writes, “Linkage between the Oklahoma City Bombing and international terrorism was immediate. In the hours and days after the blast, news organizations and law enforcement officials rushed to speculate that the investigation of the crime would focus on ‘Middle Eastern looking’ suspects” (91). Suleiman comments on the shift in national feelings—and the intense disappointment experienced by national news commentators—upon the discovery of the actual racial identity of the attack’s perpetrators.
whiteness as a category of “racial privilege” that grants white Americans the right to efface differences between others and label them as terrorists.

Throughout “First Writing Since,” Hammad refuses to dissociate the 9/11 attacks from a past and ongoing history of white terrorism and violence. In doing so, she contests the discourse of historical amnesia surrounding public and national responses to 9/11 that claim for white Americans the status of national victimhood and political innocence and use “the suffering in New York to solidify hard-line positions” (Rothberg 155). The poet’s comments about the dissociation of whiteness from terror are significant; in reciting examples of white terrorism, Hammad’s point is obvious: whiteness too is connected to terror, both socially and historically. Although Hammad provides only two examples in her poem of white terrorism within the United States, including Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma bombings and the past and ongoing activities of the Ku Klux Klan, these examples are meant to invoke a long history of white terrorism and violence. Hammad’s poem, therefore, establishes a connection between whiteness and power that is often brutal and irrational in its scope and magnitude.

In a discussion of the place of whiteness in the black imagination, bell hooks makes the connection between whiteness and terrorism abundantly clear. Recalling her own experience of being strip-searched by French officials in pursuit of illegal black “immigrants and/or terrorists,” hooks writes,

I think the one fantasy of whiteness is that the threatening Other is always a terrorist. This projection enables many white people to imagine there is no representation of whiteness as terror, as terrorizing. Yet it is this representation of whiteness in the black imagination, first learned in the narrow confines of the
poor black rural community, that is sustained by my travels to many different locations. (44-45)

For hooks, the association between whiteness and terror was cemented at a young age. Growing up black and poor in the United States, hooks’s understanding of whiteness is informed by her personal history, including her past and present interactions with white authority and power. Her views on whiteness emerge as “a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination” (37). hooks’s account sheds light on the link between terrorism and whiteness for historical others in the United States. It is striking that Hammad is able, in light of the dominant discourse of white innocence and restrictions on civil liberties and dissent in the aftermath of 9/11, to invoke these historical examples of white violence in the United States.

Hammad’s poem not only strips a post 9/11 mantle of innocence away from her American readers and audiences, but also compels them to use their contemporary experience of trauma to engender solidarity and understanding with oppressed others. In a daring move, Hammad’s poem promotes emotional and political solidarity between Americans (especially New Yorkers) and Palestinians: “if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is / feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip” (141). On this strategic connection, Rothberg writes, “Hammad’s claim is political, of course. Her claim coexists with a series of others that have sought, for local political reasons, to create links between September 11 and political contestations worldwide (including, naturally, the counterclaim that was heard often that it is Israelis who truly understand the events in New York)” (155). In this controversial literary and
political turn, Hammad usurps the position of victimhood and innocence repeatedly claimed for Israelis and invokes, instead, Palestinians as victims of brutal Israeli terrorism and occupation. Hammad’s poem constitutes Palestinians as humans who experience pain and trauma and whose struggles are worth identifying with and comprehending, especially by the poem’s American readers and audiences. This historical and political position allows Palestinians to both understand and sympathize with the American predicament after the attacks. To suggest this connection, Hammad first refutes the charge that Palestinians received with joy news of the 9/11 attacks. Buttressed by American and international news channels (including FOX News and CNN) broadcasting images of children from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip dancing upon hearing news of the attacks, this charge was used as evidence of Palestinian support for violence and terrorism. Hammad does not apologize for the images of Palestinian children celebrating the 9/11 attacks. She does, however, contest the veracity of these images and question the journalistic ethics involved in acquiring them. Rather than offering an apology for the ostensible joy experienced by Palestinians on the day of the attacks,


82 While I support Hammad’s efforts to contextualize the images of Palestinian children, I will not go as far as agreeing with Hammad’s contention that these images were, in fact, fabricated. I do, however, question the intentions behind broadcasting these images so vigorously after the attacks. Did the networks seek to provide visual proof of Arab hatred for the West? In an article from FOX news, entitled “Arafat Horrified by Attacks, but Thousands of Palestinians Celebrate; Rest of World Outraged,” for example, the writer, reflecting on world responses to the 9/11 attacks, showcases Arab, and particularly Palestinian hatred for the West (see: http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,34187,00.html). These types of articles and opinions, projecting Arabs as incapable of compassion and mourning, establish Arabs as outside of the bounds of humanity.
Hammad demands an apology from those who bribe “hungry children” with “sweets that turn teeth brown” and correspondents who “edit images” in the service of “lazy and inaccurate / journalism” (141). In one move, Hammad questions both the representations of the attacks and the role of media in facilitating hatred towards ethnic others in the United States and outside it.

In her attempts to create solidarity between Americans and Palestinians, Hammad succeeds in reconceptualizing notions of inter-ethnic and international solidarity. It is the poem’s signifying of the possibility of solidarity amongst peoples in the era of the War on Terror that I find so interesting and admirable. Her effort to humanize those previously deemed nonhuman sets her poem apart from other 9/11 literary interventions. While Nye, for example, is eager to promote understanding between the “Terrorists” and their victims, she assigns this responsibility for solidarity to the oppressed rather than the oppressors; in other words, it is the terrorists who must try and understand Americans and recognize their humanity. Hammad’s poem raises necessary questions about notions of compassion and solidarity.

In her important work on mourning and violence after 9/11, Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence (2006), Judith Butler raises the question of inter-ethnic and international solidarity between people of varying backgrounds when she asks, “What allows us to encounter one another?” (49). Her question is ultimately tied to the political goal of solidarity amongst women. In the process of articulating the means of achieving this goal, however, Butler questions the logic behind “Who counts as human?”
Butler analyzes the media’s efforts to humanize and portray various stories about the American victims of 9/11. She writes that “the extensive reporting of the final moments of the lost lives in the World Trade Center are compelling and important stories” (38). These stories lead Butler to reflect on the role narrative plays in establishing whose lives are worth remembering and grieving. For Butler, the telling and retelling of stories of American death and survival is a means through which the parameters of what constitutes the human is affirmed. Because these narratives are by nature selective – focusing on the stories of particular peoples in specific times – Butler wonders why “we cannot find in the public media, apart from some reports posted on the internet and circulated mainly through email contacts, the narratives of Arab lives killed elsewhere by brutal means” (38)? Questioning the absence of names, faces, and stories of those killed through American military aggressions, including the victims whose lives have been claimed from Afghanistan and Iraq, Butler recognizes that “the violence that we inflict on others is only – and always – selectively brought into public view” (39). In other words, Butler’s insights allow us to ask this question: what constitutes a ‘grievable’ life? Whose lives do we remember and whose lives do we willfully ignore?

I utilize Butler’s discussion here because the crucial questions she raises about the possibility of recognizing, remembering, and mourning others remain somewhat missing from our understanding of 9/11 and its aftermath. Butler’s willingness to approach the formidable task of mourning “with a theory of power and recognition” (45) is also at work in Hammad’s poem. Hammad’s refusal to accept violence in response to terror,
affirm the national over the global, and privilege her life above others, makes her poem extraordinary. In the final stanza of her searing poem, Hammad writes:

    affirm life.
    affirm life.
    we got to carry each other now.
    you are either with life, or against it.
    affirm life. (143)

Invoking Bush’s famous dictum of “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” Hammad issues a far more important imperative for her readers and audiences: “you are either with life, or against it.” Hammad’s call for the importance of affirming and respecting life is noteworthy, especially as it relates to the question Butler raises about the ways in which we may encounter one another.83 In “First Writing Since,” Hammad makes clear that this encounter cannot take place without forming new connections with others, and without recognizing how women, children, and the poor in Afghanistan and elsewhere will feel (and have felt) the consequences of 9/11. Asking the question, “what will their lives be like now?” is a necessary condition for the recognition of otherness, Hammad’s poem suggests (142). For Hammad, this process of recognition begins by valuing life (and death) both in the United States and elsewhere. As Hammad writes, “over there is over here” (142). Hammad’s equal and measured concern for both the local and international, self and other, is an important aspect of her response to 9/11.

83 In her critique of Butler’s work on mourning and violence post 9/11, Sunera Thobani argues that Butler universalizes white pain and suffering, and decontextualizes differences between those who inflict violence and others who experience it. Thobani argues that Butler utilizes in her discussion a “generic ‘human’ subject” (177). Thobani also questions Butler’s installing of non-violence as a legitimate and even “ethically and morally superior” reaction to pain and suffering (178). Although I find valuable Thobani’s criticisms of Butler’s work, Butler’s questioning of the intersections of recognition, violence, and mourning remain highly useful for my reading of Hammad’s poem.
Her assertion of the importance of affirming “life” in the aftermath of the attacks serves to undermine the rhetoric of imperative patriotism in its sanctioning of American violence, war, and terror and privileging of American pain, loss, and trauma.

Throughout these two sections, I have argued that the environment of American patriotism following the attacks has left an indelible effect on Nye and Hammad’s writings. Nye’s desire for belonging, affirmation, and recognition, although significant, lends itself to the dangerous discourse of imperative and docile patriotism criticized by Salaita, Puar, and Rai. Hammad’s response, I argue, comes closer to articulating a politics and ethics of recognition that are sorely missing from other “mainstream” literary responses to the attacks, including those by celebrated American authors like Don DeLillo and John Updike. While Nye and Hammad approach the attacks in very different ways, the brief but significant literary interventions discussed above yield some insights into the Arab American predicament post 9/11 and allow us to articulate these difficult questions: Why did Arab American women authors feel compelled to speak out against the terrorism unleashed on the United States? Why did they engage the politics of 9/11? What political conditions necessitated their interventions in the discourse of imperative patriotism? How are we to read their works in light of the violence unleashed on others in the name of these attacks? My discussion of Nye and Hammad’s work throughout these two sections has attempted to shed some light on these important questions. In the final section of this chapter, I will return to these questions by focusing on Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*. As the only Arab American novel about 9/11, Halaby’s work
demands literary inquiry, especially in its intimating of the profound consequences of the attacks on Arab Americans.

**Laila Halaby’s “Counter-Narrative” of 9/11**

In a 2008 article appearing in the popular English language based *Al Ahram-Weekly*, Amira Nowaira provides a brief survey of the 9/11 narratives, arguing that there is now a “steady flow of novels and short stories, motivated either by a genuine desire to make sense of the disaster through writing about it, or by the temptation to jump onto the 9/11 literary bandwagon” (“Counter-Narratives of 9/11”). Nowaira’s insinuation that 9/11 narratives are restricted by the confines of capitalist and consumerist demands is supported by the sheer rise in number of literary accounts of the attacks. While her questioning of 9/11 writers’ motivation and sincerity is not entirely new, Nowaira complicates this position further by arguing that “what all [9/11] works have in common is that they are written from the perspective of the ‘wronged’ culture.” Nowaira’s article claims this position of literary victimhood for “Americans or westerners who feel that their homeland has been attacked and their peace of mind eroded.” Nowaira’s casual dismissal of works by a number of American authors (including Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, and Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall*, for example) is buttressed by what she sees as the lack of “counter-narratives of 9/11.” As Nowaira notes, “very few literary attempts have been made to shed light on the impact that 9/11 has had on the Arabs and Muslims living
in America both before and after 9/11.” Nowaira’s point is ostensibly simple: she wishes to question the relative silence and the absence of alternative viewpoints on 9/11, especially ones that explore the effects of 9/11 on Arab Americans and people of Muslim backgrounds. Where, she asks, are the literary counter-narratives of 9/11?

While important, Nowaira’s search for these counter-narratives poses works expressed from Arab American viewpoints as automatically oppositional to the dominant discourses and narratives of 9/11. In this way, Nowaira appears to inscribe Arab American authors as a homogenous entity, determinedly positioned outside an imagined American collective. The danger of this position is that it can reinforce conceptions of Arab Americans as unpatriotic, and sympathetic to the motivations behind the attacks. In spite of this theoretical shortfall and some of its sweeping generalizations about the status of 9/11 literature, however, I find Nowaira’s claim about the absence of literary “counter-narratives” of the attacks compelling. This section will present Laila Halaby’s novel as a counter-narrative of September 11 that explores the attacks from the viewpoints of its two main Arab American characters, Salwa and Jassim. This novel provides an opportunity to examine how this Arab American novel grapples with the hegemonic and dominant narratives of 9/11.

Laila Halaby’s Once in a Promised Land is the author’s second novel. The author, poet, and children’s book writer is an Arab American of Lebanese and Jordanian descent. Her works, including her first novel, West of the Jordan (2003), reflect on issues of displacement, migration, exile, and racial belonging. Like much of the Arab American
women’s literature I discuss throughout this dissertation, Halaby’s writing seeks to provide American readers with insights into Arab American life. Halaby specifically addresses this point on her personal website:

I have always believed that if other people could see my world, could see a Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim family/person/story, from the inside, then they couldn’t have such ridiculous and negative stereotypes. I think over the years I have really come to appreciate the role of artists more, the role that translation plays in art. I don’t have an agenda as a writer, but I do believe that it is my responsibility to offer an honest and challenging story. *Once in a Promised Land* is my offering. (“About”)

Halaby’s reading of the “role of artists” in “translat[ing]” foreign experiences imbues the American reader with the power to see, recognize, and potentially accept or reject the stories of Arab and Muslim others in the United States. Her approach to writing this novel is based on a recognition of authors’ “responsibility to offer an honest and challenging story.” Published six years after the attacks, Halaby sees her 9/11 novel as providing opportunity for a dialogue between author and reader. While sincere, Halaby’s aspirations that literature can undo “negative stereotypes” may overestimate the roles and responsibilities of author, text, and reader. More significantly, this literary motive assigns individually held prejudices, rather than systemic and institutionalized racism, as the reason for lack of understanding of Arab and Muslim Americans. This troubling position, as I have argued earlier in this dissertation, cannot counter or undo

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84 This liberal approach to racial issues has been identified and discussed in my chapter on Diana Abu-Jaber’s work. I do not wish to delve into it again in any detail and only make note of this issue in order to bring attention to the ways in which the liberal framework that privileges individual over collective approaches to racial inequities appears to permeate contemporary Arab American women’s literature.
institutionalized forms of racism in the United States. However, it inspires much of Halaby’s novel and her approach to anti-Arab racism after the 9/11 attacks.

Mirroring the author’s desire to undo damaging stereotypes, Halaby’s novel begins with a “Before” section that is divided into two parts. This opening serves the purpose of introducing readers to the author’s literary goals and aspirations. Using the traditional opening for Arab fairytales, Halaby writes,

*Kan
ya ma kan
fee qadeem az-zaman* (vii)

With these three lines, Halaby situates her novel in a fictional and fairytale-like world. She momentarily offers readers the promise of a happy and romantic ending. The opening, which is immediately translated by the author as “*They say there was or there wasn’t in the olden times,*” affirms the importance of story and narrative in resignifying and challenging dominant conceptions of reality. The author tells her readers that “our story” is about two main characters (vii). The use of the plural pronoun shows Halaby’s belief in the complementary roles of author and reader. Halaby’s statement singles out the reader as an active participant in the process of giving meaning to a text or story, thereby conferring both authority and responsibility upon her audiences. Their literary interpretations, she suggests, have consequences because they too are part of the narrative and have a role and responsibility to interpret and disseminate its message. In her introduction, Halaby describes her main characters in this way:

Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. We really come to know them only after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by planes flown by
Arabs, by Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything. (vii-viii)

In this brief opening statement, the author again makes readers responsible for the stories of the two main characters. The tone of this introduction is ominous, foreshadowing future, unknown, dangers and tragedies, the narrator identifies Salwa and Jassim as Arabs and Muslims and links them through these racial and religious identifications to the Arab and Muslim men who “flattened” the “World Trade Center buildings.”

While the narrator asserts that the two characters in fact have no direct connection with the attacks, she also claims that they have “nothing and everything” to do with them. This binary of having “nothing and everything” to do with the tragedies of 9/11 superbly captures the fraught position of the two main characters and reflects, it seems, the contradictory condition of the Arab American community at large. By placing her characters in this ambiguous position, Halaby prepares her readers to accept Salwa and Jassim as simultaneously guilty and innocent in the aftermath of 9/11.

In the second part of the “Before” section, Halaby transports her readers to a common scene at an airport security counter. Beginning with the routine question “Were you the only person to pack your luggage?” (viii; italics in original), the scene is a series of questions posed by a security guard or airline attendant to a traveler. Instead of addressing those questions and search requests, the traveler makes certain demands of her questioner and thus inverses the expected power dynamics between them. Asked if the traveler’s luggage has “been out of your possession at any time?” (viii), the traveler asks,
“Do you see the tiny box I have placed in front of you?” Rather than accept the authority and power of the guard or agent, the traveler refuses to offer any answer or story before her request is met:

Before I tell you this story, I ask that you open the box and place in it any notions and preconceptions, any stereotypes with regard to Arabs and Muslims that you can find in your shirtsleeves and pockets, tucked in your briefcase, forgotten in your cosmetic bag, tidied away behind your ears, rolled up in your underwear, saved on your computer’s hard drives. This box awaits terrorists, veils, oil, and camels. There’s room for all of your billionaires, bombers, and belly-dancers. (viii)

The traveler’s demands are numerous. She wants the guard to give up any presuppositions s/he may hold against Arabs and Muslims. These prejudices, she intimates, are everywhere. They appear in “shirtsleeves” and “pockets,” as well as “underwear.” The idea here is that conceptions of Arabs and Muslims permeate western culture; they include the demonized “billionaires” and “bombers” and also the exoticized “veils,” “oil,” and “belly dancers.” To begin a dialogue with the traveler, the agent must give up on this wide-ranging list of presuppositions, which traverses the spectrum of good and evil. Slowly and encouragingly the traveler says to the agent, “Go ahead. I am patient. I can wait while you unpeel them all. While you scrape those tiny adjectives from the surface of your skin” (viii). Moving readers’ attention from the airport security process the Arab and Muslim traveler must undergo, the traveler subjects her questioner to a similar scrutinizing process.

Suspicious of the agent’s compliance with her request, the traveler’s demands continue to increase, asking the agent to dispose of ideas of “turbans, burqas, or violent
culture” (viii). She also asks that, “for good measure,” the agent to “throw in those hateful names as well, ones you might never even utter: Sand Nigger, Rag Head, and Camel Jockey” (ix). In short, the traveler wants her questioner – and by extension her reader – to dislodge Orientalist assumptions about Arabs and Muslims so that they may participate in the story that will follow her “Before.” The traveler, it is clear, will become the narrator of Salwa and Jassim’s story. Her role is to solicit reader understanding and demystify her main characters. The traveler assumes goodwill on behalf of the guard and readers, confirming their roles as active and willing participants in the story that is soon to come. The traveler suggests, therefore, that to enter the story, readers need to remove “excess baggage” so that they can begin to truly hear and understand what she narrates (ix). This beginning functions as a conditional invitation, in which Halaby concedes that her readers may have unspoken and hidden prejudices, and even racist ideas, about Arabs and Muslims. While she acknowledges this fact, she is confident, or at least hopeful, that her story can unsettle some of these notions and ideas.

With this opening, Halaby’s novel begins to explore the lives of Salwa and Jassim, a married Arab American couple, living in Tucson, Arizona. Their marriage appears, on the surface, to be a happy, fulfilled one. Salwa is a Jordanian-Palestinian who grew up in Jordan after being born in the United States. Jassim is a Jordanian hydrologist who comes to the United States to pursue graduate studies and then chooses to make Arizona his home. On a trip to Jordan, Jassim meets Salwa and they take an instant liking to one another. Jassim proposes to Salwa and she accepts and agrees to move with him to
the United States. Although Salwa is physically and intellectually attracted to Jassim, she is also enticed by the prospect of returning to the United States and pursuing a financially lucrative career. A beautiful woman, Salwa has a degree in business and economics from a Jordanian university and is desirous of a materially prosperous life. Both Jassim and Salwa have upwardly mobile class aspirations. In the United States, Salwa works at a bank and is studying to become a realtor. Jassim’s job as a hydrologist for the city of Tucson is demanding, leading him to incorporate daily swims in his routine so as to instill balance in his life: while Jassim “did not believe in God, … he did believe in balance,” the narrator tells us (3). The function of his daily swims is therapeutic. Without them, Jassim feels disconnected and distracted. Salwa, on the other hand, enjoys shopping and spending time at the mall while secretly harboring a desire for a child. On the surface, both characters perfectly embody the American goals of upward mobility, economic prosperity, and cultural and racial assimilation. When the 9/11 attacks occur, Salwa and Jassim’s seemingly perfect life disintegrates.

Before granting access to Salwa and Jassim’s world prior to 9/11, Halaby’s narrator shows the global impact and ramifications of the attacks. Salwa’s mother, Um Siham, and Hassan, Salwa’s teenage sweetheart, are the first to discuss the far-reaching effects of the events. Asking Salwa’s mother if she had heard of the “explosions” in New York and Washington, Hassan’s inquiry is motivated by a desire to find out information about Salwa’s marital relationship. Shocked at the news Hassan conveys, Um Siham wonders about her daughter’s well-being in the United States. Um Siham is assured about
Salwa’s safety when Hassan reminds her about the great geographical distance between Arizona and New York. Although worried about her daughter’s safety, she utters a prayer for the people who lost their lives. Um Siham says, “‘God have mercy on those poor souls on the planes and in the buildings. God have mercy on them’” (13). Um Siham’s compassion for the victims of 9/11 is sincere. Its incorporation into the novel does not further the plot, however, and may be seen as politically strategic. As an Arab and Muslim living in Jordan, Um Siham’s pious compassion is meant to convey to American (and other) readers Arab affinity with American pain. Um Siham’s appearances throughout the novel are truncated, serving mainly to cement Salwa’s connection with Jordan. In spite of this, her words carry much weight as they are voiced from the position of an elderly and dispossessed Jordanian Palestinian woman who lives outside of the United States. If this woman can feel American pain, Halaby suggests, then many other Arabs and Muslims can too. Here Halaby, like Hammad, humanizes Arabs for her readers and contests the assumption of inherent Arab hatred of the United States and Americans. Halaby thus offers readers her first “counter-narrative,” positing a challenge to predominant conceptions about the homogeneity of Arab reactions to the terrorist attacks.

Focusing on the international dimensions of the 9/11 attacks, Halaby’s main characters at first appear untouched by the violence in New York City and Washington, DC. In fact, both Salwa and Jassim are caught unawares by the attacks and see no connection between the racial and religious identification of the 19 hijackers and themselves. Jassim is so confident in his fellow Americans’ ability to distinguish between
the perpetrators of the attacks and themselves that he ridicules their Lebanese American friend Randa’s fear for her children’s safety. Narrating Randa’s worries to Jassim, Salwa says,

‘Randa is worried about her kids, thinks someone might try to hurt them,’ she told him later.

‘Why would anyone hurt Randa’s kids? People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese for the act of a few extremist Saudis who destroyed those buildings.’ (21)

In this exchange, Jassim holds confidently to the idea of people’s wisdom and common sense. He knows that they would not “take revenge” on an innocent Lebanese family. In his mind, people understand the differences between a Lebanese person and a “few extremist Saudis.” These differences, to Jassim, are so obvious that they need no further discussion or illumination. When news of the killing of a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix becomes known,85 and Salwa expresses her “outrage and sadness” at the event, Jassim remains unconvinced of Salwa’s reading of current events:

‘What does a Sikh have to do with anything? People are stupid. Stupid and macho,’ she finished in English.

‘Macho?’ he asked.

‘Macho. You know, throwing their weight around if something happens that they don’t like. Only it does not matter to them if they get the people who did whatever it is that they are angry about, just as long as they’ve done something large and loud. I hate to think what sort of retaliation there is going to be on a government level for what happened. Jassim, it’s not going to be easy, especially for you.’

Jassim said nothing. (21)

85 This fictional murder may be an actual reference to the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American man, who was murdered in Mesa, Arizona on September 15, 2001. Sodhi, a gas station owner, was shot five times and killed instantly. His murderer, Frank Rogue, is serving a lifetime prison sentence.
Concerned for her husband’s safety in the United States, especially after receiving news of the senseless murder, Salwa grasps the political environment of 9/11 better than Jassim. Her connecting of the individual incident to a masculine urge for “retaliation” is apt. More importantly, Salwa recognizes the possibility of further legislative consequences for the bombings.

Unlike Jassim who is not perturbed by increasing evidence of the national paranoia gripping the United States after 9/11, Salwa is alert to the political and social environment around her. She fears for Jassim’s safety and legal status in the United States. As a naturalized citizen of the United States, Salwa does not have the same worries. She believes that her perfect English, beauty, and class status protect her against any government backlash. However, she worries for her husband, whose legal status in the United States is precarious even though he is a green card holder. Jassim, on the other hand, simply cannot accept the possibility that he may be under suspicion due to his gender, racial, and religious backgrounds. Even when his coworkers suddenly begin to act strangely around him, Jassim wonders about the cause of their new behavior:

He’d probably not given them this much thought in the entire time he’d worked with them, and here they were in his thoughts in the swimming pool and in the shower. Why? Surely not because of what happened in New York? He had as little connection to those men as they did, and there was no way he could accept that anyone would be able to believe him capable of sharing in their extremist philosophy. No, he was not indulging this notion. (22)

Jassim’s unwillingness to “indulge” the notion that he was suddenly connected in his coworkers’ minds with the terrorists, whose “extremist philosophy” he opposes, is at odds with his intelligent and aware character. Jassim’s desire to ascribe good will and
reason to his coworkers, signifies his belief in notions of American community and fraternity. Jassim does not see himself as separate from his American coworkers. He thinks that he is just like them, unconnected with “what happened in New York.” Here Halaby affirms Arab American feelings of solidarity, with and belonging to, the United States. That Jassim cannot imagine ill will and ignorance from his coworkers is a sign of his respect for their intelligence and knowledge. His position, Halaby shows throughout the novel, is both innocent and naïve.

Jassim’s approach to his life in the United States is informed by a respect for American ways of living. He is often ignorant of the material advantages he has over other immigrants, having successfully acquired his Ph.D. from the University of Arizona and maintained an excellent job. The narrator reminds us of Jassim’s privilege in a brief encounter between Jassim and Salwa’s father, Abu Siham, who had immigrated to the United States for a short period and worked at a restaurant. After a brief stint in Chicago, Abu Siham relocated the entire family, including Salwa, back to Jordan: “‘After Salwa was born, we decided that it was not worth losing our souls so we could have nice things. Our lives in Jordan were not so bad, and our life in America was miserable,’” Abu Siham tells Jassim when he first meets him (70). Abu Salwa explains the difference between his life and that of his son-in-law in this way:

‘Your life is different, I can see, because you have an education and you are dealing with the good of America. I was working like a dog in a restaurant and dealing with people who resented foreigners who were willing to work harder than they did.’ (70)
Abu Siham’s comments exemplify his understanding of class divisions in the United States. Rather than explaining xenophobia as stemming from racist ideas and assumptions about foreign workers, Abu Siham suggests a link between xenophobia and class struggle. The issue is that the “foreigners” were “willing to work harder than they did” and were thus disliked. Abu Siham expects that Jassim’s life will be different, that he will not be subjected to the same scrutiny, because he has “an education.” The division between “the good of America” and the bad of America is clearly attributed to class dynamics and struggles. Registering the possibility of losing one’s self for material gain in the United States, Abu Siham’s comments function as a warning to the young Jassim just as he is about to marry Salwa, whom Abu-Siham described as “‘Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship’” (70).

Jassim’s limited conception of the continuing significance of race and class to social and political dynamics in the United States contributes, in many ways, to his sad fate. Jassim’s preoccupation with his work and physical balance inhibit him from making immediate connections between things around him, including his wife’s apparent unhappiness, restlessness, and desperate desire for a child. Jassim’s disconnectedness from his present makes him, at times, accept and even rationalize racist behaviors that are directly attributed to the 9/11 attacks. When, for example, the couple make a routine visit to the mall, shortly after the attacks, Jassim is content to wander off and simply stare at the merchandise. His aloof behavior raises the alarm of two young teenage employees at the mall who inform security of a suspicious Middle Eastern looking male in the vicinity.
The incident simply irks Jassim but does not, however, elicit any response or action on his part. When Salwa asks Jassim about the event, he describes things calmly:

‘If you look behind me, you will see a woman with a walkie-talkie on her shoulder. She thinks she’s Clint Eastwood. She’s following me. Apparently I am a security threat. Maybe she thinks I’m going to steal all this fashion and climb on that motorcycle, which I am then going to fly off its pedestal and into the mall. God give us patience.’ (28-29)

Jassim’s description is factual, showcasing very little anger or disappointment. Rather than link this incident to issues of class, race, and the political environment of 9/11, Jassim is content to simply mock and ridicule the security guard who “‘thinks she’s Clint Eastwood.’” Jassim is interested in continuing his shopping outing as if the event has no significance on him or Salwa and demands no further action. In fact, Jassim is willing to internalize the incident, asking God for more patience in trying times.

Salwa’s reaction to the incident of racial profiling her husband experiences, on the other hand, is strikingly different. She refuses to accept the finality of the issue and decides to confront the security guard.

‘Is there a problem?’ Salwa asked in English over her husband’s shoulder. ‘No, ma’am.’
‘Then why are you following my husband?’ ‘I’m doing my job, ma’am.’
‘Which is what exactly?’ asked Salwa with open scissors in her voice. ‘To protect the security of this establishment.’
‘And how are you doing that by following my husband?’
The woman said nothing, just stared at Salwa with a half-smile. ‘Ma’am, someone called security. There must have been a misunderstanding. I’m sorry for any inconvenience. You folks have a good day.’ She swung her gaze to the clerks in the back, turned, and walked out of the store. (29)
Salwa’s questions are piercing, demanding more than the (il)logic of duty and security as rationale for the racial profiling Jassim experiences. Salwa’s confrontation with figures of authority and her refusal to accept the security guard’s explanation that she is simply doing her job and “‘protect[ing] the security of this establishment’” is at odds with Jassim’s acceptance of the incident. Jassim simply takes off and leaves the mall after Salwa’s outburst, asking her to “‘Please let it go’” (29). Salwa cannot allow the injustice of the incident to go unchallenged and chooses to investigate its source further. Declaring what occurred as “‘illegal’” (30), Salwa’s exchange with the two young clerks is worth quoting:

Snake anger crept through Salwa’s body. ‘Excuse me, young lady,’ she said, walking over to the counter and standing in front of the busy broomstick girl. ‘Why did you call the security guard on my husband?’

The girl looked up, looked scared, which brought blood to Salwa’s cobra face, venom to her words.

‘Knock, knock. I’m talking to you. Did you think he was going to climb up and steal that motorcycle? Perhaps run off with some T-shirts?’

When the girl finally spoke up, her voice was ugly and nasal. ‘He was standing here and staring too long. He was just standing and looking at the motorcycle. It was weird.’ Her fingers fiddled with a small plastic hanger on the counter, and her eyes looked at the ceiling, at the floor, and at the other girl, who stood next to her. (29-30)

Salwa’s does not hide or temper her anger and disdain for the clerks’ racist action. The young clerk’s apparent discomfort with Salwa’s confrontational attitude does not prevent her from voicing her motives for racially profiling Jassim: “‘It was weird,’” she says. This response denotes the paranoia gripping the nation after the attacks. It also points to the facility with which the American State successfully utilizes citizens in its service. By
marking Jassim’s body as “weird,” the young clerk performs an act of citizen surveillance on behalf of a panicked American state.

The confrontation, although important, ends without victory for either Salwa or Jassim. As Jassim sarcastically remarks to Salwa, “‘Did you save my reputation?’” (31). His rhetorical question indicates the futility of individual confrontations with mass paranoia. In narrating this scene, Halaby invokes the wide-ranging public support for what Cainkar calls the “special treatment of Arabs in America” (23). In her essay, Cainkar discusses an article appearing in the Wall Street Journal by former speechwriter for President Reagan, Peggy Noonan. In a piece on her wariness of young Arab men, Noonan explains her transformation from an average American citizen and mother into a “polite tip-line caller” and eventually a “watchful potential warrior”:

In the past month I have evolved from polite tip-line caller to watchful potential warrior. And I gather that is going on with pretty much everyone else, and I’m glad of it. I was relieved at the story of the plane passengers a few weeks ago who refused to board if some Mideastern looking guys were allowed to board. I was encouraged just last night when an esteemed journalist told me of a story she’d been told: Two Mideastern-looking gentlemen, seated together on a plane, were eyeballed by a U.S. air marshal who was aboard. The air marshal told the men they were not going to sit together on this flight. They protested. The marshal said, move or you’re not on this flight. They moved. Plane took off. (my emphasis)

Masked under the guise of security and patriotism, Noonan’s article justifies the everyday surveillance of Middle Eastern looking men. Noonan’s evolution into a “watchful potential warrior” is encouraged by other acts of surveillance and public infringement on civil liberties, which she celebrates throughout her article. Acting as watch men and women, Noonan is comforted by the regulatory and punitive attitude adopted by fellow
Americans in the wake of the attacks. As Cainkar writes, “Noonan’s ‘watchful potential warrior’ has provided the FBI with thousands of tips about suspicious-acting Arabs that have proved baseless, nonetheless subjecting Arab families to intrusive home and work visits by government agents” (23). Halaby’s novel attempts to capture and accurately portray this environment of suspicion, recounting its effects on her Arab American characters. The minor characters she creates, including the two young clerks at the mall, and later the administrative assistants at Jassim’s work, appear to embody Noonan’s newly transformed surveilling citizens who place themselves in the service of a regulatory and disciplinary American state.

Throughout the novel, there are marked differences between Salwa and Jassim’s reactions to incidents of racial profiling and the effects they have on their engagements with the discourses of imperative patriotism. For example, in an effort to embrace Salwa and Jassim into the American collective, Joan, a co-worker of Salwa’s, offers her “An American flag decal” (55). Joan’s action is motivated by a sincere desire to protect her Arab friends because, as she says to Salwa, “‘You never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand’” (55). Salwa is amused by her coworker’s kind gesture and wonders what it would be like to “[place] a seventy-five-cent decal on [Jassim’s] $50,000 car” (55). Salwa’s irreverent attitude towards the spectacle of American flags after the 9/11 attacks challenges compulsory patriotism; she refuses to showcase the American flag decals because she does not wish to “‘announce to every stranger we drive by that we do not intend to blow things up’” (57). Similarly, in
her confrontation at the mall, Salwa is mostly angered by the representation of Jassim as a thief and a security threat. When the clerk says that Jassim “‘just scared’” her, Salwa responds in palpable anger: “‘I see. You thought he might want to blow up the mall in his Ferragamo shoes. Where is your manager?’” (30). It is unclear here whether Salwa is more outraged by the racial profiling Jassim incurs or the ignorance of his class status the clerk displays. Salwa is provoked by the clerk’s inability to distinguish between her husband, a professional, middle-upper class male, and the terrorists. What these exchanges reveal is an investment in American narratives of upward mobility and assimilation. Salwa and Jassim are unable to produce counter-narratives of the attacks because their ideas about the events and their living situation in the United States are deeply entrenched in notions of upward mobility and the belief in the myth of the American melting pot.

Although Salwa and Jassim’s ideas about life in the United States and their desire for material gain appear similar, their opinions on the issue of having children differ greatly. Salwa harbors a secret desire for a child and Jassim does not feel capable of raising one. He appears content with his family structure and actively discourages Salwa from conceiving a child. In Halaby’s novel, Salwa and Jassim’s personal trauma acts as a microcosm for the national upheaval in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Their personal relationship, Halaby suggests, is influenced by factors that are outside their control, including assumptions of their guilt. Halaby’s novel overturns the assumed distinction between the public and the private, noting instead the interdependence of the two. The
blurring of the public and private signifies the 9/11 attacks as a transformative moment that reduces the imaginary boundaries between the two realms. In *Once in a Promised Land*, the environment of suspicion gripping the United States leads the main characters to fear and distrust each other. As Pauline Vinson Homsi writes in a review of the work,

> The disintegration of Jassim’s and Salwa’s lives is accelerated by the fallout of the September 11th attacks. Their Arab, Muslim background seems to automatically render them suspect in the eyes of people around them. As they increasingly become the objects of distrust, fear and bigotry, the couple is forced to confront the futility of their material successes and the hollowness at the heart of their American dream. (“New Fiction”)

Homsi’s reading of the eventual breakdown of the relationship between Salwa and Jassim is accurate in so far as it suggests a link between the political environment and the social impact it has on Arab and Muslim Americans.

When Salwa chooses to forget to take her birth control pills, she is aware of the possible consequences this “big Lie” may have on her relationship with Jassim (59). Upon discovering her pregnancy, Salwa wonders why her husband of nine years would not want to have children with her: “They have been married for nine years; what was wrong with her husband that he did not want to have children? That he had forced her to lie about this most important event?” (60). This rupture of the marital trust between Salwa and Jassim causes Salwa to concede privately that “the official knowledge that she was pregnant came like a sentence, for now things would change” (60). Salwa keeps the pregnancy secret from her husband for a number of weeks and promises that “She would tell Jassim soon. Maybe tonight. But tonight came and went, as did the next night, and still she did not tell Jassim” (81). While Salwa hides her pregnancy, Jassim appears
completely unaware of the signs around him. When Salwa experiences a sudden miscarriage, she is able to turn only to her friend Randa who assists her through her ordeal. Jassim remains “oblivious of his wife. His fetus. The lost blood” (91). Through Salwa’s hopes and disappointments, Halaby’s novel utilizes the Arab fairytale’s logic by refusing to accept or offer an easy resolution for the two main characters. Their private affairs appear to have deep consequences on their public lives. Salwa’s secret pregnancy acts as a catalyst for Salwa’s and Jassim’s sad fate and the eventual breakdown of their marriage, rendering the link between the private and the public painfully obvious. For Jassim and Salwa, the connection between the two domains significantly alters their conception of America as a promised land and establishes it, instead, as an alluring place where dreams are often unfulfilled.

Jassim’s eventual knowledge of his wife’s secret pregnancy is both emotionally and physically costly. After Salwa decides to let Jassim know of her miscarriage, Jassim is irrevocably broken and unsure why his wife would choose to hide this matter from him. Deep in thought over the subject while driving his expensive car, Jassim is overcome with emotion: “Salwa had a miscarriage. Jassim’s conscious and semiconscious thoughts were colliding, creating a heady, almost blinding panic” (117). It is precisely at this moment of revelation that Jassim’s seemingly perfect world collapses as he accidentally kills a young boy named Evan in a car accident. Jassim’s instant reaction to the accident is sobering. He is unable to believe that he has killed “a child” and forces himself to tell Evan’s friend that “it’s going to be all right” (119). In telling
this lie, Jassim was “trying to make the ultimate jump into American life, the one that promises a happy ending for everyone if you just believe hard enough” (119). While Jassim performs all the duties of a good citizen by calling the police and giving a truthful statement after the accident, he is aware that his life will be significantly altered and, like Salwa, chooses to offer his partner only half-truths about the actual details of the accident:

Reality crept in and tied knots in his muscles while Salwa slept, oblivious. The words sat at the back of his throat, promising to choke him if they were not released soon. He so wished that he had finished recounting the story, but the disappointment on her face and his forgetting about her miscarriage made it somehow impossible. How could he possibly say, ‘That car accident I had – well, the boy died?’ (139)

Jassim’s and Salwa’s decisions to not fully convey the truth of their private experiences to one another leads the two characters to seek refuge in fellow American citizens. The results, Halaby shows, are catastrophic, leading to infidelity, physical abuse, and violence.

In his attempt to atone for his error, Jassim returns on numerous occasions to the site of the car accident. His reliving of the painful memory appears to be a cry for help and a desire to reach out to others. This desire leads Jassim into a Denny’s diner where he meets Penny, a waitress. Penny offers Jassim much needed support and comfort. Although he initially walks into the diner needing consoling over the car accident, he receives solidarity over the 9/11 attacks. On first meeting Jassim, Penny asks,

‘So, where are you from?’
‘I’m from Jordan.’
Penny, relaxed and tall, looked at him as if she were an old friend of a friend who had been waiting for years to meet him. ‘Do people give you a hard time these days.’

Jassim’s mind became a jumble. He wished to answer that question honestly, to tell her about the man who had stared at him and mouthed ‘Go home’ when he was having lunch with Marcus, to tell her about Corey, about the triumvirate of small-minded office girls. More than anything, he wanted to tell her about Salwa, about the woman he loved more than life itself, who had walked so far away. But how could he? How could he say these words to a woman he’d known for less than fifteen minutes? ‘No, not much.’ (156)

Penny’s question – while potentially troubling in its racialization of Jassim as other – is motivated by a sincere desire to understand Jassim’s experience. Jassim is not offended by the question and uses it to reflect on the myriad ways in which his personal and public lives converge and affect one another. When Jassim asks Penny if she has any prejudices against Arab Americans, she assures him that she is not influenced by someone’s color, ethnicity, and even sexual orientation: “I know what it’s like to be blamed for someone else’s actions, to be put in a category and left there. I will never do that to anyone, no matter his color or his ethnicity. Not even because of his sexual preference’” (156).

Penny’s comments promote the idea of inter-ethnic solidarity that crosses lines of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Her presence in the novel is both stabilizing and disruptive, forcing Jassim to open up to others while foreclosing his need for reconciling with Salwa.

The solidarity that Penny offers Jassim is not replicated by many other characters in the novel. In fact, Jassim quickly becomes an object of suspicion to those around him, including his friends and coworkers and even his partner Marcus. When Marcus begins to lose business accounts because clients refuse to work with Jassim, Marcus confronts Jassim on his behavior since the 9/11 attacks. Jassim is shocked to discover that the two
administrative assistants in his office, Lisa and Bella, were keeping tabs on him and recording his every move to the FBI. Marcus relays the information in a factual way, showing sympathy for his friend:

‘Bella called the FBI on you a couple of days after [9/11] happened, told them you were a rich Arab with access to the city’s water supply and you didn’t seem very upset by what had happened. It seemed the FBI was not interested at first. Bella started to keep a notebook on you. She wrote down everything you said, what you wore, how you seemed. Then two months or so ago she said that she thought something was wrong, that your behavior changed. That you seemed bothered and that she was going to call the FBI on you again. Report you.’ (271-272)

Halaby maps Jassim’s transformation from a good citizen and loyal worker to a potential terror suspect. The involvement of the FBI becomes a necessary act at a time of crisis. The effects of these suspicions are catastrophic and lead to Jassim’s loss of his livelihood as Marcus too begins to doubt his friend after nine years of knowing him. When Marcus discovers an article on Jassim’s desk entitled “Engineering Mistakes in the Building of the Twin Towers,” he feels justified in his racially motivated decision to fire his partner. Instead of simply linking instances of subtle and overt racism, Halaby’s novel compels readers to reflect upon the political and social ramifications of their actions on fellow Arab Americans. In so doing, Halaby encourages feelings of empathy from her readers, thereby destabilizing the pernicious narratives of Arab Americans as outsiders to the American state.

While Jassim is subjected to an overtly violent and distrustful work space, Salwa is admired at her own job and receives much attention from the young and mysterious coworker Jake who affirms her beauty and exoticism as a young Arab American woman.
When Jake first approaches Salwa, he presumes an immediate affinity with her through a few Arabic phrases he has picked up at his Arabic language course. Jake’s apparent desire and lust for Salwa is embedded in a need to consume Salwa and own her. In this, Halaby questions orientalist narratives of Arab womanhood that simultaneously denounce and affirm Arab women’s sexuality as excessive and deviant. Thinking about Salwa, Jake reflects on her beauty and his sexual desire for the “gorgeous Arab” (170):

In a blink she had transformed from being a turn-on to being an obsession. He liked her, liked the cadence of her words when she spoke, but overriding all this thinking about her was a gigantic need to be with her physically. Behind each conversation sat the need, that wanting, to the point where it was almost unbearable. Maybe because she was older. Maybe because she was foreign… He couldn’t help himself: looking at her across the room, he imagined his mouth on hers, his hand on her breasts or between her legs, and it was all he could do to focus on the customer in front of him. (170)

Jake’s feelings for Salwa are motivated by sexual desire and lust. He is allured by her “foreign[ness]” and difference. His feelings, Halaby’s novel shows, are part and parcel of a sexual, desire-driven society with a dangerous obsession with the other. In Salwa and Jassim’s world, the political and social environment of 9/11 bolsters the obsessions with the Arab American other as object of desire and potential threat. The two forms of obsession are interlinked and function to further objectify and alienate Arab Americans from their communities. They have, as Halaby’s novel shows, catastrophic consequences for the main characters.

Although Salwa’s relationship with Jake is brief, it is disastrous. Not only does Salwa suffer because of her guilt over the repeated sexual encounters with Jake, but she also is unable to detach herself from her obsessive and controlling lover. Her resolution
to visit her family in Jordan in order to escape her infidelity and failing marriage is shared by Jassim who, after being fired and suspected of terrorism, feels that “‘maybe it’s time I go home too’” (302). Before she leaves, however, Salwa must disentangle herself from her young lover: “hastily scribbled in invisible ink at the bottom of her list of preparations for leaving America was a reminder to go and say goodbye to Jake” (316). While Salwa acknowledges the foolishness of her decision, she feels compelled to mark with finality her brief affair. Salwa’s last visit to Jake’s apartment is dramatic. She meets a disheveled Jake in a “state of disorder” (317). As Salwa says her goodbye, Jake professes his love for her. The meeting permits Salwa to discover the truth of Jake’s substance abuse and recognize the folly of her actions. Angered by her decision to leave, Jake tells Salwa, “‘So you’re running back to the pigsty’” (320). The ugliness of Jake’s words affirms her decision to leave for Jordan. High on meth, Jake attacks her as she leaves his house and violently beats her: “It was the corner of the heavy silver frame that had sliced into her face, she felt a blow again, on the top of her head. She was amazed at the force and the pain” (321). While beating Salwa, Jake yells, “‘Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch!’” (322). With this shocking event, Salwa and Jassim’s life is forever overturned. Salwa wakes up to find herself “lying in an American hospital bed, disfigured and barely conscious” (328). The novel ends with the emotional and physical breakdown of Salwa whose dreams about America do not end in the “‘happily ever after’” (355).

This unsettling and violent ending has no resolution and leaves readers with little hope. There are no easy solutions in *Once in a Promised Land*. Halaby’s Arab American
characters must struggle to define who and what they are in relation to a contentious political and racialized positioning in the aftermath of the attacks. What this violent ending registers is a notion of Halaby’s Arab American characters’ simultaneous guilt and innocence. Her novel is an important 9/11 work because it suggests a link between personal violence and global, political, and economic violence. For Halaby, violence is not created simply at the personal level; rather, it is nurtured, agitated, and enacted through multiple actors at various levels. In establishing these links, *Once in a Promised Land* provides a vital counter-narrative to representations of 9/11 attacks as singular, decontextualized, and isolated forms of violence. Further, Halaby undoes the myth of Arab American innocence by providing her readers with characters who are at once deeply flawed and simultaneously innocent. Her novel operates as a counter-narrative because of its telling the story of her Arab American characters who grapple with daily struggles readers may identify with and appreciate. As Carolyn See writes in a review of the novel published in *The Washington Post*:

Neither Jassim nor Salwa is innocent. Both of them have flaws, but those flaws are personal. The tragedy that sweeps them up is personal, too, but fanned by flames of national rage and paranoia. Laila Halaby has captured the human condition perfectly here, but my God, it’s a horrid condition” (“Suddenly Suspect”).

By challenging the casting of Arabs and Muslims as absolute others in the post 9/11 world, Halaby’s novel models a complexity of thought and reflexivity sorely absent from many narratives published in the aftermath of the attacks. Refusing the us/them binary, *Once in a Promised Land* suggests a link between Americans of all ethnicities
whose lives are ordered by capitalist needs and desires. Similarly Homsi writes, “Pain, loss and sorrow, Halaby suggests, are the links that bind humanity together, bridging differences across class, culture and religion” (“New Fiction”). What is at stake, Halaby suggests, is our compassion for one another, our desire to reach across borders and racial divides. In so doing, Halaby’s novel models important political questions and literary engagements necessary for a better understanding of the ethics of writing 9/11 literature.

Halaby’s novel offers contemporary critical race and racism scholars rich and imaginative ways to conceive of Arab American others in the era of the War on Terror. In its writing of the story of her characters and their encounter with the attacks, Halaby creates a counter-narrative of 9/11. More importantly, however, Halaby renders legible an example of Arab American grief, suffering, and trauma. While this humanizing effect is an attribute I criticize in Abu-Jaber’s work in Chapter One, Halaby does not make her characters exemplary in any way. They are tragically flawed characters who are compelled, by the end of the novel, to recognize the impossibility of the American dream for racialized others living in the United States. By recognizing the limits of this dream, Halaby constructs a story that varies from the scripted accounts of economic success and prosperity that appear to transcend political violence and racial conflicts.

In an introduction to a collection of essays on the effects of 9/11 on American culture, Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln argue that “Americans are trapped in a liminal space, somewhere between life before and after 9/11” (xxi). If we accept the line between “before” and “after” that Denzin and Lincoln draw, we implicitly buttress
notions of the exceptionalism of this event in contemporary history. Certainly, the effects of 9/11 are still being felt today as the United States continues to violently insert itself “in multiple national contexts” (xxi). My aim in this chapter has been to destabilize the notion of exceptionality surrounding literature in the aftermath of 9/11 while conceding the difficulties and pitfalls of this growing literary corpus. I have argued that the three examples of Arab American women’s literary responses to 9/11 offer readers ways to grapple with the enormity of the events and the trauma to which they have given rise. Arab American literature post 9/11 provides literary critics with alternative models for writing and thinking about the attacks. These works deserve further critical attention and study as they may be able to offer various mechanisms of writing and reading our contemporary historical moment without reifying the binaries of us versus them.
Conclusion

In her debut novel, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), Laila Lalami explores the familiar literary trope of immigration from the viewpoint of four Moroccan characters bound for Spain. Having boarded an inflatable boat headed towards the Spanish shores through the Strait of Gibraltar, one by one, Faten, Halima, Murad, and Aziz, reveal their reasons for leaving their homes. Conflicted about their trip and hopeful of their extremely slim prospects of successfully reaching Madrid, Lalami offers insights into the often ignored story of illegal Moroccan immigrants (or *haragas*) dying for better destinies on foreign shores. Moving back and forth between the characters’ pasts and their current economic, political, and emotional struggles, the novel seamlessly weaves together the contradictions of modern day living. Painting a convincing portrait of tensions between fundamentalism and modernity, superstition and religious conviction, wealth and poverty, incarceration and freedom, dreams and realities, Lalami’s novel ends with a gesture towards the importance of writing one’s own stories: “There was no use reading stories like this anymore; [Murad] needed to write his own” (186). Deftly portraying the complex social and political realities of contemporary Morocco, the novel does not cater to Orientalist fantasies of Arab, Muslim, and North African difference.

Lalami, a Moroccan-born writer, who has lived in the United States since 1992 and is regularly featured in *The Nation* magazine, as well as other western publications, is a...
model of a new generation of Arab American writers who engage in their writing literary themes that transcend the borders of the United States. This new generation, which includes writers like Claire Messud, Patricia Sarrafian Ward, and Alicia Arian, choose subject matters that, in these turbulent political times, throw into disarray preconceived notions of Arab American homogeneity or radical alterity. These writers are at the forefront of a movement for literary self-expression that confounds homogenizing narratives of Arab American identity, Islamic difference, and Middle Eastern otherness. Eschewing the centrality of the United States as a backdrop for their narratives, these writers produce works that, in the words of David Williams, “offer a complex, sometimes excruciating, expression of how the ‘old’ and ‘new’ worlds are related” (55). As such, this literature offers literary critics alternative ways of conceptualizing the diasporic and racialized experiences of Arabs and Muslims in an increasingly globalized world structure and open up further discussion of the differences and similarities between diverse instances of contemporary Arab American women’s literature.

What, then, does the stunning growth in the production of Arab American women’s literature offer literary and cultural critics beyond an understanding of Arab and Muslim experiences? What do the processes of writing, publishing, and reading Arab American women’s literature tell us about ethnic American writing today? How do these fictional works, which vary in form and genre, realize their radical potential to alter and resignify Arab American experiences to a wider audience and public? And how are we to understand these works in relation to the political risks they sometimes run in preserving
rather than disrupting the status quo? These difficult questions are ones that have guided my overall project but which nevertheless need to be continually readdressed, especially in relation to the new literary focus of emerging works of literature by Arab American women writers.

Writing on new developments in “Muslim and Arab American Writing,” Nouri Gana traces the effects of the events of 9/11 “which catapulted Muslims and Arabs from a state of precarious obscurity into one of ominous conspicuousness” (1573). Gana’s essay shows how the current discriminatory political environment in the United States, bolstered as it is by racist legislation, compels Arab and Muslim American authors to confront in their works the deliberate transformation of Islam from a religious category to a racialized one. Gana’s pessimistic evaluation of the “counternarrative, reactionary, and corrective” (1577) tendencies of Arab American literature stems from his assessment of the bleak political situation in the United States. This political environment sanctions racism towards Arab Americans in general, and Muslim Americans in particular, encouraging the visual, cultural and literary denigration of Islam. As Gana argues, this environment promotes, through a “neo-orientalist political economy of publishing” (1577), the fitting of Arab and Muslim American writing into prescribed narratives. Gana discusses the overall function and role of such literature in this way:

The task of Muslim and Arab American writing is nowadays to wager more programmatically on formal adventurousness in order to wrest the universal humanity of Muslim and Arab suffering from the grinding machinery of the war on terror. (1580)
Establishing a firm link between the War on Terror and the racialization of Arab and Muslim authors, Gana’s article delineates, in somewhat prescriptive terms, the enormous political task confronting Muslim American authors whose roles are often circumscribed by a liberal, western publication industry. I have attempted to better understand and raise questions about the demands placed by the publication industry on the production and consumption of Arab American literature.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for the importance of reading contemporary Arab American women’s literature in critical and self-reflexive ways. While agreeing with other Arab American literary scholars on the stunning growth in this body of works, I claimed that this literature must be read carefully and in tandem with theoretical materials and insights that can yield tough questions about both the act of writing and the practice of reading Arab American women’s literature. This project, as I have shown throughout this work, deserves immediate attention because as Samia Serageldin argues, “There has never been a time when it was more important to examine the image of Arab Americans in the popular imagination as reflected, and refracted, through literature” (189). Questioning the predominant paradigms that are used to read and understand this literature at this political and historic conjecture is a goal I have taken seriously in this work.

Commenting on the task of reading Muslim women in western contexts, Hilary Davis, Jasmin Zine, and Lisa K. Taylor embed their project with the urgent task of developing a “politics and ethics of reading” works authored by Muslim women (272).
Their aim, as feminist critics in the western academy, is to “intervene in … public pedagogies by building communities capable of critically and reflexively reading and imagining within and against our complex locations” (276). Like Davis et. al, I have argued for the importance of developing a politics of reading Arab American women’s literature. Of course, I do not intend to privilege a particular reading or singular view of this complex growing body of works. I do, however, insist upon the imperative of reading these works with an attention to the increased commodification and circulation of Arab American and Muslim American women’s narratives. My focus on examining works by Arab American women authors stems from a desire to understand the highly gendered processes of reading, producing, and publishing this literature. In an essay on representational dilemmas for Muslim women in the western academy, Jasmin Zine argues for the importance of developing “counter-narratives that challenge the hegemonic ways in which our identities have been scripted historically” (“Muslim Women” 19). My focus on Arab American women authors arises from a political and ethical commitment to understanding the powerful and contradictory gendered history of literary self-representation as witnessed in the works studied in this project.

There are many promising avenues for future academic study of Arab American literature. For one thing, a comprehensive view of Arab American literature should transcend the boundaries of the United States and include discussions and analyses of literary works by Arab Canadian authors as well. While I have not included in my study any discussion of these works, this may be a future research endeavor, especially as Arab
Canadian authors begin to make indelible marks on the contemporary Canadian literary scene. The publication and critical acclaim bestowed upon Rawi Hage’s *Deniro’s Game* (2006) and *Cockroach* (2008), for example, merit literary investigation and study. Although my dissertation has focused exclusively on Arab American literature produced by women authors, the study of works by Arab American male authors, including the publication of Hisham Mattar’s highly successful novel, *In the Country of Men* (2006), is certainly necessary to develop a more comprehensive view of the politics of representation at play in the scripting of Arab masculinities in the War on Terror. New theoretical interventions in this area, including the publication of Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2008) and Gargi Bhattacharyya’s *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the ‘War on Terror’* (2008), signal the necessity of opening up these potentially groundbreaking intellectual and critical political areas of inquiry and merging the study of Arab American literatures with both masculinities studies and queer theory.

The works of Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hammad, and Laila Halaby, which vary in genre, form, content, and message, have in common a desire to articulate Arab American identity and difference on their own terms, from multiple, and even contradictory, viewpoints and positionalities. What I have found in this study is that these works, while contesting the conditions of Arab American invisibility and silence, often negotiate and respond to the perceptions of Arab Americans in mainstream American society. They are, to a large extent, shaped by the politics of
representation as they are applied to Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Middle Eastern others both in the United States and internationally. The literary contributions of Arab American women authors challenge and redefine both the boundaries of American identity and the limits of the American literary canon. These works, however, must not be read only within the political and geographic confines of the United States. Understanding the global impact of this literature, as well as its reconstitution of national and international boundaries, is an important task which Arab American literary critics must constantly negotiate.

*The Politics of Legibility* is my contribution to a growing field of study that takes the racialization of Arab Americans in the post 9/11 world as a serious and important area of inquiry. The authors’ literary engagements with the difficult and charged questions of race and racialization in the era of the War on Terror offer literary and critical race theorists new ways to understand race, racism, and Islamophobia in contemporary North American societies. How readers choose to interact with these authors’ negotiations of the complex demands of ethnic, national, and religious affiliations is a charged matter, warranting constant pedagogical interventions and critical inquiries. In her work *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (2003), Susan Buck-Morss urges a type of “double critique” that can responsibly interrogate “global cultural practice” (1). For Buck-Morss this double critique entails,

Two entrances into the texts: the first, individual and existential – experiencing personally the attractiveness of the ideas … The second entrance [is] social – how the text function[s] in a given historical context, how it work[s] politically to support the inequities of power in society, and how it also might work against these
inequities. (96)

Buck-Morss’s delineation of this double entry into texts – one highly individual and personal and the other collective and public – provides a useful reading strategy and method that simultaneously acknowledges the personal, the political and social, ramifications of literary texts. I have attempted to incorporate this reading method and strategy into my project, constantly insisting on the importance of studying and understanding the politics of reading, writing, and publishing Arab American women’s literature at this historical juncture.
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