

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

REREADING VALUE AND NORMATIVITY IN
CONTEMPORARY ARAB AMERICAN LITERATURE:
DIANA ABU-JABER'S *ARABIAN JAZZ* AND RANDA
JARRAR'S *A MAP OF HOME*

by
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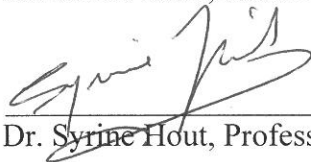
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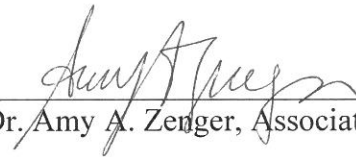
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Title: Rereading Value and Normativity in Contemporary Arab American Literature:
Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*

This project proposes an alternative analytical model to examine the uneven and shifting devaluation of racialized, classed, and gendered lives in Diana Abu Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*. As both novels depict powerful instances of nonnormative practices, they lend themselves to new analytical approaches for understanding the relationship between power, normativity, respectability, and value in Arab American fiction. The intellectual and political frameworks that inform this reading of *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home* draw on Arab and Arab American feminisms, women of color feminisms, and queer of color critique. This emphasis marks a shift from existing criticism in proposing to interpret the characters' experiences, not as struggles of identity and belonging, but as tense processes of gendered and classed racialization, self-representation and political determination. In doing so, the discussion moves towards a critique of norms and coercive practices that render Arabs and Arab American lives in the United States vulnerable to threats of violence and exploitation in the context of neoliberalism.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Our family is *mejnoon*, you know? Crazy, nuts. Half Muslim, half Christian, they switch back and forth when the mood possesses them. Or they come to this country and pretend to be Presbyterians.”

(qtd. in Abu-Jaber 339)

What Nassir, a distant relative of Jemorah Ramoud’s and her prospective suitor, jokingly articulates in the above quote from *Arabian Jazz*, hints at some of the major questions that this thesis engages with. Why would the Ramouds “pretend to be Presbyterians” in the United States? Doesn’t the very act of pretending entail a process of negotiating with shifting configurations of power? What do such negotiations tell us about the characters’ relationships with power, normativity, respectability and value? How are Arabs and Arab Americans, much like the Ramouds, compelled to inscribe themselves along classed, gendered, and racialized lines in the context of the United States?

With these questions, my analysis begins to part ways with conventional literary criticism of Arab American novels, especially with a majority that, particularly after 9/11, insists on interpreting Arab and Arab American experiences through the lens of diversity and multiculturalism.¹ Identifying and making sense of tense processes of

¹ I am in agreement with Carol Fadda-Conrey, Nadine Naber, Steven Salaita and others, who have resisted responding to anti-Arab racism as though it were “a byproduct of 9/11” (Salaita *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures and Politics* 110). Naber calls the attacks “a turning point, as opposed to the starting point, of histories of anti-Arab racism in the United States” (“Introduction” 4). Similarly, Fadda-Conrey points out that, “they are in fact a recent installment in a long history of national and international crises and conflicts that have repeatedly and consistently underlined the provisional nature of US belonging for Arab Americans” (“Arab American Citizenship in Crisis” 533). Within this context, Salaita argues, “this swell in Arab American scholarship indicated

self-inscription in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008) is what I first set out to do in this thesis. Second, I propose an alternative mode of analysis that examines the characters' experiences, not as typical struggles of identity and belonging, but as tense processes of gendered and classed racialization, self-representation and political determination.

It is worth noting that these characters' experiences echo complex tensions underlying critical discussions of the term "Arab American" and the political implications of the use of the hyphen in this designation. Critics such as Lisa Suhair Majaj, Carol Fadda-Conrey and Nayef Ali Al-Joulan have suggested that the hyphen, usually a marker of ethnic identities in the United States, could function as a bridge between Arabness and Americanness. "Rather than being a modifier," says Fadda-Conrey, "the Arab part of the Arab American staple should be on par with the American part of this label, with the hyphen signifying equity between the two identities and forming a bridge between them" ("Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland" 204). My analysis, however, is more closely aligned with that of Mervat Hatem, who on the other hand, says, "I have consciously not used a hyphen in Arab American to underline the existing tension between these two cultural sources of their identity ... if the hyphen implies a well-formulated and/or a single synthesis of the Arab and American identities, then nothing can be further from the complex cultural realities of

that on the eve of 9/11 a serious discussion of the probity of an Arab American Studies was imminent, even if the critical apparatus on which such an endeavor would be based was still relatively immature. After 9/11, though, Arab American scholarship assumed something of a chaotic disposition. A community that once was virtually invisible suddenly became the object of much (often unsolicited) curiosity. In the year following 9/11, reactions from Arab Americans in scholarly publications were scarce, although by now a broad range of inquiry exists and touches on everything from the effects of 9/11 on Arab American politics to the post-9/11 challenges of acculturation and integration" (27).

the community where endless permutations are developed” (The Invisible American Half”). In this respect, the hyphen cannot function as a bridge, especially as it reproduces the same hegemonic notions of Americanness that the protagonists of *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home* interrogate through their growing understanding of their racialized, gendered and sexualized difference in the context of the United States.

Arabian Jazz recounts the story of the Ramouds, an Arab American family of Palestinian descent living in a poor white neighborhood in upstate New York.

Matussem Ramoud left Jordan as a teenager in the late 50s, and now plays the drums in his Jazz band at a local bar. He lives in Euclid with his two daughters, Jemorah, 29, and Melvina, 22. Their aunt, Fatima, is starting to raise red flags regarding her nieces’ lack of interest in the prospects of marriage. Almost twenty years after her sudden passing, the family is still mourning the loss of Nora, Matussem’s American wife of Irish descent, who died of Typhus in a visit to Jordan. Jemorah works at the business office of a hospital, where Melvina is also a nurse.

A Map of Home is the coming of age story of the novel’s narrator and protagonist, Nidali Ammar, born in Boston in the early 80s to an Egyptian-Greek mother, Ruz, and a Palestinian father, Waheed. Shortly after Nidali’s birth, the family moves to Kuwait, and with the Gulf war, is displaced to Alexandria, Egypt. At the age of fourteen, Nidali and her family move yet again, but this time to Texas. As they grapple with the injustices and realities of colonial dispossession and war, Waheed and Ruz struggle to make ends meet. In Texas, Ruz gives piano lessons, and Waheed, a poet-turned-architect, works sixteen hours a day and is still unable to get a housing loan approved.

A Map of Home and *Arabian Jazz* have not yet been brought together in a

critical comparative study. Both illustrate, however, the circumstances of war and dispossession that drive so many Arabs to leave their homes and immigrate to the United States in the 1960s onwards. Abu-Jaber and Jarrar draw characters that experience these painful events directly and who understand them with a sensibility to the workings of neo-imperialism and settler colonialism. Indeed, Arab immigrants portrayed in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home*, and their children, are all trying to make sense of cross-generational experiences of dispossession, war, and violence. Jemorah, for instance, weighs the option of getting married and moving to Jordan against going to graduate school. In that same moment, she is told of her aunt Fatima's haunting memories of her baby sisters buried alive, after her only male sibling, Matussem, is born. Waheed, on the other hand, wants his daughter, Nidali, "to become a famous professor" in *A Map of Home*. Yet, he still clearly struggles with the traumas of Palestinian homelessness and dispossession. He cannot fathom the fact that Nidali would choose a strong writing program in another state rather than stay with her family. Nidali, Jemorah, and Melvina carry the heavy weight of these traumatic memories and realities, but at the same time, are in the process of carving out their own paths moving forward.

Set in the early 1990s, *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home* depict vividly the lives of second-generation young women of Arab descent in the United States. Protagonists are repeatedly compelled to emulate mainstream American norms in both novels, and are often punished when they refuse to do so, or when they cannot. In particular, Jemorah, Melvina, and Nidali are persistently interrogating hegemonic notions of Americanness as they make sense of their own racialized, gendered and sexualized difference in the context of the United States. At the end of *Arabian Jazz*,

Melvina finally tells her sister, Jemorah, “You *are* an American. Where do you think Americans came from, when they’re not captured on reservations? They come from other places. That’s what an American is!” To which Jemorah replies, “It’s not enough to be born here, or to live here, or to speak the language. You’ve got to *seem* right” (emphasis in the original, 330).

Likewise, Nidali’s Americanness is also made suspect on her very first day of school in Texas, when her classmates all stand up to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Assuming it is a prayer, she does not join in. When the teacher “sternly” asks her if she had filled “a conscientious objector form,” she apologizes and explains that she “didn’t want to pray.” He tells her, “It’s not a prayer. No. It’s a patriotic thing” (220).

Questioning routine practices, such as the Pledge of Allegiance in a public school setting, becomes almost unthinkable. To her teacher, Nidali’s small act of dissent is no sign of democratic practice; it is rather one new student’s shameful transition into the category of the suspicious Arab in the making.

In this respect, such experiences – and many others discussed thoroughly in later chapters – suggest new understandings of the distinct location of marked Arabness within the context of the United States. Carol Fadda-Conrey, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Steven Salaita and others, associate the emerging literary works of the 1990s with a new political consciousness resulting from experiences of racism and discrimination in the US, as well as the US government’s heavy interventions across the Arab world. Nevertheless, critical analysis, so far revolving around struggles of identity and belonging, unfortunately still neglects significant insights emerging from uneven and shifting devaluations of Arab and Arab American lives in the US. Indeed, literary critics are often inclined to mark a paradigm shift between the writings of the first wave of

Arab immigrants, and those of the more recent second and third waves.² Fadda-Conrey, for example, points towards third wave Arab American writers' "deeply interrogative rather than assimilative approach to US identity" (20). While this is definitely true, Arabness, I later argue, has always been and is still blatantly coded as a nonnormative and devalued category of identification that cannot be integrated within the mainstream fabric of the United States. In this context, I explore the classed, racialized, gendered, and sexualized character of the devaluation of Arabs and Arab Americans in the United States.

The first chapter of this thesis begins with a literature review of some of the major theoretical discussions that are built on claims of identity and belonging in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home*. The second chapter frames my research questions within the history of migration and performative racialization of early Syrian immigrants to the United States. In this chapter, I align my research interests not only within this particular history, but also with questions emerging from the theoretical frameworks of Arab and Arab American feminisms, women of color feminism, and queer of color critique. I begin to explore alternative forms of intersectional and non-oppressive solidarity and coalition building within and across racialized communities. I also consider the challenges of adopting such compelling frameworks, especially when Arab and Arab American experiences have been invisible, silenced, or seen as suspicious in the context of the United States.

In the third chapter, I locate and analyze instances of performative tension in

² See Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments" and Carol Fadda-Conrey's *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*, Steven Salaita's *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* for detailed discussions on the ongoing development of an Arab American literary tradition.

Arabian Jazz, which I understand as liminal moments where characters negotiate their own racialized, gendered and sexualized difference. In the process, I therefore identify nonnormative articulations of Arab and Arab Americanness by examining the characters' ongoing negotiations with constructions of privilege and violence. This mode of analysis particularly looks at changing configurations of power and the interplay between different categories of identification such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. The fourth chapter continues with Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*, and considers the narrator's creative self-inscriptions vis-à-vis sexualized, gendered, and racialized violence. A close reading of the novel exposes the limitations of nationalist and identity-based forms of collectivity, as analytical approaches, in the face of uneven and shifting devaluations of racialized and gendered lives.

The discussion is thus reframed from a need to reclaim and integrate "Arabness" into the fabric of the United States to a critique of insidious processes of devaluation resulting from oppressive structures that redefine notions of worth and belonging. Both *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home* depict powerful instances of nonnormative practices, as they both introduce new frameworks for understanding the relationship between power, normativity, respectability and value in Arab American fiction. I contend that downplaying such dynamics for the sake of celebratory statements in support of integration is ultimately counterproductive. This is especially true when the emphasis on the portrayal of painful experiences with deep-rooted and interlocking systems of oppression can potentially uncover important variables and inform new analytical approaches to probe processes of devaluation of racialized and gendered lives.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis builds on assumptions that exist in many critiques of contemporary Arab American novels, and of *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home* in particular, which commonly interpret different narratives as assertions of identity, diversity and reclamation. By looking at instances of performative tension in the novels, my analysis focuses on the relationship between changing configurations of power and the interplay between different categories of identification such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. Building on Marcy Knopf-Newman, Salah D. Hassan and Lisa Suhair Majaj's analyses of the historical struggle of Arabs in America, the third chapter looks closely at the characters' negotiations with constructions of privilege and violence in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*, while interpreting those, not as struggles of identity and belonging, but rather as tense processes of gendered racialization, self-representation and political determination. The analysis goes further in the fourth chapter with a critique that is sensitive to the uneven and shifting devaluation of racialized and gendered life in Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*. This chapter examines the theoretical discussions built on claims of identity and belonging in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home*.

Critics such as Michelle Hartman, Nayef Ali Al-Joulan, and Pauline Kaldas have placed much emphasis on struggles of identity and belonging in *Arabian Jazz*. While Hartman argues that Jemorah is coming to terms with a black identity, Kaldas claims that "Jemorah's inability to make definitive decisions reveals a genuine confusion about her cultural identity and the struggle to create a sense of home, whether in Jordan or in the United States" (177). Al-Joulan also emphasizes that fiction is the

medium through which "Abu-Jaber shares most Arab-American writers their concern about neutralizing misrepresentation of their ethnicity" (640). In an attempt to interpret and define Abu-Jaber's role as an Arab American writer, he juxtaposes what he broadly defines as "Arab themes" in her fiction, in opposition to "details of the American community, an act marking her attitude of fusing Arab and American cultures" (646). This prevalent methodology not only reasserts a dangerous schism between monolithic understandings of Arab and American cultures, but also forms isolated rapprochements between these two constructs.

Al-Joulani claims, for example, that "the novel offers a critique of Western societies in which the female is the victim of relations outside marriage and it also criticizes rural and other communities where families produce so many children neglecting the rights, welfare, and health of the mother, the children, and the community" (646). In pointing out that Arabs are not exceptional when it comes to gender oppression, and that such forms of violence also exist within other communities in the United States, the analysis dismisses the oppression that working class and rural communities face in their daily lives, and which, evidently, would render women even more vulnerable to violence. With this failure to understand and critique structures that create and sustain poverty, for instance, the essay falls short by way of victim blaming. The problem is no longer the political and socioeconomic conditions that create harsh realities, but unfortunately, it is that marginalized communities, according to this line of thought, produce criminals, drug users, and pregnant whores. In other words, instead of arguing against the many deep-rooted and interlocking systems of oppression – patriarchy, capitalism, neoliberalism, colonialism, and imperialism – gender is singled

out for the sake of desperately integrating “Arabness” into the fabric of the United States.

This type of critique is not only common among studies examining *Arabian Jazz*, but also with scholars who probe contemporary Arab American novels largely through the lens of assimilation. In the first and (so far) only published academic study of *A Map of Home*, Mohammed Albakry and Jonathan Siler offer a linguistic analysis of the novel as a borderland narrative. “Arab writers who use English as a medium of creative expression,” Albakry and Siler say, “are mediators who, by bypassing the need for translation and speaking directly to Western audiences, popularize and humanize their culture to non-Arab readers.” Here again, eagerness is sensed among critics for Arab American authors to embody the role of a bridge between their communities and so-called Western audiences. “Jarrar's accomplishment,” Albakry and Siler conclude, “should be considered as a window for Western readers to experience a particular instance of Arab-American experience so as to encourage communication and mutual understanding” (120). In this context, it is worth noting that the assumptions that come with the author’s choice of language are at odds with the novel’s critique of the normalcy of learning English as a standard classroom language in Arab societies. In fact, since her schooling days in Kuwait and Egypt, Nidali continuously questions not only the use of English, but also her schools’ foreign curriculums, which ultimately stand in the way of students’ ability to conceptualize their thoughts in other languages, including their own.

Moreover, a pertinent question that Albakry and Siler do not touch in their essay, is why Arab American experiences, such as those described in *A Map of Home*, in fact need to be validated by Western audiences, if at all. If, Jarrar’s role, as they say,

is to “humanize their [Arab American] culture to non-Arab readers,” then where is the sober critique of severe mainstream processes of dehumanization, and why is it replaced with celebratory and superficial statements pushing towards reclamation and integration? By bluntly identifying Western readers’ experiences of the novel as the priority, such analyses re-center middle class whiteness, thereby contributing to devaluations of racialized and gendered lives.

The mode of analysis proposed in this thesis is aligned with understandings similarly expressed in Steven Salaita, Hind El-Hajj and Sirène Harb’s criticisms of *Arabian Jazz*. Salaita, over a decade ago, has argued that “Arab American fiction is bound to essentialist identity politics even as it attempts to avoid such rigidity. The alternatives to this essentialist identity politics—what can be called the negotiated landscape of the domestic Arab—constitute an ethnic positioning unique to Arab American authors, but not unique as an actual theme” (425-426). In literary terms, such “negotiated landscapes” emerge when different characters struggle to make sense of the complexities surrounding ambivalent and emotionally charged experiences. “Essentialist tendencies of the dominant society,” says Salaita, “can be mitigated and ultimately restructured” (436). The approach suggested in this thesis insists on centering and contextualizing these ongoing negotiations with constructions of privilege and violence.

Moreover, the notion that “gender as an analytical category cannot be isolated from the political and politicized experience of different characters,” has been thoroughly argued in El-Hajj and Harb’s recent analysis of *Arabian Jazz* (156). “The novel ends without Jemorah having found a final resolution,” El-Hajj and Harb argue, “yet her memory allows her to better understand her position in America and liberate

herself from normative constructs” (154). With their subversive potential, instances of nonnormative practices in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home* are indeed particularly significant, and more so through their ability to put forward new understandings of the relationship between value and power. The limitations of multiculturalism and diversity as analytical approaches are brought to light in the following pages, and alternative formulations of power are subsequently explored in relation to racialized, gendered and sexualized difference.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My analysis draws on initial insights emerging from the particular history of migration and the performative racialization of early Syrian immigrants to the United States. In *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*, John Tehranian claims that naturalization trials have had to define whiteness, and hence immigrants were inspected, not according to the color of their skin, but to what he calls “dramaturgical and performative criteria”, or how well they were able to perform whiteness. Many factors played into what exactly constituted whiteness, among them were “reputation, associations, reception in society, and embrace of traditional notions of white manhood and womanhood” (42), as well as “wealth accumulation, educational attainment, Christian faith, English fluency, and marriage patterns” (62).

Arriving from the shores of the Levant as early as the 1900s, many immigrants claimed white status within the American judicial system in order to secure US citizenships imbued with privileges. According to Sarah Gualtieri, Arab immigrants had to locate themselves along the racial requirements of the U.S. Naturalization law, which until 1870, stipulated that only “free white persons” born in the United States were eligible for citizenship. The law was finally amended in 1870, but only to include those of “African nativity or descent.” Gualtieri argues that, “Syrian immigrants were racialized by American politics, culture, and law, and, as a result came to view themselves within racial hierarchies.” Indeed, and to this day, despite their perceived locations in the public imagination, Arabs are still in fact legally classified as “white” in the United States.

I consider the first wave of immigrants' performative racialization a significant historical moment in understanding the alternative mode of analysis put forward in the following chapters. My research interests focus more closely on contemporary literary self-representations in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home*, and on the characters' tense relationships with power, normativity, respectability and value. However, experiences such as those documented by Gualtieri and Tehranian have the potential to radically transform our understanding of Arab American lives at the turn of the last century. These encounters with normative structures, much like those fictionalized in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home*, reveal a compelling process of self-inscription and survival within a system that so harshly devalues classed, gendered and racialized lives.

The questions probed in this thesis, especially ones regarding the limitations of nationalist and identity-based forms of collectivity, are aligned with those explored within Arab and Arab American feminisms, as well as the intersecting frameworks of women of color feminism and queer of color critique. In this chapter, I first examine Black feminist thought, and in particular, the notion of intersectionality, i.e. that systems of oppression operate on multiple levels, and not only interact with one another, but also reinforce each other. I then continue to explore women of color feminisms and queer of color critique's attempts at creating intersectional and non-oppressive solidarity frameworks for coalition building within and across racialized communities. The discussion then moves towards challenges in adopting these frameworks, especially when in the context of the United States, Arab and Arab American experiences have either been invisible, silenced, or seen as suspicious, even among radical people of color. Ultimately, this chapter attempts to grapple with these

theoretical frameworks, and explores both their relevance and shortcomings in reading *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home*.

Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and many other scholar-activists, have gradually contributed to the intersectional analysis that Patricia Hill Collins frames under Black feminist thought. She says,

During that decade, African-American women scholar-activists, among others, called for a new approach to analyzing Black women's experiences. Claiming that such experiences were shaped not just by race, but by gender, social class, and sexuality, works such as *Women, Race and Class* by Angela Davis (1981), "A Black Feminist Statement" drafted by the Combahee River Collective (1982), and Audre Lorde's (1984) classic volume *Sister Outsider* stand as groundbreaking works that explored interconnections among systems of oppression. Subsequent work aimed to describe different dimensions of this interconnected relationship with terms such as *intersectionality* (Crenshaw 1991) and *matrix of domination*. (emphasis in original, 18)

The Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" outlines the genesis of Black feminism, and takes a firm position against racism and classism in the white women's movement, and sexism in the movement for Black liberation. It ultimately calls for the dismantlement of interlocking political and economic systems of oppression, namely capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. This groundbreaking analysis in the history of women of color feminism, and Crenshaw's ensuing conceptualization of intersectionality, shifts feminism's focus further away from the normative experiences of middle class white women to examinations of intersecting forms of discrimination.

Moreover, in the 1981 preface to the first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherríe Moraga begins to describe a significantly strong framework for women of color feminism. She says,

I earned this with Barbara [Smith]. It is not a given between us - Chicana and Black - to come to see each other as sisters. This is not a given. I

keep wanting to repeat over and over and over again, the pain and shock of difference, the joy of commonness, the exhilaration of meeting through incredible odds against it.

But the passage is *through*, not over, not by, not around, but through ... How do we develop a movement that can live with the fact of the loves and lives of these women in this book? (emphasis in original, XIV)

In her reflections on the complexities of her relationship with Barbara Smith, Moraga tries to make sense of inherent differences between Black and Chicana histories and experiences, and what it means, in this situation, to build alternative modes of solidarity and coalition building among Black, Latina, Asian and Native American women.

More recently, queer of color critique – with Roderick A. Ferguson, Scott Morgensen, and José Esteban Muñoz, among others – continues to build on Black feminist thought and women of color feminism. In particular, race, class, gender and sexual norms, are finally understood and articulated in relation to notions of respectability and morality. Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong say,

Contemporary regimes of power naturalize brutal racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence, labor exploitation, and the rendering of subjects as redundant and disposable by creating new, nominally nonracialized categories of privilege and stigma, or, in other words, valuation and devaluation. (17)

With queer of color critique, gendered, sexualized, and racialized difference is examined through shifting configurations of power and normative ascriptions of respectability and value. *A Map of Home*, for example, continuously reveals how devaluations of Arab lives are still far too pervasive and normalized, especially as Arabness in itself is regularly coded as a nonnormative category of identification.

Accordingly, a challenge in adopting women of color feminism and queer of color critique as theoretical frameworks in the context of contemporary Arab American literature, is that Arab and Arab American experiences have too often either been invisible, or considered suspicious and silenced in the context of the United States, even

among circles of radical people of color. The complete absence of Arab and Arab American women's writings in *This Bridge Called My Back* cannot go unnoticed, for example, and remains in fact unsettling.

It is not until the second anthology, *This Bridge We Call Home*, published twenty years later and edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, that the writings of six Arab Americans were finally included in the anthology. By then, what was once a groundbreaking book written by radical women of color, had become a collection of writings, by women and men, both "of color" and "white." To make matters even more dreadful, on a Listserv set up for *This Bridge We Call Home*, contributors who spoke out against the latest wave of Israeli violence were harshly met with hostility and a heavy anti-Arab rhetoric, resulting in their eventual silencing and marginalization.

In "The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out," Nada Elia shares her experience with that Listserv as well as her disappointment with it. She says,

The centrality of the Palestinian issue to women of color generally – namely, the fact that we are a colonized people seeking to break through the distorted hegemonic narrative that either completely erases or totally misrepresents us – was once again pushed to the margins, as Keating suggested creating another Listserv, where whoever was engaged in the political discussion would have the opportunity to continue that debate, without hindering the *Bridge* project. By doing so, she was contributing to our further marginalization, our erasure, as she took away our opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion with our potential allies, simply because one group of the contributors had accused us of being racist. (154)

Many Arabs and Arab Americans, such as Elia, have also spoken out against Zionism and experienced ensuing marginalization in progressive spaces. In an interview with Nadine Naber, for instance, Iraqi visual artist, educator, writer, and activist-organizer, Dena Al-Adeeb says,

My search for sisterhood led me to pursue organizing within other radical transnational, immigrant, and women of color feminist spaces. Building movement and solidarity with these spaces proved to be liberating, though at times silencing and marginalizing when it came to consistently resisting Zionism and its links to imperialism, neocolonialism, racism, and sexism ... Zionism is so deeply entrenched within progressive spaces, which makes it extremely difficult to talk about Palestine. Palestine and Zionism continue to be the divisive point within progressive U.S. politics. Asking potential allies to be consistent in their politics and practices has proved to be dangerous terrain. (221-222)

“The Forgotten ‘Ism” – co-authored by Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Daroudi – provides even more examples of exclusions resulting from anti-Zionist positions. The essay, though published by the Women of Color Resource Center, examines, “the Zionist project’s deliberate attempt to sabotage coalition building between Arab Americans and other communities of color” (13).

More recently, Nicholas Brady, Budour Hassan, and others, have raised red flags regarding the complexities of solidarity with Palestinians, especially in the face of rampant anti-Black racism and violence in the region. In response to the American Studies Association’s resolution in support of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, Brady, an activist-scholar and doctoral student at the University of California – Irvine, says,

Black suffering exists as a consistent heartbeat of the region, as its repressed absent center through which the other conflicts take place on top of from the sixth century onward. What remains unthought and unmentioned in all of these moves towards solidarity is that in spite of all their differences, both Israel and Palestine (and much of the Arab world) mutually bond over anti-black violence. In order to deal with anti-blackness in this region, one would have to complicate all terms of solidarity and reveal the nuanced networks of violence that hold the conflict together. In other words, anti-blackness becomes a subject that could implode the entire conversation and reveal an eery, yet essential consensus between the warring factions who fight in solidarity with Israel or Palestine: neither wants to centralize and deal with anti-blackness in the region.

In its contemporary forms, anti-Black racism, and particularly the exploitation of working class African and South Asian migrants in the region, is a matter of life and death, of survival, under incredibly difficult and often dehumanizing circumstances. However, collapsing the colonizer's anti-Blackness with that of the colonized, as Brady does in the above passage, fails in distinguishing Israel's violent policies against African refugees – as part and parcel of its settler colonialism – from the erased histories of anti-Black racism among Palestinians and Arabs at large.

Yes, the history of Arabs cannot – and should not – be disentangled from that of anti-Black violence and discrimination across the region, but does this history entail that we are unworthy of solidarity against settler colonialism? Juxtaposing Israeli and Palestinian anti-Blackness, as though they are one and the same, would only bolster Israel's Zionist project, as it reaffirms the colonial trope that because Arabs are somehow inherently homophobic, racist and sexist, they deserve their deaths, and to have their lands invaded, occupied, and exploited.³

Practices of disidentification, as José Esteban Muñoz describes them in much of his queer theorizing, could be useful in understanding and overcoming such antagonisms. He says,

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

³ See Lynn Darwich and Haneen Maikey's "The Road from Antipinkwashing Activism to the Decolonization of Palestine" for more on the nexus of sexualized, gendered, and racialized politics within solidarity movements for Palestine.

Disidentification processes can potentially make way for alternative and non-normative readings of Arabness, especially as Arabs and Arab Americans have relentlessly had to locate themselves within and against multiple discourses through which they are called to identify.

When Nidali's brother, Gamal, for example, steals his father's credit card to buy hip-hop music at the record store in *A Map of Home*, Nidali says,

Madonna is an uncool music choice. Gamal knows this so he steals Baba's credit card and goes to the record store to buy some hip-hop: Bizmarkie, Pete Rock and CL Smooth, NWA, Beastie Boys, KRS-One, A Tribe Called Quest, Erik B. & Rakim. He goes home and jams out. He remembers the stories about Arabia, how disputes over property, family allegiances, gold and women were all solved by two warring poets who stood on top of a big, sturdy boulder. The poets rhymed until one was defeated, solving the case. Gamal knows he's not black, but he comes from the home of the original rap battle. (245)

New and alternative modes of solidarity and coalition building must be able to contain the fact that Arab and Arab American histories and lived experiences are not happening in a vacuum, but that they have always and will continue to emerge through shifting configurations of power within and across sexualized, gendered, and racialized communities.

The following chapters examine the gendered racialization of Arabs, as well as intersecting systems of oppression in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home*, along with close readings of the characters' tense relationships with power, normativity, respectability and value. Queer of color critique makes sense of such relationships and frames them "in light of changing configurations of race and nation in the wake of movements for decolonization" (Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong). The mode of analysis put forward in this thesis continues along the same breath, and with a lot of faith in

Moraga's vision, that "the passage is *through*, not over, not by, not around, but through."

CHAPTER FOUR

UNSETTLING WHITE PRIVILEGE: SELF-INSCRIPTIONS, BLACK SOLIDARITY AND THE CRAFT OF PASSING IN DIANA ABU-JABER'S *ARABIAN JAZZ*

“Passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing.”

Elaine Ginsberg

In this chapter, I read Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* through the lens of performativity to unmask the constructed character of Arab American identities, and essentially claim that assertions of these identities cannot challenge existing power structures that marginalize racialized and Arab American identities in particular. Such assertions can only reinforce their own marginal status by sustaining the binary opposition that authenticates and validates the centrality of normative American identities. I ultimately intend to shift discussions surrounding *Arabian Jazz* – from ones built on assertions of identity, diversity and reclamation – towards analyses that reframe our understanding of the characters in light of their political determination and racialization within the US; their negotiations with issues of race, gender, class and sexuality as well as their awareness of tactical spaces they could potentially occupy.

Arabian Jazz has by far received the most extensive academic attention under the category of contemporary Arab American fiction. While the novel had been published since 1993, it was not until after September 11, 2001, that the majority of academic articles and essays on Arab American literature, and *Arabian Jazz* in particular, were issued. Viewed as the first contemporary novel to touch upon Arab

American themes and issues, a lot of anticipation accompanied *Arabian Jazz* (Kaldas 167). Steven Salaita likens the novel's significance within the Arab American tradition to that of Navarre Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in the Native American tradition.⁴ With the public eye suddenly scrutinizing and questioning almost every visible Arab in the US, scholars such as Pauline Kaldas, Steven Salaita, Mazen Naous, and others, focused their narratives on articulations of Arab American identity in *Arabian Jazz*, through a substantial set of questions surrounding cultural negotiations, representational dilemmas, ethnic humor, gendered memory, jazz and ethnic solidarity, as well as displacement and exile.

A quick survey of the past decade's Arab American literary criticism reveals a collective sense of urgency in the identification and diverse representation of a multitude of Arab American experiences within the fabric of the United States. As mentioned previously, a number of articles focus precisely on highlighting such representations and reclaiming a sense of Arab American identity: Majaj's "The Hyphenated Author" holds that "Arab-American writers write out of their Arab identity, out of their American identity and out of the identity produced when these two cultures come together. The art that results is Arab-American because it arises from the experience of Arab-Americans—personal or public, 'ethnic' or not." Another example is Nathalie Handal's introduction to *the Poetry of Arab Women* where she says, "Arab Americans investigate their doubleness and cultural inbetweenesses in their writing. They experience an on-going negotiation of the self as they explore their many

⁴ He identifies parallels in the ways that *Arabian Jazz* illustrates "the 'othering' of Arabs in American society, assimilation patterns, stereotypical attitudes by both White and Arab characters, gender relationships, and the complexities of ethnic signification (often a layered process among Arab Americans)" (424).

experiences, visions, and heritages, and bring wholeness to their multiplicity. They affirm their ethnicity, their Arab and American identities, their national and religious identities” (47). Familiar analyses of Arab American writing would typically look at characters’ assertions of Arab American identities and examine them based on whether or not they can continuously affirm the diversity of American life, all the while claiming identities that are rooted in Arab heritage and culture.⁵ In a post 9/11 world and with such challenging circumstances, it is no surprise that authors and literary critics alike would rush in attempts to counter essentialist readings and understandings of Arab American literature.

This chapter builds on the introduction of the 2006 special issue of *MELUS* on Arab American literature - where Marcy Knopf-Newman and Salah Hassan identify “a disabling disconnect between the political determination of Arabs in the US, their cultural production, and the academic study of Arab Americans.” In binding together a coherent Arab American literary tradition, academic work remained, to a great extent, highly focused on framing the field’s cultural production under “the unifying story of migration, and the concomitant stories of assimilation and acculturation (5).” This framing resonates with almost every introductory lecture I have attended on Arab American literature as a student. In an oral presentation for an undergraduate level

⁵ Kaldas’ analysis of Fatima’s visit to the Thanatoulos Bakery is a good example here. She says, “Fatima is perhaps the character who understand most fully the multicultural nature of the United States, with its possibilities and limitations ... Fatima's critique of this family re-defines American culture as one that requires the infusion of non-Western culture in order to survive ... As Fatima embraces this space with its diverse owners, she succeeds in doing what Majaj argues is essential for Arab Americans, ‘establishing diverse and complex connections across borders’ ... Fatima orders the "Creole Fuzzy Wah-Wah Cake," which ... seems to encompass the variety of cultures in American society ... the Ramouds ... are not only welcomed but what they have to offer is viewed as crucial to the making of American identity” (182-183).

course, I too built on the works of Lisa Suhair Majaj, Steven Salaita and Elmaz Abinader and recited “the unifying story” of the three waves of migration to the United States. In that presentation, I sought to explore how the hyphen seemed to have manifested itself within the Arab American literary imagination throughout the late 19th and 20th century. This mission – to analyze what is often described as the historical and multi-layered struggle of Arab Americans – seems perhaps essential as a starting point. However, it is a rather defensive standpoint that relies heavily on a process of reclaiming space within the United States by recovering a sense of legitimacy in asserting (not Arab, nor American, but) Arab American identities. It is a reactionary stance at heart; and while seemingly necessary to dispel stereotypes and myths surrounding Arabs in America, it unfortunately holds damaging and essentialist understandings of Arab Americanness.

Indeed, historically informed portrayals of ‘Americanness’ and ‘Arabness’ mark an acknowledgement of Arab Americans' alienation and distance from 'the old world' as well as their marginalization in 'the new world.' This particular location is nevertheless not lamented or understood strictly as a category of identification - as it is often described - but is rather portrayed as a tactical positioning of the self, with Arab Americans anchored in a dynamic state of mediation, reflection and dialogue. Because this continuing process of negotiating with pressures to perform and conform is visible through discursive, institutional and cultural practices, these portrayals ultimately stimulate the development of compelling analyses surrounding the mechanics of discrimination in the United States. As their lives repeatedly intersect with those of secondary characters who are performing scripted ideas of American and Arab identity, protagonists are often in situations where they explore and play out what it means to be

American/Arab, white/ethnic, heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, and upper/working class. Such performative reiterations are meant to locate them within highly hierarchical social landscapes, which in turn causes them to reflect on and express tensions ensuing from these various interactions. These sites of instability, where the constructedness of identity becomes visible, must not only be understood as indicators that Arab Americans are struggling and navigating through multiple identities. They are rather powerful vantage points in identifying alternative ways of understanding the complex power structures surrounding this emerging literary tradition.

If as Knopf-Newman and Hassan say, “any effort to challenge a myth by asserting a more authentic representation risks the production of a new myth” - how then, would we reframe the discussion on Arab American literature and narrow the gap between literary production and criticism? The introduction to the *MELUS* special issue offers a few recommendations in stating that “the 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).” Given that Majaj says early writers could write themselves into normative categories of identification and contemporary ones would “interrogate and challenge U.S. racial categories” - cultural production then surely entails considerable self-conscious stances vis-à-vis the gendered and classed racialization of Arabs in the US⁶. If that is the case,

⁶ Diana Abu-Jaber demonstrates this notion in an interview with Robin Field for the *MELUS* 2006 special issue when she says, “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

and it certainly is, then we must not only locate such instances of performative tension within *Arabian Jazz*, but must also examine their deconstructive potential, or in other words, what they can tell us about the racialization and self-representation of Arabs in the US.

In the following pages, I move away from the traditional academic emphasis on assertions of Arab American identities and adopt performativity as a point of entry into an organic discussion of the intersections between race, power, and constructions of privilege. I argue that *Arabian Jazz* explicitly dramatizes its characters' political determination and awareness of different possibilities for self-inscription. Drawing on Jemorah's violent confrontations with her boss, Portia; her ensuing alignment with an enslaved matrilineal black lineage; Virge's act of solidarity – i.e. her parody of the black slave and white master relationship, I explore different articulations of 'passing' as they relate to expressions of privilege.

In addressing the novel's subtle negotiations with race, Michelle Hartman says, "Jemorah spends much of the novel coming to terms with her 'negro' or black side" (156). Hartman takes a close look at one of Jemorah's clashes with her boss Portia, where Jem says, "My father's mother *was* black ... 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" (emphasis in the original, 295). In her analysis of this particular passage, Hartman notes that, "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

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 (214-215)."

heritage as ‘black’” (155). Hartman’s much needed contributions are in highlighting several linkages between the novel’s characters and African American traditions, and most of all, in drawing delicate lines between solidarity, identification and appropriation. However, the analysis weighs too heavily on Jemorah’s struggle to identify as black, or rather, on Jemorah’s struggle to identify. If we revisited the particular scene that Hartman examines above, but this time through the lens of performativity, how would we then interpret Jem’s alignment with a matrilineal black lineage?

There are two violent confrontations between Jem and her employer Portia in which she categorically refuses to adopt normative models of Americanness. Jem is drawn as a character that is self-conscious and incredibly sensitive to the realities and opportunities that are shaping her experiences. She seems aware that she is at a defining stage in her life, and it is this awareness that nearly paralyzes her in determining her next steps. This is evident throughout *Arabian Jazz* and specifically in one of the novel’s final scenes, where Jem contemplates moving to Jordan and is confronted by her relative and prospective suitor Nassir. She says, “It’s not enough to be born here, or to live here, or to speak the language. You’ve got to *seem* right ... Well I don’t know how to accomplish that, and I’m starting to think I won’t ever learn it if I haven’t by now. In fact, I don’t even want to learn it anymore” (emphasis in the original, 330). In this passage, Jem alludes to the previously mentioned pressures to perform and conform, and more importantly, to her own unwillingness to emulate normative American identities, or any identities for that matter. The process of assimilation that Jemorah continuously refers to, and that of ‘passing’ in particular, lead us to think of normative identities as generally performative – as a sequence of acts that citizens, and

particularly immigrants within this context, can and are expected to learn and reiterate through a process of transformative juxtapositions, repetitions, and imitations, if they wish to be integrated within mainstream society.

In Jem's first confrontation with Portia, she is almost begged to learn the craft of passing as an American. After taking on the role of a native informant and transmitting her knowledge of authentic Americanness, Portia offers to do Jem a favor and teach her a few tricks. She says, "you can come under my wing and let me educate you, really get you somewhere. We'll try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you American" (294-295). When speaking of Jem's late mother, Portia associates notions of goodness and beauty with Christianity and whiteness (292-293). When it comes to Jem's Arab father, Matussem, she repetitively equates him with "negroes," determining his location at the bottom of her racial scale. As for Jemora, Portia thinks there's still a chance to save her. By changing her name into something more Italian or Greek (i.e. of European descent), Jemora may be able to pass as an American in her everyday life, Portia suggests.

The notion of teaching Americanness is a recurring trope in *Arabian Jazz*; it is imagined as a favor that the more privileged can do to the less privileged and fair-skinned brown folks. By marginalizing Jem, yet still making it her mission to regularly reach out to her, Portia is automatically able to affirm and claim the privileges of her white American identity. She tells Jemora, "I want to save whatever of your mother's clean blood is left. For your own good, Jemora, I *can't* let you quit. Don't you see? You stay here, we'll work together, I'll scrub all the scum right off you, make you as pure and whole as I can" (emphasis in the original, 295). When Portia begins to understand that Jem is in fact infuriated and that she will not be able to coerce her into

taking on a docile role, she tells her, “I don’t hate you, I love you, I don’t hate you!” (297). Her often misplaced and awkward reactions to Jem’s rejections (such as leaving a note that says “I LIKE YOU, WHY DON’T YOU LIKE ME?” after Jem’s resignation) are more intelligible when seen through Nigerian American author Teju Cole’s analysis of what he coins as the White Savior Industrial Complex.⁷ “The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege,” says Cole. Whether Jem wants the help or not is insignificant – as it seems that Portia is convinced she has the obligation and moral duty to “help” Jem by offering her “a real chance” and preventing her from “breeding worse and worse trash” with “garbage like that Ellis kid. White trash worse than lazy dark skins” (295). Jemorah gradually becomes aware of her boss’ projections, but it is her sister Melvina who ultimately grapples with Portia’s case of the white woman’s burden.

Indeed, and in their second violent confrontation, Portia says “we’re all women here, aren’t we ... I hire women you see, to help them (314).” Her position as a middle class white woman is rendered invisible as she tries to align herself with the rest of the staff on the basis of common experiences of womanhood. Melvina calls her out when she compellingly brings class issues into the picture; she says, “You don’t do them any *favors* through criminal exploitation. The business office is the last non-unionized wing of the hospital, its women the most underpaid of all staff, and they work the longest

⁷ “The White Savior Industrial Complex” is a nuanced and powerful article written in response to the “Kony 2012” video, where Teju Cole says, “Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism ... Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it under the banner of ‘making a difference.’”

hours. Their right to employment isn't in question, but their working conditions are!" [Emphasis in the original] (314). With an abrasive tone, Portia tries to silence Mel and tells her, "Don't you go using that *union* word around here. These girls are mine. They answer to me and they work for me. I trained each of them like a mother, and without me they're nothing. When I say eat, they eat; when I say breathe, they breathe. They're my flock. I love each and every one of them. When they're good, I reward them. I made them, every one" [emphasis in the original] (314). Amazing here is Portia's sense of entitlement; in this passage, her white privilege explicitly becomes "a resource deployable at the social, political, and institutional level to maintain control" (Harris 1734).

Virge's interjection at this pivotal moment adds yet another thick and sinister layer to the narrative. In response to Portia, Virge – "eighty-eight years old in support hose, a jumpsuit, and neck brace" – unexpectedly parodies the white owner / black slave relationship. She tells her, "why yessuh, yessuh, good white massuh ... All us slaves is so thankful! Now Lordy, oh, Lordy won't you let my people go?" (315). In this strikingly visual scene, Virge emerges as a heavy embodiment of the nexus between sexism, ageism, classism and racism that Portia is continuously trying to disentangle – to divide and conquer. When Virge incarnates the role of a compliant black slave after Portia tries to deliberately isolate herself from her privileges as a white female manager, she weakens Portia's attempts to circumvent politics of location⁸ and detach herself from centuries of discrimination and racism. "Privilege works through an interplay of 'presence' and 'absence' of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. This interplay tends to reinforce existing social hierarchies by naturalizing the norms connected to each

⁸ See Adrienne Rich, "Notes Towards a Politics of Location."

category as well as by producing degrees of privilege and a ‘divide and conquer’ effect” (Rottenberg 5). Virge’s powerful performance invokes each of Portia’s hidden privileges and relocates them within her own historically informed narrative.

Jem’s alignment with an enslaved matrilineal black lineage during her first confrontation with Portia must therefore be interpreted within these overlapping and competing narratives. When earlier on Portia invasively tries to teach her how to be an American, Jemora, though provoked, is still aware of the space that such a confrontation opens up in front of her; she could negotiate and explore, right then and there, various configurations of identification and self-inscriptions. She yells back that her paternal grandmother was a former black slave. In this context, Sara Ahmed formulates one interpretation of passing that, in many ways, is pertinent to our understanding of the power behind Jem’s reaction. Ahmed says:

As a form of critical knowledge, this passing ‘joins’ the individual subject to a marginal community through stories and partial memories, which does not suture a gap, but makes visible its inevitability through active engagement ... Passing, the making visible of violent histories behind identity as self-presence ... can become the basis for a transformative and collective politics. (104)

Jemora’s self-inscription within a traumatic history of maternal black slavery is a form of passing, and a powerful feminist strategy to “challenge the enunciative authority of official histories,” represented in this passage through Portia. After Virge stands up to Portia, she offers her hand to Jem, who takes it. She then tells her, “That’s the only thing my hand is any good for anymore, holding hands or adding up. The arthritis got it curled into the shape of my adding machine. It’s time for you to move on, before the same happens to you, doll” (315). This bold moment of solidarity confirms that within this narrative, passing could very well serve as “the basis for a transformative and collective politics.”

The process of highlighting Jemora's self-inscription as such (i.e. not as an assertion of identity) and identifying its performative qualities takes the analysis a step further in allowing the relationship between different locations and the modes of performativity that each produces to be examined. When Jem evokes her late enslaved black grandmother, is she contributing to the polarization of different binaries? In many ways, she is. However, when such instances of performative tension are perceived as self-conscious locations rather than as points of reclaiming or struggling with an identity (in this case Jem's black identity) – our understanding of these productions of power as well as our perception of the characters' agency and political determination both shift immensely. This is because the analysis brings the attention back to the imposition of norms, as experienced by Jem, and to her negotiations with normative structures of discipline, regulation, and violence. In turn, this reveals the character's processes of survival within a system that pervasively devalues classed, gendered and racialized lives.

Arabian Jazz is a rich space to examine the apparatus through which the production and assertion of identities, as a form of resistance, become absolutely imperative. Claiming Arab American identities creates new spaces for Arabs in the United States, but unfortunately without challenging the roots of the existing system. These assertions still operate within the same framework that can only sustain itself by maintaining false and reductive binaries between normative and marginal categories of identification. However, identifying competing norms within each category, and studying these norms' relationships with constructions of privilege, ushers us into the space where different types of performances are negotiated, and various configurations of identification and self-inscription are explored. It is through a careful examination of

this complex and ambivalent space, of the *process* of articulating self-inscriptions and their relationships with constructions of privilege, that collective and transformative possibilities can gradually emerge.

CHAPTER FIVE

VIOLENT INTERSECTIONALITIES OF RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND CLASS NORMS: EXPERIENCES OF MARKED ARABNESS IN RANDA JARRAR'S *A MAP OF HOME*

Skillfully brought together through intersections of memory, gender, and violence, Randa Jarrar's award-winning first novel, *A Map of Home*, tells the story of Nidali Ammar from birth to young adulthood. Born in the United States to a Palestinian father and Egyptian-Greek mother, Nidali is soon moved to Kuwait, and with the Iraq-Kuwait war, is displaced to Egypt, only to reach Texas again with her family at the age of fourteen. Throughout these paradigm-shifting events, Nidali's narration of her life and of her parents' interspersed memories, locates the novel within larger discussions on forced displacement, the construction of collective and gendered memory, and the devaluation of racialized life.

In the previous chapter, I question existing criticism's limited emphasis on assertions of identity, diversity and reclamation in interpretations of *Arabian Jazz*. I argue that post 9/11, there is a collective sense of urgency in attempting to dispel, through literary criticism, essentialist readings and understandings of Arab American cultural productions. I also contend that this rather defensive mission relies heavily on reclaiming space within the United States by recovering a sense of legitimacy in asserting Arab American identities. It creates new myths about these identities and holds damaging and essentialist understandings of Arab Americanness. Building on Knopf-Newman, Hassan and Majaj's analyses, I argue that Arab American literary productions entail significant self-conscious stances with regards to the racialization of Arabs in the US. I propose identifying such instances of performative tension – where

characters explore and play out what it means to be American/Arab, white/ethnic, heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, and upper/working class – to discern processes of racialization, self-representation and political determination in the novel. Because this mode of analysis centers and contextualizes characters’ ongoing negotiations with constructions of privilege and violence, alternative articulations of Arab Americanness can begin to emerge.

This chapter delves into Randa Jarrar’s *A Map of Home*, and drives this mission further by analyzing Nidali Ammar’s creative self-inscriptions vis-à-vis sexualized, gendered, and racialized violence. Building on Arab and Arab American feminist articulations, and working within the intersecting frameworks of women of color feminisms and queer of color critique, I discuss here, in more detail, the limitations of nationalist and identity-based forms of collectivity. Moreover, in the following pages, and through a careful examination of the construction of violence in *A Map of Home*, I underline the urgency of incorporating alternative modes of analysis that can also probe (and contain) shifting configurations of power between and within racialized communities.

My analysis draws on insights first articulated by feminists such as Joe Kadi⁹ and Mervat Hatem after the Gulf war in the mid and late 1990s. In recognizing the often ambiguous racialization of Arab Americanness, the 1994 publication of *Food for Our Grandmothers*, edited by Kadi, is perhaps the first contemporary Arab American feminist anthology that truly begins to explore intersecting structures of power and privilege. Kadi not only questions processes of normative assimilation, but also draws

⁹ Previously known (and published) as Joanna Kadi.

parallels between her own experiences as an immigrant and those of people of color in the United States and Canada. Mervat Hatem goes even further, and looks inwards to critique what she calls "a naive liberal feminism" adopted by authors such as Elmaz Abinader and Diana Abu-Jaber. "This school of Arab-American feminism," she says, "internalizes U.S. views of Arab culture as patriarchal/restrictive and of Arab women as its submissive victims and legitimate objects of U.S. criticism and attack. Assimilation into U.S. society has been seen as a means of combating Arab sexism and of claiming for Arab American women the privileged status of Western feminists" ("The Political and Cultural Representation of Arabs" 382). Indeed, such misinformed gender-based alignments, within and across Arab and Arab American communities, not only perpetuate dangerous hierarchies, but also legitimize further racialized violence. In this respect, Hatem's critique significantly redefines the way gendered and ethnic political tensions are understood and signified within the American (and Arab American) imaginary. The debate shifts the conversation from superficial interpretations of struggles of identity and sameness to a rigorous examination of intersecting privileges and oppressions.

More recently, Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber have strongly re-affirmed a collective commitment towards building knowledge that deviates from "conventional women's studies approaches that attribute any victimization of women, regardless of the cause, to gender equality," (xxi) and that goes "beyond liberal multicultural notions of *adding* Arab and Arab American feminist perspectives to the landscape of existing models of U.S. feminisms" (emphasis in original, xxx). Almost a decade in the making, *Arab & Arab American Feminisms* is the synthesis of ongoing conversations that discern a set of post-colonial, queer and feminist guiding principles

for analysis building and political engagement. "Our analysis," Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber say, "is based on a historically specific logic approach toward gendered racialization that assumes that racial logics are flexible and mutable to accommodate imperialist power in different temporal and spatial contexts" (xxii). Indeed, strong linkages are drawn between "the necessity of resistance against hegemonic liberal U.S. feminisms that reinforce Orientalist and racist discourses on Arab and Muslim women," and the generation of "a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and transgender people 'over here' and 'over there'" (xxxv).

In setting such assertive terms of engagement, feminists such as Hatem, Abdulhadi, Naber, and others, ultimately contribute to the historical efforts of radical women and trans people of color to critique and dismantle interlocking and deep-rooted systems –namely patriarchy, imperialism and neoliberalism. The importance of this mode of analysis lies in its potential to discern shifting configurations of power. More significantly, this potential, as Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson say, reveals “the processes by which subjects, within racial collectivities, are differently incorporated or excluded from the class, gender, and sexual norms of respectability, morality, and propriety and thus placed on different sides of the dividing line between valued and devalued” (3).

The uneven and shifting devaluation of racialized and gendered life informs this reading of *A Map of Home*. Nidali Ammar’s testimonies are taken as creative forms of engagement and participation in public debates on alternative feminist politics and violence within and across Arab and Arab American communities. These stories, as described by Jarrar, are fictionalized reconstructions of her own history. In an interview

with *Beirut*³⁹, she says:

A Map of Home is the fictionalization of mostly my grappling with my loyalty to my parents and culture. If I wrote it another way, it would have been about my sexuality. If I wrote it another way, it would have been about my parents' eating disorders and how they forced them on me for years. And yet another way, it could have been about being a young mother. I chose to limit my perspective and focus on the voice. Everything else followed from there. By choosing to tell my version of history- the fictional version- I have managed to talk about all these things at once.

With this in mind, Nidali's character, as well as others, become a mesh of textual locations, a creative strategy, through which political articulations are candidly explored and negotiated through fiction. In writing this novel, Jarrar tries to make sense of the complexities surrounding ambivalent experiences that often reflect uneven devaluations of gendered and racialized life. Instances of nonnormative practices in *A Map of Home* are especially relevant to examine here, not only because of their subversive potential, but also for their ability to bring new understandings of the relationship between value and power to light.

Divided into fifteen short fragments, the chapter entitled "The Shit No One Bothered to Tell Us" gives readers insight into backbreaking lessons that Nidali and her family learn throughout their third year in the United States. It opens with a poignant description of the life of Waheed Ammar – Palestinian refugee, melancholic poet-turned-architect, and Nidali's sentimental and abusive father. The entire Ammar family seems to be coming to grips with multiple modes of homelessness. For both of Nidali's parents, this translates into an urge to buy a house and finally settle down. When Ruz, Nidali's mother, applies for a mortgage, she learns that she should have paid taxes for having earned money through teaching piano lessons. This puts her in debt; she has to use "the money from the next 133 lessons to pay for her back taxes so she won't go to

jail” (244). To buy a home, Waheed must get rejected again and again by loan agents who remind him of the soldiers at the Allenby Bridge, the only (Israeli-designated) entry/exit point for Palestinians living in the West Bank. He also associates them with “the suspicious security agents at the airports.” The new Olds, which he buys for his wife to build his credit as required for loan eligibility, reminds him of the one he had to leave behind, “even though Egypt is for sure within driving distance from Amman.” He still has to take the bus to work, where he spends sixteen hours a day, and then “comes home and screams at his daughter, who is turning into a slut, he’s sure of it” (243).

Because of colonial dispossession, as a Palestinian, Waheed is stripped of his right to return to his homeland. If this is not traumatizing enough, as an immigrant, his right to an acceptable standard of living is perpetually threatened in the United States. Waheed continues to perpetuate this violence by abusing his wife and aggressively trying to regulate his daughter’s budding sexuality. As a first generation Palestinian immigrant to the United States, negotiating with the injustice of homelessness, for Waheed, involves a great deal of anxiety and antagonism. In the first chapter, Nidali shows sympathy towards him when he tells her at the age of three her usual bedtime story. “Moving was part of being Palestinian. ‘Our people carry the homeland in their souls,’” he says. In retrospect, she reflects, “it helped to know this when I was little, forced me to have compassion for Baba, who, obviously, had an extremely heavy soul to drag around inside such a skinny body” (9). Nevertheless, Nidali is unapologetic when it comes to her father’s abusive behavior. She consistently calls him out on his violence, like when he painfully punishes her for sexual aggressions committed against her (248).

In fact, Nidali Ammar's sexuality emerges as one of the strongest points of tension in the novel. From a very young age, she begins to understand how her own sexuality is often rearticulated as a site of collective ethnic identity. When she shares with her father an anecdote that (the boy whom she would have liked to be) her boyfriend says on the school bus, a revealing exchange takes place: "'Nidali,' he said, his face changing a bit, 'we don't have boyfriends.' 'We?' I asked. 'What do you mean?' 'I mean,' he said, 'boyfriends are fiancés, and then you marry them. You are only seven. How can you get married now? So you see, my little moon, you cannot have a boyfriend yet!'" (16). In the above scene, Waheed is trying to teach his daughter that for young Arab girls like herself, respect and social worth are directly tied with moral virtue, and ultimately, virginity. For the most part, Waheed's understanding of his daughter's respectability is informed by his own perception and experiences of Arab fatherhood. At times, it seems as though for him Nidali's future – her access to opportunities and upward mobility – are more likely through marriage, and therefore relying on her ability to preserve her integrity, by and large through abstinence and a desire for domesticity.

With such telling confrontations, Nidali slowly begins to learn the complexities of gendered regulation and violence. Throughout the novel, she tries to challenge common practices and experiment with new ways of narrating and practicing herself. A year after the above conversation, at the age of eight, still in Kuwait, she excitedly enters a Koran recitation contest at school. When told that girls must cover their hair during the competition, Nidali's father says to her, "What? Don't even consider it ... Forget those retarded idiots! You must be cleansed to read the Koran, but no one ever said you had to be covered" (49). In this scene, her father's progressive understanding

of Islam is contrasted with that of his young conservative nephew, Esam, who had just arrived from the West Bank. The next day, when she goes to the competition, there were fifteen boys and one other girl. Nidali says, “I was disobeying my father, my hair was covered in Mama’s handkerchief.” In other words, Nidali passes as a veiled girl against her father’s will, in order to be eligible for the Koran recitation contest.

Even though she wins the boys’ contest – certainly an accomplishment – the process still involves compromises on her bodily integrity to the point where she cannot bring herself to own her victory. Indeed, while Nidali struggles to memorize the correct pronunciations before the contest, her father becomes violent and repeatedly whips her back with a hanger. As she tries to utter the right words, she cries and remembers violent episodes where her father would “become this monster ... sometimes he’d do this to Mama, just drag her on the floor, and she’d cry and tell him to stop” (50). Her stream of consciousness is interrupted when her father tells her to start reciting from the beginning. She stops crying, and her reflections concentrate on her sensations and parallels between her pain and the verses. She says, “my recitation became the most powerful when I recited: ‘With every hardship there is ease. With every hardship there is ease’” (50).

When her certificate arrives in the mail, it says, “This certificate is awarded to the student Nidali Ammar in recognition of h--er winning the Koran contest. Signed, Headmaster of the City Boys’ School, Kuwait.” Her parents, incredibly amused, explain to her how “the judge had been forced to alter the word and add a feminizing *ha* to make the male student, the *tilmith*, a *tilmitha*.” She understands that her victory is gendered. At the same time however, she also sees that her success had been appropriated by her father’s sense of accomplishment, “it was almost as though *he’d*

won,” she says (emphasis in the original, 57). With both her parents completely taken by this victory yet nearly ignoring her, Nidali is not sure how to feel about winning that contest anymore (58). Whether through the mandatory veil, which she willingly experiments with, or her father’s abusive behavior and sense of entitlement, Nidali’s body had been regulated and her sense of autonomy deeply threatened.

The above episodes of gender regulation and violence are not exceptional to the Ammar family, or to Arab communities in particular. As a matter of fact, “racialized communities,” according to Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson, “have always policed and preserved the difference between those who are able to conform to categories of normativity, respectability, and value, and those who are forcibly excluded from such categories” (2). Such conformity re-affirms a commitment to normative social standards, which in turn would presumably result with “greater access, opportunities, and mobility” (Cohen 31). Interestingly however, the reverse is true for Waheed, who, to a great extent, is still operating within normative standards that lean closer towards those of Arab cultures. In this respect, *A Map of Home* suggests new understandings on the distinct location of marked Arabness vis-à-vis other racialized communities within the context of the United States.

Indeed, when at the age of sixteen, as Nidali and her classmate Medina are about to have sex, she first imagines herself dying a virgin instead because her father would have killed her for no reason, “just because he was Arab” (273). She remembers the day her social studies teacher, Mrs. Ruben, brought a magazine to class to discuss the story of the Arab father of Palestinian descent who had murdered his daughter for “dating a black kid and working at a drive-thru” and made the cover of the magazine. Nidali describes the scene:

Out of the blue it seems, Mrs. Ruben, who, up to then, I thought really liked me, asked me to stand up and say a few words about my Palestinian dad. It took me a few moments to register if she was trying to make the class understand that not all Palestinians were bad or if she was simply reducing me to my Palestinianness. Either way I hated her. I couldn't imagine her bringing a statistic about a black or Latino criminal then asking a black or Latino kid to stand up and defend his entire race. (273)

In the above scene, Mrs. Ruben tries to impose on Nidali the strains of having to single-handedly represent socially acceptable forms of Arabness. What determines whether or not she is “liberated” – is her willingness to perform, for the imagination of her fellow students and teacher, whose life is valuable, and whose is not. In the process, Nidali is practically asked to internalize normative judgments and contribute to liberal narratives that continuously pathologize and marginalize Arab masculinity. Within white communities, because race is made so undetectable, such incidents of violence would be perceived as unfortunate and isolated events. But in comparison with other racialized communities, as Nidali is strongly suggesting with her reference to Black and Latino experiences, the devaluation of Arabness is still far more pervasive and normalized. Here, Arabness is in itself coded as a nonnormative category of identification – one that is currently rather difficult, if not impossible, to render invisible for the sake of privileges, or to integrate within the mainstream fabric of the US.

Eventually, Waheed is unable to buy his family a house because of his criminal record. This is due to the fact that after a violent episode, Nidali finally calls the police and reports her father. She says, “daughters in America can teach their parents lessons. Cops in America don’t like Arabs and they definitely don’t like Arabs who hit their teenage daughters and chase them around the house with knives” (249). In this scene, Nidali, a teenager who had just been sexually abused and then punished for it, is left with no choice but to punish her father by resorting to “neoliberal modes of power [that]

rely on such valuations to subject the racialized poor to brutal violence *through* rhetorics of individual freedom and responsibility” (emphasis in the original, Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson 2). Valued here, are Nidali’s autonomy and her obligation to protect herself, as an individual. Waheed’s state-sanctioned punishment, however, in no way leads to the protection of Nidali from family violence. It may even render her more vulnerable to it. Criminalized here, is the Arab masculinity that Waheed embodies. Within this neoliberal framework of state surveillance and discipline, his aggressive behavior functions as a yet another re-affirmation of preexisting narratives on racialized men and their propensity for violence.

“At the root of such judgments,” says Cathy Cohen, “sits an unexamined acceptance of normative standards of association, behavior, and even desire that limits our ability to respect the subjects under consideration and to explore their lived decisions with an eye toward its transformative and oppositional potential” (37). Given this, a question worth exploring here would be to ask what a transformative alternative to the vilification and punishment of Waheed Ammar would look like, when regimes of power naturalize his exploitation, and undermine him as an individual, on a daily basis. The violence that Nidali experiences because of her father is one that, as feminists, we learn to name and address. But in rectifying silences around gender-based violence, it is essential that we generate – what Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber refer to as – “a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and transgender people 'over here' and 'over there'” (xxxv). This means that our political project must not only stop at the violence that a character such as Nidali experiences

because she is a young woman, but to push further and interpret the gendered and sexualized character of racialized devaluation.

The above episodes all embody the urgency of building more nuanced and alternative modes of analysis that can explore shifting configurations of power within and across racialized communities. In highlighting such *differences* within Arab American communities, critics would be able to steer clear of falling into the trap of creating new myths based on idealized identities. According to Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson, “this is the definition of difference for women of color feminism and queer of color critique: not a multiculturalist celebration, not an excuse for presuming a commonality among all racialized peoples, but a cleareyed appraisal of the dividing line between valued and devalued, which can cut within, as well as across, racial groupings” (11). It is therefore not enough to celebrate the diversity of Arabs and Arab Americans, without a real engagement with processes of (de)valuation that compel most critics to take defensive stances against Orientalist academic analyses of Islam and Arab cultures. As Nadine Naber points out, “this has contributed to the problem among many feminists like myself of remaining silent about intra-communal matters for fear that there is no way to do so that will not reify Arab-bashing, Orientalism, or, Islamophobia” (248).

With vivid incorporations of severe instances of family violence in *A Map of Home*, Randa Jarrar complicates the familiar process of asserting and reclaiming identities, and makes the analysis of the novel a more daunting task to undertake. Reluctance here is understandable, especially when issues of gender-based violence within racialized communities are commonly exploited to validate more brutal discrimination. This is certainly not exceptional to Arab Americans – for women of color especially, dramatizing domestic violence and misogynist behavior often comes

with a backlash. Evidently however, due to the complexity of Waheed's experiences with regulatory violence, he cannot be essentialized and dismissed as an abusive husband and father, in every respect. As desperately as he tries, Waheed does not even have the privilege or ability to assimilate within normative American culture. Hence, special attention needs to be given to those, like Waheed, whose "lives are indicative of the intersection of marked identities and regulatory processes, relative powerlessness and limited and contradictory agency" (Cohen 29). While his behavior may not be radically transformative, it still unravels alternative ways for us to rethink the conditions under which such transgressions are triggered and practiced.

At the same time, it would be false to describe Nidali's character as a victim who unfailingly resorts to neoliberal modes of power for safety and protection. Through her relentless search for new fields of experience, Nidali continuously opens up spaces that de-naturalize the intimate workings of power and that contest its ostensible historicity. While this usually gets her into trouble, such contestations carve out alternatives that would otherwise be unreachable to her. Her raw experiences, reflections, and memories are often told against a backdrop of increasingly violent and traumatic historical events. Her ongoing negotiations with her father's abuse, in particular, are frequently set within larger frameworks of structural violence¹⁰. This creates for Nidali a sense of textual authority and agency in defining *when* and *how* constructions of violence are rendered visible and contestable. Her father's aggressive potential, his nephew Esam's conservative stances, for example, and stereotypes of "angry Arabs" and "terrorist Muslims" are disentangled from each other. Yet they are

¹⁰ Medical anthropologist, Paul Farmer, defines structural violence as "historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces [that] conspire to constrain individual agency" (79).

still deeply connected with Nidali's critique of the four, and with her rightful issues with politics of ethnic representation and the dangers of essentialism. Just as her resilience is juxtaposed with her father's abuse during their rigorous recitation exercises, and as his abuse is distinguished from Esam's conservatism, Nidali recalls the structural violence she endures because of her teacher, Mrs. Ruben, and Waheed's abusive episode with Ruz, during her first sexual experience. The fusion between the narration of her memories, and her stream of consciousness as events seem to occur, is a powerful means of historical recovery and a strategy that resists patterns of victimization and essentialism.

When she describes her first sexual encounter with her classmate Medina, for instance, the imagery is rather imbued with Arab and Muslim tropes. Reducing "Arabness" to images that would exclude nonnormative experiences would therefore be a deliberate attempt at sustaining essentialized cultural projections that cannot contain lived realities. As they are about to have sex, she tells Medina, "You're probably part Arab ... somewhere up the line, if you think about it, there was an Arab *abuela* in there. Your last name means 'city' ... it does in Arabic" (274). "Medina" - also coincidentally the name of Islam's second holiest city after Mecca - unfolds for Nidali a significant metaphor. A rapprochement is gently fashioned between the Muslim performance of the pilgrimage to the *Kaaba*, and (what she describes as) Medina's "pilgrimage from my clit to my insides." With this rapprochement comes an unexpected reconfiguration of power: Nidali takes what is commonly perceived today in the West as a conservative Muslim symbol, the *Kaaba*, and uses it within a configuration that is not foreign at all to Arab and Muslim cultures - pilgrimage as an intimate and sexual symbol.¹¹ As she

continues her thorough description, her own climax, as well as that of the scene, are both focused on how Medina pronounces Nidali's name "perfectly over and over and over again" (275). Nidali's concentration on the roots of Medina's Arabic name and on his perfect pronunciation of her name intensifies the two lovers' newfound closeness. What is rather striking in this scene is Nidali's ability to linguistically create a complex symbolic web through which she constructs and relates to the reality around her. It is through her construction of a sense of Arab familiarity that she is able to contain and enjoy the intimacy of the moment. Nidali's linguistic constructions hence generate familiar meanings as she utters words that not only shape the realities of those involved, but also define their experiences of each other.

Slowly, and in line with how Randa Jarrar intends it, instances of rapprochements between ethnic experiences in the United States and Nidali's relationship with her Arabness begin to emerge. Jarrar says her own experiences coming to America had scarred her because her family first landed "in Greenwich, Connecticut, one of the whitest, most elitist parts of the country," and she did not want Nidali, the protagonist, to go through that. She says, "I had her move to Texas, which is where I've felt most at home in the U.S. The proximity to the border, the ethnic makeup of the state, and its Southernness all lent Texas a great 'Arab' feel. I wanted to write about how such an American place can also be so Arab, or Other" (Hoffmann 62). When Nidali's family moves to the United States, Nidali meets Dimi, Camilla and Aisha at school, and every few minutes, they corrected her English. "This one talks like she's on a public radio," they would tell each other. In Egypt, this line would have

¹¹ See "*Qif bil Tawafi*," poem written by Umar ibn Abi Rabi'ah, the infamous poet from the family of the Quraish tribe of Mecca, who is renowned for poetry recounting his affairs with women during pilgrimage.

meant that Nidali spoke a lot. But in the United States, she says, “they meant I spoke like a white girl on NPR, all boring and with nary a crazy emotion.” Such incidents take Nidali back to her days in Egypt:

I remembered how in Egypt I listened to Voice of America and tried to speak like the girl on the radio. And how in Egyptian my language was full of songs and lilt and catchy turns of phrases. I wished, then and for many months later, that I could translate my old way of being, speaking, and gesturing, to English: To translate myself. (225)

Between Voice of America, her Kuwait schooling where she learns about Vikings, and the hours spent on French history in Egypt, Nidali is lost in translation. She continues, “I had even taken to talking to myself, keeping me company, narrating my own movements. In this way, *me* became *her*, *I* became *Nidali*, *you*, *she*” (emphasis in the original, 231). After this line, and throughout the following chapters, especially in “The Shit No One Bothered to Tell Us,” she shifts from narrating in the first person to the second person.

Randa Jarrar’s interviewer says that this episode in Nidali’s life reflects “particularly painful moments ... the sense of detachment (and maybe it’s a defensive mechanism) is so severe. Yet as detached as Nidali becomes from herself ... it’s almost like you enter Nidali’s state of mind. You don’t really have a choice because the text is telling you what you feel and what you’re going through.” Jarrar answers that this abrupt shift is in fact intentional “to make the reader see how it feels to be an immigrant.” She continues to say, that because Nidali’s “identity becomes fragmented ... the text needed to be fragmented too” (qtd. in Yaman). Yet, it is Nidali’s hypersensitivity to her gendered and ethnic fragmentation that enables her to focus on her voice and re-assemble, in retrospect, her experiences and memories into a powerful narrative of her own.

Storytelling is her strategy of choice – a craft she slowly learns to master. Her desire to become a writer is gradually amplified throughout the novel. In fact, her childhood urge to bear witness and to document – “to draw all these things ... to record them, to make order of my surroundings” as she says while her family travels through checkpoints to reach her grandfather’s funeral in the West Bank – is re-affirmed through the very last sentence of the novel. As the narrative ends with an abrupt metafictional breakdown, we understand that this desire is being fulfilled. When Nidali says, “I catch the pen now and listen to all our stories,” she reveals herself as the narrator and takes us back to the beginning of the novel when her father is at the hospital, also holding a pen, and writing out her new name (290). Randa Jarrar names this “a meta moment” where the narrative ends with “a feminist exchange” between Nidali and her mother (who throws her the pen), with Nidali asserting a sense of growing authority over her own life and the stories she has so far told (qtd. in Yaman).

By looking at intersecting structures of discipline, regulation, and violence in *A Map of Home*, this chapter ultimately puts forward a mode of analysis that contributes to the epistemological project of women of color in trying to make sense of ambivalent experiences and interpretations. This project’s significance lies in its ability to identify processes through which political consciousness is shaped and different categories of identification are gained and exercised. When examined closely, racialized, gendered and sexualized difference reveals new understandings on the relationship between shifting configurations of power and the ascription of value. Such emerging complexities call for alternative formulations of power, ones that offer historicized perspectives on the interplay between class, race, gender, sexuality, and nation. The limitations of multiculturalism and diversity, as analytical approaches, are fictionalized

in *A Map of Home* and discerned through close readings of characters such as Nidali Ammar and her father, Waheed. After all, one cautionary tale that the Ammars could potentially pass along is on the imposition and pervasiveness of intersecting normative and regulatory structures in everyday life.

Finally, the urgency expressed in honing such nuanced analyses cannot be disentangled from reflections emerging from the midst of the very real and tangible changing realities and configurations of power, especially in the wake of movements against the global neoliberal economic order, and the latter's link with imperialism and political oppression. In particular, Waheed Ammar is a striking and tense embodiment of the nexus between colonial dispossession, regulated migration, as well as racialized and gendered violence. Interpreting the role of bank loan agents, Israeli soldiers, and airport security agents, for instance, is continuously re-formulated through Waheed's experiences of racialized regulation and discipline with each, and in relation to his own propensity to inflict gendered violence on Ruz and Nidali. Alternative modes of analysis must thus be able to contain the Ammars' histories and lived experiences, as well as ensuing points of tension emerging from their shifting configurations of power.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

In the years spent conceptualizing this thesis, I have been interested in the ways people, or in this case, fictional characters, engage with regulatory and normative structures of power. I have also argued that Arabness has traditionally been coded as a nonnormative and devalued category of identification in the United States. My reflections have suggested that the intelligibility and sheer value of marked Arabness has depended on whether or not – and how – Arabness has been interpreted within intersecting and shifting structures of discipline, regulation, and violence. In this respect, I have emphasized the interpretation of tense and potentially subversive self-inscriptions, or at least critical practices that, for the most part, questioned and challenged existing norms.

This, however, inevitably brings me to explore the crucial question of unmarked Arabness, i.e. those awkward experiences in which class, gender, sex, and race norms in the US have actually been openly embraced, and perhaps even successfully emulated by Arab immigrants. As I have made the point that oppressive structures constantly redefine notions of worth and belonging, the discussion has consequently focused on exploring interplays of class, gender, sex, and race norms in the lives of different Arab and Arab American characters, and the relationship of these norms with ensuing ascriptions of value. My argument has strongly suggested that the circumstances under which self-inscriptions are exercised are just as significant to the legibility of processes of normative devaluation, if not more so, than self-inscriptions themselves.

Indeed, the embrace of harmful structures for the sake of inclusion and recognition has only failed and served to justify their violent expansion. But in a sense, whether or not Arabs and Arab Americans have chosen to try and emulate dominant norms, or contested them, has been beside the point. My critical engagement has been to reconceptualize the imposition of norms that render Arabs and Arab Americans more vulnerable to threats of violence and exploitation in the context of neoliberalism. Ultimately, the analysis brings the attention back to the nexus between law, power, knowledge and norms that perpetuates the injustices and realities of war, dispossession, settler colonialism, white supremacy, poverty, and heteropatriarchy in the precarious lives of Arabs and Arab Americans.

As this project has shown, identifying the uneven and shifting devaluation of racialized, classed, sexualized, and gendered lives in *Arabian Jazz* and *A Map of Home* requires a complex and nuanced understanding of power, agency, and political determination. This understanding is arguably complicated by the relationship between cultural, historical, and political variables in the emerging field of Arab American literature. Choosing to neglect these complexities and to simply enlist the devaluation of Arabness in the service of neoliberal demands for inclusion and incorporation is a denial of the police brutality, imperial racism, and military violence that increasingly targets marginalized low-income Arabs, among other racialized communities, on the basis of sex, gender, class, ability, national origin, and religion. Ultimately, such demands, in their stark collusion with regulatory and normative power structures, bolster patriarchal and racist norms and violence against Arabs in the United States and beyond.

While the scope of my study has been limited to these two contemporary novels, I would like to suggest that more emphasis be given to similar analyses in the future, especially to those bringing together narratives from across (what is traditionally identified as) the three waves of Arab immigration to the United States. Such practices would be less preoccupied with the linear development of a literary tradition and would investigate instead the often contradictory dramatization of normativity in Arab American literature. As a result, literary criticism would actively be contributing to the creation of more space for critical insight into nonnormative experiences of Arabs and Arab Americans within a historical as well as socio-political landscape that is constantly changing.

Lastly, continuing to probe processes through which political consciousness is shaped and different categories of identification are gained and exercised is particularly relevant and essential to the emergence of deeply transformative Arab and Arab American forms of collectivities. In doing so, inspiration and solidarity can be found in women of color feminism and in movements for disability justice, prison abolition, and decolonization. In many ways, these intersecting movements have been articulating compelling frameworks to critique normative understandings of value and respectability, and have been invested in the reinvention and practice of nonviolent models of living and being. However, for the racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed difference that characterizes collective experiences of marked Arabness to essentially be intelligible *and* transformative, our analyses must first be connected to the knowledge that emerges from the intimacy of our own lives.

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