

Negotiating Identity Across Boundaries

Arab-American: An Identity in the Making

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“We must go forward, because the present is unjust and insufferable, but we cannot kill the past in doing so, for the past is our identity, and without our identity we are nothing.”

- Carlos Fuentes

Searching for the Self in the “Other”

“Once I claimed a past, spoke my history, told my name, the walls of incomprehension and hostility rose, brick by brick: unfunny ‘ethnic’ jokes, jibes about terrorists and Kalashnikovs, about veiled women and camels ... Searching for images of my Arab self in American culture I found only unrecognizable stereotypes,” says Lisa Suhair Majaj (1994, p. 67), depicting her experience of what it is like to be a Palestinian living in the US. This paper strives to shed light on precisely this search for the self in the “Other,” focusing on the discursive formation of an anti-essentialist Arab-American subjectivity entrenched in the Arab-American experience, through a close analysis of the delineation of the individual and communal selves in the works of three Arab-American writers: Suheir Hammad, Mohja Kahf, and Diana Abu-Jaber. In their books *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black*, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, and *Crescent*, these three female writers, of Palestinian, Syrian, and Jordanian origin, respectively, represent the paradoxical and contradictory place Arab-American women, and by extension Arab-Americans in general, are allotted within the US. By drawing on their experience of living in the US as women of color, the aforementioned writers discursively contest and undercut the majority’s preconceived notions of what constitutes Arab-American subjectivity.

1. Suhair Hammad’s anthology *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* was published in 1996. However the poems under consideration in this paper were all written after 9/11 and are taken off the web.

Reflecting on Arab-American literature, Majaj argues that early 20th Century Arab-American writing was more assimilationist, where writers like Gibran Khalil Gibran, Salom Rizk, and Rev. Abraham Mitrie Rihbany strove to present themselves in terms to which an American audience would be receptive, thus using biblical language for instance, while distancing themselves from Islam, being cautious of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab discrimination in the US. In contrast, the writings of second and third generation Arab-Americans emphasize and affirm ethnicity. In considering the writings

of three feminist authors who wrote post-9/11,¹ this paper argues that 9/11 further accentuated this sense of ethnicity in Arab-Americans, so that the option of assimilation that was taken on by the first generation of Arab-American writers is no longer possible after the destruction of the twin towers. September 11 was a traumatic experience for all Americans, but particularly Arab-Americans who perhaps more vehemently than ever before had to confront head-on the stereotypes hurled at them. It is as if in contesting these stereotypes in their writing these three Arab-American feminists are revising American identity, so as to ensure that feelings of national belonging and inclusion henceforth encompass the otherness of the Arab-American.

Memory in the Narrative of Origins

It might be pertinent here to stop and ask what the common thread interweaving Arab-American identity is. Majaj (1996) proposes that it be memory, which works both at the personal and cultural levels in formulating narratives of origin. Majaj emphasizes the role of memory in the establishment of a communal past and in the assertion of identity, saying, "It is thus no surprise that Arab-American literature turns repeatedly to memory to explore, assert, critique, and negotiate ethnic identity" (p. 266). Arab-American literature thus presents an attempt to negotiate identity between an Arab past providing a sense of origins, and an American present. This inevitably renders Arab-American literature a literature across borders, one that constantly vacillates between the country of residence and the country of origin. Arab-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye (2002) echoes Majaj's emphasis on memory, describing how Arab-American writers find themselves time and time again drawing from the same reservoir of cultural heritage, thus establishing the foundations for Benedict Anderson's "imagined community." "When I finally met some other Arab-American writers, we felt we had all been writing parts of a giant collective poem, using the same bouquet of treasured images" (p. xiv), writes Nye in her anthology *19 Varieties of Gazelle*.

According to the US Census Bureau, Arab-Americans are categorized as non-European whites. Arab-Americans, on the other hand, perceive themselves as a minority and an ethnic people of color in the US, as is evident in Hammad's anthology *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, or in Joseph Lawrence's poem *Sand Nigger*. The preceding delineation, however, is not to argue for an essentialist Arab-American identity, for, if anything, Arab-American seems to be a dialectic relationship between two worlds, the Arab and the American, producing an ever-changing synthesis that makes of Arab-Americans both Arabs and Americans. In *Deadly Identities*, Amin Maalouf (1998) makes the same line of argument, insisting he is both French and Lebanese. He refuses to have his identity "compartmentalized," arguing that he is not half-Lebanese half-French, but both French and Lebanese, the two together constituting his one identity that can not be split. "I do not have several identities; I only have one, made of all the elements that have shaped its unique proportions" (§ 3) says Maalouf, expressing his apprehension at the idea pushed at him that he must internally feel drawn to one nationality at the expense of the other. "It reveals to me a dangerous, and common attitude men have. When I am asked who I am 'deep inside of myself,' it means there is, deep inside each one of us, one 'belonging' that matters, our profound truth, in a way, our 'essence' that is determined once and for all at our birth and never changes" (§ 5), protests Maalouf. Similarly, Arab-American identity is a non-essentialist, non-compartmentalized identity that does not partially belong to both cultures, but constitutes rather a dynamic dialogue across borders.

The Arab-American self portrayed by Kahf, Hammad, and Abu-Jaber is reflected by the

array of nuanced themes and motifs carefully woven into their writing, where all three possess a strong poetic voice that resonates with the experience of what it means to be an Arab-American in the US. While Abu-Jaber depicts the Arab-American community in Los Angeles, Hammad and Kahf draw on their own individual experiences, describing what it is like to be a veiled Muslim woman in the US in the case of Kahf, and what it means to be a Palestinian political activist in the case of Hammad. In interweaving an autobiographical element into their writing, these three feminist Arab-American writers lend voice to the individual self in the context of communal relations, shaping the subjectivity of the Arab-American experience.

Home on their Shoulders

The first formations of identity and difference begin with immigration from the homeland and the experience of exile. In *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf (2003) relates a series of anecdotes in verse, with the Arab-American journey beginning with immigration from the homeland.

When they arrive in the new country,
Voyagers carry it on their shoulders,
The dusting of the sky they left behind (p. 1)

Little is forgotten so that even the dust lingers, and home is not left behind but carried like a burden on the exile's shoulder. Home thus metamorphoses from something external into a place one internalizes upon arrival to a new country, and the journey of exile sets forth. The autobiographical tones in this poem are apparent in light of the fact that Kahf, who was born in Damascus, had to emigrate to the US with her parents at the age of four.

The new generation who was born in the US and has not experienced immigration, however, knows only this "new country," and has a different story to tell. In a poem entitled "Lateefa," Kahf (2003) presents a heart-rending conversation between a father and his daughter, in which the latter gently breaks it out to her father that Palestine is akin to a story for her.

Daddy you can talk to me
All you want about Palestine
And I'll be faithful to the end
But I don't know it, never
Smelled its rain wet streets
... I know Jersey. I've run my fingers
Up and down its spine,
Sealed the vertebrae of official buildings (p. 22)

The daughter will listen to stories of Palestine, and will be faithful to that memory, however what touches her is not Palestine but Jersey, with which she shares an intimacy apparent in the metaphor of her running her fingers up and down its spine. Home for the second generation of Arab-Americans therefore is no longer that far away place across the Atlantic. Home is here. It becomes New Jersey, and Palestine is lost. The first generation of Arab exiles, on the other hand, continues to carry home on its shoulders, the dust never quite brushed off.

Yet, though that second generation has never seen Palestine, nor sensed the smell of wet rain there, the umbilical cord has never been quite severed either. "I don't know what Palestine looks like, what Palestine tastes like, but it is something that is in your blood

and we all carry ancestry around with us” (cited in Handal, 1997, ¶ 4), writes Suheir Hammad. Hammad grew up in the racially diverse Sunset Park in Brooklyn, where she acquired a broader sense of identifying with globally disenfranchised people of color. And yet her writing returns time and time again to Palestine, and her narratives of origin. Perhaps this sense of belonging is nowhere more poignantly reflected than in Hammad’s poem “Broken and Beirut,” in which she says, “I want to go home ... I want to remember what I’ve never lived.”

Hammad’s poetic stance in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, although equally confrontational, departs from Kahf’s in its stark harshness, intermixed with pain and anger propagated by a raw and unmitigated poetic honesty. Explaining the title *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, Hammad says: “Within the Palestinian culture we have the concept of black being a negative force, and it is seen that way all over the world. What the book tries to do is take back the negative energy that is associated with black, reclaim it, and say that this is something that is about survival, something that is positive” (cited in Handal, 1994, ¶ 3).

Moving from the autobiographical individual Arab-American self, *Crescent* (2003) presents the collective experience of an Arab-American community in Los Angeles, highlighting communal relations. Perhaps nowhere is the resistance to assimilate into American culture and way of life more palpable than in Abu-Jaber’s novel where love is commingled with a passion for Arab cooking, in a manner reminiscent of *Like Water for Chocolate*. The setting is a Lebanese café in an Iranian neighborhood in LA, called Nadia’s Café, which provides Arab students at the nearby university with a safe haven in which to congregate and talk about home. The TV is constantly tuned to an all-Arabic station, while Arab delicacies, whether *baklava*, *knaffeh*, or *falafel*, constitute the bulk of the menu. It is usually the male Arab students who frequent Nadia’s Café, as Arab women keep their daughters safe at home, and those who are allowed to immigrate are the good students who cook for themselves and study in the library, we are told. It is only the Arab men who “spend their time arguing and being lonely,” trying to open a conversation with Um Nadia the owner, her daughter Mireille, or Sirine the cook. An Arab student would often loiter at the counter and relate to Sirine, “how painful it is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he’d wanted all his life – sometimes especially if it is what he’d wanted all his life. Americans, he would tell her, don’t have the time or the space in their lives for the sort of friendship – days of coffee, drinking and talking – that the Arab students craved. For many of them the café was a little flavor of home” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, pp. 19-20). In *Crescent* the clash of cultures is brought to the forefront, with the difference in lifestyles made explicit as in the aforementioned statement, where the Arab student is alienated by the difference in social relations between the US and the Arab world.

In short, the Arab in *Crescent* is out of place in the US, his/her loneliness glaring in exile. “Um Nadia says the loneliness of an Arab is a terrible thing; it is all-consuming. It is already present like a little shadow under the heart when he lays his head on his mother’s lap; it threatens to swallow him whole when he loves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty-four hours a day” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 19). The Arab portrayed in this novel seems to be fated for loneliness, which explains his/her constant need for company, as is evident in the popularity of Nadia’s Café. Nevertheless, it is precisely this experience of immigration that sets the Arab exile on a journey in search of his/her place in the US.

Exile

In *Crescent* we are confronted with the immigrant in search of the way back home, through Han (Hanif), an Iraqi exile who grew up in Baghdad, and is now a professor of Arabic literature at the Near Eastern Studies Department at the university. Han falls in love with Sirine, and yet even that cannot silence the nostalgia gnawing inside of him. “The fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life,” he tells Sirine. “Exile is like... It’s a dim gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there’s nothing real or actual inside of it... Everything that you were – every sight, sound, taste, memory, all of that – has been wiped away. You forget everything you thought you knew. You have to let yourself forget or you’ll just go crazy.” In the anecdotes Han relates to Sirine, he describes how sometimes he forgets this is the US and not Iraq. Exile is the place where you walk down the street and you constantly think it is old friends that you are bumping into, until you get closer and “their faces melt away into total strangers.” Exile is the place where it is the homeless that one identifies with most, Han tells Sirine: “they know what it feels like – they live in between worlds so they’re not really anywhere” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, pp. 182-3).

And yet Han finds himself falling in love with Sirine, and she becomes “the opposite of exile” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 158). But the pull of home remains stronger, and Han seems to withdraw into memories of home that seem to tug at him, drawing him further and further away from the reality of the US and Sirine, and back into the past. Finally Han relents, leaving Sirine a note that simply states: “I’m driven by the prospect of my return: my country won’t let go of me – it’s filled me up” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 353).

In *Crescent*, we are confronted not by a past that forms a common thread that unites Arab-Americans, but a past that alienates the Arab from America, clearly demarcating a dichotomy between both identities. Arab TV, Arab food, and Arab newspapers and stories are constantly invoked, creating a home away from home. Arab students identify with one another in their loneliness, but the past does not let go of them, as is evident with Hanif. The characters in *Crescent* are in fact Kahf’s voyagers who embark on a new continent, with the dust from a different sky still clinging onto their clothes – a dust that they will not brush off. Their alienation is all the more concrete, when they know that at the fringes of this safe haven that they have created for themselves the same accusations continue to be hurled at them, reinforcing stereotypes of the uncivilized, terrorist, and Arab “Other.”

Stereotype #1: The Muslim Arab

Syrian poet Mohja Kahf in her anthology *E-mails from Scheherazad* contemplates what it means to be a veiled Syrian-American Muslim feminist living in the US. Kahf writes poems that directly oppose the predominantly negative portrayal and perception of a “headscarf-wearing Muslim in a non-Muslim country,” and thereby creates a space that reconfigures Muslim Arab-Americans. Refusing to adhere to the repressed and subservient stereotype of the Arab woman, it is the Muslim feminist’s resistance to such stereotypes that is lent voice in Kahf’s poetry. In “Hijab Scene # 7” Kahf (2003) has taken it upon herself to respond to the regular stereotypes tossed at her time and time again, as a veiled Muslim woman living in the US.

No, I’m not bald under the scarf
 No, I’m not from that country
 Where women can’t drive cars
 ... Yes, I carry explosives

They're called words
 And if you don't get up
 Off your assumption,
 They're going to blow you away (p. 39)

Kahf here sheds light on the negative perception of Arab-Americans in the US. In her repetition of "no" and "yes," Kahf seems to be clearly answering questions asked repeatedly of her, of which she has grown tired. She does not seem surprised by the nature of the question as to whether she is bald, which is why she wears the scarf for instance. The question seems to have been posed so many times, that she does not even stop at the question, but merely hurls forth a response. As a veiled Arab Muslim living in America, Kahf is immediately presumed to be an outsider, her veil opening a spectrum of possibilities, indicating her origins, the Gulf perhaps, her nature, violent, even her physical features underneath, bald. The veil thus seems to play a contradictory role in the US, stripping her identity down to the very core, rather than evoking respect for the person wearing the veil as a fellow human being. In confirming her presumed possession of explosives, Kahf feigns succumbing to the stereotype of the Arab Muslim as a violent explosive-carrying terrorist, only to take a detour by revealing her explosives to be words instead. Violence thus takes a different form, though not any less aggressive.

Pointing out the contradictions inherent in being part of a Muslim minority in the US, Kahf (2003) writes in a poem entitled "Move Over":

We are the spreaders of prayer rugs
 in highway gas stations at dawn
 We are the fasters at company banquets
 before sunset in Ramadan
 We wear veils and denim,
 prayer caps and Cubs caps ... And thou
 We will intermarry and commingle
 and multiply, oh, how we'll multiply
 Muhammad-lovers in the motley
 miscellany of the land (p. 40)

The repetition of the word "we" here becomes an incantation denoting a Muslim Arab-American voice that challenges the exclusionary limits of homogenous white Christian culture in the US. As such Kahf seems to be pushing for space in American belonging for Arab identity, as is evident in the demand "move over."

Stereotype #2: The Uncivilized Arab

In "My Grandmother washes her feet in the sink of the bathroom at Sears," Kahf relates an anecdote in which her grandmother engages in washing her feet in the sink of a bathroom at Sears, in preparation for prayer. When she is reprimanded by a Sears representative, the grandmother, though she speaks no English, nevertheless manages to understand that the tirade is directed at her, to which she replies:

I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul
 With water from the world's ancient irrigation systems
 I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus
 Over painted bowls imported from China
 Among the best families of Aleppo
 And if you Americans knew anything

About civilizations and cleanliness
 You make wider basins, anyway
 My grandmother knows one culture- the right one (p. 27)

The so-called “clash of civilizations” reaches its climax in this poem. Arab norms are provocatively juxtaposed with American cultural norms, out of which emerges a clear clash. The Sears representative shakes her head at the incivility of this old woman, while the grandmother holds firm to her old ways and meets the condescending mark with a yet more condescending one, turning the tables around about who and what “civilized” connotes.

Stereotype #3: The Terrorist Arab

In *Crescent* we are confronted with the stereotype of the Arab terrorist, long before the attack on the twin towers on September 11. In 1990, Nadia’s Café was owned by Egyptians, we are told. Back then it was called Falafel Faroah. But then the Gulf War broke out, and CIA men began frequenting the restaurant in quest of “terrorist schemes developing in the Arab-American community.” Intimidated, the owners called Um-Nadia and asked her whether she would like to buy the place, and thus the legacy of Nadia’s Café was born. The discrimination and intimidation against Arabs therefore began long before 9/11, and was reinforced after the 9/11 attacks in a manner that did not pass without leaving its imprint on the imagination and psyche of these Arab-American feminists, as is reflected in their writings. Reflecting on September 11, in a poem called “First Writing Since...,” Hammad (2001) threatens:

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

Hammad in this poem will not yield to the stereotypes hurled against Arabs and Muslims, which have been revitalized and reinforced since 9/11. Hammad’s eclectic writing style is amply demonstrated here, a surprising fusion of Arab culture and politics mixed with Hip Hop sensibility. The enraged writing tone, and the use of the implicitly threatening word “one more,” similar to Kahf’s repetitious use of the word “no” in “Hijab Scene #7,” clearly indicates that these feminist poets particularly, and through them the Arab-American community at large, have been hounded by discriminatory stereotypes, and have grown tired. In this case, because she is Arab, Hammad is automatically presumed to be associated with the perpetrators of 9/11. She is no longer a human being, but a representative of a terrorist people, a symbol of evil, as if evil were that simple and could be pinned down that easily.

Hammad (2001) goes even further and argues that if anyone can really empathize, truly understand the meaning of the pain suffered on 9/11, it is probably precisely those Arabs and Muslims living on the other side, and more specifically it is the Palestinians living under Israeli oppression in Gaza and the West Bank, who experience terror on a daily basis:

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

... i do not know who is responsible... i don't give a fuck
about bin laden. his vision of the world does not include me or those i
love.

Hammad here again denies any association with the perpetrators, refusing to deal with what Bin Laden represents, for he represents nothing for her, and certainly does not represent her nor speak in her name. Hammad's use of slang, and her disregard for all punctuation or form, is perhaps an intentional and well-suited response to the line of uncivilized questioning which she has been bombarded with since the 9/11 attacks. One can deduce the line of questioning thrown at her from her poem, with questions like: who was responsible for 9/11, what do you think of Bin Laden, and do you identify with his line of thought?

Negotiating Identity Across Borders

While American stereotypes of the Arab as violent, uncivilized, and terrorist are contested and challenged by these Arab-American feminists, these writers concomitantly refuse to fall into the stereotypes and conformities of Arab culture. In refusing to yield to American stereotypes of the Arab Muslim women, Kahf does not seem bent on conforming to the Arab image of the Muslim women either. In "Ishtar Awakens in Chicago," Kahf (2003) asserts:

My arrogance knows no bounds
And I will make no peace today,
And you should be so lucky,
To find a woman like me
... Today neither will the East claim me
Nor the West admit me (p. 62)

And Kahf does not seem apologetic. She is in fact quite explicit about what it is that she does. In "Fatima Migrates in October" she writes:

I enter history
And break its windows
Taking from its shelves
Whatever pleases me (p. 86)

As such, Kahf conjures her own version of Islam, which she does not hesitate to put forth, criticizing Orthodox interpretations. This defiance is indicative of the positionality of the Arab-American within and yet outside both Arab and American cultures. In "Poem to my Prodigal Brother," Kahf (2003) protests Islam's parochial stress on obedience, and its insistence on certainty, whereas the search for the divine and the quest for truth begins precisely by relenting to incertitude, and getting lost in search of answers. Her obedience thus becomes obedience to the moment.

Stay inside the four walls
Of religion, they told us. Obey,
Obey, obey- obey what?
My body catching the wind is obeying
The pulse of the breathtaking Divine.
... I don't know much anymore.
It is time for us not to know.
... All this being lost has more truth in it

2. The title refers to African-American poet June Jordan's "Moving Towards Home." In this poem, reacting to the Sabra and Shatila massacre that killed hundreds of Palestinians in Beirut, Jordan writes, "I was born a Black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian" (Hammad, Born Palestinian ix).

Than the pocket-watch faith of believers
 Who stay on dry ground,
 Never wetting the hem of their piety
 ... Little brother here's the one thing I know:
 Our only outside chance at the sacred
 Comes through this being astray (p. 89)

In another poem dedicated to African-American poet June Jordan,² Hammad (1996) says:

I will not forget where
 I come from. I
 will craft my own
 drum. Gather my beloved
 near and our chanting
 will be dancing. Our
 humming will be drumming. I
 will not be played. I
 will not lend my name
 nor my rhythm to your
 beat. I will dance
 and resist and dance and
 persist and dance. This
 heartbeat is louder than
 death. Your war drum ain't
 louder than this breath. (p. ix)

Hammad has created her own identity, her own drum to which she will dance, yielding to no other rhythm or beat. Her dance shall resonate louder than war, and it will resist. As such, Arab-Americans portrayed in Kahf and Hammad's autobiographical poetry, and through Abu-Jaber's main protagonist Sirine, seem to have extricated themselves from the confines of obedience, patriarchy, and silence. Born and raised in the US, Sirine represents the second generation Arab-American par excellence. Sirine is almost forty and she will not marry. Her uncle throws husbands at her, which she rejects time and time again. Her affair with Han is informed neither by Arab social norms nor ideas. The first immigrants come as voyagers carrying home on their shoulders, but the generation after them is neither Arab nor American but Arab-American, renegotiating their identity across borders. Arab-American identity as presented here in the writings of these three female authors is an identity that refuses all forms of essentialism. As such, Arab-American identity refuses any existing categorization, putting forth a novel identity on the table, one that transcends boundaries and nationalities to create a place for the Arab in America, the outright message being "move over."

This request to "move over" is not to take over space, but to share it. For the other common thread that cuts across Arab-American writing, in addition to memory, is humanism. Being both Arab and American necessarily means rejecting the "clash of civilization" hypothesis, and positing a "clash of ignorance" hypothesis in its stead, as did the late Edward Said, no where more urgently than after 9/11. Otherwise the very word Arab-American would be a contradiction in terms. In writing about difference, and in depicting her own difference as an outsider in the US for example, Kahf does not insist on difference, invoking a common humanity instead. In a poem entitled "Affirmative Action Sonnet" Kahf (2003) writes:

But I do not insist on difference. Difference pales

Beside the horrors facing our race
 -the human one: hunger, HIV, genocide
 Where is the salve? We write. We recognize
 -we must- each other in millennial glow
 Or we will die from what we do not know
 That's all that these smoke-and-mirror poems do
 I came across the world to write for you (p. 92)

Understanding the "Other" in light of a common humanity, or a common plight depicted in this poem as hunger, HIV, and genocide, becomes urgent with Kahf's "we must." Otherwise we will die of that which we do not know, i.e. we will be killed for not understanding the other. Kahf then stops and tells us why it is that she writes. She seems to have crossed a distance to write. Who is the "you" in this verse, one might wonder. The objective, however, is clear and that is to draw light to the urgency of recognizing our common humanity.

In another poem also juxtaposing East and West, Kahf again invokes poetry as the bridge that will enable one to overcome difference and attest to a common humanity. In "Fayetteville as in Fate" Kahf (2003) writes:

This one wears overalls and that one wears a *sirwal*,
 But the open wound with the dirt in its creases
 Makes a map both can read
 But who will coax them close enough to know this?
 Darling it is poetry (p. 7)

That they may recognize one another thus becomes the poet's responsibility, one that Kahf clearly takes upon her shoulders as she embarks on this contemplative journey of self-reflection. The collective autobiography that Kahf relates in this poem affirms that Muslim-Americans are entitled to belong in the US, with their various identifications (as Muslims, Americans, feminists) complimenting rather than contradicting each other. As Robin Penn Warren (1985) notes in *Poetry Is a Kind of Unconscious Autobiography*, "For what is a poem but a hazardous attempt at self-understanding? It is the deepest part of autobiography" (pp. 9-10).

In her poetry Hammad seems to have taken a similar stance, affirming both her Arab and American identities, while explicitly condemning violence, and refusing any representation imposed on her. Poetry here is written in order to resend a message of peace and justice, for when all is broken, the only optimistic note with which a tragedy leaves us is the opportunity to open a new page and build anew. As such, Hammad (2001) depicts a "phoenix," the symbol of renewal and resurrection that resurges from the ashes of annihilation, and calls for affirming life.

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

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

Move over

In the preceding discussion I suggest that the writings of these three Arab-Americans are to a large extent informed by their experience of being women of color living in the US, pointing to the manner in which ethnic and religious adherences as well as the varieties and convergences of physical location have influenced and shaped the texts included in this study. While these three writers differ immensely in their style of writing, as well as their mediums of expression – verse in the case of Kahf and Hammad, and prose in the case of Abu-Jaber – there nevertheless remains a cohesive underlying project that unites all three: an unfolding sense of Arab-American identity. In *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, Darraj (2004) discusses the diversity of the emerging Arab-American literary voice, stating: “The multitude of styles testify to the variety of ideas, opinions, and experiences within the community of women writers of Arab descent, a fact that tears down the stereotype of Arab women as uniformly similar: silent, acquiescent, unthinking” (pp. 3-4).

Arab-American identity is an identity in the making that is constantly being renegotiated across borders. The “othering” of the Arab-American post 9/11 has reinforced and reinvigorated a non-assimilationist trend in contemporary Arab-American literature, forcing these feminist writers to stand up and defend their “otherness.” In the process these writers have in fact extricated themselves from the stereotypes of both cultures. In resisting marginalization, they not only refused to suppress difference and pretend assimilation, as did the first generation of Arab-American writers, but have in effect gone a step further, asserting a place for the Arab-American within American identity. This they have done with a clear message succinctly summarized in Kahf's title, “Move over.”

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