ARAB AMERICAN DRAMA POST 9/11: CULTURAL DISCOURSES OF AN OTHERED IDENTITY

by

ROAA ALI

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Department of Drama and Theatre Arts
School of English, Drama and American & Canadian Studies
College of Arts and Law
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Abstract

The events of 9/11 deeply impacted the Arab American community, initiating a renewed Orientalist narrative that framed them as the "enemy within". This thesis examines how Arab American playwrights are reclaiming their voice and agency to offer narratives of self-representation that unsettle and counter the discourse of Otherness that entraps them. Through an exploration of selected Arab American plays, this thesis examines the newly articulated Arab American identity, which aims to transcend an either/or dichotomy, despite being positioned on the periphery. Focusing on the racial, national, social, gender and sexual components of Arab American identity, this thesis problematises definitions of the "suspect" Arab, the "sexual" Arab and the "victimised" Arab woman and homosexual. It further questions the politics of visibility/invisibility influencing Arab American playwrights and theatre platforms as they attempt to defy their marginal positioning. It investigates the possibility of alternative theatrical spaces where Arab American playwrights can overstep the political and cultural limitations/demarcations imposed on them by a hegemonic "multicultural" discourse that privileges whiteness. In doing so, it celebrates the emergence of a resistant discourse within an Arab American theatre movement that liberates Arab American identity from Otherness.

This thesis is dedicated to Mama, Baba, Ali, Alex… and Syria

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Table of Contents

Introduction …….…….1

Chapter 1: Arab American Theatre: Battles of Censorship and Visibility……. 26

Chapter 2: Emerging from Invisibility: Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* and Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* Negotiate the Politics of Arab Women's Representation...……..…….……77

Chapter 3: In Response to Narratives of Stereotypes: Arab American Playwrights Reclaim and Fortify Arab American Representation….124

Chapter 4: From Self-Representation to the Abu Ghraib Narrative: The Arab Body as a Site of Politics……...…….171

Chapter 5: Silk Road Rising: Arab American Theatre as Activism……229

Conclusion…….. 277

Bibliography…….……...… 285

List of Illustrations

Figure 1 *9 Parts of Desire* cover page. 88

Figure 2 Photograph taken by U.S. Military in Abu Ghraib Prison 193

Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11, Arab Americans, in general, became increasingly marginalised politically and structurally; rendered as the "enemy within" in the U.S. This thesis explores the artistic expressions of Arab American playwrights who are responding to such a cultural positioning by producing and owning their self-representation. It draws particularly on selected Arab American plays that engage with complex negotiations of identity, as representative of the Arab American experience and its dramatic output. In examining these works, as well as the challenges facing the Arab American community, certain issues emerge signalling Arab American identity as a site of conflict and confrontation, which can occasionally be opposed to the wider context of both the American and Arab cultural discourses. Within the context of a renewed Othering narrative about Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. in popular media and political discourses, this study investigates Arab American identity as an ever-changing fluid construct. The struggle to form, define, and reclaim identity informs most of Arab American drama post 9/11, but is especially prominent in the plays examined in this thesis. In view of that, this introduction will commence by exploring the importance of the emerging Arab American drama, and defining key terms that inform the analysis of the selected plays, and the themes explored in this thesis. This study is developed in response to a gap in academia in regards to works that specifically examine Arab American theatre; an observation which will be investigated separately here. This introduction will conclude with a summary of the thematic and theoretical approaches followed in the thesis, as well as the structural outline of the ensuing chapters.

Although Arab American drama had a number of practitioners pre 9/11, it was not as active or prolific as it has become since. There has been a surge in the number of Arab American playwrights post 9/11 whose subject-matter are progressively engaging in the probing of the cultural, political, gender and sexual positioning of Arab Americans in the U.S. This, added to the complexity of their visibility as artists from the periphery of the American stage, rendered their work pregnant with challenging cultural and critical confrontations. Critic and editor Randy Gener highlights an urgency to embrace this new Middle Eastern-American drama (which is the big umbrella under which Arab American drama is often positioned) because it aims

> to offer fresh reckonings about a new immigrant experience, to make the invisible visible, and to suggest, both literally and metaphorically, nothing less than a wholesale revision – a reorientation, indeed – of the significance of the Middle East to the mosaic of our collective American identity ("Reorientalism").

The dramatic form provides an immediacy for self-expression, as well as a confrontational approach to address the pressing issues which Arab Americans are currently contending with within and outside the Arab American community. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, editor of *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* eloquently articulates the appeal of the dramatic genre:

> [D]rama to me is the genre par excellence where personal and political conflicts are dealt with in their rawest, most immediate form: on stage, where audiences are confronted with humanity in the guise of characters observed at

> their most vulnerable, naked moments, confronting those difficult questions most of us prefer to shove to the background most of the time. (326)

The "now" and "here" of theatre enables an uninterrupted and undiluted version of self-representation for Arab Americans, whose post 9/11 positioning necessitated a direct negotiation with the self and the audience. The Arab American plays studied in this thesis dramatise not simply the complex dichotomy of the Self vs. the Other, but also Arab Americans' dialogue with their gender, religious and sexual identities. These expressions of identity are candidate, sometimes contradictory, and often problematised by the playwright's own battles with the politics of representation and visibility.

Relatively new and set within a popular culture marred with Orientalist representations, Arab American drama is attempting to both emerge from invisibility and to counter flawed portrayals of Arab Americans in the U.S. Arab American Artistic invisibility stems mostly from socio-political frameworks surrounding Arab Americans, which often confine them to the periphery, and mark them as the "most invisible of invisibles" as Arab American writer and feminist Joanna Kadi once explained. To this effect, Arab American playwrights were quite invisible before the attacks, and although 9/11 has relatively changed this invisible status, they still operate from within the margins of mainstream culture. Despite being a challenging environment, marginality can be a platform to confront mainstream flawed narratives and foster alternative ones. Russell Ferguson argues that marginality represents a site of productivity and resistance:

> It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a

> marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds (341)

Indeed, Arab Americans are often producing alternative narratives that unsettle their stereotypical representations. Their output, however, is not always readily welcomed or accepted in the mainstream cultural centre, and artistic survival is typically difficult. Therefore, this thesis studies the cultural system within which Arab American drama operates. The need to address anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discourses after 9/11 was certainly recognised in liberal American circles, leading to the funding of projects that support Arab American representations. However, these initiatives are almost always demarcated within political and ideological discourses that have always entrenched Arab Americans. As will be examined, these discourses emerge from a cultural, racial and political history that shaped the reception of Arabs in America. Historical imperialist interests in the Middle-East, the American support for Israel, the current war on terror rhetoric, as well as Arabs' racial classification as "not quite white" have pronounced Arabs as Others in the American imagination. This was translated into a system of stereotyping, which informed the political and cultural existence of Arabs in America. Within this system, Arab and Muslim men were portrayed as "threatening" and Arab and Muslim women were imagined as "victimised". Arab status in America was that of Otherness, and they were typically cast to the periphery of the political and cultural American life. Arab American cultural production today, including Arab American theatre, is governed by this complicated discourse and represents, in its essence, a resistant discourse.

The significance of 9/11 in shaping the experience of Arab Americans

9/11 was the catalyst for a new world order and a war on terror crusade. It brought a national tragedy to Americans, including Arab Americans, that was later to be deployed in creating a long-lasting political narrative of hegemony. Compressed and transmitted around the world in a short clip of spectacular destruction, the events of 9/11 were packaged and framed within a discourse that would initiate a "justifiable" war on terror a as Allen Feldman explains:

> The video extraction of 9/11 created a temporal stasis, or at least reinforced and visually elaborated a stasis that originated in the immediate shock of the assault. However, in the news cycle of visual repetition – the buildings attacked, the smoke and flames, and the eventual collapse – televisual actuality also imposed an artificed and eminently normative and fictive linear time onto the event horizon of 9/11. Television ultimately endowed a restorative linearized chronology to structural chaos. The temporal fragments of the attack were instantaneously assembled as a narrative, a reconstruction that was serviceable as an 'arché' or origin point for a new global risk reduction agenda: 'the war on terrorism.' (212)

This cinematic rendition of the events of 9/11 was accompanied by special reports in conservative media outlets about the Arab and Muslim perpetrators of this attack. The ethnic and religious identity of these individual terrorists was extracted out of context and was made the culprit in a renewed reductive "clash of civilization" (Huntington *Clash*) discourse. The significant repercussions of 9/11 on Arab Americans led Steven Salaita to argue that "no single event shaped the destiny of Arab Americans more than 9/11" (151). Salaita contextualises the cultural shift of Arab Americans from invisibility to "negative" visibility:

> After 9/11, the Arab American community, which consists of approximately five million people, was thrust into the spotlight. This attention represented a drastic change from the community's previous position, for during the times that Arab Americans attempted to be noticed—times generally related to their flagship issue, Palestinian independence—it was rare for mainstream forums to acknowledge them. When Arab Americans were acknowledged, it was usually in the form of ridicule, dismissal, or an outright racism that had long been considered an unacceptable way to address other ethnic groups. (151)

The events of 9/11, and the discourses that followed it, facilitated the metamorphosis of Arab Americans from invisible citizens to the "enemy within"; a shift that was further supported by a long history of stereotyping. Accordingly, a renewed Othering narrative ascribing terrorism, or sympathy to terrorists, to American Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 circumscribed both communities with a general atmosphere of suspicion. In her "The Citizen and the Terrorist", Leti Volpp analyses the cultural and institutional distrust, which has engulfed Arabs, Muslims and "look-alikes" since 9/11 and framed them as outsiders to the American national discourse:

> The stereotype of the "Arab terrorist" is not an unfamiliar one. But the ferocity with which multiple communities have been interpellated as responsible for the events of September suggests there are particular dimensions that have converged in this racialization. I offer three: the fact and legitimacy of racial profiling; the redeployment of old Orientalist tropes; and the relationship between citizenship, nation, and identity. (3)

Arabs and Arab Americans, as a racial and religious category, were now more likely to summon suspicion, enmity and a verdict of difference in the U.S.. Louise Cainkar gives account of a process of Otherisation, which has entrenched Arabs in America more since 9/11: "As persons purportedly of a different civilization, the Arab/Muslim became counterposed to the American and to the white – Arab and Muslim Americans became the suspected, unsafe, and virtually circled" (80). One of the reasons that contributed significantly to the indiscriminate blaming of Arabs and Muslims was the failure to define terrorism during the Bush administration. While Islam as a religion was not directly accused, there was a notable resistance to define what precisely terrorism is, and who the terrorists really are. Salaita argues that "[t]oday, the most conspicuous feature of the pragmatism is the word terrorism, which is used uncritically to describe anybody (of the requisite Arab background) who contests either domestic or international American hegemony" (160). The outcome of this blurry discourse on terrorism, however, manifested in a backlash that did not have the tools to discriminate between innocent and "terrorist" – whoever the term might refer to. Susan Sontag explains this:

> This endless "global war on terrorism" – into which both the quite justified invasion of Afghanistan and the unwinnable folly in Iraq have been folded by Pentagon decree – inevitably leads to the demonizing and dehumanizing of anyone declared by the Bush administration to be a possible terrorist: a definition that is not up for debate and is, in fact, usually made in secret. ("Regarding the Torture", *The New York Times*)

Notwithstanding Sontag's views on the 'justifiability' of certain wars, Sontag's observation is pertinent. The lack of clarity in a flourishing war on terror narrative often rendered the Arab – who is often conflated with the Muslim – as what an American is not; and that is a

possible terrorist. Arab Americans embody both the identity of the American Self and the Arab Other after 9/11, which presents their identity a site of possible conflict and definite negotiation. Within this context of Self and Other, the Arab American identity summons racial and political markers, which despite being trapped within an either/or dichotomy, often aims to transcend it.

Definitions: The Other "Not Quite White" Arab American

In analysing this context, the Arab American identity and its dramatic expression, this thesis employs certain terms such as the unhyphenated "Arab American", the "Other", and "whiteness", which require defining. This study opted out of using the hyphen in reference to Arab Americans because it does not support the view that Arab Americanness represents two different identities conjoined by a hyphen. Though at times conflicted, Arab Americanness is an identity in its own right: an identity which, though constructed from both the Arab and American identities, moves beyond either. I, thus, chose to exclude the hyphen from the term, because I perceive it symbolically as a sign that enforces the separation between the two identities; a mark that encourages an either/or dichotomy. The understanding of Arab American identity, which is adopted in this thesis, is that which lives in the space between the two identities, replacing the hyphen and creating an opportunity for the creation of a third identity that is equally Arab and American, but transcendent of both.

Historically, hyphenated Americanism was used as a derogatory term because it was perceived as evoking an uncertain loyalty to the American nation. President Theodore Roosevelt called for its abolishment explaining:

> There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. Some of

> the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans, Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all … ("Roosevelt Bars")

While Roosevelt was calling for the abandonment of dual nationalities in America to strengthen the American national identity, his statement emphasised that the presence of a hyphen in an identity cancels the Americanism in that identity. Today, this discourse is obviously no more applicable and far more complicated. Also, the "Arab" in the Arab American identity refers to an ethnicity rather than a nationality. However, there is the sense that the presence of a hyphen in the description of an identity summons the understanding that its holder is American, 'but not quite'.

The hyphen is considered a space of negotiation between two identities in Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine's extensive research on young Muslim American youth. It is understood as "the pivotal psychological hinge where identities cast "in tension" are at once joined and separated" (195). It, thus, invokes different significance and interpretations according to personal experiences: "[h]ow one experiences and narrates the hyphen may vary from a fence to a membrane, a point of collaboration to a checkpoint, a site of contamination and shame to a new "fusion" of selves" (195). Removing the hyphen as a sign in the "Arab-American" will certainly not eradicate these tensions and conflicts, or compromises and alliances forged in this checkpoint/bridge between the two identities. It could, however, initiate a departure from a particular perception of the Arab American hyphenated identity as a forced marriage between two disparate identities.

By this, the aim is not to reach a unifying definition of Arab Americanness, as it is by no means, a coherent or homogenous category. Firstly, not all Arabs come from one

geographical location in the Arab world. The Arab world comprises of 22 countries with some sharing borders with Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Consequently, while sharing a common sense of Arabness, Arab Americans carry different Arab national, racial and cultural ancestries. In addition, Arab Americans follow different religions, which contradicts a common problematic misconception of Arabs as being all Muslims. A Zogby International poll commissioned by the Arab American Institute (AAI) in 2000 showed that 77% of the Arab Americans surveyed identified themselves as Christian (belonging to different Christian denominations), while only 23% were Muslim. While this study is not inclusive of all Arab Americans, it clearly shows that Christian Arab Americans exist, but are rarely acknowledged primarily because of the facile identification of Arabism with Islam.

Numerous academic publications (Zabel *Arabs in the Americas*, McCarus *The Development of Arab American*, Shaheen *Guilty*, Salaita "Ethnic Identity", Jamal and Naber *Race and Arab Americans*), while dedicated to defining the Arab American identity, have also attempted to rectify the fallacy which equates the Arab identity with Islam. However, this generalisation still lingers and is deeply rooted in the American mainstream collective consciousness. Not only does this blurring of boundaries between national and religious identities reduce the complexity of the Arab identity, but it also contributes to a public and institutional racial profiling. While highly contested, racial profiling has broadened its scope to include the profiling of a non-physically-descriptive religious ideology (Islam) based on its presumed affinity to certain ethnicities (Arabs). Thus, Middle Eastern looking individuals, especially men, have become readily identified suspects even though their religious beliefs might not be that of the "suspected" religion. Volpp describes a post 9/11 trend in which stereotyping and generalisation offered the public an immediate and recognisable "suspect":

> President Bush and other top officials have characterized the war against terrorism as a battle for "civilization" -indeed, a "crusade." While this characterization occasionally acknowledges the heterogeneity of Muslim practices, its ideological effect is the legitimation of the religious and modem imperative to eradicate either from without or within the forces of despotism, terror, primitivism and fundamentalism, each of which are coded as Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim. Through these actions and these statements, the American public is being instructed that looking "Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim" equals "potential terrorist." (150)

This oversimplification of multifaceted racial and religious categories not only blurred the national lines of identity for people of Middle-Eastern descent, but the religious ones as well. Christian Arabs, for example, are denied their religion in this frenzy, and Arabs in general are denied their national and ethnic specificity.

However, these groups are unified ideologically by a discourse of Otherness. This thesis adopts Edward Said's usage of the term "Other" and its later postcolonial meaning. Thereafter, it employs the term linguistically as a verb (to Other, to be Othered), subject (the Other) and noun (Otherness, Otherisation). Said argues that historically the Orient was introduced to the West as a fictional creation of Western literature, academia and politics, funded by an imperial agenda. The Orient, as reported in such literature, was a construct of Western imagination, and a projection of difference. It represented what the West was not; it represented the Other. Accordingly, individuals from the Orient were always already defined within this "alter-ego" Western narrative. In general, identity formation is a process that ontologically evokes the Other when defining the Self according to Said:

> The construction of identity - for identity, whether of Orient or Occident, France or Britain, while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally a construction - involves establishing opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us". Each age and society re-creates its "Others". (332)

In this context, a post 9/11 America has re-enforced an already existent process of Otherisation while rebuilding the national Self. This deeply rooted Orientalist conception of Arabs and Muslims was further encouraged by the religious and ethnic affiliations of the 9/11 perpetrators. Hence, Arab Americans are typically defined in opposition to a version of western and imperialist "whiteness" as the Other in an all-encompassing power structure.

The ascendancy of whiteness and institutionalisation of racism have been constant throughout American national history (exclusions of racial and ethnic groups from naturalization was not lifted until the Immigration Act of 1965). In this national discourse, one was either "white" or an Other. This either/or dichotomy is the problematic terrain from which the Arab American playwrights examined in this thesis attempt to destabilise a discourse of "whiteness". Whiteness, in this thesis, is not synonymous with racial "whiteness", but it rather refers to an ideological discourse that correlates with a social position of power. It is a social and political construction which has created, through colonisation, a narrative of white hegemony and supremacy. Alfred J. Lopez, editor of *Postcolonial Whiteness* explains that whiteness "represents not only the contents of the colonial unconscious, but the very agent of its own repression: it is that which would simultaneously recast everything else in its own image and banish the scene of the recasting into an originary myth" (5). That is to say, colonial whiteness assumed a superior locus

based on the assumption of a superior race and culture that was to be reproduced in the colonised setting, at the same time as enforcing the inferiority of the colonised. In his *White*, Richard Dyer analyses the racial imagery of whiteness in Western representations, which was both the product and perpetuator of this white supremacy. Dyer also asserts whiteness' affinity to Christianity and heterosexuality to create a norm that was specifically white, and of which "non-whites" were hurled to its margin. Dyer further argues that the visibility of white supremacy was built on the invisibility of whiteness as a racial colour:

> Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one's corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal. The paradox and dynamic of this are expressed in the very choice of white to characterize us. White is both a colour and, at once, not a colour and the sign of that which is colourless because it cannot be seen: the soul, the mind, and also emptiness, non-existence and death, all is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people, which is invisible. (45)

This idea paired with Foucault's argument that power has an invisible centre, "a tyranny of the transparent" as Homi Bhabha ("The White Stuff" 21) interprets it, places whiteness in this invisible centre with a supremacist status. Commanding the centre without being visible renders its power impenetrable as Russell Ferguson notes: "The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the centre always seems to be somewhere else" ("Introduction" 1). Accordingly, whiteness is the ideological antithesis of Otherness: While whiteness occupies the centre, Otherness is positioned on the periphery.

Dyer engages with the complexity of the racial connotation of the term by explaining that whiteness represents an exclusive selective racial category that is bestowed on chosen "white" people: "There are gradations of whiteness: some people are whiter than others. Latins, the Irish and Jews, for instance, are rather less securely white than Anglos, Teutons and Nordics; indeed, it Jews are white at all, it is only Ashkenazi Jews, since the Holocaust, in a few place" (*White* 12). Thus, the concept as referred to in this thesis, is an ideological construction; a system of power that perpetuates privileges by excluding certain groups; a "strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential "identity"" (Bhabha, 21). It is the social category that "non-whites" are encouraged to aspire to; immigrants in the U.S. are a case in point.

In the introduction to *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, Nadine Naber investigates Arab Americans' changing relationship with whiteness. She finds that most early Arab immigrants were considered white, and thus naturalisatised as American citizens. However, Naber observes that now, Arab immigrants are categorised as Others both racially and culturally, arguing that a "process by which state discourses have transformed "the Arab" over time, from proximity to whiteness to a position of heightened Otherness" (39). Early Arab immigrants to the U.S. came mostly from Greater Syria (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq) and were predominately Christian Americans (Naber "Introduction", Suleiman "Introduction"). The special "conflations of religion, civilization, geographic origin, and "race" operated to justify the "whiteness" of early Arab immigrants" (Naber 22). Yet, post-World War II immigrants arrived from larger geographic Arab areas including the gulf countries, Egypt, Somalia and Morocco, and were mostly Muslim. This complicated the racial status of Arabs in America rendering them "white, but not quite" (Samhan *Not Quite White*).

Today, "some Arab Americans have passed as "white," others have not had the privilege of passing, yet others have self-identified according to explicit nonwhite racial/ethnic categories" (Naber 30). Louise Cainkar conducted interviews with a number of Arab Americans in Chicago and analysed their responses as part of a study about Arab American racial identification. She concludes that:

> Racial identity is an unfolding, ongoing, contextual, socially constructed process for Arab Americans. As the research data show, when Arab Americans select the "white" box, it does not necessarily mean that they identify with whiteness. But when they check "other," they become lost, a group that is paradoxically hidden yet the object of social obsession. These options do not alter their grounded reality as a negatively stigmatized group; on the contrary, they offer proof of their racially subordinate status." (69/70)

Whether white, non-white or simply Other, the aftermath of 9/11 has arguably conflated all Arab Americans, ascribed them collectively to Islam, and linked them to a category that would bear the attribution of blame and suspicion. Ultimately, Arab Americans were transformed from "invisible citizens to visible subjects" (Jamal and Naber *Race and Arab Americans*). That is, their racial and cultural positioning in the U.S. has changed from that which could pass as whiteness, to that which is defined in contrast to whiteness (racially non-white, culturally and politically Other).

Out of such context, the works of the Arab American playwrights examined in this thesis contest an ideological whiteness, appropriate the periphery as a creativity site, and negotiate visibility/invisibility. Throughout this study, Arab American artistic expression is understood as a political expression as well. Arab American self-representation has, perhaps,

never been as urgent for Arab Americans as it has become since 9/11. The Arab's own voice in America was rarely heard, but rather imagined and created through Orientalist discourses. This Orientalist tendency left Arab self-representation mostly absent and unheard, occasionally acknowledged when it reproduces the same Orientalist narrative. The backlash against Arab Americans after 9/11 relied on this tradition of absent Arab American narratives, and the existence of established Orientalist substitutes. Moreover, some Arab Americans have become truly accustomed to this tradition that they either ceased trying to represent themselves all together, or they chose to contribute to a similar Orientalist discourse as a way of gaining visibility. In reference to this, playwright Yussef El Guindi writes: "It's often the case that the rare Arab or Muslim voice that makes it to the mainstream, or something approximating it, does so because it reflects the mainstream's negative view of the Arab and Muslim cultures" ("Author's Statement" 5). To change this long history of silence and stereotyping, which produced profiling, suspicion and sometimes even hate crimes, Arab Americans need to speak and be heard, be present and be seen as real Arab Americans rather than an imagined Other or "suspect". This could become possible only if Arab Americans manage to reclaim their self-representations, as well as its production. In an essay calling for an Arab American Theatre Movement, playwright and Artistic Director of Silk Road Rising Jamil Khoury writes:

> I am an Arab American theatre artist and I am nobody's victim. Arab Americans will no longer accept being vilified or marginalized or relegated to the outer reaches. Demonize us and we will respond. We are not the enemy. We are neither suspect nor a fifth column. We are an integral part of this extraordinary human experiment known as the United States of America. As Americans, we are the inheritors and benefactors of the U.S. Constitution and

> its most venerable guarantee, the First Amendment. Freedom of expression and freedom of conscience are rare commodities in the Arab World. I'd say that makes our Arab experience rather unique. ("Towards")

Khoury is calling for Arab American theatrical representations that would transform the Arab American from a state of passive victimisation to that of activism, by embracing self-expression and engaging the personal to create the political. Arab American self-representation is both a personal and a political reclamation of identity. Arab American theatre presents the self-expressions of a struggling identity in post 9/11 America, and the personal impact of such existence. It interrogates the problematic positioning of Arabs in America and engages with the political and cultural tools that have so far oppressed them, in order to create social/cultural change.

Previous Scholarship and Thesis Methodology

This thesis is the first comprehensive study of post 9/11 Arab American theatre, which covers the institutional, cultural/social, gender and sexual discourses emerging from, and surrounding Arab American drama. Because of an absence of prior studies, which comprehensively investigate Arab American drama, there was a need to formulate a contextual framework for what is increasingly becoming an Arab American theatre movement. While there has been a number of studies, covering the works of some Arab American playwrights, they were largely limited in their focus and approach. In presenting an overview of previous scholarship on Arab American theatre, it is imperative to start with acknowledging the only two anthologies dedicated to the works of Arab American and Middle-Eastern playwrights. *Salaam. Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama*, published in 2009, is the first anthology dedicated to recognising the works of

American playwrights of Middle-Eastern descent. This anthology included the works of five Arab American plays: Yussef El Guindi, Nathalie Handal, Heather Raffo, Sam Younis and Betty Shamieh. The other anthology, *Four Arab American Plays*, is published in 2013 and is specifically dedicated to the following Arab American playwrights: Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef El Guindi, Lameece Issaq and Jacob Kader. Individual plays by Yussef El Guindi (*Back of the Throat*), Betty Shamieh (*Roar*), Heather Raffo (*9 Parts of Desire*) have been published separately. Remarkably, Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* is published in *American Political Plays after 9/11*, rendering it the only Arab American play to be included in an anthology of American, rather than hyphenated-identity, plays. Although these publications represent significant steps towards the acknowledgement of Arab American drama, they remain few and far in between.

Of these works, this thesis analyses nine plays and three online projects by Arab American artists. Although a range of plays were read outside the chosen works for this thesis, the plays were selected as representative of Arab American drama, with each dramatising and problematising a facet of the Arab American identity and issues surrounding the politics of representation, women's writing, gender and sexuality, and visibility. Some of the plays analysed in this thesis were not publicly available at the start of the study, but obtained directly from the playwrights (thus all references to these works link to their unpublished scripts).

As mentioned earlier, there has not been a broad systematic study of Arab American drama. For example, most of the recent scholarly projects focused exclusively on Arab American female playwrights. Dalia Basiouny dedicated her PhD thesis to examining women-authored Arab American plays, and their representation of the Arab American identity in her 2009 "The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American

Theatre Movement". The works of Betty Shamieh and Heather Raffo was especially focused on, as in this thesis. Allison Faith Brogan, similarly, chose the work of Betty Shamieh to be the focus of her Masters dissertation "Fortifying the Roar of Women: Betty Shamieh and the Palestinian-American Female Voice" in 2012. Somaya Sami Sabry's *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of the Arabian Nights* examines the popular "Shahrazad" narrative before and after 9/11 Arab American female-authored plays. While these works explored the ways in which Arab American playwrights offer alternative representations of Arab women, this thesis moves further with this argument to touch upon the limitations within which Arab American female artists operate, and problematises the noticeable rise and visibility of Arab American women artists.

Maysoun Freij's 2008 "The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York" offers a more inclusive study of the cultural production of Arab Americans artists, and their endeavour to carve a space for themselves through generating an "aesthetic economy". Although Freij's touches upon similar issues examined in this thesis, her approach was an ethnographic assessment of the creative production of Arab Americans within a specific economic setting. While attempting to approach some of the issues I cover in this thesis, my previous Masters dissertation "Self or Other: Issues of National, Gender, and Sexual Identity in Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones*", was limited to one play both in focus and theory.

This thesis departs from earlier studies in a number of ways: firstly, among the plays this study analyses, there are a number of plays which have not been examined before; secondly, this thesis offers an extensive textual analysis of the individual plays in connection to the exploration of Arab American identity; thirdly, it aims to cover the gaps, which earlier studies have left in regards to unexamined markers of Arab American identity. In all of the earlier studies, the subject of Arab American homosexuality remained largely unaddressed.

Finally, this thesis investigates the new online space, employed by companies like Silk Road Rising (SRR), as a promising site that can potentially render Arab American voices and experiences visible and relevant to a general audience. While fully acknowledging the value of these works, this thesis moves further in an attempt to create a comprehensive framework of understanding the Arab American identity, in all of its components, through its dramatic expression.

There has been few publications focusing on Arab American literature such as: *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna Kadi; *Etching our Own Image: Voices from within the Arab American Movement* edited by Holly Arida and Anan Ameri; and *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, edited by Fawzia Afzal-Khan. What is clear from these and similar publications is their emphasis on Arab American women artistic expression at the expense of engaging with a wider context of Arab American literature. These works provide much needed exposure to the female Arab American artist and her resistance to a discourse that stereotypes her as victimised and lacking in agency. Of course, many studies and articles commented more generally on Arab American literature such as *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* by Steven Salaita, "Inside and Outside the Box" by Amaney Jamal, "The Hyphenated Author", "Arab American Literature" by Lisa Suhair Majaj. And "The Politics of Getting Published" by Andrea Shalal-Esa. These works contribute to an ongoing process aimed at defining Arab American literature and its position within the wider American context.

This thesis is, in part, an attempt to fill parts of the gaps that earlier studies have left. In doing so, the methodology of this study relies on a close reading of the scripts of chosen Arab American plays, as well as reflective engagement with critical theories that address

their context. Two factors influenced the choices made in conducting the research for this thesis. Firstly, the focus on the Arab American experience, as articulated by the selected plays, and the attempt to define it, necessitated a reliance on cultural studies theories and terminologies, rather than performance studies. Secondly, the absence of a clearly defined field of Arab American studies compelled this research to consult and incorporate a variety of critical and theoretical perspectives, which deal with themes of stereotyping, gender and sexual politics, the visibility of marginalised representations, and political activism in theatre. This knowledge was then applied or modified to support the themes in each chapter, as appropriate to the Arab American experience and its theatrical expression. Moreover, this thesis relied further on an extensive range of sources including theatre reviews, newspaper articles, media reports and programmes, films, photographs, ethnographic data, and governmental reports. In addition, I incorporate the views of some of the playwrights, which I interviewed either in person or via online communications. I also include the findings of a research trip I made to Silk Road Rising (SRR), a Chicago theatre company, which produces Arab American works. Thus, while there is no overarching unifying theory, this thesis employs the intersections between the works of different theorists, textual analysis, and data from multi-recourses to build a contextual and conceptual framework in support of this study.

As mentioned, this thesis depends primarily on the scripts of the plays for critical engagement and contextual analysis. This is partly because archival materials of past performances were not attainable, but largely because performances of Arab American plays remain modest in numbers due to the fact that Arab American theatre is often considered a "niche", and continues to be marginalised within the wider American theatre. To address this, the final chapter of the thesis draws on SRR as a case study for a theatre company that

turned to online spaces to generate more visibility and audience participation. SRR is assembling and preserving a good number of SRR's performance recordings, films, and documentaries rendering the representations of its artists visible and accessible.

This thesis produces a narrative of Arab American drama after 9/11 and its attempts/struggles to articulate the Arab American identity. Each chapter explores a theme relating to a component of this identity and the cultural and institutional context that surrounds it. A survey of past and present Arab American companies marks the start of this study. Because of the intersection between the personal and political in Arab American dramatic works, this thesis investigates the admissibility of certain political plays in the U.S. Examples of overt and mostly covert censorship on American political theatre in general – especially when invoking the Palestinian/Israeli conflict as in *My Name is Rachel Corrie* – are indicative of an acquired intolerance to the dramatisation of particular political issues. Accordingly, the admissibility and visibility of Arab American representations into mainstream spaces is arguably conditioned on the playwright's suppression of expressions relating to certain political aspects of Arab American identity, or the watering down of their dramatisation. Out of this background, Chapter One observes a tendency in certain American theatre institutions to foster particular works by Arab American *women* playwrights that offer a less problematic negotiation with political identity. In addition, the chapter highlights how members of the Arab American community exercise their own pressure to censure specific works that are critical of the community by arguing that such works contribute to the negative stereotyping they suffer from. As a result, the setting within which Arab American theatre operates in is challenging, and at times curtailing its freedom in addressing personal and political problematic discourses pertaining to the Arab American identity.

Within this context, the second chapter investigates the junction at which representation, visibility, censorship and Arab American women playwriting meet. Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* and Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* are examined as part of a new Arab American women's discourse/Arab American feminist movement that frees the Arab women out of her framed stereotypical portrayal in both Orientalist and "war on terror" narratives. The chapter argues that women playwrights like Shamieh and Raffo utilise techniques employed by early feminist theatre practitioners to present their women three-dimensional and resilient in the face of patriarchy and war. However, while developed in character, their plays display elements of censorship/self-censorship pertaining to the political voice of the characters: while vocal in naming the tools of their oppression, the characters remain largely reserved in addressing particular aspects of the political context of their situations. In exploring the politics of visibility, this chapter raises the question of whether it is possible for artists from the minority (such as Shamieh and Raffo) to escape their marginality while preserving their probable "problematic" political narratives.

When studying Arab American identity, a discussion of Arab American stereotypes becomes immediately unavoidable. Many theorists (Said *Orientalism*; Shaheen *Reel Bad Arabs*, *Guilty*, Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber *Race and Arab Americans*) have covered the Western creation of the Arab by virtue of his/her stereotypes, and attempted to subvert these narrative; yet such correlations persist and have increased since 9/11. Chapter Three thus discusses Arab American stereotypes and their cultural and institutional effects on the Arab American. In reflecting on the tools of social and cultural stereotyping, the chapter considers Sam Younis' *Browntown*, a dark comedy that satirically presents an Arab American actor who is only cast for terrorist roles; and Yussef El Guindi's *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*, which similarly dramatises the plight of an Arab

American woman writer whose visibility depends on creating narratives that enforce the same stereotypes she is contesting. The chapter, then investigates racial profiling as captured by another play of El Guindi, *Back of the Throat*, which presents the case of an Arab American framed and tried by the "terrorist" stereotype. The chapter reflects on how the conceptualisation of the "terrorist" is linked to particular racial, ethnic and religious demarcations, and how the institutional legalisation of discrimination represents the most damaging effect of ethnic stereotyping.

The Arab "terrorist" and its corporality are explored in Chapter Four within the discourses of power (in Michel Foucault's *Power/Knowledge*, *The History of Sexuality*) and queerness (in Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*). The representation of the body of the "terrorist" Arab in the Abu Ghraib photographs remain the most shocking and striking visual framing of the Arab body. Because of the performance aspect of the photographs, which carried a homoerotic imperial and Orientalist narrative of the Arab body, the fourth chapter confronts this performativity with the Arab American own narratives of their bodies and sexualities. This chapter focuses especially on the different articulations of body image and sexualities in the two different representational spheres. Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* and Yussef El Guidndi's *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* explore the relationship between Arab American homosexuality and cultural and national discourses of identity. This relationship, whilst at times contested, is reconciled by giving agency to the Arab body and its sexuality. In contrast, the Abu Ghraib photographs exploit this relationship by subjecting and othering the Arab body (and its sexuality) in service of an imperialist narrative.

Finally, the study of Arab American artistic struggles and battles for self-representation are concluded in Silk Road Rising (SRR). This Chicago theatre company was created as a direct response to 9/11 and aimed initially to offer a theatrical space for Arab

American artistic expressions. While SRR welcomes Middle-Eastern and Indian theatrical representations, the focus of its artistic director, Jamil Khoury, remains committed to the Arab Americans'. In an attempt to overcome the confines of physical and marginal space attributed to "ethnic" artists, SRR recently turned to the virtual space. Currently, it is piloting a first of its kind playwriting and civic engagement project in *Mosque Alert*. This chapter investigates how this online video/play is employing tools similar to those envisioned by Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, in its attempt to transform its audiences into "spect-actors". By incorporating the online space, this chapter investigates how SRR is producing a resistant discourse that subverts the cultural positioning of its artists as "subaltern". In doing so, it is widening the outreach of Arab American and other marginalised voices, and inviting audiences to hear/watch these stories and participate in their creation, rendering them a part of not only the Arab American cultural scene, but the American one as well. This thesis therefore concludes by considering the future of Arab American Theatre as a movement. Reflecting on the rich cultural and political value of Arab American theatrical expression, this thesis aims to render the visibility of Arab American drama a necessity.

Arab American Theatre: Battles of Censorship and Visibility

> The wider power to define meanings and subjectivities and to influence and change social relations is linked to the power to *create*, *make visible* and *legitimate* meanings and values different from those which are inherent in much mainstream culture.
>
> *Jordan and Weedon – "Cultural Politics"*

The shock of 9/11 reverberated across American theatrical stages and the Arab American stage was no exception. In the wake of a national tragedy and an endangered sense of identity, Arab American theatre saw a new wave of fruitful and concentrated artistic expression as a direct response to 9/11 and its repercussion on the Arab American community. Arab American artists began joining forces, exchanging ideas and sharing creativity to establish theatrical workshops, ensembles and companies. Growing out of an existing, albeit small, Arab American theatrical repertoire, which dates back to 1909, the expanding post-9/11 Arab American theatre has been evolving in form and organisation, dramatic plots, and audience attendance. Performing mostly in English for an Arab American and American audiences, the new Arab American theatre introduced the Arab Americans' experience, search for identity, struggle against stereotypes, and everyday problems and ambitions. However, the vast majority of these artistic expressions remain in the periphery of American theatre. In its essence, and within its many layers as an immigrant theatre, Arab American theatre evokes a political identity whose expression challenges American foreign policy in the Middle-East, as well as domestic controversial actions after 9/11. This chapter explores the challenges that face the visibility of Arab American theatrical – inherently political – expression.

As part of the American theatre, Arab American drama is situated within its institutional structure, and operates within its covert system of censorship. This chapter, therefore, explores some examples of censorship on the American theatre and the relationship between political theatre and non-for-profit theatres (where most Arab American drama is staged) to reach an understanding of the politics of visibility affecting Arab American theatre. The 'indefinite postponement' of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* in 2006 at the New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) exposed an atmosphere of intolerance towards challenging political performances, particularly those deemed sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Following the critical storm after the cancellation of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, a female Arab American theatre initiative called Nibras and Arab American female playwright Betty Shamieh were invited to stage their plays at NYTW. Accordingly, this chapter examines a perceived tendency to offer preferential treatment for some female Arab American playwrights through their access to funding and theatre spaces, and investigates the politics behind the visibility offered to these female playwrights, and the compromises that accompany such privileging. In short, this chapter introduces the political and institutional context that governs Arab American theatrical self-expression, and the ensuing compromises and self-censorship which condition its visibility.

As a starting point, a short history of Arab American theatre companies is necessary to provide a background for the Arab American theatrical presence today, and offer the context for its cultural analysis. Contrary to belief and although poorly documented, Arab American theatre has existed before 2001. The first documented Arab American play is *Wajdah* (1909) by Ameen Rihani (Hassan 38) written in English and published posthumously in 2001. Ameen Rihani, a prominent literary figure whose literary contributions included poems, novels, essays and plays, is considered the "founding father of

Arab-American literature" ("Ameen Rihani"). Like many early Arab immigrants in America, Rihani alternated between Arabic and English through his writing career. The choice to write in one or the other language was influenced by different political and cultural contexts as well as objectives. Wail Hassan describes the different agendas attached to writing in Arabic and English in the first Arab American literature produced by the likes of Rihani and Khalil Gibran:

> Obliviously, when writing in Arabic, Rihani and Gibran not only had a different agenda, but also enjoyed greater discursive latitude in that, first, they did not have to explain Arab culture to Arab readers; second, they were not expected by their readers to be Oriental spokesmen; and third, they did not have to abide by discursive strictures imposed on their cultures by a conquering knowledge system, with its stereotypes, typologies … When writing in English, however, they had to couch their message in ways that guaranteed or at least increased the likelihood of its acceptance – of their acceptance as writers – by American readers. (Hassan 41)

These socio-political contexts connected to the choice of writing in Arabic or English continues to inform much of the Arab American literature up to this date. The language of the literary work decides its target audience and the message it aims to disseminate.

Ala Fa'ik documents some of the theatrical efforts in the 1970s and 1980s following three categories: "plays in Arabic by and for Arab Americans, bilingual productions for wider audiences of both Arab Americans and non-Arab Americans, and professional productions in English for the general U.S. public" (107). New waves of Arab immigrants to the U.S. in the 1960-70s helped Arab American theatre develop from early productions of

Arab plays performed in the U.S. to Arab American plays staged and produced in the U.S.for Arab American audiences. Ala Fa'ik lists the following plays (*Party Store* in 1983, *Shuf al-Lotto Esh Sawa* (See What the Lotto Did) in 1986, *Matlub Zaim Lil-Jaliyah* (Wanted: A Leader for the Immigrant Community) 1988 and *Shaleelah wa Dhay'a Ras-ha* (A Tangled Yarn) 1984 which were performed in Arabic and staged in Detroit dramatising issues of the immigrant community with theatrical styles inspired by famous Egyptian comedies. Other bilingual productions were taking place in Los Angeles for Arab Americans born in the U.S.with English, rather than Arabic, being their native language. These productions were more sophisticated in form and dramatic plots aiming to speak to second generation Arab Americans and general audiences in an attempt to promote an understanding of Arab Americans. Fa'ik cites the example of Hammam Shafie, an Arab American actor and director, who staged his play *Where to Ramallah* in 1987 and directed *The Festival: A Muscial Play in Two Acts*, which inaugurated the Arab American Children's Theatre in 1989. According to its producer Fereal Masre, the Arab American Children's Theatre represented, "the planting seeds of love for the Arab cultural values and heritage" and was "a seed which will develop future talents and leadership for this country" (qtd. in Fa'ik 113). These seeds were growing even though the soil was rather unaccommodating politically, culturally or artistically for Arab American theatre practitioners. Albeit few in numbers and largely invisible, Arab American playwrights were artistically active before 9/11, working together or in collaboration with other Middle-Eastern artists leading to the establishment of few Arab American and Middle-Eastern ensembles or companies. While many of the early Arab American theatre initiatives used Arabic as it is theatrical language, they nonetheless laid the foundation for the emerging 'English' Arab American theatre movement. In an article following the release of the first Arab American Anthology *Salam Anthology*, co-

editor Holly Hill provides a history of Middle-Eastern theatre and notes that although the first wave of Middle-Eastern theatres which presented theatrical pieces in Farsi or Arabic "have not directly generated today's Middle-Eastern American artists, their portrayal of émigrés' personal and cultural concerns through theatre has built bridges for the new writers, actors, directors and producers who choose to work in English" ("Middle-Eastern American Theatre"). Indeed, the few pre-9/11 Arab American theatrical initiatives had significantly increased in number and size after 9/11 with English as the predominant dramatic language.

Arab American Theatre Companies: a History

One of the pre 9/11 Arab American companies considered to be the first well-organised Arab American theatre is AJYAL Theatrical Group. The company, whose name means "generations" in Arabic, has been running since 1988. AJYAL was founded by Najee Mondalek in Michigan and has been producing and staging Arab American plays since its inception. Through its 26-year-history, AJYAL has enjoyed considerable success and toured many cities inside the U.S., and outside it as in Canada and Lebanon. AJYAL dramatises and satirises issues of Arab American immigrants in the U.S. The company's website explains the plays' remit:

> Most of AJYAL Theatrical Group's shows poke fun at the everyday lives of Arab-Americans, who have recently become citizens and who are desperately trying to blend into the mainstream of American culture. The plays serve as a forum to help people laugh at their mistakes and mishaps but also to come to terms with social issues facing Arab-Americans, such as their difficulties adjusting to a new culture and lifestyle." (Ajyal.us)

AJYAL has created the character of "Im Hussein", which is perhaps one of the most famous theatrical characters amongst Arab Americans audiences. The character represents a caricature of an Arab matriarch, who carries her Arab attire, wisdom, humour and sarcasm and flavours it with her new American immigrant Self. Although Im Hussein is Arab and performs in Arabic as is the case of all AJYAL's plays, the dramatisation of her predicaments, experience and humour is addressed to, and appreciated by, Arab American rather than Arab audiences. Her popularity and fame are only peculiar to her Arab American audience. This reflects the evolvement of Arab American theatre from a theatre borrowing from, and relying on, Arab theatrical repertoire to a unique Arab American theatre that has its own style, themes, characters and audience.

While a tradition of Arab American theatre performed in Arabic for an Arab American audience was popular, the need for Arab American theatre performed in English for both Arab American and American audiences was urgent. The early efforts of Arab American dramatists writing in English lacked collective organisation and were perceived as isolated literary events rather than parts of an immigrant literature representing the Arab American community. An important contributor to the evolving tradition of Arab American theatre performed in English is actor, director and teacher of theatre Fareed Al-Oboudi, whose *Portrait of a Suspect* was staged in Chicago in 1988 and was well received and critically acclaimed. *Portrait of a Suspect* details the story of an immigrant framed as a suspect by three (American, Syrian and Israeli) interrogators simply because he is an Arab American. Lawrence Bommer praised the play in the *Chicago Reader* commenting on its intensity, liveliness and earnestness in dramatisation and performance:

> Fareed Al-Oboudi's *Portrait of a Suspect*, for all its obvious intentions and rhetorical excess, had me changed, shaken up, and reminded like crazy. It's a

> play you feel had to be written or the playwright would have exploded. Which in this case means it's right that Al-Oboudi also directs, produces, and performs in it. You could call this a "necessity" production ("Checkmate")

The review praised the passion of the performers and playwright/director without singling it out as the work of an immigrant theatre. This is significant because it shows that an Arab American play was being enjoyed and appreciated by a member of the American audience, despite the "Arabness" of its subject. *Portrait of a Suspect* was turned into an award-winning TV play in 2000, adapted for TV and directed by the playwright Al-Oboudi. The play's dramatisation of the suspicion surrounding Arab Americans would later become a topic to systematically preoccupy Arab American drama, especially after 9/11 (Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* is an example of this, which will be examined in Chapter Three). Although staged more than a decade before 9/11, Al-Oboudi's play is a theatrical testament of the suspicious narrative that surrounded Arab Americans long before 9/11.

One of the main development to influence the growth of Arab American drama was its adoption of English as its language of expression. By doing so, Arab American artists were capable of reaching a wider audience. Fa'ik comments on the new Arab American productions in English:

> Arab American theatre is rapidly moving from an exclusive form of entertainment with appreciation only by Arab American audiences into an art form with broad general interest for all Americans. These Arab American productions convey through their form and content the experience of Arab Americans in this country, so making that experience part of the American culture."(108)

Writing in English was not only a choice, made to reach a general audience, but also a natural development for an the early Arab American immigrant community, which by the 1990s was either in its second or third generation.

Arab American theatre is certainly expanding and becoming more organised. Recent companies like Nibras (translated as Lantern) was founded in June 2001 and was later invited to be a Company-in-Residence at the Off-Broadway New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW). Nibras is a theatre collective of Arab American artists including Maha Chehlaoui, Rana Kazkaz, Najla Said (daughter of renowned scholar Edward Said), Leila Buck, Omar Khoury and Afaf Shawwa. Their first work was an ensemble called Sajjil, (which means "record" in Arabic) directed by Chehlaoui and performed in New York International Fringe Festival in 2002, where it won the Festival's Best Ensemble Award. The play recorded Arab and non-Arab American views and perceptions on immigration, Arabness and Otherness. Nibras continued developing or sponsoring works of Arab American artists, as well as participating in events like the Mahrajan Al-Fan Festival of Arab World Culture, roundtable on Arab voices in theatre at the Lark Playwright Development Centre, and "Made in Palestine" art exhibition (Hill xxiii). In 2006, Nibras artists approached NYTW after the cancellation of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*, which enraged many activists and led to negative press aimed at NYTW. The NYTW was responsive to Nibras' initiative inviting them to become Company-in-Residence. This was a significant moment for Nibras and Arab American drama as NYTW was capable of offering much needed exposure to these new Arab American theatrical voices. During its residency at the NYTW Nibras worked on many productions, such as Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* in 2007 and Nathalie Handal's *The Oklahoma Quartet* in 2008. They also participated in a two day programme called "Aswat: Voices from

Palestine", which comprised of staged readings by Palestinian and Arab playwrights in 2007. Although Nibras' partnership with NYTW came to an end afterwards, another Arab American initiative called Noor was being formed at the time and drew the attention of NYTW during the "Aswat" readings (Weinert-Kendt).

Created in 2010, Noor theatre is a new company that welcomes artists from the Middle-East, fosters their ensembles, and helps produce their work. Noor Theatre is founded by three female Arab American theatre practitioners: Artistic Director Lameece Issaq, Executive Director Maha Chehlaoui and Producing Artistic Director Nancy Vitale. Their ambition is to make their voices heard and leave an Arab American theatrical mark. Noor means 'light' in both Arabic and Farsi, and the company aims to "allow artists to explore fundamentally 'what it is to be Middle-Eastern, to be an American' and, for many, 'to be a woman'" according to Vitale (qtd. in Mohler "Noor Theatre"). Noor Theatre has become a Company-in-Residence at the NYTW with its first full production *Food and Fadwa* premiering in June 2012. The production of *Food and Fadwa* at NYTW has provided Noor Theatre with much needed exposure and publicity for its artists and Arab American drama in general (the play, as well as the visibility of Arab American theatre is to be discussed later in the chapter).

Like all other Arab American theatre initiatives, Noor theatre strives to combat the negative stereotypes attached to Arab American portrayals in the media. They also aim "provide a New York home for artists of this heritage to develop their talents and tell their stories. By shedding light on their dynamic points of view, we further diversify America's rich theatrical tapestry" (Noor Theatre "About"). Noor Theatre has presented many stage readings and workshops for Arab American playwrights like Betty Shamieh and Yussef El

Guindi. Although still new, Noor Theatre is making steady progress to introduce more Arab American theatre practitioners, and welcome, nurture and validate their work.

Meanwhile, Middle-Eastern theatre companies are also presenting – albeit not exclusively – powerful Arab American artistic works. Because the Middle-East is mistakenly perceived in the media as an unanimous entity comprising of countries that share the same geography, culture and religion, negative representations cloak both Arab American and non-Arab Middle-Eastern communities. This created a sense of solidarity between the different ethnic Middle-Eastern artists, who joined forces to produce works that would educate, dispel and combat a wave of misrepresentation aimed at Middle-Easterners. Torange Yeghiazarian, an Iranian American director/playwright/actress, felt that the Middle-East was underrepresented with many stereotypes impacting its community be it Arab, Iranian, or Turkish. To alter the state of invisibility and offer a space for Middle-Eastern artists to represent themselves, Yeghiazarian initiated her theatre company in October 1996 with a production of her play *Operation No Penetration Lysistrata 97!*. The company was called Golden Thread Productions, a name inspired by the myth of Theaseus who was offered golden strings by Aridne to guide him out of the labyrinth he was entrapped in. The mission of Golden Thread Production, according to the company's website, is to "make the Middle-East a potent presence on the American stage and a treasured cultural experience" (Golden Thread Theatre "About"). The company produced and staged one play per year from 1997 – 2000. In 2000, Golden Thread Theatre started working on a project of stage readings of short plays that would turn into an annual festival called ReOrient. Two weeks before the opening of the Second ReOrient, 9/11 happened leaving the playwright/director with the decision of whether to go on with the Festival of Middle-Eastern plays or halt for fear of repercussion aimed at Arab and Muslim

communities. Asked about the ramifications of 9/11 on Golden Thread Productions and the apprehension that followed, Yeghiazarian explains:

> Initially, there was some concern. Our ReOrient Festival of short plays was actually scheduled to go on stage October of 2001 and a number of Arab and Middle-Eastern events were cancelled that fall. We held a meeting with our members, crew and new formed board of trustees to discuss our options and the consensus was that it was more important than ever to present the work we do. So we chose to move ahead. Two of the cast members stepped down: one personally lost someone in 9/11, and another one just had concerns about safety. Mainly for the comfort of others, we hired a security service and we informed San Francisco police what we were doing and asked them to pay extra attention to the neighbourhood of the theatre" ("Personal Interview")

ReOrient did go on attracting audiences and support from other art groups making the Festival a "unique experience" and a "success" according to Yeghiazarian. ReOrient celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2009 with two days event comprising of five panels with international theatre practitioners, an internet live play by Yuessef El Guindi performed both in Egypt and the U.S. simultaneously, and a launch of the first anthology of Middle-Eastern American plays by Theatre Communications Group. Alongside ReOrient, Golden Thread theatre has staged 13 plays by Middle-Eastern playwrights since 2001.

Golden Thread Theatre is the only Middle-Eastern theatrical company performing in English, which has started before 9/11, lived through 9/11 and survived after it. When asked

about what 9/11 meant for a Middle-Eastern theatre company and practitioners, Yeghiazarian explains:

> It forced us to be more visible, and visibility is a double-edged sword. Before 9/11, we did whatever we wanted and on a national level, nobody really paid attention. Then all of the sudden, we were getting calls from the New York Times asking us to comment on the events, etc" ("Personal Interview").

The appetite to hear from Middle-Eastern artists has certainly increased since 9/11. While this introduced an opportunity for these artists to be visible and heard, that visibility was precarious. This is because the Middle-Eastern artists who were invited to present their work after 9/11 had the pressure of responding to a nation in mourning, as well as portraying and defending a community under duress.

Immediately after 9/11, New York theatres were hesitant to approach or comment on the event (Carlson "9/11, Afghanistan, and Iraq"). Thenceforward – and apart from numbered theatrical examples which dramatised 9/11 politically rather than tragically – most theatrical expressions which dealt with 9/11 saw the event through tragic or rather "melodramatic" lenses (Carlson 4). Often, a scripted display of hyper-patriotism, whether from the audience or the actors who performed more passionately as a defiant patriotic statement, accompanied such events. This is the time that Jamil Khoury along with Malik Gillani started Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago. Although the thought of founding a theatre company that would stage the stories of Arab American minority was ever present in Khoury's agenda, 2001 was the catalyst for turning those thoughts into a reality. Silk Road Theatre Project was founded as "a creative response to the attacks of September 11, 2001" (Silk Road Rising "About"). Khoury and Gillani were distressed and marked by the

antagonism that faced Arabs and Muslims immediately after 9/11 and felt that art/playwriting/theatre have the capacity of addressing and negotiating the problematic times post 9/11 and their racial and cultural repercussions on Arabs and Muslims.

Representing Arab Americans was a key imperative for the theatre company, and 9/11 was a subject that would inform and shape the theatrical responses of those silent and invisible Arab American artists. Furthermore, Silk Road Theatre Project saw a need to represent not only Middle-Eastern artists, but also other minority groups, whose artistic expression was equally marginalised. The idea evolved to representing Americans with ancestry from countries panning from Japan to Italy, the geographical area historically known as the Silk Road. The company was thus officially named Silk Road Theatre Project (SRTP) and launched in 2002. The unique cultural structure of SRTP has advocated the representation of more than one voice, or one minority group. The inclusion of hybrid minority voices consciously deconstructs the idea of one homogenous representation of all minority, or individual groups such as Arab Americans or Asians. Silk Road Theatre Project was restructured and renamed Silk Road Rising (SRR) in 2012; a step that was taken to incorporate non-traditional theatrical expressions with a focus on online audiences. The company is examined as an example of a politically active Arab American theatre which negotiates the politics of minority visibility in Chapter Five.

In her documentation of Middle-Eastern American initiatives, Holly Hill notes that "Golden Thread and Silk Road have been of incalculable value to MEA playwrights" ("Middle-Eastern American Theatre"). The importance of these and similar initiatives is immense. These theatres present a platform for Middle-Eastern American playwrights where their voices are not 'foreign' and their subject-matter is perceived as part of the centre rather than the margin. Their emergence encourages playwrights to produce more work as these

companies increase the possibility of their staging. Arab American playwright Yuseef El Guindi wrote about this issue: "My biggest challenge is finding theatres open to doing Arab American plays…the more theatres like [Golden Thread and Silk Road] that spring up, the more inclined I am (and other writers I'm sure) to explore issues around immigration and the Middle-East. Before the creation of these theatres, I was somewhat hesitant to tackle subjects that I felt would not get past the first reader at a theatre" (qtd. in Hill "Middle-Eastern American Theatre"). The existence of these theatres, thus, provides institutional and economic support for Arab American playwrights, and to some extent relaxes the caution or self-censorship they typically practice, as will be discussed.

While Arab American theatre companies have been striving to forge a small existence and grow artistically and structurally, the performance arts in general have been facing a new current of 'censorship' or funding control and restriction. This was sure to affect this already marginalised and politically-attested group of Arab Americans and its artistic visibility. In effect, the visibility of Arab American theatre is conditioned on firstly, the readiness of the American general public to hear Arab American stories; secondly and more pressingly, the admissibility of these stories in theatre institutions. A brief study of the state of censorship on the American theatre will provide the institutional context within which this new Arab American theatrical voice is attempting to emerge. Thereafter, the chapter explores the reasons behind the invisibility of the Arab American theatre and the means for its visibility.

Instances of Censorship in American Theatre

In *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, John Houchin documents the history of censorship on American theatre from the Puritan Golden age until

the late 1990. He details the religious and socio-political roots of censorship tracing its impact on American theatre and recording theatre practitioners' responses to these censoring attempts. In his introduction, Houchin explains why theatre remains the focus of censorship:

> Understandably, the conservative community fears artists, particularly theatrical artists. Throughout history these individuals have generated intense public adulation, but the political, religious, and social leaders of the conservative community typically characterise them as immoral, pernicious, or subversive. They fear that these artists will teach the faithful to imagine new systems, rewrite laws, and overturn the old order. (2)

In other words, theatre arouses the unease of conservatives who fear that the audience might easily and undiscernibly adopt the social and political changes advocated by a play. Although the theatrical topics which called for censorship varied, censorship constituted a constant presence through American theatre history. Houchin shows that every wave of censorship corresponds with a perceived threat to the nation, prescribed by conservative religious and political leaders. He postulates that the 1970s through the late 1990s saw a period of cultural and political conflicts - known as "culture of wars" - with conservative parties and "political revolutionaries" urging a return to an earlier conception of America with rigid morality and preserved political/racial hierarchy. During this "culture of wars", Houchin explains that the attitudes of the conservative political activists were aligned with those of the religious leaders, seeking:

> a hierarchical arrangement ruled by white heterosexual males and supported by white heterosexual wives all of whom lived within a traditional family structure. It was a paradigm that defined itself by what it rejected, and it

> indicated homosexuality, promiscuity, divorce, and interracial unions as perversions that had shredded the moral fabric of American society. (225)

In the performing arts, these "American" socio-political values were guarded through censorship of artistic works that introduced reconsideration of, deviation from or opposition to these ideologies. For example, censorship of works of a sexual, particularly homosexual, nature in the 1980s was fierce and uncompromising. Homosexuality was considered not only immoral, but also a threat to the nation. It was viewed as destabilising to the family model and condemned as the cause for AIDS. The dramatisation of the topic in the late 1980s and early 1990s was met with many objections that often materialised in the refusal or suspension of grants. Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner faced a storm of criticism when staged in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1996 with protests and threats erupting in the conservative town. The play led to county officials, outraged by its content and conservatives' outcry, to vote for the cutting off of 2.5 million dollars of county money to the Arts and Science Council, which finances art projects like *Angels in America* ("County Strikes"). The decision also announced the withholding of funds from projects that ''promote, advocate or endorse behaviors, life styles and values that seek to undermine and deviate from the value and societal role of the traditional American family.'' (qtd. in "County Strikes"). *Angels in America* is but one example of a censorship current aimed at isolating and combating representations of homosexuality in the theatre in the 1980s and 1990s.

This was concurrent with continuous attempts to abolish the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) in line with a conservative policy to rein in the arts. The pressure on the NEA was first led by Ronald Regan in 1981 (Biddle *Our Government*) when the president pushed for a bill to cut the NEA funds. The issue of arts funding was exacerbated in 1989

with the exhibitions of Andres Serrano, described by Rev. Donald Wildmon as "anti-Christian bigotry", and Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, referred to as "morally reprehensible trash" by Republican Dick Armey (Quigley "The Mapplethorpe Censorship"). Protests were held against the NEA and these exhibitions along with rigorous attempts to defund the NEA. This led the Corcoran Museum of Art, which was granted funding from the NEA, to cancel the Mapplethorpe exhibition in a controversial attempt to safeguard its funding (Quigley "The Mapplethorpe Censorship").

The debates and battles over the NEA funding suggest that withholding arts funds and grants has become a new form of censorship. Instead of contradicting the freedom-of-speech principle by legally censoring artistic performances, censorship is achieved, all the same, by manipulating and denying funds. This is best exemplified in the case of the NEA Four. In 1990, the NEA proposed funding for four performance artists (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes). The four grants were vetoed "after John E. Frohnmayer, the endowment chairman, informed a dozen arts professionals in a meeting in Seattle that 'political realities' made it likely he would have to veto some grants recommended by panels of artists." (Gamarekian "Arts Agency Denies"). The artists attributed the NEA's decision to the sexual and homosexual themes represented in their work. Tim Miller, one of the artists, explained: ''When I wrote the application I knew I was in trouble . . . My work explores my identity as a gay person and as a person dealing with the AIDS crisis in an active, political way. So much of this is a homophobic attack on gay people and the visibility of gay people" (qtd. in Gamarekian).

This consequent invisibility, which Miller notes, is what renders the cited example as well as others of 'economic censorship' problematic. Controversies surrounding the funding of the NEA continued with renewed pressure to eliminate it in the mid 1990s (Hughes

"Pulling the Fuse") and accusations that Arts funds were sometimes connected to certain political agendas (Khan "After 'Inappropriate'"). These examples support the assumption that institutional Arts funding or its withholding can be politically influenced and operates, at times, as censorship. Thus, while disguised in a financial garment, censorship continues to be a powerful tool that actively submerges the different or Other sexual, political or national voices in invisibility.

Cases of direct or self-imposed censorship in the media, film, television and music immediately after 9/11 are abundant (Scherzinger "Double Voices", 95-113; Melnick *9/11 Culture*, 37-40). In theatre, it was apparent that a form of self-censorship was in operation. Plays that directly engaged with 9/11 were absent from New York's theatre programmes in 2001-2002 (Carlson 5). Exceptionally, and although written before 9/11, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* which opened in December 2001, was one of the few plays that approached the politics of the time. Nevertheless, the play did not escape some censoring voices during its run. Marvin Carlson explains that the play

> contained one prescient passage charging the United States with creating and supporting the Taliban and warning that it would come to regret this. Nervous producers suggested that this passage be cut, but Kushner refused, and the production opened without incident. However, government funding from the NEA was withheld without explanation from the project's West Coast premiere at Berkeley until the following spring (5-6)

Similar incidents were not uncommon, but rarely reported. The threat of possible censorship or heavy editing influenced the political content of plays that dealt with 9/11, or the domestic and foreign policies that followed. Also, the cultural and political atmosphere

following the catastrophic events encouraged a retreat in American theatre from a political confrontation of post 9/11 reality to an engagement with its tragedy. In his evaluation of the state of theatre post 9/11, and the critical and historical debate surrounding it, James Harding suggests that "9/11 has pushed the discourse of our discipline back toward a conventional, indeed reactionary, understanding of the interrelation of politics, theatre, and performance" (20). However, Carlson notes that the drums of the approaching American war on Afghanistan and Iraq proved to be an awakening moment for many – typically underreported – political theatrical works in New York. These works were primarily influenced by the precariousness of the time and the prospect of a nation heading to war.

Arab American theatrical expression, which started emerging at the time, had a different narrative that was inherently political. It confronted many challenges and was, at times, refused entry into the mainstream theatre scene in America, ignored, or point-blank censored. While Arab American playwrights' desire for freedom of self-expression is similar to that of all other artists, their expression has been particularly susceptible to curtailment of this freedom. Writing about the Arab American art movement post 9/11, Holly Arida outlines the extra challenges facing Arab American artists:

> The political reality of post-9/11 includes the War on Terror, the Iraq War, and the deterioration in the Palestinian-Israeli peace initiatives, as well as the violation of Arab American civil liberties. Artistic expression is often controversial, but with raised public fears about Muslims and Arabs supporting terrorism, political art, particularly when produced by Arab American, is more provocative than ever. (198)

It is precisely this context, which led both Arab American playwrights and American theatre companies to take extra caution, and cultivate self-censorship by avoiding to engage with certain topics for fear of being perceived as unpatriotic. With the invasion of Iraq, Arab American drama became further prone to attempts of heavy editing or overt censorship. Allan Havis argues that American political theatre has "often played, at best, a secondary role in American stage life" (2) and cites the example of a play about Iraq, censored because of its politics: "it is eye-opening to consider Connecticut's Wilton High School and the controversy engendered by the principal's cancellation of the student-composed play *Voices in Conflict* for being too inflammatory and partisan about the Iraq War" (2). That is not to say, however, that any Arab American play dealing with the Iraqi war has been entirely censored. Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* engages with the Iraqi war, and had its American Off Broadway premiere in Manhattan Ensemble Theatre in 2004. The play will be examined in Chapter Two along with an analysis of Raffo's visibility. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Arab American drama evokes political questions that are not always welcomed on certain post 9/11 American theatre stages.

A significant Arab American topic, which proves particularly irksome on the American stage, is the dramatisation of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. In this regard, censorship is systematically persistent and examples are abundant. The American support for Israel shapes the American relationship with Arabism and influences the funding of artistic projects which deal with the Palestinian/Israeli crisis. Theatrical works which engages with the question of Palestine, be it Arab American or American, endure vicious battles of censorship, disguised as denial of funds at times. Academic and theatre critic Alisa Solomon writes about the relationship between the "American public discourse on Israel" and American culture. Solomon cites many examples of cancelled shows because of their

Palestinian subject matter: from a cancelled performance of a Palestinian troupe called El Hakawati in 1990, to a withdrawn painting by a Palestinian teenager student from an exhibition at Brandeis University in 2005 (Solomon "The Big Chill"). Solomon analyses the reasons for such obtrusive censorship of works dealing with the Palestinian subject matter writing:

> [M]erely the perception that hawkish Israel supporters will raise a fuss produces a chilling effect and deters other work from being considered: Too many (and too often gutless) theater and gallery directors conclude it's not worth the hassle to take on projects that might provoke a brouhaha. . . . (Solomon "The Big Chill")

Solomon argues that art is a place for all, possibly the only site where audiences are confronted with feelings and opinions that might contradict their own. She believes that theatrical works with uncomfortable viewpoints should be responded to by other plays, or other forms of art instead of simply censoring them and silencing their perspective. Yet, the fact remains that censorship is a reality that threatens works dramatising the Palestinian/Israeli conflict; especially if they are authored by sympathetic voices such as the Arab American.

A particularly controversial example of censorship on a play dealing with the Palestinian crisis, which Solomon and numerous other critics expressed their anger about, is the cancellation of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (*Corrie*) form the New York Theatre Workshop. The incident represents the theatrical silencing of an American citizen because her dramatic voice dealt with the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. The cancellation of *Corrie* blew

the lid off the external and political influences which, in effect, had the power to censor a theatrical work on an American stage.

Corrie is a solo play conceived from the emails and diary of Rachel Corrie, an American activist killed in Gaza by an Israeli bulldozer, while standing as a human shield to protect a Palestinian home from being demolished. The play was edited by Alan Rickman, who also directed it, and *The Guardian* journalist Katharine Viner. *Corrie* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and was heading to the New York Theatre Worksop in May 2006. Just weeks before their scheduled arrival, the co-authors were informed that the production of the play would be postponed, which later turned out to be an indefinite postponement. The cancelation or blunt censorship of the staging of the play angered many art defenders and theatre practitioners. According to theatre critic and scholar Garrett Eisler, the decision to cancel the show "raised many questions about many different aspects of our current theatre culture, especially in our cherished world of non-profit institutions that we have assumed are our last bastion of free expression in an ever more conservative country and restrictive corporatised marketplace" (25). The cancellation of the play and the following outbursts of frustration from many theatre practitioners and critics can be understood in the context of two points. Firstly, the incident highlighted the curtailed political and artistic freedoms in theatre. Secondly, it intensified the disillusionment in many of the non-for-profit theatre companies, which were believed to be the new forums for artistic expression.

In a panel discussion titled "Who's Afraid of Rachel Corrie", playwright Kelly Stuart recalls her own experience with the abandonment of her play *Mayhem* by two non-for-profit theatre companies after 9/11 with one artistic director saying: "Love your play, but … America can't hear this play right now" (qtd. in Garrett 60/1). Later, she observes that "the

problem with the non-profit theatre is that it is so dependent on large sums of money from corporations and wealthy boards that it can't afford to risk offending its funders, which leads to work which under the façade of "balance" is drained of its point of view" (qtd. in Garrett 61). In other words, not-for-profit theatres avoid political works, especially those offering different perspectives, in fear of losing their corporate and governmental funding. In effect, this amounts to 'economic censorship' which is increasingly becoming a concern for artists who "worry that arts organisations' and institutions' increasing dependence on corporations for financial support invariably yields pressures for noncontroversial, crowd-pleasing programming" (Atkins 5). The postponement of *Corrie* was reported by journalist Jed Brandt to be "in response to the "concerns" of unnamed Jewish organisations" ("Who's Afraid"), while James Nicola, artistic director of NYTW stated in an interview: "I haven't personally spoken to any members of the Jewish community who've opposed the play […] I have spoken to many Jewish friends who have had degrees of discomfort with the topic." (Heilpern "A Scandal"). The confusion and lack of transparency as to the reasons behind the postponement of *Corrie* led many observers to speculate that it was the fear of losing funding of unidentified donors which led to the cancellation of *Corrie*. Hence, the new concept of censorship arises from the association between theatre works with uncomfortable political views and the lack or denial of their funding. Arguably, however, no theatrical topic has promoted such direct censorship in recent years other than the Palestinian crisis. Jed Brandt uses a powerful analogy to sum up the intersection between theatre censorship and the Palestinian/Israeli conflict as a theatrical topic: "If Israel is supposed to be the sixth borough of New York, then it's looking like the theater is another occupied territory" ("Who's Afraid"). Indeed, Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade argue that "'Palestine' has been the word that dared not be spoken" in American literary, artistic and political stages

(132). This relates directly to Arab American drama and the fact that it grapples with political issues, such as the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and others, which many theatre companies are uncomfortable with presenting for fear of repercussions similar to what happened with the *Corrie* incident.

Viner, co-author of *Corrie* wonders in her article "if a voice like this cannot be heard on a New York stage, what hope is there for anyone else?" ("Surely Americans"). The hope is certainly rare for Arab American playwrights' whose identity inadvertently evokes the Palestinian question. This is especially true when the Arab American community seems to be rendered invisible when consideration for audience members was cited as a justification for *Corrie*'s censorship. When Nicola explained that he consulted members of the community in regards to *Corrie*, journalist John Heilpern asked him about the Arab Americans' views, to which Nicola replies passively "We haven't heard from anyone in that community, and I can't speculate as to their reaction" ("A Scandal"). In the panel discussion about the play, which was cited earlier, Heilpern criticises Nicola:

> By "our community," the New York Theatre Workshop meant pro-Israeli lobbyists who believe that any criticism of Israel is wrong and shouldn't even be allowed. Whatever happened to free speech? Whatever happened to artistic independence? But then, Nicola didn't ask the opinion of a single member of the Arab community. "Our community" is a very small one, it seems, in the biggest multi-ethnic city on earth. (Garrett 62)

Here, the relationship between censorship and pleasing the audience becomes problematic when only a section of this audience, the more financially and politically influential, matters.

Arab American voices, whether those of the performer or spectator, are likely to be silenced when voices that are more powerful object to their narrative.

While the play was eventually staged in the commercial Minetta Lane Theatre in New York in October 2006 and other American theatrical venues, its NYTW cancelation - or the indefinite postponement - is one of the most recent and telling examples of censorship on a political work in an American theatre. It represents a statement about the torrid atmosphere in which American political theatre in the U.S. is trying to survive. In response to the fiasco of the cancellation of *Corrie*, playwright Paula Vogel expressed her frustration at the state of American theatre in an email to Marvin Carlson stating: "It is simply not true that American writers are not writing political plays; we simply know that they will not be produced in New York at not-for-profits with visibility and budgets" (qtd. in Garrett 59). This resistance to possibly controversial political works influences both the production of Arab American artistic expression and its permissibility. The case of *Corrie* was singled out especially because it touched upon the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. There is a general politically-motivated intolerance to any invocation, especially if sympathetic, of the Palestinian crisis or political expressions of Arab identity on the American stage. Viner laments: "Here was personal proof that the political climate is continuing to shift disturbingly, narrowing the scope of free debate and artistic expression" (2006). The censorship of *Corrie* on NYTW asserted the assumption that the visibility of a Palestinian or a similar political narrative on an American stage remains extremely challenging.

The high profile of Rachel Corrie as an American activist, the plays' editors and the critics who expressed their rage afterwards rendered this instance of censorship visible. However, the majority of censorship cases exercised on marginal voices remain typically unnoticed, unreported and undocumented. Although it is difficult to quantify the state of

censorship on Arab American writing, a presentation of few documented examples will establish a sense of the cultural and institutional limitations within which Arab American playwrights operate. The artistic expression of Arab American identity is a problematic issue in post 9/11 American culture and politics. This is because it might potentially summon the Palestinian crisis, or question the War on Terror (and its subsequent Iraqi war), or highlight the general infringement of civil rights (acknowledged to be American) since 9/11. In other words, the complicated relationship between the American foreign policy and the Middle-East as well as the American domestic policy after 9/11 rendered Arab American identity political, and its expression a challenge to both foreign and domestic American policies. Consequently, it is not surprising to see attempts to either silence, or "tone down", these works appear in various artistic fields.

The reasons behind the marginalisation of Arab American political and artistic expressions are many, but the issue of Palestine remains key. Helen Hatab Samhan argues that the political influence of powerful Israeli sympathisers have led to the exclusion of Arab American voices from politics and indeed other outlets of identity expressions. She explains that

> in many instances, protecting Israel has meant discrediting, delegitimizing, and silencing pro-Palestinian work in American schools, political bodies, and the mass media. These efforts have been far reaching enough for the civil liberties of some Arab Americans to be threatened; for acts of violence and harassment to be met with little outrage; and for the recurrence of exclusion of organised Arab American participation in the political process. ("Politics and Exclusion"12)

Samhan identifies this exclusion of Arab American voices as part of the American prejudice against Arabs, which she attributes to the American support for Israel, labelling it as "political racism" (11). While Samhan's analysis of the Anti-Arab discrimination as purely political dismisses its cultural, racial and religious nature and origin, she appropriately highlights the political power invested and practiced in the context of Anti-Arab racism. She cites many examples of academic and non-academic voices supportive of Palestine being "silenced" by Zionist American organisations. She concludes that: [a]t the core of such tactics is the fear of some American Jewish organisations that any national exposure to the substance of Middle-East issues, including Israeli injustices and Palestinian rights, will weaken the existing Israel-centered U.S. policy towards the region" (25). Here, Samhan points out a significant issue where Arab American voices are contested because they offer a different narrative in regards to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict specifically, and the Middle-East in general. She continues her analysis explaining that:

> Arab or Arab American participation is controversial, not in and of itself, but because it is perceived as such by American Jewish institutions. Such exclusion is not based on fair or democratic debate of real issues but on tactics reminiscent of the McCarthy era. In each case, there is an effort to establish guilt by association-association not with legitimate, constitutionally-protected activity by Arab Americans, but with terrorism, anti-Semitism, and even anti-Americanism. (25)

Although Samhan was commenting on pre 9/11 Arab American exclusion, her analysis is especially relevant to post 9/11 Arab American expression. The suspicion of "terrorism, anti-Semitism, and even anti-Americanism" (25) operates similarly as a form of external and internal censorship on Arab American artistic production today. The effect of the political

and cultural suspicion surrounding Arab Americans renders their artistic expression under similar scrutiny and possible censorship. Thus, it is not only works that deal with the Palestinian issue which are confronted by censoring attempts, but also other Arab American works which offer a challenging political narrative. Amaney Jamal comments on the curtailed space of Arab American artistic expression in the U.S. explaining:

> In the United States … Arab artists and exhibitors are often told to "tone down" their political identities. Artistic expressions about foreign intervention, Palestine, the Occupation, and war are vetoed out of the art exhibits. Lyrics, songs, and images that document political Arab experiences are excised from display lists, brochures, and handouts. Arab American art forms are censored by non-Arab exhibit owners, and often the non-Arab funders, too, show similar intolerance toward Arab political identity. Funding organisations are much more comfortable providing grants to promote "social" rather than "political" expressions of the culture, often asking grant writers to remove any mention of politics. This intolerance is most visible when any art forms thematically relate to Palestine or the Occupation, resulting in a segmented representation of Arab American identity within the arts. ("Inside and Outside" 77)

Jamal's insightful analysis highlights not only the pressure faced by the Arab American artists, but also the outcome. With political identity and its artistic manifestation being demarcated, creative expression becomes impaired, incomplete and ultimately distorted. That is, the tendency to offer funding and theatre spaces to works that only dramatise the "social" while dismissing the "political" renders a true artistic representation of this community lacking. This is a significant challenge to artistic freedom and the end-result of

the artistic expression, and is particularly problematic when exercised on voices of the minority. For, instead of being representative of their identity and community, their narrative is steered (by pressure of funding and visibility) to rather become a version of the mainstream narrative about this minority.

This being said, one of the possible ways of challenging this censoring environment is through empowering the Arab American and Middle-Eastern theatrical scene. By taking control of the means of production, Arab American artists are likely to enjoy greater freedoms in representing their communities and expressing their identity. An example of this is Silk Road Rising Theatre Company in Chicago (presented as a case-study in Chapter Five) which has hosted many Arab American plays with challenging topics. The Arab American plays discussed in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, as well as the case-study of Silk Road Rising are explored in this thesis for their attempt to reclaim Arab American self-representation. Silk Road Rising also premiered *Precious Stones*, a play which dramatises the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Jamil Khoury, Silk Road Rising Artistic director and author of *Precious Stones*, was capable of presenting his play despite its sensitive political content partly because he owned the means of production; and partly because the play was structured around giving an equal space for both the Palestinian and Israeli narratives without clearly sympathising with one over the other.

Outside the Arab American and Middle-Eastern theatre initiatives, however, censorship on Arab American creative expression remains active. Moreover, it does not only manifest itself in overt rejection of certain topics or works, but also by subtle practices such as deleting, editing or emphasising parts and sections of a work. Andrea Shalal-Esa has written many articles exposing the politics of visibility surrounding many Arab American literary works. She writes:

> Arab-American writers still have difficulty getting big book contracts with large mainstream publishers and if they do, they find their works often heavily edited, if not outright censored. Moreover, they have little control over the way their books are marketed and sold. (6)

Shalal-Esa cites two works (Diana Abu-Jaber's "Memories of Birth" and a novel by Gregory Orfalea) which were censored because of their Palestinian subject matter. The plight of censorship or heavy editing has also affected Arab American literary works that confront and contest popular Orientalist Arab stereotypes. Wail S. Hassan explores the admissibility and marginalisation of Arab American writing by discussing two examples of Arab American literary works: Norma Khouri's successful *Honor Lost*, and Gregory Orfalea's censored novel. Norma Khouri's memoir was first published in 2002 in Australia titled *Forbidden Love*, and was later re-published as *Honor Lost* in the U.S. in 2003. The novel, which recounts the honour killing of Khouri's friend in Jordan, was sold in considerable numbers and immersed her author with much publicity in Australia and the U.S. However, journalists who investigated the memoir's claims proved that the events narrated by the memoir were untruthful (Hassan 35). Despite being "poorly written with hysterical narration and clichéd description" (qtd. in Hassan 36), and filled with gross inaccuracies, both *Honor Lost* and its author were embraced in American popular culture. Wail Hassan (36) agrees with critic Steven Salaita (*Arab American Literary* 88) in attributing this to an American popular receptivity to works that confirm the long-standing Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs, and resistance to other works that challenge these conceptions. Accordingly, Gregory Orfalea's unpublished novel *Mirage*, which narrates the story of the marriage between a Palestinian and a Jew, was effectively censored. According to Orfalea (221), a New York publisher was

immensely enthusiastic about the novel, but decided against its publication after second consideration. Orafalea narrates the exchange between the publisher and himself:

> She said, "I want you to know I like your book very much, but I am not going to publish it." "Why?" I asked. "Because of who you are," she said. For a second I wanted to ask her, "Who am I?" But I just sat on the phone, speechless, until she filled the silence. "Greg," she said, "If you were Jewish, this wouldn't be a problem. People would believe the book. But because you are who you are, nobody will believe it."" (Orfalea 221)

In effect, Orfalea's novel was censored because he is an Arab. His story was likely to unsettle a sealed and accepted image of the Arab, deeply rooted in American popular culture.

Hassan's comparison of the reception of the two literary works demonstrates the complexity surrounding the Arab American voice in America and the underlying politics which steers it visibility or marginality. Hassan argues that

> Khouri's initial success vastly contrasts with the general neglect of Arabic and Anglophone Arab writers, suggesting that many readers in English-speaking countries are only prepared to accept texts that confirm what they already "know." Consequently, certain kinds of narratives – in this case, of Arab women's oppression – are eagerly received not only out of concern for the plight of the victims (which in many cases in indeed grave), but also because they confirm stereotypes that function to justify U.S. foreign policy toward Arab countries. By contrast, narratives that cross discursive or ideological lines are censored altogether, if they cannot be remolded and beaten into shape by editors." (36)

Hassan's comments highlight the problematic gendered discourse, which operates systematically in popular stereotypical narrative about Arabs in America; an issue which the following chapters will fully explore. Arab women seem to occupy a victimised role in the American popular taste and attempts to deconstruct this narrative struggle to find willing outlets or audiences. This narrative has been encouraged by an Orientalist tradition and has persisted in American popular culture developing audience' resistance to any different or challenging representation of Arabs. It is, therefore, not surprising for some artistic venues to exercise their censoring or editing forces in a bid to please their audiences. Shalal-Esa demonstrates the difficulty of disseminating an opposing narrative to the 'accepted' and 'expected' one of Arabs taking the example of Mohja Kahf's struggle to publish her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* . Shalal-Esa narrates that Kahf's "first editor called her a "pain in the ass." The second insisted Kahf remove many examples of white racism and harassment of Muslims in Indiana, where much of the story takes place. Those experiences, the editor argued, were just too overwhelming for the reader. Including them all would be unaesthetic" (7). However, works that conform to the stereotypical representations of Arabs are eagerly sought after, and enjoy wide commercial success (Shalal-Esa 7). The story of the victimised Arab woman in need of saving seems to be a particularly alluring narrative in American popular culture. Within this context, many Arab American women playwrights are attempting to write their own narratives and introduce their own self-representation. They are increasingly becoming visible and steadily challenging the narrative of the "passive" Arab woman. However, within this the tension between the cultural or social voice of the playwright's and her political one arises, and the permissibility of one at the expense of the other becomes problematic.

Although 9/11 created a demand for Arab American voices, not all voices were welcome: the call was for 'balanced' political voices with 'unthreatening' cultural accents. Arab American women playwrights, who like all Arab American artists were eager to respond creatively to 9/11, seemed to be favoured by artistic outlets, or given preferential treatment. This privileging, however, came with a double-edged sword: while it offered a golden opportunity for female Arab American self-representation, it expected in return to monitor, edit and remould the narrative of their representation. It remains to be seen whether this gendered privileging is laying the foundations for an Arab American feminist theatre, or covertly curtailing the expression of Arab American women playwrights whilst giving them a conditioned visibility.

American Theatric Philanthropy and Arab American Women Playwrights

After the criticism aimed at NYTW in the aftermath of *Corrie*'s cancellation, few steps were taken to cover up the artistic and political 'impotence' of the non-for-profit theatre. As noted earlier in this chapter, the NYTW welcomed Arab American theatre collective Nibras and its female playwrights in 2007; a strategic decision that was taken shortly after the controversy of *Corrie*'s postponement. The move came after Leila Buck, playwright and member of Nibras, contacted the NYTW with a message:

> I took the moment to explain why people, not primarily Arab-Americans, but many form the theatre communities were so angry. Whether NYTW was doing so or not, theatre about and from Palestine was actively censored in America. People might have been misplacing their anger, but their outrage came from years of experience. (qtd. in Hill xxiii)

The NYTW responded favourably and Nibras was invited to become Company-in-Residence. The move would prove mutually beneficial for both NYTW and Nibras: NYTW aimed to recover from the embarrassment following *Corrie*'s cancelation, and Nibras wished to benefit from NYTW's resources and support. The partnership led to the commissioning of a two-day programme called "Aswat: Voices from Palestine" in 2007. The programme comprised of staged readings of Arab American and Palestinian playwrights (male and female) exploring Palestinian themes. Thus, the partnership served to refute the accusations aimed at the NYTW for being 'biased' or exercising censorship on theatrical works which deal with the Palestinian crisis. "Aswat" was followed by the invitation of Israeli American playwright Rebekah Maggor in 2007 to stage-read her first play *Two Days at Home—Three Days*; a move that would promote the NYTW as presenting a 'balanced' viewpoint on the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

Out of the many plays that were stage-read during the "Aswat" two-day programme, few works by Arab American playwrights were selected to be further developed in NYTW (Hill "Middle-Eastern American Theatre"). Significantly, all of the works selected belonged to Arab American female playwrights (Betty Shamieh, Leila Buck, Najla Said and Nathalie Handal). From these works, only two plays were further developed into full productions, and these were *The Black Eyed* by Betty Shamieh in 2007, and *Food and Fadwa* by Lamees Issaq in 2012. While both plays have Palestinian characters, neither is expressively engaged in the politics of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, nor in dramatising the situations of these characters under the duress of war.

While Nibras became less active following "Aswat", the NYTW shifted its auspice to Noor theatre, another female Arab American theatrical collective, inviting it to replace Nibras as Company-in-Residence. As mentioned previously, the collaboration led to the

production of *Food and Fadwa* in 2012, which was the first play with a Palestinian setting to be staged in the NYTW after the abandoned production of *Corrie*. Written by Lamees Issaq and Jacob Kader, *Food and Fadwa* tells the story of Fadwa, a Palestinian woman who escapes her Palestinian crisis and domestic drama by starring in her own made-believe cooking show as she prepares the food for her sister's wedding. The play's dramatisation of the internal and personal space of a Palestinian family away from the troubling politics of its outside reality renders the play insistently a drama about family and not politics. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is decentralised and replaced by Fadwa's culinary talents and ambitions. *Food and Fadwa* received positive reviews from theatre critics such as Charles Isherwood who noted that "[t]he small details of the characters' lives, rather than the blunt, occasionally melodramatic strokes, distinguish "Food and Fadwa" from any number of other domestic comedy-dramas of family strife" ("A West Bank"). It is precisely these small details in the daily life a Palestinian family rather than its political reality that invited general audiences to attend. The title of Isherwood's aforementioned review ("A West Bank Curfew, but What's for Dinner?") reflects the play's intention to distance itself from the conflicting politics of the region. A comparison between the censorship of *Corrie* and the permissibility of *Food and Fadwa* at the NYTW supports the conclusion that certain political narratives about Palestine are inadmissible on an American stage. *Food and Fadwa* bypassed the censoring voices by engaging with the social and familial contexts of these Arab characters rather than the often-recalled political and strife-ridden situations they live in. Conceivably, the de-politicisation of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict in the play has been a key facilitator for its admissibility and reception at the NYTW.

Although the play has been praised for its attention to the small details of a family life, its dialogue and theatrical merit, the de-politicisation of the living circumstance of

Fadwa and her family leaves the play lacking in depth and sincerity. Reviewing the play, journalist Lysandra Ohrstrom comments: "In *Food and Fadwa* the occupation is less a harsh reality inflicted on the Palestinian people by one of the world's largest military powers than a giant elephant in the room made more obvious by the collective refusal to acknowledge its presence" ("Theater review"). Further, Oshrstom problematises the play's relationship with its New-Yorker audiences, noting that the playwrights' tendency to please such an audience compromised an 'honest' dramatisation of a Palestinian family. Citing her companion's remark who thought the play was "cute" because "it wasn't political", Oshrstom comments:

> I welcome any play that chips away at the ingrained bias towards Israel that is so common among New Yorkers by humanizing a Palestinian family in the West Bank and realise that immediately launching into a history of the injustices perpetrated by Israel might make a Manhattan theater audience defensive and dismissive. While I understand the need to push politics to the background of the Faranesh story, depoliticizing them entirely and sanding down the rough edges of occupation that shape the families' identity strikes me as distracting and even dishonest. ("Theater review")

In other words, while the play might succeed in humanising the Palestinian people, it fails in delivering a just representation of their daily struggles under the political conflict. Thus, the play wastes the chance of educating an audience, for whose sake it is decidedly compliant, as Ohrstorm notes: "The uninformed, pro-Israel audience to which the play is presumably geared will probably leave *Food and Fadwa* with the impression that a power cuts are among the worst of Israel's offenses" ("Theatre review").

Food and Fadwa enjoyed a healthy run at the NYTW and helped repair the theatre's damaged reputation after the *Corrie* incident. The play's premiere at the NYTW also ushered playwright Lamees Issaq and Noor Theatre into visibility proving the partnership between the NYTW and Noor Theatre to be mutually beneficial. It is not unsubstantiated to read the events following *Corrie*'s censorship suspiciously: after the cancellation of a play that asks audiences to confront the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, a new play by Arab Americans is welcomed on stage. This play, however, is about a Palestinian woman who, while affected by the Palestinian crisis, spends her entire time engaged with the unproblematic Palestinian culinary world from within her apolitical kitchen space. Here, the marginalised Arab American women voices (of both playwright and character) are offered visibility so long as their politics stay "balanced" and unprovocative.

Moreover, *Food and Fadwa* is not the only play with a Palestinian family as a subject matter to be staged in an Off-Broadway theatre. In 2004, Arab American female playwright Betty Shamieh brought her play *Roar* to the Off-Broadway Theatre Row. The play was welcomed with critical acclaim and good audience attendance. *Roar* dramatises the generational struggle of Irene, a daughter of a Palestinian family, living in the U.S.. Irene desperately wishes to become a Blues singer, but is struggling with an identity that is trapped between an Arab familial heritage and an American future. The Arab lineage remains problematic in the play not only because it refers to the immigrant experience of this family in the U.S., but because it also evokes the Palestinian conflict. However, similar to *Food and Fadwa*, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is rarely addressed in the play. In his analysis of the play, Yasser Fouad Selim points out that "references to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in the play are always marginal. Serious talks about the Middle-East conflict are often cut short because, according to Hala [Irene's mother], 'it is easier to get yourself all worked up about

stuff you can't change than to deal with the things in your life that you actually can'" (298). The insistent avoidance of politics when it comes to Palestine as a theatrical topic is a recurring issue in the Arab American plays produced in non-Arab American theatres. Moreover, the authors of such plays are often Arab American women playwrights, who are becoming increasingly visible.

However, Shamieh's success is a remarkable achievement considering her earlier belief that as a playwright, she would not be heard if she invoked her Palestinian parentage. In her acceptance speech for the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) Award for Excellence in the Performing Arts, Shamieh explains:

> I was told all my life by Palestinians and others that I would never make it in American theatre if I wrote about Palestinian issues, that it would be impossible for me to have an impact or a voice. Whatever small success I have achieved has been in spite of the constant messages of defeatism that are rife within our community. ("Miss Betty")

In her playwriting journey, Shamieh certainly managed to overcome many conflicts of identity and authorship: In the early stages, Shamieh avoided acting in plays about Arabs, or sharing works she wrote about Arab American issues for fear of being pigeonholed (Schillinger "The New 'Arab'"). Today, she is one of the most celebrated Arab American playwrights thus far. Yet, Shamieh's political narrative in her plays is often ambiguous. In *Roar* as well as *The Black Eyed*, two of Shamieh's plays that introduce Palestinian characters, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is deliberately alienated or timidly approached. It is valid to question such a tendency and wonder whether the choice to depoliticise plays about Palestinian families is the result of direct or self-censorship. Describing her plays,

Shamieh asserts: "They're not about politics, but they're inherently political. Because if you've never heard a perspective, it makes it political" (qtd. in Schillinger "The New 'Arab'"). Shamieh's statement invites many interpretations: On the one hand, it presents neutrality as a political stance; on the other, it relinquishes political responsibility. In a blog-essay, Shamieh introduces her viewpoints about what constitutes political theatre. She believes that changing audience's rigid opinions about certain political issues might not be possible, but promoting an acceptance of the opposing political party on basis of shared humanity is possible. According to Shamieh, this renders theatre ultimately political. She writes:

> why would I – as a playwright – assume that I had the power to change other people's deeply held beliefs with my plays? What is the importance of theatre if one adheres to the idea that a play rarely has the ability to change people's minds about the most divisive political issues of one's time and place? … What would it mean if there were more stories that sensitised audiences to the fact that there is an indefinable, yet recognizable human essence that unites us, both throughout the globe and across the ages? In a world that is divided into nations that wage wars on one another, it is theatre's ability to humanise that makes it so politically potent. ("Politically Potent Theatre")

This version of political theatre, while promoting admirable ends, is a version carefully constructed to comply with the politics of certain theatre venues and audience. It promotes less confrontational theatre: a theatre that is more 'comfortable' and less risky for both playwright and audience. Thus, it secures its author against economic censorship, or the danger of remaining un-staged and unpublished. It is, conceivably, the only version of political theatre about Palestine by an Arab American playwright that is allowed visibility.

Shamieh's works reflects the implementation of this politically non-confrontational dramaturgy where the Palestinian/Israeli crisis is often decentralised in her Palestinian "family" plays. In fact, one of the reviews of *Roar* began by reassuring its audience of a de-politicalised and peaceful play about a family that happens to be Palestinian in America: "Are you right to feel a nervous flutter stirring in the pit of your stomach at the prospect of seeing a play about Palestinians? If that play's title is *Roar*, are you in for roaring explosions from suicide bombs being detonated? The answer to both of the above is 'No'" (Sommer "A *CurtainUp* Review"). Perhaps, here lies the answer to Shamieh's challenging relationship with the political content of her plays. Avoiding politics renders the play accessible and brings down the guard of a potentially defensive audience. This, however, is likely the result of the industry's pressure rather than the playwright's free choice. Citing one of Shamieh's previous plays Randy Gener writes:

> the apathy among some U.S. critics who consistently dismiss (or in rare cases apologetically inveigh against) plays that deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, like Shamieh's *Tamam* and Lerner's *Coming Home*, by writing things like, "These plays may not change anybody's political convictions," or "These plays speak to the converted.(49)

Tamam was an early inception of a character that would eventually star in Shamieh's full play *The Black Eyed*. The play and its earlier versions, which Shamieh was asked to edit repeatedly in order to naturalise its politics, are discussed in Chapter Two.

The visibility and success of Betty Shamieh and Lamees Issaq echo that of Heather Raffo, another female Arab American Playwright. Her *9 Parts of Desire* (discussed in detail in Chapter Two), is a critically acclaimed play that brings the voices of nine Iraqi women to

the American stage. The Iraqi context of this play is no less politically charged than that of Palestine. The play treads carefully on the subject of the American war on Iraq. Although *9 Parts of Desire* speaks of the harrowing effects of war (both the 1990s Gulf war and American war in 2003), it is particularly the atrocity of Saddam Hussein which is expressively described and unreservedly exposed.

Raffo, Shamieh and Issaq are part of a tradition of Arab American women writers who seem to gain prominence after 9/11. Arab American women playwrights appear to be far more visible than their male counterparts in the American theatrical scene. In a subheading for an article about Arab American women playwrights, Liesl Schillinger emphasises: "Americans may be more receptive to Arab women than to Arab men" ("The New 'Arab'"). While the statement calls for many arguments about racism and sexism, it explains the distinction received by Arab American women playwrights. One can infer that the visibility of Arab American women playwrights is, in part, because they and their narratives are presumed to be 'unthreatening', 'docile' and 'manageable' – unlike their male counterparts'. Schillinger confirms this by noting: "It is interesting to know that the majority of Arab American playwrights are female, mainly because American publishers and producers find Arab women less dangerous than Arab men" ("The New 'Arab'"). She quotes the Iranian American writer Layla Dowlatshahi who expresses: "I think the idea of an Arab man is scary to Americans. Growing up in this country, I've always sensed there's been a fear of Muslim men, and of any kind of ethnic minority, especially male. They're seen as a threat. It's easier to acclimate to a female Arab or Muslim voice than to jump to a male" (qtd. in Schillinger "The New 'Arab'"). While this receptivity to female Arab American voices is much needed and it brings a necessary visibility to a previously marginalised voice, such visibility often comes with its own agenda. The admissibility of Arab American female

voices incurs its own sets of conditions and compromises where overtly Arab American political works are unlikely to pass into mainstream stages. It thus, creates an induced anxiety of owning the politics of the Arab region through an Arab point of view in a female-authored Arab American play.

Furthermore, although empowering, this tendency to foster Arab American female playwrights is perhaps an attempt to write a new narrative best understood as cultural neo-colonisation. This narrative relies on the presentation of the new Arab American woman saved from an ideological Islamic and Arab patriarchy. In her analysis of the Middle-Eastern art after 9/11, Jessica Winegar examines the phenomenon of favouring female artistic expressions under the subtitle "Fetishizing Women and Critiquing Islam" explaining:

> It is in this matrix of hegemonic notions about art and freedom, and assumptions about Islam, that we also find the many events featuring female Middle-Eastern visual artists and filmmakers whose work is presented and interpreted as showing, and therefore challenging, Middle-Eastern gender inequalities seen as derived almost solely from Islam. These events often feature women born in the Middle-East but who live in the West, and this latter fact is almost always viewed as a source of value in their work. As artists who have themselves embodied the ideal of the "bridge," then, they are seen as the most free and able to comment on, or perhaps change, the lack of freedom in the Middle-East. (668)

Here, the Arab American women artist is embraced and introduced into visibility as the new 'balanced' and 'tolerant' model, product of the American philanthropy.

The framework governing the preferential treatment of Arab American women artists is a reminder of a sexist and racist cultural history. Investigating the criteria applied in selecting Middle-Eastern art to be disseminated in American artistic venues, Jessica Winegar analyses the apparent celebration of particular forms of Middle-Eastern artistic works after 9/11. She notes that most artistic venues seek works that would "humanise" Middle-Easterners while dismissing those that deal with the specificity of the political, cultural and religious frameworks of their region. Winegar argues that the selection of particular works and rejections of others draw on an Oriental history as well as political agendas:

> My purpose in calling attention to the histories of the frameworks used in the selection, marketing, and reception of Middle-East art after 9/11/01 is to emphasize that they are [not] as objective or disinterested as they claim to be. Rather, they originated within the context of ascendant Western European and U.S. global dominance and thus bring with them a certain politics, which are then conveniently regenerated for a post-9/11 era. (661)

With this in mind, Winegar lists three forms of Middle-Eastern art that art organisers and funders typically seek and celebrate. These include "Historical Middle-Eastern Islamic art" as a signifier of a past rather than present civilisation; Sufi Music, which symbolises "a peaceful Islam" or a rebellion against it; and "visual art made by Middle-Eastern Muslim women [which] remains a perennial favorite, and is frequently interpreted as critiquing "bad" Islam" (Winegar 661/2). Framing the art of Middle-Eastern women within this discourse of freedom, or resistance to Islamic oppressive gender and sexual structures, enabled only because of Western/American patronage, is what makes such a privileging problematic as both sexist and Orientalist.

Similar courtesy has rarely been given to male Arab American Playwrights like the prolific Yuseff El Guindi, for example, whose plays were critically acclaimed both for their invigorating content and aesthetic brilliance, but are still absent from national theatres. The favouritism practiced by the arts funding apparatus in the U.S. towards Arab American women artists is best understood as a by-product of the stereotypes surrounding Arab men and women (Chapter Three will problematise this gendered stereotyping further and offer a counter narrative by Arab American male playwrights). What remains critical, nevertheless, is that artistic visibility continues to be an area where financial and institutional support carry political and cultural agendas. In her article "Islamophobia and the "Privileging" of Arab American Women", feminist scholar Nada Elia analyses the preferential treatment of Arab American and Muslim women in comparison to the Arab and Muslim man:

> The "privileging" of Muslim and Arab American women over their male compatriots is apparent in numerous forums, revealing a pattern of viewing the women as harmless and redeemable, the men as perennial enemies, never to be trusted … Arab as well as Arab American literature available in the United States is predominantly by women writers because publishers deem that what women have to offer the American readership is more interesting than what men may have to say. (2006, 158)

In other words, there is an appetite for art produced by female Arab American artists because it could, potentially, be moulded into an Orientalist narrative. The creation of this Orientalist narrative, however, follows a more sophisticated approach. Rather than producing narratives written about the Other, this Other is encouraged to take agency of its narrative. Yet, acts of censorship and editing, or manipulation of arts funding are ultimately the regulators of the final narrative. Within this context, the privileging of Arab American

women artists functions as another form of censorship, which covertly curtails the expression of Arab American women playwrights while giving them a conditioned visibility. With works devoid of a political point of view, some female Arab American playwrights are physically unveiled, but politically and creatively constrained.

This setting invites two opposing cultural analyses: Firstly, that the "invisible centre", operating through the tools of institutional support and censoring/editing/rewriting, is giving this new Arab American female voice a space. This space is only available to the artists whose voice corresponds with the narrative dictated by the "invisible centre". Thus, the "centre" privileges these voices to move from the invisibility of the margin to the exposure that it provides. This view, while pessimistic, is supported by the experience of female Arab American academics such as Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, who felt that there was an increasing demand in academia for "Third World" women to speak and take agency of their representation. Nonetheless, as Amireh and Majaj recount: "we quickly discovered that this gesture of inclusion was not innocent, but instead often functioned to contain our voices within a predefined space. Discursive, institutional, and ideological structures preempted our discourse and determined both what we could say and whether we would be heard when we spoke" (1). Based on the examples discussed earlier in this chapter, it is credible to apply Amireh and Majaj's analysis of the conditioned visibility offered to Arab American female academics to that which is presented to Arab American female artists. It appears that a predetermined "space" and narrative govern the cultural production of Arab American women in America. However, the fact that Amireh and Majaj (through the publication of their *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*) along with many other Arab American female women are challenging the conditions of their visibility by producing a counter narrative introduces the second analysis

regarding the relationship between Arab American women artists and the environment they operate within.

This cultural analysis sees the decision of Arab American women artists to be active despite the hegemonic funding and censoring structure as an act of resistance. It reads their cultural production not as a move from marginality to the centre, but as a resisting act that managed to adopt the centre's narratives and means of production. Bell Hooks argues that marginality is a space that comprises both "sites of repressions and sites of resistance" (342), but she is especially interested in the preservation of resistance when the marginalised operates within the centre. She recalls a motherly advice she received before embarking on her education in a "white" institution where she was told to learn the cultural tools of the dominant power without internalising their ideology. Hooks writes:

> She was insisting on my power to be able to separate useful knowledge that I might get from the dominating group from participation in ways of knowing that would lead to estrangement, alienation, and, worse, assimilation and cooption. She was saying that it is not necessary to give yourself over to them to learn. Not having been in those institutions, she still knew that I might be faced again and again with situations where I would be "tried," made to feel as though a central requirement of my being accepted might be participation in this system of exchange to ensure my success, my "making it." She was reminding me of the necessity of opposition and simultaneously encouraging me not to lose that radical perspective shaped and formed by marginality. (342)

To illustrate, Hooks argues that while the centre has the power to reproduce the marginalised in its image, the marginalised can equally produce its own image using the tools of the centre. Comparatively, the work of Arab American women artists is, perhaps, a reflection of the two images: that of the centre's and marginality's. Thus, these Arab American women artists produce a new narrative that is neither entirely resistant nor compliant, but is a previously unheard narrative. While some of their narratives might be compromised at times, Arab American female playwrights are neither silent nor passive. They are utilising the tools offered by a current sexist and postcolonial setting (centre) to set their narratives free. Despite operating within different forms of external and internal censorship, their narrative remains a version of events that has not been visible until recently.

In other words, Shamieh, Issaq and Raffo have produced plays that challenge the stereotypical representation of Arab women even though they had to absent other components of that representation. The next chapter will examine two plays by Shamieh and Raffo respectively, and explore how both playwrights have adopted critical and literary feminist strategies to present Arab women in a previously unshed light. It will, thus adopt the second aforementioned cultural analysis to explore the work of Arab American women playwrights who, while governed by political and cultural expectations, are shaping up a 'centrally-marginalised' Arab American feminist movement that is speaking both to the centre and the margin.

External and Internal Censorship Fostering Self-Censorship

In general, Arab American drama whether male or female authored is subject not only to external censoring factors, but also to censorship emitting from the Arab American community itself. While prone to institutional censorship outside the Arab American

community, Arab American playwrights face censoring attempts from inside the Arab American community as well. Though an Arab American playwright and filmmaker, Rana Kazkaz abandoned the American stage and other creative outlets for alternative Arab artistic spaces. Her decision sprung from a long journey she best characterises as "painful and frustrating" ("Personal Interview") through which two reasons led to her divorce from the American and Arab American stages. Firstly, Kazaz explains that as an Arab American woman after 9/11, she was perceived as, and expected to be the victim and therefore in constant need to defend herself and all Arabs through her work. Secondly, Kazaz felt pressured to create plays that would "humanise" the Arab, rather than hold an honest mirror to the Arab community ("Personal Interview"). The first reason is the product of a discourse outside the Arab community that projects a narrative of victimisation on Arab American women. The second reason stems from the Arab American community, which feeling threatened in post 9/11 America has become overprotective over its image. Hence, some Arab Americans are expressly resistant to any criticism from Arab American artists aimed at the flaws of their community. Dramatic critical evaluation of issues pertaining to gender, sexuality and religious uncertainty, in particular, are frowned upon within the Arab American circle. Consequently, Arab American artists who problematise their community's relationship to these issues are sometimes accused of betraying the group at its time of need. These artists are typically expected to prioritise combating the negative representations of Arab Americans through their work over exploring the intragroup problems and values.

Although not many, examples of pressure applied by audience members from the Arab American community can induce self-censorship, already activated by political discourses in some non-Arab American theatres. For example, the screening of *Mosque Alert*, a new online play by Silk Road Rising (discussed in Chapter Five), has been met with

intentional walkouts from Arab and Muslim American women in protest against a specific dialogue concerning the hijab or the headscarf ("Personal Interview"). Similarly, Yussef El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (examined in Chapter Four) was met with a storm of criticism from the Arab American community because it represented a homosexual Muslim son and his atheist brother. Distressingly, Silk Road Rising, the theatre company where *Ten Acrobats* was produced and staged in 2005, received a small number of death threats addressed to both its artistic and executive director to stop the run of the play (Khoury "Personal Interview"). They were empty threats, and apart from few members of the audience leaving the theatre during the performance, the play continued its run with no further incidents. However, the impact of such incidents could potentially hinder the creation and production of certain Arab American theatrical works.

This places Arab American artistic expression under a second layer of censorship: that of the Arab American community. From personal interviews with ten Arab American theatre practitioners (conducted during a research trip to Silk Roar Rising in late June 2013), all artists confirmed the existence of two folds of censorship: one located outside the Arab American community, which coaxingly advises them against political expression, and another stemming from inside the Arab American community, which does not tolerate critical portrayal of Arabs after 9/11. As a result, most Arab American artists I interviewed admitted to operating a (conscious and unconscious) version of self-censorship. That self-censorship is perhaps far more threatening to artistic and creative expressions than either inner or outer community censorship. In *Censoring Culture*, Robert Atkins and Svetlana Mintcheva dedicated a much-needed space to the exploration of self-censorship concluding that the subtlety of the practice leaves it yet the most serious form of censorship:

> Before something is censored, however, it must be produced and distributed, that is, attain some visibility. A discussion of censorship that only takes into account attempts to repress existing works, misses all those works that never came to life: Perhaps, because this novel didn't seem sufficiently commercial, there was no chance of it being published or, perhaps, because that play might have offended somebody, the playwright censored himself at the outset and decided not to write it at all ("Introduction")

While it is difficult to quantify direct censorship on some Arab American literary works because of the rarity of its documentation, it is almost impossible to do so with Arab American self-censorship. It is, however, sufficient to presume that self-censorship is a constituent that accompanies Arab American expression when artistic visibility is coveted.

All the Arab American plays discussed in the following chapters draw a picture of a complex web of influences, which affect both their characters and authors. For example, *Browntown* by Sam Yunis (examined in Chapter Three) presents the plight of an Arab American actor who is expected to fulfil the "terrorist" role on the cinematic screen as the only option for visibility, and survival in the profession. In Yussef El Guindi's *Our Enemies: Lively Scense of Love and Combat* (also analysed in Chapter Three), the female Arab American writer will only be published if she subscribes to the narrative of the victimised Arab woman, saved by a civilised West. These two plays, in effect, dramatise the censorship practiced on the Arab American artist. Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* and *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire*, examined in Chapter Two, problematise this narrative of Arab women's victimisation further and present a resistant representation. Yet, both plays are politically timid (censored). Thus, the next chapter will explore how the two playwrights are producing a representation of Arab women outside an Orientalist discourse, while investigating the

ways in which both playwrights are negotiating external censorship and imposed self-censorship.

To summarise, covert censorship on Arab American artists exists institutionally, culturally and ideologically. In all of its forms, censorship on Arab American creative expression is tied to the innate political nature of the Arab American identity: an identity that evokes the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, the war on terror discourse, and an Orientalist racial and gendered narrative. Thus, the dramatic expression of such an identity can cross certain political red-lines, which mainstream theatres are uncomfortable in presenting for fear of audience or economic boycott. Within this setting, however, a new discourse of gendered privileging is arising in regards to Arab American women playwrights; one that fosters their social, cultural and gender visibility while veiling its political perspective. This, paired with internal censorship practiced by some members of the Arab American community represent the strain enforced on Arab American artistic freedom of expression. Yet, Arab American drama shows rich and complex negotiations with these discourses. In many of the plays examined in the following chapters, a resistant narrative to discourses of stereotypes and war on terror is clearly constructed and articulated. Moreover, while some Arab American women playwrights are implicated in a neo-Orientalist discourse that governs their articulation, they are carefully negotiating the intersection between centre and marginality to offer a narrative that has not been heard before.

Emerging from Invisibility: Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* and Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* Negotiate the Politics of Arab Women's Representation

but I choose to believe in
another power tonight
the power
rocking the stage
telling the world
we exist
look at us
pronounce our names
remember us.

Nathalie Handal – "First Bombing"

Female Arab American playwrights, such as Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo, Lameece Issaq and Leila Buck, are becoming increasingly visible in the aftermath of 9/11. Their artistic visibility is undoubtedly a positive step towards deconstructing the Orientalist discourses concerning Middle Eastern women. However, this visibility does not always grant these Arab American women playwrights an unfettered agency over their narratives. As concluded by the previous chapter, there is institutional limitation on Arab American political narrative in theatre. In fact, some Arab American women playwrights had to adjust parts of their narratives and make editorial compromises to accommodate the politics of the theatres that staged their work. By employing early feminist practices in theatre, such as collective writing and focus on female-centred plays and subjects, these playwrights are helping to initiate an Arab American feminist movement. In most female-authored Arab American literature, there is a conscious attempt to unsettle an Orientalist expectation of what an Arab and/or Arab American woman is. By representing themselves as Arab American women, they challenge a Western gendered discourse that systematically frames

Arab women as victims of their cultural patriarchy and religion. In this context, this chapter examines two plays by two successful Arab American women playwrights: Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*, and Heather Raffo *9 Parts of Desire*. The analysis of these two works follows two points: the first provides an examination of the subject matter and techniques employed by these two plays to present an alternative, "empowered" representation of the Arab woman, and the second addresses the politics of representation and visibility that envelops the two plays and their authors. As a starting point, however, it is essential to contextualise Arab American women within the gender and religious discourses of their community, as well as the political and cultural American discourses following 9/11.

The Gendered Positioning of Arab American Women after 9/11

As outlined in the introduction, the state of suspicion following the tragic attacks of 9/11 cast collective and indiscriminate blame on Arabs and Muslims. A new "Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim" category was created to denote exclusion from the American national Self and imply "foreigner, or enemy alien, or terrorist" in its fold (Volpp 579). Assuming that this new category was unselective and genderless is a mistake, however. Louise Cainkar notes in *Homeland Insecurity*: "As it turns out, post- 9/11 repercussions for Arab and Muslim Americans were quite gendered, with men positioned as the security threat managed largely by the government and women as the cultural threat dealt with by the public" (6). In other words, the blame and consequent suspicion and incrimination of Arabs and Muslims was gendered: the male was considered a threat to the public sphere of the nation, while the female represented an incongruous cultural sign that needs to be privately contained. Accordingly, the national security institutions handled the national threat of the Arab and Muslim male, while the mission of assimilating or "Americanising" the Arab and Muslim female became that of the American public and its cultural institutions.

Yet, this cultural management operated differently on Arab and Muslim American women based on their dress code. Muslim women in hijab (head cover, or scarf), became particularly visible in the post 9/11 turmoil, and were the primary target of hate crimes directed at women associated with Arabness and Islam (Cainkar 6). Louise Cainkar postulates that the hijab marked them as an Other, who is different, and in defiance of the American concept of freedom (6). It became a performative sign of a religion associated with the 9/11 attacks, and therefore a symbol of cultural enmity. On the other hand, Muslim women who did not wear the hijab were considered "Americanised", embraced as converts to an American culture that liberated them from their oppressive religious and patriarchal homeland culture. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad contends that

> the hijab is viewed by Americans – as a symbol of cultural difference (and thus inferiority), a threat to secularity, or simply as a personal expression of religiosity – it frames the female body as an icon of the "clash of civilisations" and has far-reaching political and social implications (*Muslim Women* 39).

The visibility and acceptance of Arab American and Muslim women is, thus, initially governed by the politics of dress. The following management of these Othered women stems from the "civilised" Western attempt to free them from the perceived oppression of their patriarchs as well as their own "internalised" oppression.

As many Arab and Muslim feminists (Hadad 261/2, Al-Hibri 161) argue, the problem with the Western narrative of the victimisation of Arab woman by their male oppressors is not whether patriarchy and oppression of women still exists in the Arab world or not; Arab women still have their battles to be won against patriarchy and oppression.

However, this is but one facet of their on-going struggle. Women in Palestine and Iraq, for example, operate within the context of war, which creates a daily struggle for them to survive. The representation of Arab women as victimised, only to be rescued by a Western intervention (military or culturally) is highly problematic. This is because such representation dismisses the context within which Arab women live; it defines Arab women by their relation to men (by whom they are seen to be oppressed), which negates an autonomous existence for them and further reduces them to passivity.

As problematic as it is, this gendered positioning of Arab and Muslim women is new. In *Orientlaism*, Edward Said finds that Arab and Muslim women were introduced to the Western imagination through novels and travel literature about the Orient, which framed them as exotic, highly sensualised, hidden from sight and almost always oppressed by Arab male patriarchy. In *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, Mohja Kahf traces and documents the Western narrative of victimisation, which consistently trapped Muslim women and Arab women, by extension. Kahf argues that ""the Muslim woman is being victimised" is the common axis undergirding a wide variety of Western representations" (1). Academic and feminist Minoo Moallem defines the framing of the Muslim woman, as she asks for its urgent questioning:

> It is time for us to question the representation of Muslim women at this particular conjuncture [9/11].The trope of the Muslim woman as the ultimate victim of a timeless patriarchy defined by the barbarism of Islamic religion and in need of civilizing has become a very important component of Western regime of knowledge. ("Am I a Muslim Woman?" 52)

Although the narrative of Muslim and Arab women's victimisation has been constantly present in Western discourses, Kahf points out that such a narrative retains elements of invisibility until reactivated at important junctures in imperial and colonial history (2). Representations of the "victimised" Muslim and Arab woman have been widely disseminated and exploited as a justifying factor for past colonial conquests in the East and present military interventions in the name of the "war on terror".

The American political discourse following the 9/11 attacks repeatedly referenced the oppression of Muslim and Arab women, in propagandas prior to the Afghanistan and Iraqi war asserting the need to 'liberate' or 'rescue' them. In "The Citizen and the Terrorist" Leti Volpp interprets the Orientalist gendered representation of Arab and Muslim women as a strategic choice to facilitate and implement colonial projects emphasising a post 9/11 optimal manipulation of it:

> Historically, the status of women in need of uplift was a source of justification for Western colonisation of regions of the world – in the words of critical theorist Gayatri Spivak, "white men saving brown women from brown men." This idea was resuscitated during the aftermath of September 11. One of the stated justifications for American intervention in Afghanistan – made by both President George Bush and First Lady Laura Bush - was that Afghan women needed to be saved from the Taliban and Islamic barbarism. (153)

Arab and Muslim women found themselves increasingly exploited in a discourse that claimed to liberate their bodies, sexualities and rights. In favour of a productive feminist discourse concerning Muslim Women that steers away from imperial discourses, Laurie

Penny contends: “Wars have always been fought by men over the bodies of women. Today, Islamic women in particular find themselves in the unenviable position of understanding their bodies as an ideological battleground, whether they live in Southend or Saudi Arabia” (“Thinly veiled”). Many Arab American women playwrights are actively engaged in countering this “ideological battleground” by creating an alternative representation of Arab women to reflect their realities, struggles and ambitions. They find it imperative to counter the narrative of the “victimised” Arab woman in their plays.

Betty Shamieh and Heather Raffo, two female Arab American playwrights, are part of a new movement, championed by Arab American women playwrights, which seeks to reclaim the representation of Arab women in America. The previous chapter illustrated the advantaged, yet precarious state that Arab American women playwrights seem to occupy in the post 9/11 American cultural scene. On the one hand, Arab American women artists are favoured by publishers and art venues on the supposition that audiences are more receptive to Arab women’s narratives. On the other hand, these same artists are pressured into editing and modifying certain parts of their narratives, if such parts alluded to Middle Eastern political realities, deemed uncomfortable for some American audiences and art funders. While the previous chapter concluded that certain funders and theatre venues favour women playwrights, whose works are politically tamed, one cannot dismiss the fact that these Arab American women artists are becoming a voice to be reckoned with. They are acquiring an Arab American feminist stance, a position they have rarely enjoyed in the Arab or American cultural scene before 9/11.

Arab American women playwrights, such as Shamieh and Raffo, are writing from the confines of limiting gender and political discourses. Distinctly, one of the most enduring discourses that these playwrights are trying to challenge is the Orientalist one. As Arab

American women, both playwrights had to justify their ability to write and engage actively in the public space. This is because the Orientalist narrative of the "victimised" Arab woman places them in the private space of home and silence. In an article celebrating the new voice of Arab American playwrights, Liesl Schillinger follows similar Orientalist conceptions of Arab women; "It is not surprising that their [Arab American female playwrights'] voices are only being heard lately; the women belong to a new demographic. They are breaking a path not only creatively, but socially, overcoming pressures from the immigrant community to find husbands, not agents" ("The New 'Arab'"). In here, Schillinger reiterates an expected narrative of Arab women as lacking professional ambitions while harbouring domestic ones. It also hints that the newly found Arab American female voice is the result of a nourishing American culture, which allows women to be heard, unlike their familial cultures.

Although 9/11 has renewed an Orientalist narrative about Arab women, many Arab American playwrights have highlighted the September attacks to be the catalyst for their invigorated artistic activism. They felt the need to present an alternative self-representation after their identity came under attack. However, the issue of Arab American representation becomes problematic when Arab and Muslim women's rights take centre stage. Speaking for the rights of Arab women in Arab American-women-authored plays means confronting patriarchy and questioning gender ethics; an issue, which is not exclusive to the Arab world and is still relevant in Western feminist thought and practice. However, doing so could contribute to Orientalist narratives, by being used as evidence in support of the view that Arab culture and men as oppressive to women, thus legitimising a Western politically and economically motivated negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims. By reflecting critically on the Arab culture, some of these artists stand accused of betraying their culture at its time of need, supporting the same rhetoric that is fuelling the "war on terror". The task of Arab

American women theorists, artists and playwright is, thus, especially complex as they manoeuvre their struggles, creativity and activism in the minefield of a threatened cultural and gender identity.

Arab American playwright Leila Buck summarises the challenges facing female-authored Arab American artistic expression:

> As experienced by other minority groups before us, and today more than ever by Arabs, the media spotlight on "hot-button" communities is often a double-edged sword. This attention, while providing an opportunity for recognition and understanding, is largely filtered through the lens of sensationalism…In the case of Arab Americans, Arab audiences are hungry for positive portrayals to balance the media; non-Arabs may see negative or even questionable characteristics as confirmation of those existing stereotypes. In this sense, both groups often place upon one story, character, or artist the burden of representing an entire people. (26)

The new Arab American female voice springs from a net of conflicting discourses, liaisons and belongings. Furthermore, visibility and its politics form another complex layer in the making and dissemination of Arab American representation in the U.S.

Betty Shamieh is vocal about her personal struggle with her identity as an Arab American playwright facing the politics of visibility. Shamieh, a (2000) Yale graduate, was the first Palestinian-American playwright to have a play (*Roar* 2004) premiere off-Broadway. Her *The Black Eyed,* analysed in this chapter, had been translated into many languages and enjoyed many productions. *The Black Eyed* had its world premiere at the

Magic Theatre in May 2005, its European premiere in Athens at Fournos Theatre in 2006, and its American premiere in the Off-Broadway New York Theatre Workshop in 2007.

At the beginning of her career, Shamieh wanted to escape a categorisation that would pronounce her an Other, thrust in a marginalised artistic space. To avoid a predictable invisibility, she embarked on a quest for "universality" in both choosing and dramatising her characters. She consciously sought after a "universality" granted to the White American writer that she understood to be untainted by markers of Otherness: "white, male writers are known as writers, while women and minorities [can] become very quickly pigeonholed; and theatres often times will accept certain types of plays from people with a certain ethnic identity" (Shamieh qtd. in Alexander "First-Generation America"). She realised that her Arab story/stories would potentially leave her with a pigeonholed name: the Palestinian American playwright.

Writing about her experience, Shamieh confides that she kept plays dealing with Arab characters and culture private – in other words, silent – until she "felt safe, which is hard to feel when you're in your early twenties anyway, particularly if you are a minority trying to break into a field where few or no members of your race are working" (Shamieh 267). She further expresses the insecurities she felt as a person and artist, whose identity incorporates Arabness: "I wanted to get few productions under my belt before I became 'the Palestinian-American playwright'" (qtd. in Schillinger "The New 'Arab'"). That is to say, Shamieh felt the need to veil her Arab identity by working on "universal" themes and characters instead of Arab-related ones because she wished to be recognised simply as a playwirght, rather than an Arab American, playwright. However, 9/11 (Shamieh 268) gave her the awakening call to negotiate the Arab American voice in her. She decided to reclaim this problematic site of her artistic identity and started writing many plays about Arabs and

Arab Americans in general, and women in particular, including, *Chocolate in Heat* in 2001, *Roar* in 2004, *Again and Against* in 2009 and *The Black Eyed* in 2005. While centring on Arab American issues and contributing positively to the building of an Arab American feminist movement, these plays remain the product of an Arab American woman playwright who is consciously attempting to escape invisibility in a post 9/11 America. *The Black Eyed*, for example, offers a refreshing representation of empowered Arab women, but applies a form of censorship when addressing difficult political issues pertaining to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

Heather Raffo, on the other hand, attained artistic visibility through her much celebrated play *9 Parts of Desire*; a play that unapologetically invites Iraqi women characters to the American stage. Raffo's play enjoyed a remarkable production history, and is continuing to tour universities and artistic venues inside and outside the U.S. It was initially produced at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh (2003). It then made its way to the Bush Theatre in London "where it was repeatedly chosen as one of the "Five Best Plays" in London by *The Independent*" (Raffo xi). The play was further developed to be a part of the "New Work Now" festival of readings in the Public Theatre, New York in May 2004. *9 Parts of Desire* continued its production journey steadily to premiere at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre in October 2004 where it ran for nine months and received five extensions. The play won numerous awards and was a critic's pick of (the *New York Times*, *Time Out*, and *Village Voice*).

Considered one of the most successful Arab American plays, it seems that the Arab component of the author's identity contributed to, rather than marginalised, Raffo's artistic visibility. Her play offered a narrative about Iraq that many Americans were curious, if not eager to hear. It remains to be seen whether Raffo will continue to be known as the Arab

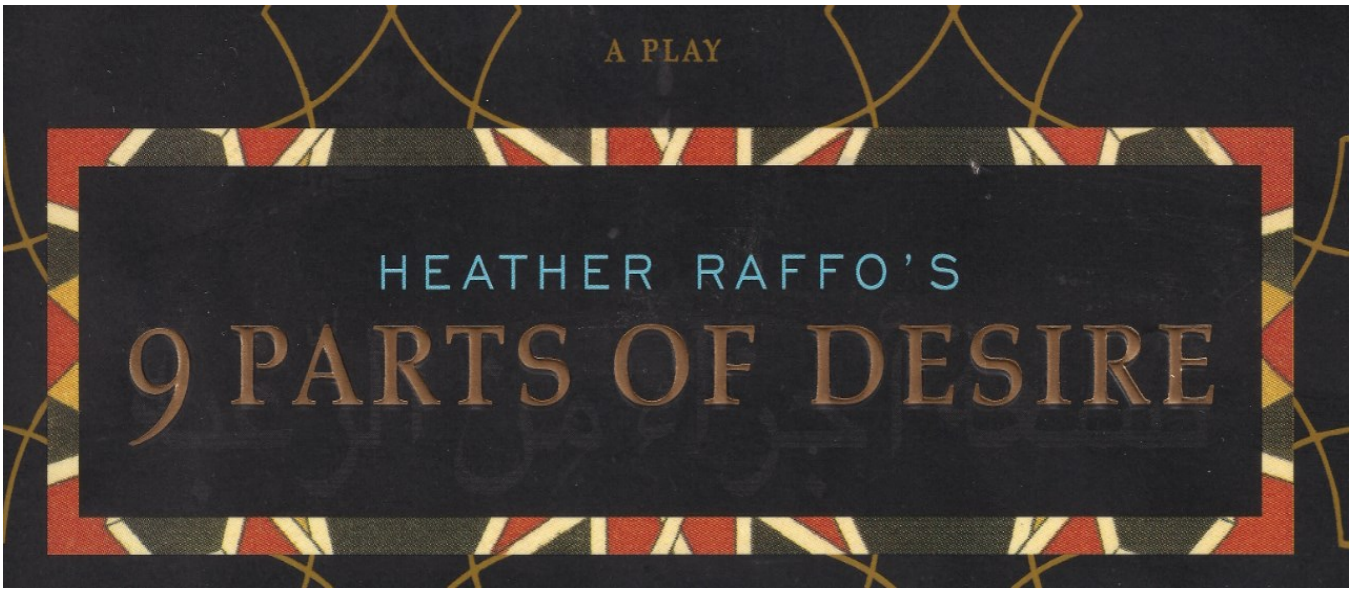
American playwright, who only brings Iraqi narratives to the American stage (a pigeonholed position, which Shamieh initially resisted). Raffo's current work in progress, *Fallujah: The First Opera on The Iraq War*, definitely takes Iraq as its central theme.

Despite Raffos' success, the tension between her Arab American identity and visibility is not completely resolved. A reading of the paratext of the 2006 text of *9 Parts of Desire* suggests that Arabness continues to be a problematic site in the limelight of the American cultural landscape. Gérard Genette defines the paratext as the materials external to the literary text in a printed form, such as the front cover and illustration, title, dedication, and back cover. He explains that the paratext serves as a "threshold" to reading and understanding the literary work beyond the written words. According to Genette, the paratext is

> a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (2).

The publishing format of a play forms one of the platforms of visibility for the author. Occasionally, the paratext divulges the marketing rules governing visibility, which might not be stated otherwise. The visual framing of title of *9 Parts of Desire*, illustrated in the front cover (figure 1), reveals the positioning of the Arab part of Raffo's Arab American identity. When carefully examining the title in the front cover, one sees the English title elevated in bright golden bold letters. Beneath the bold letters, there is a discrete shadowing of the

English title; "تسعة اجزاء من الرغبة". This "shadowing" effect of the English title, presented in almost transparent letters, is the play's actual title in Arabic.



(Figure 1)

The Arabic title is indiscernible, almost invisible and overcome by the pronounced and emphasized English title. The concealed fragile Arabic title is marginal, secondary and obscured. It symbolises the burden of Otherness synonymous with Raffo's identity as an Arab American, and exhibits the conflict between the universal/English and marginalised/Arab voice. The hidden Arabic title is indicative of the state of marginality that Arab American playwrights fear, and are eager to escape from. This concealment of the Arabic heritage of both the play and playwright echoes Shamieh's fear of being pigeonholed as the Arab (Palestinian, Iraqi, etc.) American playwright. In this context, the paratextual presentation of Raffo's play demonstrates that compromises of identity have to be – and often are – made for the sake of artistic and cultural American visibility. Yet still, the Arabic

title was not altogether abandoned, representing the playwright's desire and attempt to have her Arabic heritage acknowledged without bearing the post 9/11 prejudice against it, if possible.

The period following 9/11 attacks forced many Arab American artists to reconsider their position as Arab Americans in the U.S. and re-evaluate their art in relation to the politics of representation. Shamieh talks about her decision to reclaim the pigeonholed space designed for the Other and bring the Arabic voice of her Arab American identity to the forefront: "I realised I could write not only *despite* my fear of being pigeonholed, but also *about* my fear of being pigeonholed and of having my opportunities limited because of who I was" (268). Shamieh's resolution is an attempt to renegotiate the periphery and the place of Arab American women playwrights in it. In their two plays, Shamieh and Raffo respond to the silence inherent in their Othered identity by uniting voices of Arab women in an outspoken collective one. They invert the passive state, which they have been framed within, and present the Arab woman as having agency; vocal and active. As stated earlier, Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* and Raffo's *9 Parts of desire* are two examples of an Arab American feminist movement which is negotiating the politics of representation and visibility in its early inception stages. As expected, artists within this movement seem to deploy similar techniques, borrowed from early feminist theatre practitioners, to ensure the visibility of their representation.

In her introduction to *Feminist Theatre Practice*, Elaine Aston emphasises that feminist theatre does not necessarily follow a devised set of rules or techniques, but is rather guided by "commitment to exploring different ways of representing or 'seeing' gender; of making ourselves visible when we cannot be 'seen' in dominant systems of social, cultural and theatrical representation" (18). Borrowing a term from Simone Benmussa, Aston

describes feminist theatre practice as "sphere of… 'disturbance'" that defies easy categorisation. It rather utilises any necessary theatrical methods to unsettle the dominant system, which marginalised its representation. Aston purports: "That which a feminist theatre practice seeks to disturb are our systems of representation that refuse women the possibility of representing themselves; refuses them agency, subjectivity, identity and so on" (*Feminist Theatre Practice* 19). In this sense, the new movement championed by Arab American women theatre practitioners resembles the early feminist theatre movement in its goals and methods. Arab American women theatre is precisely that which Aston describes: a theatre that enables its artists to reclaim both their gender and cultural representations from a dominant Orientalist discourse.

There are distinctive practices, reminiscent of these followed by early feminist theatre, which are shaping the works of post 9/11 Arab American female playwrights. Women-only theatre companies, discussion groups and forums were some of the first feminist practices advocated in the 1970s and 1980s to encourage women to express themselves in a free 'space'. These feminist theatre companies "ceased operations in the late 1980s or early 1990s" (Aston *Feminist Theatre Practice* 23), but Arab American women are reviving similar strategies by organising themselves in women theatre groups, initiatives and companies. As detailed in the previous chapter, Noor Theatre, Nibras Theatre and Golden thread Theatre are theatre initiatives led by Middle-Eastern American women with a focus on the representation of Arab and Arab American women. Also, a number of Arab American women playwrights have been working together to produce collectively authored projects; a practice followed by many feminist theatre artists (Aston 31/2). For example, *Sajjil*, or record in Arabic, is a documentary piece of theatre that brought seven Arab American women playwrights together. Leila Buck describes the experience: "Initially, we were like,

'Wow, there are seven Arab-American theater artists?' Who knew?" (qtd. in Schillinger "The New 'Arab'"). Besides creating opportunities to network and grow artistically, *Sajjil* presented its playwrights with the opportunity to reflect on, and evaluate their Arab American identity. The piece was based on interviews with Arabs and non-Arabs to describe what it means to be an Arab before the playwrights collectively authored the final piece. Also, Arab American women playwrights have not just adopted collectivity as a practice, but a theme as well, most prominently in *The Black Eyed* and *9 Parts of Desire*.

The Black Eyed introduces four Palestinian women who meet in the afterlife. Each woman belongs to a different time period, from the biblical Delilah to the Architect, a modern Arab American woman. Trapped in a void, they discuss (and celebrate) their struggles, choices and decisions in life. The play's setting is a blurry afterlife, which stands for neither heaven nor hell, but rather a limbo. Four Palestinian women gather in this indefinite place before the door of the symbolic Martyrs' room that they wish to enter, but they are left eternally waiting. These women are Delilah, the biblical figure; Tamam, a woman from the periods of the crusades whose name means "enough"; The Architect, a nameless woman who struggles to articulate lucidly; and Aiesha, a suicide bomber. At times, they speak individually and subjectively, and at others collectively as a chorus to indicate a shared consciousness of womanhood. The play does not offer answers to the questions these women pose, but gives them the space to voice their experiences, oppressions, and more importantly, their unyielding strengths.

Similar to *The Black Eyed*, Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* focuses on an array of Iraqi women voices, whose stories blend into a collective song by the end of the play. The play focuses on nine Iraqi women from different backgrounds, ages and locations, who each narrates her story through monologues. Their stories represent a history of struggle and

survival in an Iraq wounded by an oppressive regime and successive wars. *9 Parts of Desire* was inspired by Raffo's visit to Baghdad Museum in 1993, where the playwright was transfixed by a painting of an Iraqi woman artist. The play presents the monologues of its representative of Iraqi women, who have survived decades of patriarchy and wars (the first and second Gulf wars, and American war). The concluding lines of the play, sung by the character Nana, suggest that each Iraqi woman's story is part of another woman's, presenting a mosaic of a torn Iraqi psyche. Performed as a one-woman show, written and performed by Raffo, the playwright/actor becomes the embodiment of these nine women's voices and stories.

In a review of the play, John Lahr writes that "[w]ar and tyranny dehumanise the enemy; silence is part of that process" ("Fury and the Jury") and the play avenges this silence with every woman it represents. The Iraqi women in *9 Parts of Desire* include the sexy artist Layal, the doctor, the exiled communist Huda, the innocent Iraqi girl, the helpless Arab American, the historical Nana and the symbolic Mullaya. These women have endured the oppression of Saddam's regime and the disastrous impacts of three wars, and yet they have survived. Summoned by Raffo, their stories are invited to the American stage to be told and remembered.

Appropriating Feminist Dramaturgical Techniques for an Empowered Representation of the Arab woman

As mentioned, *The Black Eyed* and *9 Parts of Desire* appropriate theatrical techniques envisioned by early feminist theatre practitioners. Both plays share the same subject position (full cast of women) presented in a similar non-linear narrative. In general, feminist theatre places great importance on the subject position of women; i.e.: how to

construct a woman's position on stage from the perspective of a woman; how to own the representation of one's self and redefine it in correspondence with their experiences, feelings and struggles. These questions lie at the heart of Shamieh and Raffo's creative moulding of Arab women's experience on stage as their Palestinian and Iraqi women have endured a state of invisibility, silencing and presumed passivity. By positioning these women at the centre of the plot and narrative, they regain their hijacked voices and actions. This view is supported by Sue-Ellen Case who discussed many women playwrights' choice to centralise women in the dramatic plot:

> Several plays by contemporary women playwrights construct women in this subject position, providing new images of women and their experiences along with new structures for their representation. These plays dramatise the difference between women as objects (sexual objects, etc.) and women as subjects of the drama. At the same time they alter the structure of the subject position from its old appearance as protagonist to new forms of the subject's appearance and development (126).

Much of the emphasis of feminist theatre has been the subject position and subversion of an all male-centred theatre. Appropriating the subject position demanded a revolutionisation of male-authored styles, plots, characters and themes that were predominantly patriarchal. Elaine Aston notes that

> in contemporary feminist theatre where women have been seeking to take up a subject position they have looked to the 'interrogative' style of the text and performance practice, in which the contradiction of the subject is split open in

the interests of challenging and changing the symbolic or social order" (*An Introduction to Feminism* 35).

Aston's remark highlights the intricacy of a feminist piece where women not only become the creators and drivers of the dramatic action, but also the source of subjective reflections and sometimes contradictory projections of the self, thus provoking a reappraisal of an accepted system of patriarchal values. This mode seems appropriate for what Shamieh and Raffo are trying to accomplish, because it can unsettle the narrative of the "victimised" Arab woman. The characters in both *9 Parts of Desire* and *The Black Eyed* express their desires and complex emotions without restrain. Their voices stem from a raw feminine place; uncultured by false propriety. By doing so, they reverse a male order that, at times silenced them, and at others forced them to alter their meaning. Almost every monologue in *9 Parts of Desire* follows this interrogative style. For example:

Layal: Your eyes say to me that I am a whore

their eyes say I am the most beautiful woman in Baghdad

I am their fountain

I have been raped and raped and raped and raped

and I want more

they see me, they recognise me for what I am

that is freedom

they will never kill me – (Raffo 51)

Layal, whose character is based on a real Iraqi artist, whose paintings hung in the Saddam Art Centre (Raffo x), tells a complicated story of a woman who is entrapped in a patriarchal and authoritative system, yet who still asserts her authorship of a choice. While her speech may confuse the reader/spectator as enigmatic, her words reflect an understanding of the Self as well as ownership of it. Her monologue is non-linear and has characteristics of stream of consciousness. In its confessional "interrogative" style, it would typically remain unarticulated in a patriarchal setting. However, the presentation of this untamed and unstructured voice in the play defies the systems (whether patriarchal, cultural or political) that would prohibit Layal's expression.

Furthermore, the stage, in its entirety, is the property of the female characters of both *The Black Eyed* and *9 Parts of Desire*. They are rarely interrupted when they start to express themselves freely. Such practice allows the retrieval of women's place and right to speak; a necessity for Arab women who can be repressed within their own culture, and are spoken for in a Western discourse. The Architect in *The Black Eyed*, for example, is a woman who lived all her life inarticulate, unable to communicate any of her thoughts or emotions, but the play has given her the space to tell her story: "I may be inarticulate./ Have always been./ It's not I'm not thinking clear thoughts,/ I'm thinking too many of them" (Shamieh 321). The Architect has been given the space and freedom to express herself even though her sentences might be, at times, incoherent. In Shamieh's play, even those women who are inarticulate have the space and time to be and to speak. This is because they are the subject position; they are the story, not merely present to facilitate someone else's story.

More importantly, this introspective, interrogative female-centred style allows Shamieh and Raffo to challenge Orientalist discourse, which misrepresents Arab women. Both plays present their women characters as resilient, complex and active individuals in

contrast to the Western one-dimensional narrative of the "subdued" Arab woman. Arab women, in Orientalist and American political discourses, have been made to play the same role female characters played in traditional male-focused plays. That is, where women are viewed as the "other-from-man" (De Lauretis 5) in a dominant patriarchal dramatic narrative, Arab women are similarly constructed as the Other in an Orientalist discourse (victimised, repressed and passive, unable to stand for herself and always in need for the West's intervention).

The Architect's story is that of an Arab American who boarded one of 9/11 planes to meet the person she loved and decisively lose her virginity. The plane crashes and the Architect finds herself in the afterlife to confront the man who bombed the plane:

> If anyone gives me trouble while I'm trying to get in, I will tell them
>
> I died a virgin, but that was just bad luck.
>
> While I was alive, I did the hardest thing imaginable,
>
> more wonderful than a million buildings that will one day crumble.
>
> I am a woman who was born with a good heart
>
> and I designed and executed my life in a way that made sure
>
> That's how I would stay (Shamieh 350)

These lines provide a strikingly different portrayal of the Arab woman than the one circulated in some Western discourses. The Architect's account of her life is full of self-awareness, resolution, desire and achievement. In her lifetime, she was a proud architect who designed solid edifices; a woman who knew when she wanted to lose her virginity and pursued her decision with actions. The action verbs (design, execute) that the Architect uses

along with the determination to write her own destiny and even her memory after she died, attest to her activism in her own life. Even in the afterlife, she refuses to indulge in self-pity, but is rather self-assured despite her inability to express articulately.

Similarly, Raffo emphasises in her production notes: "I would encourage those doing a production of never to think of these women as victims or portray them sentimentally but rather to explore the resilience, ambitions, warmth, humor, integrity, and ancient history of the Iraqi women depicted here" (71). The text itself requires such production because these women are emotionally versatile and complex. Both Raffo and Shamieh employ a female subject position that corresponds not only with the Western feminist agenda in overcoming patriarchal traditions, but also with a desire to defy a Western stereotypical portrayal of the Arab woman.

In addition to centring their plays around their women characters, Raffo and Shamieh employed further feminist practices. Feminist theorists and theatre practitioners, who appropriated the subject position, were similarly interested in evaluating the dramaturgical apparatus that were traditionally male-authored, such as a linear narrative line. Teresa de Lauretis stresses the importance of the interrelations between subjectivity and narrativity stating

> that many of the current formulations of narratives process fail to see that subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative and indeed constituted in the relation of narrative, meaning and desire; so that the very work of narrativity is the engagement of the subject in certain positionalities of meaning and desire" (106).

De Lauretis continues her analysis of a gendered narrative that, until recently has dominated Western theatre. Women in traditional patriarchal narratives are inactive properties who are transported from a male's (father's) hands to another (husband's) for the sole purpose of serving the male protagonist's story. De Lauretis recalls the female characters of the Sphinx and Medusa as she explains this gendered narrative. She provides an analysis of their place in the narrative concluding that they "have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else's story, not their own; so they are figures or makers of positions – places and topoi – through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning" (109). This gendered narrative is often assisted by a realist linear narrative which "operates a system of 'closure'" in which "well-constructed or well-made forms follow a linear pattern from exposition to crisis and ultimate resolution. The subject of that narrative is male and its discourse is phallocentric" (Aston *An Introduction to Feminism* 40).

There is an echo of these feminist theories in regards to narrativity in the two plays' structures. As noted before, both of the plays recruit a full cast of women in non-linear narratives. *The Black Eyed* revolves around a gathering of the four Palestinian women telling their stories in a circular narrative with no exposition, crisis or resolution. The play begins with these statements "Unanswered questions, unquestioned answers" (Shamieh 277). The same lines are reiterated at the end of the play, bringing an open-ending to the circle of the narrative. Moreover, the play starts its events with the women's desire to enter the Martyrs' room, but they never manage to, thus offering no resolution. Similarly, the narratives of *9 Parts of Desire*'s Iraqi women seem to flow chaotically, without a linear order or closure. The play opens and ends with a lyrical lamentation by Mullaya, whom Raffo describes as "a woman in Arabic culture hired to lead call-and-response with women mourning at funeral"

(3). Mullaya's first lines are echoed again at the end of the play pointing to the circularity of the narrative line. Commenting on the circularity of the narrative, Raffo states:

> I intended circles [of time.] The first director that directed it in England, Eva Bruderman, told me this play was a spiral, and that set me free … it allowed my circles to go faster … Joanna Settle, who directed the show … said that the reason why she loved this play and wanted to do it was that immediately upon reading it, she felt like she had a female voice. She said the play was female in structure, not just in language, and she had not yet come across a play like that" (qtd. in Russell 115).

Raffo needed, and managed to create a "female structure" to reflect the significance of the women she is representing. A narrative that could be singularly identified as female reinstates Arab women's right to represent themselves, which was denied because of gender and colonial discourses.

Non-linear narrative is also a technique of documentary theatre, which Raffo draws upon. A documentary play employs "advocacy journalism, oral history, and dramatic techniques to create a theatrical representation of societal and political forces using a close re-examination of events, individuals, and situations" (Wilmeth 216). While Raffo maintains that the play is a dramatisation of the stories she heard, *9 Parts of Desire* is built on research and numerous interviews with real Iraqi women and includes some expression retold "verbatim". Combining elements of the documentary theatre along with a non-linear structure achieves two aims. Firstly, it helps emphasise the subjectivity of a women's story where her private monologues are part of her daily public existence. It also provides an element of authenticity necessary for conveying these women's experiences. Peter Weiss

described documentary drama structures as "dissolving the structure. Not a calculated rhythm but raw material, compact or in a loose stream, when showing social struggles, portraying a revolutionary situation, reporting from the theatre of war" (252). This is because real life events and interactions do not follow a linear line. The narrative line in both plays does not enclose the women characters in a passive situation where they merely exist to facilitate the plot. The non-linear narrative gives women characters the freedom to speak, represent themselves, revisit their circumstances and be indispensable in a story about their own lives. Although non-linear narrative is not exclusive to feminist theatre, it remains an effective theatrical practice for escaping a fixed gendered discourse.

In feminist theatre, however, appropriating the subject position and creating subjective narratives do not denote a mere substitution of the female protagonist for the male one in a traditionally closed and glorifying plot. Elin Diamond makes this clear as she states: "[t]o re-inscribe a historical narrative in which woman is the signifier of power and authority would be to romanticise her, to remove her from history (which would be just the reverse of phallcratism)" (94). In other words, romanticising the female subject will not yield any effective change in deconstructing a gendered narrative or social order. Shamieh and Raffo's female characters are constructed in light of this view, as the narrative does not enclose them in an idealised setting, but rather presents them with the space to tell their stories freely. Both playwrights offer a representation of female subjects inscribed by the female subject herself. These characters refuse to be victims, but are simultaneously struggling against oppression and war. At times, they can be ambivalent and unpredictable reflecting a representation of real, rather than flawless women. For example, *9 Parts of Desire*'s Layal is a complicated character, with Raffo describing her as "the Marilyn Monroe of Baghdad. Everything about her was steeped in rumor. She was this complicated woman who was possibly very tied to

the regime. Maybe she was forced to be; maybe she liked it" (qtd. in Renner "Iraq Through"). Far from the idealised woman, Layal has many facets to her personality. Layal loves drawing self-nudes; an act she embraces despite being incongruous with the Arab culture. She is a woman, mother, and wife who enjoys being nude and reclaiming this nudeness by immortalising it in a painting:

> Well, I am not a person of great sacrifice
>
> I have sacrificed in my life, sure,
>
> but nothing like what I see around me . . .
>
> I'm a good artist.
>
> I'm an OK mother.
>
> I'm a miserable wife.
>
> I've loved yes, many
>
> but
>
> not enough.
>
> But I am good at being naked
>
> that's what I do, in secret. (Raffo 11)

Layal is neither a Madonna, nor a whore, as per the traditional binary. She is a three-dimensional woman with contradictions and convictions that she lives by. She is a mother, who is not very good at being a "mother". Her presence deconstructs that romantic view (or the male gaze) of the simple exotic half-naked belly-dancer Arab woman, familiar in Orientalist stereotypes. Layal sheds her clothes as a personal choice and desire, rather than

an act designed to please a man, freeing herself thus from the male's gaze, which traditionally dictates women's actions.

Shamieh and Raffo's female characters are survivors, still struggling – perhaps though instantly more spirited in the company of fellow women. In fact, the presence of these other women as active associates in the thread of the plays bids farewell to the romanticised narrative of the singular protagonist as shall further be discussed.

Collectivity: a Technique and a Theme

Following the re-appropriation of the subject position, theatre feminists have directed their attention to the centrality of a protagonist. Sue-Ellen Case notes that "[t]he notion of the collective subject is the most radical concept in recent work on women in the subject position. Many feminists consider it to be the most forward-looking construction in the feminist field" ("From Split Subject" 143). The presence of a collective subject on stage diverts the play from an all-inclusive protagonist story and replaces it with a multitude of voices and actions. Discussing Karlyn Kors Campbell's analysis of the Liberation Movement, Elaine Aston writes:

> What Campbell had identified was the 'consciousness raising' rhetoric of feminism which advocated collective self-determination by women, as opposed to the dominant rhetorical mode in which a single rhetorician persuades his listener(s)/audience to accept his argument. In turn, the feminist rhetoric of collectively organised women's theatre was argued for: 'all feminist theatres are rhetorical enterprises: their primary action is action, not art' (Gillespie 1978, p.286). (*An Introduction to Feminism* 56)

An attempt for action surely does not exclude the artistic expression in which it is moulded. Nonetheless, Aston's emphasis in this statement lies on the need and significance of employing a collective subject in feminist theatre. Although collectivity as a subject can undoubtedly support the representation of those who have been traditionally underrepresented, it can also hinder the authenticity of such representation. Collectivity is empowering and challenging to a previous patriarchal order that excluded women from the dramatic action. Simultaneously, however, collectivity potentially deprives some characters (and the women they represent) of an individual voice, and thus an authentic representation. The following analysis examines whether the use of a collective subject succeeds as an empowering factor in *The Black Eyed* and *9 Parts of Desire*.

Sue-Ellen Case believes that using the collective subject alienates the audience who would else build emotional ties with a protagonist. Case explains: "The rapid succession of characters alienates the audience from any empathetic relationship to a single character, the former notion of the subject, placing the reception in the critical realm of aesthetics and social representations" ("From Split Subject" 143). Indeed, the choice of collectivity as a subject, along with a non-linear narrative, can convey a sometimes-necessary alienation and de-romanticisation of the one protagonist. Theatre critic Chad Jones, for example, felt *The Black Eyed* to be slightly alienating indicating that: "[t]he only hitch in the play is that because of the narrative, which flows from the abstract to the specific, we lose some emotional connection with the women, so we experience "The Black Eyed" more in our heads than in our hearts" ("Arab Women Assess"). This alienating effect can be considered as a successful tactic in feminist theatre as it encourages critical thinking, urging the audience to contemplate these women's issues and participate in finding answers. A similar sense of alienation is not present in *9 Parts of Desire*, due to the intense emotional nature of

the characters' monologues. In both plays, however, collectivity is crucial as a theatrical tool even if it potentially creates a sense of alienation. With women belonging to the margin in traditional male stages, a collective subject gives an equal space for each of the female characters to make a presence, speak and be heard. It presents no surprise, thus, to see a collective subject rather than a traditional protagonist on the stage of Shamieh and Raffo who are well acquainted with the concept of marginality. Collectivity offers each of the plays' Arab women, who were previously denied a platform, the space and the time to tell their stories.

In both plays, Raffo and Shamieh offer a feminist perspective in their theatre through the employment of collectivity not only as a technique, but also a theme. As a technique, they choose a plot that centres around the collective subject rather the than a protagonist. These women's stories, when read individually, are scattered and spread throughout the play, without an obvious plot correlation. Yet, there is an underlying sense of unity achieved by the presence and experiences of their fellow women. Each woman's story in these two plays represents a stream that feeds from and adds to a reservoir of women's consciousness. Therefore, one woman's story is echoed in and continued by another's. This metaphorical reservoir is represented in the plays through the presence of the chorus in *The Black Eyed* and *9 Parts of Desire*'s Mullaya (who is "a woman in Arabic culture hired to lead call-and-response with women mourning at funerals"(Raffo 3)) in.

The chorus in *The Black Eyed* is not a separate entity introduced on the stage anonymously. It consists of the characters themselves, who unify their voices at times to make one chorus' statement. The chorus is able to articulate statements and concerns that are silently shared by all the women: from the question "Why do our people rejoice when a boy child is born?" (Shamieh 308); to the statement of intent "they [women] get stuck here, too

stubborn to give up the search" (298); or the statement intended to defy patriarchy "I was never ashamed of who I was" (342). Where these thoughts are typically contemplated individually and often silently, their collective utterance by all characters remove them from passive wondering to active acknowledgment promoting thus a quest for social change.

Similarly, the Mullaya in *9 Parts of Desire* is a character who represents the collective consciousness of the nine women on stage, as well as all Iraqi women. Her lines suggest a collective suffering, struggle and resilience shared by all Iraqi women: "I have too much existence/ I have lived through seven thousand revolutions ... I cannot stop what I am here/ either I shall die/ or I shall live a ransom for all the daughters/ of savagery" (Raffo 64-66). Near the end of the play, Mullaya cites lines from other characters' monologues and incorporates them into one final speech. By becoming the song, which unifies every women's voice, the Mullaya insures that these women's isolated experience, pain and defiance will not be dismissed. She is the metaphorical manifestation of the collective subject present in the play.

Moreover, Raffo presents collectivity as a character in her suggestion for any production to assign one actress to play all the characters in the play. In the production notes, Raffo explains that "although the solo actress plays nine separate characters, through her the audience sees what could also be conflicting aspects of a single psyche". The play quickens its pace and "the characters cut each other off midsentence, driving the play toward a psychic civil war with the solo performer embodying the larger argument of what liberation means for each woman and for Iraq" (69). By enforcing collectivity as integral to the structure of the play, Raffo aims to liberate the individual women she represents, as well as the collective of Iraqi women. She continues: "[w]hen we see an actress transform from one Iraqi woman to another, we are better reminded of the complexities of nationality and the universality of

all women" (Raffo 70). In fact, the transition between the personal and collective is constant in both *The Black Eyed* and *9 Parts of Desire*. Collectivity is particularly important in these plays because it helps relate the experience of one woman to another and constitute a collective voice that aims ultimately to be empowering.

Additionally, collectivity is employed in these plays as a theme. The use of the chorus in *The Black Eyed* helps encourage the characters as they are opening up, speaking and representing themselves for the first time. In many instances, the characters seem to have their voices failing them, only to be assisted by the chorus in *The Black Eyed* and Mullaya in *9 Parts of Desire* to finish their stories. For example, Delilah, the biblical figure in *The Black Eyed*, finds it too difficult to vocalise the betrayal she felt by her people, who led her to seduce Samson only to later call her a "whore". The chorus intervenes to offer the voice Delilah most needs to finish her story:

> Delilah: My People!
>
> My people called me a whore.
>
> I overheard a young man from my own clan say:
>
> Chorus (Tamam and The Architect):
>
> "The whore did her job and she did it well." (Shamieh 281)

The Chorus is present also to assert these women's confidence and enforce their self-worth. For instance, the chorus replies "it's a fact" to the characters who moderately state "I'm a pretty woman. It's not a boast" (Shamieh 285, 310, 334). Similar to Mullaya in *9 Parts of Desire*, the chorus stands for the collective consciousness these women share. As women, there are common experiences they have all undergone which constitute a continuous solid

component of their consciousness. Some of the chorus's lines pronounce these statements loudly: Chorus (Delialah and Tamam): "No one hears our cries. No control over our own destiny" (Shamieh 352). Occasionally, the chorus' intervention occur to complement the overall style of the play, rather than advocate collectivity as a theme. In general, however, the collective voice in *The Black Eyed* is utilised to offer its characters a wall of support they can rely on when their own voices fail them.

Likewise, *9 Parts of Desire* deploys collectivity as a theme. For example, Layal inscribes the collective experience of women on her body through her art. Many women abused in Saddam's regime were denied a voice to express the injustices inflicted on them. Layal is restoring the right of being represented to all these women, as she persists on drawing them and telling their stories with the brush strokes and colours she possesses. Raffo explains that "Layal begins the play embodying the stories of many Iraqi women as she works" (Raffo 69). Layal's painting *Savagery* is an example of women's collective of struggle and resilience. Layal explains her endeavour: "I think I help people maybe/ to be transcending/ but secretly./ Always I paint them as me/ ... I do not ever want to expose exactly another woman's body/ so I paint my body/ but her body, herself inside me./ So it is not me alone/ it is all of us" (Raffo 8).

Similarly, at the end of the play, Mullaya, encompassing the consciousness of all Iraqi women, helps Layal finish her story. Layal's last testimony becomes incoherent under the weight of everything she has lived through: Saddam's regime, women's sufferings, and the 1991 war which ended her life. Just then, when Layal could not express herself anymore, Mullaya "carefully picks up these broken pieces of language and builds a greater and celebratory whole from them (Raffo 69). Mullaya chants almost religiously: "she called it Savagery/ when you love like you cannot breathe" (Raffo 66). By naming the painting,

which Layal died before managing to, Layal's story is finally complete. Moreover, by announcing the painting's title, Layal and all the women's experiences she painted are not lost in oblivion, but saved in the collective consciousness represented by Mullaya. This spirit of shared womanhood, experience and accepted responsibilities of one woman toward another is a strong theme in the play. The theme serves a vision of empowerment whether by the collective representation of invisible women, or by providing women with collective body of support.

Problematising Collectivity: Representation of the Other and the appetite for "Universality"

Although collectivity is an important feminist empowering tool, which has, as aforementioned, served the structures and themes of both plays; it can arguably be problematic when used to represent the Other. Paired with the heavy responsibility of representing the traditionally misrepresented Arab woman, the deployment of a collective subject could run the risk of presuming to speak for/represent all Arab women. In other words, the risk of using a collective subject lies in its tendency to blend all characters' voices to reach a "universal" Arab women's voice. To counterpose stereotypes, both playwrights went to great lengths in presenting three-dimensional, active and resilient characters. The worry, however, is that when all these women's voices merge into one; their individual voices may be lost, and with it the Arab woman as a real individual, rather than another cultural sign. Reclaiming the representation of a traditionally misrepresented Other is an immense challenge, not only for Shamieh and Raffor, but any artist wishing to bear this responsibility. Playwright Najla Said acknowledges this:

> One of the greatest challenges that a writer must face is that of writing from the perspective of another human being. The character may be fictitious or real, the same sex, sexual orientation, race, age, social class, ethnicity as the writer – or not. In my opinion, "ethnicity" is in the same category as all of the others I've mentioned. The artist's job is to create realistic characters whose truths and experiences are believable, period. This can be tricky business, especially if the writer sets out to tell the story of someone of a marginalised or underrepresented, misunderstood community." ("Artistic Authority Series")

While "authenticity" has become a problematic term that is increasingly abandoned by practitioners, the concept remains relevant when analysing Raffo's and Shamieh's representation of Arab women. By merging the voices of all the characters into one, one wonders if the Arab woman is not, yet again, reduced to one image, one narrative envisioned by the playwrights via a chorus or a "Mullaya". It is true that this new image deconstructs dominant Western narrative of the Arab woman as victimised, but it also has the potential of containing the diversity of Arab women within the confines of one representation.

Earnest attempts at brining Arab women, dressed in their traditional attire and paired with their cultural heritage are present in both plays. This is especially the case in *9 Parts of Desire* where Raffo summons her Iraqi women to the stage, complete with their Arabic dress, Arabic music, and language (Raffo adopts a variety of English accents, sometimes broken English to reflect every character she embodies). Raffo has been particularly praised for her honest portrayal of her Iraqi characters: "We believe in their reality because Ms. Raffo inhabits each one so fully, both as actor and as author, and because we never feel, not even for a moment, that she is making them tell us what we — or she — want to hear"

(Teachout "Invisible Women"). Although Teachout's observation is not entirely accurate (the characters' political voices are moderated, as will be discussed later), his review redeems Raffo's characterisation and performance as a true reflection of a multitude of characters (and Iraqi women).

Nonetheless, Raffo as well as Shamieh aim to create a "universal" women's narrative, with Arab women as its main champions. The choice of collective subject corresponds with a desire to merge Arab women's experience with the Western "universal" narrative of women. It is important to remember that the two playwrights are writing about Arab women from their cultural site as Arab Americans. They thus "forge a site of cultural translation which seeks to explore the boundaries of an Arab-American women's diasporic identity position that draws on national, racial, religious and international allegiance" (Sabry 17). Within this "site of cultural translation", they not only represent, but also translate their Arab women characters to an American audience. In doing so, the Arab woman becomes akin to a "universal" figure, whose struggles are relevant to any other woman. For example, in *The Black Eyed*, the four characters assure the audience that "Women of all different cultures and all centuries have come here to look for their martyrs" (Shamieh 298), from Japanese, to Iranian, Tamil, Buddhists, Irish and Jewish women. The intention here is to provide parallels between the Palestinian women's circumstances, dramtised in the play, and these of all women alike. Similarly, in *9 Parts of Desire* Layal identifies her struggle for survival as universal: "So many women have done the same as me/everywhere they have to do the same" (Raffo 61).

Shamieh and Raffo's attempts at "universality" stem from their desire to deconstruct the stereotypes of the Arab woman as the Other. By presenting her in accordance with a universal woman figure, they remove the Arab woman from an imaginary cultural site to a

site similar to that of the American audiences'. That is to say, Shamieh and Raffo de-Other their Arab women characters by stressing their "universal" values. The only concern that could rise from this strategy is that parts of the Arab woman's specific sociocultural context could arguably be lost for the sake of "universality".

Ultimately, the eagerness to present the Arab woman's voice as synonymous with a Western Universal woman's voice raises the question of whether the represented voice is that of the Arab woman's or the Arab American playwright's. It is predictable that the playwright's voice is influenced by the politics of artistic visibility and audiences' expectation. Shamieh, more so than Raffo, has received criticism for her tendency to appease an American audience (Selim "The Representation of Arab America", McCarter "Lighting Out"). *The Black Eyed*'s characters often speak lines, intended to bring the audience to identify with them, and consider them relevant, equal, and ultimately "universal". It also can be argued that by representing the Arab woman as a universal figure in *The Black Eyed*, Shamieh not only introduces the Arab woman as universal, but also the playwright who represented her. New York Magazine critic Jeremy McCarter observed harshly this tendency: "Shamieh, like so many dramatists in this vein, has a weakness for statements that might soothe a New York audience but don't seem especially plausible. "We do know that all religions are wacky," say three of the women in unison, sounding an awful lot like, say, an American playwright" ("Lighting Out"). Furthermore, it is the collective chorus who typically make such statements. Shamieh's use of the collective subject supports her vision of universality for both her Arab women characters and herself as a playwright. When answering a question about how she wishes her audience to respond to her plays, Shamieh states:

> My favorite compliments come from people who start off with "I'm not an Arab..." or "I'm not a woman..." but they connected with it. I write about Arab issues, hopefully, in the way that Tennessee Williams wrote about Southerners. They're a subset of a society, but you're making those people so alive that a white man who has nothing to do with Blanche DuBois can identify. Roar was basically Streetcar set in an Arab family after the first Gulf War. (qtd. in Snyder "Beyond the Veil")

The above observations do not reduce the importance of Shamieh's play, or her attempt to introduce the Arab woman to an American stage from an Arab American, if not Arab, perspective. *The Black Eyed*, as well as *9 Parts of Desire* certainly succeed in portraying the Arab woman as three-dimensional, savvy and active, thus reversing a longstanding Orientalist discourse that misrepresented her. The analysis concerning the quest for universality in character and artistic status, conversely, relates to the politics of artistic visibility and their potential impact on the "authenticity" of the representation of the Other.

Escaping Invisibility

As discussed in the previous chapters, Arab American women playwrights have been granted a set of privileges compared to their male counterparts. I argued that such gendered privileging was the result of an American discourse that views women artists as producing desirable works that focus on gender and sexual issues, and are politically "balanced". Both *9 Parts of Desire* and *The Black Eyed* contain cultural and political viewpoints that support such an analysis of Shamieh and Raffo's success and demand for their works within this context.

One of the major themes in both plays is the sexuality of Arab women. *9 Parts of Desire*'s title is inspired by the quotation: "God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men" (Ali b. Abi Talib qtd. in Raffo) placing the focus instantly on the characters' sexuality. Layal's monologues are the most expressive: she embraces her body and her sexuality as an instrument that guarantees her favours from the men of Saddam's regime (Raffo 51, 61). Her nudity is a reclamation of her right to own her body, and her silenced desires. The theme of sex and sexuality is, likewise, integral to *The Black Eyed*. The title of the play refers to the Hori (The Black Eyed) who, according to a patriarchal interpretation of a Quranic verse, are virgins in heaven rewarded to righteous men. The play unsettles this concept and replaces it with the women characters' interpretations and desires. The characters in the play are sexually demanding and active about their sexual pursuits. For example, Aiesha, the suicide bomber, expects "Men, forever chaste with their chastity renewing throughout eternity, untouched, eager" (306) as a reward for her act. Delilah mocks the religious connotation attached to Aiesha's suicide bomb act, as well as her understanding of sexuality: "Did you happen to miss that she said that these men had no sexual experience?/ How many times can a woman scream: "That's not it"" (Shamieh 306). Delilah is obviously referring to the importance of a woman's sexual climax and her right to it. Another example of the characters' indulgence with their sexuality is the Architect's story, who died on one of 9/11 plans while she was on her way to meet her lover and lose her virginity.

The focus on Arab women's sexuality is possibly one of the reasons why both plays were accepted, and welcomed on the American stage. Dramatic works which discuss Arab women sexuality are especially sought after as Jessica Winegar notes: "work celebrating the sexuality of Middle Eastern Muslim women is desirable because it is dependent upon the

idea that Islam should be critiqued for oppressing women and denying them their "natural" sexual humanity" (671). This follows a discourse that consider Arab women as being denied of their sexuality by an Islamic and patriarchal system, only able to reclaim it when embraced by a progressive West. Within this context, Shamieh and Raffo's plays can be read as either confirming this discourse, or resisting it by showcasing strong Arab women characters, who assert their agency over their bodies and sexualities.

Another point worth examining is the politics of dress, particularly in *9 Parts of Desire*. When questioning the politics of gender visibility of Arab women, their traditional dress (veil and abaya) features dominantly. The abaya (conservative Islamic traditional dress) acts as the prop in *9 Parts of Desire*, used by the performer to metamorphose from one character to the other. It is the common thread that unites these nine women and allows their movement. Maria Beach describes the many ways that Raffo, as a performer, uses the abaya:

> For Layal, an artist who paints nudes, Raffo wears the abaya slipping off her slender shoulders, strokes her throat sensually, and moves with a confident grace that is betrayed by nervous giggles, Raffo twists her abaya into a long braid to become an Iraqi preteen girl who dances with awkward exuberance to music videos ... For Amal, a sweetly sensitive Bedouin woman, Raffo ties the abaya like a scarf and seems to spontaneously gain weight. She uses the abaya as a prop at times, most poignantly when she tenderly cradles the bundle of a charred child before becoming Umm Gheda, a mother who lost her family when the Amiriya bomb shelter was destroyed by two American bombs in 1991, and who resides at the site as its guardian. (Beach 103)

The deployment of the abaya in this way invites two interpretations. On the one hand, Raffo is deconstructing the adopted meaning of the veil as restricting and limiting for Arab women. Instead, the abaya is represented as an agent of mobilisation; it facilitates the change from one character to another in the play suggesting, perhaps, that the traditional Islamic dress functions as an enabler of social mobility in Arab culture. On the other hand, the traditional Islamic dress could lose its religious and cultural value by being easily disposed of. Moreover, Raffo offers her audience what could be described as a "voyeuristic", or "beyond the veil" insight. These observations relate to a larger narrative that presents the Arab American woman as liberated (from both a patriarchal and religious oppression), moderate, and balanced in her politics. Thus, her visibility is often aligned with this narrative.

One of the most enabling factors for the visibility of Arab American women playwrights is their cautious approach to politics of the Middle-East. The former chapter introduced the challenges posed by the theatrical institutional environment on artistic works which contextualise the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and other problematic politics in the region. Dramatic works of this nature typically face imposed editorial requests or self-censorship. This was the case with *The Black Eyed*, where forms of censorship were effectively practiced on Betty Shamieh's early scripts of the play.

Shamieh was invited to present a dramatic piece at the Brave New World Festival at New York City's Town Hall in November 2001. Although her first submission was a "plea for non-violence" (Shamieh "The Ubiquitous Censor" 333) dramatising the suffering of the sister of a suicide bomber, the organisers rejected her piece and withdrew their invitation. For the sake of Arab American visibility at the Festival, Raffo compromised. She wrote a new monologue about an Arab American woman on a hijacked plane whose conversation with the hijackers unite the different opinions of the other passengers, leading the plane to

eventually land safely. This later became the basis for The Architect in *The Black Eyed*, although the story and monologues changed considerably. Nonetheless, Shamieh's modified narrative was again censored: "when I got into rehearsal on the day of the performance … I realised someone had censored the text, deleting chunks of my work that deal with the main character talking to the hijackers and making them see the error of their ways (Shamieh "The Ubiquitous Censor" 333). Shamieh explains that eventually the "token Arab American playwright's play" was dispensed with entirely as organisers cited 'shortage of time' for this blatant censorship. She summarises her experience by describing the implication of such censorship: "What made the experience particularly disturbing was that organisers had touted this event as a venue for alternative ideas and voices. To censor voices that present exactly those perspectives made it seem as though those voices don't exist" ("The Ubiquitous Censor" 334).

Rather than abandoning playwriting, however, Shamieh adapted to the censoring attempts practiced on Arab American dramatic works. She offered compromises in exchange for a chance to bring the Arab American voice to the stage. Justifying her decision to write a different narrative than her original one at the Brave New World Festival, Shamieh says:

> So, in an Uncle Tom-like manner, instead of holding my ground, I wrote another piece. I did so because I was the only Arab American playwright in the lineup. Arab American artists are largely faceless in this country and I felt that, by dropping out, I would be helping those who are trying to keep it that way" ("The Ubiquitous Censor" 333).

As mentioned, the organisers ultimately censored this new piece all the same. While external censorship is a significant problem, as argued in the former chapter, the practice of self-

censorship (which often stays unreported) forms another serious concern. Shamieh's decision to self-censor and change her narrative in pursuit for individual or collective Arab American artistic visibility posits the question about the integrity of representation in these circumstances. It also stands as an example of the gendered privileging that some Arab American women playwrights receive, arguably because their narrative could be more easily politically contained.

Eventually, The Architect was able to tell her story, or a version of it, in *The Black Eyed*, with the later production and publication of the play. It is difficult to investigate whether modifications of a political nature were made to the original script, as it is not accessible. However, an examination of the political context of *The Black Eyed* could give clues to some compromises on the political tone of the play. Similarly, despite the absence of accounts of challenges facing *9 Parts of Desire* because of its Iraqi subject, it is possible to infer that opinions about the American/Iraqi relations were moderated. Although the two plays are arguably political, a distinct political point of view is missing from both. *The Black Eyed* and *9 Parts of Desire* are about women in war zones: Iraq and Palestine, yet both plays shy away from formulating a clear and direct condemnation of war.

The Black Eyed's four women refer to the oppressive situations under which the Palestinians live, but they seem unable to vocalise their suffering beyond that, nor are they allowed to blame Israel for their continued struggle. Shamieh does not fully explore the context and realities of Palestinian women. She manages this by thrusting these Palestinian women in an afterlife setting where the daily struggles of life and death are reduced to past memories. The strongest political attitude to be clearly expressed in the play appear only once spoken by The Architect, who fantasises about being the mediator between the plane hijackers and the passengers on the play. In her reverie, the passengers would understand the

plight of the Middle-East and wish to take action: “In fact, they’ll refuse to get off the plane/ until Palestinians are allowed the right to self-determination/ Iraqi are not killed so their oil can be stolen/ The people on the plane don’t buy the crap the American government tries to sell us about trying to secure human rights” (Shamieh 343). Aside from this, however, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict clearly is not pronounced as the major life-shaping force for these four Palestinian women.

The politics of visibility in the American cultural scene can provide the context to understanding the intentional suppression of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the building of the play. In an introduction to the influential journal titled “Gender Nation and Belonging: Arab and Arab American Feminist Perspectives”, Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany write:

> [A]mong U.S. progressives the domain of “acceptable Arab feminist speech” defines any and all critiques of the Israeli occupation and expansion as anti-Semitic. As a result, exposing Zionism as a form of colonialism, racism, and sexism becomes impermissible within progressive spaces and our participation becomes predicated on silence. (11)

While being silenced constitutes a formidable danger, introducing modified or compromised representations creates another. *The Black Eyed*, while introducing Palestinian women on the American stage, fails to offer a comprehensive portrayal of the current state of Palestinian women. Shamieh’s choice of characters enables her to avoid direct confrontation with the Palestinian/Israel conflict. Three of the characters are not current residents of Palestine (a historic Delilah, an Arab American, and Tamam from the time of the crusades). The only character who lives in contemporary Palestine is Aiesha, the suicide bomber whose violence

is clearly condemned in the play. This has allowed the play to steer away from in-depth discussions of the current situations in Palestine. However, although the play is not politically confrontational, it does manage to extract the Arab woman from an Orientalist discourse. Thus, political realities might have influenced some aspects concerning the representation of Arab women, but their gender and cultural identity has been re-affirmed.

In *9 Parts of Desire*, the absence of a clear point of view concerning the 2003 Iraqi war has been reported as one of the factors for the success of the play. Commenting on the politics of the play, Los Angeles Times critic Don Shirley writes:

> In past productions, she has observed that liberals often "expect it to prove they should go to marches. They're a bit confused when they realise that many Iraqis felt something had to be done about Saddam." Conservatives "are thrown by how deeply they can connect with the humanity of these women" ("Voices from a war zone")

This political ambivalence in the play, while interpreted as representing the opinions of different Iraqis, is also a way of avoiding political confrontations with possible funders or members of the audience. In her review of the play, Maria Beach correctly points out to the multiplicity of political viewpoints expressed in the play stating that "[w]ithout presenting a singular political position, it is clear Raffo's sympathies lie with the women and civilians who are the victims of all types of violence" (Beach 102). While reflecting the different aspirations of Iraqi women, the absence of a precise political stance on the war of Iraq leaves the play purposely indecisive. Moreover, despite the fact that the calamity of the American war is documented, it is that of Saddam Hussein's brutality which occupies the larger space of the narrative. A telling example is a comparison between the descriptions of torture in

Saddam's prisons narrated by Huda, and the notorious, yet unnamed Abu Ghraib, described by The American:

The American:	Huda:
still	The prison status was terrible
and we're	we stayed lying on the floor
smiling	only lying like sardines. We were naked.
at	I remember one woman she got her period.
a man	You know what they do when a woman gets her period?
naked	They hang her upside down naked
with a sandbag on his head	so her blood runs on her, for her whole cycle like that,
raped	upside down …
with a chemical light, told to masturbate.	The fearsome thing was that every night at sort of two o'clock
I cannot carry it	we heard the gates and chains opening
and they're	and they'd call a list of women and they'd take them and
thumbs-up	they wouldn't come back.
smiling	we could hear things, all night, always rape,
don't tell me	or rape with electronic instruments.
they didn't know	But, their way, I promise you, their way
their job	was to torture the people close to you
not with smiling	that is how they'd do it.
every photo	One woman I was with
they were	They brought her baby, three-months-old baby, outside
smiling. (Raffo 48)	the cell

	they put this woman's baby in a bag with starving cats they tape-recorded the sound of this and her rape and they played it for her husband in his cell. (Raffo 52)

Undoubtedly, the harrowing descriptions of both systems of torture require a brave and passionate playwright to convey. Yet, it is clear that a form of external or self-censorship was practiced in the dramatisation of Abu Ghraib prison, while no details were spared with Saddam's. Sentences describing the American soldiers' abuse of Iraqi prisoners are short and elusive compared to the lengthy, detailed and dramatic sentences documenting Saddam's regime crimes.

To Raffo and all the Iraqi women she represents, the overthrow of Saddam's regime is the end of decades of repression and suffering. However, the political ambivalence in the play and emphasis on Saddam's atrocity seem to reproduce an American narrative about the war on Iraq. To a mainstream American media, eager to incorporate the Arab American voice in a discourse supporting the "war on terror", Raffo's play is interpreted as a legitimisation of the war on Iraq. In the "Women to women" interview with Raffo, the interviewer interrupts Raffo to make sure that Sadam's incrimination rather than the American war's is clear:

> Raffo: A girl who accidently turns her father in, which is a common story –
>
> Interviewer: When Saddam Hussain was
>
> Raffo: Yeah. ([06:57-07:05])

The war on Iraq is again justified when the interviewer asks whether there was theatre under Saddam's regime. Raffo explains that there was, albeit being subtle when political: "Yeah. I mean, you couldn't say anything bad about Saddam, but you could allude to it. It could be poetic, and if he didn't catch it you would be fine. You know. But, yes there was theatre." The interviewer restates the aim of the question intentionally: "but the stakes could be high if he caught it" with which Raffo agrees with ([24:00 – 24:22]). Raffo's hesitation towards owning a political point of view is best highlighted when the interviewer asks her about the lack of a precise political opinion in the play to which she answers: "yes, well, ish" ([13:57-14:20]). She attributes the absence of a clear attitude towards the war on Iraq as a reflection of Iraqis' opinions, with families who suffered most under Saddam's regime celebrating his overthrow and those who are losing lives daily because of the American war lamenting it. Yet, the only opinion expressed clearly in the play is through the words of the expat Huda: "The mistake is not the war, no, America had to do it./ The mistake was supporting Saddam all his life" (Raffo 40). Although in her interview, Raffo refers to the war on Iraq as invasion, it is only Huda's overtly supportive stance toward the war on Iraq which is distinctly stated in the play.

Here again, however, the Iraqi women are represented in their full colours. It is true that some of *9 Parts of Desire*'s characters are more politically vocal than others when it comes to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, yet this does not reduce Raffo's efforts in creating strong, emotional, sexually charged, active and resilient Arab women. Political expressions, especially those discordant with the "war on terror" discourse, remain a challenging site for Raffo and Shamieh. Both playwrights chose to avoid politically confrontational narratives due to the risks of being silenced or made artistically invisible. Ultimately, the plays might not have been produced, staged, published or written about, had

they been too political and in discord with the political discourses of certain conservative funders, theatre institutions and members of audience.

In conclusion, Arab American women playwrights have engaged, since 9/11, in the initiation of an Arab American feminist movement. Playwrights like Betty Shamieh and Heather Raffo, among others, are adopting practices used by early feminist theatre artists to free Arab women from an Othering Orientalist discourse. The appropriation of the subject position in a non-linear narrative, as well as deploying collectivity as a technique and theme, are some of the tools Shamieh and Raffo have used to construct the new Arab woman character. The site of Middle-East politics remains a dangerous and treacherous territory for Arab American theatre practitioners. However, Arab American women playwrights need to engage with this territory, despite its perils to their visibility on American stage, for their feminist movement to metamorphose to the next stage of being, and proclaim a politically activist stance. It is a long way until the movement is fully empowered and able to crystalise both its vision and influence. Yet, it is only by finding the voice within and the specificity that corresponds to the real experience of Arab/Arab American Women, that this new movement could become mature, autonomous, comprehensive and powerful. Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* and Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* represent the struggle for such a vision: they symbolise incomplete, but important steps on the way. Though politically limited, both plays bring Arab American women out of their stereotypical existence in the American imagination, and present them humanly, active, powerful and full of desire for life.

In Response to Narratives of Stereotypes: Arab American Playwrights Reclaim and Fortify Arab American Representation

The tradition of Arab negative stereotyping has been the singular topic, which all Arab American playwrights have persistently and systematically addressed in their plays, despite the diversity of their dramatic subjects. In order to respond to a longstanding practice of misrepresentation, Arab American playwrights have re-appropriated the right of self-representation as a precursor to write and stage their identity. The previous chapters have introduced Arab gendered stereotyping as a framework that influenced the lives and artistic expressions of Arab Americans in the U.S. Chapter One and Two examined a tendency in the arts industry to privilege some Arab American women playwrights, while attempting to appropriate their voices and influence their narratives. Conversely, Chapter Two discussed how these playwrights negotiated their privileges to produce a narrative that unsettles the Western representations of Arab women. This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the topic of Arab stereotypes, the process of their formation, their daily impact on Arab Americans' lives, and their cultural and institutional appropriation in the American context. The dramatisation of a problematic existence and identity negatively shaped by Arab popular portrayals is explored through an examination of Sam Younis' 2009 *Browntown*, and Yousef El Guindi's *Our Enemies: Lovely Scenes of Love and Combat* (Unpublished manuscript, 2008) and *Back of the Throat* (Unpublished manuscript, 2006). The analysis of these plays follows a distinction made between the social/cultural and institutional impact of stereotyping on Arab Americans in post 9/11 America. Younis' *Browntown*, and El Guindi's *Our Enemies* examine the social and cultural struggle of living within the frameworks set by

damaging stereotypes; and El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* investigates the institutional discrimination originating from the endorsement of stereotypes and prejudice.

Understanding Stereotypes and the Process of their Formation

A classic definition of prejudice is conceived by the renowned psychologist Gordon Allport who states that prejudice is: "an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalisation. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group or an individual of that group" (*The Nature of Prejudice* 10). Once conceived, this erroneous and reductive generalisation evolves into a narrative relating to a certain group repeatedly retold until established as its representative. By being communicated, shared and reiterated, this narrative "tends to retain stereotype-consistent information, thus supplying a steady flow of stereotype-confirming information through discourse (McIntyre, Lyons, Clark and Kashima 254). Hence, stereotypes enjoy supreme and rarely disputed authority over the targeted group once established. Stereotypes systematically and determinedly affect how people perceive, process information about, and respond to a certain group and its member.

Stereotyping and its consequent prejudice and discrimination function on three respective levels: individual, cultural and institutional. Stereotyping results in 'implicit and explicit bias' on the individual level that manifests itself by (conscious or unconscious) formulation of opinions and attitudes about the stereotyped group (Dovidio et al. 10). This has the potential of generating actions such as avoidance, racial slurs and even violence towards the stereotyped body. Cultural and institutional discrimination, on the other hand, is defined as the investment of prejudice and stereotypes in forming laws and policies that "unfairly restrict the opportunities of a particular group of people" (Dovidio et al. 10). That is, accepted stereotypes about a certain group are incorporated within the law and legitimised

in different forms, as in racial profiling for example. Therefore, what might start as a faulty and generalised opinion or attitude towards a group of people becomes legalised by institutional prejudice affecting people's rights and lives. Arabs represent one of these groups that seem to be a long and readily accepted target for stereotypes. In fact, Edward Said has noted that "[f]or no other ethnic or religious group is it true that virtually anything can be written or said about it, without challenge or demurral"(287).

As explained in the previous chapters, Edward Said's *Orientalism* demonstrates the West's authority in constructing the East freely and fictionally as long as it continues to be exoticised and fantasised as an Other. Through meticulous examination of a variety of literature on matters Arab and Muslim, Said shows the persistence of negative Arab stereotypes in Western systems of knowledge and representation. Thus, Arabs, and Arab Americans, have been subject to an ideological process of stereotyping which assigned different roles to Arab men and women: stereotypes of Arab men represent him as active threatening entity, while Arab women are portrayed as passive and victimised. In either of their gendered specificity, however, Said argues that Arab stereotypes convey a Western projection of Otherness. That is, the Arab (or Oriental) represents that which the Western (or Occident) is not (Said 45, 72, 54, 109). Focusing on the Arab male, Said concludes that if the Arab is bestowed with enough attention to be talked about, then he is recollected "from a faintly outlined stereotype as a camel-riding nomad" (285) who is "seen as a disruptor of Israel's and the West's existence" (286). Said further describes the Arab male typecast to be that of a wealthy oil sheikh whose Islamic religion is static, authoritarian and incapable of objectivity. The vast amount of literary evidence presented in Said's *Orientalism* not only uncovers and documents the negative representations of Arabs, but it also exposes a frightening introduction of Arabs and Muslims to "the Occident". The Orientalist tradition of

stereotyping Arabs began long before 9/11, but has fervently intensified and metamorphosed since the tragic September 11th attacks.

Pre and Post 9/11 Stereotypical Representations of the Arab in American Mass Media Culture

Said demonstrates that the system of representing the Orient created a set of stereotypes which, after being historically transmitted through Western academia and literature, has evolved into images circulated via the modern and accessible cinema (Said 278). Jack Shaheen, an authority in exposing the misrepresentations and stereotypes of Arabs in Hollywood and on television, shows how Hollywood has for the past century employed the strategy of repetition in presenting Arabs in fixed stereotypes that are often slanderous. He finds that Hollywood has "used repetitions as a teaching tool, tutoring movie audiences repeating over and over, in film after film, insidious images of the Arab people" (Shaheen, *Reel* 7). He recognises that this strategy serves the purpose of perpetuating Arab stereotypes converting them from film images to accepted truths.

The danger of such stereotypical images, especially when they become unquestionable due to their incessant reoccurrence, is that they dehumanise Arabs and affect their social and cultural integration within sections of the American society. The events following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 are but one example of undeserved criminalisation of Arabs motivated by popular Arab's negative portrayal. In media initial reports, the attacks were hypothesised to be undertaken by Arab and Muslim "terrorists", leading to a number of FBI investigates and hate crimes against Arabs and/or Muslims (Progler 11-17). The presumed Arab and Muslim suspects were later found to be wrongly accused as the American Timothy McVeigh and his accomplices were tried and convicted of

the Oklahoma bombing. It was, however, Arabs' stereotypes which rendered them as potential suspects.

Shaheen notes that the process of stereotyping Arabs began with early Hollywood movies in which the male Muslim Arab was typically represented "as [an] uncivilised character, the outsider in need of a shower and a shave, starkly contrasting in behavior and appearance with the white Western protagonist" ("Hollywood's" 25). Examples of films which depict Arabs unfavourably are abundant: The *Sheik* (1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) represent Arabs as bandits and murderers; *Black Sunday* (1977) determinedly ascribes the terrorist role for the Arab; *Wanted: Dead or Alive* (1987) announces the Arab "terrorist" approaching and threatening L.A; *Rules of Engagement* (2000) portrays Arabs as legitimate targets of U.S. Marine missions. In most of Hollywood's representation of Arab, Shaheen finds that:

> Arab Muslims are fanatics who believe in a different god, who don't value human life as much as we do, they are intent on destroying us (the west) with their oil or with their terrorism; the men seek to abduct and brutally seduce our women; they are without family and reside in a primitive place (the desert) and behave like primitive beings. The women are subservient — resembling black crows — or we see them portrayed as mute, somewhat exotic harem maidens. (qtd. in Harrington)

In their recurrent representation as brutes, thieves and terrorists, Arabs were made to embody a projection of the displaced Other in the Western imagery. Films, which vilify Arabs enforced the dichotomy between the 'virtuous' and 'civilised' Westerner and the Arab antithesis, as well as perpetuating "ideologies of alienation" towards the Middle East (Bellin

75). These Othering or alienating portrayals of Arabs are further enforced via additional outlets other than television or Cinema. Shaheen expands his investigation of Arab stereotypes to include comic books, and distinguishes the dominant depictions of the Arab man as "the repulsive terrorist, the sinister sheikh or the rapacious bandit" whose physical features are "frequently bestial, demonised and dehumanised" ("Arab Images" 123). Repeated Arab negative imagery was thus widely circulated through different media outlets before the September attacks of 2001. 9/11, however, brought a new layer to the narratives composed about Arabs and provoked a collective attribution of blame on Arabs and Muslims.

The various antagonistic stereotypes assigned specifically to the male Arab (dark, bearded, aggressive, lustful and backward, etc.) have been channelled after 9/11 into one magnified archetype or grand narrative of the Arab as the terrorist; likely suspect or enemy. As aforementioned, instances of the Arab depicted as a terrorist had existed before 9/11 in mass media, but the 'terrorist' stereotype did not achieve its predominance amongst other negative Arab portrayals until after 9/11. In his *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, Shaheen documents the transformation of Arab stereotypes in accordance with American foreign military adventures, noting that "all those reel desert nomads and obese oily sheiks were suddenly dispatched to the dressing rooms to make room for the new head attraction: Arab as crazed Islamic fundamentalist bent on destruction" (prologue). The tragedy of 9/11 was exploited to sanctify the new Arab terrorist stereotype employing previous negative portrayals as precursors and signifiers. One of the mediums which has harboured the new "terrorist" Arab stereotype is the digital world of video games. Especially after 9/11, video games have transported the sites of stereotypes from images on screens into an enemy with which a player can engage. The role of the observer has changed

from passive viewer into an active participant. In action games, Vit Sisler notes that "the Middle East is a favourite virtual battleground" (208) in many post 9/11 video games. In such games, Arabs are the "Other"; i.e.: the enemy whose extermination is the mission of the player who is considered one of "us" (Sisler 208). Examples like these are alarming because they demonstrate the rapid and sinister evolvement of Arab antagonising portrayals in various media forms, as well as the transformation of the reader/viewer/player from a passive consumer to an active agent who acts in response to these negative typecasts. The three plays discussed in this chapter will contextualise the serious impact of stereotyping on Arab Americans' interaction with their cultural and institutional surrounding.

The Narrative of the Socially Stereotyped in Sam Younis' *Browntown*

In an introduction to *Browntown* on Arabcomedy.org, the following question is poised: "Who are the hijackers and who are the hostages in the entertainment industry?". In its dramatisation of this question and its ramification, *Browntown* presents Arab American characters who have become hostages of their own social and cultural stereotypes. *Browntown* was the playwriting debut for Arab American actor/playwright Sam Younis winning a 2004 Fringe NYC award for "Overall Excellence in Playwriting". It is a comedy about three actors: two Arab Americans; Omar and Malek, and one Indian American, Vijay, whose ethnicities are occasionally conflated – because of the "brownness" of their skin – by some Hollywood producers. Omar, Malek and Vijay are auditioning for the role of a terrorist in a made-for-TV movie. The characters express their personal struggle in having to audition for roles like these, which they deem to be ethnically and ethically degrading. Ironically, the end of the play sees neither Omar and Malek, nor Vijay secure the role, which is eventually given to a famous "black Irish" actor. The play satirically presents the three actors' personal take on racial profiling in show business, and their negotiation with a culture of stereotyping

which seems to always encompass them. *Browntown* is somewhat autobiographical as it is loosely based on anecdotes from the playwright's personal and professional life: "I began writing *Browntown* in reaction to my audition experiences as an Arab-American actor" (Younis 225). Younis explains that the play voiced the perplexities and questions which occupied his mind while he was auditioning for roles. Some of his questions were: "Why am I routinely a candidate for terrorist roles? Why are these terrorists always named "Mohammed"? Why does that Indian guy keep getting the Arab terrorist parts over me? Why should that upset me? Am I a sellout?" (225).

The *Color of Terror*, the movie which the characters are auditioning for, is described by Omar (one of the characters in the play) as just "like another scary brown-guy movie" (Younis 235). It is about a character called "Mohammed" who complies with Al Qaeda to launch a terrorist act in America. The movie's title and its necessary terrorist "Mohammed" call to mind all stereotypes associated with both Arabs and Muslims since the two are generally mistaken for one another. In a bitterly comic manner, Omar asks: "But that's the thing, man. Why is his name Mohammed? Why do all terrorists got to be named Mohammed in these movies?" (Younis 235). The question highlights how the film industry enforces a link between Islam as a religion and terrorism by borrowing Islamic ideological or cultural signifiers and applying them to terrorist representations, thus encouraging as association between the two.

Brownstown's characters are trapped within the confines of an image that does not correspond with what they consider their own. Omar complains that the movie he is auditioning for presents a construction of the Arab where he tics all the boxes of the assumed stereotypes of an Arab. He trivialises the authenticity of the Arab stereotype, which he conveys to be laughable albeit painful.

> Omar: For chrissake, this Mohammed's got four wives, he hates all Jews, he drives a Mercedes that he bought with his family's oil money, and he's conspiring with a guerrilla group called "Allies for Allah." They may as well put him on a camel and strap a bomb on to him in the opening scene (Younis 235/6).

This Arab "Mohammed" is a brutal patriarch and a savage anti-Semite, who is bent on destroying the West. He fulfils an extensive list of negative stereotypes which, in its use of indiscriminate generalities, blurs the distinction between Islam as a religion, Arabism as an ethnicity, and terrorism as an ideology.

Carrying on his description of the "terrorist" role, Omar continues: "This is basically the same shit as *True Lies* or *Not without my Daughter!* There are consequences for perpetuating these stereotypes" (Younis 235/6). Omar expresses his criticism from the position of a helpless actor whose livelihood depends on an industry that negatively and directly influences his life. Throughout the play, Omar and Malek convey their concerns about the damage such negative stereotypes has on their culture and identity. This damage continues to be significant because of the power and reach of Hollywood. Marguerite Moritz explains how Hollywood and the Western media have become the major source of information on non-western people, due to the state of global dominance both have reached. Moritz further states: "with respect to Islam, when Muslims have not been rendered silent, they typically have been represented as threatening religious fanatics. For decades, critics have charged Western media with heavy reliance on damaging, inaccurate, and sensational stereotypes in their representations of Islam" (352). Because of the authority which Hollywood and the Western media have, these representations become generally accepted as true depictions of Arabs and Muslims.

Unfortunately for *Brownstown*'s two Arab American actors, they still have to apply for this role despite deeming it to be degrading to their culture and identity. Malek wonders: "why do I go to audition after audition and pray that some asshole will give me the opportunity to slander my own culture on network television?" (Younis 242). The answer to Malek's question lies in the cultural and social setting surrounding Arab American actors whereby fulfilling the "terrorist" role in a movie is one of the few options for work, available to them. The repetitive mechanism utilised in producing negative Arab stereotypes renders positive portrayals of Arabs in mainstream American films irrelevant and unpopular. Thus, *Brownstown*'s characters, like many Arab American actors, are entrapped by these stereotypes on an individual and social level. Unless they endorse, enact and internalise these very negative stereotypes, they are refused entry into the entertainment industry, and are ultimately denied economic survival.

Furthermore, *Browntown* examines the significance of race and skin-colour in the creation of such negative stereotypes and the indiscriminate generalisation applied when forming racial stereotypes. The play capitalises on this generalisation as a source of incongruity, confusion and ultimately bitter laughter. The two Arab American actors, Omar and Malek, are auditioning with the Indian American, Vijay, for the Arab "terrorist" role. Omar ponders: "I just don't understand why they keep hiring an Indian guy for specifically Arab roles" (Younis 236). The three actors reveal that the confusion between the two ethnicities is not a one-off incident since the Arab American actors have previously auditioned for Indian roles as well. The conflation between the two races and cultures lies solely on the similarity of the brown skin colour these Arab and Indian American actors share. As Omar puts it when having a discussion about the Indian role he has been cast: "well, my guess is they really don't know the difference" (Younis 237). Ignorance and

oversimplification are prerequisite for establishing any stereotype, and the play highlights this through ridicule and black humour.

Malek and Vijay discuss their situation as actors who are always invited to take parts in performances that perpetuate their "brown-man" stereotypes or what Malek names "Brownsploitation" (Younis 242). Malek, though admitting to the epidemic of stereotypes encompassing all minorities, points out disappointedly that the Arabs are the worst stereotyped leading Vijay to ironically award him "the "most likely to be vilified" trophy" (Younis 243). Stereotypes in this context become a precondition for all personal, social and professional interaction for these Arab American actors effectively impeding the realisation of their potentials.

Concluding the tragedy for these struggling actors, the Vice President of Casting, Hamilton, decides to allocate the role to a Black Irish famous actor called Colin Farrell. The irony inspires as much laughter as it does tears. The following dialogue between Ann, casting director, and Hamilton demonstrates the ruthlessness of the showbiz industry towards minority in general and Arab Americans in particular:

> Ann: But Collin's not Arab.
>
> Hamilton: It's all about wardrobe and makeup, Ann. You know that!
>
> Ann: He could maybe *pass* for Arab, I guess, but that's really not the point.
>
> Hamilton: Haven't you ever noticed those dark, deepset eyes?
>
> Ann: I know he has dark eyes, but why not go with someone who is actually –

> Hamilton: Do you want people to see this movie or not? … We need a *name* actor! … He's black Irish, which is as close as you're gonna get to Arab if you're talking about *stars*. (Younis 258)

Omar and Malek were simply denied the role. Their struggle in the entertainment industry did not stop with only auditioning for degrading roles, but it culminated in their exclusion all together because they were not, and could not be big enough "stars" in this industry. *Browntown* represents a category of Arab Americans, who chose the entertainment industry to be their profession, but who face a daily uphill battle to exist professionally and culturally against negative stereotypes that define them in the industry.

The play depends in its build-up on the ignorance and confusion created by the incongruity of stereotypes. This is not a surprise since the dramatisation of ignorance is one of the main tools employed in the making of a comedy. By introducing the subject of stereotypes through the comic medium, Younis whisks away the rigidity and uncompromising nature of the Arab stereotype. He transforms a somewhat fixed and accepted stereotype into a joke through disparaging the stereotype itself. This enables Younis to challenge the authority of stereotypes, as a point of reference, when the audience first meets the Arab/Arab American characters. Beyond the anticipated "terrorist" stereotype, Younis aims to familiarise the audience with the Arab in the non-threatening territory of comedy and cement the disparity between what he identifies as Arab and what a stereotype constitutes as Arab.

The employment of comedy to subvert ethnic stereotypes and introduce a political point of view is a popular practice by ethnic comedians. Omid Djalili, a British award-winning comedian explains:

> With the running jokes, the bits of physicality like the belly dancing, the bingo numbers, you keep the laughs all bubbling along with very high energy, I found the political points that I did make were made stronger because the audience really were in effect softened by being in such an entertained state. They would take the political points more. (qtd. in Pickering 102)

Indeed, comedy disarms the audience and allows critical statements to pass unopposed according to Sigmund Freud who analysed the subject of jokes and humour in great length in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In his examination of the purpose and mechanism of jokes, Freud explains that one of the functions of a joke is to defend the self, and protect it from ridicule and hostility. According to Freud, a joke will "bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation, just as on other occasions we ourselves have often been bribed by an innocent joke into overestimating the substance of a statement expressed jokingly ...." ("Jokes and their Relations" 833). The bribery intended by the comic medium with which Younis deals with Arab stereotypes is that which lures the audience to laugh with, rather at, the Arab American characters on stage.

In their battle against stereotypes, comedy serves yet another purpose for Arab American performers. It offers them a light-hearted outlet with which they can deal with their own precarious situations. Freud explains the employment of comedy as a defence-mechanism tactic in his 1927 "Humour" essay: "The main thing is the intention which humour carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people. It means: 'Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children - just worth making a jest about!" (166). Humour, thus, is a tool intended to ridicule reality so as to render it less threatening and more controllable and negotiable. The social and cultural

existence of Omar and Malek, as well as their creator Younis, is influenced by derogatory stereotypes affecting both their personal and professional lives. This resonates with Younis' admission that the play is based on some of his experiences, which were frustrating and painful. Humour, here, functions as an Arab American coping mechanism for a rather dark post 9/11 reality.

It is not surprising that comedy is an attractive genre for Arab American playwrights/performers, whether employed as a tool to "bribe" the audience against stereotypes, or help the artists deal with a difficult reality. Holly Arida notes that Arab American comedy is an "area of performance art that has grown tremendously over the last decade" ("The Arts." 200). The popularity of the genre led to an annual Arab American Comedy Festival to be launched in 2003 in New York (celebrating its 11th anniversary in October 2014). Founded by comedian Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid, the festival aims at "increasing the visibility of talented Arab-American artists" as well as "attracting positive attention for the Arab-American community" ("Arab American Comedy"). Through comedy, "Arab American comedians are attempting to heal misunderstandings and misperceptions about Arabs, and especially Islam" (Arida, 200). Comedy seems to be the perfect medium for combating Arab stereotypes: it invites audiences to laugh with the Arab American performer about the incongruity of the Arab stereotype, thus initiating a renegotiation of "who an Arab" is beyond his stereotype.

Through humour and satire, *Browntown* gives the audience (whether Arab American or American) access to bitter laughter about a reality they live, participate in and are affected by. It offers the Arab Americans a voice and a space - though limited – so as to enable them to represent themselves. Dalia Basiouy identifies comedy and the Arab American Comedy Festival, which featured sketches from *Browntown* in 2003, as "a platform, 'a space of their

own' for Arab American artists to define themselves and their work, negotiate stereotypes, and joke about their own habits, fears, accents, misunderstandings, and the challenges of living between two cultures" (331). However, it is still long before Arab Americans can conquer their stereotyped image and replace it with their own self-representation. Thus, the play ends in the words of Omar: "I think I've had enough of Browntown for one day. Yallah" (Younis 261). One cultural translation of "Yallah" is "by God, let's go", which seems a fitting conclusion for one day in the lives of Omar and Malek. Their world, or "Brown town", consists of daily battles against negative ethnic stereotypes, and their final call in this play is not that of resignation, but a call to recharge their energies in preparation for a tomorrow influenced by the same stereotypes.

Framed Narratives of Arab American Representation in *Our Enemies*

Yussef El Guindi's *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* tackles similar issues to those covered in *Browntown*, but adds complex layers to the analysis of social and cultural Arab stereotyping. *Our Enemies* premiered on the stage of Chicago's Silk Road Theatre Project on February 21, 2008 where El Guindi was playwright in residence. The brilliance of El Guindi's work has been acknowledged by multiple awards, demand by theatre companies, and academic interest. Indeed, the American Theatre Critics Association (ATCA) announced that *Our Enemies* had won Yussef El Guindi its 2009 "M. Elizabeth Osborn" New Play Award for an emerging playwright. El Guindi has also recently received the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award.

Our Enemies examines Arab American representations in media and the issue of assimilation as two problematic sites. As well as addressing Arab stereotypes, the play questions the cultural positioning of the stereotyped Other in the American cultural canvas.

The current analysis of *Our Enemies* will mainly focus on the packaging/framing of representations of the Other in line with the following questions: Where does the stereotyped stand in comparison to the grand American narrative in mass media? What narrative is the Other permitted to serve? Is the Other allowed visibility and involvement in writing the cultural scene of America? These questions reflect the concerns discussed in the first chapter about the controlled visibility of Arab American artists. However, where the first chapter examined the issue theoretically, this chapter analyses a dramatisation of it in *Our Enemies*. The play engages with the complexity of Arab American representation, its creation, censorship and packaging, in the American popular culture. It focuses on how Arab Americans are typically granted visibility if, and when, their narratives fit within the confines of the space allocated for minority, and how some Arab Americans have unfortunately adapted their voices accordingly.

The play has two converging plots: The main one concerns Noor, who is an aspiring, but struggling writer. Her novel's publication depends on her acceptance of imposed edits by her American agent, Olivia. To be published, Noor is expected to abandon her own narrative and adopt a tailored one to fit the expectations of American popular media of what her story, as an Arab woman, should read like. The edits required of Noor are aimed at changing her work from a novel to an autobiography, with its female protagonist rendered as a victim of Arab male patriarchy and cruelty. The play highlights the issue of packaging Arab American writers, especially female ones, as a typical prerequisite for being published, visible, and recognised. The plot of Noor's failing struggle for self-representation coincides with that of her boyfriend, Gamal, and his accidental activism. Gamal is a young Arab American who is exasperated by the Arab American "sell-outs", who indulge with the media and voluntarily participate in perpetuating a negative image of Arabs. One example of these is the Arab

American writer Mohsen, who enjoys mass media demand by expressing opinions in support of the negative framing of Arabs, popular in the shows that request his appearance. Sheikh Alfani is another example of an Arab American whom Gamal accuses of spreading wrong perceptions of Arabs in America. Gamal's unplanned activism manifests itself in dark humorous forms with tools comprising of lipsticks and cakes, which become accidental weapons leaving harmless but visible marks on Gamal's suspected enemies. This little community of Arab Americans cross paths on the stage of *Our Enemies* to offer glimpses of the struggles, passions, betrayals and misinterpretations which shape the relationships between members of this community, and could, at times, threaten its existence.

As a minority, Arab Americans have a marginalised space for representation in mainstream media. The "celluloid" Arab is what s/he has always been in Shaheen's words: "the cultural 'other'" (*Reel Bad Arabs* 172). Thus, s/he is often confined to the periphery, if not to invisibility. Gamal is one of those Arab Americans who is well aware of the space he is constricted to, as a member of a minority. In his attempts to protect this precarious space, Gamal accuses Sheikh Alfani of spreading regressive and alienating views about Islam. Gamal asks Sheikh Alfani to consider the reasons behind the continuous demand for his views as representative of all Muslims. When Sheikh Alfani defends himself and his rights asserting that "this is a free country", Gamal expresses his apprehension: "No, actually it's a big swimming pool and you're pissing in it. You're pissing in the *corner* where the rest of us are trying to keep our head above water" (El Guindi 24, emphasis added). The connection between social and cultural survival and representation in media is stressed when Gamal, conscious of the positioning of Arabs in the American cultural landscape, voices his anger:

> There's no such thing as a normal conversation when it comes to us [Arab Americans], is there. When they invite you on they don't want a normal

> conversation. This isn't about polite disagreements. This is about who's in and who's outside the pale. And you seem determined to keep us outside it. (El Guindi 26)

The anxiety of any further contamination to this limited margin which Arab Americans occupy pushes Gamal to actively express his frustration with means other than just words. He attacks Sheikh Alfani with a chocolate fudge cake after accusing him of distorting the image of Muslims and Arabs explaining that "sometimes, talking things out, just doesn't seem to work. And if you can't change someone's mind - you can at least let them know how you feel ... I'm... sorry... Sorry" (El Guindi 27/8).

The first chapter discussed the positioning of Otherness in the cultural centre/margin dichotomy concluding that Othered minorities, such as Arab Americans, are usually cast to off-centeredness or marginalisation. The Other either exists in the margin by maintaining the image of an "outsider", or can occasionally migrate to the centre when mirroring its image and narrative. In *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*, Michael Pickering identifies "stereotypical othering" as a "rhetorical strategy of exclusion, made in the interests of a unified collective identity" (49). He continues:

> The ritualistic process of social exorcism it [stereotypical othering] performs attempts to contain the Other in its place at the periphery. Identity is in this way dependent on the difference that has been translated into Otherness. This gives symbolic centrality to what has been socially excluded, projected outwards onto the Other. Such symbolic centrality suggests either a fear of what cannot be admitted into an ordered identity, or a critical lack, an absence in the presence of identity which demands that the Other be turned into an

> object of happy assimilation, as a spectacle, an exhibit, a source of entertainment, or as a fantasy. (49)

This periphery is the location which *Our Enemies* dramatises most of its Arab American characters to be trapped in. Three of the Arab American characters in the play indulge, wittingly or unwittingly, with a form of assimilation. Mohsen and Sheikh Alfani correspond with Pickering's classification of "happy assimilation", while Noor is coaxingly thrust into a 'compulsory' assimilation, as will be discussed. The play shows that it is this condition of assimilation which grants the three characters exposure in certain American media outlets. El Guindi himself acknowledges the challenges of breaking away from the periphery and offering a true representation of a minority whose complex identity negotiates both heritage and assimilation

> American culture works by catering to constituencies. Theaters, popular culture, address what they feel are their audiences. Because Arabs and Muslims are still struggling to find their place in the wider American culture, the mainstream doesn't feel the need to include us, or program shows/ plays by us. When we are included, it's usually in a negative light. ("Personal Interview")

He also confides that he once felt the need to adopt a pseudonym to secure his way out of the exclusion and pigeonholing associated with a writer from the Arab American minority:

> There was a time when I wrote under an anglicized name (Joseph Guindi) because I knew "Yussef El Guindi" would create certain expectations (must be an "ethnic" story). I stopped when the confusion it caused (I forgot which

> name different people knew me by) became too irritating... (Personal Interview)

El Guindi felt obliged to relinquish his Arabic name and adopt a name that would signify assimilation in pursuit of artistic creativity and mobility, often inaccessible to writers from the minority. His experience echoes that of the plays' protagonist, Noor: As Yussef felt inclined to change his name; so does Noor feel pressured to alter her story.

In her frustration with the state of invisibility immersing Arab Americans, Joanna Kadi deems Arab Americans to be "the Most Invisible of the Invisibles" (xix). Both *Browntown* and *Our Enemies* contemplate the price of Arab American visibility in the American entertainment and literary industries. The two plays show that artistic exposure for their Arab American characters is often connected with endorsing negative stereotypes. In *Our Enemies*, Noor is pressured by her agent, Olivia to make radical changes to her novel. The required changes are intended to perpetuate an image of the Arab woman as victimised by Arab/Muslim repressive patriarchy. Noor represents many an Arab American woman writer, who still struggles to introduce her narrative unedited or uncensored.

The problem for Arab Americans who wish to express themselves lies in the disparity between self-representation, which they are eager for, and a projection of Otherness, which is what their representation is often reduced to in popular culture. In the play, Noor is pressured to mould her self-representation in accordance with an already conceived American stereotypical narrative about Arab women. Over a meal hosted by the literary agent Olivia, Mohsen is invited to encourage Noor to adopt his methods of how to become publishable. He admits to Noor that he was asked to convince her to change the

genre of her writing from fiction to autobiography. Noor finds this suggestion problematic asking:

> Noor: Why they think I'd make an interesting subject, I don't know.
>
> Mohsen: It's what you represent to them.
>
> Noor: What they choose to project on me. (El Guindi 56)

Within this, the publisher's desire for an autobiography corresponds with her aim to present Noor's story as a "true" representation of Arab women authored/authenticated by an Arab woman writer.

The play conveys that an Arab American's self-representation needs to abide to certain roles as a prerequisite for acceptance in the publishing market. A truthful Arab artistic narrative would potentially not sell if it does not correspond to a set of stereotypes, which are both familiar and recognisable to an American audience. On a rudimental level, this relates to the functions of stereotypes, which Henri Tajfel (1981) categorise as "individual" and "collective". Charles Stangor and Mark Schaller summarise Tajfel's theories:

> [S]tereotypes serve an individual function by systematizing and simplifying information available to a perceiver, and protecting that perceiver's value structure. At a collective level, Tajfel suggested that stereotypes serve groups by offering culturally accepted explanations for events, by justifying group actions, and by providing means for groups to differentiate themselves positively from other groups" (19).

Based on this, the publisher's resistance to accept Noor's narrative is expected because Noor's story could contradict the familiar stereotypes of Arab women, thus disrupting their recognisability to members of the reading public. The Arab Other has already been framed in an image, which renders its reception uncomplicated and easily identifiable. Said's *Orientalism* has thoroughly theorised the "Oriental" prism which Arab images pass through before they reach a "Western" audience. In these lines, he questioned the process of representation and its truthful correspondence with what it is representing:

> [T]he real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer ... What this must lead us to methodologically is to view representations (or misrepresentations - the distinction is at best a matter of degree) as inhabiting a common field of play defined for them, not by some inherent common subject matter alone, but by some common history, tradition, universe of discourse. (272)

While this view about representation applies distinctly to representations of Arabs in Orientalist texts, Arab American-authored representations are similarly limited by publishers' pressure and the publishing market's expectation.

Only when she adheres to the roles imposed by her publisher is Noor allowed a voice, accepted and offered a platform to speak whether in her novel or on talk shows. The promotion of her new novel starts with a talk show hosted by Earl, who insists that the novel is a memoir and therefore representative of herself as well as her Arab culture. In discussing

her novel, Earl forces particular conclusions about Arab women's oppression at the hands of their presumed 'savage' men. Noor insists that her work is fiction, asserting that:

> Noor: what I really wanted to say is that I'm not, in this book, trying to make sweeping statements about anything, let alone Middle-East attitudes, or men, as you seem to be suggesting.
>
> Earl: But it's safe to say your central character comes under a lot of pressure from the men in her life. I would call it – wouldn't you characterise it as harsh? The way they try to hem her in at every turn, preventing her from fulfilling her potentials?
>
> Noor: There's a tendency, I think, to want to superimpose a particular type of narrative regarding women from that part of the world, and I'm not sure –
>
> Earl (interrupting, leafs through book) (El Guindi 91)

Earl's interrupting and overlapping statements overtake Noor's space to express herself. Her voice is silenced and replaced by Earl's assumptions and attitudes. As a member of the minority, Noor is allowed a limited and tailored space in the hegemonic centre, but when she oversteps the borders of this space, her voice is quickly silenced.

Noor's predicament is by no means an isolated incident in a trend that sees the writing of Arab/Arab American women being packaged in accordance with predetermined narratives. Jessica Winegar highlights the commodification of representations of 'bad Islam' with Middle-Eastern women as their authors. She argues that

> what is unique today is the overriding emphasis on art as a means for Middle Easterners to critique their contemporary gender relations and religion (seen

> as related), and to liberate themselves from certain, presumably oppressive, aspects of both. Moreover, there is an unprecedented concentration on religion (Islam) as a problematic site in need of either erasure or significant civilizing (660/1).

Many Arab/Arab American women writers have had to oppose such Orientalist rendering at some junction in their careers. While some Arab American women writers have successfully challenged this narrative (as the previous chapter shows), few have lost a battle or two and remained unpublished (as in Mohja Kahf's unpublished novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* , discussed in the first chapter), and others have been published after being heavily edited and marketed to comply with that narrative. Critic and writer Mohja Kahf demonstrates the framing and repackaging of Arab feminist writer Huda Sharawi in the 1986 *Harem Years*, the English translated version of Sharawi's Arabic text, *Mudhakkirati*. Kahf argues that it was the pressure of reception into the American popular culture which has altered the book so that "Sharawi can be accommodated within the United States reading environment as a victim and an escapee and shielded from the negative category of pawn" (149). The translation of *Mudhakkirati* has altered the literary work from an autobiography of a popular Arab figure into a memoir of Sharawi's private life and that of the "harem" with a misinterpretation that would present Sharawi as victim of gender oppression and male dominance. Similarly, *Our Enemies* shows that the reception of Noor as a female Arab writer is conditioned on her fulfilment of the damsel in distress narrative. This old colonial narrative remains attractive because it vilifies the Arab/Muslim male (already perceived as guilty after 9/11) while presenting the American public and policy makers as heroes saving the likes of Noor. The play especially problematises the repressive nature of such a narrative when enforced on Arab American women writers as their own self-representation. El Guindi

emphasises this packaging of Arab women's narrative in the contemporary U.S. media inferring that Noor's story is by no means an isolated or fictional incident:

> With Noor, I think she can't escape the packaging (you only have to look at the way books about Middle Easterners/ Muslims are publicized - especially books by Arab/ Muslim women - to feel Orientalism is alive and well). I think she knows this, and will always struggle with this aspect of her career. ("Personal Interview")

Noor comprehends that the narrative she is allowed to adopt is a prescribed one. She stresses that she was trying to write a story about the Arab as s/he is, to represent him/her unvarnished (without idealisation or vilification). After the publication of her book, which now contains the publisher's required changes, Noor explains to Gamal: "You do understand my intent with this book? To humanize. Warts and all. Make real what's been two dimensional up to this point. ... apparently I'm only allowed to tell certain stories, and the one I did write is going to be squeezed into the one they're intent on reading" (El Guindi 99). Noor's published book thus represents a literary form of oppression, contradicting the promises of liberty and self-determination implied in the very Orientalist narrative the book adopts. The irony did not escape Gamal who reveals the implied hypocrisy: "Funny, huh, how they're putting you in a kind of literary burqa, even as they talk about your freedom" (El Guindi 100).

El Guindi's criticism of this tendency to straitjacket Arab American women artistic expressions if they contradict the mainstream narrative is resonant with the concerns raised in Chapter One and Two about the autonomy of Arab American writers and their self-representation. While women artists in particular are pressured to adopt a certain narrative

that complies with Orientalist discourses, Arab American writers in general struggle to freely express themselves (as examined in Chapter One). In the previous quotation, Gamal is perhaps being the spokesperson for El Guindi himself, who is aware that his Arab American political plays would hardly find any welcoming ears on mainstream American stages, and so he feels inclined to camouflage some of his themes and statements. In a way, he is also prone to wear the same literary burqa Noor was forced into. Reiterating Gamal's comment, El Guindi singles out this dichotomy between the American freedom of expression and the restrictions which accompanies it:

> In a very strange way, I feel like I'm facing the kind of challenge that a writer scribbling away in a repressive regime might face. I am free to write whatever I want, of course - but then it will probably end up in my drawer. If I want mainstream acceptance, then I have to be a tad coy and strategic. I have to mask and sublimate some elements. I think I have trained my imagination to never hit anything directly. Which, dramaturgically speaking, is probably for the best....I just know that mainstream theaters shy away from anything overtly political, and so I have to write accordingly. (Personal Interview)

The play, however, does not surrender to straightforward answers for the questions of representation, stereotyping and the construction of identity. Instead, it addresses the complexities of the topic revealing the role of some members of the Arab American community in perpetuating negative representations. The issue of how the Arab is perceived certainly does not lie solely on the shoulders of American mass media. The makers of the Arab negative images are sometimes Arabs (or Arab American) themselves, who would gladly give into the temptation of easy success and generous American acceptance by perpetuating the portrayal of their own culture as an Other. The play presents an example of

those “sell-outs” in the character of Mohsen, the egotistic Arab writer popular in the U.S. mainstream culture for his unfavourable views and opinions about Arabs. In a heated argument between him and Noor, Mohsen calls his actions brave and proclaims himself a saviour of Arab women; a catalyst for change in the Arab world. Noor accuses him of being delusional, a mouthpiece of an American propaganda that vilifies Arabs. She states that she refuses to take part in a campaign that supports and justifies this:

> Mohsen: how dare you even think to criticise me, you, whose denial of everything that’s wrong with us is killing us as much as the lunatic who straps on bombs and slaughters people....
>
> Noor: And if you think I’d allow myself to be positioned as some spokesperson for Arab women while doubling as PR for people who want to civilise us? – You idiot, they do want me to write another bodice-ripper. Just with a Muslim twist. That will elicit the same Victorian gasps of horror about those brutish men and their poor suffering women. So everyone here can feel snug and warm in all their superiority. Christ, you’ve been here ten years and you regard everything you’ve come from as an alien planet. Stop being their houseboy! (El Guindi 61-64)

Noor is inviting Mohsen to read between the lines of this Orientalist narrative which they, as Arab American writers, are invited to perpetuate. She is urging him to have the necessary cultural sensitivity and understanding when translating his own culture, which he seems to have now long forgotten and abandoned in pursuit of lucrative book deals and fame. Indeed, Mohsen’s current identity has been established by Gamal at the beginning of the play as that of a sell-out. Pretending to be a make-up artist in one of Mohsen’s interviews, Gamal

inscribes the word “whore” over Mohsen’s forehead with red lipstick (El Guindi 6) marking him as a media “whore” whose stories can be changed and rewritten according to the highest bidder.

While Noor and Mohsen, and to some degree Sheikh Al Fani, represent those who are actively engaged in contributing to Arab American representation, Gamal symbolises the Arab American who is defeated in his battles against the unfavourable nature of some of those representations. At the beginning of the play, Gamal is a lively ‘accidental’ activist who attempts to defend the Arab image against the Arab American spokespersons who tarnish it. He follows unconventional, perhaps desperate, methods in expressing his displeasure, but his sentences and actions demonstrate the frustration of a young Arab American man who feels wrongly sentenced to an existence sullied by negative stereotypes, perpetuated by the likes of Mohsen and Sheikh Alfani. To ‘cure’ his frustrated outbursts, Gamal starts seeing an American therapist. What transcribes between Gamal and the therapist indicates a lack of communication/miscommunication between the American culture and Arab Americans. Gamal’s anger at his situation and members of his community is attributed to yet another stereotype of the Arab man by his therapist. The therapist claims that Gamal’s anger is a manifestation of sexual frustration (evoking here the portrayal of Arab men as lustful, but sexually deprived). The ignorance with which Gamal’s therapist approached his circumstances along with his ineffective actions render him eventually numb. Towards the end of the play, he appears to have surrendered to some sedating strategies that do not understand, nor target the source of his frustration. Unable to achieve anything, however, he gives up fighting all together and is tragically killed by Hani, Sheikh Alfani’s son. He was stabbed by one of his own, an Arab, whose image he tried to defend fervently. Gamal’s deep sense of injustice and agony is the result of a hostile environment which,

influenced by antagonising representations, Others him daily. Announcing his defeat, he states:

> I want to be oblivious for a while. I've decided to trade in my Arab for the time being, so to speak; and all other identifying markers that I feel I have to labor under and see if I can't function as someone who just...gets up in the morning and doesn't have to arm himself against all these assaults to my – to who I think I am; but am not if I don't want to be. I didn't realise that identity is a – choice, really. (El Guindi 99)

Gamal demonstrates his desperation by longing to escape from a confined space dictated by the Arab component of his Arab American identity. He gives into the illusion that identity can be a choice, while, in fact, he will always be prescribed by his name, his physical appearance, his accent – if he has any – and his religion as an Arab American living in post 9/11 America. He is a subject as Louis Althusser explains: "I only wish to point out that you and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" ("Ideology" 161). In Althusser's words, all individuals are subjects to an ideology implemented by the state and social establishments. Althusser argues that it is impossible to escape ideology because it is embedded in institutions (such as the University, Church, or governmental bodies) prescribing all social and culture interactions. Therefore, there is no freedom of choice in regards to one's identity: Gamal cannot escape his identity.

Our Enemies' curtain call offers no conclusions or answers. In fact, it adds to the confusion and ambivalence experienced by the characters, who exist in the precarious spaces

created by their self-representation and stereotyped image. Gamal is stabbed by Sheik Alfani's son, who wrongly presumes that Gamal has set his father's mosque on fire. Gamal's final words, "I am on your side... I am on your side" (El Guindi 104), are both tragic and expressive of the miscommunication between members of the Arab American community, which is leading to damaging results. Gamal's death is also symbolic of the battle fought by the characters in the play towards owning their self-representation, but ultimately losing it to an Orientalist narrative wildly popular in American mainstream culture, and internalised by some members of the Arab American community. *Our Enemies* dramatises the cultural struggle of its characters as double-layered. Their struggle for self-representation is not only waged in generally unwelcoming and Othering spheres outside their community, but inside it as well. They are fighting an Arab-Arab battle where they combat amongst themselves instead of uniting to confront stereotypes and build a solid cultural territory of their own. In fact, Mohsen expresses this so eloquently: "It seems the one thing we do well – is be our own worst enemies." (El Guindi 89). All in all, the title itself, *Our Enemies: Lovely Scenes of Love and Combat*, inspires such interpretation. The play calls for a unified stand by the Arab American community to face the threat of cultural ostracisation after 9/11. It also calls for a resolution to the packaging of Arab American artistic expressions in pre-determined narratives. Finally, it leaves the audience contemplating about the ways in which Arab Americans can negotiate a place in post 9/11 America, that is neither assimilative nor Othered.

In attempt to address concerns like these, both *Browntown* and *Our Enemies* presented the narrative of the Arab by the Arab American, and aimed to render it as part of the American cultural scene. Both plays dramatised the cultural and social mechanism of stereotypes and the impact it has on Arab Americans' livelihood, sense of identity and

belonging. Yet, there is another and far more damaging aspect of the process of stereotyping and prejudice legalised in the form of institutional discrimination. Immediately after 9/11, Arabs became suspected terrorists and laws were constituted in the name of the "war on terror" targeting Arabs and/or Muslims together. Institutions like the police and the FBI employed racial profiling in their investigations and surveillance of potential suspects – who were almost always Arabs or Muslims. In the few months following September 11, "1200 Arab and South Asian Muslims were arrested and detained" (Ashar 1192; Amnesty Report) on the suspicion they were active or had knowledge of the terrorist attacks. It was evident that the Arab/Muslim has become to serve the image of the terrorist.

Why the "Terrorist" Arab?

Days after 9/11 president George W. Bush took the stage addressing a national tragedy stating that "[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" ("Address to a Joint Session of Congress"). This immediate dichotomy was introduced with no definitions made at the nature of terrorism or who is/is not the enemy, and was readily offered as part of a new political strategy fostered by the U.S. media covering the "war on terror". With Islam becoming a commonly known, but rarely publically identified suspect, this dichotomy adopted by the Bush administration "generally constructed a polarised world in which anyone with the slightest connection with Islam comes under suspicion" (Karim 117). Juan Cole writes that "Bush identified Islam as a "religion of peace" and discouraged scapegoating Muslims for the September 11 attacks; yet, at the same time, he continually linked the Muslim world to terrorism and depicted it to the American people as a threat to U.S. national security" (128). This gave rise to a mythical construction of Islam and Muslims, which was put in sharp contrast to American nationalism and security leading to

the cultivation and popularisation of terms like "Islamofascism" (Berman, Onfray, Hitchens).

Terrorism and sensationalised terms like Islamofascism awakened an old American sense of national threat that lay dormant since the collapse of the communist Soviet Union and the end of the Red Scare. Long after eliminating the 'dangers' of the Soviet Union, the fear of a foreign threat shaped America's relations to immigrants. Arab immigrants were especially targets of vilifying cultural and national discourses due to the American support for Israel and the gulf wars in the 1990s. With the attacks of 9/11, the threat, which was latent in the American collective consciousness, was evoked and assigned to Muslims and Arabs with labels like Islamofascism substituting communism. To validate this hypothesis more, the following chapter will investigate how both communists and Muslim presumed "terrorists" have been similarly rendered in homosexual terms to facilitate a definition/construction/substitution of the enemy.

In his article "1-0 in the Propaganda War: How the Right Played the Fascism Card against Islam", Albert Scardino writes "Fascism is coming back into fashion, at least in the propaganda wars. For the right, it comes in the shape of a new word: 'islamofascism'. That conflates all the elements into one image: suicide bombs, kidnappings and the Qur'an; the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan; Iranian clerics and Hitler". It did not help either that after the September attacks, the Bush administration seemed to be obstinately ignorant when it came to defining terrorism leaving the confusion between Islam and terrorism a valid assumption. Journalist Ronald St John documents this deficiency in defining terrorism: "The Bush administration emphasized from day one that the War on Terrorism was not a war on Islam; however, administration supporters and others have increasingly defined it in exactly those terms" ("Bush policies"). Immediately after 9/11, the link between Islam and terrorism

was inferred, circulated in the media and generally accepted. At the same time, the threat, which at once assumed the same qualities as the Red Scare, was summoned back with the purpose of giving it a name, a form and a reality: Islamofascism. Karim Karim explains this phenomenon writing:

> Following the devastating attacks against American targets on 11 September 2011, Muslims have generally come to occupy the position in popular US imagery previously held by communists. Just as cold war foes are being transformed into new-found partners in important Western organisations like NATO, militants Islamists are helping sketch out a portrait of the new collective enemy of America the overall idea about Muslims is that they are the Other against whom collective Self should be on guard (117)

The Other, represented by the terrorist, Islamofascist (Muslim and/or Arab); becomes the new suspect of a national threat. Though a flawed term, Islamofascism flourished with conservatives like David Horowitz usurping the term to launch events such as "Islamofascism Awareness Week" on American campuses in October 22-26, 2007 and April 7-11, 2008. Islam and terrorism here became synonymous blurring any difference between religion and extremism. This categorical identification of the enemy has been both a response to a national tragedy associated with "Muslim" terrorists, and a transference of a long-established sense of national threat that accompanied the American history up to the end of the Cold War. Robert Worth writes about the parallel between the Cold War and 9/11 pointing out the significance of an enemy, or thereby its construction, in the American national psyche:

> America's discovery of an enemy who is not merely an enemy, but "evil," has impeccable historical credentials. In a long history of responding to real and perceived threats, it seems clear that this large, heterogeneous country defines itself in part through its nemeses. Such bellicosity can serve as a convenient tool for unification where differences among "us" can be minimised, erased, or overlooked with a powerful "them" or "other." ("Truth, Right")

In other words, the enemy of the United States, whether real or imagined, is ever-present in the collective consciousness ready to assume a new identity as national interests suggest. 9/11 announced the new identity of the enemy to be Muslims/Arabs/Islamofascists. Historian Niall Ferguson comments on the similarity between the troubled time after the terrorist events of 9/11 and World War II. He ridicules the term Islamofascism and suggests that:

> [i]t's just a way of making us feel that we're the "greatest generation" fighting another World War, like the war our fathers and grandfathers fought. You're translating a crisis symbolised by 9/11 into a sort of pseudo World War II. So, 9/11 becomes Pearl Harbor and then you go after the bad guys who are the fascists, and if you don't support us, then you must be an appeaser. ("Conversations with History")

Generally, defining the 'enemy' renders it prey to a process of vilification and Othering. In defending the national Self, the employment of stereotypes and racial profiling becomes a justified policy in institutions like the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI creating laws like the Patriot Act (see the 2004 report by The American Civil Liberties Union). Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* stems out of such atmosphere of suspicion,

which has engulfed most Arab American Muslims after 9/11 and led to many FBI agents' visits to Arab American homes, as will be discussed.

Institutionalising Stereotypes in *Back of the Throat*

Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* offers a dramatisation of the institutional discrimination which comes as part and parcel of a public discourse that fosters stereotypes. The play was first stage read on January 30, 2005 in Chicago's Silk Road Theatre Project, and was then performed at San Francisco's Thick House from April 16 – May 15, 2005. *Back of the Throat* then toured across the U.S. returning to Chicago's Silk Road Theatre Project for its Midwest premiere to run from April 04 - May 28, 2006. The play was also staged at the Old Red Lion in London in September 2008, and was translated into Arabic and staged in Cairo, Egypt. *Back of the Throat* offers a parallel narrative of the situation of many an Arab American male after the catastrophic events of 9/11. Carl and Bartlett are two FBI agents visiting Khaled in his apartment to interrogate him about a link he might have with an Arab presumed terrorist; Asfoor, who is said to have carried a terrorist attack.

Back of the Throat starts with the ominous knock of Carl and Bartlett on Khaled's apartment door and ensues with an intriguing narrative development and dramatic staging. In their interrogation, Carl and Bartlett invite characters (a stripper, a librarian and Khaled's ex-girlfriend) from Khaled's past through flashbacks. Each character seems to construct its narrative in accordance with the FBI agents' narrative of Khaled as "the terrorist". As their narration unfolds, the reader and audience become aware that Khaled is already framed as a terrorist by the FBI agents' visit influencing the other minor characters' recollections of him and forming the pretext for their memories. They construct a conscious/unconscious concoction of events, which would nicely fill in the gaps missing from the FBI agents'

incriminating narrative. Once they accomplish their roles in the plot, inscribed by Carl and Bartlett's version of Khaled's presumed guilt, they freeze but stay present on the stage. By the end, Khaled himself seems to have become lost in their narratives, confused and defeated with an injured insecure sense of identity. He is left robbed of his books, his name (as Bartlett mispronounces it repeatedly), his constitutional rights, and even of memories of past encounters as they all seem corrupted by a new framed narrative.

The play shows examples of the institutional bias practiced in the U.S. following 9/11, as well as giving the FBI agents full space to tell the narrative of a suspicious America after a tragedy. In this parallel, Carl and Bartlett stand for the American collective conscience in its urge to apprehend the terrorist and eliminate the threat in the wake of tragedy. Khaled stands for the Arab American male who emerged after 9/11 as immediate suspect of a crime he did not commit - as the play ends with strong suggestions of Khaled's innocence. The post 9/11 atmosphere of national suspicion introduced new political practices and legislations, such as the Patriot Act in 2001, which have summoned previous stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims and passed them into governmental laws, effectively legitimising bias. Amongst the sections of the Patriot Act, there are few which enable the FBI to search telephone, email, financial and library records without a court order. Another provision of the Patriot Act allows the detention of an alien for an indefinite period if s/he is believed to have engaged in a terrorist act. Such practices have effectively encouraged suspicion, nurtured xenophobia and legitimised discrimination. *Back of the Throat* dramatises such policies, which were legally practiced on Khaled because his racial profile corresponded with that of an Arab/Muslim "terrorist". It was a search of library records which had connected Assfor (the terrorist) to Khaled – as visiting the library at the same time – and which was rendered as one of the incriminating pieces of evidence against Khaled.

While some law-makers saw it a necessity to legalise racial profiling post 9/11, it was stereotypes and the "demonization" of Arabs and Muslims which have "impacted the evolution of the law and encouraged harsh governmental efforts to remove Arabs and Muslims from the United States" (Akram and Johnson 327). Ronald Stockton explains the power of stereotypes, or public opinion towards an ethnic group in the legitimisation of certain unlawful practices:

> It is important to remember that while government policies are not simple outgrowths of public opinion, governments operate within parameters defined by what the public will tolerate. If the public is willing to dehumanise a population—be it domestic or foreign—then exceptional latitude is allowed where human rights are concerned. (150)

In the few months following 9/11, more than 1200 Arabs and South Asian Muslim men were detained (Ashar 1192, Amnesty Report). This made it clear that Muslim and Arab looking men were being profiled and institutionally prejudiced against, thus fostering a sense of paranoia amongst Arab Americans.

The play reflects a sense of autobiographical resonance as El Guindi explains that *Back of the Throats*:

> began as a paranoid thought game. In those first few months after 9/11 as an Arab/Muslim American one wasn't quite sure where one stood. What laws were still in place to protect one from government inquisitiveness or from a government, rightly or wrongly, deciding to throw aside civil liberty concerns in the need to protect the country from an amorphous enemy whose potential for another strike was very real. In this climate […] I

> personally, on a visceral level, found myself fearing a knock on the door. For no logical reason, I should add. (25)

In her review of the play, Jenn Q. Goddu reiterates El Guindi's words commenting on those internalised fears of terrorist suspicion preoccupying some, if not all, Arab Americans which become living realities: "The playwright's fear of what it might be like to be 'tagged' and come under government scrutiny translates into Khalid's experience, although El Guindi says the character is more of an Everyman or Every Arab-American or Every Muslim than a surrogate for the playwright" ("A Play that Asks"). The feared knock on the door opens the play. The minute the FBI agents come into Khaled's apartment, power relationships are clearly established.

This dramatised knock on the door represents the act of "hailing" or "interpellation" of the Arab as the terrorist suspect. That is, by visiting his apartment for interrogation, Khaled was being already reduced to a "terrorist". Louis Althusser introduced the idea of all individuals (subjects) being hailed by ideology in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses":

> [I]deology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (162)

To draw parallels, the knock on the door introduced the FBI agents as immediate representatives of authority and the Repressive State Apparatus, which comprises of "the

Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc." (162). It symbolises the act of "hailing" Khaled as a suspect. Upon being recruited or called upon as a suspect, Khaled immediately internalises a consciousness of guilt even though he is innocent by all appearances. This ties in with Althusser's further explanation of the process of "hailing":

> Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognised that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else). (162)

Upon answering the door and complying with the FBI's interrogation, Khaled has unconsciously accepted an ideological power-relation whereby he is the suspect and Carl and Bartlett are the authoritarian enforcers of law.

There is a constructed discourse (Orientalism) about the Arab followed later by a constructed language or ideology (war on terror) which has encompassed Arabs and Muslims since 9/11. It wrote the Arab, constructed the Arab without consulting the Arab, and then "hailed" him as a suspect of terrorism. This is the setting of Khaled's story after 9/11, which turned into a nightmarish reality by the arrival of the FBI agents at his door. The civil visit of Carl and Bartlett quickly turns into a menacing interrogation. During the initial questioning, Khaled feels the need to defend whatever objects of his Arabic or Islamic culture evident in his apartment. Among the evidence collected by the agents are books with titles like *A Manual for the Oppressed*, *Theater of the Oppressed*, *Covering Islam*, *Militant Islam*, *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tsetung* (El Guindi 12). Khaled asserts that he was a

literature major and that he was introduced to most of these books during his studies. Still, the titles alone, including the one about the communist leader, presented Khaled as an increasingly alarming suspect to the agents, as the link between communism and Islam resurfaces here again. To Carl and Bartlett, Khaled is an Arab and a Muslim who appreciates communist books; he could thus be an enemy to whom violence and malice is justified for the sake of national security. Thereafter, Khaled finds himself a victim whose basic human rights are repeatedly violated:

> Carl: (Carl kicks Khaled in the groin. Khaled gasps, grabs his testicles, and collapses onto his knees) First off: that has been coming since we got here, because of repeated references to an innocence that is not yours to claim. If you were innocent, why would I have kicked you? Something you've done has given me good cause to assume the worst. The responsibility for that kick lies with your unwillingness to assume responsibility for the part we know you played. We need to know what that was. It might have been a bit part, but never think that makes you a bit player. (El Guindi 54)

In his calm justification of the physical abuse, Carl reflects the institutional discrimination which was employed in the treatment of many real Arabs and/or Muslims after 9/11. A constructed narrative, circulated and perpetuated by the media, and legitimised by policy makers has constituted laws as part of the "war on terror" placing Arabs and Muslims in a precarious state of suspicion and incrimination. The 2002 September report of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) documents 24 government actions and suggestions, which have targeted immigrants and refugees. Arabs and Muslims have, particularly, been "targets of undemocratic and counterproductive government policies that have been ineffective in improving national security" (Tsao 6). The enforcement of

these laws led, in effect, to a legitimised racism operating through reliance on physical and cultural stereotypes, as the report conveys such concerns: "The roundup of suspects has focused on Arab and Arab-American individuals, raising issues of racial profiling and group suspicion" (Tsao 10). It is this background which led to the cementation of what is fictional and what is real in the rehearsals of *Back of the Throat* in the Chicago Silk Road Theatre Project's production. During workshops organised pre-production, real FBI agents, lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Arab American individuals who had been subject to FBI interviews and visits were all invited to reinforce the aspect of realism which inspired the play (Goddu "A Play that Asks").

Thus, Khaled's experience echoes that of many Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. Khaled is framed as a threat as assumptions create an alternate reality in which the American self, represented in Bartlett and Carl, creates the Other in Khaled. In one of the conversations between Bartlett and Khaled, the FBI agent states: "But in the meantime there's no avoiding the fact that that's who I am. Engaged in trying to find out who *you* are" (El Guindi 15). The identity of the American government official is ascertained in his statement, but that of the Arab American remains subject of inquiry in a context of a national security threat. In his analysis of the "imperative patriotism" which flourished in the aftermath of 9/11, Steven Salaita explains how it "tends to inform xenophobia, a fact that is expressed in statements such as, "If you don't like America, go back to where you came from"; "If you don't agree with the United States, why don't you just leave?"; and "A real American works hard and doesn't complain" (155). Salaita argues that:

> [t]hese statements insinuate that "American" is a stable, fixed identity rooted in a physical and cultural Whiteness for which many immigrants do not qualify. They also indicate that in xenophobia narrow political suppositions

> often govern social behavior: To dissent against the imagined mores of America is to forfeit identification as American. Leaving the United States then becomes the only logical option." (155)

In this context, Khaled's "Americanism" is questionable because he represents a dissenter (pronounced so by the FBI agents because of his connection to Assfor, though unproven, and the "dissenting" books found in his apartment). Khaled's identity and belonging in this narrative is under suspicion and suspension in the eyes of the FBI agents. With this in mind, the conversation continues when Khaled asks for a lawyer:

> Khaled: I have the right.
>
> Bartlett: Not necessarily.
>
> Khaled: Yes, I believe I do.
>
> Bartlett: I'd have to disagree.
>
> Khaled: I know my rights. …
>
> Bartlett: Er, Khaled, you can't have a lawyer.
>
> Khaled: Yes, I can, I know my rights.
>
> Bartlett: No you don't, you've been misinformed. (El Guindi 8)

Khaled is stupefied as he feels robbed of his basic constitutional rights. He knows himself to be an American citizen, yet his civil rights are infringed simply because he is an Other; an Arab American suspect for reasons unknown. When he proclaims "I still have rights", he is affirming his identity as an American citizen and his consequent legal rights. Feeling robbed of his national identity and its correspondent justice system, Khaled protests

vehemently: “This is – this is way over the line. Acting like some – cut-out pair of thugs playing tag to try and intimidate me. This is my country too, you know. This is my country! It’s my fucking country!” (El Guindi 26). The question of his identity becomes urgent, not only because of the need to assert his national belonging, but also to protect his civil rights as an American citizen. That does not redeem him, however. With a name as alien as the Arabic Khaled and an Arab ethnic profile, he has been ‘activated’ as a terrorist the minute he was visited by the two FBI agents.

Khaled’s name is marked as a problematic site from the outset of the play. In its specific Arabic phonetics, it stands as a signifier of Otherness. Language, in fact, plays a seminal part in *Back of the Throat*. It is the unidentified character whose presence is both potent and concealed. Khaled’s Arabic name is turned into a confirmation of Otherness when Bartlett fails repeatedly to pronounce it correctly attributing his failure to “that back of the throat thing” (El Guindi 5), which is particular to Arabic and necessary in pronouncing the first letter of Khaled’s name. The difficulty of pronouncing Khaled’s name represents the cultural impasse between the FBI agents and Khaled. The national alienation of Khaled (as an Other citizen with an Other language and culture) started then continuing all through the play, although Khaled himself cannot speak that “Other” language; Arabic. Khaled’s presumed Arabic language, culture and Muslim religion were viewed as evidence (in his suspected relation to Asfoor, the “terrorist”). The role of language and its interpretation/(mis)translation in constructing cultural differences and colonist ascendency is emphasised when Khaled invites Asfoor to the stage through flashback, in an attempt to contextualise their meeting. Asfoor utters what appears to be a soliloquy referring to the cultural colonisation practiced on the Arab world through language, and how he would like to acquire that language and reverse its hegemony. The play’s last lines comes from Asfoor:

> And now...my tongue...it wants to rise. Soar. As it used to. It wants to take off in this new language and conjure up brilliant words. It wants to do things in English that seemed so impossible for so long. I can help you find your voice too....You're stuck. I know you are. You've lost your way. I can feel it. I can help. Most of all...above all else, Khaled...I know how to inspire....I know how to inspire. (El Guindi 69)

Although these lines are challenging to interpret, they refer to language as the key player responsible for much of the Orientalist discourses, which provided the pretext for post 9/11 cultural and institutional backlash against Arabs (such as Khaled) in the U.S. It is left unclear whether Asfoor had actually carried out a terrorist attack or not. However, there may be a suggestion that Asfoor is inviting Khaled to rediscover his culture, his language and maybe acquire an identity that is not so readily suspended as his American one, which was rendered questionable by the FBI agents. With such a sharp, albeit ambiguous, ending centring around language, it is possible to infer that Arabic language and culture, which was the introductory link between Khaled and Asfoor, is a contributing factor in the incrimination, if not of Asfoor, then indeed of Khaled.

Incidentally, the play alludes to a possible homosexual encounter between Khaled and Asfoor, which may have further insinuated the criminality of both. When Beth, Khaled's ex-girlfriend, gives her statement to the FBI agents, she recalls her suspicion of Khaled having an affair with a man (Asfoor). The homosexuality of both Khaled and Asfoor is again implied when the stripper Jean recollects her experience with Khaled who, by not being affected by her professional charms, raised her suspicion, so she followed him to the bathroom:

(she opens the bathroom door)

And... (a laugh)

Damn if I don't see both of their legs under one of the stalls. And they must have heard me, because Khaled comes shooting out and runs, just runs past me. …

Bartlett: Did you get a sense of what they might have been doing in the stall?
Jean: Not a clue. Might have been sucking each other off for all I know. Or shooting up. Who knows. At least one of them's dead. Have you got the other one yet? (El Guindi 65)

Although not sufficiently supported in the play, the insinuation of the terrorist as a homosexual adds a further layer in the construction of Otherness, whereby terrorists are outsiders of human morality and cultural priority. The connotation of terrorism and homosexuality will be examined in the following chapter, which will analyse the role of gender and homosexuality in the conceptualisation of Otherness. In the context of *Back of the Throat*, however, it is noteworthy, that the play insinuates a suggestion of homosexuality as a further tool in the FBI's profiling of a terrorist.

Despite focusing on the 'collateral damages' of post 9/11 policies, the play also conveys the dilemma of dealing with an atmosphere of threat and fear which has become part of the American collective consciousness in the aftermath of a tragedy. The important question in this play is posited by the FBI agent Bartlett: "What is more important: inconveniencing you with accusations of having broken the law or insuring the safety of everyone?" (El Guindi 25). This question exposes fears that both the American and Arab American harbour: The American fears a terrorist threat, and the Arab American fears being

suspected of committing a terrorist act. The crisis for the Arab American, however, remains aggravated by the institutionalised employment of stereotypes of both the Arab culture and Islam in profiling the terrorist.

In conclusion, cultural and institutional stereotyping became the dominant ideology which engulfed Arabs and inscribed the relationship between the U.S. and Arab Americans, particularly after 9/11. The history behind stereotyping Arabs is long and mostly politically and economically motivated. The aftermath of 9/11 has, however, demonstrated the implementation of stereotyping as an ideology in dealing with and perceiving Arabs and Arab Americans. According to Althusser, ideology requires "Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA)" such as educational, political, cultural and social establishments (153/4). *Browntown* and *Our Enemies* dramatise examples of the social and cultural apparatus of stereotyping, which affect Arab Americans daily on an individual and social level. The more damaging use of stereotypes manifest itself in the institutional legalisation of discrimination, which is a direct result and a necessary complement to the social and cultural process of stereotyping. Governmental sanctioned establishments such as the Department of Homeland Security and laws like the Patriot Act symbolise what Althusser termed the "Repressive State Apparatuses"(RSA)". *Back of the Throat* presents a theatrical example of the institutional apparatus of stereotyping in the case of the Arab American Khaled who has been framed and tried by the "terrorist" stereotype of the Arab. Combined, social and institutional stereotyping operate as an ideology writing an influential part of the American narrative of Arab Americans after 9/11.

Browntown, *Our Enemies*, and *Back of the Throat* invite audiences to look at what it means to be an Arab American. Out of a social, cultural and legal surrounding which refers to negative stereotypes in its interaction with Arab Americans, the three plays present: an

actor who has had enough of auditioning for the same terrorist role in *Browntown*; a writer whose visibility is conditioned upon her reproduction of the popular stereotypical narrative of Arabs in *Our Enemies*; and a confused suspect who is visited by the FBI for crimes he is innocent of in *Back of the Throat*. The discussed plays introduce their Arab American characters as vulnerable, perplexed and in search for an identity that seems to always summon two dichotomies: the American Self and its Other in a post 9/11 suspicious America. Arab American playwrights are attempting to give voice to the Arab Americans so they could represent themselves and subvert an ideology of stereotyping, which has continually Othered their identity. By reclaiming self-representation, these playwrights are working towards transcending Arab Americans' negative portrayals in the media. They are aiming to erase the suspicion as a component of their identity, and fortify the polycultural essence of that Arab American identity.

From Self-Representation to the Abu Ghraib Narrative: The Arab Body as a Site of Politics

> Besides terrorism, gender and sexuality are the grounds upon which the Islamophobic wars at home and abroad are fought
>
> *– Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem "Gay Imperialism"*

In the previous chapters, the role of stereotypes in forming representations of the Arab as an Othered cultural and ethnic entity was analysed. Discussed was also a gendered process, which clearly assigned different roles to Arab and Muslim men and women, and governed both the construction of Arab stereotypes and the social and cultural interaction of Arabs in America. This chapter takes a further step in the examination of Arab portrayals in the U.S. and focuses on the gender and sexual identity of Arabs and Arab Americans as expressed and problematised in representations of the Arab body in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq war. Taking a journey through a collection of photographs and two plays, the aim is to examine portrayals and conceptions of the Arab body and its sexuality; particularly homosexuality. The current analysis will start with the Abu Ghraib photographs as one of the Western/American narratives inscribed on the Arab male body, especially that which is considered "terrorist", in post 9/11. The Abu Ghraib photographs were chosen for their performative nature, emphasis and "fixation" on the Arab body, as a spoil of the war on terror. In contrast, Yussef El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (Published in 2009) and Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* (unpublished script 2003) offer an essentially different self-representational narrative of this Arab body. These different authors of representations provide two unique opposing narratives: the Abu Ghraib photographs transfixes the Arab body within the Orientalist gaze, framing it in the Slave/Master

imperialist discourse; and the two Arab American playwrights offer agency to the Arab body and permit the negotiation of its sexuality. In these representations, the Arab body is introduced as a site of colonial conquest and affirmation of power in the shocking photographs of Abu Ghraib; a site of conflict and negotiation in El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*; and a site of reconciliation and compromise in Khoury's *Precious Stones*.

The aftermath of 9/11 saw the Arab and Muslim body and the discourse of its gender and homosexuality become a regular concern to politicians discussing or building support for the war on terror. For instance, Laura Bush, assigned by the White House to deliver President Bush's weekly Saturday radio address, announced on November 17, 2001 that "[t]he fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" ("Radio Address"). The *Los Angeles Times* reports that following Laura Bush's speech, the State Department released its report on the Taliban's "War Against Women" in which it was stated that "The Taliban perpetrated egregious acts of violence against women, including rape, abduction and forced marriage" (Gerstenzang and Getter "Laura Bush Addresses"). In this and similar propaganda leading to the war on terror, the Muslim women's body in Afghanistan and Iraq, commonly referred to as veiled, raped and scarified to honour killing, is presented as a signifier for women's suffering and gender inequality. Within this context, the Bush administration's discourse on the war on terrorism was made to be equated with promoting women's rights, amongst others.

Similarly, and although less prominent in the propaganda for the war on terror, Muslim homosexual rights have increasingly become a part of an imperialist discourse in post 9/11 America as well as Europe. There is often a concentrated, if not exaggerated, media coverage of incidents of oppression and persecution of Muslim and/or Arab

homosexuals, commonly paired with public political condemnation. No example is more telling than that of the Iranian Makwan Moloudzadeh, who was accused of raping three children when he was 13 (eight years prior to his trial), and was executed by the Iranian state on 4 December 2007. Amnesty International organization condemned Moloudzadeh's trial as being "grossly flawed" stating that "[e]xecution for a crime committed at the age of 13 is a gross abuse of international human rights standards" ("Iran: Execution of child offender"). The case attracted great attention from activists across the world who were rightly outraged by the legal inconsistencies of the trial, and its disregard to internationally recognised human rights. However, what became problematic and controversial was the appropriation of Moloudzadeh's charge and conviction, by some LGBT bodies (for instance, British Outrage!, Italian Gruppo Everyone, and US gay Website Queerty.com) to denote a narrative of Moloudzadeh as a gay man, prosecuted and eventually executed because 'he fell in love' and had sexual intercourse with a peer at the age of 13. Scott Long, a former Director of the LGBT programme at Human Rights Watch, claims that Moloudzadeh's execution, along with later execution of two other Iranian youth convicted of rape in Mashhad, provided a pretext for media outlets and some gay groups to establish that all Iranian executions for same-sex rape cases were, in fact, executions motivated by the homosexual identities of the accused. This, Long argues, was erroneous and product of misinformation, misinterpretation and usually motivated by a calculated agenda that thrives on representation of victimised Muslim homosexuals. After citing multiple examples of how Western gay activists, as well as politicians, have capitalised on the stories of these executed Iranians to signify homosexual oppression in Iran and the Muslim world generally, Long expresses his concerns writing that

> Their [the two youths in Mashhad] images continued being exploited when their will were gone. What if they were "gay?" What if it is true, what if all the frenetic speculation astonishingly corresponds to fact? Then they died for it, terribly and unjustly. But should that fragile connection then be turned into a vehicle for others' ends, for promoting fear or engendering division or intimidating immigrants or selling the idea of a war?" ("Unbearable Witness" 123)

Although Long's article met controversy over its accusations against gay activist group OutRage!, and was followed by an apology by UK Publisher Routledge to OutRage!'s member Peter Tatchell ("Copy of Routledge letter"), Long's well-researched analysis reflects the existence of agendas in reporting and campaigning for homosexual rights in the Muslim world. These agendas, which are deliberate at times and accidental at others, are motivated by varied political, imperialist and/or Orientalist interests. The narrative of Muslim and Arab gay victimisation in the Muslim world has been indirectly integrated in the mission of the war on terror. Following the two Iranians execution in 2005, influential conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan wrote: "I'm saddened that more gay organizations haven't rallied to the war against Muslim religious fanatics. This is our war too" ("Islamists Versus Gays"; qtd. in Long "Unbearable Witness"). Sullivan's blog and its political rhetoric drew the following response from an American soldier:

> Your post on the Islamo-fascist hanging/murder of the two gay men confirmed for me that my recent decision to join the U.S. military was correct. I have to stuff myself back in the closed [because of the US ban on gays in the armed services] … but our war on terror trumps my personal comfort at this point. (qtd. in Long "Unbearable Witness")

Such a comment demonstrates the weight of political discourses, which rely on a revival of a narrative of victimisation, in justifying the war on terror, as well as manufacturing an inaccurate representation of Muslim women and homosexuals as lacking agency.

While these discourses made a case for foreign interventions abroad, they problematised the already contested gender and sexual identity of Arab Americans domestically. The two plays discussed in this chapter provide a response to the intensified probing of Arab sexual and gender identity post 9/11, where Arab Americans can negotiate these identities within the parameters of their social, cultural and political settings. El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats* introduces an Arab American family in its endeavour to define and locate cultural identity in the U.S. *Ten Acrobats*' Huwaida is a daughter and a sister whose body image is instrumental in her perception and assertion of her gender and cultural identity. Similarly, Hazem is the gay son who finds himself struggling to balance his sexual, religious and cultural identity. El Guindi's dramatisation of these issues falls within the context of giving agency to the characters in regards to their gender and sexual expressions, as well as decisions. Equally, Khoury's *Precious Stones* presents a private negotiation of sexual and national identity through the dialogues and discussions of the two main characters. The play sees Leila and Andrea propose a settlement of the long national Palestinian/Israeli feud while they embrace their homosexuality. The concept of Otherness features prominently in this play as it informs the characters' sense of selves, as lesbians belonging to two nations in conflicts. This chapter's analysis of the two plays focuses on politics of the body as the vessel through which Arab American femininity, masculinity and sexuality are constructed and challenged in the complicated post 9/11 milieu.

While the two plays' representation of the gender and sexual identity of the Arab/Arab American and/or the Muslim stems from self-reflectional and often empowering

purposes, the representation of that identity in political discourses, outside the Arab/Muslim American community, is strongly linked to cultural imperialism, Western discourse of superiority and colonist agendas. Where much of these discourses took place before and around the time of the Iraqi war, the scandal of the Abu Ghraib photographs embarrassed the narratives of "saving" and "liberating" Arab/Muslim women and homosexuals, and called for a critical examination of the positioning of the Arab/Muslim body within the war on terror discourse. The Abu Ghraib photographs presented the Arab body, that which is accused of terrorism, as naked, enslaved and conquered (sexually abused and tortured). The following will provide a critical examination of the changing meaning of the Arab and Arab American body in both the Arab American self-representation and the Abu Ghraib photograph's representation.

Critical Discourses of the Body

The body has been the subject of many cultural and feminist investigation and theories. Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*, *Madness and Civilization*, *Power/Knowledge*) theorises the relation between political systems and the body, and the inscription of power upon the body through its incarceration, punishment, medical and psychological subjection. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains how the body became the locus upon which discipline was exercised in the service of societal/cultural/political power:

> The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may

> operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. (138)

It was, thus, that the body was being made 'docile'; reformed, rehabilitated, and ultimately made part of the power structure. Foucault extended his analysis of the disciplinary mechanism exercised in prison to other institutions pointing out parallels in which all individuals are eventually interpolated within a system of power; be it economic, cultural or political. Foucault's insights regarding the body as the subject and projector of power systems, through multiple disciplinary practices were linked by feminists to gender being a matter of another discipline enforced on the body. In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler introduces the theory of constructing gender on the basis of the performativity of the body. She argues that the distinction between male and female behaviours and roles in society, considered to be "natural", is in effect culturally constructed. Butler stipulates:

> Gender is performative insofar as it is the *effect* of a regulatory regime of gender difference in which genders are divided and hierarchized *under constraint*. Social constraints, taboos, prohibitions, threats of punishment operate in the ritualized repetition of norms, and this repetition constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization. ("Critically Queer" 21)

Here Butler believes, as did Foucault, that the subject does not predate social norms, or has ever existed 'purely' outside a specific system of power. Butler further contends that the body is the medium which, through repetition, performs its assigned gender role. In short,

the body in the writings of both Foucault and Butler is subject to a regulatory system of power.

Following Foucault's thought, there are two ideological discourses containing the Arab body in all the representations examined in this chapter. The first discourse is the imperial one, which has literally imprisoned the Arab body and inscribed a narrative of power on it, discussed in the Abu Ghraib photographs. The second one is that of the Arab culture and its difficult negotiation with sexual and gender identities, investigated in the two Arab American plays. There is yet another discourse that engulf the Arab and Muslim body which Jasbir Puar has analysed in her *Terrorist Assemblages*. Puar examines how "terrorist" bodies, especially those of Arabs, Muslims and Sikhs, have been constructed outside the American national discourse after 9/11. Puar argues that while a shift to include queers as part of the American nation has occurred, this was paired with the revival of an "American exceptionalism" that is now both "hetero" and "homo". The building of this hetero-and-homo nationalism divided American citizens into U.S. patriots whose race, gender and sex are constructed in stark contrast to the look-alike terrorist bodies whose race and sexuality are perceived to signify perversity.

While these distinctive ideological discourses exercise their respective authority on the Arab body, the Abu Ghraib photographs and the two Arab American plays significantly differ in their representations in terms of giving agency. As noted earlier, both *Ten Acrobats* and *Precious Stones* give agency to the Arab body, while the Abu Ghraib photographs deny it this agency and reduce it to an object.

Abu Ghraib Photographs: The Other representation of the Arab Body and its Homosexuality

The Arab body, its abuse and imposed homosexuality was the centre of the torture scandal in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. Reports of torture in Abu Ghraib Prison surfaced in the media (the Associated Press) from November 2003 (Ricchiardi "Missed Signals"). American channel CBS's *60 Minutes II* reported a story about the abuse in April 2004 along with the broadcasting of few leaked photographs. The official investigation began in January 2004 by Major General Antonio Taguba, and became public later with the release of *The "Taguba Report"*. It is worth mentioning that no senior officer has yet been held accountable for the offences committed in Abu Ghraib: in total, two military leaders were demoted, and nine low-ranking officers were convicted and charged (Follman and Clark-Flory, "Prosecutions and convictions").

The *Taguba Report* states "[t]hat between October and December 2003, at the Abu Ghraib Confinement Facility […], numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees" (Taguba and Antonio, *The "Taguba Report"*). Other findings of the report revealed:

> Videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees; forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing … Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped; arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them (ANNEXES 26 and 26)" (Taguba and Antonio, *The* "*Taguba Report*").

Other "intentional abuse" was reported by several detainees who described the following acts: "Threatening male detainees with rape; sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick" (Taguba and Antonio, "*The Taguba Report*"). The photographs,

which were leaked to the media in 2004 clearly demonstrated that torture at Abu Ghraib had a particular sexual nature, with naked detainees assembled in various positions with their genitals exposed or connoting sexual acts.

The release, reproduction, critique and theorisation, by journalists and scholars alike, which followed the publication of Abu Ghraib photographs rendered them similar to a cultural performance act. This is because the photographs, their abundance and content were not simply materials necessary to and required for war. Although it was claimed that the photographs were taken either as instruments of torture, to blackmail the detainees into confessing by threatening to circulate them unless they cooperated, a later Army report insisted that "the cameras used were all personal" (Mirzoeff 23). Thus, one can speculate that the photographs had a different purpose than being simply deployed as part of an interrogation. Instead, these pictures carried a sense of showmanship where, often, there was a stage, director, and audience inside and outside the prison facility, which turned the pictures into a form of performance laden with cultural signs. In a photograph taken of Iraqi detainees piled up naked to form a human pyramid (Figure 2), none of the detainees face the camera. The photograph captures the back of the naked Iraqis who are especially positioned so each detainee's genitals touch another detainee's buttocks. The photographs represent a spectacle of power: imperial power that is capable of humiliating, stripping and sodomising its Other to ascertain its national, "hetero" – and recently "homo" – sexual unchallengeable ascendancy.

The Abu Ghraib photographs transfixed the Arab body as a stage in the "theatre of war" upon which various forms of domination are performed. Surprisingly, no Arab American playwright has specifically engaged with Abu Ghraib in their work. For these playwrights, the subject proves perhaps too difficult to deal with, research, document or

dramatise. A limited number of American plays tackled the subject like *There is Love Lessons from Abu Ghraib* originally performed during 2007 by Jennifer Schelter, Jim Leonard's *Bad Apple*, a musical about Abu Ghraib staged between October - December 2012, and 2011 *Abu Ghraib* a solo play acted by Ishwak Singh. Heather Raffo briefly alluded to Abu Ghraib's torture in her *9 Parts of Desire*, but stopped short of naming it. As discussed in Chapter One and Two, silence and censorship about sensitive political topics such as the case of the Abu Ghraib photographs, are either self-induced or socially and institutionally recommended. However, the reason behind the absence of Arab American plays about Abu Ghraib could be that reality simply proved stranger than fiction and the Arab Americans' stage was incapable of mirroring the atrocity committed on the real world's stage.

Although Arab American plays about Abu Ghraib are so far absent from the theatrical scene, the photographs themselves constitute a performance. This view has been supported by Stephen Eisenman who writes that elements of the "theatre of cruelty" are revisited in the Abu Ghraib photographs. According to Eisenman, the photographs "stage and record two kinds of desire: first, the supposed, perverse desires of Islamic [Arab] detainees; and second, the actual, un-repressed desires of the US prison guards who freely wield guns, fists, handcuffs, dogs and leashes" (101). Indeed, many aspects of the photographs implied a theatrical act of power that was performed on the bodies of the Iraqi detainees within the context of a Western empire, the U.S., waging a war on terror. The male Iraqi detainees, often perceived as "terrorists" in their lasting role as an Other to the Western Americans in general – and American soldiers specifically – are the object of that act. Abu Ghraib prison incarcerated both male and female detainees, and the abuse reportedly affected both. However, the pictures that are public, are predominantly of abused male prisoners

often photographed to connote sodomy, thus deploying queerness a prop used in that performance. Homosexuality was then to signify either the perverse nature of those Arab "terrorists", and/or an act of emasculation. The fact that the photographs were mostly of Arab male naked bodies signifies the exclusive relationship between nationalism and masculinity. That is to say, these photographs show Arab men rather than women to be considered as national threats to the U.S., and the subjugation of their bodies follows the narrative of defending or avenging the nation. Sodomising the Arab/Muslim as an element of torture, however, contradicts a narrative of benevolence towards Arab and Muslim queers, presumed to be victimised by their culture. As argued earlier in the chapter, instances of Muslim gays, prosecuted outside the U.S., received wide attention in the American media, with some activists arguing that the war on terror is, in part, about liberating Muslim women and gays from their cultural prosecution. The Abu Ghraib photographs demonstrate that those Iraqi detainees ("terrorists") are not only outside the rhetoric of protecting Muslim/Arab gays, but are tortured by being explicitly sodomised. Thus, within the war on terror discourse, homosexuality is utilised both as an element of torture, and a cause for benevolence.

The employment of sodomy as torture calls for many readings and interpretations. The following analysis of the photographs focuses on the presentation of the terrorist body as homosexual, and recalls the homosexual framing of communists in the Cold War era. As research indicates, a presumed connection between terror and homosexuality has been long created, and deployed in an American "national security" discourse during the Cold War.

Terrorism, the Communist Threat and Homosexuality

The body has received significant attention in American national discourse: as a site of power inscription (incarceration, slavery, segregation), or a site upon which national inclusion or exclusion is decided. For instance, the Red Scare era saw homosexuals being accused of having communist ties, or sympathising with communism. The idea that terrorism after 9/11 was a substitute for the threat of communism in the American collective consciousness, discussed in Chapter Three, proves to be further validated here. There are parallels in the treatment of the then alleged communists, especially in the McCarthy era, and the now suspected terrorists. Then, there was an unadvertised connection between communism and homosexuality in the second Red Scare (1947–1957) with both claimed to represent national security threats. The Red Scare coincided with an intense prosecution of homosexuals (referred to as the Lavender Scare or McCarthyism). Robert J. Corber revisits the American post-war cultural and political milieu assessing the representations and politics of the gay male body through the reading of selected novels, plays and films. He argues that the findings of the then conventionally challenging Kinsey Reports (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*) were manipulated by a national security discourse to establish a connection between homosexuality and communism, and render both as a threat to the U.S. nation. Corber finds that the Cold War era witnessed "a project to make the gay male body illegible" (63):

> By distorting the Kinsey reports' findings, the discourses of national security not only contained their potentially liberatory impact but also reinforced the link between homosexuality and communism in the nations' political imaginary. For if, as the Kinsey report claimed, gay men could not be easily identified and were present in all walks of American life, then they resembled

> the Communists, who had allegedly infiltrated the nation's political and cultural institutions and threatened to subvert them from within. (63/4)

The conceptualisation of both homosexuality and communism as parasitical entities threatening the longevity of the nation from within is reiterated in a 1950 Congressional session. Congressman Miller of Nebraska delivered an address to the Congress, warning against homosexuals in the government and their potential risk to national security:

> I sometimes wonder how many of these homosexuals have had a part in shaping our foreign policy. How many have been in sensitive positions and subject to blackmail. It is a known fact that homosexuality goes back to the Orientals, long before the time of Confucius; that the Russians are strong believers in homosexuality ... Perhaps if all the facts were known these same homosexuals have been used by the Communists. (Miller, "Online Congressional Record")

It is no surprise that Miller traces the origin of homosexuality to the Orient, as the Self-contrasting deviant Other. Edward Said (167, 188, 190, 315) cites several examples from Orientalist literature that connect perverse sexuality to the Orient. The image of the Oriental as sexually repressed on the surface, but bursting with perverse and deviant desires underneath is created in contrast to the Occidental and in support of "his" heterosexual national identity (Boone "Vacation Cruises"). Miller's statement of suspicion and national exclusion resembles parts of the rhetoric employed in the propaganda of the war on terror. The sense of threat created by the Cold War has been resurrected in post 9/11 America. Examining evidence from history binds present and past. To a national discourse,

homosexuality and communism or terrorism represent the threat of annihilation and death. Jasbir K. Puar alludes to the:

> historical convergences between queers and terror: homosexuals have been traitors to the nation, figures of espionage and double agents, associated with communists during the McCarthy era, and, as with suicide bombers, have brought on and desired death through the AIDS pandemic (both suicide bomber and gay man always figure as already dying, a decaying or corroding masculinity). (Puar, 2007, p.xxiii)

However, while many homosexuals were suspected and prosecuted during and after the McCarthy era, the contemporary American discourse with regards to homosexuality has dramatically changed. Puar has written extensively about the formation of what she terms "U.S. sexual exceptionalism" (2) and its interpolation in the war on terror. Puar argues that the national positioning of homosexuals in the U.S. has shifted from exteriority to interiority. In other words, homosexuals – albeit not all – have been reintroduced as part of the nation and its discourse with the promotion of many political (the increase support for gay marriage) and cultural (the rise in gay representations in media) actions. Puar postulates that "an exceptional form of national heteronormativity is now joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity" (2) to form what she coins "homonationalism" (2). This inclusion, however, is conditioned upon the embracement and reiteration of a White (in its hegemonic sense) secular and liberal discourse, which is ontologically non-inclusive of "look-alike-terrorists". Thus, "[t]he (White) secular norms by which queerness abides contributes greatly to (racist) Islamo- and homophobic representations of terrorists" (Puar 14). Within this discourse:

> The secular gay and lesbian human rights framing of Islamic sexual repression mistakes or transposes state repression for sexual repression, essentially denying any productive effects of juridical structures … This contemporary version of repression does not contradict colonial fantasies of Orientalist sexual excess, perversity, and paedophilia. Working in tandem, the proper modern gay or lesbian Muslim subject is foreclosed, while the terrorist is forever queer, improperly sexual …" (Puar 14).

In other words, the American "homonationalist" discourse draws the 'perverse' terrorist and its body outside the newly formed American liberal agenda whose norms now include both heterosexual and homosexual 'good' Americans.

Puar later cites instances where terrorists were represented or referred to as queers in popular culture, such as when novelist John le Carre's pronounced Osama bin Laden's manners as similar to a "man of narcissistic homoeroticism" (qtd. in Puar 38). Further, representations of the monstrosity of these presumed homosexual terrorists depend on their divergence from popularised representations of homonormativity. Puar continues her observations of the terrorist masculine bodies as portrayed in American and Western media and national discourses in a framework of perversity and depravation:

> The depictions of masculinity most rapidly disseminated and globalized at this historical juncture are terrorist masculinities: failed and perverse, these emasculated bodies always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction, and are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body - homosexuality, incest, paedophilia, madness, and disease. (Puar xxiii)

Within this context, Puar asks "What is terrorist about the queer?" and more urgently "What is queer about the terrorist? And what is queer about terrorist corporealities?" (Puar xxiii). As a threat to the nation, suspected "terrorists", a term that is often used indiscriminately, have been demonised and dehumanised to establish their difference and enmity to the nation. As disruptive forces to a homogenous national front, communists were linked to homosexuality because of their deviation from the then national code, which portrayed the nation as a healthy heterosexual entity. As communism and homosexuality were conflated in the 1950s, the sense of a threat facing the nation was reiterated with the AIDS scare in the 1980s. Then again, the U.S. state was challenged by an epidemic, pinned on homosexuality, with the potential of endangering the existence and longevity of its nation. The purported relationship between communists, terrorists and homosexuality has, thus, persisted in a national security discourse inscribing the blame of the threat on the communist, homosexual, terrorist body. In Abu Ghraib, the "terrorist" corporeality is finally punished and subjugated, with a display of an imposed – and avenged – perverse homosexuality.

Theorizing Abu Ghraib: Judith Butler and Susan Sontag

In "Torture and the Ethics of Photography", Judith Butler explores the question of "whose lives are grievable, and whose are not" (952). Butler argues that there is a frame of ethical and moral (Western) responsibility which governs interactions with other individuals and responses to their suffering. This frame, however, is not inclusive, and those who do not fall within this responsibility are ultimately dehumanised, and positioned outside of internationally agreed-upon conventions and protocols in times of war, for example. The suffering, torture and eventual death of those considered outside the spectrum of human rights are unaccounted for; the Western moral responsibility does not extend to them. The

Iraqi detainees, perceived as terrorists, fell in that category, where their human rights were simply non-existent as far as their American captors were concerned. Questioning the frames of the photographs and their purpose, Butler asks:

> And we do not know how much of this torture is actually done for the camera, to 'show' what the US can do, as a sign of military triumphalism, sadistic control, the ability to effect a nearly complete degradation of the putative enemy, an effort to win the clash of civilizations and subject the ostensible barbarians to our civilizing mission which, we can see, has rid itself so beautifully of its own barbarism." ("Torture and the Ethics" 959)

Sexual abuse was not only practiced in Abu Ghraib, but is generally regarded as a form of torture in prisons which has, regrettably, been long ongoing. However, the case of Abu Ghraib is specifically noteworthy. The sexual abuse appears to carry purposes and meanings beyond being a mere element of psychological torture. The soldiers were posing almost always with wide grins, and occasional thumbs-up (Figure 2), indicating a number of possibilities: pleasure, pride and unaccountability. These soldiers are willingly dramatising and performing a doctrine of power. Susan Sontag traces the sexual nature of the torture to pornography: "most of the pictures seem part of a larger confluence of torture and pornography: a young woman leading a naked man around on a leash is classic dominatrix imagery" ("Regarding the Torture").

The replication of pornography is certainly a valid interpretation of some of the photographs, especially considering their performative nature, and the fact that they were distributed inside and outside Abu Gharaib, which suggests the commodification of the pictures. However, Butler draws attention to a crucial point on basis of which she disagrees with Sontag on the pornographic nature of the photographs. Butler argues that whereas

pornography is understood to incorporate the consent of the parties involved, the Abu Ghraib photographs represent coercion. They represent a non-consensual master/slave imperial and sexual narrative. The bodies of the Iraqi detainees were ethically unaccounted for, and thus sexual fantasies of depravity could be re-enacted on these non-consenting bodies without either shame (this torture was inflicted in service of the U.S. nation) or accountability (officers were "encouraged" rather than restrained (Sergeant Ivan L. Frederick II qtd. in Hersh "Torture at Abu Ghraib")).

While Butler and Sontag wrote passionately in response to the photographs, both seem to engage in a dialectic that is Western-constructed, self-reflective and predisposed to a rectification of a Western morality. Sontag writes: "The notion that apologies or professions of "disgust" by the president and the secretary of defense are a sufficient response is an insult to one's historical and moral sense" ("Regarding the Torture"). In other words, these photographs have not only violated a human code, but also and perhaps more importantly, the American "historical and moral sense", which thus needs urgent rectification. The measures needed to address the Abu Ghraib torture lie within the desire to restore this professed American morality rather than to reinstate the human rights for the dehumanised Iraqi detainees.

The "ethical responsiveness to the suffering of the other" from which Butler initiates her argument springs from a Western universal discourse, which typically interpolates a process of Othering. In other words, the binary opposition of "us" and "them" is a predisposition to embracing the responsiveness and responsibility towards the Other. For example, Butler writes: "I want to suggest that the photographs do not necessarily numb our senses nor do they necessarily determine a particular response" ("Torture and the Ethics" 956). The question is: who is "ours"? Is it "us" as in Americans or Westerners, or is it

humans in general? Would Butler's "us" include the Arab, or the detainees who lived to see the photographs? Butler is certainly not a contributor to an Orientalist discourse, which places Arabs in an Othered space. Addressing a Western audience to evaluate its morality, while excluding the very victims of these photographs, is what appears to be theoretically problematic from a postcolonial perspective.

Both Sontag and Butler engage in an admirable re-evaluation of the ethical and moral grounds which led to the Abu Ghraib scandal. However, the Iraqi detainees are still stipulated as Others in this discussion. They are still the subjects, the absent third person entertained in Western academic discourses about the Orient. In such discourses, their function lies in being the Other which the West can construct its healthy moral image in opposition to. The Iraqi detainees and their rights are not part of the debate, but are rather consequential of this theoretical framework which aims to reinstate the Western superior morality, and by extension its relationship to the Iraqi detainees.

Conceptualisation of Homosexuality

Among the many interpretations of Abu Ghraib photographs are those pertaining to a postcolonial reading of the dynamics of power along with the employment of homosexuality. In her article, "Staging Terror", Wendy Hesford writes:

> The visual repetition of the 2001 burning, collapse, and ruins of the World Trade Center on 9/11 on television screens across the world had codified perceptions of the terrorist threat and U.S. vulnerability. The Abu Ghraib photographs reclaimed dominance by transferring that visibility, fear, and terror onto the geopolitical body of "unlawful combatants" … (30)

This view supports the assumption that the staging, release and reproduction of the Abu Ghraib photographs serves as a retaliation to the dissemination of the photographs and videos of 9/11. While the terrorists left their mark on the Twin Towers, the American soldiers left their inerasable mark (torture, rape and sodomising) on the supposed terrorist bodies. Puar argues that the sexual torture was, although amplified, not exceptional to Abu Ghraib, but falls within contexts of "U.S. nationalism, patriotism and increasingly, empire" ("Abu Ghraib" 533). Puar continues: "[A]s postcolonial scholars have aptly demonstrated, the sexual is already part and parcel of the histories of colonial domination and empire building; conquest is innately corporeal" ("Abu Ghraib" 533). That is, the strife for colonial power is always corporeal. To take Purr's argument further, the body of the deviant Arab terrorist needs to be conquered. Hence the invasion is accomplished by the literal invasion of the Arab body (sodomising by electric light, broom sticks and American soldiers' fingers).

Reading the discourse of empire as a discourse of power, Foucault's theories about the positioning of the body in such a discourse are pertinent. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains how the classical age found the incarcerated, punished body to be an effective exhibitor of power. While the aim of re-appropriating the body, then, was to present it reformed, subjected and docile; narratives of managing the body have evolved. In the empire's version, the narrative becomes more violent and self-serving. The Abu Ghraib pictures show that the goal of bodily torture was a complete subjection of the detainees and the inscription of a revived coloniser/colonised order. In this order, the mechanism of imperial power is exercised through humiliating the body of the colonised and disintegrating its cultural and sexual identity. The symbolic significance imbedded in these photographs resembles that of a public execution in the middle ages in that: "[i]ts aim

is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, at its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength (Foucault *Discipline and Punish*, 48/9). It is on the bodies of those Iraqi detainees (considered enemies of the U.S.) that the U.S. empire re-enacts its superiority, perhaps avenges 9/11, and reinstates the dichotomy of the powerful Self in opposition to the conquered Other.

Moreover, the sexual torture was especially effective because of the religious identity of the detainees. The intricacy between the Arab Muslim body and homosexuality becomes a key in the creation of shame and humiliation. This Islamic religious identity, considered Other to Western Christianity, is further employed in service of this humiliation. A press release by Al-Fatiha Foundation, an organization advocating LGBT Muslim rights suggested that "sexual humiliation is perhaps the worst form of torture for any Muslim" ("Al-Fatiha Condemns"). The press release continues:

> Islam places a high emphasis on modesty and sexual privacy. Iraq, much like the rest of the Arab world, places great importance on notions of masculinity. Forcing men to masturbate in front of each other and to mock same-sex acts or homosexual sex, is perverse and sadistic, in the eyes of many Muslims. ("Al-Fatiha Condemns").

Puar (*Terrorist Assemblage* 93) problematises Al-Fatiha's comment, and reads it as wittingly or unwittingly contributing to, and being interpolated into an Orientalist discourse that stresses "American sexual exceptionalism" as opposed to Islamic sexual oppression. This view of Islam, canonised in Orientalist books such as Raphael Patai *The Arab Mind*, has been often reproduced in theorising why the sexual torture was so effective

against the Iraqi prisoners. Because homosexually is perceived as an Islamic taboo, the implication is that these Arab detainees had contributed, themselves, to the intensity of their humiliation by following Islam; the Other religion. However, the fact that Islam is considered to be repressive of sexuality and unaccommodating of homosexuality does not preclude the existence of an Orientalist conception that renders the Orient a location of perverse sexuality for the Orientalist's gaze.

The Western/Imperial Othering Gaze on the Arab Body

In an attempt to analyse the sexual nature of the torture, Sherene Razack explains that "the sense of self that is simultaneously required and produced by empire is a self that is experienced in relation to the subordinate other—a relationship that is deeply gendered and sexualized" ("How is White" 343). The Iraqi detainees represent the Other to the American soldiers, not only nationally but also sexually. In Abu Ghraib, their perverse sexuality is highlighted in contrast to the American hetero-and-homo nationalists.



Figure 2

In his "Invisible Empire", Nicholas Mirzoef indicates that sodomy was used in Abu Ghraib so as to render visible the deviance of the Other. Mirzoeff supports his argument thus:

> The presence in one photograph [Figure 2] of Specialists Charles Graner and England posing as a dating couple behind a sodomitical pile of prisoners is a trophy not of deviance, but of the assertion of the imperial body, necessarily straight and white, over the confused sodomitical mass of the embodied spectacle that is the object of empire. (28)

In other words, the picture is a visual evidence of the ontological dichotomy between the Self and the Other. The sodomising torture allows the 'heterosexual masculinity' of the Empire to stay reassured and intact while that of the Other is effeminised and subjugated. This heterosexual masculinity does not, however, contradict the recent inclusion of homosexuals in American civil and patriotic life, as argued earlier. It rather resonates with Puar's theorising of American sexual exceptionalism, which is integrated in what she terms "homonationalism" achieved "through stagings of U.S. nationalism via a praxis of sexual othering, one that exceptionalizes the identities of U.S. homosexualities vis-à-vis Orientalist constructions of "Muslim sexuality"' (Terrorist Assemblages 4). All of the above coincides with the debate that pornography was a catalyst motivating Abu Ghraib's sexual torture (as in Sontag's "Regarding the Torture of Others", Soussloff's "Post-Colonial Torture", Viner's "The Sexual Sadism"). While all of this holds true, the question of why the American guards and soldiers greatly enjoyed – as evident in many pictures – the spectacle of Arab imposed homosexuality remains rarely asked.

Although Edward Said refers to the exotic sexualised Orient in its heterosexual garment, the lure of the Orient as exotic and contrasting to the image of a masculinised heterosexual West remains theoretically valid. In "Vacation Cruises; or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism", Joseph Boone addresses

> the way in which the public and personal texts produced by both straight and non-straight travelers are implicated in colonizing enterprise that often "others" the homosexually inscribed Arab male, a condition that obtains, albeit with differing valences and contexts, whether that "other" is perceived with dread or with desire. (45)

Researching some of the travellers' anecdotes and writings, he concludes that there were erotic references to Arab male bodies, as well as indications that some of the visits to the Middle-East were motivated by homosexual encounters in that "devious" and exotic land. The Orient, or Middle-East represents, in Said's words, a place "out of history" where the Western male body can break out of the heteronormative – and recently homonormative – role and experiment, all the while maintaining imperial superiority and leaving the Middle-East a place for both contempt and desire:

> For many Western men the act of exploring, writing about, and theorizing an eroticized Near and Middle-East is coterminous with unlocking a Pandora's box of phantasmic homoerotic desire, desire whose propensity to spread without check threatens to contaminate, indeed to reorient, the heterosexual "essence" of occidental male subjectivity. (Boone 50)

The discourse of empire has evolved, of course, and with it the symbolic significance of the Oriental/Middle-Eastern body. Desire/fear is replaced by disdain/subjection as Puar notes:

"it is the (perverse) repression of the Arab prisoners that is highlighted in order to efface the rampant hypersexual excesses of the U.S. prison guards" (94). In both critical evaluations of the positioning of the Arab body, the Western/imperial gaze is implicated in sexualising/sodomising the Arab body. The sexual sadomasochist acts performed in Abu Ghraib instils the rules of engagement between the Occident or the American soldiers as Master and the Orient or the Iraqi prisoners as Slave. Being superior towards the Other, as well as perhaps being sexually expectant is the context within which many American soldiers met the Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib. The imperial pleasure of controlling, containing and subjugating the Othered Arab body was equated with, and presented through the sexual pleasure of a dominant and voyeur.

The framing of imperial power and subsequent pleasure within sexual sadistic terms refers back to a long history of Orientalist discourse inscribing the interaction between the West and the Middle-East where the Self/Other cultural, religious and sexual dichotomy is continually reinforced. Whether the Arab body was desired, or was simply an "out of history" site where the American soldiers can relinquish their hetero-and-homo normative patriotic self, the photographs demonstrate an active staging and production of sodomised Arab bodies conquered by the American soldiers. In the Abu Ghraib photographs, the Arab body becomes the new geopolitical space for imperial and neo-colonial power. Invariably, these images stand as a cultural performance about a Master/ Slave narrative in which power relations are asserted, but their brazen display of a sadistic imperial violence remains humanly inconceivable.

The Arab Body Speaks in *Ten Acrobats* and *Precious Stones*

While the narrative written on the Arab body in the Abu Ghraib pictures is that of subjugation and imperial hegemony, an altogether different narrative of this Arab body is being written on Arab American stages. This narrative is owned by Arab American playwrights, who have engaged in a dialogue with the Arab and Arab American body, and replaced an Orientalist discourse with their self-representational stories. The two plays examined in this chapter, *Ten Acrobats* and *Precious Stones*, not only present the Arab body and its gender identity on stage, but also negotiate its homosexuality; a subject rarely touched upon in Arab American theatre. Because of the proliferation of Orientalist discourses which frame the Arab and Islamic culture as repressive, attempts to critically interrogate sexuality within these cultures are viewed as contributing to the same Orientalist discourse, and thus betraying the Arab and Muslim American in the contested post 9/11 times (Naber "Decolonizing Culture" 87).

Nonetheless, the need to engage with discourses of Arab American homosexuality beyond the Orientalist one is urgent. *Ten Acrobats* and *Precious Stones* are unique in their courage to approach and dramatise the topic of Arab homosexuality while facing protest and dissatisfaction from some members of the Arab American community. Introducing the homosexual theme in *Precious Stones* was especially challenging for Khoury, who is openly gay. In an interview with theatre academic Michael Najjar, Khoury explains: "Needless to say, that has been an enormous struggle for me, both in the Arab-American community and in the Arab world […] It has also been a source of a great deal of pain, rejection, anger, disappointment, and resentment." (qtd in Najjar "Writing from the Hyphen").

El Guindi describes a struggle he similarly endured when presenting a preview of *Ten Acrobats.* The play was originally written in response to an invitation from Cornerstone Theatre Company who asked El Guindi to write about his Arab community in their endeavour to incorporate diversity. However, "when sections of the play were presented to a gathering of people from the Muslim community in Los Angeles, those sections were met with some resistance. […] They wondered why I [El Guindi] had decided to include particular conflicts and issues, when so much else could have been included" (El Guindi, Introduction to *Ten Acrobats* 5). By "particular conflicts and issues", El Guinid refers to themes of homosexuality, feminism and atheism which he problematised in *Ten Acrobats*. This negative reaction discouraged Cornerstone Theatre Company from proceeding with the production. The play did not come to life until Jamil Khoury, artistic director of Silk Road Rising Theatre and the executive director Malik Gillani welcomed the play and produced it. *Ten Acrobats* was premiered at the Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago in 2006.

El Guindi started writing the play out of his desire to depict a "normal" Arab American family and its daily struggles and familial trials. El Guindi acknowledges that he felt a responsibility towards his Arab community, because of the hostile environment which has imbued Arabs with dehumanising and/or Othering stereotypes after 9/11. Still, El Guindi portrays these normal Arab characters fairly and sympathetically, as well as realistically with "their fair share of flaws and warts" (El Guindi 4). He addresses problematic issues (such as atheism, feminism and homosexuality) that are generally barred from the religious and cultural system of some Arab American and American communities. In *Ten Acrobats*, El Guindi manages not only to invite the Arab body to articulate its gender and sexual identity, but also to empower it with an agency that is often confiscated through various imperial, religious and cultural discourses.

The Arab American Body as a Site of Conflict and Negotiation: The Search for Liquid Identity

Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith dramatises the story of an Arab American immigrant family with two sons and a daughter. The family endures many conflicts in its everyday existence. Some of these are generational between the father, Kamal and his children, and others are cultural stemming from the family's immigrant experience. Kamal expresses the family problems in his speech: "First, my son goes insane and becomes an atheist; then, my daughter goes insane and dumps the engagement, and now, my other son goes insane fornicating in the bushes. What happened? Did they change the drinking water on us?" (El Guindi, *Ten Acrobats* 65). The children appear to be living in-between two cultures formulating an identity that resembles a mosaic of both Arab and American cultures. Though at times, the pieces of this mosaic seem discordant, the whole is an evolving attempt at harmony, and dialogue between the two cultures. Tawfiq, one of the sons, is an atheist who strives for the freedom to express his own beliefs, while satisfying his religious father and the tradition of his inherited Arab culture, at the same time. The daughter, Huwaida, is a strong, outspoken veiled young woman about to be engaged, but whose search for an identity that is both Arab and American is rather challenging. Hamza is the second son who – unlike his brother – conforms to the social and religious order suppressing his homosexuality.

As noted earlier, the play dramatises many themes such as family relations, generational conflicts, the Arab immigrants' attempt to acclimatise in the U.S., homosexuality and the Arab woman identity through her body image. However, the focus of this chapter is on the representation of the body and homosexuality. Therefore, these ideas will be analysed through the characters of Huwaida and Hamza and their struggles.

Huwaida suffers from a recurrent dream/nightmare, which she discusses with school psychologist, Pauline. The dream introduces H.D., Huwaida's dream double, who is a potential literary reference to the American poet Hilda Doolittle "H.D." who dealt with the evolvement of the feminist artist and self, and the negotiation between heterosexual and lesbian identity in her 1920s *Madrigal Cycle* collection. *Ten Acrobats*'s Huwaida experiences similar self-defining moments in the play in regards to her cultural and gender identity. In her dream, Huwaida witnesses her alter ego, H.D., participate in Miss America pageant to the dismay of the audience, comprised of her Arab relatives. All through the recurrent dream, H.D. is dressed in a swimsuit while still wearing a veil that covers her hair. Huwaida describes her dream to Pauline:

> I'm a contestant in this beauty pageant. And for some reason it always begins in the swimsuit section […] And I'm veiled. It's bad enough I'm in a swimsuit. But on top of that I'm also veiled. Like I have to humiliate myself in front of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, like I'm a circus freak. (El Guindi 15/6)

Huwaida's dream is a place for her cultural and sexual dialectical discourse to manifest through her body. Her body becomes the landscape for which both Arab and American cultural signs are being prescribed and contested. The centrality of the body in Huwaida's negotiation with her Arab American identity resonates with Foucault and Butler's understanding of the relationship between a cultural system and the body.

Foucault and Butler saw the body as a site upon which a certain cultural system can demonstrate its authority through the inscription of specific gender and sexual codes. Both theorists agree on the cultural function of the body even though Butler disagrees with

Foucault on the ontological existence of the body in her "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions". Nonetheless, in the thought of both theorists, the body becomes a performer of certain cultural codes as well as a perpetuator of their system. In the absence of a pronounced understanding of the "raced" body in the writings of both Foucault and Butler, Linda Alcoff's *Visible Identities* focuses on the racial and cultural manifestations of the body as identity markers: "The reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them" (5). The body, thus, attains a pivotal importance as a sign of a certain cultural and racial system as Elisabeth Bronfen writes:

> Images of the body not only serve as the screen for fantasies of plenitude, integrity and protection; they also function as the medium for formulating and perpetrating cultural prescriptions and forbidding, and as such come to figure as the site at which a given culture can repeatedly renegotiate its privileged collective self-representation as well as its hegemonic values. (112)

Based on such theoretical premises, Huwaida's dream in *Ten Acrobats* raises many questions in regards to her Arab American body, its representation and its relation to her identity, and provides the possibility of negotiating, destabilising or reconstructing this identity.

The dream occupies much of the dramatic space allocated for Huwaida's character. Huwaida's body negotiates a new identity in her dream through a change of body image; an identity she is incapable of either embracing or rejecting. When narrating her dream to the therapist, the following exchange takes place:

> Pauline: When you say veiled-

> Huwaida: Just my head. The rest of me is barely covered. Though I have to say, I look very good. The swimsuit fit fantastically on me. I mean I'm mortified but a part of me takes note of, wow: I'm not bad. That diet worked. I should say of course that this woman, though I know it's me, looks nothing like me. (El Guindi 15/16)

Huwaida's confusion in recognising herself in her dream stems from the contradicting signs her body carries. Theoretically, the body represents a liquid state that is constantly changing (changes include: weight, makeup, sexual desire, age, clothes, nakedness, and veiling) and each bodily alteration represents the potential for a different identity. The body, therefore, is the carrier of a "liquid" identity, to borrow Zygmunt Bauman's term in *Liquid Modernity*. This contests the notion of a stable identity because if the body carries the signifiers of one or multiple identities, then this identity is subject to alteration as the body changes. Huwaida's dream destabilises her identity by disrupting both her Arab/Muslim (represented by the hijab) and American (represented by the swimsuit) identity.

H.D. in the dream is given a microphone and starts to offer her opinions about women's empowerment, Muslim and Arab rights in America all in a confident, determined and active language. The fact that H.D. seems to represent an empowered version of Huwaida, through her scantily-clad thinned body, is a critique of the social acceptance of women in general and Muslim women in particular, which is widely based on women's body image. H.D. has a different voice, attitude, and confidence that emancipates her from both male-dominant, and American nationally Othering discourses. H.D. states in her address to the audience of the pageant's audience: "And to all my Muslim brothers, I say *assalam alaykum* [Islamic greeting], and please hold off on your objections until after you see me in the talent sections" (El Guindi 16). H.D. continues:

> I think it's time we Muslims stepped out into the light and made a big splash. For too long we have let others misrepresent us, mock our ways and call us everything under the sun. Well I say, enough of that. We're here, we're proud, and by golly we can kick ass along with the best of them (El Guindi 17)

H.D.'s speech highlights two problematic areas which are interconnected and seem to manifest through a conflicting body image: a barely covered body with a head scarf. The dream in general, and H.D's speech in particular, reflect Huwaida's insecure American national identity (and her possible exclusion of it because she is wearing the hijab), and cultural and religious identity (and her possible exclusion of it for uncovering her body in a swimsuit). Bronfen echoes Foucault and Butler's ideas when she discusses the "culturalisation" of the body by inscribing certain signs on it, arguing that the body always carries a form of cultural identification:

> This primacy of the body as object of negotiation and representation, however, also readily calls forth the question whether there is a body outside language or whether our knowledge of the body depends on the highly diverse and differentiated images of it that come to be constructed in accordance with particular social contexts and questions of normalcy relevant at specific historical moments. Is the body always already cultured or does the body pose as the measure and demarcation point of culture, as the site of truth, authenticity and inevitability? (112/3)

This "measure and demarcation point of culture" could not be more accurate in the case of hijab. Any woman wearing the hijab is instantly identified as Muslim, which not only marks

her as possibly belonging to the Arab, or Middle-Eastern culture, but also evokes a possible sense of tension for her American national identity in post 9/11 America.

Here, the hijab not only calls for a theorisation about the body and its significance in cultural demarcation, but also for a postcolonial feminist discourse about the subaltern's voice and choice. Because Huwaida is a Muslim veiled woman, Pauline insists on interpreting the dream as Huwaida's call for help and liberation. Pauline's view falls comfortably with the popular Western understanding of Muslim and Arab women as victimised, veiled and in need of saving. It has been noted earlier in the chapter how discourses of Muslim women victimisation have been especially encouraged and advertised after 9/11 – particularly in the war on terror rhetoric. Huwaida, however, affirms to Pauline: "Look. I don't need to be liberated or saved. I just want this annoying character in my dream to go away" (El Guindi 20).

In fact, the Arab woman's body and its veiling has been the subject of many discussions and confrontations between some Western feminists and postcolonial and Arab feminists. In *Terrorist Assemblage*, Puar highlights the binary opposition imbedded in Western feminism speaking about and for Arab and Muslim women. Puar argues that the stance of these Western feminists is firstly superior, and secondly a product of an imperialist discourse:

> Gender exceptionalism works as a missionary discourse to rescue Muslim women from their oppressive male counterparts. It also works to suggest that, in contrast to women in the United States, Muslim women are, at the end of the day, unsavable. More insidiously, these discourses of exceptionalism allude to the unsalvageable nature of Muslim women even by their own

> feminists, positioning the American feminist as the feminist subject par excellence. (5)

Interestingly, *Ten Acrobats* presents a dramatisation of this through Huwaida: "I don't know what it is about women professors here that they feel impelled to save us – as if we needed your precious help when you spend most of your life agonizing over the dumbest, f'd-up things. Go crusade someone else's ass". (El Guindi 58/9). Huwaida's anger echoes the frustration of many Arab and Muslim women and their representatives, who find themselves constantly portrayed as lacking in agency. As evident in the previous chapters, resisting the victimisation of Arab and Muslim women portrayed in some Western discourses is a recurrent topic in post 9/11 Arab American drama whether female-or-male authored.

In Scene 8, the spotlight falls on Pauline who addresses the audience while talking to Huwaida. Adopting a repetitive critique, popular in Western media and some feminist thought, she delivers a long speech about Huwaida's veil concluding that it is a sign of oppression which has been internalised by women. For Pauline, it is a subordinating tool that marks Muslim women's bodies:

> It's not okay that we take on the prejudices of one gender and make them our own. So that we women end up being the gatekeepers of our own oppression … I don't know how you can call yourself a feminist and say that, and cover yourself as if you have something to be ashamed about, as if you have *anything* to apologize for." (El Guindi 57).

To this attack on personal, cultural and religious choice, Huwaida responds by wearing heavy make-up and a very revealing dress to make a statement about the objectification of women in the West. Sarcastically, Huwaida addresses Pauline, and possibly some Western

feminists: “dress me. Unshackle me from my manacles. Help me be a better feminist. Or am I not a feminist wearing this? Should I let my underarm hair grow? Is that it? Let it all hang out. Burn my bra. Put a little jiggle in my breasts as I march down the street, declaring my womanhood” (El Guindi 57).

Here, *Ten Acrobats* introduces the Arab body as a contesting site for different ideologies of culture, religion and versions of feminisms. Huwaida’s defiance is a statement of her firm belief in the hijab being a choice. Her protests, however, fall on deaf ears as Pauline insists on “curing” Huwaida of her religion or culture. Pauline is incapable of listening to/understanding Huwaida and her cultural and feminist ideals. To Pauline, Huwaida’s attachment to the signs of her Islamic and Arabic identity is the source of her oppression and confusion, whereas her liberation lies in embracing the cultural codes of her American identity. This leads Huwaida to quit her “therapy” sessions regretting that Pauline’s doors were not “opened once” (El Guindi 59)

The dramatisation of Huwaida’s crisis of identity reflects the real and challenging situations of Arab/Muslim American women in post 9/11 due to the visibility imposed on them and a recurrent political discourse “advocating” their rights. The Arab and Muslim women’s body, presumed to be oppressed, becomes the bearer of Arab and Muslim indictment as backward and uncivilised. In *Ten Acrobats*, Huwaida’s body, as a representative of the Arab woman body, is the new domain of power with cultural signs (such as the hijab or the disposal of it) defining its belonging: Western/American or Arabic and Islamic. However, *Ten Acrobats* enables Huwaida to reclaim her voice as an Arab American woman by refusing to internalise Pauline’s discourse, and asserting her agency over her body and the construction of her identity.

The body receives a significant meaning in Islamic religion: fasting and praying are principle bodily manifestations of faith, for example. This is notably contextualised in *Ten Acrobats*, as the play is set in the month of Ramadan (the Islamic fasting month). References to the relationship between religion and the body are frequently present throughout the play. This relationship becomes particularly contested when that body's sexual identity is homosexual. This is the case of Hamza whose trips to the park to practice his musical instrument led him to meet Kevin, who is gay. Hamza hesitantly resists Kevin's advances on the basis of his religion and culture. Kevin informs Hamza that one of his lovers was Muslim, which Hamza finds hard to digest:

> Hamza: He wasn't a real Muslim then.
>
> Kevin: He thought he was. Is that what's troubling you? – Not what a devout Muslim does? Is a devout Muslim and a devout human being two different things? (El Guindi 44).

The conflict that faces Hamza is that of belonging, where his religious/cultural identity is at odds with his sexual identity and his body lies at the centre of this battleground. His position evokes such questions as: On which side of the cultural and national border would an Arab American Muslim homosexual stand? and how is it possible to thread a homogenous identity with so many seemingly disconnect seams? In her attempt to theorise queer belonging, Elspeth Probyn questions the construct of belonging, writing:

> The problematic of belonging that I propose thus foregrounds the body as a place of passage, moved through by desire and being moved in return. Images of past and present belongings, of necessity, pass through and on. But, of

> course, images of 'belonging' conjoin with images of leaving: points of departure. (6)

Probyn argues that entertaining the possibility of a new belonging requires the departure from another. Hamza's crisis of identity in the play stems from his positionality on the crossroad between (Arab/Islamic) cultural belonging and (homo) sexual belonging. However, his Arab American identity can arguable offer him a manoeuvring space, in which he can negotiate and unsettle the stability of a fixed Muslim/Arab identity.

The story of Hamza's homosexuality reaches the family when they receive a phone call from the police while breaking their fast. Later on, it is inferred that Hamza was caught participating in a sexual act with a man in the park. The play keeps details of the incident hazy, with the characters avoiding divulging information to reflect the state of shame, embarrassment and concealment Hamza and his family find themselves in. The tension evoked by homosexuality in the Arab and Muslim community is reflected in the hesitation, pauses, and unfinished sentences between father and son. The word "homosexual" is not iterated once:

> Tawfiq: He's … Hamaza's –
>
> Kamal: La'a [translated as "No"]. Don't say it.
>
> Tawfiq: Yes, he is. Kamal: Haram [translated as "Shame"] – don't drag them into this. Even they would be offended.
>
> Tawfiq: But that's – that's what he is, he's –
>
> Kamal: My son is not that! (El Guindi 66).

The silence in this verbal exchange is a wish to whisk away the threat of homosexuality by rendering it unsayable. Leslie Kane devotes her *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* to the study of pauses and silences asserting that "[t]he retreat from the word encompasses not only nonverbal symbolism, but also many forms of connotative, indirect dramatic expression such as innuendo, intimation, hesitation, reticence, and bivalent speech that implicitly conveys more than it states" (16). The use of silence, dramatised by pauses and unfinished sentences, in the above conversation serves to convey a naked non-verbal denial, rejection of, and resistance to the challenge that homosexuality imposes on the Arab and Muslim identity. This challenge is rendered a threat to the discursive Arab identity as socially and culturally constructed. Thus, the denial of explicit articulation of Hamza's homosexuality falls within a social discourse that aims to regulate sexuality and governs its expression, but of which repression and censorship are fundamental tools:

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom" (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 6)

Silence here serves to rein in the unsettling effect that Hamza's homosexual adventure brought to the Arab American family and its social and cultural identity.

Language proves too inept to resolve, or mediate the battles of the body in *Ten Acrobats*. The father, Kamal, reverts to religion and the written Holy text to justify his angry

reaction and denunciation of his son's homosexuality (El Guindi 66). The argument around homosexuality being a product of depraved bodily desire is advocated by Kamal in the play, who believes that every religion upholds this view. Defending his brother, Tawfiq confronts his father with the view that homosexuality could be an expression of love. The dilemma of the spiritual concept of love, manifesting in a homosexual encounter is beyond the tolerance of the father who protests: "you call what happened 'love'? That is love to you?" (El Guindi 67). Kamal rejects this concept rigidly leaving Hamza trapped between two options: either denying his homosexual identity, or embracing it, but being disavowed by his father, culture and religion.

Hamza finds himself imprisoned in a cycle of shame, disapproval and dismay. Unable to act, or defend himself, he dismisses his homosexuality delivering a hesitant, frightened and shaken statement of denial:

> I . . . I promise you . . . what happened . . . it will never happen again. I don't know what . . . I wasn't . . . It was never supposed to happen. … Whatever you think, I'm not – it's not. It's not me. Please don't think that. I'm not . . . (El Guindi 67/8).

This short speech includes six pauses, which expressly communicate Hamza's hesitation and confusion. His identity ("I'm not – it's not") is trapped within his inability to depart from one belonging: He gives up his sexual identity as to maintain his cultural and religious inclusion. It was, nonetheless, his choice to conform. His brother Tawfiq, who firmly expressed his atheist beliefs despite the threat of social and religious expulsion, tries vehemently to defend Hamza's new acquired homosexual identity, but fails. Tawfiq sarcastically remarks: "Well that was healthy. Hamza is well on his way to becoming a

healthy, functioning member of this society. A few more twists like that and he'll be just screwed up enough to fit right in" (El Guindi 68). Tawfiq's comment is reminiscent of Foucault's theories of power systems (such as cultural and religious systems in this case) disciplining the body (and its sexuality) to keep it the subject of social control. In view of that, Tawfiq refers to the eventual containment of Hamza within a sexual discourse that is both acceptable and governable within an Arab cultural heritage.

The familial dramas and conflicts presented in *Ten Acrobats* do not reach a resolution by the end of the play. The characters simply temporally and spatially "freeze" (El Guindi 89) in anticipation for Iftar (the breaking of fast in Ramadan). The only character who offers an epilogue is H.D., Huwaida's double from her dreams. She informs the audience of a shared experience felt at the moment of Iftar, which transcends language:

> But if you quite down and pay attention, you may get a glimpse of being part of a bigger, better drama than your own; and the people you're with are the only ones who will help you play it out. […] You pass the food. And just before that first glass of water is drunk, all these good feelings come to a head. So that the first thing that passes your lips is tasted by something deeper inside". (El Guindi 89)

In a way, it is also through the body that conflicts can be potentially resolved. The play offers a romanticised and idealised ending through H.D's speech. In that speech, there is the hope that the experience of Iftar will help the family reconcile and mend its fractions. The characters, however, were left frozen trapped in their conflicts, unable yet to communicate. Perhaps, *Ten Acrobats* presents language as failing to talk of matters of the body. Perhaps it is the Arab/Arab American body dramatised as a newly discovered raw soil with the

potential to cultivate new identities. Whether by departing from previous belonging, or liquidating the borders of the existing belonging, actions and resolutions rest solely in the characters' hands.

The Arab American Body as a Site of Conciliation and Compromise: Liquid Identity Negotiated

In *Ten Acrobats*, the characters' sexuality and their relationship to their bodies are problematised through a familial context. Hamza's decision in regards to his homosexuality is set within the parameter of exclusion/inclusion from his family, and deviation/preservation of a cultural and religious heritage. Huwaida's problem, similarly, lies in her inability to stabilise an identity which moves in-between the internal and external borders of her family and Arab identity. *Precious Stones*, on the other hand, introduces the Arab American Leila outside this familial context. Leila's story invites the politics of the body to mediate and resolve the conflicting politics of nationality. The emphasis of both plays on the Arab body as a site full of potentials – sometimes plausible and other times unachievable – communicates the desire of both playwrights to empower this body and its articulation.

Jamil Khoury (the artistic director of Chicago's Silk Road Rising) inaugurated his then Silk Road Theatre Project in 2003 with a production of his play *Precious Stones*. The play presents the possibility of crossing over national and sexual borderlines to initiate a seemingly unimaginable dialogue between two women, whose national belonging is dividing, but whose sexual belonging is unifying. Set in Chicago in 1989, the play introduces two diasporic women; Andrea, a Jewish American woman, born and bought up in Chicago, and daughter of Holocaust survivors from Krakow, Poland; and Leila, a Palestinian American woman, born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon and daughter of refugees expelled

from Jaffa, Palestine in 1948. The two women embark on an Arab-Jewish dialogue project for their communities, but they finally become its only participants with a lesbian love affair fostering their efforts. While similar in many ways, they differ in their national longing and its identification: Leila's Palestinian identity is determined by a historical and familial attachment to Palestine, and Andrea's longing for Israel stems from her Jewish identity. Their attempts at dialogue are set within the paradigm of two irreconcilable national (Palestinian and Israeli) narratives. These narratives are based on denial of the Other as the only form of existence and survival. Palestine and Israel represent a relentless national Other to each other and the existence of one depends on the non-existence of the other as discussed later. Out of such impenetrable narratives, *Precious Stones* offers a glimpse of hope when Andrea and Leila invite the body and politics of gender and sexuality into their room of national conflict. By doing so, the play offers its hyphenated characters the chance to overstep the borders of their conflicting inherited national belongings and reach a compromise. *Precious Stones* moves in a quick tempo where Leila and Andrea are always dancing a dangerous and progressively more daring tango. Some of the other minor characters: Palestinian Bassima and Zionist Esther enter and exist in short interludes serving to highlight the gravity of division between the two conflicting sides of the Palestinian/Israeli crisis.

The Palestinian/Israeli conflict serves as the frame of reference in which the characters and themes of *Precious Stones* are situated. Leila and Andrea's identities are constructed within the confines of a discourse that is particular to their respective inherited cultures, histories and – to borrow Benedict Anderson's term – "imagined communities". At the beginning of the play, Khoury sets the scene for a possible conversation between the two

opposing parties. However, these two national Others seem incapable of understanding each other; language becomes incapacitated and eventually inaudible:

> Andrea: The problem is, we don't know each other. Or we know each other, but we don't talk to each other.
>
> Leila: Or we talk to each other, but we can't hear each other. (Khoury 12)

They later refer to the irreconcilable nature that governs the interaction between the discourses of their national belongings:

> Leila: Andrea, I'll be honest with you. This whole notion of dialogue with Jews is extremely sensitive to Arabs.
>
> Andrea: As it is for Jews. Dialogue is never easy, Leila. We're all going to hear things we'd rather not. Some of us may get hurt. We'll get angry. We'll get offended. (Khoury 13)

Indeed their dialogue proves to be extremely antagonistic, built on national essentialism that denies the Other epistemologically. Ideologically, the only way for either of these national narratives to survive lies in denying the Other. The simple acknowledgment of Israel in 1947 by UN resolution 181 ("1948: Lest We Forget") led to the denunciation of Palestine. Thus, the identity of either of these conflicting nations' citizens (although Palestinians are considered stateless and therefore are not currently recognised as citizens) is highly influenced by a denial of the other party's national identity and rights. Herbert Kelman explains the intrinsic dichotomy that shapes the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its participants' claim for national identity:

> Each party [Palestinian and Israeli] perceives the very existence of the other – the other's status as a nation – to be a threat to its own existence and status as a nation. Each holds the view that only one can be a nation: Either we are a nation or they are. *They* can acquire national identity and rights only at the expense of *our* identity and rights. (Kelman 354).

In fact, a reading through most of the conversations between characters exemplifies the internalisation of this national narrative and its role in shaping their attitudes and identities in opposition to the Other. In one of their dialogues, Andrea and Leila exchange their respective inherited memories, stories and sufferings which are always set as binary oppositions. Examining the following discussion presents the deeply rooted convictions, beliefs and narratives of each character as a heavy burden, which hinders any endeavour to reach a reconciliation:

> Leila: We were innocent civilians. We weren't attacking anyone.
>
> Andrea: That's not how I understand it. And what about all the Jews who were expelled from Arab countries? They lost homes too you know.
>
> Leila: That's a Zionist *myth*.
>
> Andrea: Not according to the Jews from Iraq, Morocco, Yemen ...
>
> Leila: "The people without a land going to the land without a people." Except of course there were a people on that land. Us. (31/2, emphasis added).

To all appearances Andrea and Leila belong to two parallel national lines with the chance of their ever meeting in a middle ground amounting to an-impossibility. In fact they are believed to be sworn enemies as they are both actively engaged in political organisations

which respectively support two opposing ends of the conflict (Andrea is an Israeli sympathiser who works for the Jewish Council, and Leila is a Palestinian activist with ties to the Arab-American Federation). They however, manage to step outside their inscribed national enmity and find that middle ground in other landscapes: the landscape of body, desire, gender and sexuality. They invite the personal to take part in their national discourses hoping to thread their own new narrative. They un-silence their bodies and offer the space for a new female narrative to be born. This new narrative, written by their female and homosexual bodies, promises to unsettle the old national masculine separatist narrative.

The notion of nationalism as a masculinised territory has been theorised by many scholars. In her introduction to *Gender Ironies of Nationalism*, Tamar Mayer shows that nationalism 'smells' of sexism. She illustrates that what is supposed to be a home of equality for all is actually a nation that clearly places men on pedestals while women remain subordinate within national frameworks. Furthermore, Cynthia Enloe points out in her *Beaches, Bananas and Bases* that "nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope" (44). Nationalism and the right to dictate and navigate its narrative have been fundamentally the property of men while women follow and perform their national, gender and sexual duties in the silence of their domestic spheres. While this discourse has progressed in recent years with the advances of feminist and queer thought, it remains true to nations in danger (such as Palestine), and nations in the building stage (such as Israel). *Precious Stones* decidedly reverses this tradition by introducing nationalism through feminised "memory", feminised "humiliation" and feminised "hope" through the dialogue between Leila and Andrea. When Andrea approaches Leila for the first time, Leila wonders why the proposed dialogue should be exclusively run by women. Andrea answers: "But we need to formulate our own ideas and

approaches to this conflict as women," (Khoury 12) suggesting that the feminine history of silence, suffering and oppression promises a women's agenda necessarily different than the masculinised one. These shared female experiences have the potential of initiating a dialogue and possibly even strike a compromise. Yet, Leila reminds Andrea of the tight masculine grip which would not tolerate a feminised vision of nationalism saying: "I just worry if it's all women no one in my community will take it seriously. They'll think we're swapping recipes or something" (Khoury 12)

Leila's hesitance to be immersed in the dialogue and its female initiation reflects her scepticism of its practicality, much less success. One could even discern signs of a possibly internalised masculine nationalist discourse which places women in the private sphere of the household/kitchen. On the other hand, Andrea's readiness to engage in that dialogue is perhaps encouraged by her desire for Leila, which moves her progressively outside the confines of her national narrative. Being openly gay allows her to defy the strict rules set by a masculine national discourse that alienates her, and her Palestinian Other similarly.

In Andrea and Leila's attempt to reach each other, they deal with the fixity of their established identities and challenge orthodox discourses of nationalism, gender and sexuality. In *Woman, Nation, State*, Yuval-Davis and Nira, Floya Anthias examine the nation as an imagined gendered community, where women are expected to fulfil the role of the biological, cultural and national bearers and reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis, Anthias, Campling 7). This gendered nationalism in which women are subordinated and straightjacketed in the name of the nation is a construct of a national discourse envisioned by "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 183). In this sense, women are anticipated to be heterosexual to fulfil their national obligation of bringing forth the nation's future members. If not, then they challenge the expectations that govern their national existence and risk

being condemned to an existence of silence and invisibility. Although, as noted earlier, such a discourse is shifting to accommodate the increasingly visible call for a more inclusive gender and sexual diversity in the Western construction of the nation, it persists in "developing" nations such as Israel where in Theodor Herzl's vision of Zionism, "women's importance seems limited to their role in reproducing and sustaining the Jewish nation" (Mayer 286). Thus, they are estranged from the nation, and in specific cases, they are even incriminated. Kramer examines the relationship between nationalism and sexuality and the representation of the homosexual as an outsider and Other; an outcast who is deprived of national recognition:

> Yet the positive sexual images of the good nationalist relied also (as always) on images of the threatening Others who crossed the "normal" boundaries of sexual behavior and "respectable" gender identities. For proper people in all social classes, therefore, the "ugly counter-image of the nervous, unstable homosexual and masturbator ...became an important symbol of the threat to nationalism and respectability. (539)

Homosexuals are typically demonised within the confines of a narrative that proclaims heterosexuality normative. Homosexuality constitutes a threat to nationalism because it it endangers the biological continuity or what Lee Edelman terms the "reproductive futurism" (2) of the nation. Moreover, lesbianism, in specific, jeopardises the hegemonic masculine grip over women and is, thus, marginalised from national narratives. In this regard, the play presents a rather unusual combination of two characters who are conflicted nationally, but allied sexually.

Both Leila and Andrea are expected to follow the norm of heterosexuality as dictated by the Palestinian and Israeli national and cultural narratives, which they identify with. For Leila, homosexuality is a violation of all the "moral" codes of the Arab society; in Andrea's case, homosexuality represents a betrayal to her Jewish identity. Andrea relates her parents' reaction to her revelation of her lesbian identity: "They said I was finishing Hitler's job!" (Khoury 127). Julia Brad explains how Jewish lesbians risk being ostracised if they deviate from the heterosexual cultural and biological reproductive role and those "who question either the problem or the solution are silenced by the claim that they are giving Hitler a posthumous victory" (5). Although not without difficult inner conflicts, Leila and Andrea manage to free their identities from a national discourse, which denies them the choice of a sexual identity, as they embark on a lesbian affair. This affair does not resolve the "othering" national narratives they have both inherited, but it makes a political statement in the context of this conflict, as Leila uneasily puts it: "Hey look everyone. A Jew and a Palestinian in love. And both women, no less" (Khoury 123).

Precious Stones deliberately presents and negotiates the intersection between nationalism and gender. Leila and Andrea's dialogues embody an intrusion to the masculinised territory of nationalism and re-appropriation of it. In fact, *Precious Stones*'s distinctive merit lies in its ability to offer the opportunity of reading politics through women's narrative, and make nationalism, unorthodoxly, a female language. Helene Cixous famously wrote: "[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875). Although written by a man, who openly identify himself as "gay and feminist" (Khoury "*On Both/And*"), *Precious Stones* is consciously attempting to answer Cixous' urge by empowering its two female protagonists through bodily desire to write this new female

national discourse. With such "offense" to established masculinised nationalisms, the play entertains the possibility of renegotiating the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, and possibly reaching different conclusions, if nationalism were appropriated for once by those females, feminists and lesbian "underdogs".

Khoury observes that the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is "a truly masculine conflict. It has this powerful, macho, militaristic discourse and women are marginalized within it, which I think gives them a manuevering [sic] space that men do not have" (Interview "In Conflict"). It is that manoeuvring space which offers new perspectives for a barren situation. The play entertains the idea that inviting women to this conflict brings forth fertility to future solutions after an eternity of masculinised sterility. On his decision to further present these female characters as homosexual, Khoury explains: "The play felt lesbian to me from the beginning. I sat with the idea of two men, but it didn't work. The heterosexual configuration also didn't work – there's a negotiation of power in heterosexual relationship and that would just be too much. It's a woman's story" (Interview "In Conflict"). It is specifically the lesbian body (Arab and Jewish) presented here to be capable of changing the configurations of power and political conflict, and writes a new national and sexual narrative.

Leila's body in particular invites new dynamics to the stifled dialogue through the "irresistible" albeit illusionary Orientalist allure. In fact, Khoury highlights the expectations and infinite possibilities, which the Oriental body is imagined to inspire by virtue of the Occident's projection of desire. After Andrea and Leila's first meeting, Andrea's friend and Jewish political activist Rachel asks Andrea about her impressions of "the Arab" (Khoury 15). In her inquiry, Rachel summons the Arab Leila from a scripted stereotypical book of reference in which she is "[m]ysterious looking" wearing a "veil" (Khoury 15). Rachel asks:

> You are so smitten! (turns very animated) Do you have some fantasy about being in the desert and stumbling upon an oasis where you see a tent with a camel outside, and this mysterious, exotic woman stares out at you, revealing seductive, piercing brown eyes that lure you into her tent, where she feeds you figs and dates and pours fresh, cold water over your face, her hips gyrating as she begins belly dancing for you, letting her veil fall to the floor... (Khoury 16)

In Rachel's imagination, which is projected on Andrea's lesbian desires, Leila is promptly reduced to a body; specifically an Oriental sexualised body. She is conjured from the desert within images and fantasies of the exotic, forbidden, highly sexual and alluring Other. Rachel's mental depiction of Leila within the frame of these images is Orientalist par excellence. To this, Andrea objects: "Shut up, Rachel! She's very sophisticated" (Khoury 17). Leila's body, however, plays an integral part in resolving the insurmountable obstacles encumbering the dialogue and endangering any possibility for compromise when Andrea and Leila converse from across the borders of their national belongings. Leila's body becomes the new political negotiator; outspoken in gestures, dance moves and unifying acts of love.

The following excerpt is one of the examples in which Andrea and Leila cannot strike a compromise, as their ideological heritages stand at odds:

> Leila: … We're not equals. Israel's the occupier, we're the occupied. Who has the state, Andrea? Who has the army? Who controls all the land? Israel does.

> Andrea: Imagine being hit in the head with a giant rock. Your skull could be smashed, you could lose an eye ... those "precious" stones you're so fond of happen to be lethal weapons.
>
> Leila: Those precious stones are going to set us free! (Khoury 90/91)

At this moment, Andrea decides to leave. However, instead of quitting their dialogue with each pronouncing the other an eternal enemy, Leila asks Andrea to stay and plays Arabic belly dance music. She starts to dance swaying her hips and inviting Andrea to join her, who firstly hesitates in embarrassment. But then, the stage direction describes:

> Leila continues to titillate Andrea with her suggestive dance moves, tempting her to give it a try. Slowly, Andrea's body begins to sway. She feels awkward and self-conscious at first, but quickly picks up steam and allows her body to start responding to the rhythm. Soon, she is reciprocating Leila's sensuality, and the two begin to belly dance in a highly erotic manner. Finally, Leila kisses Andrea and the two begins making love. (Khoury 91)

Leila's body invites a new "imagined" geographic territory upon which a compromise to two irreconcilable national narratives is possible. Andrea's yielding and acceptance of Leila's invitation and their act of love making is the consummation of a figurative peace treaty and a new promise. Political and national borders are dissolved as Andrea starts swaying her body corresponding to Leila's sensual invitation to join her. Here, it seems that they both relinquish their ideological barriers and cross over to a neutral land free from political, national and gender rhetoric.

Precious Stones presents an artistic vision of reconciliation. The setting is a bedroom, the site is the homosexual body and the background is a flag woven from two national

Others. Leila and Andrea's lesbian affair signifies their individual bid to disrupt the territory of established "normalcy" to reach a fluidity of identity, sexual and otherwise. Their "Isralestine" (Khoury 24) is conceived in the bedroom with the figurative Palestinian flag bleeding into the Israeli one set as the backdrop of the play (as per Khoury's advice for the play's production in *Precious Stones*'s introductory notes). Theatrically, the bedroom setting in Act Two, Scene Two could suggest a symbol of the closeted space socially allocated for homosexuality, but that which is productive of resistant discourses. The bedroom represents the "out of place" space in which national Othering discourses are contained within another form of Otherness both Leila and Andrea share, that is of queerness. It is the queer marginal site in which irreconcilable conflicting national Others meet and "come out" of the closet with a liquidated/destabilised national and sexual sense of identity that would ultimately unify them. In this space of their own, Andrea and Leila try to reach for an acceptance of the Other and attempt to create a compromise where neither the Self nor the Other is ignored or silenced.

The play is undoubtedly optimistic in its approach to national and sexual politics. It seems that the resolution to such a barren and dire conflict currently only exists in a romanticised artistic vision. In *Precious Stones*, the body becomes an empowered vessel negotiating a seemingly irresolvable conflict, and as it defies its heteronormative positioning, it promises reconciliation through the creation of a new "feminised" national narrative. The thematic significance of the body in the play is evident throughout. In fact, the geographical site of the conflict itself is portrayed as a body. During one of Leila and Andrea's conversations in which they attempt to conjure a solution for the crisis, Leila observes "Look at the ridiculous borders of the so-called states. Palestine is chopped into two pieces, one cut off from the other, it looks deformed. Gaza's like some sick joke. Israel's virtually anorexic

in the middle" (Khoury 23). The conflict between the two nations and the annihilating narratives of each is reducing the two territories into an unhealthy unattractive body. This is in contrast to the sexy body of Leila and the erotic fulfilling possibilities of Andrea and Leila's sexual union, which symbolises their new "Isralestine".

Significantly, the essentialism inherit in the binary opposition of the Self/Other is rendered subject to negotiation by cultivating the politics of the Arab and Jewish lesbian body. As Andrea and Leila engage in liquidating the heterosexual boundaries of their bodies, so too does the dividing line between the Self and Other begin to dissolve. Points of similarity in those national enemies start to unravel questioning the essence of a Self/Other dichotomy. The play refers to many parallels between Andrea and Leila suggesting that an Othering process can be read as a mirroring process where the Self projects its fears and survival anxieties on its imaginary reflection (an idea that Said's approached similarly in *Orientalism*).

The similarities between Leila and Andrea originate from a fundamental diasporic status they both share. Palestinians and Jews are typically understood as diasporic due to their displacement from homeland and their restless longing for home; imaginary or actual, as Avtar Brah defines:

> [P]eople may have had to desert their home as a result of expulsion and persecution, as has been the fate of a number of Jewish groups at various points in history. [...] Perhaps the dispersion occurred as a result of conflict and war, resulting in the creation of a new nation state on the territory previously occupied by another, as has been the experience of Palestinians since the formation of Israel" (182)

Andrea and Leila are diasporic nationally as they live away from a historical or conceptual homeland. Leila longs for a lost home, Palestine, which she has never actually been to. Answering Andrea's question if she has ever been to Palestine, Leila replies: "No, can you imagine? I've been all over the world and I can't even visit my own homeland?" (Khoury 48). Similarly, Andrea longs for a promised home; Israel, which she has no intention of settling in: "That's pretty much how most American Jews feel about Israel. We love it, we support it, but we'll stay put here, thank you very much" (Khoury 110). Although the circumstantial origin of Leila and Andrea's displacement is different, diaspora as a cultural and national identity seem to encompass them both.

Moreover, this cultural and national displacement is further amplified by their sexual diversion from what is considered "normal" heterosexuality. So, Andrea and Leila are twice diasporic in view of the fact that "[f]or diasporic individual, home is an unsettled category due to migration; for the queer, home is unsettled because of normative heterosexuality" (Kalra, Kaur, Hutnyk 63/64). Their sexual identity alienates them not only outside their national community, but within. They persist, as Audre Lorde calls it, "Outside the structures" (26) which intensifies their diaspora and turns it from a national specificity to a statement of identity. As Andrea proclaims: "I'm a Jew, I'm the daughter of survivors, I'm a woman. I'm a lesbian. I'm a feminist. My DNA reads 'underdog'" (Khoury 64).

The parallelism between the two characters introduces itself even more evidently through the intentional presentation of Leila's physical appearance to be similar to that of a Jew as Andrea notes: "So many people go to Israel and they can't tell the Jews and Arabs apart. I of course could, but if you were to tell me right now that you were Jewish I'd totally buy it" (Khoury 85). Leila embraces Andrea's statement and attempts to appropriate this resemblance specifically to herself and Andrea saying; "you think we look alike ... you and

me?" (Khoury 85). The national Self, here, mirrors the national Other through the physiognomy and sexuality of the body.

The play further emphasises the suggestion that Andrea and Leila reflect each other in Act Two, Scene One. The scene witnesses a theatrical stylistic change as the two protagonists play all six characters. Leila plays the two supporting Jewish characters; Rachel and Esther, and Andrea plays the two supporting Palestinian characters; Samir and Bassima. In the playwright's notes for the play, Khoury proposes that "[t]his allows for each actor to embody varied and often-contradictory perspectives and is an artistic nod to the theoretical premise that empathy with one's "other" is essential to creating meaningful dialogue" (Khoury 7). By physically embodying the Other, Leila and Andrea are both Palestinians and Israelis challenging the ontological difference proposed by their respective nationalist narratives.

A state of Otherness and diaspora shape the existence of both Andrea and Leila and informs their relationship with one self and on another. Yet, instead of originating a defensive discourse that would further distance them, the two protagonists utilise such a state to escape established national and gender roles, and shatter their expected silence as members of a marginalised national and sexual diaspora. Indeed it is their diasporic state which offers a cultivating soil for creating an identity of resistance which fluctuates in the orbits of – as Homi Bhabha puts it – "culture's 'in between', bafflingly alike and different" ("Culture's In-Between" 54). Through the marginal space of their bedroom, Leila and Andrea manage to open a dialogue, and document it on their lesbian bodies. The ending of *Precious Stones* does not offer a 'heterosexual' happily-ever-after, but a simple "we will figure something out" (Khoury 130) in an "Isralstine" located on the queer bodies of Leila and Andrea.

Precious Stones introduces homosexuality a promising territory to unsettle rigid national discourses, with the Arab body playing a leading role. The political thematic atmosphere of the play is different than the familial one in *Ten Acrobats*, but both plays are similar in: firstly, emphasising and problematising the Arab domestic space; and secondly, showcasing empowered representations of the Arab body; and thirdly, negotiating this body's homosexuality. While the Arab body seems to be introduced as a sign with political, cultural and religious ramifications, there is hardly any objectifying, or voyeuristic narrative about it. When discussing homosexuality, the plays insist on giving agency to the characters and their Arab bodies by enabling them to express their views and own, or disown, their homosexuality within the context of "choice". This agency is cultivated and accomplished, through the plays, in spite of a discouraging religious and cultural heritage.

In conclusion, this chapter examines three narratives of the Arab and Arab American body through two mutually exclusive discourses: that of the imperialist, and the Arab/Arab American. The photographs of Abu Ghraib shocked many, led to numerous academic and media debates, brought forward scepticism in the American military's morality, and revived a post-colonial Master/Slave narrative. As the photographs implicate, the torture in Abu Ghraib was carried out on the Arab body primarily through sexual humiliation. Although humiliation as assertion of power is the predominant and most obvious reason for the abuse, there was a manifest sexualising process, which left Abu Ghraib prisoners almost always naked, sodomised and forced to engage in sexual acts with one another. Abu Ghraib photographs are pictures of wars, but their narrative indicates an obsession with the subjugation of the naked Arab body. To compare the bodies of Hamza and Huwaida from *Ten Acrobats* and Leila from *Precious Stones* to those of the naked detainees from Abu Ghraib requires a courageous leap from the fictional worlds of the plays to the stage of war.

In these contrasting worlds of representations (theatre and war), the body is the site where politics of nation, imperialism, gender and sexuality are inscribed. The Arab American playwrights give their characters the agency of their bodies where they can veil or bare it, conform it to heterosexuality or announce it as homosexual. The American soldiers project their national and sexual egos in pornographic representations onto that Arab body where it is contained, exposed and sodomised. In Abu Ghraib, the Arab body is a landscape of damnation, but the Arab American stage present it as a territory of hope. The two plays, while sometimes stepping outside the cultural and sexual borders set by their Arab American communities, have questioned the discourses governing the Arab body and envisioned new narratives for its gender and sexual identity. Theatre, in this chapter, overcame the horrors of war with visions of dramatic hopes. *Precious Stones* was Khoury's first step in a theatrical journey embodied in his company, Silk Road Rising. Since *Precious Stones*, Silk Road Rising has steadily progressed, flourished, and persevered in challenging and unsettling established Arab and American discourses of culture, whiteness, gender and sexuality, as will the next chapter showcase.

Silk Road Rising: Arab American Theatre as Activism

> Ironically the margins of whiteness are a lot bigger than the centre – *Khoury "On Whiteness"*

> Arab America needs its artists so that we as a community can grow and self-examine and get to know each other. We need [a] safe space in which to confront challenges and taboos, space in which to ponder and imagine and debate. Arab American theatre is that safe space. It is a mirror to who we are and what we want to become.
>
> – *Khoury "Towards"*

Arab American theatre artists have struggled to "speak" within the limitation of a cultural and political discourse that often frames their voice as "ethnic". This raises the question of not only whether Arab American playwrights can "speak", but also how their voices can "be heard" when they do. The challenge facing Arab American drama lies in creating spaces that would free Arab American plays from being demarcated as "marginal" or "subaltern", and attract a wider audience to view and engage with the issues presented in their plays. Silk Road Rising (SRR), a theatre company in Chicago that caters for Middle-Eastern (especially Arab American) and Asian voices, has provided a platform for many Arab American playwrights examined in this thesis. It is also attempting to create an unrestrictive space for its artists by engaging the online public sphere in the making and distribution of its current and future projects. SRR is benefiting from and harnessing new technologies to: firstly, make its projects available and accessible to a wider audience; secondly, engage its audiences in a participatory process that would effectively render them as "spect-actors"; and thirdly, redefine the artistic output of ethnic artists as polycultural, rather than subaltern or marginal. Through its various projects, SRR is also committed to developing a new discourse that unsettles rigid constructions of the Arab American identity; a resistant discourse that has been promoted by almost all the works examined in this thesis.

The intersection between the formation of Arab American identity and discourses of in/visibility, whiteness, sexuality and gender is a core theme that SRR has addressed through its live plays and online projects.

SRR started as the vision of artistic director Jamil Khoury, an openly gay Christian Arab American, and his husband, executive director Malik Gillani, a Muslim Pakistani American. Under the leadership of Khoury and Gillani, SRR has been commissioning new works and producing many plays by artists from the Middle East and Asia for over thirteen years. The company was previously called Silk Road Theatre Project (2002-2011), and was mainly engaged in the production of live theatre. Although the initial aim of the company was to present artists from the Middle East, this vision soon expanded to include artists from the Silk Road; a geographical area stretching from Japan to Italy that was historically known for its silk trade and cultural interaction. Defining its mission, the artistic and executive directors state:

> Recognizing that America's relationships with countries of the Silk Road have become increasingly characterized by conflict and complexity, we feel it is imperative to communicate the histories, perspectives and beliefs of Silk Road peoples to American audiences. (Silk Road Rising "About")

One of the core issues that SRTP wanted to address was the lack of visible self-representations by Arab, Muslim and Asian Americans in the face of countless negative stereotypes, which smeared them after 9/11. SRTP aimed, thus, at providing a stable platform that would cater specifically for Arab and Asian American artistic expressions and encourage their visibility. In its twelve seasons, SRTP developed and produced 11 world premieres, 9 Midwest and Chicago premieres, and 39 staged readings.

Given the barriers facing some Arab American playwrights who seek to dramatise political issues, like Palestine, or challenge American foreign or domestic policy (as examined in Chapter 1), SRR offers a much-needed platform for such contested voices. While SRR is not an exclusive platform for Arab American playwrights, it is one of the few American companies to prominently pioneer theatrical Arab American self-representations. For the purpose of this study, all the artistic works chosen for analysis in this chapter are Arab American authored, addressing specific Arab American concerns. This chapter will introduce the company and its vision of activism; its visibility status (and attempts to escape invisibility); its new online projects and their, as well as the company's, role in creating an Arab American theatre movement.

In what Khoury characterises as a "direct response" to 9/11, the then called Silk Road Theatre Project opened its doors to artistic Arab expressions of isolation, discrimination, and uncertainty. Its residence in the historic Temple building of the Methodist Church in Chicago further symbolises a cultural invitation for dialogue between conflicting discourses of religion, race and sexuality. The artists behind the theatre company are motivated by the desire to confront certain fixed categorisation and dichotomisation of identity, especially that of the Arab and Muslim. The directors explain the spark behind the company's inception as thus:

> Company co-founders and life partners, Malik Gillani and Jamil Khoury, felt galvanized to respond to the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments that swept the US in the aftermath of the attacks, and to challenge arguments surmising a "clash of civilizations." Their hope was to counter negative representation of Middle Eastern and Muslim peoples with representation that was authentic,

> multi-faceted, and grounded in human experience. (Silk Road Rising "About").

SRTP was founded on Khoury and Gillani's personal belief in tolerance and inclusion across the areas of religion, race, gender and sexuality. This, paired with an urgent quest for self-representation, constituted the fundamental value in the making of this new theatre. SRTP began with small steps that gradually grew to make an impression on the Chicago theatre circle artistically, theatrically and actively.

In September 2011, Khoury and Gillani revitalised their company to introduce online projects, and rebranded it as Silk Road Rising. Khoury introduced SRR as:

> Silk Road Theatre Project is rising to new levels, new challenges, and new goals. Beyond our own organization, we see the rising up of new arts and aesthetics, including the rise of the Internet as a leading medium for arts engagement. Within our own organization, we see the rise of our online profile, as we tap into social media as a means of creating and connecting. In taking this word as our own, we celebrate the rise of a virtual Silk Road that is artistic, egalitarian, democratic, and visionary. ("Our Name")

This announced SRR as a space for various artistic articulations comprising of live theatre, online theatre, video essays, and a new playwriting process in the conceptualisation of "video/plays".

I chose SRR as a case study after careful analysis of the company's work over a period of four years, which culminated in a research trip to the company's residence in Chicago in late June, 2013. As stated, SRR is one of the few American theatre companies that fosters and showcases Arab American theatrical works: it produced four of the plays

studied in this thesis, which are Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* and Yussef El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*, *Back of the Throat*, and *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*. In these plays and many others, SRR is not only bringing visibility to Arab self-representation, but also confronting its Arab American audience with sensitive topics and demanding their negotiation with discourses of homosexuality, gender, religion and national and cultural essentialism. SRR is also contributing to the building of Arab American artistic and academic studies through the production of documentaries, essays and panels, which investigate the Arab American identity. Moreover, SRR is currently piloting a new process of playwriting that focuses on online space and interaction, promising both activist and artistic innovation.

In my research trip to SRR conducted between June 21st – July 2nd, 2013, I visited the theatre, participated in workshops and rehearsals and interviewed the artistic director, executive director, and several Arab American actors and playwrights, funders (or their representatives) and audience members. My aim was to examine SRR's work in its physical and cultural surrounding, observe the mechanism and theoretical context driving its production, and assess audience interaction with both the company's live and online theatre. This chapter incorporates the findings of this trip alongside an analysis of selected SRR's online documentary and "video/plays" to: firstly examine the company's success in challenging discourses of whiteness and invisibility by advocating Arab American self-representations; and secondly, argue that SRR's new online direction has the potential of overcoming the problematic of space and invisibility, as well as advancing the company's mission of activating social change.

In addressing these issues, the analysis of SRR and its projects will focus on SRR's appropriation of cyberspace to redefine the positioning of the subaltern in mainstream

cultural spaces. The "subaltern" is employed here to signify the American playwrights of Middle Eastern and Asian descent whose expressions are often deemed outside mainstream interest, and thus marginal. The term is derived from Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in her reference to the colonised, third-world subjects who are outside the Western hegemonic power structure, and whose voices are either silenced or appropriated and reproduced to support that Western power system. Positioned as such, it is imperative to find new platforms for these voices to enable them to speak and be heard.

Within this context, SRR's incorporation of the online space represents an attempt to create new venues for theatre production that would liberate it from the traditional demarcations of centre/margin. This move is, expectedly, paired with the experimentation of new projects that carry elements of "cyberperformance" (Jamieson "Cyberformance"), and are strongly driven by a desire to mobilise social/cultural activism. Khoury's *Mosque Alert* is a current SRR's project that is developed, in part, to enable its audience to have a participatory role in the process of playwriting. By engaging with the situations and problems of the characters through various stages of the playwriting process, the audiences become "spect-actors". Transforming audience members from spectators to actors is a practice of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and is explained by Cohen-Cruz as:

> The spectator is not merely a witness of a personal creative act but a participant, a spect-actor, in a social drama. Spectators have been invited to participate through forms including discussions following the performance, the questioning of the actor "in role," the suggesting of options for the actors to try out, and the acting out of alternatives themselves. ("Mainstream or Margin?" 113)

Khoury transports these techniques from a traditional theatrical space to an online space for a similar aim, as will be explored later in the chapter.

SRR in Practice: Resistant Narratives in Theatrical and Online Spaces

In the span of ten days, the period of my field trip, SRR was operating four projects separately, along with public engagement work. One of these projects started with director Dipankar Mukherjee and playwright Meena Natarajan from Minneapolis Pangea World Theater, who were invited by SRR to present a staged reading of their play *Conference of the Birds*. SRR's space seemed to evoke and reinforce Mukherjee's theatrical spiritual awareness when he stated at the beginning of the rehearsals: "we come to this space to make an ensemble. We leave it more sacred than it was before" (Ali "Rehearsals Recording"). The staged reading was performed through three consecutive nights to a fully booked theatre, followed by discussions with the audience. These were particularly lively, with the majority of the audience members staying for a considerable period of time after the end of the staged reading in order to participate.

While the rehearsals and production of *Conference of the Birds* were ongoing, SRR had another project flourishing: *Multi Meets Poly*, an online video/play. The concept of an online video/play is described by Khoury as a "hybrid of a staged play and a short film" that is accessible through the internet, a medium that is possibly "democratic and egalitarian" ("Personal Interview"). While the concept of the online video/play, as well as the play itself, were still in the development stage during the workshops I attended, Khoury and the artists involved were building on the experience accumulated from SRR's previous online video/plays and documentaries. *Multi Meets Poly* presents a fascinating scenario where two ideas, multiculturalism and polyculturalism, are humanised, gendered and introduced face to

face in a contest for survival and popularity. The play will be explored later in the chapter as an example of the company's polycultural vision.

The third project was the rehearsal process for the Midwest Premiere of the critically acclaimed *Invasion!* by Tunisian Swedish playwright Jonas Hassen Khemiri. The play is translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles, and directed by Anna Bahow. *Invasion!* confronts its audiences with the myth of the "threatening" Arab male and deconstructs it by exposing stereotyping and racial profiling as the real culprit, which holds language, culture and humanity hostages, at the centre of this myth. *Mosque Alert*, was the fourth project which Khoury was developing at the time, and presenting to audiences in seminars organised in different venues. Introductory videos of the play and its concept were screened at CAIR (The Council on American–Islamic Relations) on June 26th, followed by prolonged discussions with audience members who were debating the religious and sexual identity of Muslim Americans. *Mosque Alert* will be examined in details later in the chapter to explore the methods employed in this pilot project and its effectiveness. In the four projects taking place during my ten-day visit, SRR was a vibrant hub for culture, critical and intellectual debates, and artistic creativity that is democratic and progressive.

As an artistic American institution, SRR has had a pluralistic cultural vision for American society. While negotiating the cultural politics it operates within, SRR is aiming to introduce polyculturalism as an alternative model to multiculturalism. The company's cultural vision is best dramatised in Khoury's new online video/play *Multi Meets Poly*. The specific branding of SRR as a polycultural institution follows a current theoretical debate that distinguishes multiculturalism from polyculturalism in essence and practice. Vijay Prashad draws the distinction between the two cultural schools of thought: "A polyculturalist sees the world constituted by the interchange of cultural forms, while multiculturalism (in

most incarnations) sees the world as already constituted by different (and discrete) cultures that we can place into categories and study with respect" ("Everybody was Kung Fu" 66-7). That is, according to Prashad, multiculturalism "assumes that people come in cultural boxes that are hermetically sealed, that their culture is a thing that is immutable and pure" ("Interview with Vijay Prashad"). Prashad's problematisation of multiculturalism stems from his view that cultures cannot be marked with either geographic or ethnic borders, but are rather constantly interacting and evolving. While multiculturalism was the offspring of liberal cultural and political theorists, its application in Western society is increasingly facing criticism. Some critics argue that multiculturalism has caused "undue disturbance of the health of society, and that social problems have mounted that outweigh the recognised benefits" (Farrar et al. 2). Allowing "minority" cultures to "speak", while perpetuating their ethnic categorisation and status represents another flaw of multiculturalism investigated by Sneja Gunew in her *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*, who criticises multiculturalism for being a model that maintains racial hierarchy whilst advocating racial harmony.

In response to such criticism, a move towards a new cultural conceptualisation, as well as organising system, of multi-ethnic nations appears to be in demand. Robert Winder, by British writer and former literary editor of *The Independent*, writes in favour of polyculturalism:

> Multicultural suggests an array of discrete cultures. Polycultural suggests a mixture of ingredients too closely entwined to be distinct, a whole greater than the sum of the parts. In emphasising the connections rather than the barriers between 'cultures', it is plainly the more cohesive and optimistic … term" (Bloody Foreigners 467).

Evidently, this theoretical background informs the vision of SRR: "Silk Road Rising understands that cultures are inherently linked. We seek the intersections of cultures without denying the specificities of cultures. And we strive to create a world that values art over ideology and inquiry over dogma" (Silk Road Rising "About"). Thus, in welcoming plays from playwrights of the Silk Road (Japan to Italy), SRR is focusing on empowering representations of the under and misrepresented in the U.S., rather than promoting a racial alliance to a specific exclusive race or culture. This has rendered SRR as "the nation's first ever theatre company dedicated to representing such a diverse grouping of peoples and cultures" (Silk Road Rising "About").

The motivation behind SRR as a polycultural artistic initiative resounded clearly in the workshops of *Multi Meets Poly*, which was being developed at the time of my research trip. The play dramatises this vision eloquently in highly intelligent, witty and sometimes humorous language. The following dialogue exemplifies the culturally sophisticated dramaturgy, and reflects the discussions that are ever present in SRR's rehearsal rooms and stage:

> Multi: You said that I sequester cultures in their own little silos.
>
> Poly: February is African American month. March is Women's History month. May is Asian American month. September 15 through October 15 belongs to Latinos. I'm sorry. It's problematic.
>
> Multi: As opposed to all twelve months belonging to white folks?
>
> Poly: "You had your month, now go away." We ate your food. We watched you dance. We loved your ethnic costumes.

> Multi: Better everyone be erased? I create space for cultures to be heard, for cultures to flourish. On their own terms!
>
> Poly: Yes, and I thank you for that.
>
> Multi: I enable cultures to interact with each other as equals. Not as sponges or ingredients.
>
> Poly: And it is in that interaction that cultures change and become something else. Therein lies the beauty… (Khoury *Multi Meets Poly*, 9)

The play is a dramatic translation of the cultural debates preoccupying its author as a playwright and an artistic director of SRR. It is almost a transparent confessional work about the inner workings of SRR as a cultural institution. Here, the vision of a theatre company is, perhaps for the first time, dramatised in an online video/play. While the play does not present either of the two cultural models as triumphant, it definitely encourages the maturation of polyculturalism at the expense of multiculturalism. In the following exchange, polyculturalism is clearly presented as a future certainty:

> Poly: I integrate. You segregate. I welcome. You polarise. I facilitate. You regulate. I encourage. You impose. I ask. You accuse. I emerge. You force. I accept. You tolerate.
>
> Multi: In other words, I'm serious and you're a suggestion. You're a helpful hint.
>
> Poly: No, I'm a destination, and you're a temporary weigh station. (Khoury *Multi Meets Poly*, 24)

During the workshop sessions, *Multi Meets Poly* stirred endless discussions between the two actors who each, on a personal level, believed in only one of the two cultural ideologies. The play thus appeared as an extension of the actors' consciousness, as much as that of the company's cultural discourse. The discussions incorporated stories of personal experiences which reflected on the successes and failures of multiculturalism in the face of racism, sexism and homophobia in the U.S. The workshop sessions became cultural laboratories evaluating policies and unsettling established practices in the American context, which exemplified SRR's engagement with current challenging political and cultural debates. In *Multi Meets Poly*, cultural politics are anthropomorphised because they represent a vital organism that affects the daily lives of all the ethnic artists of SRR.

It is important to note that this play will be produced as an online video/play and featured on the company's website. Choosing this method of production facilitates the accessibility of an intellectual and polemical play that might not otherwise attract a large audience. It thus serves to transfer these cultural debates from the theatrical to the virtual space where any willing virtual audience member can, and is, encouraged to participate.

In this polycultural vision, the artists behind SRR have produced discourses on whiteness, advocated discourses for Arab American homosexuality, and maintained an understanding of theatre as a powerful platform for activism, throughout. The need for political activist theatre is especially urgent for the under and misrepresented minority. Khoury believes that theatre is inherently activist. He emphatically states "I am a very political person. I am very unapologetically political" ("Personal Interview"). This is particularly true in the case of Arab American theatre, because by simply reclaiming representation, it confronts current cultural and political discourses. Khoury makes his point in an essay dedicated to establishing an Arab American theatrical movement:

> Arab American theatre artists are actively engaged in addressing our country's domestic and foreign policies, and that deliberately or inadvertently, sub textually or substantively, our art becomes a plea for policies that are just and fair. I'm not reducing our art to advocacy, but I'm also not denying that advocacy fuels our art, at least in part. It wouldn't be art if it didn't. To those who say "activist theatre" is mere euphemism for activism, I say "activist theatre" is euphemism for theatre. Otherwise, why bother doing theatre? (Khoury "Towards")

Khoury's theory is the result of thirteen-year practice in SRR, producing and supporting theatrical projects that varied in shape and content, but promoted the same politically activist end. The activist edge of the theatre company manifests noticeably in the production of plays with an acutely political nature (for example, *Back of the Throat* (2006) confronted the discourse of American national security and politics of suspicion after 9/11, and *Invasion!* (2013) problematised the institutionalisation of racial profiling in the U.S.). In its endeavour to represent artists of the Silk Road (who are often under-represented), one of SRR's main goals was the commissioning of new plays that might not otherwise be readily welcomed either because their authors are not yet established, or because their subject matter offers an alternative version of events. This has, also, been paired with the sponsoring of theatrical initiatives such as "SouthAsianPlaywrights.Org", an online resource for American South Asian playwrights, and "Middle East America: A National New Plays Initiative", a first-of-its-kind collaboration between SRR, San Francisco's Golden Thread Productions, and New York's Lark Play Development Center aimed at supporting and developing the work of American playwrights of Middle Eastern descent. By welcoming new artists and

collaborating with other minority theatres, SRR is contributing to a movement that aims to create a resonant ethnically-empowered theatrical American scene.

SRR has also developed two educational programs: the first is "Myths to Drama", which is based on the State of Illinois' Board of Education descriptors and is incorporated in selected school curriculums with the focus on arts and drama; the other is a playwriting focused programme called EPIC (Empathic Playwriting Intensive Course), which helps students employ their responses to the world around them in a playwriting practice. According to the initiative outline, "EPIC was developed out of a desire to impart upon today's students the importance of empathy—not just as a value and a practice, but also as a significant tool when it comes to cultural sensitivity and conflict resolution" (Silk Road Rising "EPIC"). EPIC uses the example of *Mosque Alert*, an online play Khoury is currently developing whereby he recruits virtual audiences as spec-actors. While this will be discussed separately, the above examples show a clear commitment to activism.

Khoury believes in the inherent political nature of art: "Art is activism, art produces knowledge, art generates discourse, art builds communities, and art strengthens identities. By definition, an artist is an activist, a teacher, a community builder, and so much more. Art is progressive politics" (Khoury "Towards"). In SRR, the personal cannot be separated from the political because the artistic expression of an Arab American identity is bound to conjure political discourses that surround and inscribe it. In a newspaper article titled "Jamil Khoury, the Theater Activist", Khoury narrates his personal experience of what 9/11 meant to him as an Arab American, and to his partner Malik Gillani, a Pakistani American. He explains that while he, even though a Christian, felt entrapped within the general atmosphere of blame and antagonism affecting Arabs and Muslims, his partner Gillani and his family endured a greater backlash because of their "brown skin", and Islamic religion (Khoury shares the

painful story of the murder of Gillani's brother in 2003, presumed to be the result of a hate crime). Such experiences influenced the spark behind SRR, as well as its mission, rendering its art political and its direction activist. Khoury demonstrates this in his statement in the Chicago Reader's article:

> There are people who wake up in the morning to do theater because they love to do theater, and that's what galvanizes them—the art form itself. For us, we love the art form, but that's not where we're coming from. It's the desire to impact change. There are people who have accused us of being "activists." Hello. Guilty as charged. (Khoury "The Theatre Activist")

Amongst the many issues that SRR has addressed in plays, essays, documentaries and video/plays is homosexuality. SRR's incorporation of a progressive sexual agenda is vital for two reasons. Firstly, it supports the free expression of Arab American homosexual identity, and thus encourages its integration in the Arab American community. Secondly, it claims agency over the discourse of Arab American homosexuality at the post/911 contested times, which saw an appropriation of the narrative of Arab and Muslim homosexual "victimisation" in the war-on-terror rhetoric, as analysed in the previous chapter. By producing a discourse on Arab American homosexuality, it subverts the hegemonic, often Orientalist, narrative of the passive Other, who needs to be spoken for.

In an acknowledgement of the activist work SRR has produced to support the LGBT community and promote its visibility, the theatre company was inducted in the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame on November 12, 2014. In announcing this honour, Khoury reflects on the obstacles which faced the company because of its ethnic specificity and political aims:

> I think about the people who've accused Silk Road Rising of "being too gay" or of "not being gay enough," and then proceeded to project their own priorities and "hierarchies of oppression" onto us. I think about being told that our focus on ethnicity, race, and cultural identity gets "diluted" when gender and sexuality is "thrown in the mix." ("The Good")

It is arguably that mix that forces a true renegotiation of identity and invites fluidity between uncompromising identity borders. Although homosexuality is a problematic topic in Asian and Middle Eastern circles, it was specifically the theme of Khoury's *Precious Stones*, which inaugurated SRR in 2003. The play, as the previous chapter examined, is "unapologetically lesbian" (Khoury *Precious Stones*) pronouncing the theatre company as a platform for progressive sexual politics. *Precious Stones* exemplified, from the start, SRR's commitment "in part, to the holistic integration of feminist and queer stories within the canons of Asian American and Middle Eastern American storytelling" (Khoury "The Good"). Khoury acknowledges that such a commitment both "distinguishes" SRR, and "provokes backlash, particularly from within segments of our Asian and Middle Eastern communities" (Khoury "The Good"). This was particularly the case in 2005, when SRR presented its second production of a play with a homosexual theme through Yussef El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*. The play was met with fury from a small number of Arab American community members, who could not tolerate the representation of homosexuality in the Arab/Muslim American family context. Then, SRR received death threats, and a police car was parked near the venue (Khoury "The Good") for protection. While the production ran smoothly without incidents, the threats receive from some community members are evident of the need to probe the discourse of Arab and Muslim American homosexuality.

SRR's latest work to engage with homosexuality is the 2011 quasi-Autobiographical video/play *Both/And*. The play dramatises a version of Jamil Khoury himself, an Arab American gay man running a non-for-profit theatre organisation, and having to justify both his identity and national and cultural belonging to other characters, mainly Arab Man, and Gay Man. In a video/essay introducing the play, Khoury argues that the play challenges the rigidity of the either/or rhetoric of identity:

> For me Both/And is a rebuttal, it is the antidote, the challenge to the more masculinist notion of either/or. Either/or being a very established paradigm in American culture: This or that, black or white, us or them. Both/And, on the other hand, is holistic; it is integrative; complimentary; it is the idea that one can be both this and that. ("On both/and" [2:30-3:05])

It specifically challenges the traditional view that gayness and Arab Americanness are incompatible facets of one identity, promoting a progressive transgression of established dichotomies. The play renders some scenes, especially those between Jamil and the Arab Man, uncomfortable to view. The Arab Man holds traditional, and rather outdated, views about masculinity, women, and economics. He is portrayed as uncompromising, and often threatening. This led some to criticise the play for replicating and perpetuating stereotypes about the Arab Man, which Khoury addresses in his essay:

> I maintain that Arab Man is, of course, not representative of all Arab men. He represents a social conservatism characteristic of some Arab men, no doubt, but one that ultimately transcends Arabness. His voice, his socially conservative views, his economically conservative views could be embodied

> by a South Asian character, a White American character, a Latino American character or whomever. ("On both/and" [7:29 - 8:00])

Khoury concludes this point by offering his apology for those who felt offended by the portrayal of the character of Arab Man, maintaining that: "He is a character for whom I feel a great deal of affection and familiarity, but he also evokes a certain anxiety and animosity within me/Jamil [the character]" ("On both/and" [5:06 5:18]). This both "affection" and "anxiety" informs the relationship between the Arab American and his gay identity and influences their interaction and integration. With this play and other talks, essays and partnerships, SRR has embraced representations of homosexuality despite being confronted with uncomfortable or angry Arab American and Asian American audiences, at times. *Both/And* reaffirms the stand of SRR's on homosexuality as iterated in the company's first production, *Precious Stones*: mainly, that the intersectionality between hyphenated identities and homosexuality is not a transgression of cultural taboos (for example, Muslim, Arab, Indian), but a progression towards a fluid and holistic identity.

Theatre as an inherent site of activism is not particularly the philosophy of every theatre practitioner. In fact, Khoury himself was accused in several occasions of politicising issues that were purely artistic. Prior to its incorporation of the online sphere, SRR was producing ambitious artistic and political works, but was operating from within the confines of a limited theatrical space that often offered a restricted admissibility to alternative ethnic representations.

Cultural and Institutional Limitations

One of the challenges that inspired the new online direction of SRR is the fact that it is a small company which is politically vocal in its representation of voices from the Middle

East and Asia; voices often portrayed as the Other to the American mainstream public. As mentioned earlier, the voice of SRR and those who are represented by it belong to the periphery, and can be described as "subaltern", to borrow Gayatri Spivak's terminology. Although Spivak objects to its indiscriminate appropriation, the term is generally understood to refer, in postcolonial studies, to the oppressed "objects" who are located in a "space of difference" outside of the hegemonic discourse (De Kock "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak", 45). It is in this context that most Arab American voices are arguably subaltern. Their representation in the American mass media has been the product of an Orientalist discourse that frame them as the Other, and which has continued with ferocity after 9/11. Within this discourse, their voices were often silenced, or dismissed for being irrelevant. Here, the activist must endeavour to destabilise the demarcations which, set by a hegemonic centre, renders voices of the Other marginal. According to Spivak: "No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. To do a thing, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech" (De Kock 46, original emphasis). To bring the subaltern "into speech" is to acknowledge its existence and right to articulate, and be heard. However, these subaltern voices are typically resisted and subdued because they are potentially capable of unsettling the "imperial cultural" or hegemonic discourse.

A recent incident exemplifies the difficulty surrounding the "speech" of the Other (embodied by SRR), and brings to light the disparity between two theatrical spheres: a mainstream "White" (to be situated and problematised later) and a political Other. In anticipation of the premiere of *The Jungle Book* at the established Goodman theatre in Chicago, Catey Sullivan interviewed the theatre's celebrated Director in Residence Mary Zimmerman, who adapted and directed the show. The interview included questions about the director's treatment of Kipling's politics of representations, racism and misogyny, which

Zimmerman declares them to be "pretty terrible and pretty undeniable" ("How Mary"). However, when asked whether she was concerned that *The Jungle Book* could perpetuate racial stereotypes, especially with King Louie's character, Zimmerman answers:

> Yeah, it was a concern. But I've decided to make it not a concern.... But we've done some things with casting that I'm not going to give away, but that I think will remove that element. I know what the lyrics of ["I Wanna Be Like You"] say, but look at the original—it's sung by Louis Prima. He's the King of the Swingers. It's something I think where the racism is in the eye of the beholder, you know? If you look at that as racist, doesn't that say more about what you're projecting on to the character?" (Sullivan "How Mary").

Zimmerman, here, understands racism as a projection of one's own prejudice or sense of victimisation. She asserts that one cannot dismiss classic masterpieces because their authors might have held "moronic ideas", arguing that people are "so layered" that they should not be judged on one aspect of their personal and artistic expressions, and concluding that: "[s]ometimes I feel like righteous indignation is everybody's favorite emotion these days" (Sullivan "How Mary"). In this, Zimmerman is most likely speaking with "best intentions", but her understanding of racial discourses proves rather problematic. Her quick and reductive dismissal of racism is indicative of a "White" privileged denial of an Orientalist and colonial past. This is further supported when, in reference to the legacy of colonialism in India, she states: "[y]ou have to remember the past, but you don't have to live in it" (Sullivan "How Mary").

This interview provoked a strong reaction from Khoury, who wrote an impassioned response:

> For years I have bit my tongue about director Mary Zimmerman. After all, she is much beloved in Chicago theatre and has even been declared a "Genius." I simply went ahead with my business, voicing the occasional criticism behind closed doors. Not wishing to risk the wrath of calling out a local star on her reckless, unexamined Orientalism (Khoury "The Trouble with Mary")

In here, Khoury admits that he often felt the need to exercise self-censorship in the past, presumably because the politics of both representation and business would not welcome his critical voice. In his response, Khoury spoke from a personal experience as an Arab American in America, and as a descendant of Syria, a country with a legacy of French occupation, which rendered his personal account political. He refuted Zimmerman's version of colonialist legacy as short-lived, and listed examples of the struggles which colonised lands and peoples had to endure. Moreover, he especially contested Zimmerman's light-hearted engagement with the issue of stereotypical racial representations and the discourse of racism in general, arguing that an element of "unexamined white privilege and American privilege" ("The Trouble with Mary") remains the creator of such views.

Additionally, in Khoury's response, one can clearly recognise the disparity between the two directors' understanding of theatre and its relationship to activism. Zimmerman believes that theatre is purely an artistic adventure to be experienced by audiences: "I feel like it's enough for shows to be experiences. There is no object that you take. I hope what audiences have at the end is a sense of the incredible wonderment of being a child. Children have one foot in reality and one foot somewhere else" (Sullivan "How Mary"). Theatre for Zimmerman represents a vocation informed by artistic experimentation; while for Khoury it symbolises a rare space for artistic expression of a politically and culturally Othered identity.

There is an urgency for activism generally expressed in SRR, and specifically in Khoury's work, which stems from personal experiences of racial, cultural and political Otherisation before and after 9/11. Similar oppressive history does not inform the context in which Zimmerman – and to a lesser extent the Goodman Theatre – operates in. Zimmerman's interview and Khoury's subsequent response demonstrate the discrepancy of the cultural and political spaces the two directors occupy. Khoury made this clear in a follow-up interview with Zimmerman that was published on SRR's website:

> I think it fair to say that Silk Road Rising's philosophical and political approaches to storytelling and cultural representation are markedly different than Mary Zimmerman's. We assimilate context and historicity differently. We define authenticity differently. In short, we inhabit a radically different world than Mary Zimmerman. (Khoury "Mary Responds")

This disparity might explain the shock expressed by many Chicago theatre critics and practitioners after Khoury's response. Khoury's article generated several discussions about theatre's relationship with race and representations, mostly expressed and disseminated through social media sites. While comments supporting Khoury and thanking him for "speaking up" were abundant especially from members of the Silk Road community, many directed a torrent of criticism towards Khoury personally, and SRR generally. Khoury's response was diluted, curbed and reduced, by many outraged critics, to nothing but 'personal angry words' by an Arab American director. *The Chicago Tribune*'s Chris Jones described Khoury's essay as "strikingly personal" ("The Jungle Book") in attempt to discredit its intellectual and critical legitimacy, while dedicating the article to defending Zimmerman and her vision. Some mocked the essay as a promotional stunt for Khoury and his company describing it as a "full-career slam" (Weinert-Kendt "Catch-Up"). Some argued that Khoury

was aggravating the issue without substance, and others accused him of unprovoked racial sensitivity.

The issue between Khoury and Zimmerman was laid to rest after Zimmerman invited Khoury and Gillani for a meeting, which was followed by SRR's publication of Zimmerman's responses to questions Khoury raised about the musical and Zimmerman's problematic interview. Khoury wrote that Zimmerman addressed his concerns with "utmost of integrity, honesty, and sincerity" ("Mary Responds"). Both directors made amends, albeit admitting that they operate in different cultural and political structures. Nonetheless, while the matter was dealt with by the two playwrights, there still persisted an air of contempt in Chicago's theatre circles aimed at Khoury, and what some people deemed to be an "unwise" attempt to speak and criticise the politics of representation and race in the work of an established director like Zimmerman.

Another incident that similarly drew attention to SRR and discourses of representation, visibility and limitation occurred during the run of *Invasion!* (July 30 - September 15, 2013) at SRR. As mentioned earlier, the play engages critically and dramatically with Arab racial profiling, as well as stereotyping. *Invasion!* stirred heated debates in Chicago theatre circles, which escalated after theatre critic Hedy Weiss wrote a review of the play in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Weiss praised the play for its aesthetic and artistic content, but refused to "buy" its argument, concluding her review with a suggestive support for racial profiling against Muslims. Weiss writes in her original article, published in the newspaper edition: "But despite Khemiri's passion, those still thinking of the horrific terrorist attacks at the Boston Marathon might well be tempted to ask: What practical alternative to profiling would you suggest?" ("*Invasion!* Arrives"). The article demonstrated a lack of simple cultural and critical negotiations with racism. Weiss's article was

republished online the next day with the previous comment removed because, according to an editor's note, it only and simply expressed a "political opinion" (Editor's note "*Invasion*! Arrives"). Khoury responded immediately with an article speaking out unabashedly and resolutely against the "praise" for racial profiling expressed in Weiss' article. This provoked a torrent of social media activity generating both support and abuse for Khoury and SRR. *The Chicago Reader*'s Michael Miner defended Weiss' review as a "political opinion" which a critic is entitled to ("Hedy's review"), and took Khoury's response out of context to imply that Khoury only engaged with Weiss' article because it offered a "somewhat" good review of the production (whilst disagreeing with its content), suggesting that problematising the racial context of Weiss' article serves Khoury's strive for publicity. The view that Khoury and SRR are needlessly politicising some artistic issues because of 'unprovoked' racial sensitivity, or worse still, for publicity's sake, is echoed in certain "hegemonic" critiques directed at the company and its director.

These critical responses to *Invasion!* and SRR's engagement with Zimmerman highlight two points: firstly, the role of SRR's in producing daring culturally and politically inciting plays, and making visible alternative points of views; secondly, the unreceptivity of particular critics to these alternative voices. Khoury's attempts to engage and challenge what he believed to be a racially problematic discourse were contested and, at times, dismissed as self-serving. This dismissal echoes Spivak's question "can the subaltern speak?" and J. Maggio's "can the subaltern be heard?". While Spivak maintains that the "'native informant' is simultaneously created and destroyed", Maggio argues that "Spivak's terms of engagement always imply a liberal-independent subject that is actively speaking" ("can the subaltern be heard?" 421). That is to say, the subaltern can speak outside the hegemonic

discourse – to the surprise and dismay of this discourse - but the admissibility of this voice remains contested.

As argued earlier, the voice of the "subaltern" is positioned outside the locus of the "White" cultural and political discourse. In this sense, Zimmerman is positioned within what could be considered Chicago's mainstream "White" theatrical centre, whereas SRR and Khoury's voice is marginalised and kept on the periphery. In the periphery, the voice of the Other is characteristically framed as irrelevant, dismissible and outside the circle of inclusion. This centre's resistance to voices from the periphery has been discussed by Russell Ferguson:

> As historically marginalized groups insist on their own identity, the deeper, structural invisibility of the so-called centre becomes harder to sustain. The power of the center depends on a relatively unchallenged authority. If that authority breaks down, then there remains no point relative to which others can be defined as marginal. The perceived threat lies partly in the very process of becoming visible. ("Introduction: Invisible Centre" 10)

Theoretically, visibility for those who are typically marginalised is a risk to the centre because it threatens to propagate alternative discourses, which could challenge the hegemonic power of the centre. In the case of SRR, the repercussions on Khoury, following his increasingly visible critical discourse, are indicative of an established centre uncomfortable in accommodating minor voices, which have spoken, challenged and contested the privileges and politics of representation (deemed/presumed as inclusive by this centre). Simply put, Khoury, an Arab American with a small company, has questioned the

works and politics of "white" celebrated theatre practitioners: many of Khoury's critics considered this to be an offence.

The political and cultural limitations confining the non-"White" Othered voices constituted one of the most persistent obstacles that SRR faced before its move to incorporate the online space. In the case of Khoury's discussed critical responses, SRR circumvented these limitations by publishing the essays online and sharing them through social media, making them "uncomfortably" visible. However, prior to its integration of online space, SRR was not only confined to a cultural space that limited its capacity and visibility, but also restricted by the spatial limitation of an 80-seat theatre capacity, which rendered it a small theatre in size, audience, and funding. Well aware of these limitations, Khoury and Gillani aimed to widen the company's outreach and activist possibilities: "we were looking to grow in different directions. We were looking to reach people beyond a bricks and mortar theatre based in Chicago; we wanted to reach out to the world potentially, and to really spread our gospel, to spread our message" ("Personal Interview"). Cyberspace was an option that would, if used wisely and innovatively, rid the company from both the restriction of a small theatrical space and a prescribed cultural invisibility. As a result, Khoury and Gillani, while still committed to live theatre, embraced the online space as an additional platform for their artistic and activist endeavours. The company was renamed Silk Road Rising in 2011 to reflect these new directions and ambitions. Within this framework, the advantages of appropriating the online space and its conceptual variance from traditional theatrical spaces, as well as SRR's project of civic engagement will be explored in details.

New Possibilities: Online Theatre/ Online Activism

Khoury outlined the artistic and socio-political aims of the new SRR in an introductory essay, as well as in a personal interview asserting that SRR is a "continuum", an "evolution" and "elevation" ("Personal Interview") of the work of SRTP. Indeed, SRR is carrying on the identity and goals of SRTP through new channels, and new artistic and civic experiments. Commitment to live theatre remains the focus of SRR: "Our devotion to live theatre remains constant, but is now buttressed by an emerging commitment to online theatre" ("Our Name"). Equally, the central emphasis in regards to the theatrical subject-matter remains representation of the under-represented (communities from the Silk Road region) and the cultivation of its visibility in a polycultural setting: "The rise of the Silk Road is a metaphor for polyculturalism, cross-cultural exchange, and a world connected through ideas and stories. The Internet is the 21st century's Silk Road; it facilitates the rise of global citizenship" ("Our Name"). This vision is especially important in defining the activist mission of SRR. It denotes the social and cultural value of SRR through its endeavour to restructure current cultural debates and destabilise a cultural hierarchy, which perpetuates the marginalisation of minor cultures in the U.S. It defines the site of activism as not racially and ethnically-exclusive, but that which promotes inclusive "global citizenship". Art, representation and activism are the apparatus of this view as Khoury writes: "Mining the intersections of art and activism remains central to our aesthetic, as does showcasing perspectives seldom, if ever, heard in mainstream media" ("Our Name"). Fundamentally, activism is, the engine of SRR, and the main catalyst behind its rebranding and growth.

Confident in drama as a tool for social change, SRR has made every effort to widen its outreach and bring drama to audiences beyond the confines of its small theatrical space. Furthermore, changing the method of outreach (by integrating online public sphere)

summoned a renewed understanding of theatre, reinventing the process of playwriting and audience interaction. When asked in a personal interview about the absence of "theatre" in the new name, Khoury explained how SRR was introducing new forms of online theatre, and video/plays, which some individuals participating in SRR's focus groups did not associate with theatre. Khoury disagrees philosophically with this view as he believes that theatre "is forever morphing and reimagining itself and evolving" ("Personal Interview"). The name, however, does not only signify SRR's new artistic methods, but is also meant to be "inspirational" and "aspirational" according to Khoury. The "Rising" in the name is metaphorical for the "Silk Road's people rising, emerging, claiming their own voice, claiming the mantle of their own representation" ("Personal Interview"). Through the adoption of cyberspace as a platform for creative representations and engagement, SRR is "metaphorical for the 21st century Silk Road" ("Personal Interview"). That is to say, the internet is a reminder of the ancient Silk Road route where people were connected from China to Syria and Japan to Italy by sea route. That route allowed people of different cultures, religions and philosophies to communicate; and the cyberspace, now, has the same ability to connect people.

Indeed, cyberspace opens up unlimited possibilities for both creative and activist endeavours. Especially in the field of theatre, cyberspace allows the experimentation of "out of the box" artistic expressions. While the "liveliness" of online theatre is still a widely debated topic in academia, cyberspace certainly liberates the theatrical act from spatial confines. In *A Short History of Western Performance Space*, David Wiles problematises the relationship between a play and its space arguing that the transformation of "the play-as-text" to "the play-as-event" involves space not only as a facilitator, but as a performer as well. Space becomes, thus, part of the "the play-as-event", and the play is ultimately left a

property of its space. This is because regardless of wherever the play-as-performance travels to, it remains confined to its particular space of performance and, thus, rendered an "ontological constant", Wiles explains. To "eliminate the dichotomy of play and space" (Wiles 1) and enable theatre's potential for social/political activism, the transference of the theatrical act outside of its theatrical site becomes urgent. The expansion of the theatrical space to include non-theatrical sites was enthusiastically practiced in the 1960s and early 1970s by US activist theatres like the New York Free Street Theatre, for example. Discussing the necessity of such initiatives, Jan Cohen-Cruz notes:

> Funding exigencies aside, non-theatre sites are attractive to activists because of the diverse populations they incorporate. In additions, performances in such sites are less easily pigeonholed as "just theatre" – that is, considered irrelevant because they take place in spaces designed for "art" and thus lack political clout. (111)

Khoury's earlier explanation of choosing the new name (SRR – without including the word theatre) reflects similar preoccupations regarding the limitations that the theatrical space conjures for activists and audiences alike. By integrating cyberspace, SRR, and Khoury, challenge the exclusive relationship between theatre and its space in their endeavour to reach a wider audience. The non-theatrical virtual space allows non-theatre-goers for whom theatre exists in an artistic, divorced-from-reality atmosphere not only to reconsider theatre, but actively engage in its making. Thus, SRR's cyberspace cements a bridge between artist, and members of public who could be apathetic or uninterested in theatre and its demand for engagement in social and political change. This SRR's cyberspace would also enable unrestricted accessibility to the various artistic projects online: audiences' location and time

become inconsequential for those who wish to view and engage with these online projects. Khoury explains the incentive behind using cyberspace as a theatrical site:

> We have been contacted by people primarily outside of the United States, but also within the U.S. outside of Chicago, or people who can't get to our theatre, interested in our work and interested in some of the themes and issue that we grapple with artistically, and asking for ways to access SRR's material and participate in the conversations we are having. ("Recording: Funder Meeting")

Moreover, cyberspace has the potential of transferring the private sphere of a theatre to a spatially-boundless public sphere. Christopher Balme highlights the limitation of traditional theatre in breaking away from the divide of private/public spheres:

> Today, the normal performance fare, no matter how innovative, taboo-breaking or transgressive, has little engagement with the public sphere. The very artistic achievements of the past century that has successfully transformed the theatre from a rowdy, potentially explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption have been obtained at the cost of theatre's very publicness. The darkened auditorium has become to all intents and purposes a private space. (3)

In such a "private space", audience's access and engagement is always limited. In contrast, cyberspace could provide a "public sphere". The use of the term "public sphere" refers here to the blend of two theoretical debates. The first is Jürgen Habermas's original conceptualisation:

> the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. (27)

Habermas's public sphere incorporates "freedom of access, freedom of speech, autonomy and equal status of participants" (Balme 6). The second is the subsequent critiques of the term that contest elements of "exclusion" innate in Habermas's understanding of this "bourgeois public sphere". Mainly, that of women and other marginalised categories, as Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere" indicates; and "Habermas's emphasis on rational argument and consensus as the major mode of public sphere activity" (Reinelt 18) which excludes other modes of expressions from being represented in that sphere. Accordingly, the public sphere that I imply here is an inclusive sphere that enables a free negotiation of ideas and actions.

With caution, one can arguably identity the internet as a new public sphere that offers, albeit still controlled by organisations and funding bodies that support specific agendas, a conferring site for individuals to share their opinions and network towards promoting a social or political goal. Within this sphere, "counterpublics" are more likely to emerge and be sustained. Michael Warner defines counterpublics as "formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment" (63) whose discussions are "structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying" (56). These 'counterpublics' are "alternative publics that come into being creating an alternative or rival public culture" (Reinelt 18). In this sense, SRR's engagement with cyberspace can arguably be considered a "counterpublic"

since it offers alterative voices that challenge or unsettle established hegemonic configuration of visibility and racial discourse.

SRR's manoeuvre to online theatre achieves two objectives: escaping the small spatial capacity of the theatre's physical space, and escaping a categorisation within Chicago theatre circles of being a "minority theatre". Establishing an online presence helps SRR escape the confines of the "marginal" space allocated to theatres of non-mainstream issues, advancing and making visible a version of "counterpublic". It is worth mentioning that Arab American representations have taken prominence on SRR's cyber-stage. While the company has always supported Arab American theatre practitioners in its long run, it was previously limited to producing three plays from the Silk Road area in a season. The incorporation of cyberspace eased the restriction of theatrical season structure and offered the liberty of immediate artistic expression. In fact, since the launch of SRR, most of the online video/plays, documentaries, essays, and artistic ruminations covered specifically Arab American issues. Examples include: The earlier-examined video/play *Both/And*; a 2012 documentary film "Not Quite White" (Khoury and Combs), which theorises the lack of Arab racial definition in the U.S.; and Khoury's 2012 video/play *The Balancing Arab*, which dramatises the Arab in the every-day setting with cultural and political interactions often "stranded in context and lost in translation" (Khoury *The Balancing*).

The surge in Arab American plays on SRR's website is, in part, courtesy of Khoury's commitment to Arab American representations, but is also related to the nature of cyber-stage as a platform open to any representation, regardless of how challenging or non-mainstream it may be. In an interview with the artistic director of Golden Thread Theatre, Torange Yeghiazarian notes that "Arab American plays are the hardest to sell" ("Personal Interview"). Whether this is the case or not, SRR's cyberspace seems to be able to welcome

and foster Arab American representations more frequently than the company was previously able to accommodate through the production of live plays. Similarly, cyberspace allows greater freedom in adapting theatrical topics that might possibly be too niche for public taste. For example, the decision to produce *Multi Meets Poly* as an online video/play relates directly to this: the complexity and dialectical nature of the play renders it, arguably, too problematic for mainstream audiences.

Furthermore, cyberspace enables a freer creative process that does not follow the regulations of traditional theatre. Although dependant on funding capacity, SRR's online theatrical space is uninhibited by other restrictions like overt or covert censorship, ticket sales and the politics of distribution/visibility. By reclaiming distribution, the theatrical work is no longer a subject of demand, but an autonomous object. Khoury explains the freedom of artistic creation achieved through the ownership of distribution:

> To me, it [cyberspace] is an incredible space for self-expression. It is how I am now doing my art, how I am now getting my voice out there. I cannot imagine if I was somehow reliant on the traditional mediums for this sort of expression, trying to get produced by other theatre companies, trying to get picked up by a film company, trying to get published by an X newspaper or magazine or publishing house. The fact that we are controlling that and controlling our means of distribution is hugely liberating and empowering in so many levels. ("Personal Interview")

This is especially true when recalling the two publicised incidents of Khoury's response to Mary Zimmerman's musical and interview and Hedy Weiss's review of *Invasion!*. Khoury's voice was, in part, acknowledged because it was rendered visible online; extensively shared

and discussed in social media. That was the result of Khoury's ability to publish his response immediately and freely on SRR's website without the need to be "approved", edited or postponed. The control over the production and distribution of meaning as a tool of liberation and power is emphasised by Manuel Castells who theorises the power relations of network society:

> Digitization is tantamount to potential viral diffusion throughout global networks of communication. This is highly positive if you do want to diffuse the message, but devastating if you do not want to diffuse the message … In this case, the network power exercised by digital networks assumes a new form: the removal of control over message distribution. This is in contrast with the traditional network power of mass media, which reformats the message to be suitable for the audience in accordance with their corporate strategy. (780)

Ownership of distribution introduces a more fluid interaction with subject matter and artistic expression. Two of SRR's projects owe their inception and realisation to the fact that they are online projects: the first is a documentary film titled *Not Quite White: Arabs, Slavs and the Contours of Contested Whiteness* (Khoury and Combs), and the other is Khoury's *Mosque Alert* video/play. Through their online presence, both attempt to create a resistant discourse.

Not Quite White is an online documentary, which investigates whiteness and redefines it through Arab American and Polish American Lenses. As suggested by earlier analysis, SRR is a small company that operates from the periphery of "white" mainstream centre. By offering its platform to ethnic voices, it inevitably challenges a white discourse of

superiority. Definitions of whiteness are constantly renegotiated in almost every SRR's performance, but are most notably pronounced through *Not Quite White*. The documentary can be viewed as an attempt to appropriate the production of knowledge and meaning to reflect minority voices. Khoury accompanies the documentary with a video essay titled "On Whiteness", and through both, he utilises cyberspace as a platform to not only produce knowledge on whiteness, but also to localise it to the Arab (and Slovak) experience. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be limited to the Arab American experience and its relation to whiteness as presented in the documentary and essay. In both, Khoury problematises whiteness outside the dichotomy of whites/non-whites to introduce a category specific to the Arab Americans defining it as "not quite white" (a borrowed term from Helen Hatab Samhan "Not Quite White"). Khoury introduces the definition of whiteness conveyed in "Not Quite White":

> [W]hiteness as a constructed social and political category, a slippery slope that has historically played favorites, advantaging northern and western European immigrants over immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and the Middle East. We maintain that whiteness has victims: non-white victims, not quite white victims, and white victims ("On Whiteness" [3:48 – 4:19])

This definition of whiteness echoes a theoretical understanding common in Whiteness Studies, which has been lately adopted and developed by Arab American academics to theorise Arab American racial status in the U.S (see Introduction). Khoury moves further with these theories and introduces them in a dramatic form. By employing performative and audio-visual tools, this knowledge is disseminated outside academia to a more general audience. "Not Quite White" incorporates segments of a video/play (*W.A.S.P.*) produced by

SRR, archival material and photographs, interviews with academics and music to render knowledge about whiteness accessible, localised and distributable.

The documentary starts with short scenes from *W.A.S.P*, an autobiographical play through which Khoury investigates his racial identity as an American with Arab, Slavic and Polish heritage. By initiating the documentary with himself as an object of inquiry and moving beyond it, "Not Quite White" engages the personal and retains performative quality. In introducing the documentary, Khoury explains his contentious relationship with whiteness:

> I am of course seen as white, perceived and received as white ... However, do I feel white: kind of, maybe, sometimes; but more often than not, I feel not quite white. Being of mixed Arab and Slavic heritage and having an Arabic name, Jamil, certainly complicates my whiteness. After all Semites and Slavs are suspect whites. Being queer also disrupts my whiteness. Queerness weakens, it dilutes the white brand, and so I find myself on the margins of whiteness. ("On Whiteness" [2:33 - 3:28])

This challenged relationship with whiteness translates itself artistically and symbolically through SRR, as a theatre company with its own problematic relationship with a white mainstream centre. Khoury pronounces the trouble with whiteness in regards to the immigrant experience: "we are resentful of how whiteness erases our respective backgrounds, negates our cultures, our family histories, all that is unique and particular about our stories" ("On Whiteness" [9:36 9:55]). It is here that the perseverance of alternative voices becomes urgent. Something that is only viable through ownership of the production and distribution of knowledge. As the company's first online documentary, "Not Quite

White" was capable of probing the racial positioning of Arab Americans, and producing a counter discourse to whiteness. The documentary, which is uploaded to SRR's website and YouTube simultaneously, has been viewed almost 5000 times, with audiences commenting on their racial identification, as well as their relationship to whiteness as a system of privileges. Thus, "Not Quite White", as an online project, has increased the company's visibility, and attracted general audiences to engage with Arab American racial positioning in the U.S.

Mosque Alert: Online Theatrical Model for Civic Engagement

While the study of online theatre, or cyberperformance (Jamieson "Adventures in Cyberformance"; Papagiannouli "Cyberformance and the Cyberstage") is steadily growing, most scholars examine the techniques, technologies, art format and semiotics of space and time surrounding this new genre. This analysis of SRR's *Mosque Alert* online video/play focuses exclusively on activating audience's engagement and the employment of cyberspace as a theatrical activist site. Introducing *Performance, Politics and Activism*, Lynette Hunter writes:

> Performativity recognizes that knowledge is made in many varied ways, and that the skills needed to make difference and take responsibility for value are often open to vulnerability, uncertainty and the kind of collaboration that requires us to work with those we do not know as well as those we do. Rather than a liberal equality that is based at root on economics (what you have already) and education (what you can be trained to gain), making theatre politically means that everyone has to have creative access to the performance that will engage their capacity to make difference and form value. (5)

Khoury's concept for an activist theatre reflects Hunter's understanding of political performativity as a participatory process which compels its audience to be active. This idea is central to Augusto Boal whose conception of the Theatre of the Oppressed has shaped much of the contemporary political and activist theatre. Boal postulates: "Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it" (*Games for Actors* P.xxxi). In his many practices and methods, Boal aimed to deconstruct the traditional theatrical structure and render knowledge transferable between the actors and audience.

Many of Boal's ideas resonate in SRR's new project, *Mosque Alert*, which Khoury describes as "a first in new play development history". Technically, this new artistic venture "is taking the theatrical aesthetics and theatrical language and then combining them with a cinematic lens and a sort of filming sensibility with close-ups, angle shots and so forth" ("Personal Interview"). Khoury continues that the theatrical stage is clearly presented as the location of action in the video/play. The online video/play is then entrusted to cyberspace as the "place of seeing". In regards to the writing process that *Mosque Alert* follows, Khoury explains it as a: "nine-step, online, interactive, new play development and civic engagement process" which turns "what is typically a solitary writing project into lively virtual engagement" (" Introduction to *Mosque Alert*").

The nine steps start with introducing the original idea of the play in a video/essay, moving to the prologue where the characters and their situational relations are explained. The next steps revolve around building the characters and conflict scenes via video blogs, which the audience responds to in the form of commentary. The writing stage then comprises of recorded workshops to be posted online for audience feedback. After this, Khoury will have a stage reading of the play to be followed by a full five-week live

production at SRR. The play will then be presented online in the form of video/play for virtual audiences and co-authors. The process concludes with the critical engagement of the audience through submissions of articles, or commentaries. Through this long process, estimated to span over four years (the project is currently in its third year), the audience has the opportunity to reflect on and respond to the situations and conflicts portrayed in the play at each and every step.

Mosque Alert project focuses on the playwriting process, rather than the end result; a technique devised in Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre. Forum Theatre, part of Boal's influential Theatre of the Oppressed, necessitates the participation of both actors and spectators "spec-actor" to find solutions for a situation of oppression. This method involves many techniques such as "simultaneous dramaturgy" (Boal *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 132) where spectators become immediate playwrights of the action unfolding on the stage. In *Mosque Alert*, virtual members of the audience become the actors writing their own narrative of events and finding solutions for the characters' social problems.

Mosque Alert dramatises the tension between two families (the Khans, who are Muslim and the Bakers, who are Christian) over the building of a new mosque in Chicago's western suburbs of Naperville. Imam Mustafa Khan is the spiritual leader of the Muslim community, while Charles Baker is the Republic candidate for Mayor of Naperville. The two families are neighbours, but have had many conflicts since the proposal for building the mosque was announced. The play examines and contests Islamophobia in the U.S. and its frenzied manifestation whenever the subject of mosque construction arises. The conception of the play was motivated by the controversy that followed New York City's proposed "Ground Zero Mosque" ten years after 9/11. *Mosque Alert* challenges much of the anti-

Islamic rhetoric, which increased since 9/11, and the concept of American identity as "white".

Although SRR is just beginning to master this new form, *Mosque Alert*'s video blogs have already been viewed "over 11 000 times" inside and outside the U.S. in countries like Ireland, "Canada, the UK, Malta, Haiti, Ghana, France, Iraq, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, Columbia, Spain and Greece", and have been shared and commented on hundreds of times through social media according to statistics gathered from SRR's website. Shishir Kurup, an online commentator, described the approach employed in *Mosque Alert* as an "inclusive way of making art and proliferating personal investment in the writing process. It takes the idea of community based art making in a meaningful new direction". She particularly reflected on the employment of web space as an innovation that could benefit practitioners of Theatre of the Oppressed "toward bringing together that which is disparate" ("Comments"). Khoury is understandably proud of SRR's new direction as he explains:

> I think it is ground-breaking … to the best of our knowledge no one else is approaching new play development in quite this way ... There is plenty of civic engagement online, but not in the form of civic engagement being a response to a new play development, and a response to the development of a fictional story that is informed by real life situations and circumstances ("Personal Interview")

SRR's vision of activism is already producing fruitful results through the comments posted by virtual audience members, followed by responses from Khoury, formulating what might be called a playwriting dialogue. Activism as conceived by *Mosque Alert* project is an engagement with ideas, situations of conflict, cultural differences and current political events

as evidence by the participatory comments. In response to a video blog (vlog) introducing the play's prologue, one commentator, Deanna Nord, links to an article in the *Chicago Tribune* about signs being posted in Naperville after the building of an Islamic centre was announced and exclaims: "The story unfolds online and on the ground!"("Comments"). Another participant, Nizar Jiwani, continues the conversation by making a clarification and incorporating personal communication he received in regards to the building of the centre: "The sign reads: Vote No to Mosque. I received an email from HOPE United Church of Christ, where they saw this sign on the land they sold and the Islamic Center of Naperville is trying to build a mosque [on]" ("Comments"). In response to both, Khoury replies:

> Yes, life is imitating art is [*sic*] imitating local news. Amazing to think that our Naperville stories have aligned reality and theatre so seamlessly. But it's mighty sad this battle is even happening. Surely those anti-mosque signs sprouting up in and around Naperville are testimony to how much work needs to be done. ("Comments")

Here, *Mosque Alert* as a play is mirroring current events, and the playwright as an author is conversing with his audience members. Consequently, the play morphs during each step as a result of audience input, questions and viewpoints. By creating this dialogue between playwright and virtual co-authors, audiences are responding to the oppressed situations of the characters, and thus becoming active spectators. *Mosque Alert*'s online model implements civic engagement by revitalising both the playwriting process and the concept of the "spect-actor".

While the playwriting process, including ensemble writing, is often a sacred and personal project where the playwright/s is/are protective of their authorial voice, SRR's new

initiative invites any member of the virtual public to witness and take part of every step of this often solitary and "holy" process. An introduction of *Mosque Alert* on the evening T.V. news program *Chicago Tonight* reads as the following:

> When a new play is being written, a playwright might have a group of actors get together to read the script to see how the work is developing, but the playwright usually doesn't share it with the public until the play is finished. But one playwright in Chicago is making every step of the writing process from the first idea to the development of scenes available to everyone to see and comment on all the time. (*Chicago Tonight*)

It is understandable that the programme's introduction finds Khoury's decision to share his playwriting process with the public surprising, as the audience often only witnesses the end product of this process. However, this collaborative process of playwriting is designed especially with audience's engagement in mind, for the purpose of activating social/political change. It is the dialogues, conversations and debates conducted online between audience members and playwright, which will eventually form the final version of *Mosque Alert*.

Yet, this theatrical model, while advocating engagement and dialogue with the audience, evokes the problematic question of ownership. Would the work be artistically and creatively owned solely by the playwright, or would the audience's participation be acknowledged? Sonja Vivienne examines a case study of digital storytelling in which individuals narrate their stories to be later converged in an edited version comprising of all the storytellers' voices. She identifies the acknowledgement of participants as one of the challenges of online creative engagement:

> While it is arguably more difficult to diminish agency in web spaces that merely facilitate distribution and rely on participants to 'opt in', strategies designed to effectively engage users may inadvertently flatten complex self-expression. Additionally web spaces that aim for communal collaboration and ownership must in some way seek consensus from divergent users, potentially eliding the voices of 'lurkers' and minorities. (8)

Although in *Mosque Alert* the method of engagement and its aim are different than in Vivienne's study, the question of audience's acknowledgement in *Mosque Alert*'s final version is valid. It remains to be seen how the opinions/voices of the virtual audiences will be incorporated and/or acknowledged. However, Khoury has already named the virtual participants in the writing of *Mosque Alert* as "co-creators" (*Mosque Alert*). Thus, the answer seems to be gravitating towards a joint ownership of the artistic work between the playwright and the virtual co-author. This has the potential of unsettling the concept of authorship and hierarchy of author vs. audience.

Transferring audience members into "spect-actors" lies at the heart of the playwriting process in *Mosque Alert*. Boal created the term "spect-actor" to refer to those engaged in Forum Theatre, where audience members become incorporated actors in the performance; simultaneously witnessing and participating in the theatrical event. Boal explains his vision of the spectator in Forum Theatre:

> While the audience "writes" the work the actors perform it simultaneously. The spectator's thoughts are discussed theatrically on stage with the help of the actors. All the solutions, suggestions, and opinions are revealed in theatrical form. The discussion itself need not simply take the form of words,

> but rather should be effected through all the other elements of theatrical expression as well. (*Theatre of the Oppressed* 132)

Boal's vision of the audience "writing the work" is essential here, as it renders the participants owners of a voice and a version of the theatrical event. It is at this moment that the audience ceases being an observer or spectator and becomes an actor. This enables the spectator to become an active creator of knowledge rather than a passive receiver. In SRR, the stage for *Mosque Alert* becomes the wider cyberspace, and the virtual online participants gain creative agency. Although not instantly, the discussions, conversations and suggestions of the *Mosque Alert*'s "co-creators" are ultimately acted out in the final revised script, live play and its online video/play version.

Furthermore, SRR's online model for theatre instantly transforms audience's actions from isolated/uncommunicated to participatory. The reactions of *Mosque Alert*'s online audience are articulated, communicated and recorded. The Online "co-creators" who wish to participate in the playwriting process need to register first by creating a username and password account, or by signing in using social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook. Making the effort to register indicates, symbolically, that the online-users are choosing to participate, and are sufficiently motivated to register and post comments. Their participation represents their voices, opinions and sometimes experiences, which they have found a forum and an outlet for. Nathan Singh, an online participant writes: "[f]or someone like me who lives in CA, and is a fan of Silk Road, it allows me to be a part of their process in creating a new work (which is really exciting!). I no longer have to watch from a distance, but I have a seat at the table" ("Comments"). This forum, SRR's "Engage: Video/Play" promises to incorporate and extend the visibility of these voices in the cyber and physical space of theatre.

Within the context of visibility, it is important to comment on a particular aspect of online participation regarding the way online commentators choose to identify themselves. *Mosque Alert*'s online participants have the option of posting their comments under their real name (or real Twitter and Facebook account) or post anonymously. Here, anonymity can be utilised and interpreted both positively and negatively. On one hand, anonymity can be viewed as an effective tool in subverting external and internalised discourses of oppression (whether racial, religious, sexual or gender-related). This is especially true in the case of *Mosque Alert*, where hate speech directed at Muslims is a possible outcome. By posting anonymously online, the virtual participant is liberated of his/her inhibitions and fear of being prosecuted. Khoury views anonymity in exactly this positive light. He observes that the anonymity of "online viewing …[and] online engagement might actually make you more willing to respond, particularly if you can respond anonymously, and it's a way to gage a lot of people's inner thoughts and feelings where people might feel somehow inhibited in a live theatre setting ("Personal Interview"). Conversely, anonymity facilitates a "ghost"-like existence for those who choose it, free from identification and commitment. This could effectively impede further engagement and interaction with other online participants. Furthermore, anonymity shields the user from a sense of responsibility as Lee Salter argues:

> A precondition of communicative action taking place is that actors accept responsibility for their utterances…The balance of anonymity and responsibility often depends on what sort of discourse is sought. On one hand, if the background culture of the user is authoritarian (to whatever degree), then anonymity is an important tool that enables criticism without the fear of repression. On the other hand, if there is a liberal culture, the likes of which exist only in approximation, then anonymity loses its role as security, leaving

> the question of whether anonymity serves to allow utterances to carry only their internal weight at the expense of responsibility. (138)

Salter's analysis of anonymity is productive in understanding the process of online interaction, which *Mosque Alert* operates within. Indeed, the potential for "irresponsible" comments has been calculated by SRR as all comments are subject to approval by a SRR's moderator prior to being publically posted. Thus, there is a governing body to harness "irresponsible" interaction. This move, however, is not used as a censoring method, as some of the participants' comments contradict SRR's polycultural view, but were posted regardless. Notably, however, most of *Mosque Alert*'s commentators have posted using their social network identification (which usually comprises of a first and last name), signifying a commitment and a desire for acknowledgment. In both cases, the final version of this artistic and activist project is eventually the result of the cooperation between SRR, playwright Jamil Khoury and the identified and anonymous collective.

The cultural and theatrical value of *Mosque Alert* can be summarised in two points: firstly, it offers an original approach towards playwriting, a first-of-its kind model for collective creation and ownership (although this remains to be seen); secondly, it initiates a "public sphere" that is more democratic and inviting than others, where online audience members become activists responding to and engaging with cultural, racial, religious and political dialogues. The project has already been adopted in some universities and schools, while its virtual online audience members are becoming empowered virtual co-creators in this activist theatrical work. *Mosque Alert* is but one project with limited funds, but it is creating powerful and influential cultural and racial debates. Khoury summarises this best: "we believe there is a transformative power to Art [and] story-telling. I don't think one play

is ever going to change the world, but we believe that Art changes minds, changes hearts, perhaps changes policies" (Khoury in *Chicago Tonight*).

Conclusion

SRR is constantly engaging with projects that have aspirational aims reaching well beyond the confines of its small theatrical space. While its artists are succeeding in promoting their self-representation, unsettling discourses of racial and sexual othering, and attaining more visibility; funding remains one of the greatest challenges facing SRR and its longevity. Unless SRR is able to monetise the online theatre, films, and documentaries it produces, its survival depends solely on grants, sponsorships, donations and ticket sale from live theatre (which returns only 15% of the cost of production). It is not yet certain how SRR will generate financial revenue out of its many online projects, although ideas such as "subscribed memberships" or "pay-per-review" have been mentioned (albeit unenthusiastically) in the funders' meetings, which I attended during my field trip. However, with activism as the ultimate aim, it is difficult to envisage pricing civic engagement and the forums established to enable and foster self-representation. The need to monetie the online production of SRR is perhaps urgent. However, for the time being, it is the public and funders' belief and support of SRR, which is embracing, encouraging and helping it financially and morally thus far.

In this chapter, the positioning of "ethnic" playwrights as well as their production of a resistant discourse have been explored through the analysis of SRR's projects. Voices of Arab American and other ethnic playwrights are generally trapped within a political system of representation that deem them subaltern, and their expressions a property of the periphery. Owning the production and distribution of knowledge, as in the case of SRR, is imperative in

making these ethnic voices visible. On its own, however, this does not penetrate a mainstream centre that views their representation as "irrelevant". SRR's integration of cyberspace as a cyber-stage is an attempt to destabilise this centre/margin divide by creating a "public sphere" that would invite audiences to become "spect-actors" in discourses of race, religion, gender and sexuality. SRR is reaching an increasingly wider audience through its live theatre and online presence promising more debates, cultural and political confrontations, and certainly more ethnic and Arab American voices. More specifically, on SRR's live and online stage, the Arab American identity is being visible, and constantly defined and redefined. Khoury's role as an artistic director, an Arab American playwright and an activist features prominently in defining not only the direction that SRR has taken, but also the present and future Arab American theatre. Khoury unapologetically declares: "I want an Arab American theatre movement that is vibrant and visible and daring and unafraid of its own power" ("Towards"). This movement, though only in its infancy, promises to represent, to be politically active, and render the Arab American identity visibly defined, yet fluid.

Conclusion

This thesis reflected critically on a number of Arab American plays and projects, and explored their playwrights' attempts to define and dramatise facets of their cultural, national, gender and sexual identity on the American stage after 9/11. These works were selected as representative of Arab American theatre, and read within the context of creating an understanding of the Arab American experience post 9/11. Arab American drama negotiates many territories and is constantly redefining itself to survive and grow, and this thesis investigated, in part, how its artists are currently carving a space of their own and aiming to render that space part of the wider context of American theatre.

As artists, who are often categorised as "ethnic" or "of the minority", their creative expression is typically motivated by two aims. Firstly, they are responding to narratives, which have habitually "Othered" them and perpetuated their marginality. Orientalist discourses have been instrumental in defining Arabs in America in accordance to a set of mostly negative stereotypes. All of the Arab American plays examined in this thesis provide a self-representational narrative that counters and defies the antagonistic portrayals of Arabs, which have been long established in mainstream popular culture. Secondly, Arab American playwrights are endeavouring to challenge a current cultural and political setting that still sustains a centre/margin divide. Within this divide, whiteness is the ideological construct that represents the norm and the invisible centre of power, and Arab American artists, as an ethnic minority, are thrust to its periphery. Many of the works discussed contest a "white" multiculturalism: that which allows a space for these Arab American voices while maintaining the demarcation of their representations as ethnic, marginal, and "subaltern". All

of the plays explored in this thesis are contributing to the building of a resistant discourse, which aims to redefine the Arab American in post 9/11 America.

The reclamation of representation is the main aim of all the plays studied in this thesis. Stereotypes, gender and sexuality are common thematic dominators, alongside a commitment to social activism. Yet, Arab American drama faces institutional pressure which amounts, at times, to direct censorship, when dealing with theatrical expressions that are politically challenging. This thesis found that the question of Palestine remains the most problematic to explore dramatically on the American stage, and its production is often marred with controversy. This is especially true when the New York Theatre Workshop cancelled *My Name is Rachel Corrie* in 2006. Following that incident, a group of Arab American women playwrights (artists from Nibras and Noor theatre collectives) were invited to present a play with a family setting that was Palestinian, but decidedly non-political. The first chapter explored this instance to be an example of the conditioned visibility offered to some Arab American playwrights. That is, although the narrative of some Arab American woman playwrights was rendered visible, the political specificity of this narrative was eclipsed. Thus, the first chapter investigated the problematic context surrounding the Arab American representation and noted the following: Firstly, Arab American expressions of identity can contest certain political and sexual lines, rendering such political works difficult to produce in mainstream theatre institutions. Secondly, the exercise of direct censorship and especially self-censorship is an expected practice in the creation and production of Arab American works. Thirdly, the increasing support for the visibility of Arab American women artists is a phenomenon that originates from a complex and problematic discourse (that is both Orientalist and gender related), which frames these voices as less politically resistant, and more accessible to a general audience.

This setting presents the artistic expression and production of Arab American women playwrights a rich terrain for the negotiations of the aforementioned discourses. Most Arab American women artists are challenging a stereotypical narrative that portrays the Arab woman as passive and victimised; and a discourse of visibility/invisibility that compels certain compromises. In reclaiming their representation, Arab American woman playwrights are attempting to deconstruct the Orientalist narratives surrounding their identity, and author their own. The second chapter examined how Betty Shamieh's *Black Eyed* and Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* provide a platform for the Arab woman upon which she is vocal, active and in control of her own existence. In essence, most of the current Arab American women playwrights – especially Shamieh and Raffo – are utilising tactics such as collectivity and non-linear narratives, similar to those envisioned by earlier feminist theatre practitioners. By this, these playwrights are trying to make visible the gender, racial and cultural identity of the Arab and Arab American woman. Yet, their stories seem to be stifled, edited, or cut short, when invoking challenging Arab political issues. The second chapter found that Shamieh and, to a lesser extent, Raffo have practiced a "filtering" process on some of the political issues in their plays, as a way of engaging with the politics of visibility. The two plays examined in Chapter Two lacked certain political clarity, but offered an empowering representation of the Arab woman; one that asks its audience to reconsider and deconstruct the erroneous stereotypes they might hold of Arab women. Maintaining the balance between the two discourses of representation and visibility is difficult for Arab American playwrights in general, but it is especially so for Arab American women artists due to their gendered positioning in the American cultural scene post 9/11.

In all of its forms and expressions, Arab American drama is fundamentally creating a counter-discourse to unsettle an Orientalist stereotyping tradition. The third chapter focuses

on three plays (Sam Younis' *Browntown*, Yousef El Guindi's *Our Enemies* and *Back of the Throat*) which explore the social/cultural and institutional interpolation of stereotypes in the conceptualisation and treatment of Arab Americans. Interrogating the politics of visibility, *Browntown* and *Our Enemies* contextualise a resistance in American popular culture to perceive Arab Americans through lenses other than those of stereotypes. The first two plays present an Arab American male actor, whose only chance for work lies in portraying a terrorist character in mainstream movies; and an Arab American woman, whose publisher insists on packaging her narrative to perpetuate the stereotype of the "victimised" Arab woman. Based on this and other examples, the chapter finds that the participation of Arab American artists in the American scene of cultural production is strained by the proliferation of negative Arab stereotypes in mainstream culture, which ultimately results in an unwillingness to accept Arab Americans' alternative representations. Although the social and cultural aspect of stereotyping has formidable consequences on the lives of Arab Americans, its institutional incorporation in some post 9/11 policies (such as the Patriot Act) signifies the seriousness of the threat it constitutes on Arab Americans and their national and cultural existence. Accordingly, Chapter Three investigated further the maturation of the male Arab/Muslim "terrorist" stereotype, and the framing of Otherness as a threat in American national security rhetoric. *Back of the Throat* dramatises how the civil rights of an Arab American male are disregarded/divested by representatives of the law, when he is reduced to a "terrorist" by virtue of his stereotypes. This culture of stereotypes not only affects the daily interactions of Arab Americans with their surroundings, but is also deeply rooted in a legal system that re-incorporated racial profiling as a tactic after 9/11. Additionally, such a culture influences the reception and distribution of Arab American art; a condition that current Arab American playwrights are vigorously attempting to overcome.

Out of a history tainted with Orientalist and stereotypical constructions, the Arab body remains a site that many discourses attempt to appropriate. Chapter Four engaged with the Arab and Arab American body on the stages of both war and theatre to confront the discourses that have contained it so far, and examine those that aim to empower it. Previous scholarly projects on Arab American theatre have been reluctant to approach the Arab/Arab American body and its sexuality, partly because dramatisations of the Arab sexual body remain modest in number, and partly because of the shifting meanings of the Arab body in different cultural (Arab and Western) systems. However, the fourth chapter engaged with the Arab/Arab American body and its representations as an essential part of understanding and theorising the Arab American identity.

The Arab/Arab American body has carried a considerable importance in racial and political discourses in the U.S. (such as the "war on terror" discourse); from gender and sexual ones that proclaim to liberate it, to racial ones that categorise it as a sign of cultural or national difference. Yet it was the Abu Ghraib photographs, which rendered the Arab body problematically visible. The photographs symbolise a Master/Slave narrative of imperialist power written on the sodomised Arab body, and were taken and preserved by the American soldiers as trophies of power, and/or assurance of the heterosexuality of the American soldier who has not, unlike the Arab "terrorist", been 'homo'sexualised. Here, Chapter Four problematised the relationship between nationalism and the body reading the Abu Ghraib photographs as an example of the creation of sexual and national Others in the image of a sodomised Arab body. Outside a Western imperialist war-on-terror discourse, the Arab body remains subject to other discourses (like that of the Arab culture), but its representation within that discourse becomes, understandably, entirely different. Yussef El Guindi's *Ten Acrobat* and Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* are two Arab American plays that explore the

Arab body and candidly discuss its sexuality. In these plays, the Arab/Arab American body retain a focal importance in defining the Arab American and unsettling certain identity markers. The Arab American homosexual bodies in these plays are sites of conflict (of Arab heritage and homosexual identity) and reconciliations (between two Palestinian and Jewish lesbians). The bodies of the main characters become a battleground for warring ideologies that aim to appropriate it; yet in both plays, the characters are given agency over their bodies and sexualities. The Arab/Arab American body in these self-representational narratives is not a defeated conquered image, but a negotiator capable of destabilising traditional configurations of cultural and national identity. The chapter concludes by presenting the homosexual Arab American body as a promising site that could unsettle rigid uncompromising cultural borders in the building of a future fluid (liquid) Arab American identity.

In all of its chapters, this thesis contemplated the cultural positioning of Arab Americans and the admissibility of their voices in mainstream artistic venues. The final chapter examined Silk Road Rising (SRR), which produced several of the plays discussed throughout this thesis, and their attempts to mobilise the representations of what is considered "ethnic" voices away from the periphery of cultural expression and production. In investigating SRR's polycultural vision, this thesis finds that polyculturalism is a part answer to addressing the challenges, which Arab American identity and its expression face in post 9/11 America. That is, the current multicultural system, while acknowledging ethnic voices, preserves their demarcations, and consequently their marginalisation. For Arab Americans, their identity and art need to be examined and appreciated as part of the wider American context, rather than being acknowledged/accentuated as a visible cultural Other.

The final chapter further explored SRR's recent incorporation of online space as a platform for its artistic alternative narratives, and argued that such a step contributes to the reconfiguration of artistic spaces and the positioning of ethnic artists within them. The chapter also examined *Mosque Alert*, a new participatory online video/play developed by SRR's Artistic Director, Jamil Khoury. By inviting audience members to share the playwriting process and engage with the characters' social and political problems, Khoury is imbuing the online artistic space of SRR with an agenda of social/cultural activism. SRR's incorporation of cyber space, while still in its early stages, is already presenting more Arab American voices and issues that contribute to the wider negotiations of Arab American cultural presence and identity in post 9/11 America. The online space is an effective tool to empower the intrinsically political voice of Arab American drama. As this thesis has found, the traditional space of theatre is limited to Arab American artists due to many factors: funding, censorship and audience's appetite for what is considered "ethnic" representation. This thesis argues that the online space, if politically constituted, offers a vital new sphere for articulation, as well as a challenge to the status quo.

In essence, this thesis has challenged and shifted the meaning of Arab American drama from a largely invisible ethnic expression of an Othered identity to a site of political and cultural negotiations. It highlighted the problematic discourse surrounding Arab American women theatrical articulation as compromised by an Orientalist and political discourse: a discourse that promises visibility to selected narratives of Otherness, which do not disrupt a current political status quo. It demanded a closer look at Arab American gender and sexuality, outside the patronage of discourses that claim to liberate them while insisting on their victimised positioning. It argued that new directions must be taken to destabilise a current cultural scene that invites representations of the Other, while maintaining their

packaging as Others. In all, it advocated the possibility of, and urgency for an Arab American theatre movement; a movement that offers a visible and fluid articulation of the Arab American identity; a movement that presents uncompromised narratives; a movement that incorporates the voices of Arab Americans in the wider American cultural context; a movement that will reclaim Arab Americanness from Otherness.

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