

INTRODUCTION

Articulating Arabness

I was born in San Francisco, three years after my parents arrived to the United States from Jordan.¹ Over the next twenty years, my family moved several times across the Bay Area, creating for me a childhood and a sense of community that was both rigidly structured and ever changing. Throughout my childhood, “culture” felt like a tool, an abstract, ephemeral notion of what we do and what we believe, of who belongs and who does not. Culture seemed to be the way that my parents exercised their control over me and my siblings. The same fight, I knew from my aggrieved conversations with friends and relatives, was playing out in the homes of countless other Arab families. The typical generational wars—about whether we teenagers could stay out late at night, or whether we could spend the night at our friends’ slumber parties—was amplified into a grand cultural struggle. The banalities of adolescent rebellion became a battle between two “cultures,” between rigid versions of “Arab” and “American” values. To discipline us, our parents’ generation invoked the royal “we,” as in, “No, you can’t go to the school dance, because we don’t do that.” Here, “we” meant “Arabs.”

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I hated these words. I hated these declarations of what “we” did and didn’t do. And yet they worked. Sort of. I came to understand a set of unspoken rules: that Arab girls don’t wear mascara or that going to a party with a boy will offend the memory of my grandparents. Sometimes I actually upheld them. Or, more often as time went on, I simply tried to hide these parts of my life from my parents. Because even worse than disobeying my parents was the threat—always present in my house, in our extended family, and in our community centers—that I might be betraying my people, a term that signified anyone from the Naber family to everyone in Jordan to all Arab Christians to all Arabs. Transgressing these unspoken rules was understood not as mere adolescent rebellion but as a form of cultural loss, of cultural betrayal. And even worse, each moment of transgression seemed to mean the loss of Arab culture to “al Amerikan,” that awesome and awful word that could encompass everything from the American people to the American government to the American way of life (at least as my parents seemed to imagine it).

Our Arab community, like so many immigrant networks, was wildly diverse, comprised of Muslim and Christian Jordanian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian families. And yet our parents’ generation seemed to have a remarkably similar idea of what “American” and “Arab” meant. They seemed to share a tacit knowledge that Amerika (America) was the trash culture, degenerate, morally bankrupt, and sexually depraved. In contrast, al Arab (Arabs) were morally respectable—we valued marriage, family, and close relationships. It was not only our parents who put this pressure on us. What we learned at school and from the U.S. media reinforced this dichotomy, perhaps in different terms.

But as with all products of human belief, there were caveats, and shades of grey, and matters of proportion. Our immigrant parents’ generation disproportionately pressured girls to uphold their idealized demands of Arab culture. Girls’ behavior seemed to symbolize the respectability of our fathers and our families, as well as no less than the continuation of Arab culture in America. Particularly as my girlfriends, cousins, and I hit puberty, the pressure seemed to intensify. I couldn’t wear my trendy jeans with the tear down the side for fear that *al nas* (the [Arab] people) would curse my sloppy clothes and bare skin, as if the tiniest sign of rebellion would let down the entire community. By the time my friends and I graduated from high school, young women’s bodies and behaviors seemed to be the key signifiers in the stereotyped distinction between Arabs and Americans. The amorphous and seemingly arbitrary pressures and distinctions and rules felt outrageous. My friends and I would joke about what would happen when we came home

after going out with our American friends. One night, a friend came home late, and her mother was, as usual, waiting for her at the front door. Before she walked in, her mother remarked, “Why didn’t you stay out there with the slutty girls and the trash?”

Compounding matters, our parents raised us in predominantly white suburbs and encouraged us—in certain ways—to assimilate. They encouraged us to befriend the “American kids” and helped us dress up for colonial days at school. And many of us watched our fathers change their names from Yacoub, Mohammed, and Bishara to Jack, Mo, and Bob when they arrived to their grocery and convenience stores as the sun rose. It was only later that I came to understand that they had changed their names not only for assimilatory purposes but also after being called “dirty Arab” or “Palestinian terrorist,” or after customers refused to shop at their stores.

Despite this, and despite the fact that our parents were encouraging us to adopt the values of middle-class America, the fundamental message in our family and community remained: we were Arab and they were American. It felt like we were living between two worlds, one within the confines of our modest suburban homes and our Arab community, the other at school and in the streets of San Francisco. With each passing year, it seemed more and more impossible to live in such a bifurcated way. I fought with my parents all the time, and because I started to doubt which “side” of me was really me, the demands from both sides just made me want to rebel against everything.²

Even as I yelled at them, I knew that my parents only wanted the best for me. Due to my adolescent myopia, I had only the faintest sense of the difficulties of their lives and the concurrent struggle of their immigrant generation to foster cultural continuity in America. Just like I was with my ripped jeans, they too were trying to articulate who they were. It would be years before I grasped how each day they confronted not only the pressures of displacement and assimilation but also the realities of an expanding U.S. imperialist war in the region of their homelands and intensifying Orientalism and anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racist discourses in their new home.

More than thirty years ago, Edward Said argued that “Orientalism” is a European fabrication of “the East,” that “the Orient” is shaped by European imperialist attitudes and assumes that Eastern or Oriental people can be defined in terms of cultural or religious essences that are invulnerable to historical change. Orientalism, he explained, configures the “East” in irreducible attributes such as religiosity or femininity. This political vision, he contended, has promoted the idea of insurmountable differences between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”). Like Said, critics of Orientalism have long argued that essentialist representations

of Islam are crucial to Orientalist thought. In Orientalist thought, Muslims, Arabs, and other “Orientals” are hopelessly mired in a host of social ills, the cause of which is an unchanging tradition that exists outside of history and is incompatible with civilization (Majid 2000, 7; Moallem 2005; Shohat and Stam 1994). Feminist scholars have in turn argued that this strand of Orientalist thought has constructed visions of Arab and Muslim societies either as completely decadent, immoral, and permissive or as strict and oppressive to women (Abdulhadi 2010, 470; Moallem 2005; Shohat and Stam 1994). This new Orientalism relies on representations of culture (Arab) and religion (Islam) as a justification for post-Cold War imperial expansion in the Middle East, U.S. alliance with Israel, and the targeting of people perceived as fitting the racial profile of a potential terrorist living in the United States, that is, people perceived to be Arabs, Middle Easterners, and/or Muslims.³ New Orientalist discourses have birthed a variety of widely accepted ideas: of Arab and Muslim queers oppressed by a homophobic culture and religion; of hyper-oppressed, shrouded Arab and Muslim women who need to be saved by American heroes; of a culture of Arab Muslim sexual savagery that needs to be disciplined—and in the process, modernized—through U.S. military violence (Puar 2007; Abu-Lughod 2002; Razack 2005).⁴

The impact of Orientalism, I began to see, was everywhere. Our Arab community had a plethora of cultural and political organizations that put on music concerts, festivals, and banquets, and a range of political organizations that focused on civil rights issues and homeland politics. And yet there were no resources for dealing with the difficult issues within our families and communities. As in many immigrant communities, ours opted to avoid bringing attention to personal matters in public space and among one another. This seemed like a product of fearing both how airing potentially “negative” ideas about us could fuel anti-Arab racism and how we might judge one another for our successes or failures when it came to making it in Amerika. Such pressures manifested in a sense of internal conflict I shared with many of my peers. Throughout high school especially, many of my Arab American peers were devastated by the conflicting feelings of love, pain, and guilt toward our parents and the conflicting ideas about Arab culture that we learned from their generation and U.S. society. We joked about fleeing our community altogether—and some of us did flee. Some of us swore to each other that we would never marry an Arab. These pressures were pushing young people in our community away from each other. In addition, on my trips to Jordan to visit relatives, I learned that many of the Arabs I knew in the Bay Area had more socially conservative understandings of Arab concepts of religion, family, gender, and sexuality

than their counterparts in Jordan. I was baffled: why were the stakes of culture and family respectability so high in America?

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After I survived the dual gauntlet of high school and what I understood as my parents' expectations, and after I moved away from their home, I began listening more carefully to the stories of our immigrant parents. I began asking why they came to the United States, what they experienced when they arrived, and what they dreamed of and worked for in the United States. Not surprisingly, our parents' commitments to cultural continuity were much more complicated than I had understood them to be. As the twentieth century became the twenty-first, I spent several years investigating these cultural ideas and exploring how and why they operated as such an intense site of struggle for middle-class, second-generation Arab Americans then growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area. I worked with community-based organizations and did ethnographic research with people who were between eighteen and twenty-eight years old, whose families had immigrated to the United States, primarily from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. I also worked with fifteen immigrants from their parents' generation, immigrants who came to the Bay Area between the 1950s and 1970s, an era characterized by increased Arab migration to the United States, the expansion of U.S. empire in the Arab region, and the intensification of colonization, racism, and xenophobia in California.⁵ I additionally worked with immigrants of the same age group as the second-generation young adults who are the focus of this book. All of my interlocutors were connected, in one way or another, to what many referred to as "the Arab community," an all-encompassing word representing a wide range of people and ideas.

Despite a broad diversity in family origins and religious values, and despite access to socioeconomic class privileges, nearly all of these young adults told a similar story: the psychological pressure to maintain perceived ideals of Arab and American culture felt overwhelming and irresolvable. As Nuha, a daughter of Jordanian immigrants put it, "Sometimes it can make you crazy because you can't get out. I have so many worlds and every world is a whole other world. But in your mind they're totally separated, but then they're all there in your mind together. You get to a point that you are about to explode." Bassam, a Palestinian Arab American who served on the board of the Arab Cultural Center in San Francisco during my research, placed the feeling of Nuha and so many others within the context of America at the turn of the twenty-first century:

We have real needs as a community. We are really under attack. We are being damaged severely in, and by, the U.S. There is a great necessity for proactive behavior and community building. But it conflicts with the way our young people are brought up here. I'm so sympathetic to the need to perpetuate the community and yet, I'm horrified that the methods we think we must use to do so are going to kill us psychologically in this society.

For several years, as I worked closely with teens and twenty-somethings, we shared stories about the norms and expectations of our immigrant communities. From their stories, the themes of family, religion, gender, and sexuality continually emerged. It became clear that these themes formed the backbone of the idealized concepts of Arab culture that circulated in their families and communities, and were the battleground on which they, and their parents, and the Arab community, and the looming world of America all wrangled. This struggle, over bifurcated concepts of culture, and the ways that we understand ourselves as individuals and peoples, is the first cornerstone of this book.

And once again, Orientalism was at the heart of this struggle. The dominant middle-class Arab immigrants' articulation of Arabness through rigid, binary categories (good Arab girls versus bad American girls, for example) was based on a similar framework that guided Orientalist discourses about Arabs. My parents and their peers reversed Orientalism and used its binary categories (liberated Americans versus oppressed Arab women, bad Arabs versus good Americans) differently and for different purposes. Articulating immigrant cultural identity through rigid binaries is not an unfamiliar resolution to immigrant and people of color's struggles in a society structured by a pressure for assimilation and racism (Prashad 2000; Espiritu 2003; Cohen 1999; Gaines 1996). As Vijay Prashad argues, this dynamic, while a reaction to political and historical conditions, is an attempt to depoliticize the immigrant experience where culture is articulated not as living, changing social relations but a set of timeless traits (2000, 150). In many ways, the research for and writing of this book have been haunted by culture or, more precisely, by Orientalist definitions of culture. As we will see, the uninterrogated naturalization of a dichotomy between an idealized "Arab" and "American" culture among Arab Americans—a reversal of Orientalist discourses—has momentous effects on second-generation young adults. These effects are highly gendered and sexualized. Yet this same concept of Arab culture, usually associated as it is with essentialist understandings of religion, family, gender, and sexuality among Arab communities, allows Orientalist thought

to be left intact and activated. Consigned to the cultural, aspects of dynamic, lived experience come to be seen as frozen in time—essentialist Arab traditions that exist outside of history—and this is the same conceptualization that operates as the basis for the demonization of Arab communities in the discourses and practices of U.S. empire.

Within the dominant middle-class Arab immigrant discourse that circulated in my interlocutors' homes and community networks, gender and sexuality were among the most powerful symbols consolidating an imagined difference between "Arabs" and "Americans." Consider the ways some of my interlocutors described what they learned growing up about the difference between Arab and American culture:

Jumana: My parents thought that being American was spending the night at a friend's house, wearing shorts, the guy-girl thing, wearing makeup, reading teen magazines, having pictures of guys in my room. My parents used to tell me, "If you go to an American's house, they're smoking, drinking . . . they offer you this and that. But if you go to an Arab house, you don't see as much of that. *Bi hafzu ala al banat* [They watch over their daughters]."

Tony: There was a pressure to marry an Arab woman because the idea was that "she will stand by her family, she will cook and clean, and have no career. She'll have kids, raise kids, and take care of her kids, night and day. She will do anything for her husband." My mom always says, "You're not going to find an American woman who stands by her family like that. . . . American women leave their families."

Sam: "You want to screw, go out with American girls. They all screw," you know . . . that was the mentality growing up.

In the quotations above, concepts of "good Arab girls" operated as a marker of community boundaries and the notion of a morally superior "Arab culture" in comparison to concepts of "American girls" and "American culture." Idealized concepts of femininity are connected to idealized notions of family and an idealized concept of heterosexual marriage. These ideals underpinned a generalized pressure for monogamy—and more specifically, for no sex before marriage—and for compulsory heterosexuality. In the middle-class communities at the heart of my study, dominant articulations of Arabness were structured by a strict division between an inner Arab domain and an outer American domain, a division that is built upon the figure of the

woman as the upholder of values, and an ideal of family and heterosexual marriage.

This jumble of ideals about Arabness and Americanness was the buoy that guided, and girded—but also threatened to drown—the middle-class Arab diasporas in the Bay Area. These ideals created a fundamental split between a gendered and sexualized notion of an inner-familial-communal (Arab) domain and an external-political-public (American) domain—a split that both provided a sense of empowerment and belonging and also constrained the lives of many of my interlocutors. This split was terribly familiar to me, and at the same time, largely undiscussed both in my own life and in the larger Arab American communities. I have spent nearly a decade trying to decipher the divide within our Arab community between the internal and the external and figuring out how we find meaning and formulate a life within this split.

As my research progressed, I began interpreting the predicament of growing up in new ways. Both my parents and the parents of my interlocutors constantly referred to Arab culture—as the thing that rooted us, and often, it seemed, ruled us. This amorphous entity shaped our calendar and our thoughts, what our goals were and who our friends were. But the more I searched, the harder it became to find this culture. The concepts of “Arab culture” my parents relentlessly invoked were indeed historically grounded in long-standing Arab histories, and yet it became increasingly clear that they were just as much shaped by the immigrant journey of displacement and diaspora and the pressures of assimilation in the United States. My parents’ generation, and through them my peers’ and my interlocutors’, have ultimately been shaped not by a ceaseless and unchanging tradition but by an assemblage of different visions of how we are to make our way in the world. This is why I refer to my interlocutors’ stories as *articulations* of Arabness.⁶ Articulations of Arabness are grounded in Arab histories and sensibilities about family, selfhood, and ways of being in the world but are also hybrid, syncretic, and historically contingent. Our articulations of Arabness are shaped by long-standing traditions, by the isolation of running a mom-and-pop store, by the travel of news and stories through the internet and satellite TV, by Arab responses (past and present) to European colonialism and U.S. empire, and by the words and images of contemporary media. The result is in some ways disappointing to all sides: the stories of my interlocutors expose the absurdity of the Orientalist discourse so prevalent in America, but they also expose the historical conditions in which middle-class Arab American claims to hold onto some authentic notion of Arab culture have emerged. These articulations offer a long overdue look at the way concepts of

community and belonging are made across the diaspora, and provide insight into the possibilities for decolonizing Arabness or rearticulating Arabness beyond Orientalism or reverse Orientalism.

Rearticulating Arabness

As I met more Arab Americans through the late 1990s, I found that young adults were involved in diverse social arenas. I let my research follow wherever the stories, imaginations, and visions of my interlocutors would lead me. I spent a lot of time among the Arab Cultural Center's networks, the major middle-class Arab American community networks in San Francisco, where I kept meeting people who frequented Arab community events but who found their primary sense of belonging within two interconnected anti-imperialist political movements. Amid difficulties with many of their parents and the frustrating clash between rigid notions of Arab and American culture, these young adults kept talking about their involvement in either the leftist Arab movement (LAM) or Muslim student activism. The Bay Area, long a hotbed of radical politics of all sorts, had in the preceding several decades birthed this activism.

I was struck by a consistent undercurrent among these activists. Indeed, young adults certainly engaged in typical forms of political activism. They organized demonstrations and teach-ins. They developed grassroots organizing strategies. They attempted to attract other members. They wrote letters and articles and distributed them on the street corner and on the internet. They held press conferences. Yet they also developed deep-seated alliances with each other. They formed alliances, they supported each other, and just as important, they disagreed. In the process, they came up with new concepts of Arabness that challenge the dominant middle-class Arab and U.S. discourses we have seen. From their flurry of activity, from their hopes and their frustrations, I saw how these movements were generating new articulations of Arabness. I gained unique insight into the ways in which dominant Arab and American discourses can be "unhooked, transformed, or rearticulated" (Diaz and Kauanui 2001). As these young adults were actively working toward ending injustice and oppression, they were also forming new definitions of family and kinship, new ideas of affiliation and belonging, new grounds for the fostering of community. They were remaking and transcending dominant concepts of Arabness and America and putting forth new visions of the future.

LAM and Muslim student activists had different aims and ideologies but had many things in common, and their projects and campaigns often

overlapped. It was the late 1990s, and self-determination for the people of Palestine and Iraq was at the top of their agendas. Their movements shared a similar analysis that the United States was engaged in a regional project that aimed to remake the Middle East according to political, economic, and military structures most beneficial to U.S. empire. They concurred that U.S. Orientalist discourses were crucial in legitimizing U.S. empire in the Middle East region. They were committed to replacing Orientalist versions of Arabness and Islam with articulations of self that were grounded in the historical and material realities of immigration and displacement, racism, and U.S.-led militarism and war. LAM's concepts of self were wrapped up in the framework of secular, leftist national liberation struggles against colonial, imperial, and racial domination. Young adults involved in Muslim student activism worked through a framework that disaggregated the categories Arab and Muslim and articulated who they are as "Muslim First, Arab Second." They defined Islam as a politically constituted religious framework for addressing racial and imperial injustice and oppression that offered an alternative to Orientalist ideas about them imposed upon them by U.S. society. At times, the articulations of self that emerged in these movements were liberatory. At times, they reproduced constraints that resembled the dominant discourses they sought to transcend. In combination with dominant middle-class concepts of "Arab culture" that we saw among Arab immigrant families earlier, rearticulations of Arabness within the leftist Arab movement and among Muslim student activists form the second cornerstone of this book.

Muslim student activists were articulating a global Muslim consciousness among a diverse assemblage of individuals of all ages and groups of all kinds. Muslim community organizations, student organizations, and educational and religious institutions; immigrants and second-generation Americans from diverse countries of origin; African Americans and white Americans; lifelong Muslims and new converts to Islam—all collaborated in shaping this global Muslim consciousness in the Bay Area. As the name implies, this global Muslim consciousness parallels efforts of Muslims worldwide to better their world. "Global Muslim consciousness" does not refer to a formal global Muslim political movement with a unified international structure or network or formal membership; its adherents throughout the world take up different issues and strategies depending on the priorities of their surroundings (Mandaville 2007; Majid 2000). In the Bay Area, the Muslim student activists I worked with share a general understanding that fighting injustice in oneself and one's society is an act of worship. In the Bay Area in the late 1990s, people involved in articulating a global Muslim consciousness focused on a set of issues that they

understood to impact Muslims around the world—issues that also impact non-Muslims. They understood that as Muslim Americans, they had a responsibility to address problems emanating from the U.S. government. They took up the U.S. government's criminalization of youth of color, specifically African Americans in general and African American Muslims in particular. They also took up the U.S. war against terrorism and its impact on civilians in places like Iraq and Palestine and on immigrants and immigrant communities living in the United States.

The leftist Arab movement (LAM) is a smaller collective of primarily middle-class college students and graduates between the ages of eighteen and thirty, who bring to their work myriad histories of displacement. Their ideas parallel those of the leftist Arab movements in the Arab world and its diasporas. Most members of LAM are not also involved in Muslim student activism. Yet their efforts emerge out of interconnected histories, and they often work on similar issues, support one another's work, and come together in joint projects or campaigns.⁷ LAM activists are Iraqis, Egyptians, Palestinians, Jordanians, Lebanese; men, women, queers; Christians, Muslims, agnostics, and atheists; recent immigrants and exiles, and individuals born or raised predominantly in the United States; computer engineers, nonprofit workers, service workers, artists, and students. Although this diversity contributes to a varied and often contentious set of political visions, there are certain matters that bring these activists together. During the time of my research they were focused on two separate but unified campaigns: one to end U.S. sanctions on Iraq and the other to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Like Muslim student activists, LAM activists shared this tacit knowledge: Iraqis and Palestinians were dying en masse; the U.S. war on Iraq was looking more and more like genocide; U.S. tax dollars were paying for this; and the world was sitting back and watching.

I tried to move equally between both of these groups of people, interviewing LAM activists and Muslim student activists alike. Yet because I had fewer avenues into Muslim religious communities compared to LAM's political community, and because the work of Muslim student activists was more diffuse, I spent more time with LAM activists. In addition, I was an active participant in LAM's work. I was a board member of the San Francisco chapters of two community organizations that were central to LAM: the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. And I was employed as a manager of the building that housed the main organization LAM worked through at the time and the offices of several leftist, antiracist organizations in the Mission District. During the period of my research, I spent a lot of my time around LAM activists.

And yet, for each struggle LAM waged, I couldn't help noticing the other struggles that it silenced. Mobilized by daily images circulating in alternative media sources of dead Palestinian and Iraqi children, LAM activists operated as a community in crisis. Operating in a crisis mode meant that certain issues were privileged over others. This was most clearly evident in moments when a few members criticized the sexism or homophobia within the movement. Such critiques were met with official movement logic: the issue of sexism is secondary to the fact that "our people are dying back home." Many members, women and men alike, seemed to have internalized this potent reasoning. In this movement, as in many racial justice and national liberation solidarity movements, the official movement logic also subordinated critiques of sexism and homophobia in reaction to racism. Not only were gender and sexuality barely discussed, but the official movement discourse insisted that discussing these internal issues in public could actually endanger the goals activists were fighting for. In fact, many LAM and Muslim student activists shared the belief that U.S. Orientalist representations of Arabs and Muslims, specifically images of hyper-oppressed Arab and Muslim women and Arab Muslim sexual savagery, were among the most common images Americans saw—especially from the news media and Hollywood. In this analysis, Orientalist representations were among the many reasons why so many Americans supported U.S. military interventions in the Middle East, and why many Americans, particularly liberals, expressed profound empathy for Arab and Muslim women—perceived to be victims of their culture and religion—but little concern over the impact of U.S.-led war on Arab and Muslim human life.

In response, many activists feared that discussing sexism and compulsory heterosexuality within Arab communities would reinforce Orientalism. Both LAM and Muslim student activists tended to relegate matters of heteropatriarchy among Arab and Muslim families, communities, and organizations to the margins. The tacit belief was that activists who publicly critiqued sexism or homophobia within Arab and Arab American communities were no better than traitors to their people. The result—of yet another binary structure—was that attempts to dismantle heteropatriarchy were often confined between two extremes: untenable silence, on the one hand, and the reification of Orientalist representations, on the other. As a result, I spent my days talking with a broad spectrum of Arab American young adults about how an unspoken code meant that some issues could not be talked about; and then I spent my nights going to meetings and events where some members internalized this potent logic, perhaps in different ways and for different purposes. Movements that were inspiring so many young adults around

me, while bringing social justice-based Arab and Muslim perspectives to San Francisco's political milieu, could also replicate some of the debilitating aspects of our communities.

Today, nearly any discussion of the Arab world begins with the terrorist attacks of September 11. The complexity of the Arab world, and of Islam, have for many Americans been supplanted by these devastating acts. These emotions have narrowed and simplified understandings of the world's nearly 1.5 billion Muslims, the three hundred million Arabs living in Arab nations and the millions of Arabs living in the diaspora, as well as the overlap and variety among these groups (Moore 1999; Darity 2008). I seek to enlarge our understanding and, as a result, I insist on exploring the world that predates 9/11 while also considering the ramifications of that day. To be sure, the 1990s was a different moment, one that witnessed both the crystallization of U.S. empire in the Middle East and a restriction, in its own right, of U.S. global military supremacy and the Pentagon's post-Cold War plan (Maira 2009; Mamdani 2005; Khalidi 2004).

Through an analysis of the varied concepts of Arabness within middle-class Arab American families and within Arab and Muslim anti-imperialist social movements—the two cornerstones of this book—I will interrogate the dichotomies that ensnare Arab communities as they clamor for a sense of safety and belonging in the United States. As I acknowledge the remarkable efforts of those who came to the United States from the Arab world, and analyze the innovations of their children as they seek to create new ways of living in the United States, I also hope to unlock the rigid back and forth between Orientalism and anti-Orientalism, and in the process imagine new means of articulating Arabness in America.

In the pages to come, we will meet a wide range of people, from business professionals to artists, refugees to students, people involved in cultural festivals and political demonstrations and wedding celebrations, all of whom are trying to articulate affirmative concepts of who they are in between the interconnected forces of empire and diaspora. We will see how the themes of religion, family, gender, and sexuality permeate the effort among Arab Americans to define themselves and shape the way the wider world perceives them. We will hear the stories of immigrants who came to the Bay Area from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the stories of their children who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. We will see how both generations—in one way or another—became invested in a middle-class politics of cultural authenticity—a narrative of Arabness that prescribes what is respectable and what is stigmatized, what is normal and what is deviant. We will see instances where both of these groups reify Orientalism or reverse Orientalism's binary terms, from “bad

Arabs” versus “good Americans” to “good Arabs” versus “bad Americans,” and more specifically, to “Arab virgins” versus “American(ized) whores.” We will see Muslim student activists articulate a new religiously constituted politics of racial justice, gender justice, and anti-imperialism as an alternative to Orientalism and reverse Orientalism. We will see Arab feminist activists struggling to find a “home” within a leftist Arab movement. We will see Arab and Arab American activists transforming their communities from within—bringing the internalized back into the external, the private back into the public, and the cultural back to the political.

None of these stories can be understood through standard visions of American assimilation, or through the essentialist concepts of culture or religion, Arabness or Islam. Nor can they be understood through liberal feminist or queer studies frameworks that approach either patriarchy or homophobia as self-contained issues. Analyses of the relationship between nation and diaspora that fail to account for U.S. histories and structures of settler colonialism and imperial expansion are also inadequate. Here, instead, we see how the domain of “culture,” of the internal—and their manifestations in concepts and practices of religion, family, gender, and sexuality—can only be fully understood by considering the domain of history and politics, of the “external.” In the pages to come, we will see the devastation caused by our insistence on separating these domains and will glimpse a messier reality, where a more complete articulation of self can be found in the entanglement of cultures, histories, and politics among Arabs in America.

A Note on Method(s)

De-Orientalizing Methodology

In the course of writing this book, my interlocutors had as many questions for me as I had for them: “How is this study going to benefit us?” “How is your research going to be different from the way academic institutions in America study us?” Much is implied in these questions, including a tacit knowledge that academia, especially in the United States, tends to see “Arabs” and “Muslims” from an Orientalist perspective and to use methodologies that reinforce histories of imperial domination and racism against us (Samman 2005). Though of Arab descent, just like them, I was tainted, at least in some of their eyes, by my place in the academy. The vestiges of Orientalism, as many of us know, are nearly impossible to shake. I have drawn upon the work of Arab, indigenous, third world, and people of color scholars whose work aims at “decolonizing methodologies.”⁸ I have also drawn on my own understandings of local knowledges, cultural sensibilities, and political

commitments among Arab Americans. I adapted the notion of “decolonizing methodologies” into the framework of de-Orientalizing methodologies, a framework, I contend, that emerges from the specific context of Arab American life at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Many scholars have noted that a huge gap exists between the actual concerns of Arab Americans and their portrayal in current academic and popular literatures. Yet few have studied what Arabs living in the United States themselves are saying about their twenty-first-century predicament. Much of the progressive political critique related to Arabs and America focuses on centers of power and domination, such as government policies and media representations, which are by definition external to the actual individuals, and the daily lives of the communities, targeted by the war on terror. This approach unintentionally reifies the centers of power by ignoring—among other things—Arab and Arab American engagements with race and intra-communal differences among Arab and Arab American communities; when we subsume Arabs and Arab Americans into the scholarship as mere targets of the war, however good our intentions, we contribute to their disappearance as human subjects and agents. My hope is that this book not only refuses, deconstructs, and de-essentializes Orientalist forms of knowledge but also replaces Orientalism with new forms of knowledge. Foregrounding the complexity of the lived experiences of subjects within a transnational feminist ethnography engenders what I hope can be an antidote to the objectifying modes of Orientalism and imperialism that shape discourse.⁹ What emerges is a dynamic picture of the plurality and relationality of Arab diasporas, a dynamism that has to do with the location of Arab diasporas in relationship to multiple Bay Area histories and communities, and with the way the locality of the Bay Area emerges in terms of global facts taking on local form (Appadurai 1996).¹⁰

The Research

Most of my research took place in the San Francisco Bay Area between January 1998 and August 2001. My research is based upon participant observation and intensive interviews with twenty-two immigrants and eighty-six young adults, most of whom are second-generation Arab Americans from Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. I interviewed forty second-generation men and forty-six second-generation women. I use the term “second-generation” to refer to people born in the United States or who came to the United States before they were five years old. Although seven interviewees self-identified as gay, lesbian, and/or queer, people conceptualized sexuality

in many ways—ranging from liberal notions that mapped sexuality onto an identity category (gay, lesbian, or queer) to identifying as queer to mark one's nonconformity with dominant concepts of family, gender, and sexuality. By specifying heterosexual/straight and gay/lesbian/queer research participants, I bring to focus the distinct kinds of oppression and exclusion that people whose lives do not conform to dominant sex-gender systems are forced to engage with. Yet this distinction cannot capture the complex ways sexuality is imagined and lived or the fluid and changing meanings of sexual desire, behaviors, and sexual identities that have circulated in the Arab region and its diasporas (Massad 2007; Abdulhadi 2010).

My training in anthropology significantly shaped my interest in the institutional forms of power that are critical in producing notions of cultural identity, community, and belonging, even as I was acutely aware of the pitfalls of the field's standard definitions of culture, definitions rooted in colonialist frameworks that have “contributed directly or indirectly to maintaining the structure of power represented by colonial systems” (Asad 1973). I planned to begin my research among networks where dominant constructs of “the Arab community” circulated in the Bay Area. When I developed my research design, I came face to face with anthropology's institutional structures of grants and funding, and they were much less flexible than the critical theories I had studied in my graduate courses (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). I was trained to think beyond homogeneous notions of culture, but the institutional structures expected me to craft a research design that assumed “a permanent join between a particular culture and a stable terrain” (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996, 1). Grant applications asked me to define my “field site” and to justify how the “sample” of people I planned to interview represented an equal number of individuals from my “population group” across the categories that were the focus of my research (religion, nation of origin, and gender). In the preliminary stages of my research, I tried to fit my research into this concept of one “field site,” and I worked with middle-class Arab community leaders and e-mail list-serves. At the time, I conducted interviews with sixty young adults (an equal number of persons from families with Muslim and Christian affiliations) and conducted participant observation at public events and family- and community-based social gatherings related to this network.¹¹ Participant observation included attending social, cultural, and political events, everything from music concerts to family gatherings, weddings, parties, and film festivals to cultural festivals, political demonstrations, and press conferences. I also joined the board of a few organizations, attended Arabic language and religious courses and religious ceremonies, led workshops

and events, and frequented Arab-owned restaurants and coffee shops that attracted Arab and Arab American customers. Because I was working among people actively negotiating the meaning of Arabness, I spent my time among groupings, organizations, or locations where heated discussions over cultural politics took place—Arabic language classes at colleges and universities, Arab community-based (social, cultural, and political) organizations, student groups, online Arab community list-serves, and family- and community-based events and gatherings.

I realized within the first year that these traditional research methods were foreclosing possibilities of exploring the multiplicity and contradictions of middle-class Arab communities. I took solace in poststructuralist feminist anthropology (Moore 1999; Viswesweran 1994; Abu-Lughod 1991; Haraway 1988) and feminist women of color theories of the self (Alarcón 1991; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Beal 2008). I went to the exact same events and talked to the same people but saw the events differently and asked different questions. I expanded my research into new areas—a more diverse group of places that attracted Arab American young adults. These approaches, rooted in a critique of essentialist or universalist definitions of womanhood, are committed to transcending the notion of “bounded selves” and “bounded cultures” (Viswesweran 1994). They shift the focus from our standard, liberal humanist idealization of a self-contained, authentic, singular, or independent self to an emphasis on tensions and contradictions among multiple discourses (including, but not limited to, gender, race, class, and sexuality). This conjuncturalist, anti-essentialist approach calls for “an understanding of the relationship between subjects and their histories as complex and shifting . . . and for using this concept to describe moments, social formations, subject positions and practices which arise out of an unfolding axis of colonization/decolonization, interwoven with the unfolding of other axes, in uneven, unequal relations with one another.”¹² It was here that my de-Orientalizing method was born.

Essential to this method is the power of the stories we all have to tell. Rather than seeking to represent the “real” Arab Americans (as opposed to the media’s fictive Arabs), I came to track the historical and political conditions that give rise to concepts of Arabness, and the specific and diverse narratives through which individuals who in one way or another affiliate with the Arab region and its diasporas make claims to, negotiate, live, reject, or transform these concepts. My focus on plural narratives about Arabness brought to my attention the range of discourses and power relations that shape these stories (Abu-Lughod 1993). Even the collectivity that many Arab Americans in the Bay Area themselves referred to as “the Arab community”

cannot be explained in terms of a bounded, monolithic group tied to a single geographic place.

I also drew upon transnational ethnographic methods (Lavie and Swendenburg 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 2009), which refuse the concept of bounded field sites and the illusion of “bounded groups that are tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, or culturally homogeneous” (Appadurai 1990, 196). Some Arab Americans were less affiliated with the dominant middle-class Arab community network and negotiated the meaning of Arabness within other collectivities such as Muslim student organizations, anti-imperialist political movements, and feminist and queer collectives. I decided to design the “what” and the “where” of my research not in terms of a bounded “Arab American population” but by epitomizing George Marcus’s notion of “multi-sited ethnography”—where narratives emerge ethnographically by the researcher following the people (2009, 90). I followed young adults’ stories, imaginations, desires, and visions where they would lead me. For instance, at Arab Cultural Center events, I met a few young adults who frequented Arab community events but found their primary sense of belonging among other Muslims. This corresponded to the growing institutionalization of Bay Area Muslim institutions, which were in turn an outcome of the increasing migrations of Muslims from various parts of the world to the Bay Area since the late 1980s. As I talked with my interlocutors, I learned of a growing trend among Arab American young adults to claim their identity as “Muslim First, Arab Second.” A narrative of belonging to a global Muslim community, among Muslims from various parts of the globe, took precedence over an Arab identification.

Thus, I committed a portion of my time to participant observation in Muslim organizations where young adults articulated Muslim identity among Muslim migrants, second-generation Muslims, and Muslims with various racial/ethnic histories. My research revealed that among these young adults, a particular group forged powerful concepts of home, belonging, loyalty, and affiliation through their involvement in a transnational social and political movement focused on ending global oppression. This led me to define Muslim student activism, which was the primary entry into their involvement with transnational Muslim politics, as my second research focus. I interviewed twenty Arab American Muslim students involved in this movement and conducted participant observation at the religious education classes and social and political events that constituted their social world. I did not take up studying distinctly Christian narratives. Indeed, there are Arab Americans who are also practicing Christians and who articulate distinct concepts of cultural identity and politics that might fit in with the focus

of this book. There is also a distinctly Arab Christian faith-based activism rooted in Christian forms of liberation theology.¹³ Yet owing to geopolitical conditions I cover in chapter 1, such as the peak in Arab Muslim migration patterns to the Bay Area in the 1990s and the politics of war that singles out Arab Muslims disproportionately compared to Arab Christians, there was no institutionalized transnational Christian political movement that second-generation Arab Americans were joining.

I encountered and subsequently worked with another collective of transnational Arab activists, this time young adults involved in leftist, anti-imperialist protest focused on Palestine and Iraq. These activists were connected to the dominant middle-class Arab community although a general middle-class sentiment was that they were “too liberal” or “too radical.” This leftist Arab movement (LAM) in the Bay Area included primarily young adults with different histories of migration, including both second-generation young adults and immigrants and refugees of the same age group. For a short time, they worked in collaboration with the recent Iraqi refugee community. I was a board member of the main organization through which LAM worked. Here, the categories “Arab,” “Arab American,” or “second-generation” were less significant than the narrative of leftist diasporic anti-imperialism. At the same time, differences of gender, class, and immigration history complicated, in unexpected ways, all attempts to explain this movement in categorical terms.

I also interviewed individuals whose experiences were crucial to the stories that this book tells but do not fit neatly into the above groupings. These interviews took place with community leaders who were primarily immigrants. They assisted me in locating my interlocutors’ stories within relevant historical and political circumstances. To better understand my interlocutors’ references to their middle-class immigrant parents, I conducted interviews with fifteen immigrants of their parents’ generation who moved from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria to the Bay Area between the 1950s and the 1970s. I spoke to them about Arab immigrant experiences in the Bay Area during this period, a time I knew little about beyond memories that my parents and their friends shared around the coffee table. To bolster my research among second-generation Arab American Muslim student activists, I interviewed four individuals whom these students considered key Muslim community leaders. These individuals directed or were active members of major Muslim American institutions in the Bay Area.

Following Ruth Behar, I focused my interviews on “life stories” rather than “life histories”—on what she calls “the fictions of self-representation, the ways in which life is made in the telling”—so as to “elaborate the concept of the actor as engaged in the meaningful creation of a life world.”

My work with Muslim student activists and activists from the leftist Arab movement documented “activist stories,” an offshoot of Behar’s term. Activist stories, I contend, are those of individuals who strive to be effective not just for themselves but in order to develop a broad understanding of their group within its particularized historical and political realities. While activist stories, like all ethnographic stories, are indeed fictive, I take interest in just how historically grounded and gravely urgent these stories become to my interlocutors’ lives. The conditions of living in the empire bring them to tell stories about recurring lived realities of violence and the fragility of life, even as they reside far away from many of the places they are fighting for. Throughout the book, I use pseudonyms to hide my interlocutors’ identities. Unless my interlocutors agreed, I avoid writing at length on matters that would reveal their identities.

Ethnographic Accountability

My relationships with my interlocutors shaped the kinds of knowledge I produced (Narayan 2003; Abu-Lughod 1991). I have an intimate familiarity with the people with whom I worked and the way they view family, culture, and politics. I also shared many political sensibilities with my interlocutors. For decades, my family was involved in the Arab Cultural and Community Center of San Francisco, an organization I turned to during the period of my research. In the late 1990s, I was an active member of the organizations that are the focus of chapters 4 and 5, the San Francisco chapters of Arab Women’s Solidarity Association and the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, San Francisco Chapter. I also was involved in feminist and antiwar organizations that several of my interlocutors were affiliated with, such as the Women of Color Resource Center and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

Accountability in research means developing research agendas in collaboration with the agendas of interlocutors’ social justice movements and their struggles for representation and self-determination (Smith 1999, 115–20; Viswesaran 1994, 32; Speed 2008). The social movements that are the focus of chapters 3, 4, and 5 prioritize interconnected agendas, such as dismantling imperial, colonial, and racial domination in their homelands and in the United States. A primary strategy of their movements was to bring counternarratives to U.S. publics that could replace the dominant U.S. imperialist representations of the Arab and Muslim region and their diasporas, representations that they argued legitimized U.S.-led wars and anti-Arab racism. Many of my interlocutors and I were engaged in a similar project

that believes in the potential of Arab and Muslim counternarratives to shift the balance of powers.

On a daily basis, I, like my interlocutors, have negotiated the discrepancy between the ways dominant U.S. discourses represent family, gender, sexuality, religion, and culture among Arab Americans and the diverse ways Arab Americans live these concepts. My interpretations of their stories were shaped as much by the analyses they shared as by my own. This reciprocity of analytical work is the reason why I refer to them as my interlocutors rather than subjects or interviewees. The mutuality of our work was especially true with the women activists who are the focus of chapters 4 and 5, as their political analyses and the political projects in which they were engaged most closely resembled my own. In light of these connections, many interlocutors seemed to perceive me as “one of us.” There were many times when interlocutors lost sight of my position as researcher. Such familiarity was a great honor; they saw that I was someone interested in the textures of their lives. In turn, the intimacy they showed required careful consideration and negotiation, about what I would publish and what would remain “between us” (Simpson 2007).

The principles of reciprocity and feedback shaped my research. This entailed not only reporting back with the research findings after the research was complete but also sharing research and obtaining feedback on the findings, analyses, and theories along the way (Smith 1999, 118-22). This was important for three reasons. First, my research addresses potentially sensitive matters—people’s in-depth personal stories, political events that could implicate a research participant in government harassment against them, or intra-communal tensions that could be construed by other members of the community as “airing our dirty laundry in public.” Thus in places where the personal and political stakes are high, I invited interlocutors to read chapters, correct mistakes, refuse publication of sensitive matters, contribute to the analysis, and provide feedback. In some places, I incorporated their responses into the book. Second, reciprocity and feedback allowed interlocutors to collaborate with me on how I was going to represent their stories. For instance, several activists whose stories I narrate in chapters 3, 4, and 5 collaborated with me on how I would refer to their political visions and affiliations. Third, reciprocity and feedback allowed me to gauge the usefulness of my research and analyses to Arab and Arab American audiences and beyond, specifically, the people whose stories I narrate in the book. Ethnographic accountability meant relating to my interlocutors not only as research participants but as theorists, scholars, and analysts themselves. At times, this went smoothly, especially when interlocutors responded with comments such as

these: “Your work is incredible, poignant, and you’ve named, reclaimed and worked through some incredibly difficult & spectacular moments in our collective history” (on chapters 4 and 5). At other times, I entered into elaborate discussions and negotiations over responses like this: “The class dimension is severely understated. Women who leverage years of investing in their own self-betterment by being UC or Stanford grads do not bring about the same intellectual resource in defending their rights as that of a student or waitress scrounging by.”

The Limits of Accountability

Writing for multiple audiences was among the most momentous challenges. I saw myself writing both for academic audiences and for Arabs and Arab Americans and their social movements (each with their own set of complexities). Challenging U.S.-led empire and war was among the social justice agendas that mattered most to the activists with whom I worked. Yet a dominant current in U.S. academia is hostile to Arab and Arab American political narratives, often censoring those that call U.S. empire into question, especially in relation to Palestine (Samman 2005; Roy 2007). The ways in which many Arabs and Muslims view the 1990s, although shared by many (often marginalized or targeted) scholars and activists throughout the world, contest much of the standard discourse prevalent in the media and supported by the government. This contested, and in many ways delegitimized, understanding of the recent relations between the United States and the Middle East is woven through my interlocutors’ narratives. Indeed, it contradicts much of what our mainstream media has been telling us for the last two decades. Consider, for example, the contested discourses on May 15, the day marking the creation of the state of Israel. Celebrated by dominant U.S. and Israeli discourses as Israeli Independence Day, this day is mourned among Palestinians, Arabs, and social justice advocates internationally as *al-Nakba* (the catastrophe) for its displacement of 750,000 Palestinian refugees and destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages. May 15 is just one of hundreds of instances of divergent visions of the world. Yet we must acknowledge and confront the imbalances of power and the ways in which, as Edward Said has written, the power to block certain narratives “from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (1993, xiii).

Balancing the demands of the academy and community accountability was a constant negotiation. Tenure procedures as well as the process of publishing generally reify positivist concepts of objectivity and call for distance

between the researcher and research participants. Balancing these demands, I positioned myself as an auto-ethnographer who aims to narrate each story, place it in a theoretical, historical, cultural, and political context, and provide some sort of background, analysis, commentary, or interpretation.¹⁴ There were indeed moments where I suppressed the urge to take stronger political stances or to advocate for one collective I worked with over another. I was also concerned that some of my interlocutors would want this to be more of an activist how-to book than I was willing or able to write. I cannot control the way this book will be read. Anytime women of color and third world women write about sexism and homophobia within their families or communities they risk having their words rerouted back through a colonialist, racist, or Orientalist mindset and misinterpreted as exemplifying their people's potential for violence and backwardness. Indeed, I also risk disappointing some of my interlocutors and people of the Arab Bay Area who may not want to see a book about intra-communal tensions and hierarchies.

Mitigating the Silences

Like all projects, this one inevitably has its own biases. In airing some voices, I have no doubt I am creating some silences. My own subject position impacted the way I related to people and the reasons why I came to narrate some stories more than others. To a certain extent, my family's history of involvement in middle-class Arab immigrant community networks gave me "insider" status as well and granted me a level of respect that impacted my research. Community leaders and interviewees generally assisted me and welcomed my project. Yet at times, my subject position was a site of difference or even distance that disrupted my "insider" status, even if temporarily. My Christian religious heritage and family name, for instance, positioned me as a guest in Muslim spaces. My active involvement in certain collectives led me to more awareness about some Arab American young adults' interests and commitments than others. For instance, I was more familiar with collectives that worked in some relationship to middle-class Arab immigrant institutions and collectives that were anti-imperialist, antiracist, antiwar, and/or feminist.

I grappled with how to write about queer Arab activism as I am not an insider to these politics, and when the research began I had developed only minimal relationships of mutual trust and respect with queer Arab activists. On the one hand, I believed that excluding queer Arab narratives would reinforce the long-standing exclusion of queer narratives from Arab American histories. I took heed from queer Arab interlocutors and activists who

insisted that being spoken for and represented also contributes to exclusion, erasure, and marginality. Through conversations with queer activists, I decided not to write a separate chapter on queer Arab activism. We agreed that it made more sense to weave queer Arab narratives throughout the book and to situate them in relationship to the complex web of subject positions and concepts and practices of gender and sexuality that constitute the Arab Bay Area. This would illustrate what one interlocutor explained as “showing that sexuality is part of everyone’s life experiences rather than associating sexuality only with queers.” I also decided to avoid the topic of theology in my discussions of Muslim student activism and to avoid in-depth representations of the previous period of the Palestinian movement and the Palestinian women’s movement in the Bay Area (1970s and ’80s) that I refer to throughout the book. Such a focus, I believe, would have been beyond my area of expertise and accountability and would have diluted my ability to explain the conditions most relevant to my research.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, one interlocutor, a human rights activist, refused to continue to be interviewed. She told me that she felt objectified as an Arab woman in the United States; after the U.S. public and media had been ignoring Arab and Arab American needs for so many years, all of a sudden, a plethora of organizations and media were asking her to speak at public events and to the media. Though she appreciated what I was trying to do, she felt unable to participate in any further efforts to represent her community. The ravages of Orientalism, as we can see, manifest in innumerable ways. My book is less compelling without her voice, but her decision contains its own power, and makes its own statement. I highlight these dilemmas to take responsibility for the fallibilities of this project. Even as I consulted with my interlocutors about my decisions, I was, ultimately, the researcher, the author, and the storyteller. I edited interview material for readability and I had the final say about how their stories would be retold and interpreted.¹⁵