Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/ American(ized) Whore

Nadine Naber

> It was a typical weeknight at my parents' home. My father was asleep since he wakes up at 4:00 a.m. to open his convenience store in downtown San Francisco. I joined my mother on the couch and we searched for something interesting to watch on TV. My mother held the remote control, flipping through the stations. Station after station a similar picture of an Anglo American male and female holding one another in romantic or sexual ways appeared on the screen. As she flipped the station, my mother remarked, "Sleep, Slept . . . Sleep, Slept . . . THAT is America!" She continued, "Al sex al hum, zay shurb al mai [Sex for them is as easy as drinking water]."
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> –Nadine Naber, journal entry, December 2, 1999

As I LISTENED to my mother,[1] I recalled several experiences growing up within a bicultural Arab American familial and communal context. *Al Amerikan* (Americans) were often referred to in derogatory sexualized terms. It was the trash culture–degenerate, morally bankrupt, and not worth investing in. *Al Arab* (Arabs), on the other hand, were referred to positively and associated with Arab family values and hospitality. Similarly, throughout the period of my ethnographic research among middle-class Arab American family and community networks in San Francisco, Cal-

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ifornia,[2] between January 1999 and August 2001, the theme of female sexuality circumscribed the ways my research participants imagined and contested culture, identity, and belonging. The theme of female sexuality tended to be utilized as part of some Arab immigrant families' selective assimilation strategy in which the preservation of Arab cultural identity and assimilation to American norms of "whiteness" were simultaneously desired. Within this strategy, the ideal of reproducing cultural identity was gendered and sexualized and disproportionately placed on daughters. A daughter's rejection of an idealized notion of Arab womanhood could signify cultural loss and thereby negate her potential as capital within this family strategy. In policing Arab American femininities, this family strategy deployed a cultural nationalist logic that represented the categories "Arab" and "American" in oppositional terms, such as "good Arab girls" vs. "bad American(ized) girls," or "Arab virgin" vs. "American(ized) whore." I coin the term Arab cultural re-authenticity to contextualize this process within Arab histories of transnational migration, assimilation, and racialization. Arab cultural re-authenticity, I suggest, is a localized, spoken, and unspoken figure of an imagined "true" Arab culture that emerges as a reaction or an alternative to the universalizing tendencies of hegemonic U.S. nationalism, the pressures of assimilation, and the gendered racialization of Arab women and men. I use the term hegemonic (white) U.S. nationalism to refer to the official discourses of the U.S. state and corporate media and the notion of a universalized abstract American citizen that "at the same time systematically produces sexualized, gendered, and racialized bodies and particularistic claims for recognition and justice by minoritized groups."[3]

This article focuses on the narratives of three of the thirty interviewees who are specifically activists who have worked within or supported Arab homeland struggles (i.e., Palestine and Iraq), radical Arab and Arab American feminist, queer Arab, and/or women of color feminist movements. Their location on the margins of both hegemonic U.S. nationalisms and Arab American cultural nationalisms provides a rich site from which to explore dominant discourses on gender and sexuality that circumscribe Arab American femininities. Their narratives represent historically specific contexts in which the gendered and sexualized discourses of

assimilation, anti-Arab racism, and U.S. Orientalism emerge, as well as the multiple points at which they break down. Counter to dominant colonialist Western feminist approaches that highlight "religion" (Islam) as the primary determinant of Arab women's identities, this article demonstrates that religion (Christian or Muslim) alone does not determine the processes by which Arab American femininities are imagined and performed. Instead, it situates discussions on religious identity within the context of intersecting coordinates of power (race, class, nation, and so forth) and historical circumstances. Moreover, I do not present their narratives as sites from which to universalize the experiences of all Arab American women, but to provide an opportunity to think beyond misperceptions and stereotypes. I locate myself in the context of multiple, contradictory loyalties, such as Arab daughter, sister, and cousin, anthropologist, researcher, community activist, and feminist. This location rendered me at once "insider" and "outsider," collaboratively and individually deconstructing, contesting, and often reinforcing the cultural logics that circumscribed my research participants' identities.

This article focuses on the tense and often conflictual location of Arab American femininities at the intersections of two contradictory discourses: Arab cultural re-authenticity and hegemonic U.S. nationalism. I explore the ways that the theme of sexuality permeated many Arab immigrant families' engagements with the pressures of assimilation vis-à-vis a series of racial and cultural discourses on Arabness and Americanness. I argue that although my research participants (and their parents) perceived their cultural location within a binary of Arabness and Americanness, when lived and performed, this binary constantly broke down, particularly along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation. Yet binary terms for expressing the themes of family, gender, and sexuality persisted throughout my field sites as a discursive mechanism for explaining more complex processes that implicate my research participants and their parents within a desire for a stereotypical "Americanization" that is predicated on "Arabness" as the crucial Other. A binary cultural logic of "us" and "them" that was gendered and sexualized was then a discursive reaction to the complex dichotomies of hegemonic U.S. nationalism that at once pressure racialized immigrants to assimilate into a whitened middle-class U.S.

national identity while positioning them outside the boundaries of "Americanness." Both generations were mutually invested in expressing the two racial-ethnic-national categories (Arab and American) in dichotomous terms because it provided a discursive mechanism for engaging with the processes of immigration and assimilation in which Arabness and Americanness absolutely depend on each other to exist–as opposites and in unison.

My research is based on intensive interviews and participant observation among thirty second-generation women between the ages of twenty and thirty, both Muslim and Christian, of Lebanese, Jordanian, Palestinian, and Syrian descent.[4] My research participants' parents emigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s, during a period of heightened secular Arab nationalism in the Arab world. Although most of my research participants were raised within secular families, religious affiliation (Muslim or Christian) was a key marker of identity and difference throughout my field sites. Most of my research participants of Muslim descent, for example, explained that growing up they understood Islam as part of their cultural identity. Most of my research participants who were from Christian backgrounds generally agreed that they were raised as "Christian Arabs" or that the "Arab community" that their parents identified with was comprised predominantly of Christian Arabs.

Before coming to the United States, most of my research participants' families were traders involved in small business enterprises who were either displaced to the San Francisco Bay area as a consequence of colonialism, neocolonialism, and war (i.e., Palestinians and Israeli colonization, or Lebanese and the Lebanese civil war) or emigrated to the San Francisco Bay area in the 1960s in search of economic mobility. Their parents did not integrate into culturally whitened middle-class corporate communities upon migration, but relied on familial and communal financial networks and support to eventually buy their own grocery and liquor stores. The internal pressures of tight-knit, familial, and communal networks and the external pressures of Americanization, assimilation, and racism have fostered an often reactionary bourgeois reproduction of Arab cultural identity. Cultural authorities–including parents, aunts, and uncles as well as the leaders of secular and religious community-based institutions–tend-

ed to generate a socially conservative and essentialized notion of "Arab culture" alongside a contradictory desire for the "American dream" and assimilation into American modes of whiteness.

This article, then, is not an analysis of *all* second-generation Arab Americans, but of how locational conditions (especially when it comes to racialized, gendered, class, and religious identities) mediate and break down an imagined "Arab" identity in the context of the San Francisco Bay area of California. It is an exploration of how binary oppositions within Arab American discourses on gender and sexuality take on particular form among my research participants, a group of educated, middle-class, young women active in progressive Arab, Arab feminist, and/or queer Arab political movements whose parents are ethnic entrepreneurs and immigrated, or were displaced, to the San Francisco Bay area–a traditionally liberal, racially/ethnically diverse location. Focusing on the narratives of three young Arab American women, this article highlights the processes by which discourses of Arab cultural re-authenticity and hegemonic U.S. nationalism police Arab American femininities circumstantially, depending on the types of "bad girl" behaviors to be controlled within a particular location. I argue that the phenomena of intersectionality cannot be generalized as taking one singular form for all Arab Americans; that one must be cautious about using the terms "Arab American" or "Arab American women" in a U.S. national sense; and that feminist theory and practice vis-à-vis Arab American communities should take the specific ways that the coordinates of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation intersect in different contexts seriously. For example, perhaps part of the motivation behind the policing of an Arab daughter's behavior among middle-class business entrepreneurs invested in economic mobility and the selective reproduction of patriarchal cultural ideals is that San Francisco is home to some of the most vibrant progressive Arab, queer Arab, Arab feminist, and Arab student movements alongside some of the most vibrant civil rights, racial justice, feminist, and queer movements in the nation. In the San Francisco Bay area, multiracial coalition building, transgressive sexual politics, and critiques of classism, capitalism, U.S.-led imperialism, and war heavily inspire young people, such as my research participants, who are either active in or loyal to progressive politics.

Among my research participants, the performativity of an idealized "true" Arab culture emerged in the context of "regulatory ideals" that they associated with "being Arab" and distinguished from the regulatory ideals of "being American," such as: knowing what is *'abe* (shameful); knowing how to give *mujamalat* (flattery); knowing what you're supposed to do when someone greets you; drinking *shai* (tea) or coffee; talking about politics "sooo" much; getting up for an older person; respecting your elders; looking after your parents and taking care of them; judging people according to what family they are from; marrying through connections; gossiping and having a good reputation.[5]

Articulations of "selfhood" among my research participants were key sites where the oppositional logic of self/Other, us/them, Arab/American was reproduced among my research participants. Selfhood was often articulated in terms of a choice between "being an individual, being my own person, being an American," or "being connected, having family, and being 'Arab.'" Yet what ultimately distinguished "us" from "them," or *Al Arab* from *Al Amerikan,* among my research participants was a reiterated set of norms that were sexualized, gender specific, and performed in utterances such as "*banatna ma bitlaau fil lail*" (our girls don't stay out at night). Positioning the feminized subjectivities within my field sites in between the binary oppositions of good Arab daughter vs. bad American(ized) daughter, or Arab virgin vs. American(ized) whore, the discourse of Arab cultural re-authenticity reproduced a masculinist cultural nationalist assumption that if a daughter chooses to betray the regulatory demands of an idealized Arab womanhood, an imagined Arab community loses itself to the *Amerikan.* Jumana, recalling her parents' reinforcement of this distinction while she was growing up, explains,

> My parents thought that being American was spending the night at a friend's house, wearing shorts, the guy-girl thing, wearing make-up, 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].

My research participants generally agreed that virginity, followed by heterosexual (ethno-religious) endogamous marriage were the key de-

mands of an idealized Arab womanhood that together, constituted the yardstick that policed female subjectivities in cultural nationalist terms. Here, discourses around Arab American femininities allow for a cultural, versus territorial, nationalist male Arab American perspective within the United States that emerges in opposition to hegemonic (white) U.S. nationalism and in the context of immigrant nostalgia. Here, an imagined notion of "Arab people" or an "Arab community" is inspired, in part, by a collective memory of immigrant displacement and romantic memories of "home" and "homeland culture." Among middle-class familial and communal networks in San Francisco, Arab American cultural nationalism was expressed in terms of an imagined Arab community or people that constituted "woman" as virgin or mother vis-à-vis an extended family context. Among Arab American cultural authorities in San Francisco, the ideal of marrying within one's kin group within the discourse of Arab cultural re-authenticity was refashioned in terms of marrying within the kin groups' religious group (Muslim or Christian); village of origin (Ramallah, Al Salt), economic class, national (Jordanian, Lebanese, Palestinian, or Syrian), or racialized/ethnic (Arab) group. These categories were hierarchical, as "religious affiliation" tended to supersede "national origin" and "national origin" superseded "racial/ethnicity identity" as the boundary to be protected through a daughter's marriage. Although the regulatory demands of Arab womanhood were often framed as an alternative to assimilation and Americanization, the cultural discourses that controlled a daughter's marriagability simultaneously enabled a family strategy of assimilation to an appropriate American norm of whiteness that privileges heterosexual marriage—within particular boundaries of race and class—as capital.

The following narratives epitomize the processes by which discourses on Arabness and Americanness shifted depending on the kinds of power relations that set the stage for a daughter's expression and/or transgression of idealized notions of femininity within a given context. The first narrative centralizes intersections of race and class in the policing of Arab American femininities. The second narrative emphasizes intersections of religion and sexuality. The third narrative draws attention to intersections of Orientalism and religion. Together, these narratives highlight three differ-

ent locations along a continuum of gendered experience among my research participants at the intersections of race and class; religion and sexuality; and Orientalism and religion. In doing so, they point to the process by which different sociohistorical circumstances produce shifting constructions of Arabness and Americanness in general and shifting constructions of Arab American femininity in particular. Although my research also illustrates that Arab cultural re-authenticity articulates masculinity and femininity as relational and mutually constitutive and implicates masculinity in binary terms that are contested, transformed, and often reproduced along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation, an analysis of Arab American masculinities is beyond the scope of this article. Overall, this article argues for a historically situated, anti-essentialist approach to Arab and Arab American feminist studies that takes the locational conditions that mediate and break down an "imagined Arab American identity" seriously.

Race, Class, and the Double Life

> Rime and I met at Arabian Nights, one of the few clubs in San Francisco where the DJ spins Arabic music. A mutual friend introduced us to one another and told her that I was doing research among young Arab Americans. As the DJ mixed hip-hop, reggae, and Arabic beats, Rime described herself as "living in two worlds . . . the 'Arab' world of [her] family . . . and the 'American' world outside of home." The next time we met, she explained that her parents emigrated to San Francisco from Jordan in the late 1960s in search of economic opportunity, that she was the oldest among five siblings, that her father owned a liquor store in one of San Francisco's poor black neighborhoods for the past fifteen years and that she graduated with a BA in nutrition and was persuing a master's degree in public health.
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> –Naber, journal entry, June 18, 1999

Excerpts from Rime's Oral History: *In high school, my parents didn't want me hanging out with my brother's friends because they got paranoid about my virginity and they didn't want me hanging out with my cousins' friends because they were Mexican and black. In high*

school, my mom got paranoid about my virginity. My dad used to tell me, "I had a nightmare that my daughter would marry a black man." That was because my dad owns a liquor store in the Tenderloin [neighborhood] and all his life he's been robbed and shot at, and his wife's been robbed by blacks. He blamed poor black communities for their situation without understanding it and he couldn't understand that I had a lot of black friends at school and that blacks were always the first ones out there supporting Arab student movements at school.

I remember when my cousin got pregnant with a guy who was half Mexican and half black. She lied and stayed out of the house for four years. Her family knew but kept it secret. The couple got in a big fight and the guy kicked my cousin out and she moved back to her parents' house. She did the most despicable thing a girl could ever do in Arab culture—and they took her back.

I was with Roger until recently. He was someone who I thought was total instant love but he was more of my support blanket because he was outside of the traditional Arab cultural realm. I lived in his house, and his parents accepted that 100 percent. As far as my parents were concerned, I was living with my cousin. But there was always the anxiety about getting caught for lying and I internalized hating being a woman. I would wake up at his house thinking about my father seeing me with a black guy. It was pure panic. Roger would touch my skin and be like, "You're so cold."

Because I was Arab I had to take care of my family's reputation and I was always reminded of it. I think my parents knew about him, but their attitude was, "Do what you do . . . don't let anybody find out." Then it was always my friends' fault—my American friends—"they're bad." And I couldn't work at the family store, because "American" men picked up on me there.

When I was graduating from college, I was partying a lot and I felt I needed to be more responsible. That's why I went back home to Jordan. In Jordan, my life completely turned around. I met Omar. All my life, the message was that I had to marry an Arab Christian man. I finally met an Arab Christian man who I love, and I thought the double life and the lying could be resolved . . . but my parents are not accepting him. Before he told his family or my family, he asked me to marry him, and traditionally, that was wrong. My mom is stuck on that issue. The thing that was really bugging her is that he's a communist and an atheist and against all the traditions. But what they focus on mostly is that . . . "the guy has no money—and you're going to go live with his family."

*Traditionally if an Arab man is going to get married he should furnish and open a house for the girl and then get married, not get married and then worry about that stuff. My mom keeps saying "*Batlee *[stop]. You're not getting married." It all comes down to our traditions—having Arab traditions, and then being raised here in the U.S. . . . Why does it have to be so dif-*

ficult? Is it because I'm Arab? Is it because of my mother?"

I'm planning on moving to Jordan and marrying him. My parents will get over it. My cousin asked me, "Have you told him about birth control?" And when I said yes, she went crazy and said I was crazy for telling him about birth control. They see him through a Western image of Arab men. They think I'm going to go back there from this independent, free spirit to be all the way across the world in this backward culture, like I'm going to be locked up at home rolling grape leaves all day. He says, "Don't worry, it won't be like that."

If we get married and I move back to Jordan and it doesn't work, I'll say, I'm going to get some milk, but then I'll get a ticket and go to New York. I won't even give them a phone number. I'll call them once a month—and tell them that I'm okay. Then I'll go and get all this freedom, but I'll be all alone. I'll be another lonely white CEO woman who's all alone and has no one: has no family, no brothers, no nothing. 'Cause that's what it's like in American culture.

Sometimes it can all 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.

When Rime speaks of living in "two worlds," fixity and singularity underwrite her view of "culture." Rime speaks about "Arab culture" and "American culture" as though they already existed, transcending place, time, and relations of power. Yet as Trinh T. Minh-ha puts it, "categories always leak."[6] Rime's family's Christian religious affiliation and Omar's economic class, which disqualifies him as a suitable marriage partner, disrupt Rime's homogeneous "Arab world." Moreover, Omar's position as a "disappointment" to Rime's parents and his ironic foreignness reflects the instability of Arab cultural re-authenticity in that Omar bursts the bubble of "authentic Arabness" that they left in the homeland and have tried to recreate in the United States. Here, Omar's forced presence in Rime's family's life exposes the nostalgia underlying Arab cultural re-authenticity for what it is.

Similarly, the racialized distinctions Mexican and black rupture Rime's essentialized "American" world. These discontinuities drive the present argument that while Rime sees herself between "two worlds," rupture and difference position her along the two axes of sameness and difference. At a critical distance from both "worlds," Rime decides to marry a Jordanian man of Christian descent who is an atheist. Yet her narrative reproduces a

good girl versus bad girl binary in which "bad-girl behaviors" are signified by her desire to marry across lines of socioeconomic class and political affiliation. As she crafts an alternative plan to move to New York alone in case the marriage does not work, she invents tactics for transgression beyond the boundaries of a nostalgic "true" Arab culture.

Rime's "two (Arab and American) worlds" are not homogeneous or stable, but multiple and overlapping in the context of power, history and the changing intersections of class, race, gender, religion, and politics in different locations. Rime implies that the unacceptability of interracial marriage compounds the virginity ideal. Although prohibitions against mixed-race unions are common in the Arab word, Rime's interpretation of her community's prohibitions is mediated by historically based U.S. nationalist anxiety about interracial marriage. Rime's father's positionality as a liquor store owner in the Tenderloin neighborhood further shaped the racialized and gendered imperatives that policed Rime's sexuality. His nightmare over his daughter's potential interracial marriage emerges as a threat to securing white middle-class norms and implies the forging of a critical distance from the racial Other toward whiteness. Here, "Arab culture" is invoked as a strategy for harnessing markers of middle-class whiteness. Meanwhile, the regulatory ideal that forbids sex with the United States' racialized Other controls Arab daughters' sexuality while protecting Rime's family, and an imagined Arab people, from degeneracy in white middle-class terms. Binaries collapse in the context of a much greater complexity in that her father's attitude fits comfortably when he seems to be speaking (in his daughter's mind) to Arabness. Yet in fact, in policing Rime's sexuality, he is reinforcing the new identity he has had to develop in the United States, demonstrating the fiction of Arab cultural re-authenticity.

Rime's two worlds are similarly narrated in gendered and sexualized terms and her perception of a fixed and stable "Arab culture" is disrupted when her aunt and uncle take her cousin back after she "got pregnant with a guy who was half Mexican and half black." Here, her cousin's parents seem to care less about her mixed-race relationship and illegitimate pregnancy than with presenting the public face of an "authentic" or "traditional" Arab family. Through silence (that is, Rime's cousin staying out of the house for years; Rime living with her cousin) both "traditionalist" parents

and their "Americanized" daughters are mutually implicated in keeping the idealized notions of Arabness and Americanness active and in opposition. These silences allow them to keep the binary intact and mask the fact that at different points the oppositions threaten to be one and the same.

Although Rime narrates herself as a split subject, her "worlds" "inside" and "outside" (Arab and American) were not discreet. In bed, the boundaries between "inside" and "outside" collapse as her father's disapproving gaze interrupts the privacy of her boyfriend's bedroom while her boyfriend places his hand on her skin. Rime interprets the regulatory ideal of marrying "an Arab Christian man" as the central act that would render her embraceable or acceptable within the discourse of Arab cultural reauthenticity in between two seemingly distinct and homogeneous "Arab" and "American" worlds. Yet in learning of Omar's unacceptability as a communist atheist from a different socioeconomic class, Rime comes to terms with the heterogeneity of Arab cultural identity. Yet she also reproduces the notion of a normative "Arab cultural identity" when she interprets her reality as a choice between "having a family and community," or "being another lonely white CEO woman." Here, Rime's distinction between "having family and community" and "being a lonely white CEO woman" represents the reproduction of idealized notions of selfhood in the diaspora. As Rime critically receives cultural meanings, she associates "Arab" cultural identity with love, community, cohesiveness, and control and "American" cultural identity with individualism, autonomy, and alienation. Yet as Rime's parents render Omar unacceptable because he lives in the homeland, lacks money, and lacks Christian values, the fantasy of a romantic notion of "cultural authenticity" located in the homeland collapses along the lines of class, religion, and gender.

The Heterosexual Imperative

> Waiting for a friend at Café Macondo, in San Francisco's Mission district, graffiti reading QUEER ARABS EXIST caught my attention. Later, in conversations among Arab women activists, I learned that the graffiti artist was a Syrian American woman named Lulu. Lulu was also the coproducer of a special issue of *Bint Al Nas* on the theme of "sexuality." *Bint Al Nas* is a cyber magazine and network for queer Arab women and

as part of this issue, Lulu designed the web art, "Virgin/Whore," where a collage representing herself as "virgin" (represented by drums, pita bread, camels, Allah, a Syrian flag, and a photograph of her family members wearing blindfolds) transforms into a second collage representing her as "whore" (represented by images of dildos next to her girlfriend's name written in Arabic, handcuffs, a blurred image of the picture that represents her parents, and a photo of Madonna). A few months later, Lulu and I made plans to meet at Café Flor, a queer hangout in the Castro district of San Francisco. I recognized Lulu from the tattoo of her girlfriend's name Amina in Arabic script on her arm and the Palestinian flag sewn onto her book bag. We talked about the collage and she explained, "What I am doing with the two images is showing how they are dichotomous, or at least they have felt that way, and how really, it has been an either/or situation. Also, I think it's how my mother would see my sexuality: dirty, sinful, dark. The reason for the roll over of images is to show that the two states can't coexist."

–Naber, journal entry, December 28, 2000

EXCERPTS FROM LULU'S ORAL HISTORY: *I grew up with this all the time: "Sex is an act of love in marriage. If you're not a virgin when you get married, you're in trouble." I fought that all the time. I would ask my mom about Syria. I would say, "If good Arab women are not having sex and Arab men can have sex, then who were the Arab men having sex with?" She would answer, "The Christian women." So the Christian women were the whores. That is very prevalent in my family, the Muslim virgin and the Christian whore. The whore is either American or Christian.*

My family is unique because we talked about sex. My sister was really vocal about having boyfriends and they were always black, which was even more of a problem. My parents are into the idea that Arabs are white. I think it's more of a Syrian-Lebanese thing. But I didn't have the same problems with my parents about boyfriends as my sister because I knew I was queer since I was thirteen or fourteen. It was when I came out when things erupted for me. It got to the point where they were asking, "Don't you want to have a boyfriend?"

My mom won't come visit me at my house because she doesn't want to see that I live with a woman. The bottom line is premarital sex. Lesbian sex doesn't happen because Arab girls don't have premarital sex. When I came out, it was like, "That's fine that you're gay—but don't act on it. We don't want you having sex." Everyday I heard, "Get married with a guy and. . ." suppress it, basically. I said, "I can't do that." And I still get that . . . "We (Arabs)

don't do that" . . . or "You're the only gay Arab in the world."

It became this thing that everyone was going to fix me. My uncles would come and take me out to lunch. They would say, "Let's talk. This doesn't happen in our culture. You've been brainwashed by Americans. You've taken too many feminist classes, you joined NOW, you hate men, you have a backlash against men. . . ." It was like . . . "This is what this American society has done to our daughter."

When that was the reaction I received, I totally disassociated myself from Arabs. I felt I couldn't be gay and Arab. I felt that either I have to go home and be straight or be totally out and pass as white. But later, I got a lot of support from queer Arab networks.

One of the first people I met was Samah. She was doing some research and asked if she could interview me. I did it and we both cried. Then I went to a queer Arab women's gathering. I was the youngest one and everyone knew that I came out a week after I turned eighteen and was kicked out by my parents four months later. I was the baby. They all supported me. Over the years, they've become my family.

Now my mom tells me, "Just go have sex with a man—maybe you'll change," and I say, "Maybe you should try it with a woman." She keeps finding ways to say I'm too Americanized . . . and when I tell her, "You don't know how many queer Arabs I know." She says, "They're American, they're American born, they're not Arab . . . " or "They must be Christian," or "Their fathers must not be around because no father would accept his daughter being gay."

They blamed Western feminism and said I should go to a therapist. Then they changed their mind and said not to go because they don't want it on my hospital records that I am gay—because "You know," they would say, "After you change—someone might see on your hospital records that you were gay." Their idea was that they didn't want anyone finding out "after I change" and "once I get married," that I had this dark past. Then at the very end they did try to send me to a hospital. That was when the shit hit the fan, our big final fight. I was so strong in defending myself—and they thought that too was very American. So it became this thing of like— and they make it very clear—"You chose your sexuality over us. Sex is more important than your family." Which goes back to the tight-knit family Arab thing. It's all about group dynamics.

When Lulu's mother replaces the "American whore" with the "Christian Arab" she reveals the gaps and fissures within the idea of a unified Arab American nationalist identity and the ways that Arab cultural re-authenticity shifts depending on sociohistorical circumstances. Lulu's mother's

association of the category "Syrian Christian" with the classification "Westernized Other" signifies the ways that the categories "Islam" and "Arabness" have often been conflated throughout Arab history and in several cases, juxtaposed against the notion of a Christian West. According to her mother, the Syrian-Muslim self is to be protected from the corrupted, Westernized, Syrian-Christian Other.

Intersections between national origin and racial identification in Lulu's narrative further complicate Arab cultural identity in the United States. Lulu, in remembering why her parents did not accept her sister's black boyfriends, explains that identifying as white is "a Syrian-Lebanese thing." The Syrian-Lebanese distinction is common within hegemonic Arab American discourses in San Francisco. Many of my research participants agree that Syrian and Lebanese Arab Americans have had more access to the privileges of middle-class whiteness compared to other Arab Americans.[7] Steering Lulu's sister away from the racial Other, Lulu's mother, like Rime's father, secures a white middle-class positionality. Yet when it comes to Lulu's sexuality, the association of Syrians with whiteness is quickly disrupted as a sexualized, cultural, nationalist logic disassociates them as "Arabs" from the loose, sexually immoral American "feminist" Other in the name of controlling Lulu's sexuality. In Lulu's narrative, then, the *Al Arab/Al Amerikan* boundary is permeable and shifting. As Lulu explains, her parents uphold the normative demands of middle-class American whiteness to tame her sister's sexuality while they distinguish themselves from *Al Amerikan* when it comes to taming Lulu's behaviors.

Fissures in Arab cultural re-authenticity also emerge when Lulu's mother suggests that Lulu "try sex with a man." In the case of Lulu's queer identity, a heterosexual imperative becomes a more significant symbol of the Arab virgin/American whore boundary than the "virginity" ideal. Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality."[8] Lulu's queerness, the central marker of her betrayal, underwrites her marginalization as traitor-outsider-American by cultural authorities such as her mother, her father, and her uncle. The extent to which she is seen as "unacceptable, faulty, damaged," culminate in her family's attempt to send her

to a hospital to fix her so that she might return "straight" home. Here, the stance of their conservativism is made possible by their inculcation and reproduction of white American middle-class norms, such as "therapy," within the discourse of Arab cultural re-authenticity. Lulu's parents thus reinforce a particular kind of assimilation constituted by the ways that Arabness and Americanness operate both as opposites and in unison in the policing of Arab American femininities throughout my field sites.

In overriding the virginity ideal with the heterosexual imperative, Lulu's mother reinforces the control over women's sexual and marriage practices that underlie the heterosexual conjugal ideal in Arab and Western societies. Yet beyond reinforcing a heterosexual imperative, Lulu's mother is also reinforcing family ideals critically inherited from Arab homelands that are not only conjugal, but include extended kin that are inscribed beyond household or nuclear terms. In attempting to reinstate Lulu's heterosexuality, Lulu's mother seeks to protect Lulu's father's honor as well as the family honor of her nuclear and her extended family. Moreover, the intervention of Lulu's uncle can be interpreted in terms of the refashioning of a patrilineal ideal in the diaspora, in which males and elders remain responsible for female lineage members (even after marriage) and men are responsible for providing for their families, which includes their current wives and underage children and may include aged parents, unmarried sisters, younger brothers, and the orphaned children of their brothers.[9]

As a form of political critique directed against patriarchy and patrilineality, Lulu's chosen family is a sign of her resistance. In the act of choosing her family, Lulu challenges Arab and Anglo-European ideologies that read blood and heterosexual marriage ties as the key foundation of kinship, demonstrating that all families are contextually defined. In undermining the association of kinship with biology, Lulu overtly performs the social, ideological, political, and historical constructedness of kinship. Yet when she meets Samah and joins queer Arab e-mail lists, Lulu finds an alternative to the Arab/American split in the coming together of what she understood to be her "queer" and her "Arab" identities. Lulu's insistence that QUEER ARABS EXIST is an act in resisting racism, homophobia, and patriarchy on multiple fronts: it undermines the Arab virgin/American

(ized) whore that seeks to control women's sexuality by marking women who transgress the heterosexual imperative of Arab cultural authenticity as "American" and it disrupts the dualistic logic of hegemonic U.S. nationalist discourses that homogenize and subordinate Arab women as either veiled victims of misogynist terrorist Arab men or exotic erotic objects accessible to white/Western male heroes. Yet cultural identity, for Lulu, is more than "separate pieces merely coming together"–it is a site of tension, pain, and alienation that is constantly in motion.

Lulu's narrative signifies the critical inheritance of the polarization between Muslim and Christian Arabs from the homeland(s) to Arab San Francisco. It exemplifies the ways that this polarization took on local form among many bourgeois Arab American Muslims with whom I interacted. Throughout my field sites, hegemonic Arab Muslim discourses often privileged Arab Muslim women as the essence of cultural re-authenticity–as opposed to Arab Christian women who were often represented as promiscuous and therefore, "Americanized." Yet although cultural authorities often deployed religion as a framework for policing feminized subjectivities throughout my field sites, religious background alone did not determine the extent to which my research participants upheld, reconfigured, or transgressed the feminized imperatives of Arab cultural re-authenticity. My research participants who transgressed "good girl" behaviors through dating before marriage, interracial, and/or same-sex relationships were religiously diverse. In addition, religious affiliation alone did not determine the extent to which parents, aunts, or uncles circumscribed their daughters' behaviors and identities.

While Lulu explained that her mother deployed her Muslim identity to reinforce the normative demands of virginity, her parents' self-identification as "white" complexified their understanding of a "normative femininity." In addition, Lulu stated that her mother deployed a pan-ethnic "Arab" identity when she asked her to suppress her lesbian identity. Thus, while the discourse of the "Muslim virgin" and the "Christian whore" policed Lulu's femininity, the "virgin/whore" dichotomy was also constituted by a series of intersecting and contradictory discourses such as white versus non-white, Arab versus American. The ways that these discourses operated to police femininities depended on the different ways that coor-

dinates of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation intersected in each of my research participants' lives.

U.S. Orientalism and the Religious Difference

> Nicole and I agreed on Kan Zaman in San Francisco as our meeting spot since we heard they served *argilah* [an Arabic water pipe]. Little did we know that on Thursday nights, it was the place to be for ex-hippie yuppies who enjoy mixing a little humus and a pita with a few drinks before a night of partying on the town. As we walked in, I greeted the owner Yousef, who goes by the name of Joe to his customers, as we watched two Anglo-American women who went by the names of Laila and Amina belly dancing with nose rings and sequined bikini tops. Sitting down on a bed of bright colorful pillows in a recreated imaginary Orient we began our first conversation. As daughters of Arab Christians, we had parents who similarly believed that emigration to the United States would mean further distancing themselves from the "backwards, uncivilized, Muslims." Over dinner, we confessed similar stories about our parents' comments about the Muslim Other and pondered the irony that our immigrant parents view us as "more Arab" than them because we interact with Muslims. For the following three months, Nicole and I continued meeting for dinner as she shared with me her struggles over gender, culture, and identity between and among the boundaries of "Arab" and "American."
>
> –Naber, journal entry , August 16, 1999

Excerpts from Nicole's Oral History:

One time I asked my uncle to send me an argilah *from Lebanon. When it arrived in the mail, my mom hid it in the closet and started flipping out at me. She kept asking why her Western educated, Lebanese, Christian, civilized, modern daughter—and she used all these adjectives—who they gave the privilege of having a Western education—wanted to go back and smoke an* argilah *which is a backwards, dirty, horrible, uncivilized Muslim habit.*

But when you grow up in the United States, all kinds of Arabs end up hanging out with each other and the Muslim Christian thing isn't as big. In college, the biggest movement was the Palestinian movement. I was involved because it was an Arab thing, even though growing up Lebanese, the Palestinian struggle wasn't driven into you as much. In Lebanon, Palestinians, especially the Palestinian Muslims, were associated with being refugees, being radi-

cal politically, and trying to take over other Arab countries.

In college, my ethnicity bloomed. I felt more proud of being Arab—even though when I would tell people I was Arab, they wouldn't believe me because I go to parties and drink and they thought that if you were an Arab girl, you had to wear a veil and your parents never let you do anything. I remember once, when I told someone I was Arab, they said, "And your father let you go to college?" In college, my name and my look became cool because I was viewed as exotic. All of a sudden, you turn around with dark curly hair and dark lips and you're the item of the year. White men are confident to approach you. It's trendy. It's part of the boy talk with other boys. This one guy said to me, "I've been with a Sri Lankan, a Madagascan, a Somali. . . . It's like . . . I was with this Lebanese." People approach you because you are the vision of this exotic Arab woman goddess.

My parents were really liberal about guys. I would tell them when I had a boyfriend. In college, I started dating Ben. His mother is a Jewish lesbian. I told my father this over the dinner table. He was upset, but he got over it. They accepted him because no one else would have to find out about his mother. We could have told my dad's family that he is Christian.

Both my parents are Christian, but we were raised atheist. So why this reaction to Mohammed? After college, I met the love of my life, Mohammed. He's a Palestinian Muslim, and we've been dating seriously. My mom freaked out saying that meant he is Muslim and how dare I date a Muslim. She went on to say, "Don't you know that there are 15,000 cases of Christian Western American women married to Muslim men and the women are in the States and the men have taken their children from them to the Muslim world and the women are in the States trying to get their children back from those horrible men?"

She learned this on 20/20. Then she said, "Well you know, if you are sleeping with him, his family is going to kill you." The stereotypes never stop. She says that he will force me to sleep with him so I will have to marry him or that he will make me cover my hair, or he will marry more than one wife. After a few months she said, "Your father is freaking out because people in the community are talking about you. Even his friends in Lebanon heard your are dating a Muslim. He's saying that you've ruined his reputation." My dad called me and said, "You have to stop dating him right now." I told him that this doesn't make sense. I have aunts married to Palestinians. But even though Lebanese think they're better than Palestinians, that wasn't the issue. The issue was that he is Muslim. My dad is acting as if he's experiencing absolute betrayal and they're losing their daughter to the enemy.

What's crazy is my mom is Armenian and her Armenian parents let her marry my dad, an Arab! And my parents are atheists! So it's not really about religion per se, it's that they want me to marry someone Westernized, and Lebanese Christian falls into Western. Then there's

this issue of land. My dad has all this land in the village. He's already discussed with my brother and [me] what land we get. And in the future, I want to build a house on that land. I know if I marry Mohammed my father is going to disown me and he won't give me that land. But I know that my brother will undo it. My brother told me he would give me the land but I know it's hard on him because he is also worried that he will get a bad reputation for sanctioning his sister to date a guy that is against his father's wish. I think my parents are doing all this to save face. I'll never forget the e-mail Mohammed sent me. It said, "How good is it that we love each other if we're going to allow Ottoman conventions to kill it?"

I have to figure out for myself if I can endure being rejected by my society and excluded from the social glue that keeps me tied to my roots and all the networks of social relations my family built here even though they're so reactionary. If I make the decision to marry him, I will be cut off from my lifeblood. Can I endure the pain and hardships of struggling against society for the sake of following my heart? But personal happiness extends way beyond the bond that ties man to woman. There are other ties . . . between an individual and her society, a daughter and her mother, and a girl . . . and the community that nurtured her. When I think about giving up Mohammed it's like giving up one kind of happiness to preserve another. My family and community's love has roots and gives me stability, whereas Muhammed symbolizes risk and daring and revolutionary uncertainty. That's what is causing my identity crisis. My life is bound up in the lives of others.

Within Nicole's narrative, her peers' Orientalist representation of Arab women as simultaneously veiled victim and exotic goddess, coupled with her mother's associations of Muslim habits with the terms, "backwards, dirty, horrible, and uncivilized" and Muslim men with the themes of misogyny, illustrate the significance of Orientalism to middle-class U.S. notions of identity and modernity. Her peers reproduce an Orientalist logic that renders Arab women as requiring Western discovery, intervention, or liberation. Her mother, in aspiring to avoid identification with the Orientalist's Other, refashions Ottoman distinctions between Muslims and Christians and Lebanese nationalist distinctions between Lebanese and Palestinians in Orientalist terms. Here, Ottoman distinctions between Muslims and Christians are rooted in a framework for organizing social difference according to religious categories that persists in Arab states, despite the establishment of nation-states. (Within the Ottoman period of Middle East history, the categories "Muslim and non-Muslim" [with mul-

tiple subgroups] provided the predominant framework for organizing difference, and civil rights were assigned and administered by religious sect or rite.)[10]

At the intersections of Orientalism and Ottoman frameworks for organizing difference, the terms of Arab cultural re-authenticity shift. Nicole's mother deploys a selective assimilationist strategy that on the one hand operationalizes Arab cultural re-authenticity in terms of homeland notions of cultural difference, such as Ottoman distinctions between Muslim and Christians, while on the other hand, deploys Orientalist terms that denigrate behaviors and identities that are associated with pan-Arabism and Islam. This strategy disassociates Arab Christians from Arab Muslims, associates Arab Christians with the "West" and with "modernity," and articulates a desire for middle-class U.S. nationalist notions of identity that affirm that to be "modern" and "American" is to be "Orientalist." Nicole's mother thus pronounces a selective assimilationist strategy that reproduces the sexual politics of colonial discourse in terms of a rape/rescue fantasy in which the figure of the dark Arab Muslim male rapist threatens Western (including Westernized Arab Christian women) and sex between Muslim men and Christian women can only involve rape.[11]

For Arab Christians, the possibilities for disassociating themselves from Orientalism have been made possible in that the "Western trope of the Muslim woman" articulated "as the ultimate victim of a timeless patriarchy defined by the barbarism of the Islamic religion, which is in need of civilizing" has permeated Orientalist discourses.[12] The significance of Islam within the refashioning of Orientalism among Nicole's Lebanese Christian family is particularly clear when Nicole recalls the difference between her parents' response to her ex-boyfriend Ben whose mother was a Jewish lesbian and their response to Mohammed. Although Ben's mother's Jewish and lesbian identities can be hidden, or conflated with Western or "American civilized identity," Mohammed's identity cannot.

Throughout her narrative, Nicole locates herself in between a series of binaries, such as American vs. Orientalized Other, Western modernity vs. religious discourse, Muslim vs. Christian, Lebanese vs. Palestinian, and individualism vs. "connectivity."[13] While she uses binaries as a coding for articulating her struggle between different kinds of happiness, she simultaneous-

ly articulates her identity at the intersections of a constellation of loyalties that are multiple, contradictory, constantly shifting, and overlapping. As these loyalties intersect, they produce a complex process that implicates her (and her parents) within a desire for being with the man she loves in the context of stereotypical Americanized norms such as freedom, individualism, and loneliness, and for maintaining her ties to her family, which are constituted by the multiple genealogies of Ottoman history, Western Christian modernity, and U.S. Orientalism, multiculturalism, and racism. Nicole's narrative thus redraws the boundaries between "Arabness" and "Americanness" along multiple axes of power and control; affirms that binary formulations such as "Arabs" vs. "America," or "Christians" vs. "Muslims" are "always more complex than the straightjacket of identity politics might suggest";[14] and counters celebrations of hybridity that fail to account for the ways that essentialist categories, while constructed and fictive, operate to support hierarchies of privilege and domination and power and control.

Conclusion

Walking down the street between one of San Francisco's largest populations of homeless women and men and the new dot-com yuppies, I did my usual skim of graffiti on Café Macondo's walls. The "FOR" in LESBIANS FOR BUSH had been crossed out and replaced with the word "EAT." As I turned to the wall behind me to find out whether QUEER ARABS still EXIST[ed], my eyes followed an arrow, drawn in thick black marker that pointed to the words QUEER ARABS and was connected to the words, ONE OF MANY PROBLEMS.

Looking closer, I noticed another message superimposed over QUEER ARABS EXIST in faint blue ink. A line was drawn between the words QUEER and ARABS and the letter "S" was added to the beginning of the word "EXIST." I re-read it several times before I finally understood that superimposed upon QUEER ARABS EXIST, the new message, in coupling the words ARABS and SEXIST, implied that ARABS are SEXIST. I thought about my research and the resemblance between the images on the wall and my research participants' everyday experiences. While Lulu's graffiti confronted the lumping of Arabs into the homogeneous categories "veiled

victim" or "polygamous terrorist," the defacement of QUEER ARABS EXIST reinforced the binary construction of "the Arab" as Other. Similarly, while Rime, Lulu, and Nicole burst the boundaries of hegemonic Arab American and U.S. nationalisms on multiple fronts, they also rearticulate hegemonic nationalisms in binary terms as a coding for a more complex process in which the categories "Arab" and "American" are mutually constitutive and exist both as opposites and in unison, in the context of immigration, assimilation, and racialization.

As I took another glance at ARABS ARE SEXIST, superimposed over QUEER ARABS EXIST, I noticed another message, a much smaller message written in black letters in Spanish and English that framed the top right side of QUEER ARABS EXIST. It read ES ALGO BUENO. IT'S A GOOD THING.

–Naber, journal entry, June 2001

Notes

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1. This is not a literal translation, but conveys the message of my mother's words. Throughout the rest of this article, I have edited my research participants' quotes into a readable form, maintaining the originality of the quote as much as possible. This process included cutting repetitive words and statements, rearranging the order of the narratives, and simplifying elaborate explanations. I have also altered names and places in order to protect my research participants' privacy.
2. These networks included local chapters of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, the Muslim Students' Association, Students for Justice in Palestine, and the Arab Cultural Center.
3. Minoo Moallem and Ian Boal, "Multicultural Nationalism and the Poetics of Inauguration," in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminism, and the State*, ed. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcon, and Minoo Moallem (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 243-64.

4. I first became acquainted with my research participants by joining community organizations and cultural/artistic collectives and by attending functions organized by Christian and Muslim religious institutions, Arabic language schools, and Arab and Muslim student groups. Fifteen of the women research participants were Palestinian, seven were Syrian, six were Jordanian, and two were Lebanese. The greater number of women of Palestinian descent whom I interviewed represent a pattern common within what my research participants refer to as San Francisco's "Arab American community," in which Palestinians make up the majority among those active in Arab American community affairs. Nevertheless, immigrants from the Levant (Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Syria) comprised the majority of early Arab immigrants to San Francisco. They developed a variety of community networks through the establishment of a series of clubs and community associations. These networks have organized "difference" in terms of village of origin (i.e., the Ramallah Club), country of origin (i.e., the Lebanese American Association) or pan-ethnic Arab identity (i.e., the Arab Cultural Center). Due to their early history of migration to San Francisco, the varieties of institutions they established, and their overall socioeconomic privileges compared to Arab immigrants and refugees living in the San Francisco Bay area from other countries (such as Yemen, Iraq, Tunisia, and Morocco), the term "Arab" or "Arab American" community often privileges Levantine Arabs, while either excluding or marginalizing "other Arabs."
5. Here, I use terms that were reiterated among my research participants to illustrate the ways that my research participants regularly associated "Americanness" with freedom and individualism and "Arabness" with family and connectivity.
6. See Trinh T. Min-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
7. Throughout my field sites, Palestinian and Jordanian Arab Americans tended to view Syrian and Lebanese Arab Americans as more "assimilated" than themselves. Several factors have produced this "difference." Historically, Syrian and Lebanese emigrated to the San Francisco Bay area in the early 1900s, before Palestinians and Jordanians, who first immigrated in the late 1950s.
8. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 17.
9. Here, I build on Suad Joseph's definition of patrilineality in Arab families in "Gendering Citizenship in the Middle East," in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3-32.
10. See Aaron Rodrigue, "Difference and Tolerance in the Ottoman Empire: Interview by Nancy Reynolds," ed. Nancy Reynolds and Sabra Mahmood, special issue, *Stanford Humanities Review* 5, no. 1 (1992): 81-92.
11. Here, I borrow from Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's three axes of sexualized, racialized, colonialist discourse. See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
12. Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 20.
13. "Connectivity" here is from Suad Joseph's definition of "patriarchal connectivity" in

Lebanon. See Suad Joseph, "Gender and Rationality among Arab Families in Lebanon," *Feminist Studies* 19 (Fall 1993): 465-86.

14. Ella Shohat, introduction to *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (New York: MIT Press, 1998), 6.

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