

# Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments

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**Although Arab-American literature has been in existence in the U.S. for over a century, it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America. However, the last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in publication by Arab-American writers. This literary burgeoning reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers.**

The story of Arab American literature started in the late 1800s, when Arab immigrants first began to arrive in North America in significant numbers from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, primarily from what is now present-day Lebanon. The original (largely Christian) migrants came mostly as sojourners, not immigrants. Settling in colonies in cities such as New York and Boston, and fully intending to return home one day, they voiced a mainly diasporan consciousness: a fact evident in their newspapers, which were often sectarian, political and geared toward events in the Middle East.

However, they found themselves living in a heavily assimilationist U.S. context. The question of how to respond to such pressures while also maintaining Arab identity was a matter of great importance to the early immigrant community: newspapers and journals published debates about how to preserve Arab identity in the American-born generation, even as they discussed practical matters of integration. Complicating the process of Americanization were racial definitions of American identity which threatened to exclude Arabs. The Naturalization Act of 1790 had granted the right of citizenship to what it termed “free white persons.” But in the early 1900s what was meant by “white” became a subject of intense debate. Arab immigrants, among others, became caught up in naturalization laws basing eligibility for citizenship on non-Asiatic identity.

In a series of court cases known as the “prerequisite cases,” petitions for naturalization were challenged and in some instances denied on the basis of whether or not individuals qualified as “white.” These cases not only decided the fate of individual immigrants, but also set precedents for the inclusion or exclusion of entire ethnic groups. In the cases involving Arabs, courts argued that Arabs should be denied naturalization as U.S. citizens on the basis of dark skin color, origin on the continent of Asia, distance (literal or metaphorical) from European culture, and cultural and geographical proximity to Islam. Most of the cases before 1920 were eventually resolved in favor of the applicants, and the 1920 census classified Syrians and Palestinians under the category “Foreign-born white population” (Naff, 117).

However, the links between western, European, Christian identity, “whiteness” and American identity, and between non-European, non-Christian identity, non-whiteness and non-American identity persisted, shaping Arab-American experience and literature both directly and indirectly. By the 1910s several literary societies and journals had come into existence, and in 1920 the literary organization Al Rabita al Qalamaiyya (the Pen League) was established by Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani and others. These authors, who wrote in Arabic as well as in English, produced what is known as the Mahjar (émigré) school of Arab-American writing. Although they had their greatest impact on Arabic literature, these writers were conscious of serving as bridges between East and West, and actively sought to establish philosophical meeting points between Arab and American ideologies and contexts, even as they invoked poetic forbears of both east and west—from Al-Mutanabbi, Al-Farid, and al-Maari to Homer, Virgil, Milton, Emerson and Thoreau.

Such invocation of western literary models suggested not only an attempt to bridge worlds, but a certain anxiety as well. Indeed, Arab-American literature of this period often reflected a strong need to prove oneself worthy in the U.S. context. As critic Evelyn Shakir puts it, speaking of Rihani’s novel *The Book of Khaled*, “implicit in all this name dropping is the claim that here is an ‘oriental’; who can run with western writers, who can match their erudition and imitate their tone, their word play” (“Coming of Age,” 66–67). This anxiety was even more apparent

in the autobiographies of the period. Writing within the already established genre of U.S. immigrant autobiography, in which narrators related a teleological trajectory from Old World to New World, autobiographers such as Abraham Mitrie Rihbany and Salom Rizk emphasized those aspects of their identities likely to gain acceptance by white Americans, and distanced themselves from those elements of Arab culture viewed as less readily assimilable. In particular, they stressed their Christian identity, their geographical origin in the “Holy Land,” and their “spirituality,” employing biblical rhetoric and religious parallels in their attempt to engage American readers and familiarize the “exotic” even as they implicitly or explicitly sought to distance themselves from Islam. Such narrative strategies were unsurprising given the broader context of assimilation pressures, prerequisite cases and wartime fervor, all of which made the racial, legal, and social status of Arabs in the U.S. tenuous. But they formed a literary template which later Arab-American authors were to seek consciously to transform.

After the flourishing of the Mahjar literature, Arab-American literature entered a period of quiescence. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Quota Act had drastically limited numbers of new immigrants: in the absence of ongoing contact with the home culture, Arab-Americans went so far in the assimilation process that some historians have described them as being in danger of assimilating themselves out of existence (cf. Naff). Although there was not a complete dearth of literary production, Arab-American writers wrote about their Arab background with hesitation and through self-distancing narrative strategies. Novelist Vance Bourjaily, for instance, expressed his Lebanese identity only marginally, through what Evelyn Shakir calls a kind of role-playing (see “Pretending to be Arab”). William Blatty, most famous for his novel *The Exorcist*, engaged with Arab-American identity in his memoir *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* through slap-stick humor and self denigration. Overall, the literature of this period reflects a hesitancy to engage with Arab-American identity as something of contemporary relevance.

After the 1960s, however, things began to change. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements opened new spaces for immigrant and ethnic literary voices more generally. With the publication of works by African Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans and others, Arab-Americans found it easier to write about their ethnic heritage and find publishers and audiences, even as demographic changes resulted in more Arab-Americans’ turning to literature and the arts as a form of self expression. At the same time, there was also an influx of new immigrants from the Arab world. These immigrants, who were from a variety of countries, frequently Muslim, and often better educated and more politically engaged than earlier immigrants had been, stimulated settled Arab-Americans to engage more directly with Arab culture and politics. Meanwhile, political events, from the 1967 war to 9-11 and beyond, forced Arab-Americans to grapple with their identity and with the “write or be written” imperative: Define yourself or others will define you.

Today, Arab-American literature has emerged as a literature in its own right, with younger writers able to take for granted the existence of a community, both ethnic and literary. However, the forces which situated Arab-Americans as anomalies in the U.S. context and which made it difficult for Arab-American writers to engage with their identity with comfort and directness are still at play. As in the early decades of the century, Arab-Americans today confront a cultural, political, and social context that is fraught with tension. Instead of courts excluding Arabs on the basis of race, popular racism now targets Arabs on the basis of skin color, dress, name, accent and other characteristics. This has become institutionalized in the pervasive racial profiling in place at U.S. airports and border crossings. Earlier epithets of nigger, dago and spic have transmuted to labels of sand nigger, towelhead, camel jockey and worse. More insidiously, what Helen Hatab Samhan has termed “political racism” targets individuals, Arab or not, for their political views. The most hot-button topic is that of Palestine: in the context of this prevailing political racism, to express any criticism of Israel is to risk being branded as “anti-Semitic.” Creative writers have also felt the impact of such forces: some have had work rejected because of their identity or the thematic content of their work, while others have found themselves targeted when they give readings and public appearances.

Contemporary Arab-American writers grapple with these exclusionary forces even as they explore both ethnic affirmation and diasporan sensibilities. Post-1967 writers gave voice to a quest for self-identification that was particularly compelling because of its American idiom. Writing in English and publishing in American literary journals, these writers drew on U.S. literary traditions, especially free verse and the lyric poem. Authors such as Sam Hazo, Sam Hamod, Jack Marshall, Naomi Shihab Nye and others began to publish poetry that touched, sometimes glancingly, sometimes directly, on Arab identity and probed what had been lost during the generations of assimilation. For instance, in the poem “Dying with the Wrong Name,” Lebanese-American Sam Hamod

describes immigrants entering through Ellis Island who were forced to “Americanize” their names. The poem makes clear that what is lost in forced assimilation is more than a name: it is an identity, a history, a self. “There is something lost in the blood,” Hamod writes, “something lost down to the bone/ in these small changes. A man in a/dark blue suit at Ellis Island says, with / tiredness and authority, “You only need two /names in America” and suddenly—as cleanly / as the air, you’ve lost / your name” (*Dying with the Wrong Name*, 19).

Hamod was also one of the first to give literary voice to Muslim Arab-American experience. In his poem “After the Funeral of Assam Hamady,” he describes stopping by the highway in the middle of South Dakota so that his father and grandfather could pray. In contrast to his youthful embarrassment at the scene, in retrospect Hamod views the faith of the older men as something transcendent and redemptive. “I always liked trips, traveling at high speed,” he writes, “but they have surely passed me / as I am standing here now / trying so hard to join them / on that old prayer blanket—/ as if the pain behind my eyes / could be absolution” (*Dying*, 16).

A 1979 memoir by Eugene Paul Nassar, *Wind of the Land*, similarly proved pivotal in the attempt to narrate Lebanese ethnic experience and to preserve it from the erasure of time and assimilation. Celebrating life in a Lebanese American community in upstate New York, *Wind of the Land* offered a poignant affirmation of identity and a celebration of familial and communal bonds, and stood as an example of the growing need of authors to lay claim to Arab-American identity with lyricism and celebration rather than defensiveness. However, what also emerged in such texts was the problem of nostalgia. In asserting Arab and Arab-American identity as something valuable and nurturing, and in memorializing the traditional values of the past, authors such as Nassar and Hamoc made a significant intervention in the invisibility of Arab identity, but they also inscribed a nostalgia for patriarchal structures.

Of course, the conflation of ethnicity, nostalgia, and fixed gender roles is hardly unusual: ethnic portrayals in general typically embody ethnicity through traditional images of women, in which memories of childhood safety, warmth, and comfort are merged with longing for the similar comforts of ethnic food, community, language, and traditional social roles. But such naturalized representations are not, as other authors have made clear, unproblematic. For instance, Nassar affirms the Lebanese culture of the immigrant generation as a familial culture in which patriarchy is revered. While this vision posits Lebanese culture and the traditional family as a bulwark against the presumed instability of American life, it also inscribes a limiting view of gender relations. In his work, Lebanon, Lebanese women, the narrator’s mother, and the Lebanese American community merge into a “natural” order where hierarchies are honored and filiality is the basis for relationships, while in contrast, the American context is described as a place where “women have strings around the men’s testicles” and “the child punishes the father” (“Wind,” 24). In this view, ethnicity offers the dream of a world defined by traditional, patriarchal relationships, a dream that was sure to be questioned by those disempowered in these relationships.

Indeed, at the same time as some writers were deploying nostalgia as a way to retrieve ethnic identity, other authors probed the boundaries of patriarchy and insisted on exploring new visions for the future. These writers engaged in literary portrayals which sought to affirm without mythologizing, and which leveled self-critique at the same time as self-affirmation. It was within this context that the landmark anthology *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*, edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, was published in 1988. This collection asserted the existence and presence of Arab-American writers, introduced Arab-American poets to a new audience, created a sense of an Arab-American literary community, and made it possible for authors to write not as anomalies but as Arab-Americans, thereby laying down the page upon which the century-long story of Arab-American literature could begin to be told. And, significantly, the collection sought to leaven nostalgia with self-critique, juxtaposing reclamation with incisive cultural criticism.

In the 1990s, this attempt to bring together celebration and self critique began to emerge as a pervasive theme of Arab-American writing. The stories of Lebanese-American Joseph Geha provide a notable example. In his 1990 short story collection *Through and Through: Toledo Stories*, one of the first Arab-American fictional narratives of the contemporary period, Geha probes the transformation from Arab to Arab-American, depicting both the immigrant struggle for adaptation and subsequent generations’ attempt to negotiate the complex facets of their identities. Deftly avoiding nostalgia, the stories provide a poignant but ultimately forward-looking rendition of Arab-American immigrant and ethnic experiences. Geha’s characters struggle with the tension between Arab communal values and the individual freedom and risk which America offers: on some level they are all ibn Arab (children of

Arabs, by implication inscribed in Arab cultural values), and their valuation of familial connections and communal identity is deep rooted. But they are also Americans, whose move into the American context is made possible through a widening of the boundaries of community, and a transformation of this communal identity into a sense of individual agency. What these stories teach is that openness to change is necessary for survival, cultural as well as personal.

Palestinian-American Naomi Shihab Nye offers another example of a writer who affirms and gives voice to Arab culture and tradition while at the same time making space for change. Nye, daughter of a Palestinian Muslim father and an American Christian mother, is one of the most well-known of Arab-American authors: a prolific writer who has earned an avid readership among both Arab-American and mainstream American audiences, children and adults, Nye has managed to bring Arab culture and politics into the U.S. sphere in a deeply humanistic fashion. From her earliest publications Nye has suggested that Arab-American identity is not something to be preserved or denied or escaped or romanticized: it is just another way of being human. In language that is readily accessible to a mainstream U.S. readership, Nye creates spaces in which Arab and Arab-American experiences can be articulated, not through nostalgic reclamation, but by honoring the diversity of experiences and the necessity of change.

It is in this space between worlds that her own voice grows and bears fruit. Instead of voicing a static Arab-American identity dependent on the past and defined through preservation of cultural heritage, Nye suggests that what it means to be Arab-American—or any identity for that matter – is discovered in process, by making sense of disparate experiences and cultural contexts and by nurturing the sparks generated by their juxtaposition. In her poetry Nye dismantles the idea of a self that is static and stable, and insists instead on selfhood as a process of becoming and discovery. In the poem “Half and Half,” for instance, she addresses the dynamics of bifurcated identity. The poem closes with a resonant image of inclusiveness: “A woman opens a window—here and here and here—... She is making a soup from what she had left/ in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean./ She is leaving nothing out” (*19 Varieties*, 97).

Nye also addresses the darker side of Arab-American and Palestinian experience—stereotypes, racism, political tragedies—exploring what it means to have a cultural inheritance that is not always easy or positive. In the poem “Blood,” she narrates a childhood experience: a girl who knocked on her door and “wanted to see the Arab.” Nye says they didn’t have one. After that, she says, her father told her who he was: “‘Shihab’—‘shooting star’—/a good name, borrowed from the sky” (*19 Varieties*, 136). But the poem then moves from a light-hearted consideration of the possibilities offered by her father’s folk tales of being a “true Arab” to a deeply troubled questioning of the implications and responsibilities of this identity. What does it mean to be a “true Arab,” especially in the context of political tragedy (in the case of this poem, the 1982 massacres of Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatila camps in Beirut). As Nye asks at the end of the poem, “What does a true Arab do now?” (137). The painful resonance of this final question lies precisely in her inability to answer it. The gift of heritage, Nye makes clear, is also a warning: notions of “true” identity are too easily reified into the hard lines of absolutes that lead to bloodshed. What matters, she suggests, is not one’s ethnic identity so much as the care and concern one human extends to another.

Other Arab-American writers who emerged during the 1970s and 1980s not only affirmed and explored Arab and Arab-American culture but also engaged in strong critiques of the Arab world. Etel Adnan is among the most powerful of these: a writer who came to the U.S. from Lebanon in the 1950s and whose works situate her in a specifically transnational, rather than ethnic, framework, Adnan identifies not as an American or an Arab but as a universal citizen. Yet hers is a universalism based not on misty philosophies—a charge sometimes leveled against the Mahjar writers—but rather on the struggle for survival, physical and cultural, within contexts of injustice and violence. Her work deals less with the celebration of Arab identity in the U.S. than with a critique of its devolution in the Arab world; and Adnan often gives voice to an incantatory rage in which no country or culture is spared. In the poem “The Beirut Hell Express,” for instance, she writes, “In New York I say the hell with America/ In Moscow I say the hell with Stalin/ In Rabat I say the hell with Hassan II/ Hello the beggar/ hello to the fedai/ hello to Mohammad the visionary/ hello to the prisoner ... people of Beirut ... take your vertebrae and squeeze out/colonialism like pus” (in *Grape Leaves*, 90). The ability to voice such cultural critique and self-criticism has emerged as one of the most important elements in contemporary Arab-American writing today.

In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that the next landmark literary event was the publication of the anthology



*Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna Kadi. This anthology, which brought many new voices into print, established the category of feminist Arab-American writing in English. Yet it should be clarified that feminism was not a new concept in Arab-American experience. Women—who constituted one out of three of early immigrants—had been challenging traditional gender roles and engaging in feminist debate from the early period of immigration. Many women emigrated alone, or took their children and left their husbands behind, and after the WWI Armistice there were actually more female than male emigrants (Shakir, *Bint Arab*, 28). The Arab-American press in the 1910s and 1920s recounted the diverse accomplishments of Arab-American women as lawyers, doctors, college graduates, aviators and musicians, as well as giving space to debates on gender. Lebanese American Afifa Karam, for instance, wrote prolifically on gender issues between 1904 and 1924, mostly for the Arabic newspaper *Al Hoda* (see Handal, “Reflections,” 103). However, formal attempts at feminist organization did not emerge till after the 1967 war, when Arab-American life more generally was reinvigorated in the context of the U.S. social, civil, student and women’s rights movements. In the 1980s, a number of feminist organizations, academic as well as activist, were started, including the short-lived Feminist Arab-American Network, the Association for Middle Eastern Women’s Studies, The Union of Palestinian Women’s Associations in North America, and a North American chapter of the Arab Women’s Union, the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (cf. Handal, 103).

*Food for Our Grandmothers* thus does not voice a new phenomenon so much as bring it into new visibility. Kadi saw the book as creating space for Arab-American feminist voices and as empowering Arab-American women to create alternative maps to those of mainstream American discourse. The selections, which address issues of identity, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, political activism, race, and class, chart the quest for belonging and the search for a home capable of encompassing the voices of Arab-American women from a variety of backgrounds.

One of the most important things about *Food for Our Grandmothers* was that it made clear that the concerns of Arab-American women were not just about “gender oppression.” In fact, stereotypes of gender oppression within so-called inherently misogynistic Arab societies and communities have been among the most debilitating forces Arab-American women have had to confront. As Evelyn Shakir puts it, “According to popular belief, all Arab women can be divided into two categories. Either they are shadowy nonentities, swathed in black from head to foot, or they are belly dancers—seductive, provocative, and privy to exotic secrets of lovemaking. The two images, of course, are finally identical, adding up to a statement that all Arab women are, in one sense or another, men’s instruments or slaves” (“Mother’s Milk,” 39). The impact of such stereotypes is political as well as cultural. The portrayal of Arab men as inherently patriarchal and oppressive and of Arab women as either exotic or oppressed becomes just one more way of positioning Arab culture as inferior to western culture and therefore of perpetuating colonial relationships between east and west, Arab and American/European. This creates a double bind for Arab-American feminists. On the one hand they must struggle against the notion that they need “liberating” from their own culture (as if western society offered a panacea), and find difficulty in simply claiming their identities with pride. On the other hand, they often find they have to suppress their feminism in order to claim a sense of home in their Arab communities and avoid the charge of community betrayal, especially at times when these communities are under siege. As Lara Deeb puts it, “It’s impossible to belong, without silencing something, and there is violence in that act of silencing” (quoted in Abdulhadi, et. al., 23).

The task of creating a sense of belonging that does not involve silencing is no easy task. Kadi offers an evocative description of this attempt in her introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers*. Moving from an invocation of the book as a map to the memory of her grandmother braiding her long hair, she denotes the conjunction of personal, communal and historical concerns shaping Arab-American experiences. “I know it is possible and I believe it is necessary to create maps that are alive, many-layered, multi-dimensional, open-ended, and braided. ... Take three strands—one that is Gram, one that is me, one that is the force of history—twist, turn, and curve; do not pull so tightly that it hurts; do not weave so loosely that strands escape. It is difficult finding that balance” (Kadi, xiv).

Finding that balance has also involved an engagement with elements of Arab-American identity that have historically been silenced, especially that of race. After the early tensions around race had subsided, the settled Arab-American community largely attempted to pass for “white.” But in recent decades, with the politicization of Arab identity to the extent that even non-Arabs fall afoul of anti-Arab racism, “passing” has proved impossible. As Kadi observes, “our race is simultaneously emphasized and ignored. For long periods of time no one can remember that Arabs even exist....this forgetfulness changes once there is another ‘crisis in the Middle East.’ ...

During crises, Arabs can be reassured we exist as a distinct racial group” (xvi).

Yet perceptions of race have always shaped Arab-American literature, whether directly or indirectly. As we saw, early Arab-American writers, realizing that “American” meant Christian, European, western, and white, consciously tried to write themselves into these categories. Contemporary Arab-American writers, in contrast, increasingly interrogate and challenge U.S. racial categories. Lebanese American Lawrence Joseph was one of the first of these writers to bring racial categories in relation to Arab-American experience to the foreground.

In his poetry, which is grounded in the racially–fraught contexts of Detroit and New York City, Joseph moves beyond insular celebrations of Arab-American culture to an exploration of U.S. racial divisions and the location of Arabs on the black-white spectrum. His poem “Sand Nigger” critiques what he calls “the racial—or ethnic or nationalist—designations or categorizations that exist throughout the American language” (Interview, 2), and seeks to destabilize all racial and ethnic categories. The poem begins by invoking cultural markers of Lebanese identity—foods, names, places, familial intimacies—in a familiar gesture of ethnic reclamation. But then the terms of articulation shift: Lebanese ethnicity is reconstituted instead at the fault lines of racial and intercommunal violence: family quarrels, relatives killed in Lebanon’s civil war, the violence and poverty of Detroit. Lebanon of steaming pots, plates of kusa, vines and almond trees, becomes “Lebanon of my mother/ warning my father not to let / the children hear”; of his father’s vocal cords bleeding because he shouts too much in the grocery store that fails, of a cousin describing his niece’s head severed with bullet in Beirut’s civil war and demanding, “More than an eye for an eye” (*Codes*, 90–91). Meanwhile, outside the house Joseph becomes a “sand nigger”—a term which invokes the stark racial divisions of American culture as well as ethnic ambiguity, and which thrusts Joseph into the U.S. context while simultaneously relegating him to its fringes. The familiar Arab proverb with which the poem concludes invokes similarly shifting and overdetermined lines of inclusion and exclusion, this time within Arab culture. “The name fits,” Joseph says: “I am the light-skinned nigger/ with black eyes and the look difficult to figure—a look of indifference, a look to kill... who waves his hands, nice enough to pass, Lebanese enough to be against his brother, with his brother against his cousin, with cousin and brother against the stranger” (92).

For Jordanian-American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber, race is similarly both a marker of exclusion and a site of contestation. In the short story “At the Continental Divide,” Abu-Jaber depicts a newly arrived Jordanian immigrant, Jamil, whose dark skin, foreignness, and ambiguous sexual identity make him the target of a policeman’s rage. The policeman snarls, “Oh, A-rab, one of them. Worse than niggers aren’t you? Kill your own babies and mothers, bomb planes with Americans on them...A-rab scum.” (147). The physical beating that follows reinscribes this “non-white” identity onto the body in definitive terms. However, Abu-Jaber makes clear that defensive assertion of “whiteness”—the strategy of so many early Arab-Americans—is not an adequate response to such violent racism. The issue is not just the pragmatic fact that while some Arab-Americans might be able to “pass” as white, others are unable to do so. Rather, it is that cultural pressures toward assimilation enact their own kind of violence. As Abu-Jaber writes elsewhere: “Lighten the hair, thin the lips, change the name, cover the dress, hammer down the accent, stash away the strange gods, the poetry, the ancient disturbing pointless old stories. Smash it all down flat” (“Arabs and the Break in the Text,” 132).

The dilemma of identification options is explored more fully in Abu-Jaber’s novels, *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*, which feature protagonists with Arab fathers and American mothers. Stymied by the complexities of their mixed identities and the inability of those around them to understand that complexity, the protagonists struggle to find homes for themselves between Arab and American cultures. For both, issues of identity are played out in part through race, as they experience classifications such as “white” or “not white” as a form of violence. Jemorah, the half Jordanian, half American protagonist of *Arabian Jazz*, finds the racial tensions around Arab-American identity brought to a crescendo in an interchange with her employer, Portia, who considers the “good white blood” running in Jemorah’s veins to have been contaminated by her Arab father who “[isn’t] any better than Negroes” (294). For Portia, this Arab “taint” (294) is nonetheless recuperable into a framework of white ethnicity: lipstick and hair lightener will help make her more of an “American.” Recoiling from such bigotry, Jemorah turns instead to her Arab identity. But the novel suggests that reverting to the other side of the hyphen isn’t a solution either: rather, what is needed is the ability to move with fluidity between worlds. Similarly, in the novel *Crescent*, the Iraqi-American protagonist Sirine is distanced from her Arab identity and in search of a sense of self. Viewed as simply white because of her skin color, she experiences a constant sense of dislocation and homelessness. The novel charts her search for a sense of homecoming to the complexity of her selfhood, a search played out through her

relationship with an Iraqi exile.

The extent to which the singular classification “white” in relation to Arab-Americans serves not as a mode of inclusion but as a form of violence and erasure has become a recurrent theme in Arab-American letters. Egyptian-American poet Pauline Kaldas, for instance, depicts the ways in which Arab women are excluded from “white” American identity, yet simultaneously recuperated into its domain through a neocolonial gesture of possession. In her poem “Exotic” Kaldas describes an Egyptian woman—dark enough to be “interesting,” white enough to be “safe”— who presents an “also permitted” alternative to the mainstream “golden beauty” (45). But such “permissible” difference turns upon exoticism as well as the safety of categorization. The woman in the poem is surrounded by a swirl of voices that attempt to define and contain her: “Hey baby!’ / ‘What are you—Lebanese, Armenian, Spanish, Puerto Rican, Italian, Mexican / c’mon what are you?” (45). But invoking ready-made slots of identification avoids an actual engagement with the complexity of difference. As Kaldas writes, “The square edges me as it extends White/ includes People from North Africa and the Middle East” (45).

Arab-American women writers have continued to expand their exploration of the conjunctions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and politics in recent writing. In addition, a growing body of theoretical and crucial work on the subject is emerging. A special issue of the MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies, ([web.mit.edu/cis/www.mitejmes](http://web.mit.edu/cis/www.mitejmes)), “Gender, Nation and Belonging: Arab and Arab-American Feminist Perspectives,” has helped to consolidate and expand the discourse on Arab-American feminism. As the editors of this issue, Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber and Evelyn Alsultany, note, there is not a singular single site of Arab-American feminist struggle. Rather, discussions of Arab-American feminism break down stereotypes of gender oppression and identification, exile and belonging, and show feminism to be a multifaceted concept.

Much as there is no single site of Arab-American feminism, there is no singular definition of what constitutes Arab-American literature. One viewpoint holds that Arab-American identity is a transplanted Arab identity, turning upon preservation of Arab culture, language, and sensibilities. In this view, Arab-American literature is in essence “Arabic writing in English.” The second viewpoint is that Arab-American identity is quintessentially an American identity emerging from U.S. soil, articulated in relationship to U.S. ethnicity and within the framework of the “multiculture,” and that Arab-American literature must reflect this identity. Within both viewpoints lies the question of thematics. Some argue that Arab-American literature, to be called such, must be about specifically Arab-identified topics. Others disagree, arguing that an enforced “ethnic” thematics will limit and ultimately impoverish the literature. Although such debates are not unique to Arab-American writers, one way in which Arab-American literature differs from many other ethnic literatures in its close engagement with political events overseas. Indeed, it might be argued that Arab-American identity is a transnational rather a hyphenated identity.

The 1999 anthology *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* gives voice to some of these dynamics. In it, editors Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash sought to move beyond an “American ethnic” perspective and to explore the ways in which authors can draw on Arab cultural and linguistic legacies to create a new Arab-American vocabulary and to develop, as Mattawa puts it, “a cultural identity rather than mere ethnic identification.” As Mattawa notes, “the staples of grandmotherly aphorism, thickly accented patriarchal traditionalism, culinary nostalgia, religious dogma, belly dancing and adoration for Kahlil Gibran are meager nourishments for cultural identity, let alone a cultural revival and a subsequent engagement with the larger American culture” (*Post Gibran*, 61).

Mattawa’s calls for a revitalization of Arab-American culture and a reinvigoration of points of contact with the Arab world are reflected in his poetry, which charts not only the nuances of exile and the complexities of dislocation in both the U.S. and the Arab world but also the hybridization of cultures and multiple points of intersection. His poems traverse the U.S. to the Middle East and North Africa, moving through the various cultural contexts which Mattawa inhabits and which inhabit him. In his second poetry collection, *Zodiac of Echoes*, Mattawa invokes the dimensions of exile: “The days crawl through its tunnels. The roads are long and long....I forget and remember again” (1). But exile is also extended back to the Arab context: Mattawa, now perceived as a foreigner in Cairo, argues with taxi drivers who refuse to believe that he is Arab. In exile, it is not possible to return: the lost home is gone forever. In recourse, Mattawa, like so many other writers, turns toward a self-wrought homemaking that is grounded in dislocation but also in language, celebrating and claiming exile on its own homeground: “Exile, your ninety-nine names trill the tip of my tongue. Isn’t it time to sing what I’ve gathered into blessing –indigenous,

though scant?" (34).

Poetry has continued to provide some of the most powerful Arab-American voices. Syrian-American Mohja Kahf has emerged as among the most vibrant of these. A dynamic, feisty writer who insists on critiquing as well as celebrating her own cultural contexts, whether Muslim, Arab or American, Kahf has a keen eye for the creative dissonance of seemingly incongruous juxtapositions. The author, in addition to her recent novel, of the poetry book *Emails from Scheherazad* and of the column "Sex and the Ummah" on the website "www.Muslimwakeup.com," Kahf writes as a Muslim feminist whose project is to unsettle the rigid stereotypes that so often imprison Muslim women behind walls of misperception. We tend to think of Scheherazad—the exemplar of "oriental" women—against an exotic, foreign, ancient landscape. But *Emails from Scheherazad*, conjures up an image of Scheherazad bent over a computer keyboard, veil flung back, manicured nails clacking as she types missives to American readers. After all, as Kahf makes clear, Muslim and Arab women in the U.S. are not foreign or exotic, but are living completely contemporary American lives amid the "motley miscellany of the land." As a Muslim-American feminist, Kahf rejects all attempts, whether western or eastern, to appropriate the female body for male agendas. As she notes in the poem "My Body is Not Your Battleground," "My hair will not bring progress and clean water/ if it flies unbraided in the breeze." Nor will it "save us from our attackers/ if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun." Wearing or not wearing hijab is not the issue: what is important is female choice and autonomy. "Untangle your hands from my hair," she commands, "so I can comb and delight in it...so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love" (*Emails*, 58).

Kahf's voice takes on particular power in poems that explore the cultural schism experienced by the children of immigrants. In a poem called "The Passing There" that refers to the Robert Frost poem "The Road Not Taken," Kahf describes crossing an Indiana field with her brother in search of raspberry bushes. The farmer who owns the field is "no Robert Frost/ although he spoke colloquial." He curses the children, his epithets "express[ing] his concerns/ about our religion and ethnic origin" (*Emails* 18). This childhood incident becomes, for Kahf, an emblem of her life in the new world—her positioning in, but not quite of, the American landscape. In the Syrian life she might have had, "other purples waited, a plum tree had our name on it"; the vineyard watchman "chased away /children whose names he knew...our parallel-universe Syrian selves among them" (19). But in Indiana, "My brother and I crossed through a field. Its golden music wasn't ours" (19). Caught between the competing requirements of memory and amnesia, the conflicting pull of old and new lands, the children navigate mutually exclusive worlds.

What Kahf takes from this duality is not just the wrenching apart, but also a necessary, if difficult, coexistence. The Indiana field is superimposed on the Syrian field; cornfield choirs and Arabic anthems come together in unlikely but vibrant counterpoint. At the poem's conclusion, the echoes of Frost make clear that the new world's claims are ineluctably present, imbuing the structures of language as well as of identity: "My brother knows this song:/ How we have been running/to leap the gulch between two worlds, each/ with its claim. Impossible for us/ to choose one over the other,/ and the passing there/ makes all the difference" (20). Notably, Kahf does not just absorb and reflect the Frost dictum: she transforms it. For her, as for other Arab-Americans, it is not a matter of choosing one world over the other, Arab or American. Rather, she insists that Arab-American identity exists at the point of crossing: the hyphen linking cultures, the gulch between worlds. Hers is not the dream of univocal identity, feet firmly rooted on one side of the divide, but rather the messy reality of hands stained with American berries, shoulders limned with Syrian dust. Kahf knows that it is not the choosing of one path, as Frost would have it, but the passing between both that makes all the difference.

Kahf's integration of Arab and American identity occurs partly through language. Her writing draws on both American colloquialisms and Quranic suras; it is informed by American free verse, with its tendency toward tonal subtleties and understated imagery, yet is imbued with an energy that draws on the heart of the Arabic oral tradition and Arabic poetry. At times Kahf is very explicit about her intention to use Arabic influences to revitalize the English language. In "Copulation in English" she writes: "We are going to dip English backward/ by its Shakespearean tresses/ arcing its spine like a crescent/We are going to rewrite English in Arabic" (*Emails* 71). Drawing on Arabic not just for specific images and words, but also for its sheer exuberance, Kahf celebrates Arabic language and culture and identity even as she creates a new language that can negotiate the passage between Arab and American, making space for both without apology.



Although the lyric mode preferred by older writers remains alive and well, contemporary writers are increasingly creating a new diction for the expression of Arab-American realities. In particular, a new generation of spoken word poets are bringing Arab-American voices into American performance spaces. Of particular note is Suheir Hammad, a well-known spoken word poet who has achieved some fame as co-writer and performer in the 2003 Tony Award-winning Broadway show and HBO series “Def Poetry Jam on Broadway.” Hammad, who has published two books of poetry, *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* and *ZaatarDiva*, and a memoir, *Drops of this Story*, uses gritty, urban, hip-hop rhythms in her fiercely feminist, politicized, no-holds-barred poetry; her work has endeared her to a younger generation of Arab-Americans in particular. Her writing, which links national and international contexts, moves from rage against sexual violence to anguish over Palestinian suffering to Arab-American experiences to social justice issues in the U.S.. Her ability to link disparate contexts has made hers among the most compelling of Arab-American contemporary voices. Charting the violations which Palestinians have endured as well as the racism encountered by Arab-Americans, she also engages directly with cultural self-criticism, critiquing sexism and racism within Arab communities. And she insists that U.S. readers acknowledge their own historical legacies of violation against Native Americans. As she puts it in the poem “In America, ‘Right now you are standing on stolen land no matter where you are reading this poem” (<http://www.suheirhammad.com>; accessed Jan. 21, 2007).

Like many Arab-American writers, Hammad articulates a search for home—one located beyond the dual legacy of violence in the Middle East and exclusion in the U.S. In a poem titled “broken and beirut,” she explores the connections between a history of violence and oppression, and the need to recreate both self and world. The poem begins by invoking the Palestinian experience of war and massacres: “people blown apart burned alive/ flesh and blood all mixed together/ a sight no human being can take/ and yet we take and take....” Yet out of this horror of piecing together body parts from the rubble, she holds out the possibility of finding—or creating—some vision of home and self. Tired of “taking fear and calling it life,” as she puts it, she longs to be able to go home to something before pain, before massacres and bombs and wars. But her desire is not for a romanticized space outside of history. Rather, she longs to go home to herself, and in the process to re-imagine the possibilities of self and history, political and personal agency. “I want to remember what I’ve never lived,” she writes, “a home within me within us/ where honey is offered from my belly... return to what we’ve forgotten.../ to the drum the hum the sum of my parts.” This is not a utopian nor an escapist longing: it requires work, imagination and memory. But out of it comes something nourishing: “honey/ on the lips of survivors” (*Born Palestinian*, 97). As Hammad’s work shows, Palestinian-American writers bring to their work an extra dimension of exile, that is engendered by Palestinian experience. A writer whose work exemplifies this is Nathalie Handal, who negotiates questions of identity, community and selfhood within the framework of Palestinian exile. Handal has long insisted on situating Arab-Americans not just within an insular U.S. locale but within a transnational context. Her edited anthology *The Poetry of Arab Women* identified Arab-American writers as members of the Arab diaspora, and in her own writing she wrestles with issues of bifurcated identity not just on U.S. ground but in a global context. In her work one can trace a nuanced progression from exilic displacement, to an understanding of “home” as self-created in language, to an active feminist stance and an insistence on claiming arrival, no matter how provisionally.

Handal’s first poetry book, *The Neverfield*, narrated the classic journey of the exile through memory and history in search of both home and selfhood, arriving at last at an imaginative space where language holds out the hope of transfiguring historical and personal realities. Her second collection, *The Lives of Rain*, depicts with greater particularity the multiple facets of exile and Palestinian experiences. In poems which are innovative and compelling, Handal explores the realities of political conflict and the possibilities of finding or creating home. The book’s opening poem, “The Doors of Exile,” is an iconic portrayal of the condition of exile: “The shadows close a door/ this is loneliness: / every time we enter a room we enter a new room” (1). Other poems chart, with devastating clarity, the violence with which Palestinians contend: the physical violence of war and occupation, the emotional repercussions on those who survive, and the intellectual violence which Palestinians encounter when they attempt to speak of their own historical and personal realities. This is a violence enacted not just against the body, but also against the spirit. In the poem “Twelve Deaths at Noon,” the narrator asks, “When was the last time we looked at our reflections/ and saw ourselves, not jars of eroded bones/ not the small child in us looking for our burnt eyelashes./ When was the last time we slept without dreaming we died,/ without wishing the killer dead, without looking for our gun/ while making love?” (15).

From Palestine, the poems move into the Palestinian diaspora, as Handal traces the dialects of displacement

through Europe, North Africa, South and North America. Languages and places intersect and collide, creating a sense of both richness and longing: Arabic and Spanish and French and English, Morocco and Mexico and the Caribbean and the Balkans and Miami and New York. Yet these linguistic and cultural juxtapositions provide only stopping points: as she “travel[s] and move[s]/ from one continent to the next/ move, to be whole” (36). “Home is who we are” Handal declares in the poem “Baladna” (*Lives*, 33) but home keeps slipping out of her grasp. Standing, as she puts it, “at the corner of a small road somewhere between my grandfather and what seems to be my present,” her identity remains something just out of reach: “we write a ballad to celebrate ourselves, baladna, and wonder, is that what it’s like/ to dance in Arabic?” (33).

The book’s final poem “Amrika” seeks to breach diaspora’s “tyranny of distance” (*Lives*, 58). How, Handal asks, “does one begin to understand the difference / between Sabaah el khayr and bonjour, / the difference between the city of lights and black-outs”? (58). In the face of throats “swollen with history” (59), it is a question without answer. Yet in the final section of the poem, “Debke in New York,” Handal claims a homecoming of sorts. She announces: “I arrive... I wear my jeans, tennis shoes, walk Broadway, pass Columbia, read Said and Twain...recite a verse by Ibn Arabi/ and between subway rides to the place I now call home, listen to Abdel Halim and Nina Simone” (63–64). Hers is an arrival composed of disjunctions and conjunctions, of fragmented perceptions whose resonance is cumulative. For a moment exile is held in abeyance—even if this homecoming is only possible in the imagination: “It is later than it was a while ago” the poem concludes, „ and I haven’t moved a bit, / my voice still breaking into tiny pieces / when I introduce myself to someone new / and imagine I have found my way home” (64).

Part of this homecoming has been a move into new modes of expression. Khaled Mattawa has been in the forefront of calling for a move into genres traditionally underrepresented in Arab-American literature, especially fiction. With Pauline Kaldas he edited a groundbreaking anthology of short fiction, *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004). The reasons for the dearth of narrative in Arab-American literature, Kaldas and Mattawa suggest, have been complicated. By shying away from prose, Arab-Americans “may have wished to exert greater control over the representation of their community” (xi). Indeed, the formula for publishing success for ethnic novelists has too often involved a binary opposition in which the “old world” represents outmoded communal and family values and the U.S. is celebrated as a progressive utopia. This over-determination has produced a reluctance to speak out lest one’s words be used against one’s own culture. But a current generation is turning more and more to fiction, in stories that are, as Kaldas and Mattawa put it, “neither acts of betrayal nor acts of eulogy that sing uncritical praise” (xiv).

Recent years have seen a plethora of new novels, including Patricia Ward’s *The Bullet Collection*, Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*, Naomi Shihab Nye’s young adult novel *Going, Going*, Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine*, Rawi Hage’s *The De Niro Game*, Samia Serageldin’s *The Cairo House* and Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Striking in this newer literature is a willingness to address gender issues and sexuality with more openness than previously.

The newest genre to emerge in Arab-American letters is that of drama. An increasing number of Arab-American playwrights are writing and producing plays, including Betty Shamieh, whose work has been produced off Broadway, and Jamil Houry, co-founder of the Silk Road Theatre Project. The Arab-American theater collective Nibras, based in New York, has helped to bring Arab-American drama to visibility. A first-ever edited collection of Arab-American drama, underway, will assist in making Arab-American plays available to a reading public.

Arab-American authors increasingly demonstrate both the diversity of the Arab cultural roots on which they draw and the diverse ways in which these cultural roots play out in the U.S. For some, Arab-American literature will always be about the narrative of leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. For others, Arab-American literature takes its place on a global canvas, as one component of a worldwide Arab diaspora in which cultural ties can be reinvented. Arab-American authors may disagree whether the past is something to recover, or to recover from, as Khaled Mattawa has put it. But what is clear is that Arab-American ethnicity and expression is a matter not just of the past, but of the present and future. “The stories you believe are the stories you make” says Mattawa (*Zodiac*, 7). Arab-Americans have been making stories and poems for over a century, and increasingly the stories they make seek to remake the world they live in. The world that emerges is multifaceted, made of many cultural strands. In her memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, Diana Abu-Jaber asks, “Why must there be only one home?” (328). It’s a question that echoes throughout Arab-American literature. Clearly, there has never been a singular

home-space, one definition that will work for everyone. But as one examines the evolution of Arab-American literature over a century, it is clear that Arab-American authors have moved from a stance of defensiveness to self-assertion, producing literary texts that speak to their own realities and chart a space for their voices. In their work it becomes apparent that if “home” is finally only possible in the imagination, it is nonetheless a space with infinite possibilities.

There was a parallel immigration to South America, and a parallel literary emergence there. However, my discussion in this essay is limited to the U.S. context, and is for the most part limited to texts written in English.

The first Arabic newspaper in the U.S., *Kawkab Amrika* (Star of America) was inaugurated in 1892; others quickly followed. In 1910, Syrians, Palestinians, Turks, Armenians, and others were classified as ‘Asiatic’ by the U.S. Census Bureau. In 1911 the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization ordered court clerks to “reject applications for first papers from ‘aliens who were neither white persons nor persons of African birth and descent “—a ruling that targeted “Asiatics” for exclusion (see Naff, 253).

Haney Lopez provides a compelling analysis of these cases in *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. For a discussion of the Arab-American cases in particular and their relationship to Arab-American literature, see my “Arab-Americans and the Meanings of Race.”

Although Naff cites the 1929 census this seems to be an error. See also Hitti, who notes that “In the reports of the fourteenth decennial census of 1920, the Syrians were for the first time treated as a separate people” (*Syrians in America*, p. 19 note 1). A similar literary organization, al Usba was formed by Arab immigrants in South America at about the same time. As Abdulhadi, Naber and Alsultany put it, “Irrespective of whether we identify as Arab or Arab-American we are as affected by developments ‘back home’ as we are by what happens at ‘home’...we see Arab American identifications as transnational and counter-hegemonic to the dominant definition of hyphenated American identities that often imply subscribing to assimilation and the long-discredited melting pot theories” (13–14). For a discussion of the prevalence of poetry as opposed to fiction in Arab-American letters, see my essay “New Directions.”

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