

Building the Archive of an Arab American Cultural Institution: Media as a Tool for Community Development

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Abstract

My research this summer explored Arab American activism and community building since the 1980s, particularly in the Boston area. I focused on the reasons and motivations behind the use of media (particularly television) as a way to advance political and cultural themes and identities. I spent the summer working with “Arabic Hour,” a volunteer-based, non-profit television show that has been an integral part of the Boston-area Arab American community since 1981. Over the last thirty years, the program has collected more than 1000 English-language interviews with both domestic and international figures on various topics. In order to examine the impact of “Arabic Hour” on the community, I worked on the early stages of a digital archive of “Arabic Hour” episodes. When the archive is completed, it will serve as an important resource for local and national Arab American communities, scholars of Arab American and Muslim American history, and students of media in the United States.

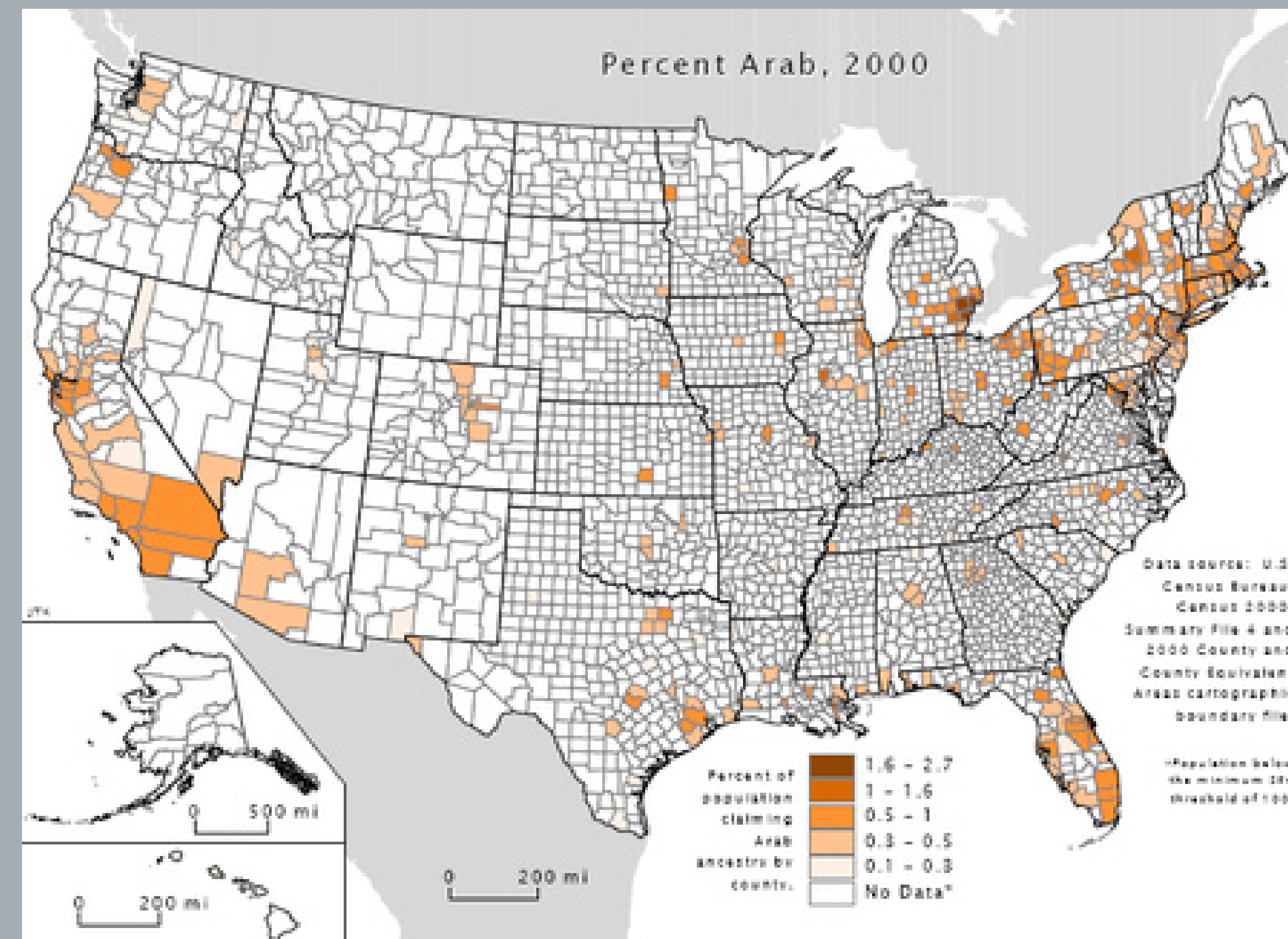


Figure 1. Arab American Settlement in the United States, US Census Bureau

Materials/Methods

The data for this project was collected in the course of viewing, assessing, and archiving episodes of “Arabic Hour.” I spent a lot of my time this summer digitizing these tapes (currently in 3 different formats), assessing and recording the topics covered in each episode, and creating a searchable database that tracks each episode’s date, segments, themes, guests, and other key information. In order to archive each entry, we used Pinnacle Dazzle hardware and software to convert tapes into AVI format or uncompressed audio/video format. In addition to digitizing, viewing, and recording information about these episodes, I read relevant texts to contextualize the interviews in each episode. Three especially important texts were *Muslims in America* by Edward Curtis, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian Diaspora* by Sarah Gualtieri, and *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* by Rabab Abdelhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber. Through these texts, I explored topics related to the Arab American community including the history and development of the community, immigrant experiences, religion, race, and gender.

Results

This summer, I focused on the interviews in the episodes, though the other segments (news, music, cooking, poetry) are also important. There are interviews with individuals inside and outside the community, including former government officials, poets, activists, and religious leaders. Of the episodes that I have viewed, interview topics have included literature, language and identity, and current events in the United States and the Middle East. These episodes document Arab American life, and the “Arabic Hour” network and community provides a valuable organizing and discussion space for Arab Americans in Boston. During the summer, much of my viewing focused on two time periods: that of the early 1980s at the beginning of the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon and in the spring of 1996, where the focus of many of the interviews was once again, relations between Israel and Lebanon. In both of these time periods, “Arabic Hour” episodes sought to educate viewers about current events in Lebanon, while also providing a space for Arab Americans to respond to the invasions through relief funds, marches and demonstrations, and lectures.

Conclusion

For my thesis, I will study media and Arab American activism in Boston during the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon. I plan to closely examine tapes produced between 1981 and 1985 to study the development and growth of the “Arabic Hour” program as well as Arab American activism in Boston during this period in the Lebanese Civil War. I also plan to supplement with other materials such as traditional book research and interviews that I will conduct in the community. With these elements, I hope will paint a picture of how activism during this time contributed to community building in the Boston area, around the country, and abroad. In order to do this research, I plan to continue viewing and digitizing many of the tapes from this time period so that I can contribute to the building of this digital archive and to my own thesis research.

References

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