

Arab and Muslim American Female Playwrights:
Resistance and Revision Through Solo Performance

A dissertation

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Abstract

Within the dominant narrative constructed about the events of September 11 and the subsequent War on Terror, the United States government and Western media ostensibly defined and categorized the disparate peoples of the Middle East and South Asia into fixed generalities for mass consumption. In particular, the representation of Arab and Muslim women as oppressed and voiceless became a prominent trope used to justify American military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response to the conventionally passive and limiting portrayals of Arab and Muslim women, playwrights such as Heather Raffo, Rohina Malik, Laila Farah, and Bina Sharif created through their solo performances a multitude of female characters who question and contradict such generalizations. Considered collectively, the dramas produced by these artists together create a theatrical form of resistance and revision as a means of bearing witness to the contemporary realities of Arab and Muslim American women.

Through an analysis of the theatrical self-representation of contemporary Arab and Muslim American female playwrights and solo performers, this dissertation examines the ways in which these one-woman shows are challenging the stereotypical racial discourses perpetuated about Arabs and Muslims after September 11. The playwrights in this study use solo performance as a means of negotiating current tensions surrounding the representation of their race, culture, and gender, simultaneously demonstrating and critiquing the construction of collective identities. It is the purpose of this project to illuminate and explore commonalities that have emerged as part of this theatrical resistance, and to

consider the cultural and political identities that have been presented to contemporary audiences as a result of such practices. Within the chapters of this study, I investigate these artists' use of narrative structure, costumes and props, language, and politics in their efforts to redefine the contemporary representation of Arab and Muslim American women on stage.

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Introduction

Who Tells Your Story?

Although the two military operations initiated by the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century— the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq two years later— were fought overseas, the resulting sociopolitical climate in America was ultimately destructive in its own way. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, interest and questions about the peoples of South Asia and the Middle East proliferated. Curiosity quickly turned to misconceptions, however, as varied and complex racial, ethnic, and religious identifications became consolidated in monolithic representations. The images and stories about Arabs and Muslims subsequently perpetuated by the American government and media ostensibly defined and categorized disparate peoples into fixed generalities for mass consumption. In a televised address to Congress on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush described publicly for the first time the people responsible for the attacks, referring to members of the Taliban as “enemies of freedom” and detailing their acts of terrorism committed across the globe. He included in this list the oppressive measures the group had enforced in Afghanistan: “Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.”¹ These broadly drawn characterizations and the context in which they were presented established

¹ George W. Bush, “Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001,” in *Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001-2008*, accessed February 20, 2016. http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf.

a number of binaries that came to define the dominant discourse of American wartime narratives after 9/11: terrorist versus victim, civilized versus uneducated, us versus them. Such identifications became, in turn, convenient tropes used to support specific political agendas within the framework of Bush's War on Terror, which he described as the fight "of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom."²

Historian Nada Shabout points out that within these narratives, Arab and Muslim women in particular have been "transformed into unfortunate objects of pity,"³ an image that was evoked as a justification for the United States' involvement in Afghanistan as well as the invasion of Iraq. The enormity of the misrepresentation of Arab and Muslim women in the context of war is evident in the rapidity with which these interpretations solidified in the national consciousness. A month after the attacks of September 11, then First Lady Laura Bush delivered a radio address in which she cited the cruel treatment of women in Afghanistan as a primary reason for United States military action in the region. The speech is replete with words and phrases— such as oppression, severe repression, brutality, and punishment— that position these women as victims in desperate need of saving. "Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror," said Mrs. Bush, a sentiment that can be construed as indicating that the countries siding with America are civilized, while those who are against us are barbarians. She went on to announce that the "fight against terrorism is also a

² Ibid.

³ Nada Shabout, "Images and Status: Visualizing Iraqi Women," in *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*, ed. Faegheh Shirazi (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 152.

fight for the rights and dignity of women,”⁴ appropriating a kind of feminist discourse as a means of justifying the decision of her husband’s government to go to war. As Karen Beckman writes in her essay on feminism during times of conflict, “the Bush administration used Laura Bush’s ‘speaking for’ Afghan women to create the impression that Afghan women had no voices of their own.”⁵ In the master narrative of American political rhetoric, they are portrayed as subjugated and voiceless, reinforcing the imperialistic notion that such women need to be “saved.” From the very first moments of the United States’ military engagement in South Asia and the Middle East, American politicians and, subsequently, the Western media, situated the liberation of Arab and Muslim women as a prize to be won in battle.

One of the most assertive challenges to these rather hyperbolic assertions came from the theatre, as Arab and Muslim American playwrights and performers began creating work that complicated many of the essentialist notions perpetuated after September 11. The substantial increase in productions by such artists is often referred to as the Arab American theatre movement, a construct that I will address more specifically later in the introduction but one that is significant in the opposition to dominant wartime narratives in the United States. In contrast to the growing perception Arab and Muslim women as silenced and oppressed, female playwrights emerged as the most prolific contributors to the Arab American theatre movement, particularly through their creation of solo performances. In the

⁴ Laura Bush, Radio Address, November 17, 2001, The American Presidency Project, accessed December 12, 2010, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=24992>

⁵ Karen Beckman, “Feminism in the Time of Violence,” in *Interventions: Activists and Academics Respond to Violence*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Janet R. Jakobsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 14.

wake of 9/11, writer-actresses such as Heather Raffo, Rohina Malik, Laila Farah, and Bina Sharif turned to the structure of a one-woman show as a means of combating the conventionally passive and limiting portrayals of Arab and Muslim women promoted by the government and the media. The performances by Raffo in *9 Parts of Desire* (2003), Malik in *Unveiled* (2009), Farah in *Living in the Hyphen-Nation* (2005), and Sharif in *Afghan Woman* (2002)⁶ instead offer a multitude of female characters who question and contradict such generalizations. Considered collectively, the dramas produced by these artists together create a theatrical form of resistance and revision as a means of bearing witness to the contemporary realities of Arab and Muslim American women.

Through an analysis of the theatrical self-representation of contemporary Arab and Muslim American female playwrights and solo performers, this dissertation examines the ways in which these one-woman shows are challenging the stereotypical racial discourses perpetuated about Arabs and Muslims after September 11. The playwrights in this study use solo performance as a means of negotiating current tensions surrounding the representation of their race, culture, and gender, simultaneously demonstrating and critiquing the construction of collective identities. It is the purpose of this project to illuminate and explore commonalities that have emerged as part of this theatrical resistance, and to consider the cultural and political identities that have been presented to

⁶ Dates listed in parentheses here refer to the year of the show's first performance, with the exception of Farah's *Living in the Hyphen-Nation*, which references the date of publication. Farah performed versions of several of the monologues from this show in earlier appearances, but the text as it is currently performed was first published as part of her article, "Dancing on the Hyphen: Performing Diasporic Subjectivity," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 2005): 316-45.

contemporary audiences as a result of such practices. Within the following chapters, I will investigate these artists' use of narrative structure, costumes and props, language, and politics in their efforts to redefine the contemporary representation of Arab and Muslim American women on stage.

What's in a Name?

I have made the decision to refer to the writers and performers included in this dissertation as Arab, Arab American, and/or Muslim American because my primary focus throughout this project is the overarching struggle of representation within these broad terms. This nomenclature is also in keeping with the use of the phrase "Arab American theatre," which has been adopted by both media outlets and theatre artists of Arab descent to describe the surge in productions by Arab American playwrights after September 11. Many of the plays discussed here can also be considered a part of this Arab American theatre movement, and therefore it seems appropriate to maintain consistent terminology. There are also several instances throughout this project where I refer to the Middle East and South Asia, a designation that I employ to refer to the geographic location of the ancestral countries of the artists whose work is examined here.⁷

Arab as a "term," however, is particularly burdened in our contemporary lexicon, as it implies a sense of unity and a collective identity that is nearly impossible given the disparate peoples to whom it refers. Initially a descriptor of

⁷ The term "Middle East" is sometimes criticized for being Eurocentric, but its use here is in keeping with the geographical designation most often adopted in the United States. Specifically with regard to the artists in this project, I use Middle East in reference to Iraq and Lebanon, and South Asia in reference to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

the Semitic peoples of the Arabian Peninsula, it is now more specifically applied to those who speak Arabic as their primary language. This designation then encompasses a population that spans from the eastern coast of Africa through the southern part of Iran. However, while there may be linguistic connections across this geographic area, there are clear distinctions in terms of nationality, religion, and culture amongst such peoples. Issues of identity are further complicated for Arabs in America as the United States government does not recognize “Arab American” as a distinct ethnic group; Arab Americans are typically categorized as white on the United States census, a classification that has recently been publicly protested and is under review for the 2020 census.⁸ Given such a complicated history, for the purposes of this paper the use of Arab aligns with its current acceptance as a reference to Arabic speakers. Beyond this factual application, however, the term will be also analyzed within the context of its rhetorical use, both by the American government and also within the performance of identity construction by the artists included here.

In the current writing about Arab Americans, there remains a divide in both scholarly and mainstream journalism between writers who use a hyphen to connect the two words and those who do not. The choice seems to be largely a personal one, and there are several instances in which the hyphen is a crucial component in the self-identification of an artist or in the theoretical framework of an academic approach. For example, Dina Amin, a prolific scholar, director, and translator, titled her preface to the very first anthology of drama by Middle

⁸ Tanzina Vega, “Census Considers How to Measure a More Diverse America,” *The New York Times*, U.S. Section, July 1, 2014.

Eastern-American playwrights “What’s in a Hyphen?” In this essay, she refers to the playwrights included in the volume as “hyphenated artists,” and goes so far as to assert that “[p]ure breeds usually do not need identity definitions, they are already defined. It is the work of the hyphenated/hybrid authors that usually require an overture for their ethnic origins...” which she believes is the “plight of most second-generation writers.”⁹ The hyphen is similarly significant for performer and professor Laila Farah, whose work is analyzed in this dissertation. Her monologues, presented together as a show called *Living in the Hyphen-Nation* and published collectively as part of an article entitled “Dancing on the Hyphen,” focus primarily on the negotiation between her dual identities of Arab and American, the balance of which shifts depending on where she is during moments in which her identity is questioned. She explains, “I make a critical move to highlight the hyphen as a means of existing and entering the geographic spaces of diasporic experience, both as inscribed in the mind and as written on the body.”¹⁰ For Farah, the hyphen acts as representation of that tenuous connection between these two facets of her being, marking the space from which she draws the content of her performances.

However, despite these few noteworthy examples, the majority of contemporary scholarship on the subject is written without a hyphen between Arab and American, and the conformity to that grammatical choice seems to hold true in most recent articles and manuscripts. The latest published contribution to

⁹ Dina Amin, “What’s in a Hyphen?” in *Salaam.Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama*, ed. Holly Hill and Dina Amin (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), x.

¹⁰ Farah, 320-1.

Arab American theatrical analysis, a comprehensive volume covering Arab American drama from 1908 to the present written by Michael Malek Najjar, does not include the hyphen. He believes that “the connection between these two worlds is more of a gulf than a bridge. Arab Americans live in this space between these two identities in a state of constant negotiation.”¹¹ Dalia Basiouny’s dissertation and her subsequent published chapters on Arab American theatre avoid the hyphen for reasons that resonate with my own approach to the matter. She writes, “I will not hyphenate the term Arab American. I prefer to drop the hyphen to mark an inclusion of Arabs in American society, the same way the terms Italian American or African American are spelled, reflecting their status as an integral part of American society.”¹² By “inclusion” Basiouny does not mean assimilation or absorption, but rather the acceptance of a minority culture as a significant and valued part of the majority culture. Given that this notion of recognition and understanding of their ethnicity and religion seems to be a shared goal of the playwrights included here, it seems appropriate to adopt the language usage that best reflects that. As such, the only times in which the hyphen appears between Arab and American in this project is in direct quotes from an author who chooses to use the hyphen.

A similarly contested issue within the discussion of Arab American writing is the concept of diaspora. A term of Greek origin meaning scattering or dispersal, historically it was used to refer the forced exile of Jews from their

¹¹ Michael Malek Najjar, *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 13.

¹² Dalia Basiouny, “The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American Theatre Movement” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2009), 16.

homeland, and then expanded to include other groups (such as African slaves) uprooted from a native country to which they could not return. As such, the notion of diaspora has often been associated with traumatic events and the inability to go home because, as William Safran theorizes in the first issue of the journal *Diaspora*, “although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which [the members of a diaspora] can identify politically, ideologically, or socially.”¹³ However, Safran writes in his detailed explanation of diaspora that despite the traumatic circumstances under which they had to leave their home countries, a common characteristic of diasporic peoples is that “they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return— when conditions are appropriate.”¹⁴ This specific clause, one of six in Safran’s definition of diaspora, imposes a fixed limitation on the experience of living in the diaspora that seems to conflict with the inherent malleability of hybrid identities. At the time of his writing, Safran was trying to prevent what he perceived to be the dilution of a term originally rooted in the experiences of a very specific group of people (Jews exiled from their historic homeland) by scholars attempting to impose the concept of diaspora on incongruous circumstances. Insisting on the rigidity of such terms, however, does not allow for the consideration of future circumstances that might also motivate mass border crossings, such as economic crises, political events, sectarian violence, and labor demands. Given the increasingly varied reasons for emigration in recent decades, my approach to diaspora focuses more specifically

¹³ William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1991): 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83-4.

on the tension between a sense of belonging and the expression of difference. As Loren Kruger suggests, “[t]he migration of diaspora from the marginal connotations of loss and nostalgia to the central constitution of national if hyphenated identities marks shifts in the conception and realization of national identification.”¹⁵ Within the context of work produced by contemporary Arab and Muslim American writers, the evolution of the diasporic experience is reflected in the authors’ focus on hybridity and a sense of liminality.

This shift— from a mandatory break with one’s homeland compelled by outside forces to a renegotiation of one’s cultural and political identity based on transnational experiences and ancestry— is the juncture at which many contemporary Arab and Muslim American playwrights locate their work. In general, the connections to an exilic homeland are now much more traversable; generations of Arab Americans can visit their ancestral countries with ease and frequency, which drastically alters their diasporic experiences. Rather than self-identifying their nationality as “either/or” there is a greater emphasis on the “and.” Questions of allegiance and identification are thus framed through diasporic transnationalism, a state of mobility between countries and languages that, while often less traumatic and permanent than the plight of previous diasporic peoples, possesses its own challenges. Layla Al Maleh writes of contemporary Arab American literature that “concerns pertinent to cultural and relational identification lie at the heart of these works, and the tension between

¹⁵ Loren Kruger, “Introduction: Diaspora, Performance, and National Affiliations in North America,” *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (October 2003): 260.

assimilation and preservation is equally persistent,”¹⁶ an assessment that is certainly applicable to Arab and Muslim American drama as well. In this dissertation, the writers I include can be considered diasporic because of the way in which their work negotiates two different cultures and explores the permeable relationship of Arab and American identities in the twenty-first century.

From “Invisible” to Public Enemy Number One

Many scholars writing about Arab Americans insist that, as a population, they were generally invisible before the September 11 attacks. Both Basiouny and Steven Salaita frame their analysis of the post-9/11 treatment of Arab Americans as part of a shift in racial positionality from largely invisible to extremely visible, and their use of this particular language is an extension of existing scholarly work on Arabs in America. Salaita writes, “Since 9/11, Arab Americans have evolved from what Nadine Naber once described as ‘ “the invisible” racial/ethnic group’ of the United States into a highly visible community that either directly or indirectly affects America’s so-called culture wars, foreign policy, presidential elections, and legislative tradition.”¹⁷ Naber and Amaney Jamal co-edited a volume in 2008 entitled *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* that is specifically devoted to charting this

¹⁶ Layla Al Maleh, “Preface,” in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspective on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh (New York: Rodopi, 2009), x.

¹⁷ Steven Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 110.

shifting positionality.¹⁸ This assessment of general invisibility is perhaps most applicable to the earliest waves of immigration from Arab countries at the beginning of the twentieth century, as many newcomers consciously worked toward assimilation, emphasizing their Christian beliefs to aid their acceptance by an established majority. The inconspicuousness of their Arab identity was further perpetuated by bureaucracy, as these first-wave immigrants were considered to be Ottoman rather than Arab because their homelands (areas that would become Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine¹⁹) were identified as part of the Ottoman Empire until after World War I.²⁰ In addition, it was not uncommon for Arab immigrants— or any other immigrant population, for that matter— to have their names altered by immigration officials or to change their own names at Ellis Island.

While this notion of “invisibility” may be an accurate depiction of Arab Americans throughout much of the 1900s, I believe it would be difficult to assert that such status lasted into the twenty-first century. Najjar states that although “some hyphenated groups have had periods of acceptance by the dominant culture, it can be said that Arab Americans who have not assimilated (especially those who are Muslim or who dress in traditional Arab/Muslim dress) have never really been accepted by the majority of American society.”²¹ A lack of acceptance does not equal invisibility, however. Political scientist Ronald

¹⁸ Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ I use the designation of Palestine in reference to this geographic region because the State of Israel did not yet exist in the early twentieth century.

²⁰ Basiouny, 2.

²¹ Najjar, 61.

Stockton, who has extensively analyzed images and archetypes of Arabs in American popular culture, demonstrates that the media treatment of Arab and Arab Americans indicates a conscious marginalization based on ethnicity and religion. In 1994, seven years before the terrorist attacks in the United States, he concluded that “an exceptional proportion of all hostile or derogatory images targeted at Arabs are derived from or are parallel to classical images of Blacks and Jews, modified to fit contemporary circumstances.”²² Although September 11 was not the genesis for such images, the occurrences of that day, combined with the governmental and media responses, stratified existing perceptions of Arabs and Muslims.

The portrayal of Arabs and Muslims on screen— particularly in the final decades of the twentieth century— emphasizes Stockton’s assessment, as Arab and Muslim characters are, more often than not, the villains of the story. After the Cold War ended, Hollywood needed to redefine the role of “American enemy,” a part that had typically been filled by the general threat of communism, and the Soviet Union in particular, for nearly half a century. After the Soviet Union collapsed and the Berlin Wall came down, events unfolding in Iraq and Kuwait in the summer of 1990 seemed to prompt a shift in the characterization of the cinematic enemy “away from a sovereign state and ideology to a group of nonstate-actors and a form of violence pursued in the name of a different ideology— Islamic terrorism,” notes Krista E. Wiegand. She goes on to write that while this change has necessitated some tweaks in the governmental narratives

²² Ronald Stockton, “Ethnic Archetypes and the Arab Image,” in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 121.

about threats to the national security of the United States, “the task has been relatively easy due to the ability of the rhetoric to simply substitute the concept of Islamic terrorism in place of the concept of communism as the enemy.”²³ This is not to suggest that the threat of militant Islamic terrorism is not legitimate, but rather to highlight the media’s penchant for interchangeability and generalization of races and religions in its effort to generate dramatic narratives.

One does not have to search very hard to find a big-budget movie in which Arab men are violent anti-American terrorists (*True Lies* in 1994) or greedy and crass (*The Mummy* in 1999), nor is it a challenge to compile a list of films in which Arab women are portrayed as scantily-clad harem girls (available examples range from comedies such as 1955’s *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy* to *Son of the Pink Panther* in 1993, to action films like 2010’s *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*). In his extensive examination of the ways in which Arab characters are portrayed on film, Jack G. Shaheen observes that “prior to September 11, 2001, Hollywood had already released nearly 1,100 movies with Arab characters or images in them, the vast majority demeaning... All 1,100 movies clearly demonstrate that Arab stereotypes were contaminating minds long before 9/11.”²⁴

While the sheer volume of stereotypical portrayals of Arab and Muslim people in popular entertainment is overwhelming, it is the repetition of these

²³ Krista E. Wiegand, “Islamic Terrorism: The Red Menace of the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Impact of 9/11 on the Media, Arts, and Entertainment: The Day That Changed Everything?*, ed. Matthew J. Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 52.

²⁴ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilified a People*, updated ed. (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2009), 2. Shaheen also specifically addresses the negative stereotyping of Arabs on screen in the years after September 11 in *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs After 9/11* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008).

dehumanizing representations that is particularly dangerous. John F. Kennedy remarked that “the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie— deliberate, contrived and dishonest— but the myth— persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.”²⁵ The continued recycling and perpetuation of these stereotypes across centuries and various forms of media has assisted in the widespread misunderstanding of a significant portion of the world’s population. The attacks perpetrated on September 11 retroactively legitimized many of these assumptions for some Americans. Salaita asserts that “9/11 provided an ostensibly empirical pretext to legitimize anti-Arab racism, but in no way did 9/11 actually create anti-Arab racism; 9/11 merely validated it.”²⁶ Such interpretations were then furthered by the American government, which used images of murderous Islamic extremists and supposedly oppressed Arab and Muslim women to brand their military engagement in the Middle East and South Asia. As Shaheen observes, “Convenient stereotypes make everyone’s job easier.”²⁷ The symbiotic relationship between Hollywood and the United States government in constructing such representations, whether intentional or subconscious, created an environment in which Arab and Muslim Americans were “collectively indicted... as Public Enemy #1.”²⁸

In her dissertation on the Arab American theatre movement, Basiouny remarks that “[t]he theatre of an ethnic minority can be used to study both the

²⁵ John F. Kennedy, Yale University Commencement Address, June 11, 1962. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed January 22, 2016. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/Kennedy-Library-Fast-Facts/Yale-University-Commencement-Address.aspx>.

²⁶ Salaita, 111.

²⁷ Shaheen, 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

minority culture and the majority culture within which it seeks to define itself.”²⁹

This assessment seems particularly insightful when considered in the context of the dynamics that developed between Arab and Muslim Americans and the majority culture in the United States in the years following September 11. While the terrorist attacks of 9/11 understandably sparked an immediate and intense emotional response, it was the tenor of the reaction by the public, the media, and the government in the United States that provided the primary impetus for a theatrical renegotiation of Arab and Muslim identity. The tension created when the “good versus evil” mentality spilled over from television and movie screens into the daily lives of the American people can arguably be cited as the catalyst for the Arab American theatre movement. The Arab and Muslim American artists included in this dissertation are able to address hundreds of years of imperialistic attitudes and Orientalist “othering” by situating their plays and performances within a framework that is, at least in part, reflective of the experiences of its audience members in a post-9/11 world. The content of these solo performances directly addresses many of the fears and concerns held by the American majority culture after September 11, but the performers use those attitudes as a means of negotiating their own hybrid identities. As a result, the productions by Raffo, Malik, Farah, and Sharif simultaneously offer a theatrical analysis of the minority and majority culture responses to a major historical event.

Arab American Theatre Movement

²⁹ Basiouny, 1.

The origins of Arab American drama are more literary than theatrical, as most of the Arab American playwrights in the early twentieth century were primarily novelists or poets who wrote only a few dramatic texts. Writers such as Kahlil Gibran, Mikhail Naimy, and Ameen Fares Rihani crafted plays that were generally meant for publication rather than production, and in some cases their work was not translated from the original Arabic or published at all until long after the author's death. Those that were performed were typically presented in Arabic and only for members of the author's own community. Najjar summarizes the content of these early Arab American dramas as deeply rooted in their writers' Maronite Christian backgrounds, exuding a "deep ambivalence, if not outright anger toward the church and its officials... This hostility toward the Eastern Church and the distance these writers felt from Arabs and Arabism informs the style, tone, and political nature of their works."³⁰ Concerns about the workings of the church, the particulars of East-West interactions, and the poet/prophet ideal born out of their creators' religious beliefs characterize much of the work that Najjar places under the heading of Modern Arab Drama, which spans the years between the publication of Rihani's play *Wajdah* in 1908 to 1967. Yasser Fouad Selim further explains that the majority of these early Arab American writers, who were immigrants from Syria and Lebanon, "stressed their Christianity and distanced themselves from the Arab culture in order to evoke American sympathy

³⁰ Najjar, 18.

through religious spirituality and brotherhood... Assimilation and lack of interest in the Arab World affairs were the marks of that period's literature."³¹

The work generated during the first decades of the twentieth century stands in stark contrast to the style and content of Arab American plays written after the Six-Day War in 1967.³² The playwrights of this later period are generally the descendents of immigrants rather than immigrants themselves, and represent a much broader array of home countries and religions. These are writers who have experienced the social and political repercussions of several world wars and countless other violent conflicts; a number of them have also witnessed independence movements in some of their familial homelands. All of these events significantly inform the content of their dramas, which are more politically engaged with issues in both Arab countries and the United States. Whereas their predecessors distanced themselves from their ethnic heritage, many contemporary Arab American playwrights address the complexities of identity politics and cultural hybridity, subjects that most know intimately from their own experience.

Many elements of the artistic shift that occurred in Arab American dramas during the 1960s continues through the work produced today, although the events

³¹ Yasser Fouad Selim, "Arab American Theatre Caught in Censorship: A Study of Betty Shamieh's *Roar* and *The Black Eyed*," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* Vol. 4, No. 3 (February 2014): 81.

³² This conflict, also known as the Third Arab-Israeli War, was the result of mutual distrust and growing hostility between Israel and several of its neighboring countries, including Egypt (called the United Arab Republic during this period), Jordan, and Syria. The mobilization of Egyptian forces along the Sinai Peninsula prompted swift action by Israel that took Egypt by surprise, and the Israeli military was able to similarly overwhelm troops from Jordan and Syria that were recruited to help. By the end of the conflict, Israel was able to triple the amount of land under its control (including parts of Jerusalem that it had lost in the previous war, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula) and had lost fewer than 1,000 soldiers, while the Arab casualties rose above 20,000.

of September 11 mark another turning point in the content, style, and reception of Arab American drama. The most significant change this theatrical genre experienced after the attacks, however, was simply the demand for the work itself. Egyptian American playwright Youssef El Guindi explains, “For the longest time Arab issues or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar” because they were considered “too complex” and the subject matter “too edgy.” Then, after 9/11, “Suddenly there were calls for plays.”³³ Many of these calls came from fellow artists and writers who were motivated to create opportunities in which they could combat the sweeping nationalistic narrative that cast them as the “Other,” and also to engage with sociopolitical issues arising as a result of this misrepresentation.

The initial offering by New York-based theatre collective Nibras engaged directly with the public to address the perpetuation of stereotypes surrounding Arabs and Arab Americans. While members of the group had connected online through an Arab Drama listserv prior to September 11, the events of that day strengthened their resolve to generate theatrical work that showcased the diversity of the Arab American experience. Titled *Sajjil*, which means “record” (as a noun) or “to record” (as a verb), the piece was created from material collected by the group’s members in response to asking people of different ethnicities and religions, “What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘Arab’?” The result, explains Nibras co-founder Maha Chehlaoui, was “a collage of perception of immigrant experience and a very immediate projection of how things were

³³ Dinitia Smith, “For Arab-American Playwrights, a Sense of Purpose,” *The New York Times*, Theater Section, February 11, 2006.

different.”³⁴ Debuting at the 2002 International Fringe Festival in New York City, *Sajjil* presented the responses they received in a documentary-style performance during which the actors imitated the people they interviewed, similar to the approach utilized by Anna Deveare Smith in *Fires in the Mirror*. The production received largely positive reviews and won the festival’s Best Ensemble Award, but perhaps the show’s most lasting achievement is its place in history as the first post-9/11 theatrical presentation to confront the negative perception of Arab Americans. Najla Said told *The New York Times*, “The point we were trying to make was that Arab culture is linked to Islamic culture, but not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab; and not all people from the Middle East are Arab; that we’re a varied culture.”³⁵

Like Nibras, there were several other organizations whose creation and production was motivated by the September 11 attacks. Silk Road Theatre Project (now Silk Road Rising), for example, was formed in Chicago in 2002 by playwright Jamil Khoury and his husband, Malik Gillani. The company takes its name from a network of trade routes that ran from East Asia into Europe on which Chinese silk was the most lucrative product to sell, but the name also acknowledges the 1.5 million people in the metropolitan Chicago area who can trace their lineage back to Silk Road countries.³⁶ Gillani and Khoury “felt galvanized to respond to the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments that swept the

³⁴ Holly Hill, “New Threads,” in *Salaam.Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama*, ed. Holly Hill and Dina Amin (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), xxi.

³⁵ Liesl Schillinger, “The New ‘Arab’ Playwrights,” *The New York Times*, Theater Section, April 4, 2004.

³⁶ Hill, xix.

US in the aftermath of the attacks, and to challenge arguments surmising a ‘clash of civilizations.’ Their hope was to counter negative representation of Middle Eastern and Muslim peoples with representation that was authentic, multi-faceted, and grounded in human experience.”³⁷ Silk Road’s inaugural production was Khoury’s *Precious Stones* in January 2003. Set in Chicago in 1989, the play engages with the conflict between Israel and Palestine through its two female leads, one from each ethnic background, who come together to organize a Jewish/Arab community group and end up falling in love. The goal of both Khoury and his company to foster empathy and acceptance is evident in his play’s structure; in performance, the actresses who play the lead female roles take on multiple parts within the narrative, including those of the supposedly opposing ideology. Spectators are therefore confronted with the physical representation of reconciliation between contradictory perspectives, emphasizing the organization’s mission to “provide resources and learning opportunities that allow individuals to explore, express and embrace a more global perspective.”³⁸ Khoury’s piece is also one of the only Arab American plays to address homosexuality, a topic that remains a sensitive issue in the Arab community. *Precious Stones* avoids the contrivance of neatly solving all of the characters’ problems by the play’s end, however. The ambiguous closing moments remind the audience that such matters— religion, sexuality, race, gender— are universally complex, and that the conversation surrounding these subjects needs to continue if there is any hope for resolution.

³⁷ “About Silk Road Rising,” accessed January 17, 2016, www.silkroadrising.org/about.

³⁸ Ibid.

Though the objective of many early works by Arab American writers post-9/11 was to correct misunderstandings about Arabs and provide a more truthful representation of Arab and Arab Americans, these productions did not hesitate to challenge governmental positions and policies that contributed to growing racial tensions. The political tone of the late-twentieth-century Arab American plays became more pointed after September 11, taking on specific laws and political issues in both the United States and abroad in the artists' ancestral countries. In Ismail Khalidi's *Truth Serum Blues* (Pangea World Theater, 2005), for instance, much of the play takes place in Guantanamo Bay, where protagonist Kareem is being interrogated because of his close relationship with his Palestinian cousin, Waleed, who investigators believe is working with Hamas. Kareem describes the various methods of torture used by his interrogators, including sleep deprivation, extreme temperatures, and breaking several bones in his body. Woven through the dialogue are voiceovers from radio news reports about other abuses and human rights violations perpetrated by government or military operations in the name of finding terrorists. Blending together elements of fact and fiction, Khalidi's work directly indicts several governmental policies established by the United States after September 11, particularly the USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act and Operation TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System).

Yussef El Guindi, perhaps the most well known and most produced Arab American playwright, also confronts these governmental practices in both *Back of*

the Throat (2006) and *Language Rooms* (2010). Born in Egypt, El Guindi and his family moved to England when he was three years old. After returning to Egypt for college, he relocated to America in 1983 to pursue a graduate degree in playwriting at Carnegie Mellon University; El Guindi became a United States citizen in 1996. *Back of the Throat* was the first of his plays to draw widespread critical attention because of its timely topic and bold challenge to the seemingly unfettered power of United States governmental agencies after September 11. Khaled, the Arab and Muslim American protagonist of the play, is visited by two government agents who search his apartment and interrogate him, eventually resorting to physical violence in an effort to determine his possible relationship to a suspected terrorist (a connection that is based on false information and is factually untrue). The agents leave at the end of the piece, but threaten to return to Khaled's home the following day for further questioning. *Language Rooms* is a thematic continuation of *Back of the Throat* as it focuses on two Arab and Muslim American men working as agents and translators on a foreign black site operated by the United States government.³⁹ One of the two agents is reprimanded by his superiors for not getting the desired results from his interrogations, and is subsequently suspected of disloyalty by the government and the other Arab agent whom he had considered his friend.

The works by El Guindi and Khalidi delve deeply into notions of loyalty, both to one's country and to one's self. After September 11, the concept of

³⁹ A black site is a term used to describe a location where a secret military "black project" is being conducted. In recent years, the term has been specifically applied to secret prisons or interrogation facilities operated by the United States government, usually located overseas and therefore outside of any American legal jurisdiction.

loyalty became a complex issue for many Arab Americans as their loyalty to the United States was presumed to be questionable because of their ethnic or religious background. Basiouny notes that the “American political rhetoric of ‘good and evil’ or ‘us versus them’ applied not only to international affairs where it separated the U.S. and its allies from other countries, but also to tensions created at home for Arab American individuals and communities with loyalties to both sides.”⁴⁰ Detention and deportation programs enforced after 9/11 tacitly sanctioned the growing distrust by the American public, which seems to have infused the early works by playwrights who began writing about the issues affecting their communities. In an interview about his play *Language Rooms*, El Guindi says that he felt as though after September 11, his own “loyalty was now under question. Emotionally speaking, I felt I was being shipped to a no-man’s land where everything about me, along with my fellow Arab and Muslim Americans, was being reevaluated. Were we loyal citizens? Could we be trusted? Were we a threat? Were we really American after all?”⁴¹

There is a striking difference, however, between the way in which loyalty is framed in plays written by Arab American men and those written by women. For example, works by Betty Shamieh (arguably the most prominent female Arab American playwright) and Leila Buck are more concerned with loyalty primarily as it pertains to the well-being and self-discovery of their female characters, rather

⁴⁰ Dalia Basiouny, “Descent as Dissent: Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11,” in *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent*, ed. Jenny Spencer (New York: Routledge, 2012), 144-5.

⁴¹ Walter Bilderback, “Interview with Playwright Yussef El Guindi,” February 9, 2010, accessed January 23, 2016, <https://www.wilmatheater.org/blog/interview-playwright-yussef-el-guindi>.

than focusing on loyalty as a function of national allegiance. *Chocolate in Heat: Growing Up Arab in America* by Shamieh premiered just before September 2001, but it is indicative of much of the early twenty-first-century drama by Arab American women in its focus on the challenges of identity formation of a first-generation American girl born to Palestinian parents. The play also condemns the misinformation perpetuated about Arabs and Arab Americans which promotes the kind of prejudicial attitudes the protagonist endures throughout her life.

Shamieh's *Roar* (2004) chronicles the experiences of a Palestinian American family living in Detroit after the first Gulf War, exploring the contentious relationship between hardworking immigrant parents and their American-born teenage daughter.

Leila Buck's body of work, including *In the Crossing*, *Hkeelee (Tell Me a Story)*, and her solo show *ISite*, are based on her own personal experiences as well as those of her family. Her plays grapple with the struggles of navigating a hybrid identity in America but also explore the challenges of returning to the home country of one's ancestors. This is not to say that Arab American female playwrights eschew overtly political subjects in their work, but rather that their engagement with such matters is often more closely related to their own personal or familial identity construction than an examination of the policies themselves. Shamieh says of her first produced plays, "They're not about politics, but they are inherently political. Because if you've never heard a perspective, it makes it political."⁴² The performance pieces by Raffo, Malik, Farah, and Sharif share a

⁴² Schillinger, "The New 'Arab' Playwrights."

similar narrative focus to the plays of Shamieh and Buck, a thematic connection that propels the gendered perspective of this project.

Given the general exploration of identity politics across myriad works by Arab American playwrights, the construction and classification of Arab American drama can be controversial in and of itself. In his definition of Arab American theatre, Najjar lists the playwright's self-identification as Arab American as a criteria for his or her drama's classification under the heading of Arab American theatre (Najjar does acknowledge, however, that some artists analyzed in his book refuse to self-identify). There are other playwrights, such as Iranian American Layla Dowlatshahi, who embrace the Arab American label even if it is not accurate. Dowlatshahi explained to a *New York Times* reporter, "It's an honor to be called an Arab for me," because she believes it is more important to work together with her Arab American peers in challenging pervasive stereotypes than draw attention to semantic differences.⁴³ For the purposes of this particular project, the self-identification of each writer-actress will be discussed insofar as it relates to their specific plays, but it will not be utilized to label or classify the work itself. Instead, my analysis will focus on the stylistic and thematic elements in each artist's performance, exploring how such aspects of writing and production speak to the author's individual history, while still sharing commonalities with work by other female playwrights. The parameters of Arab American theatre here, then, are more reliant on the form and content of the plays and the performer's self-representation onstage, rather than the self-labeling of the artist offstage.

⁴³ Ibid.

Arab American theatre is really a broad categorization, and its use as a term could certainly be interpreted as committing some of the same mistakes against which its presumptive playwrights typically rail, particularly in its elision of multiple identities, ethnicities, and religions. There are, however, some common characteristics of these works that, when examined together, offer a compelling picture of a unique genre of theatre, one that incorporates experiences and points of view that have previously been omitted from traditional theatrical canons. This dissertation seeks to explore the significance of these similarities as well as the challenges that arise in the inevitable classification of productions created by playwrights of Arab descent. In particular, the following chapters will concentrate on the ways in which the female writer-actors included in this study utilize such labels within the context of their performances to subvert or affirm the preconceptions that often accompany these distinctions.

I also endeavor to address the aforementioned pitfall of sweeping inclusivity within the construction of a genre of Arab American theatre by examining the specificity of these plays outside the framework of a theatrical movement. The current application of the “Arab American theatre” label to work by Middle Eastern and South Asian playwrights is particularly complicated, as some works written by non-Arab writers are occasionally included as part of the Arab American theatre movement. Rohina Malik’s *Unveiled*, for instance, is sometimes characterized as Arab American drama, but the London-born Malik is actually of Indian and Pakistani descent. Several of the characters in her play are Arab, however, which could support the application of a broader Arab American

theatre heading. On the other hand, perhaps the classification of *Unveiled* as Muslim American theatre would be more accurate, since its narrative concentrates on the particularities and misperceptions of Islamic practices after September 11. This difficulty in trying to categorize *Unveiled* is not unique when analyzing work by Arab and Muslim American playwrights, as it emphasizes the inherent complexities of these artists' identities and the subjects they address in their work.

It is therefore not the aim of this project to dissect the application of the term Arab American theatre, nor do I wish to assign specific labels to the plays explored in the following pages. This is not to say that genre classifications are not important or useful, however. The significance of the Arab American theatre movement and its categorization as such cannot be understated, and the continuing interest in plays that address contemporary realities of Arab and Muslim Americans offers some assurance that the "movement" has secured a permanent home in the landscape of American theatre. Yet my aim here is to move beyond the broad strokes of this theatrical collective identity and explore in depth the work of four playwrights who give voice to those that are often still left in the margins of the marginalized: Muslim and Arab women.

The Current Conversation

Despite the increasing presence of Arab and Muslim American playwrights, within the broader context of contemporary theatre scholarship Arab American drama as a whole remains largely overlooked in most forums. The most recent edition of *History of the Theatre*, one of the foundational textbooks of

any theatre scholar's education, gives no meaningful mention to theatre by Arab playwrights, either in the United States or abroad. The volume's only substantive mention of Islam classifies it as "largely a negative force" in theatrical history.⁴⁴ As a full-fledged academic discipline, Arab American theatre scholarship is still in its nascent stages. Currently, the only book-length study primarily devoted to Arab American theatre is the recent publication in 2015 by Michael Malek Najjar, entitled *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present*. Najjar devotes one chapter each to Arab American stand-up comedy and filmmakers, but the rest of his monograph traces the path of Arab theatre in America, from its earliest incarnations through today in the form of thematically-organized chapters covering topics as varied as early Arab American drama, post-9/11 plays, and work that addresses the Arab-Israeli conflict. Besides Najjar's monograph, the available scholarship on Arab American drama is limited to a short list of journal articles and book chapters (of which El Guindi and Shamieh are often the subject), and a few recent doctoral dissertations and Master's theses.⁴⁵

Within an already underserved area of study, there remains a dearth of scholarship devoted to the plays by Arab and Muslim American women in particular. Given that the female artists of the Arab American theatre movement are in fact the most prolific playwrights, there is ample material available for

⁴⁴ Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, Tenth Ed. (Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), 66.

⁴⁵ In addition to Dalia Basiouny's dissertation that is referenced earlier in this section and Michael Malek Najjar's 2011 doctoral thesis that became the book mentioned herein, Allison Borgan completed her Master's thesis titled "Fortifying the Roar of Women: Betty Shamieh and the Palestinian-American Female Voice," at Ohio State University in 2012.

analysis and research.⁴⁶ However, many of these plays have received very little attention in performance or print. With the exception of Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* and several plays by Shamieh, a significant percentage of productions authored by Arab and Muslim American women have been limited to brief, under-publicized runs off-off-Broadway, in small regional theatres, or on college campuses. The scripts for these plays are largely unpublished, and the few that are available remain relegated to very specific anthologies (such as *Salaam.Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama* and *Four Arab American Plays: Works by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef El Guindi, and Lameece Issaq & Jacob Kader*), which restricts the potential for exposure to new audiences.

Much of the academic writing on female-authored Arab and Muslim American plays is similarly limited. Available critiques of their work are confined to a few journal articles, most of which are focused on exploring the content of a particular piece without addressing its form or production, and to chapters in books whose intent is to provide an overview of Arab women's writing in general.⁴⁷ In the latter context, these theatrical works are primarily considered through a more traditional literary framework in conjunction with the analysis of novels and poetry that make up the volume's other chapters. This

⁴⁶ The appendix of Najjar's book, "Abridged Chronology of Arab American Drama, Film and Performance, 1896-2015, lists 34 individual plays written by Arab American playwrights between 2002 and 2015 (this does not include multiple productions of the same title). Of those 33, 19 were written by women.

⁴⁷ See for example Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (London: Routledge, 2007); Susan Muaddi Darraj, ed., *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); Somaya Sami Sabry, *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of The Arabian Nights* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011).

approach is useful in that it illuminates a number of significant themes and tropes across genres of diasporic writing by Arab and Muslim Americans, which can be applicable to theatrical writing as well. It is the aim of this dissertation, however, to bring the voices of Arab and Muslim American female playwrights from the margins of academic discourse to the forefront, putting them in conversation with one another to fully explore the revision of Arab and Muslim female characters through solo performance.

The significance of this one-woman narrative structure will be explored and analyzed in depth throughout the remainder of this dissertation, but it should be acknowledged that a contributing factor to the resurgence of solo female performers in the early twenty-first century is, in all likelihood, a purely logistical one: opportunity, or, more pointedly, lack thereof. The dearth of available substantive roles continues to limit the ability of female actors to find a place in traditional productions. This struggle is often further complicated for women of racial and ethnic minorities who want to avoid stereotypical roles based on their appearance, and recent studies have demonstrated that female playwrights are already at a proven disadvantage in terms of production opportunities because of their gender.⁴⁸ In writing a solo piece, then, these actors are able to create roles for themselves, ones perfectly suited to their own abilities and backgrounds. Such

⁴⁸ Emily Glassberg Sands' findings in her 2009 Economics thesis at Princeton, "Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theater," generated much discussion about this issue when she presented her work in a forum at 59E59 Theatre. With regards to gender parity on Broadway, see Lynn Nottage Opinion Piece in *The New York Times*, "Women Are Missing from Tonys and Broadway," June 6, 2014. An account of recent statistics and efforts to combat this paucity can be found in Suzy Evans' article "Women Push for Equality On and Off Stage," *American Theatre*, October 2014.

performances are also appealing to theatres because they are economical to produce. This perspective is not meant to diminish the impact of the writer/performers included here, but rather to emphasize the lack of substantive roles for Arab American actresses and the need for more diverse voices in American theatre. The opportunities that these writer-actresses created for themselves may have been motivated by circumstance and practicality, but what they made from their situations is worth further consideration. By creating complex and timely monodramas based on their unique experiences, Arab and Muslim American female artists have become, in many ways, the most significant voices in American theatre after September 11. Contemporary theatre scholarship, however, is not yet fully reflective of their extensive contributions.

The aforementioned book by Najjar does contain a brief chapter on female solo performance. Within this section, he analyzes plays by Heather Raffo, Leila Buck, Najla Said, and Jennifer Jajeh, chosen because, as he writes, these artists are “professional actresses in addition to solo performers, and because these works have garnered attention by producers, publishers, and the media.”⁴⁹ The pieces Najjar includes are certainly the most well known Arab American monodramas by women. Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* is arguably the most popular female-authored Arab American play, generating an impressive record of professional and collegiate productions both in the United States and abroad⁵⁰, and Najla Said’s work is often the focus of mainstream media and academic

⁴⁹ Najjar, 209.

⁵⁰ Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* was the fifth most-produced play in America during the 2007-2008 theatre season, and has received productions in Brazil, Greece, Sweden, Turkey, Malta, France, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Scotland, England, and Canada.

articles in part because she is the daughter of the late scholar Edward Said. Although all four of the works examined by Najjar were produced after September 11 and are very much influenced by the misrepresentation of Arabs and Arab Americans stemming from that day, the pieces by Said, Buck, and Jajeh are focused more specifically on their own experiences living and traveling abroad, stories based on discoveries about their ethnic homelands, their ancestors, and themselves. *9 Parts of Desire*, by contrast, deals directly with the terrorist attacks and the ongoing political tensions between Iraq and the United States, and is therefore the only play covered in Najjar's book that is also analyzed here.

9 Parts of Desire is also the sole overlapping play between my dissertation and the only other full-length project devoted to Arab American female playwrights.⁵¹ Dalia Basiouny's Ph.D. thesis, entitled "The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American Theatre Movement," was completed in 2009 at the City University of New York. In her manuscript, Basiouny examines the work of fifteen Arab American female performers, stand-up comedians, and writers, exploring the ways in which these artists engage with identity politics and political expression in the early years of the twenty-first century. Specifically, she analyzes the selected plays and performances as part of the burgeoning Arab American theatre movement, focusing on the prevalence of female authors as "a cultural phenomenon that operates differently with different audiences." She asserts that such productions "clarify Arabic and Arab American themes and problems for general American audiences, at the same time they help shape the

⁵¹ Basiouny also mentions Rania Khalil's *Flag Piece* in her introduction, which I analyze in the third chapter of this project, but her inclusion of this work is brief and more descriptive than analytical.

identity of their Arab American audiences, who see images of themselves and their stories on mainstream stages.”⁵² Basiouny is able to approach this topic from a uniquely personal perspective; born and raised in Egypt, she entered the United States as a Fulbright scholar in 2001 and stayed to pursue her doctoral degree. She is herself a playwright, director, and founder of Sabeel Group for the Arts in Cairo and, as such, much of her analysis is based on her individual experiences with these performances as well as her own participation in the formative moments of the Arab American theatre movement.⁵³ The expansive nature of her approach to this topic provides a strong foundation for any further research on the work of Arab American female artists. However, the significant number of productions that Basiouny covers in her work inherently constrains the depth of her analysis for each individual performance, and her consideration of these particular plays is specifically tied to the development of the Arab American theatre movement. Within this dissertation, I hope to build on the seminal texts by Basiouny and Najjar in a way that deepens the conversation about the plays and performances of Arab and Muslim American women, while also including contributions by female playwrights who, though not ethnically Arab, engage with similar issues.

The work accomplished by Najjar and Basiouny is invaluable in documenting the breadth of Arab American plays and performances in the nascent years of the genre’s theatrical movement, and the attention that both scholars

⁵² Basiouny, “The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American Theatre Movement,” 5-6.

⁵³ Unfortunately, Basiouny’s dissertation has not been published in book form, and she has released only two book chapters (one in conjunction with Marvin Carlson) based on the research included in her thesis project.

devote to the contributions of female artists is unmatched in contemporary theatre scholarship. This is, however, the extent of available academic writing that offers a substantial consideration of the women who have played such a significant role in the creation of contemporary Arab American theatre. At present, the scholarly discussion is largely focused on the need for recognition of such works and an examination of how the plays and productions resist the widespread “othering” of Arab and Muslim peoples in the last several decades. Many of the articles and book chapters on the subject try to cover as much ground as possible in a limited format, seemingly in an effort to spread the word about an underrepresented form of theatre. While this approach is necessary in the early years of investigating a theatrical movement, my goal with this project is to tighten the analytical focus of contemporary research on Arab American theatre by scrutinizing a particularly prevalent style within the categorization and considering the commonalities of the included texts and performances. As such, this dissertation will be the first full-length study to provide an in-depth analysis of a specific genre— that of the one-woman show— within the body of work produced by Arab and Muslim American female playwrights. Unlike the some of the other volumes mentioned previously, I have decided to structure my project thematically, rather than devoting each chapter to individual plays. I believe that this approach keeps the selected works in conversation with one another throughout, which in turn strengthens the overall examination and contextualization of this body of work.

While there are several other compelling solo performances by Arab and Muslim female playwrights, I have chosen to focus only on the monodramas by

Heather Raffo, Bina Sharif, Rohina Malik, and Laila Farah, as well as a brief performance piece by Rania Khalil, because of their direct engagement with the events of September 11 and subsequent military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Within this framework, I investigate how the United States' involvement in the wars overseas has directly affected the social and political position of Arab and Muslim American women, as well as influenced the construction of their diasporic identity through theatrical performance. My methodology combines a close textual analysis with elements of performances studies, drawing upon the historical, political, and cultural undercurrents of the years after September 11 to form the contextual lens through which I examine the selected plays. Although there is not a strong emphasis on dramatic theory in this project, throughout my analysis I engage with the theories that are most relevant to my investigative approach, including trauma theory, feminist theory, theories of cultural exchange, and post-colonial theory.

The first chapter focuses on the form and structure of these performances. Beginning with a brief overview of solo performance in American theatre, this section explores the semiotic implications of the one-woman shows by Heather Raffo, Rohina Malik, and Leila Farah in the context of prevailing misconceptions about Arab and Muslim women that proliferated after September 11. Inspired by one of the early tenets of feminist solo performances, "the personal is political," I look at the structural and narrative means through which the personal *becomes* political in each piece. Through the negotiations of their postcolonial ethnic histories and the complexities of a multinational existence in post-9/11 America,

these artists use the self-reflexivity inherent in solo performance to explore the creation of their own diasporic identities. They bear witness to war, trauma, and prejudice as an act of resistance to the fixed representation of Arab and Muslim women, demonstrating the necessity for a revision of ingrained assumptions while simultaneously enacting that revision over the course of each performance. The resulting productions both embrace and subvert the construction of collective identities, interrogating the master narratives typically disseminated about their ethnicities, gender, and religion.

Chapter Two continues the exploration of the plays by Raffo, Malik, and Farah discussed in the opening chapter, and adds to the conversation Bina Sharif's *Afghan Woman*; together these works are analyzed as sites of cultural exchange. Through an examination of the writer-performers' use of costumes and props, language, and pedagogical approaches, I draw connections between the specific methods employed by these artists to mediate the space between themselves and their audiences in a post-9/11 world. In particular, this chapter examines each performer's use of the veil to foreground the complex relationship between the construction of a Muslim woman's diasporic identity and the lingering Orientalist perceptions of this image. I also investigate the performative nature of the self-identification process and its pedagogical opportunities, as each actress shares with the audience detailed information about her culture and religion that can facilitate understanding and/or empathy from spectators. At the same time, these individualized narratives prevent the audience from viewing the performer as a monolithic representative of a particular race or ethnicity.

The final section of this dissertation investigates the role of political theatre in a post-September 11 context, engaging with the specific political implications and critiques put forth by these female-authored solo performances. I begin with an assessment of Rania Khalil's silent one-woman show, *Flag Piece*, analyzing her performance as an extreme distillation of the evolving American attitudes of patriotism and nationalism in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Prevailing government rhetoric and public perception is further challenged through the work of Sharif, Raffo, and Farah, as they draw attention in their productions to the passive positionality of Arab and Muslim female identity within the construction of President Bush's "War on Terror" narrative. This chapter illuminates connections between political and military actions by the United States and the sociopolitical circumstances of the artists' ethnic homelands, examining the ways in which these performers insert the often-overlooked experiences of women into narratives of war in both their ancestral and diasporic countries. In particular, I explore the role of the media in the construction and dissemination of this dominant hegemonic discourse, and the theatrical devices used by Arab and Muslim American female playwrights to challenge the assumed authority of embedded media during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The chapter as a whole argues that the perspectives presented in these female solo performances effectively re-gender typically male-dominated war stories, and ultimately promote a level of critical analysis and ethical assessment made impossible by the master wartime narratives put forth by the American government and media.

Speaking For or Speaking With?

Any discussion that is framed within some notion of a collective identity is, of course, rife with pitfalls as it lends itself to potential generalizations. At the same time, however, I believe it is also a useful concept for the purposes of this project because of its inherent mixture of structure and fluidity. Arab, Muslim, and American are all descriptors that come with a particular set of implied characteristics, and yet there is also certain variance within those terms. Throughout their performances, Raffo, Malik, Farah, and Sharif problematize some of the widely accepted markers of collective identity (such as the veil, for example) in an effort to fracture rigid classifications and highlight the significance of these variances within the diaspora. It is precisely this tension between collective and individual identities with which the playwrights studied here are wrestling, in large part because the collective identity of Arab and Muslim Americans is one that has been chiefly dictated by the West, particularly after September 11.

Even though contemporary artists are working to dismantle many of the broad generalizations that have dominated Western media in the last decade (and beyond), some scholars have raised concerns that the opinions and perspectives of dissenting voices may be equally misinterpreted as representative of all Arab or Muslim women. In the same way that negative connotations of veiling, for example, have been widely disseminated and generally accepted in the West, there is some danger in the presentation of a seemingly collective voice offering

insight into the realities of Arab women both in the United States and abroad. In her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, Haideh Moghissi cautions that “in the name of validating women’s ‘self-perceptions’ and ‘hearing women’s own voices,’ only the voices of particular groups of women are heard and that then these voices are broadcast as the unanimous expression of ‘women in Islamic societies.’”⁵⁴ Myra Macdonald shares these anxieties, specifically those regarding Muslim women. She contends, “If the newly audible voices are mainly those of diasporic or Western Muslims, and the shrouded, silenced images those of women in Afghanistan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, the Orientalist polarity between ‘liberating’ Western Islam and ‘repressive’ Eastern Islam is accentuated.”⁵⁵

Such trepidation is certainly understandable, and a valid fear given the predilection in American media for narrative homogeneity, even in the presentation of oppositional stances. The framing of the problem of representation as either/or, however, does pose a challenge, since firsthand accounts from women living in the aforementioned countries are not easily accessible or prevalent. Perhaps then we can look to the work of the writers and performers of this project not as definitive, but as the beginning of a conversation about the formulation and veneration of collective identities. Addressing the problematic representation of African Americans, bell hooks offers an analysis that can apply to the challenges facing Arab Americans as well:

⁵⁴ Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 42.

⁵⁵ Myra Macdonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil,” *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2006): 15.

[T]he issue of race and representation is not just a question or critiquing the *status quo*. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking.⁵⁶

For many of these artists, theatrical performance has become an exploratory space in the struggle over representation, a format through which they can expand beyond the binary images— East/West, Muslim/Christian, veiled/unveiled— typically put forth by American media. As performers, they get to question and explore these ingrained representations, destabilizing accepted stereotypes and engaging with their audiences in a way that might prompt a shift of paradigms and perspectives, as hooks suggests. In their one-woman shows, Raffo, Malik, Farah, and Sharif draw upon the established rhetoric regarding Arab and Muslim women, but reframe it in a way that highlights the tenuous nature of its construction.

These performers are, in essence, cultural translators. Their plays and productions continually resist the resurgence of Orientalism by providing a tangible link between cultures and nations through individualized narratives.⁵⁷

Like many translations, however, the final product is constructed through the

⁵⁶ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 4.

⁵⁷ My use of Orientalism is in keeping with Edward Said's interpretation of the term to describe the West's construction of a mythic and essentialized version of the East. Over time, the repetition of the myth allowed stereotypes to become acceptable as facts. This representation of an exoticized land and its supposedly uncivilized people was ultimately self-serving, as it was used to justify Western imperialistic actions. See Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993). The connection between 19th century Orientalism and the interventionist politics of the United States after September 11 is certainly compelling, as the similarities are striking.

perspective of its translator, resulting in individualized narratives about the Arab and Muslim American experience that may provide us with more questions than answers. Accordingly, there is still no consensus about what kind of message (if any) should be put forth by these artists regarding their respective and collective cultures. What is clear, however, is that these artists have instigated a crucial conversation through their theatrical performances, and this discussion will hopefully continue to spark creativity, inquiry, and understanding across myriad mediums and academic disciplines.

History Has Its Eyes On... Us

Like many Americans, I have a very clear memory of the morning of September 11, 2001. I was a sophomore in college, getting ready for class with the television on in the background, when reports that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center began to infiltrate the morning talk shows. Soon all stations switched to live coverage of the Twin Towers, and my roommate and I sat on our beds as we watched the horrific events of that day unfold on live television. While the attacks certainly had a profound impact on the way I looked at the world, the aftermath of the tragedy was also personally devastating to my roommate. The daughter of a Lebanese father and Palestinian mother, my friend experienced firsthand the cruelty of the anti-Arab backlash after September 11. She was detained and questioned at airports because of her name, and strangers made derogatory comments to her based on the color of her skin. I was horrified when she described to me the demeaning and uncomfortable circumstances in

which she continually found herself after the attacks. As a white woman of European descent from a small, homogenous town in New Jersey, this kind of prejudice was not something I had experienced, and I was disheartened to watch what my friend had to face from her fellow American citizens. Despite these challenges, she continued to celebrate and share her Arab heritage, and I have learned so much from her over the years about her family's culture and language.

When I moved to New York after graduation, I was astounded to see aspects of my friend's diasporic experience represented on stage in Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*. At the time, I worked as an assistant agent in the Theatre Department of the William Morris Agency (now William Morris Endeavor), and Raffo was one of our clients. Her play addressed a number of challenges that my friend had faced as an Arab American: the constant worry about the safety of family members during violent conflicts in their countries, the reductive assumptions about Arab peoples that proliferated through Western media, and the hostility of a post-9/11 global climate. From a business perspective, Raffo's work filled an existing gap in contemporary theatre, as *9 Parts of Desire* gave voice to experiences of Arab and Arab American women that had previously been omitted from theatrical performance. From a personal standpoint, I felt fortunate to promote her play in my capacity as an assistant agent, as I believed very strongly that the multi-vocal narrative of the piece and its inherent humanity would resonate beyond the walls of the theatre.

My time as a graduate student has given me the opportunity to examine such significant moments in my personal history through a scholarly lens. I have

been writing about Arab and Muslim American female playwrights for a number of years now, but in the past few months there have been several events that have crystallized, at least for me, the importance of their work and the necessity of documenting their experiences. The terrorist attacks and bombings in Paris in November 2015 orchestrated by the self-proclaimed Islamic State were, according to ISIS leaders, retaliation for President François Hollande's foreign policy bias against Muslims. A few weeks later, the shooting spree carried out in San Bernardino, California, by a Muslim husband and wife left fourteen people dead and many more wounded. The next day, a story about the attacks in *The New York Post* appeared under the headline "MUSLIM KILLERS." These two instances have reignited the familiar anti-Muslim rhetoric that seems to dominate public discourse after national tragedies supposedly perpetrated in the name of Islam. In this instance, however, words quickly translated into action. The number of hate crimes committed against Muslims in both the United States and Europe reached a record high in the weeks following the events in Paris and California. The United Kingdom has reported an increase of nearly 275 percent in hate crimes against Muslims since November 13,⁵⁸ and Reuters calculated that "at least 10 anti-Muslim attacks took place across the US every day between December 5 and 11."⁵⁹ The inability of the general public to draw a distinction between radical Islamic extremists, such as members of al-Qaeda and ISIS, and

⁵⁸ Michelle Mark, "Muslims Hate Crimes Soar in UK: After Paris Attacks, Women Wearing Hijab Targeted by Young White Men," *International Business Times*, November 23, 2015.

⁵⁹ "Anti-Muslim Attacks Occurring in Record Numbers Across US," *Reuters*, December 14, 2015, accessed January 27, 2016. <https://www.rt.com/usa/325922-hate-crimes-muslims-mosques/>.

followers of the Islamic faith is reminiscent of the similar misunderstandings and misrepresentations that perpetuated after September 11. The violence callously aimed at Muslim Americans, however, is more rampant than ever before, and this increasing Islamophobia is rapidly becoming one of the most deadly forms of racism in the United States.

On a somewhat lighter note, I was fortunate enough to see *Hamilton* on Broadway in October 2015, and was profoundly affected by its relevance to our contemporary sociopolitical situation. Although its story is set more than two hundred years in the past, the musical incisively captures the zeitgeist of our time in its exploration of the hybrid American experience. The show is not only a reminder that the United States is deeply indebted to the many extraordinary contributions of immigrants, but it also poses larger questions about who ultimately has the right to share someone's story and the significance of what we leave behind. With its haunting warnings that "History has its eyes on you" and "You have no control: who lives, who dies, who tells your story," the musical is eerily prescient in its application to the volatile election cycle currently occupying media headlines. Many races and ethnicities have been targets of candidates' vitriol, but none more so than Muslims. Every degrading stereotype attributed to Arabs and Muslims after September 11 has been rehashed on national television during presidential debates, and proposed policies to combat the spread of ISIS include plans by presidential hopeful Donald Trump to ban Muslims from entering the United States as well as potentially implement a database in which all

Muslim Americans must be registered.⁶⁰ Regardless of who wins the presidential election in 2016, it seems apparent that the lives of Arab and Muslim Americans in the twenty-first century are still subject to governmental decisions made largely without their input. What will history have to say about that? How can the voices of the marginalized be heard above the roar of those that have the microphones? The Arab and Muslim American writer-performers included in this dissertation continue to push forward in an effort to be seen and heard despite these challenges, and in doing so they have written themselves back into the narrative. I hope to do justice to their work by sharing a small part of their stories here, and I remain optimistic that the courageous performances of these women will “be the first chapter in the story they will write some day.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ The controversy as to whether or not Trump suggested the idea of a registry for Muslim Americans or simply misunderstood a reporter’s question continued for several days in November 2015 based on statements Trump made in several interviews. In her examination and analysis of each of those interviews, Lauren Carroll concludes that while Trump did not appear to generate the idea of a Muslim registry, he would not rule out the need for one in the future, and he does believe that the United States should have a database for all Syrian refugees. Lauren Carroll, “In Context: Donald Trump’s comments on a database of American Muslims,” *Politifact*, November 24, 2015, accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2015/nov/24/donald-trumps-comments-database-american-muslims/>.

⁶¹ Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*, 2015.

Chapter One

Out of One, Many

The construction and representation of Arab identity in America has a complicated history, as detailed in the Introduction. After more than a century of “invisibility,” the events of September 11 forced Muslim and Arab Americans into an intense and unflattering spotlight, portraying them alternatively as either the enemy or, as was often the case with the presentation of Arab and Muslim women, as victims. Dalia Basiouny writes that following the September 11 attacks, “[a]rtists of Arab descent were placed in a position that tested their patriotism and made their dual allegiances impossible to avoid. Thus, many theatre artists from Arabic backgrounds were compelled to a position of dissent because of their descent.”¹ The desire to challenge this negative representational shift prompted an increase in both the creation and production of theatrical pieces by Muslim and Arab American playwrights and performers. An overview of the resulting work suggests that its purpose is two-fold: first, to offer American audiences a more accurate depiction of Arabs and Muslims, including their specific cultures and home countries, and second, to explore the construction of the writers’ own diasporic identities.

Within this burgeoning Arab American theatre movement, many of the plays contributed by its female artists have taken the form of one-woman shows, written and presented by their creators. The resulting performances are themselves a kind of hybrid, in that the writer-actresses demonstrate the need for a change in the representation of Arab women at the same time that they are

¹ Basiouny, “Descent as Dissent: Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11,” 143.

performing that change themselves. Heather Raffo, Rohina Malik, and Laila Farah all draw upon the well-established theatrical tradition of solo performance in their work, but each repurposes the form in her own unique way to explore disparate aspects of contemporary Arab and Muslim female identities. Ranging from the struggles of daily life in war-torn Iraq to the reactionary response of the American public after September 11, from national trauma to personal achievements, and from fictionalized creations to autobiographical docudrama, the plays analyzed here offer a comprehensive counter-narrative to the prevailing misrepresentation of Arabs and Arab Americans.

In her first appearance in the play, the character Layal in Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* tells the audience, "I am the body that takes the experience."² The same can be said of all the female artists in this study, given that they have chosen to structure and present their work as a one-woman show. This act of solo performance frames each writer-actress as a physical— and oftentimes emotional or political— representative of the people whose stories she is sharing. Whether or not it is the performer's intention, the semiotic implication of a single person on stage speaking as several characters is often that of a collective identity, particularly if the characters within the work share a common racial or religious affiliation. Even the plays that are autobiographical and told from the perspective of a single speaker engage with the complexities of identity formation, interrogating broader issues of racial, ethnic, and gender construction through a personal narrative. This chapter will explore the implications of the presentation of a collective body through solo performance, as well as examine the role of

² Heather Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2006), 13.

collective identity in the development of Muslim and Arab American theatrical representation.

Solo Performance: Re-presenting the Self

The tradition of the solo performer is well established in American popular entertainment. Vaudeville, for example, offered a number of performers who delighted the audience with their singular song-and-dance routines or their magic tricks, while stand-up comedians continue to gain fans through live shows, as well as with cable television specials. As Stephen Bottoms notes in his writing on solo performance, character-based solo dramas, however, “have historically been a rather marginal form, usually confined to the realm of short sketches and one-act plays, or to one-man shows such as those in which actors impersonate ‘great men’ like Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln.”³

The genre gained both its largest influx of practitioners and its greatest notoriety beginning in the early 1970s, as a number of female artists created solo performance pieces to engage with pressing issues of gender and equality. Connected in many ways to the tenets of the second-wave feminist movement, the solo work produced by these women was largely autobiographical. As Deirdre Heddon writes, it was presented “as a means to reveal otherwise invisible lives, to resist marginalisation [*sic*] and objectification and to become, instead, speaking

³ Stephen J. Bottoms, “Solo Performance Drama: The Self as Other?”, in *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*, ed. David Krasner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 519.

subjects with self-agency; performance, then, as a way to bring into being a self.”⁴ Performances such as *Interior Scroll* by Carolee Schneemann blurred the lines between real life and art in an effort to give voice to women’s experiences and perspectives. Under the banner of “the personal is political,” many of these performances were an extension of what Heddon describes as “[c]ollective consciousness-raising activities,” which were intended to assure women that their individual concerns were part of a larger social problem: the continual oppression of their sex.⁵

Both the content and intent of feminist performances during this period are often criticized in hindsight for their assumption of a universal female experience. Much like the eventual rejection of the essentialism of second-wave feminism and its focus on white, middle-class women, writer-performers began in the 1980s to more fully explore the multiplicity of female stories and experiences. Acknowledging differences in race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class allowed for further challenges to dominant hegemonic narratives. The creation through solo performance of an essentialist construction of ‘Woman’ in the 1970s, an attempt to counteract the pervasive oppression of the female sex as a whole, was then itself fractured in the following decades to include those who had previously existed only in the margins of the marginalized. In their one-woman shows, artists such as Holly Hughes, Deb Margolin, and Dael Orlandersmith have continued the tradition of autobiographical solo performance, but with an eye toward exploring and even questioning the continuing tension between the

⁴ Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

personal and the political. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain in their work on autobiographical performance, the women who create within this genre are essentially “naming themselves by making art and performance from their own bodies, experiential histories, memories, and personal landscapes.”⁶ The ways in which early feminist solo artists negotiated their own identities through the use of self-referential practices while simultaneously critiquing social norms can be seen as a direct predecessor to the similarly structured presentations by the Arab and Muslim American female performers included here.

Autobiographical narratives remain the most prevalent form of solo performance today. Although writer-performers such as Eric Bogosian and Anna Deavere Smith have created and presented notable multi-character solo shows since the 1980s, it is primarily autobiographical solo work that currently receives the most attention in print. Much of the existing research on solo performance in general centers on single-character monologue pieces in which the writer speaks as him- or herself and relates personal experiences to the audience.⁷ This particular brand of solo performance also benefits from more high-profile productions, such as those of Billy Crystal and John Leguizamo. Perhaps the popularity, both scholarly and commercially, of this theatrical format is rooted in the idea that, as Bottoms suggests, “such work seems predicated on the attempt to present the performer’s ‘self’ to the audience, as directly as possible, by

⁶ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Introduction: Mapping Women’s Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces,” in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 5.

⁷ In addition to the work by Deirdre Heddon and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson already cited here, see *Auto/biography and Identity: Women, theatre and performance*, eds. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

minimizing any sense that this s/he is playing a role, or presenting ‘an act.’”⁸

This connection between the actor and audience creates a sense of intimacy that, in the case of performers like Crystal and Leguizamo, offers a kind of familial comfort and camaraderie over the course of a performance.

Conversely, Bottoms argues, multiple-character solo shows “require spectators to adopt a more critical or ironic attitude toward the material presented. No one character sticks around long enough to become the audience’s ‘friend,’ and instead the careful juxtaposition of different characters implies that their different attitudes and viewpoints are being presented for our scrutiny.”⁹ The technique of purposeful distancing as a means of encouraging critical thinking from an audience is certainly applicable to both one-person shows as well as traditional dramas, but Bottoms’ evaluation implies that there is little or no opportunity for emotional connection with the personae presented in a multi-character solo piece. He cites the work of Anna Deavere Smith in particular as an effective example of this approach, asserting that her embodiment of various characters allows her to explore “social tensions” without the kind of intimacy that would likely privilege one character over another as “the singular arbiter of ‘truth’.”¹⁰ I would suggest, however, that within the context of Smith’s performances, as well as those created by the subjects of this dissertation, the political *becomes* personal through the use of the theatrical mirror as a tool for self-actualization on the part of both the artist and the audience. The writer-performers analyzed here draw upon the self-reflexivity of solo performance in a

⁸ Bottoms, 521-2.

⁹ Ibid., 528.

¹⁰ Ibid.

way that turns the mirror on themselves, but in confronting the racial and ethnic constructions that have prompted them to publicly share this self-analysis, the spectators become aware of their part in contributing to the reflection against which the performers are reacting.

Mediating the political through the personal is perhaps most clearly exemplified within the style of documentary performance, a form that is variously defined and whose specifics are continually debated and revised. Performers such as Smith, for example, craft their plays from actual documentation of a particular event and transcripts of interviews with real people, while others reframe their own lived experiences in a more abstract way, keeping the essence of something in their personal history without situational facts. Both approaches can be seen as a kind of documentary performance, but are obviously varied in terms of intent and execution. Jonathan Kalb groups a number of seemingly disparate contemporary solo performers under the “documentary” heading because of the ways in which they “fuse a psychological and political appeal, linking compassion and identification with objective scrutiny in a way that, though Brecht might not have approved of it, amounts to a new, peculiarly American form of individualistic *Verfremdung*.”¹¹ Distinguishing which of the plays included in this study should or should not be classified as documentary performances is tangential to the main focus of the project and therefore will not be addressed at length, but Kalb’s notion is useful in terms of exploring both the genesis and the presentation of each piece. The structure of a multi-character solo performance

¹¹ Jonathan Kalb, “Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self,” *Theater* Vol. 31, No. 3 (2001): 14.

draws attention to the theatricality of the show and echoes Brecht's desire to "make strange," but the performer's presentation of the self and her personal connection to the material creates a new theatrical amalgamation, a kind of bio-docudrama, that promotes a unique exchange of empathy and objectivity between actress and audience.

It is precisely within this tension between emotional investment and impartial analysis that playwrights Heather Raffo, Rohina Malik, and Laila Farah negotiate a revised theatrical representation of contemporary Arab and Muslim women. Building on the tenets of feminist solo performance as well as some of the presentational aspects of documentary theatre, these writer-performers have created opportunities to engage with the dominant discourses about their race, ethnicity, religion, and gender that proliferated following September 11, while simultaneously exploring their personal identity formation. The intersection of self-representation and collective identity or, as Smith and Watson describe it, "the contextual interface of documentary or ethnographic practice," creates "a dynamic relay between personal and communal memory [that] reconfigures the relationship of forms of communal memory and reworks the nation's official memory of a group as devalued or invisible."¹² While Smith and Watson's work is specific to autobiographical visual and performance art by women, their assessment of the connection between the individual and the collective is characteristic of contemporary Arab and Muslim American female solo performance. They assert:

¹² Smith and Watson, 28.

Working at this interface enables women artists to foreground the experiential history of the identity statuses they bear, and bare. Their representations in various media embody and body forth in culturally specific settings their experiential histories. Particularly for postcolonial and multicultural women artists exploring the relationship of a colonized ethnic identity to a national identity that has, historically, dominated and effaced it, replacing that received history with collective histories of tradition and intimate bonds is a productive means of telling new autobiographical stories.¹³

Though not all of the pieces included here are autobiographical, they do share a similar path of resistance to the fixities of identity construction, and together they forge a diasporic cultural identity that blends the political and the personal.

Narrative Trauma and Collective Memory

In her book chronicling the untold accounts of Iraqi women, gender studies scholar and anthropologist Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali notes that the most crucial factor in presenting such narratives is “to recognize that experience, memory and truth do not necessarily overlap, that there might be multiple truths about an event without diminishing either the significance of the memory or the importance of finding out what ‘really’ happened in terms of political developments, repression, wars and social changes.”¹⁴ In *9 Parts of Desire*, Heather Raffo uses this idea of multiple truths to explore the effects of war and trauma on the women of Iraq. By presenting her characters’ memories within a nonlinear framework spanning several decades of unrest— from the Gulf War to the beginning of the United States’ engagement in Iraq after September 11— Raffo demonstrates how, within the complexity of these connections, the trauma of a single person transcends its

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 3.

specificity to create a communal experience of events. This narrative collectivity does not minimize the significance of each individual's memory or experience, but rather forms a completely separate account of cohesive and/or conflicting details that can be judged on its own, a whole distinct from the parts with which it was created. Within the context of solo performance, it is the presence of a single performer onstage that offers an opportunity for the creation of a collective identity, yet her presentation of distinct and individual stories maintains the integrity of each character's memories.

9 Parts of Desire weaves together the stories of nine Iraqi women, the portraits of which are all based on interviews conducted by the author. While Raffo was born and raised in America, her father is Iraqi and much of her family still lives in Iraq. This ethnic lineage situates her in a rather unique position: she is both an insider and an outsider in terms of Arab culture. Raffo's seemingly liminal status, however, was not a hindrance in her research; she claims, in fact, it allowed her to gain greater access to the untold stories of the women of Iraq. Being half-Iraqi, Raffo felt that the women she interviewed opened up to her immediately because she was one of them, but the fact that she was American allowed her interviewees to "express fears or secrets that might otherwise be judged more harshly by someone from their culture."¹⁵ Her time spent with these women was more about the sharing of meals, love and experiences rather than a formal process of questions and answers. This kind of emotional exchange is representative of the dialectical nature of Raffo's play, as the voices of her nine

¹⁵ Heather Raffo, "About *9 Parts of Desire*," accessed December 8, 2010. <http://www.heatherraffo.com/9parts.html>

characters are juxtaposed in such a way that they engage with one another across the monologic structure of the script. Though she did acquire ideas and material for her show during these meetings, she is very clear to point out that, with rare exceptions, none of the stories she heard are repeated verbatim in her play; most are composites of the multiple women she interviewed.¹⁶ In her introduction to the published version of the play, Raffo writes, “I consider all the women in my play to be dramatized characters in a poetic story. I liken it to songwriting— I listened deeply to what each woman said, what she wanted to say but couldn’t, and what she never knew how to say. Then I wrote her song.”¹⁷

Despite the playwright’s assertions to the contrary, however, *9 Parts of Desire* is often marketed and categorized as documentary or verbatim theatre.¹⁸ Although the exact characteristics of this genre vary in definition from scholar to scholar, as previously mentioned, this kind of descriptive label puts a heavy burden on the piece and saddles it with a specific set of expectations. In their introduction to *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, editors Will Hammond and Dan Steward write that any kind of “claim to veracity on the part of the theatre maker,” be it the real world existence of the play’s characters or the inclusion of documented dialogue, “changes everything. Immediately, we approach the play not just as a play but also as an accurate source of

¹⁶ Heather Raffo, Author’s Note to *9 Parts of Desire* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2006), 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ In her dissertation, “The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American Theatre Movement,” Dalia Basiouny asserts that *9 Parts* is, in fact, a work of documentary theatre. She uses publicity materials from the off-Broadway production and comments from several reviewers, in conjunction with the scholarly writings on the genre as a whole, to support her assessment.

information.”¹⁹ Because Raffo’s narrative unfolds within the context of historical events and is based, in part, on details that she received from her interviews in Iraq, there is an inclination to file the play under the documentary heading. However, to label either the stories she was told or her creative interpretation of them as “an accurate source of information” imposes limitations on the reception of the piece as a whole. Furthermore, situating this play within the confines of documentary theatre disregards the significance of Raffo’s position as an author. In choosing which elements of these recollections to include, Raffo forms a distinct narrative separate from the stories she heard, creating her own history of the wars in Iraq from the perspective of a diasporic writer in America. The result is a unique blend of fact and fiction that gives voice to women whose experiences had largely been stifled.

While I disagree with the classification of *9 Parts* as a straight docudrama, its conception and structure display elements of both verbatim theatre and early feminist performance. “[D]ocumentary solo performance,” Kalb observes, “is a search for freshness and unpredictability that carry the force of gossip, for powerful topical narratives that are not easily dismissed or second-guessed, and for performance circumstances in which *Verfremdung* becomes a living concept again because the reality of the performer-researcher has been made an active part of the art.”²⁰ The visibility of specific theatrical techniques employed by Raffo in her solo performance— switching character from scene to scene, gathering source

¹⁹ Will Hammond and Dan Steward, Introduction to *Verbatim: Techniques in Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, eds. Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books Ltd., 2008), no page number in digital edition.

²⁰ Kalb, 16.

material from living witnesses, referencing recent historical events— draws attention to the way in which the show positions her as the vessel and the voice for women in Iraq. Raffo has stated that she did not specifically set out to create a one-woman show and was simply concerned with “telling a story in a structure that ‘heightens what is being said’,” but to achieve that she needed to find “a form that matched the function of the collected consciousness and spirit of one person playing nine Iraqi women in what she calls ‘a psychic civil war on stage’.”²¹ Even if unintentionally, *9 Parts of Desire* draws upon the traditions of documentary and feminist solo performance by bearing theatrical witness to overlooked political and social crises. It is, however, the amalgamation of traumatic and diasporic experiences within this framework that makes the productions by Raffo and her fellow Arab American playwrights a particularly noteworthy challenge to prevailing master narratives.

Though this piece was initially inspired by the playwright’s trip to Baghdad in 1993 to visit her extended family, the final product began to come together more fully in light of the escalating conflict between the United States and Iraq a decade a later. Raffo writes on her website that, given the current events at the time, she started to ask herself questions that were on the minds of many Americans: “Who are the people of Iraq? What do they want? Why are we there? Did we do the right thing?”²² These questions do not, however, drive the focus of the play towards a particular political statement that overwhelms the work as a whole. While a more detailed discussion of the play’s politics will be

²¹ Najjar, 210.

²² Raffo, “About *9 Parts of Desire*.”

presented in Chapter 3 of this project, it is significant to note here that Raffo's decision to avoid overtly partisan ideology and to instead explore the complexity of a country in constant turmoil is crucial to the success of her performance as a solo piece, and to the formation of a collective identity. By eschewing political rhetoric and focusing on the personal, *9 Parts of Desire* draws attention to the commonalities of women who are both the subjects of, and witnesses to, trauma.

Stemming from Sigmund Freud's extensive study of psychological trauma, the term is generally defined as an overwhelming experience or intense upheaval to which the response is delayed and, when it does occur, is psychically intrusive and long lasting. Within the context of *9 Parts of Desire*, each character experiences a traumatic event (such as the death or disappearance of a loved one) that is tied to the continuous state of national unrest and conflict in Iraq. In

Unclaimed Experience; Trauma, Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth notes that

The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives... often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival [author's emphasis].²³

The structure and content of the individual monologues in the play demonstrate the ways in which the life of each woman is haunted by a past tragedy and how the survival of that event is itself an ongoing struggle. Their shared liminality, shaped by their personal histories—having narrowly escaped death only to know that it will come again—is exacerbated by the ongoing uncertainty regarding the

²³ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 7.

fate of their country. The trauma experienced by each character in Raffo's work is the result of decades of hostility, yet over the course of the play these women find very little opportunity for closure or peace. Furthermore we, as a contemporary audience aware of Iraq's recent history, know there will be even fewer opportunities for them in the years they are about to endure.

The most striking example of the unyielding effects of trauma in *9 Parts* is present in the story of Umm Ghada; Ghada, as she informs the audience, is the Arabic word for tomorrow, and Umm means mother. The character tells how she came to have this unique name after the American attack on the Amiriyya bomb shelter in 1991²⁴:

Yes I was inside
with nine from my family
talking, laughing
then such a pounding, shaking
everything is fire
I couldn't find my children
I couldn't find my way out
but somehow I did.

In the whole day later
I am searching, searching charred bodies
bodies that were fused together
the only body I did recognize
is my daughter Ghada
so I did take her name (*With so much pride.*)
I am Umm Ghada, Mother of Ghada.²⁵

This kind of broken narrative— full of phrases rather than sentences, incomplete ideas, repetition, sensory recollections— demonstrates the intrusive nature of

²⁴ On February 13, 1991, the United States dropped two laser-guided bombs on the Amiriyya bomb shelter in southwest Baghdad, a facility originally constructed in 1988 to protect Iraqis from Iranian attacks. It later became a shelter during Gulf War raids, but the U.S. believed it was being used as a military command center. The bombing killed over 400 civilians, most of them women and children.

²⁵ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 31.

trauma and the temporal divide between the traumatic event and the memories of it, which arise without warning and are only fully experienced in their deferred repetition. Caruth frames the relationship between memory and trauma as one that is “not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”²⁶ Part of this inability to possess the past is tied to the burden of survival; Umm Ghada is still haunted by this moment of catastrophe because the cycle of her trauma is not complete.

As a result of this unfinished encounter with a traumatic event, Raffo’s play can be effectively viewed through the theory of witnessing created by Giorgio Agamben and his study of Auschwitz. Agamben asserts that it is nearly impossible to bear witness to profound trauma, given that “[t]he ‘true’ witnesses, the ‘complete witnesses,’ are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness.”²⁷ That is, those who witnessed the full extent of a traumatic event are no longer alive to share their stories or are so traumatized that they are unable to speak about their experiences. As with the Holocaust, for example, the people who endured the greatest trauma did not survive, and many of those who did live cannot bring themselves to articulate the details of what occurred; the true witnesses remain silent. Agamben continues:

The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of

²⁶ Cathy Caruth, “Introduction to Part 1,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 34.

a proxy makes no sense; the [dead] have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted... Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness. But this alters the value of testimony in a definitive way; it makes it necessary to look for its meaning in an unexpected area.²⁸

The unexpected area is that gap between the actual event and the struggle to articulate the unspeakable, an emptiness that, according to Agamben, can be filled in by an act of an “author.” Thus, the difficulty of adequately expressing traumatic experiences through language and direct testimony creates an open space in which fiction can begin to express that which cannot be accurately described in reality.

Umm Ghada, in this sense, is bearing witness to the deaths of her daughter and her family members, as well as to a historical moment in the Gulf War. While we as an audience may accept the veracity her testimony, she is not, by Agamben’s definition, a true witness: she survived the attack, thus making her a pseudo-witness and her testimony incomplete. Even though Umm Ghada was present during the bombing, it was, for her, an inexperienced experience in that she did not die as well. Ikram Masmoudi, in her article on Iraqi women novelists, makes the point that any testimony stemming from such experiences “is necessarily a part of fiction” because the person did not experience the full trauma. She goes on to suggest that when Agamben “proposes that testimony is an act of an author, he implies the creation process where the insufficiency existent in the experiences of the survivor (lack/lacuna) can be completed and

²⁸ Ibid.

made valid.”²⁹ Here then we have an author (Raffo) bearing witness to another author (Umm Ghada) who is bearing witness to a moment of trauma, and neither of them can fully testify to events of that particular day. While these degrees of separation from the trauma itself might suggest an inherent dilution of both fact and emotion, it is precisely this distance—the gap to which Agamben refers—that offers an opportunity for substantial revision to the representation of Arab women on stage. That is, the fact that Umm Ghada remains a pseudo-witness instead of a true witness reinforces her position as a survivor, which allows her to share testimony of an event that otherwise may have been glossed over in traditional wartime narratives.

Umm Ghada narrowly escaped the destruction of the Amiriyya bombing, and subsequently exists in a space between life and death. She is capable, however, of bearing witness to that liminal position, giving a voice to her own experience and those of other female survivors of wartime violence in Iraq. Within that open space, Arab American female playwrights can create a counter-narrative to an existing storyline of collective trauma perpetuated in mainstream Western media. While there are countless women in Iraq who have experienced trauma, I would argue that much of what is shown in news reports is trauma produced by representation. That is, we are presented with a narrative created by media outlets to promote a specific agenda which, in the years following September 11, frequently centered upon the suffering of women in several Middle Eastern and South Asian countries. In an effort to dismantle the collective

²⁹ Ikram Masmoudi, “Portraits of Iraqi women: between testimony and fiction,” *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 & 2 (2010): 63.

identity of Iraqi women as helpless victims of trauma, a trope that quickly became an accepted reason for American intervention in the Iraq War, Raffo instead constructs a collective of witnesses, a group of strong female survivors whose stories can finally be heard.

Within Umm Ghada's story, Raffo extends the collective identity of those witnesses to include members of her own audience. Following the bombing, Umm Ghada decided to live in a small yellow trailer next to the burned-out shelter, keeping watch over the structure and explaining its significance to passersby as though she were a docent at a national monument. She tells us:

This trailer is my witness stand.
 All photos on this wall— and here— are me
 with emissaries from the world
 who come to Amiriyya shelter to look
 what really happen here
 not what they read in papers
 or see in the CNN.
 Here is the guest-book they all sign,
 your name will be witness too.
La, I must show it to you first. *Ta`al*.³⁰

She then takes spectators on a “tour” of the facility, pointing out the charred hand- and footprints on the walls, but avoiding the areas she deems to be too gruesome, where bits of hair and skin are still stuck to the concrete. While Umm Ghada is bearing witness to the actual traumatic event, the audience members are bearing witness to the remnants of that trauma, both physically (in the description of the shelter) and psychologically (through Umm Ghada's vivid narrative). At the end of her monologue, Umm Ghada says to the audience, “Come. / Now you sign the

³⁰ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 31. *Ta`al* means “Come here” in Arabic.

witness book.”³¹ Though she is not actually requesting that the spectators cross the fourth wall and sign her book, symbolically she is asking us to confirm that we have heard and understood her story, that we are now witnesses too.

This same compulsion to witness and memorialize can also be found in the character of Layal who, of the nine women in the play, is the closest approximation to a narrator in the piece. We hear from her on six separate occasions, whereas the most appearances by any other persona is The American’s four, and several characters only have a single monologue. Raffo’s creation of Layal is based on the true story of Iraqi painter Layla Al-Attar, a nationally renowned artist and a favorite of Saddam Hussein; she was appointed director of the Saddam Art Center during Hussein’s rule. She is perhaps best known for allegedly creating the unflattering mosaic doormat of George H.W. Bush on the floor of the Rashid hotel entrance in Baghdad.³² Raffo’s version of Layla is reminiscent of her namesake— although with a one-letter name change— in that she too is a successful painter favored by Hussein’s regime and the curator of the Saddam Art Center. The character as envisioned by Raffo is described in the stage directions as “sexy and elegant; a resilient and fragile woman. She is a dare devil with a killer smile.”³³ She uses her *abaya* as a kind of smock rather than as the traditional garment for covering the head and body of a Muslim woman.

³¹ Ibid., 33.

³² Layla Al-Attar was killed in a cruise missile attack on Baghdad in June 1993 that was ordered by President Bill Clinton in response to an attempted assassination of former President George H.W. Bush by Iraqi agents during a visit to Kuwait. There is widespread belief in Iraq that an American bomb specifically targeted her home in retaliation for her presumed part in this mosaic, but the U.S. report maintains that her death was unintended collateral damage.

³³ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 12.

Layal is a self-assured and creative female presence, and the emotional anchor of the play; through her frequent appearances on stage, we are given a broader sweep of her life, rather than a singular defining moment around which many of the other characters' narratives are structured. In choosing the most brash and forthright woman of her play as its nexus, Raffo continues to present a strong counter-narrative to combat the stereotypical portrayal of the veiled and oppressed Arab female.

Layal's story is not devoid of tragedy, but the way in which she frames her situation for the audience makes it clear that even under the watchful eye of a patriarchal regime, she has tried to negotiate life on her own terms. After she was married, she confesses, she had an affair with another man at her art school, and when her husband found out, he shot her. Even as she believed she was dying in the emergency room, Layal insisted to the doctors that "it was me /with the gun, it was me, it was an accident. / We never spoke about it / but he never stopped me from having an affair again!"³⁴ Layal's ability to engage in extramarital sexual relationships is certainly out of the ordinary for women in Iraq, but we learn over the course of her monologues that such "freedom" has a price. She has had consensual sex with, but has also been raped by, a number of high-powered men. These relationships allow Layal to operate outside traditional societal conventions, but they also make her somewhat dependent on these men; she confesses that she continues to "run to them, I come crying, begging, take care of me..." because she knows that no one "but the regime" can protect her.³⁵ Her

³⁴ Ibid., 35.

³⁵ Ibid., 49.

connections to influential men, complicated though they may be, have elevated her to a position of favor within the government. As such, she is given access to substantial resources as well as allowed creative freedom in her artwork (she explains that she is one of the few Iraqi artists unafraid to paint nudes). Layal elucidates, in a very matter of fact manner, that this is how the world works under Saddam's reign and though she may not like it, she knows how to live within it. For example, she dismisses the rumors that she received her position at the Art Center as a result of an affair with Saddam Hussein's cousin, not because the accusations are false, but because she believes it does not matter whether or not they are true. Layal does what she must to give herself the best possible life in Iraq, just as she would if she lived anywhere else.

Addressing the audience, she vows never to leave her country because the idea that her existence would be better or easier in the Western world is a fallacy:

I will never leave
 not for freedom you do not even have
 call me what you like, look at me how you will
 I tell you so many women have done the same as me
 everywhere they have to do the same.
 If I did the same in your England and America
 wouldn't they call me a whore there too?
 Your Western culture, sister, will not free me
 from being called a whore
 not my sex
 women are not free.³⁶

In an article analyzing *9 Parts of Desire*, Magda Romanska interprets this speech as representative of the way in which "Layal's fractured self is stuck in the post-traumatic moment of misrecognition," as the character uses this rationale to

³⁶ Ibid., 59.

explain her actions without having to acknowledge her own moral culpability.³⁷

While it does not appear that Romanska is purposefully devaluing Layal's choices, her idea that this woman is a stranger to herself (even if such a state is the result of trauma) nevertheless strips Layal of her agency in the same way that much of the Western media has done to Arab and Muslim women in recent years. Layal may not be in complete control of her situation, but she is fully aware of her circumstances and the decisions she makes in order to survive. She very frankly admits "I wish I were afraid / I am beyond afraid— / I am just running, running / straight into it."³⁸

The fact that an oppressive patriarchal hegemony has forced Layal into this tenuous position can certainly be interpreted as a means of victimization, but it also highlights her ability to endure and her desire to bear witness. Layal, as someone who has both experienced and witnessed violence, takes as her task the ability to "render body memories tellable." As Roberta Culbertson explains, in order to both honor and understand traumatic events, "the survivor must tell what happened," sharing the memories of the violence perpetrated on their bodies through narrative. The memories must be ordered and arranged "in the form of a story, linking emotion with event, event with event, and so on," thereby "undoing the grasp of the perpetrator and reestablishing the social dimension of the self lost in the midst of violation."³⁹ Layal accomplishes this through the survival of her

³⁷ Madga Romanska, "Trauma and Testimony: Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol. 30 (2010): 222.

³⁸ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 49.

³⁹ Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self," *New Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter 1995): 179.

own near-death experiences and subsequent artistic success, which together inspire her to create in her artwork a kind of collective representation of the women in her country. Within her paintings, Layal bears witness to the stories of Iraqi women who have endured unimaginable suffering, memorializing their trauma in oils and watercolors. She tells us of a piece she painted based on a university student who went on a date with Saddam Hussein's son and, when she returned home covered in bruises from the beating he gave her, made the mistake of telling her roommate the truth of what happened. In retaliation "Uday, he took her back / with his friends, they / stripped her / covered her in honey / and watched his Dobermans eat her." Layal transforms the young woman into a painting of a branch's blossom, "leaning over the barking dogs / they cannot reach / no matter how hungry they are."⁴⁰ Her artwork offers both an illustration and the testimony of a traumatic event, filling in the narrative gap left by brutal death of an innocent girl framed within the context of a larger metaphor for her own experiences and those of her fellow female citizens.

Both Layal's representation of traumatic memories through her painting and Raffo's theatrical interpretation of such stories demonstrate the significance of creative outlets in promoting active resistance against the devaluing or erasure of Arab women's voices. Master narratives that emerge from times of conflict frequently focus on battles won and lost, military strategies, and statistics, prioritizing quantifiable information over anecdotal. Much like the gap that

⁴⁰ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 14. Here Raffo is referencing a true event that was widely reported in the media. An article by Tonya Ugoretz Buzby from *The Middle East Quarterly* (Vol. 2, No. 4, December 1995) includes the details of this incident, and those of many other cruelties perpetrated by Uday Hussein, as witnessed by his body double Latif Yahia.

Agamben identifies in the witnessing of trauma, the omission of civilian, and specifically female, wartime experiences from traditional discourse provides a space in which women can construct their own counter-narratives from personal memories. In her work on novels by Arab women writers, Brinda Mehta observes that literature has become one of the most successful modes of expression for reclaiming their history and culture. Raffo and Layal— both her fictional incarnation and the real person on whom she is based— extend the possibilities of presenting memories through art. Just as Mehta’s analysis “locates the site of memory within an in-between space of interstitial subjectivity that has enabled women to engage in prediscursive and discursive rites of cultural and linguistic repossession through literary inventions,”⁴¹ so too can we place Layal’s paintings and Raffo’s performance.

It was, in fact, a painting by Layla Al-Attar that inspired Raffo to share the artist’s story as part of her play. She describes the first time she encountered a piece by Al-Attar in the Saddam Arts Center during her trip to Baghdad in 1993:

It was like being in the Museum of Modern Art in New York— if you can imagine that filled with floor-to-ceiling portraits of Saddam Hussein. Then I went upstairs into this little back room and there was a wonderful nude of a woman, standing with her back towards the viewer amid a thicket of bare trees. I was transfixed because I thought, “It’s a painting of me.”

It spoke to me of femininity and of sorrow, everything I had felt in Iraq... I found so much of myself in that painting. I immediately photographed it. When I got the film back it was the only picture that had come out on that roll of film. I’ve lived with that image ever since. I knew Layla had to be a character in my play, so I asked everyone if they knew her or her work. I tried so hard to

⁴¹ Brinda Mehta, *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 3.

meet someone that had met her but she kept slipping through my fingers like a shadow.⁴²

Raffo later discovered that Al-Attar had died as a result of an American bombing attack on Baghdad just a few months before she first encountered the painter's work in that Iraqi gallery. Al-Attar's painting, titled "Savagery," is incorporated by Raffo into the play as the self-portrait that the character of Layal is working on while she delivers her monologues.

In her first appearance onstage, Layal explains to the audience that although she is painting other women's stories, she paints them as herself. She does not want to expose another woman's body, "so I paint my body / but her body, herself inside me. / So it is not me alone / it is all of us / but I am the body that takes the experience."⁴³ It is, in part, the weight of these experiences that make Layal's death at the end of the play inevitable; as Layal draws closer to the moment of passing, she appears to crack under the many stories and images that she has taken on. She begins to repeat fragments of lines spoken by other characters in the play, seemingly possessed by their power. Such an uncontrolled, overwhelming reaction exemplifies Culbertson's notion of "body memories," or the recollections of the body's response to a trauma, in that the "[m]emories of these split bits of experience... are intrusive and incomprehensible when they reappear... They make one appear crazy, because there is no temporal, single self, but an asynchronous mass of firing images, randomly (it seems), breaking through the dull film of the surviving self."⁴⁴ In this sense, Layal in particular, but also

⁴² Quoted in Jackie McGlone, "Looking for Layla," *The Scotsman*, July 24, 2003.

⁴³ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 13.

⁴⁴ Culbertson, 178.

the play as a whole, becomes the theatrical embodiment of a fractured self and fragmented memories, a reminder that collective trauma is never a closed cycle. Layal's trauma is finally complete, but it is now the responsibility of her audience to bear witness to her story and the stories of those that she shared.

Like her character Layal, Heather Raffo has tried to bear some of the burden, sharing the realities of Iraqi women as both the playwright and actress of this piece. Raffo was the original performer of *9 Parts of Desire* when it received its world premiere at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, in August 2003. This production transferred to the Bush Theatre in London, and then opened in New York City at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre in October 2004, with Raffo continuing her role as both playwright and performer.⁴⁵ The show and Raffo's performance garnered substantial critical praise; the production received several extensions and was sold out for nine straight months. Raffo was nominated for several acting awards, including the Helen Hayes, Outer Critics Circle, and Drama League Awards, and she received a Lucille Lortel Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, and the Marian Seldes-Garson Kanin playwriting award. The primary reason for the play's success is perhaps best expressed by Maria Beach in her review of the show for *Theatre Journal*, in which she writes that Raffo "voices Iraqi women's desires for justice, peace, and freedom; expresses female artistic and intellectual aspirations; and depicts with compassion and dignity women's struggles to survive war and other forms of systemic violence... [It] is a provocative work because of the multiplicity of ideas, emotions, and political

⁴⁵ In subsequent productions, both professional and amateur, *9 Parts of Desire* has been performed in a variety of ways: by a single actress, multi-actor casts that use doubling to cover the roles, and nine different women.

viewpoints Raffo incorporates into her collective portrait.”⁴⁶ That is, the play does not simplify war in the way that most media coverage does, and therefore avoids the pitfall of becoming yet another piece of theatrical propaganda. In a hyper-mediatized society constantly bombarded with images and news reports about the conflict in Iraq, Heather Raffo manages to present a story about war that is not rooted in politics. Instead, her play is about a collective female experience, which can translate across different ethnicities and ideologies to re-train the American expectation for the representation of Arab women in the theatre.

The desire to undercut prevailing media representations of Arab and Muslim women, both in the United States and abroad, is shared by solo performer and playwright Rohina Malik. The struggle of straddling multiple identities is something that Malik knows intimately, as she was born in London to an Indian mother and Pakistani father who immigrated to England after they were married, and she now resides in Chicago. In her one-woman show *Unveiled*, Malik relies on her live audience to act as the witnesses to both her personal and fictional experiences of living as a Muslim woman in a post-9/11 world. Whereas Raffo draws upon the stories of the women she interviewed in Iraq, Malik’s work was created as a means of combating the prejudice against members of her ethnic and religious sects that she herself encountered in the years after the events of September 11. First performed as a solo show by the author in 2009 at Chicago’s 16th Street Theater, *Unveiled* showcases the stories of five women who find themselves in direct confrontation with the unmitigated bigotry and hatred

⁴⁶ Maria Beach, “Nine Parts of Desire (review),” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 2006): 102.

spreading through America and England following the terrorist attacks. Representing different ethnicities (from Pakistani to Moroccan) and varying geographical locations (Chicago, the American South, London), Malik's characters are all practicing Muslim women who wear the *hijab*, or traditional headscarf and modest clothing of their faith, but their actions throughout the play are diametrically opposed to the stereotypes frequently associated with that particular image after September 11.

While *9 Parts of Desire* concentrates primarily on the lives of women still living in Iraq, *Unveiled* explores the complexities and nuances of what it means to be a Muslim woman in the Western world today. Given that her play premiered and has been primarily performed in the United States, Malik is likely addressing audiences that are largely American (though racially and ethnically diverse, depending on the area), and therefore personally familiar with the national response to September 11. By specifically locating four of her characters' stories in American cities, Malik is framing her trauma within in a more recognizable geographical and political climate. This further complicates the process of witnessing and its relationship to the formation of collective identities, as both Malik and many of her audience members experienced the events of September 11 and its aftermath themselves. *Unveiled* asks its viewers to remember their position as a collective body following the terror attacks, then confronts that collectivity by demonstrating the impact it had on Muslim and Arab Americans.

In her study on the place and presentation of trauma post-9/11, E. Ann Kaplan suggests that we should perhaps move beyond just the sharing of trauma

and consider the ethical implications of witnessing. Kaplan's interpretation of witnessing requires a level of engagement— a response more active than simple observation or empathy— that results in a sense of individual responsibility. She writes:

‘[W]itnessing’ happens when a text aims to move the viewer emotionally but without sensationalizing or overwhelming her with feeling that makes understanding impossible. ‘Witnessing’ involves not just empathy and motivation to help, but understanding the structure of injustice- that an injustice has taken place- rather than focusing on a specific case. Once this happens one may feel obligated to take responsibility for specific injustices. Art that invites us to bear witness to injustice goes beyond moving us to identify with and help a specific individual and prepares us to take responsibility for preventing future occurrence.⁴⁷

Kaplan builds upon the ideas originally developed by Agamben in his study of the Holocaust, offering a somewhat updated interpretation of bearing witness to trauma. Kaplan's theoretical approach is one that firmly resides in the shadow of September 11, and subsequently imbues such art with a kind of call to political action. Each scene of Malik's play is a microcosmic example of witnessing in this sense. Like *9 Parts of Desire, Unveiled* addresses political issues without being overtly partisan, but it does ask its audience to analyze and understand “the structure of injustice” that leads to the individual confrontations she explores in her performance.

The first character we meet is a dressmaker named Maryam, who was born and raised in Pakistan but now lives in Chicago with her family. Her monologue is framed as a meeting with a potential client interested in a custom-made wedding dress, and she explains that after a traumatic experience attending

⁴⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 22-23.

a wedding for which she made the gown, she can no longer bring herself to create them. She tells her client about the racially motivated verbal abuse she endured from a stranger not long after September 11, a story that is based on Malik's own experience.⁴⁸ Maryam explains that as she approached the hall where her best friend's wedding was being held, an American man attending another event at the same venue yelled at her, "Take that shit off your head!", referring to Maryam's *hijab*.⁴⁹ Initially, Maryam ignored the man, but his continued harassment in front of her children prompted her to respond. She says:

MARYAM: And as I started to walk away, I could hear him laughing with his lady friend. Maybe it was his laughter. But I stopped and turned around. In that moment I realized everything I do, my children will do. If I let people treat me like garbage, my kids will grow up and do the same. So I looked that man straight in the eye and said. "Sir, you need to get an education, because you know nothing about my religion."

MAN: Fuck you! You're in America, take that shit off your head.

MARYAM: That's right I'm in America, where I have my constitutional right to practice my religion and dress how I like.

MAN: You A-rabs are all terrorists. Go back to Afghanistan!

MARYAM: Afghanis are not Arabs. I'm not an Arab, or an Afghani, or a terrorist. I'm an American, a Pakistani-American.

MAN: If you're American, then dress like one!

MARYAM: I am dressed like one.

MAN: I know all about your kind. You people are insane. Paradise, right? If you want paradise, kill all non Moslems. [*sic*]

MARYAM: (To the client in the store) I told him he was wrong, I told him we believe Paradise lies under the feet of the mother, so

⁴⁸ Tim Smith, "Unveiled: A post-9/11 portrait of Muslim Women," *The Baltimore Sun*, December 1, 2011.

⁴⁹ Rohina Malik, *Unveiled* (Unpublished, Revised August 2010), 4.

honor and respect mothers. I told him what he said to me was really ignorant.

MAN: Don't call me stupid you bitch!⁵⁰

Maryam's attempts to reason with the man and explain his misinterpretation of her religion only enrage him further, and he physically charges at her; the attack is aborted only by his girlfriend's pleas to stop.

This kind of irrational violence triggered by the sight of traditional Muslim dress is a theme that runs through the other monologues in the piece, a reminder that, as journalist and former diplomat Omar Sacirbey writes, "some people's prejudices are so deeply rooted that they find the *hijab* a convenient symbol to vilify a faith they do not understand and feel threatened by."⁵¹ While the significance of the *hijab* and Malik's use of the headscarf as a pedagogical tool will be discussed more extensively in the following chapter, it is applicable here insofar as Malik consciously draws attention to something that became a loaded visual image following September 11. Framing the *hijab* as the central point of conflict in each monologue allows Malik to highlight the discrepancy between the Western treatment of the *hijab* as a symbol of collective identity and the reality of what the headscarf actually means in terms of identity formation for Muslim women. Maryam explains to her customer that on the day of her friend's wedding, she "was wearing my favorite *Hijab*. That's the Arabic word for veil. It was my grey *Hijab* that *Ammi*, my mother gave me when I first decided to cover

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

⁵¹ Omar Sacirbey, "Images of Muslim Women in Post-9/11 America," in *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*, ed. Faegheh Shirazi (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 263.

my hair. I made the decision when I was twenty. I was growing in my spirituality and it just felt like the right time.”⁵²

Maryam shares how happy this choice made her mother, explaining that her decision to wear the veil even prompted her mom, who was rather old-fashioned and not typically talkative about her personal life, to open up to her daughter about her own experiences as a wife and mother. Maryam’s anecdote may seem simple, but its inclusion is significant. By focusing the character’s recollection on the ways in which her decision to cover deepened the relationship with her mother, Malik is attempting to “open up understanding of Muslim femininity.” As Myra Macdonald writes of other post-9/11 art featuring images of veiled Muslim women, “it is in these [works] that the challenge of evading the continuing discursive power of forms of representation with a long and pernicious history is most acutely visible.”⁵³ By including in her monologue an example of female connection forged through Islamic tradition, as well as the significance of the *hijab* to her personal growth as a Muslim woman, Malik is able to draw attention to the stark contrast between the intimate truths of contemporary Islamic women and monolithic stereotypes of the veil.

Through Maryam’s story, the audience is made aware of the more subtle religious and emotional connotations of the *hijab*. However, Maryam’s cultural explanation to the customer and the personal memory it evokes for her is quickly countered by her blunt description of the attack. This sharp juxtaposition is a theatrical representation of the positionality of Muslim American women before

⁵² Malik, 3.

⁵³ Myra Macdonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of image and voice in media representation,” *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2006): 7.

and after September 11, and Malik's presentation of the exchange echoes Kalb's assertion that "*Verfremdung* becomes a living concept again" in documentary solo performance "because the reality of the performer-researched has been made an active part of the art."⁵⁴ Because Malik, as Maryam, speaks the lines of both her character and the attacker as though the exchange is occurring in the present (rather than presenting a recounting of the dialogue as the memory of a past event), the audience is placed in the position of bearing witness to the trauma itself instead of its recollection. Maryam expresses her shock that a man would believe it was acceptable to yell at a woman in front of her children, realizing that he felt he had the latitude to do so because "in his eyes, I was not a mother, a wife, a daughter. I was just a 'Mozlem', a 'Terrorist', I was not human."⁵⁵ While Malik challenges her spectators to become pseudo-witnesses to Maryam's personal horror, she is also asking them to participate in a broader recognition of how individual trauma has the power to deconstruct the discourse of the predominant national narrative at the time. It is, of course, impossible to know the minds and opinions of the theatergoers attending performances of *Unveiled*, but even if Malik never addressed a single person who thought negatively about Arabs or Muslims, she certainly performed for audiences who were participants (active or passive) in the nationalistic sentiment following September 11. Malik shares with the audience "a traumatic memory [which] reaches back to an act of

⁵⁴ Kalb, 16.

⁵⁵ Malik, 5.

violence that breaks down and reconstructs the social bond”⁵⁶ in an effort to create a new collective identity, one that would stand with Maryam against injustice.

Cathy Caruth suggests that “[i]n a catastrophic age, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures.”⁵⁷ The psychoanalytic effects of trauma are universal in many ways, and provide a common ground for people who have experienced such events in myriad cultures and circumstances; shared suffering undoubtedly expands the definition of “we.” Bernhard Giesen contends that “collective trauma transcends the contingent relationships between individual persons and forges them into a collective identity,”⁵⁸ a cohesion that is physicalized in the presentation of a single performer on stage speaking for a multitude of traumatized women. More significantly, the occurrence of trauma, as has been established here, is only historicized through those that bear witness to the violence and survive, then find the courage to share the story of what they witnessed with others. Thus trauma offers the opportunity for a relationship between cultures, the establishment of which requires a kind of mutual agreement between the speaker and the listener. In this exchange, both parties participate in the creation of a new narrative that fills a previously unoccupied space in history.

“A Culture of Storytellers”: Scheherazade’s Legacy

⁵⁶ Bernhard Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 113.

⁵⁷ Caruth, “Introduction to Part 1,” 11.

⁵⁸ Giesen, 112.

Malik's and Raffo's choice of the one-woman show as the narrative structure for their plays both evokes and dismantles yet another of the most prominent images of Arab women: that of the captivating storyteller Scheherazade. Beginning with Antoine Galland's 1704 French translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the Western world became fascinated with the story of the virgin bride who told her royal husband a tale so compelling each night that he spared her from execution in order to hear its ending. It has since been translated and adapted many times on both the page and the screen, often depicting Scheherazade as overtly sexual and seductively manipulative (see, for example, the 1942 Universal film *Arabian Nights* or even Disney's *Aladdin* in 1992). The popularity of such opulent, romanticized depictions of "the Orient" have subsequently played an integral role in the construction of the Western perception of the Middle East, embodied in the sultry figure of a belly-baring young woman.

While Scheherazade is able to control her fate through her narrative prowess and, in some popular entertainment versions, through her physical attributes as well, it is important to note that she does so under extreme duress. The fact that her life depends on the quality of her storytelling is, of course, the driving force of action in the plot and an effective literary device, but it does present Scheherazade as an Arab woman trapped by an unyielding patriarchal system. Given the centuries-old history of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the Western hemisphere, Scheherazade and the particulars of her circumstances are often an introduction of sorts to the Arab world, and its underlying premise is therefore problematic. As Somaya Sami Sabry writes in her analysis of the

Scheherazadian narrative, “[t]he frame tale in particular, with its storytelling driven by the threat of the sword, has served in defining the representations of Arab women in Western culture and mainstream American culture, as oppressed and constantly living in fear.”⁵⁹ As it did in its original literary incarnation during a period of extreme Western imperialism, *One Thousand and One Nights* continues to offer several archetypes that reinforce stereotypical assumptions of Arab women.

In *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, Mohja Kahf traces the evolution of Muslim women in literature, detailing the creation of several varying collective identities that all seem to similarly position Muslim women as oppressed in some way. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the connection between the Islamic faith and the subjugation of women coalesces into an indelible association still widely perpetuated today. Within the growing literary discourse exploring the religion of Islam, Kahf asserts that concerns relating to the Muslim woman also ballooned, but “[p]aradoxically, her figure simultaneously shrinks in subjectivity and exuberance.” She turns into “an abject harem slave, the quintessential victim of absolute despotism” in the eighteenth century, then in the following years this “harem slave is rescued by the Romantic hero and recreated as the ideal of numinous femininity.”⁶⁰ While the images in each specific story range from extremes of positive to negative female ideals, the

⁵⁹ Somaya Sami Sabry. *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of The Arabian Nights* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011), 8. It should be noted that Sabry spells the name of the heroine of *The Nights* Sheherazade, and her reference to Sheherazadian narrative is therefore similarly spelled. Direct quotes from her work will honor her choice of spelling.

⁶⁰ Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), 8.

parameters of Arab and Muslim female representation become fixed within the Scheherazadian legacy in Western literature during this period.

In drawing upon the tradition of orality put forth in the *Nights* and the familiarity of American audiences with its famed storyteller, contemporary female solo performers are able to resist persistent Orientalist representations by emphasizing their continuing prevalence while simultaneously undermining such generalities. Scheherazade becomes a vehicle for identity exploration, allowing female writer-performers to interrogate traditional ethnic and gender constructions within their work. For example, the layering of narratives from multiple speakers throughout Malik's *Unveiled* is evocative of the structure of the *Nights*, but here it highlights the importance of individuals within a collective. While all of the female characters in the play share some cultural and religious commonalities, the specificities of their unique stories fragments current tendencies to position individual Muslim women as representative of all Muslim women. In *Unveiled*, the character of Noor remarks that hers is "a culture of storytellers,"⁶¹ a statement that references a widely accepted stereotype of Arab women as the descendants of Scheherazade, but the content and purpose of her specific tale forces the audience to reconsider what that oral culture means in a post-9/11 world.

Noor's story is not one of dashing heroism or magic, but rather a tragic recounting of witnessing her husband being beaten and stabbed to death by a group of Islamophobic young men who then turn on her. They punch Noor, cut off her clothes, and then climb on top of her, responding to her screams by saying only "No mercy for terrorists." The sound of approaching sirens finally stops the

⁶¹ Malik, 7.

attack, and as the boys flee Noor is left to watch her husband die while she unsuccessfully tries to stop his bleeding. Overcome by grief and unable to leave her house even to give her statement to the State's Attorney, Noor's mother finally convinces her daughter to testify in court by telling her that "SILENCE IS SOMETIMES A CRIME!" [playwright's capitalization].⁶² So Noor begins to share her story: with the State's Attorney, the jury hearing the case against her husband's killers, victims' advocacy groups, and finally with a client of her law firm who is afraid to testify against her own rapist. She passes on her mother's wisdom to that client, imploring her, "You have to speak, your words, they have power."⁶³ Malik, as a contemporary Scheherazade, gives voice to Noor, a different Muslim woman with a compelling story to share, who in turn empowers yet another woman to tell her own tale.

The orality of *One Thousand and One Nights* is a significant feature of its history, in part because the transmutability of its spoken narrative stands in stark contrast to the privileging— particularly in the Western world— of the written text. There is no known original or definitive text of the *Nights*; it is a legend that has been told with many variations in countless countries around the world. The adaptability of the frame tale's themes, as well as the fluidity of the story and its teller, is analogous to the diasporic position of the writer-actresses who present their own accounts of survival. "Performance of Sheherazadian narrative," Sabry suggests, "represents an example of how twenty-first-century experiences of Arab-American women are encoded in performance in a dramatic format which

⁶² Ibid., 13.

⁶³ Ibid., 14.

effects change through demonstration, just as *The Nights* sought to do.”⁶⁴ As solo performers, these women actively challenge the fixed representations of Arab and Arab American women through orality as well, by demonstrating on stage the ways in which their own hybrid identities have shifted (whether by choice or by force) after September 11.

The last of the five monologues in *Unveiled* exemplifies a modern Scheherazadian narrative of promoting change through demonstration. Spoken by the character of Layla, the owner of a Middle Eastern restaurant in a western suburb of Chicago, the story illustrates the reactionary re-racing of Arabs and Arab Americans in the United States after the fall of the Twin Towers through the perspective of an individual account. Layla explains that although she was born on the evening referred to as *Laylatul Qadr*, the “Night of Power,” during the month of Ramadan, she never felt herself to be as strong a person as her namesake indicated: “I always felt weak, all my life. I could never speak up for myself, ever. Yes it is true. I used to be a very weak person. I swear it is true. But one day, I found my power. When? You really want to know? Okay, let me grab a chair.”⁶⁵ Layla pulls up a chair next to her customer, sharing her own tale of danger and fear as she describes the mob she encountered when picking up her children from their Islamic school, which was connected to a Mosque, on the afternoon of September 11. Confronted by their angry voices screaming “GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY YOU TERRORISTS” [playwright’s capitalization] and the sight of her friend being forcefully barred from entering the

⁶⁴ Sabry, 133.

⁶⁵ Malik, 23.

Mosque by a young man in the crowd, Layla explains that she finally feels the power of her name:

I grab that boy, his eyes looked like a wild animal. “What are you doing? Is this the solution? Is this helping the people in New York? Do not call me Terrorist, I am not Terrorist! I know you are angry. I am angry too! My brother, he lives in New York. I don’t know if he is alive or dead! (She wipes her face) Don’t spit at me! LISTEN TO ME! Murder is *Haram*, it is forbidden. This is not Islam. No! I am not sand nigger. I am from Middle East like Jesus. I believe in Jesus too, and he would never accept this behavior.

It is Quran, Allah created us different tribes and nations, so that we get to know each other. Get to know me. Get to know my community. We are good people, we want peace. Islam, it mean peace! Get to know me. My name is Layla! Get to know *me*. (*She is pleading*) Get to know *me*. (*She is demanding*) GET TO KNOW ME! [playwright’s emphasis]⁶⁶

Within two short paragraphs of her play, Malik accomplishes a number of significant feats for a diasporic writer. She offers a microcosmic example of the ways in which anti-Muslim vitriol after September 11 became an accepted collective identity imposed upon both Arabs and Muslims, while simultaneously educating her audience about several important aspects of Islam. She also establishes the importance of understanding the individual in a collective and asks the audience to consider the ramifications of group identities. Layla ultimately shows the boy the compassion he could not initially muster for her when she tells a police officer not to arrest him because she wants to end the cycle of violence and punishment. Reminiscent of Kaplan’s revised concept of witnessing, Layla’s response to this altercation “involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common.”⁶⁷ It is clear that Malik chooses to place this particular monologue in the closing position as a kind of call to action for her

⁶⁶ Ibid., 24-5.

⁶⁷ Kaplan, 122.

audience, encouraging them to find within themselves the power to advocate for peace and justice. While this may seem a straightforward moral given the plot of Layla's account, it is the construction of a post-9/11 diasporic narrative framed in what appears to be a culturally traditional oral style that is more significant than the conflict within the story. By using the structure of her piece to connect to her American audiences through their *Arabian Nights*-influenced perception of Arabic culture, Malik is able to essentially translate the more unfamiliar specificities of her race and religion in the context of an approachable framework. Just as Scheherazade used her stories to undermine the constructed roles for Arab women of her time, so too does Malik in her creation of *Unveiled*.

Heather Raffo also evokes the specter of Scheherazade in *9 Parts of Desire*, the references to whom she strategically places in the monologues of Layal. Of all the characters created by the writer/performers included in this project, Layal is the one that bears the greatest resemblance to the famously alluring and evocative storyteller. Her frequent laughter, unembarrassed discussions of sexuality, and carefree attitude even in the face of such horror likely suggests parallels with Scheherazade in the minds of Western audience members. In her first monologue, Layal tells us:

I fear it here
 and I love it here
 I cannot stop what I am here
 I am obsessed by it
 by these things we all are but we are not saying.
 "Either I shall die" — how does it go?
 Oh my favorite, Shaharazad! (*An aching giggle.*) "Either I shall die or I shall live a ransom for all the virgin daughters of Muslims and the cause of the deliverance from his hands to life!"⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 15.

She then admits that although she has endured great sacrifice in her life, it does not compare to the sacrifices of those around her in a war-torn country, and that while she is an acceptable mother and subpar wife, her greatest talent is “being naked... in secret.”⁶⁹ Raffo’s language and insinuations in this passage are overt, playing upon the stereotype ingrained in the minds of her spectators and setting up expectations based on these assumptions that she will later dismantle.

Sabry writes that performances in particular “take such cultural reformulations of ‘Sheherazadian [*sic*] orality’ to a new level by introducing an overtly racial correlative, through which these performances undermine racial tensions and prejudices by enacting them and exaggerating them in performance.”⁷⁰ In the context of *9 Parts of Desire*, this effect is even more pronounced. As an Arab American women performing Arab female characters while drawing upon the stereotypes of Arab women (such as those perpetuated by the legend of Scheherazade), Raffo is confronting a multitude of assumed collective identities in order to challenge the lingering remains of Orientalism. She draws attention to such racial constructions slowly over the course of the play, switching back and forth between characters who are clearly distinct from one another, but still imbuing each one with a few traits that could be considered stereotypical, or that are at least in keeping with the broad generalities put forth by the Western media. Evaluating the piece as a whole, it becomes clear that the sum of these characteristics is a comprehensive list of prevalent stereotypes of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁰ Sabry, 19.

Arab women, but presented as part of individual, meticulously detailed stories, Raffo removes any opportunities for a reductive interpretation of these women.

By refusing to shy away from such recognizable signifiers, Raffo is able to expose and analyze them within the context of her play as a means of re-racing the representation of Iraqi women. That is, Raffo offers for a Western audience a stable, even comforting, depiction of her race in many ways, but she quickly undermines the sense of familiarity she initially provides. In the opening moments of the piece, for example, we see Raffo, a woman of Arab descent herself, slowly entering the space as the character of Mullaya, an older Iraqi woman dressed in a traditional headscarf who is singing an old song of her country; a Mullaya, we learn from the stage directions, is a professional mourner who is hired to lead the call and response at funerals. It is unclear in this scene just who she is mourning, but she appears to be weeping for her entire nation as she kneels at the river's edge: "the river again will flood / the river again will be damned / the river again will be diverted / today the river must eat."⁷¹ Mullaya paints for the audience the picture of a troubled land with a history of conflict, a place that is home to disparate peoples who share both honored customs and collective trauma. This is a characterization that Raffo's audience would recognize as consistent with the prevalent media depictions of the Middle East in general, and she is careful to avoid specifics in this opening monologue.

While Raffo sets a familiar stage in the opening scene of *9 Parts*, she is unafraid to shift from the more comfortable space of generalities to the more challenging realm of the particular in the following monologue, the first in which

⁷¹ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 10.

we meet Layal. While she does offer the audience a recognizable referent in her mention of Scheherazade, the overall tone of what she tells us is colored by the account of Uday Hussein's torture of a young girl, described earlier in this chapter. Like Scheherazade, many of the women in *9 Parts of Desire* are simply trying to survive in the midst of unimaginably cruel circumstances. However, while Scheherazade's "fight was located in the realm of the private,"⁷² Raffo's work, and that of her contemporaries, brings the fight out into the public sphere and opens up a dialogue about the current experiences of Arab and Arab American women. Layal continues in her subsequent scenes to engage with female sexuality and sexual politics in Iraq, two topics not widely discussed in the mainstream press but which are integral to the dismantling Orientalist representations.

In her collection of short performances pieces, together titled *Dancing on the Hyphen*, artist and scholar Laila Farah similarly foregrounds Scheherazade as an evocative cultural referent in her opening monologue, then immediately undercuts any preconceived notions of a vixen behind the veil through her overtly political and racially charged rhetoric. In the first section of her play, called "Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa," Farah recounts her personal experiences of negotiating checkpoints in Lebanon, where she spent her formative years, and in the United States, where she was born and where she lived after being evacuated from Beirut in 1984. The stage directions indicate that the early moments of the piece play directly into the Scheherazadian stereotype:

⁷² Masmoudi, 76.

Crossing through the audience to the back of the room with Arabic music undulating, I begin to dance seductively to the music and weave through the audience. As I turn around to weave back through, I am stopped, and I bluster through in halting, heavily accented English about having all my papers in order.⁷³

After she yells at the customs officer that she is a dual national, Farah asks a much larger question, “How do you know how I really am?” She then manipulates her veil to enact several stereotypical images that she offers to the customs officer as possibilities for her potential true self: “the exotic/harem girl / the downtrodden peasant, veiled, illiterate, miserable, squatting in the field / the Intifada woman throwing rocks in the street / or Hannan Ashrawi paying homage at a religious site.”⁷⁴ It is significant Farah begins this list with the most socially acceptable stereotype, that of the harem girl, and then delves into the more racially specific descriptions to challenge her audience’s analysis of their own biases.

Farah continues this challenge by literally performing a process of identification during her performance. She crosses borders— geographic as well as cultural— in her play, and must define herself in relation to the checkpoints at which she is stopped. Each instance of questioning at a new border is marked in the text by the stage direction “*change mask*,” and a subsequent instruction that Farah speaks aloud, “switch papers/codes/languages.” Like Scheherazade, Farah adopts a fluid identity to make it through each hurdle or confrontation that threatens her freedom, but she does so by recounting very specific experiences that subvert how she is racialized as an Arab American woman. At a checkpoint

⁷³ Laila Farah, “Dancing on the Hyphen: Performing Diasporic Subjectivity,” *Modern Drama*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 2005), 321.

⁷⁴ Farah, 322.

in Beirut, a Syrian soldier questions her Lebanese heritage because of her lighter hair color. He “wraps his filthy fingers in [her hair] and tells his buddies to come over and look and touch and feel the spun gold softness of it.”⁷⁵ The level of skepticism is the same at a customs check in America: “I have an accent they can’t quite place, yet I speak English so well— my nose just a little too long and Mediterranean-looking— my attitudes just a little ‘radical’ and subversive— and that name of mine, what country is that from?”⁷⁶

Farah’s presentation demonstrates the necessarily performative nature of the multiple identities of Arab American women, highlighting the ways in which certain features (hair color, accent, speech pattern) are frequently used to categorize one’s ethnicity but also exploring the moments in her travels when she needs to decide whether or not to fully embrace or deny those aspects of herself. Farrah is asking her spectators to engage with the construction of race and the process of racing, analyzing the construction of collective identities that are both imposed upon and developed by a diasporic subject. Throughout her piece, Farah demonstrates the ways in which “diasporic subjects intentionally complicate their identification processes in performance, with the aim of redefining them.”⁷⁷

Farah is very clear about the position from which she writes and performs. As a professor of Women’s Studies at DePaul University, as well as a self-proclaimed feminist and activist, she approaches her writing and performance as a kind of educational opportunity. Her one-woman show has played primarily at academic institutions around the country, which gives her the freedom to delve

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 323.

⁷⁷ Sabry, 143.

deeper into notions of performative reflexivity within the context of her plays. At the end of “Sheherazade Don’t Need No Visa,” she summarizes her diasporic position as such:

An unveiling of colonizing frameworks... this is an unveiling of different ways of being and of representing that being... this constant switching of papers, codes, and languages creates whole new forms of epistemic knowledges and how to body forth these knowledges... And so Sheherazade may or may not have a veil which she may or may not wear, but she only uses it when she wants to, and she stops at no borders but those of her own creation... And, by the way, she don’t need no visa...⁷⁸

The multiplicity of speakers in the plays discussed here documents what Farah believes is “the element most absent in the depiction of Arab women’s lives— their multiple identities and the complexities located therein.”⁷⁹ Even in Farah’s single-speaker docudrama, we see firsthand the array of voices and personae that she adopts to negotiate borders that are at once metaphorical and very real, demonstrating for her audience the kind of crossings frequently traversed by Arab and Arab American women. The framework of the Scheherazadian narrative utilized by these writer-actresses thus functions in performance as a crossroads of the past and present, text and speech, the concrete and the fluid. These intersections, however, are not definitive; the present quickly becomes the past and the spoken word can be memorialized in text. The diasporic resistance to fixed representation, in turn, necessarily remains an ongoing conversation instead of an answer, a story that continues to unfold day after day, just like the tales of Scheherazade.

⁷⁸ Farah, 324.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 317.

Getting Personal

The question that seems to plague solo performances most often is whether or not they are inherently autobiographical. The indelible connection between solo performance and the sharing of personal experiences is, as previously mentioned, part of the genre's origins, and autobiographical shows remain the most prevalent and commercially successful productions of the form today. Within the plays examined here, the relationship between the personal and the performance is even more challenging to parse out. All three women explore in their work what it means to be Muslim and Arab American in a post-9/11 world, while they themselves are negotiating similar circumstances. It is hard not to wonder then how much of their own lives they are dramatizing or what parts of their individual personalities we are seeing on stage. Such consideration of the “real” beneath the “performed” can be seen as shifting the decision about to whether or not a performance is autobiographical to the spectator, regardless of the author's objective. Deirdre Heddon writes that if such classification is based on reception, then it “begs the question of whether the autobiographical ‘status’ of a work matters.” She subsequently concludes that it does: “That I believe something *has* happened (or *will* happen or *will happen again*) does place my experience of the theatrical even into a different emotional register. The ‘real’, even if intellectually understood as contingent, nevertheless retains its pull— and so it should, given that its impacts are often painfully tangible” [author's emphasis].⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Heddon, 10.

Like the earlier discussion about the fallibility of conclusively categorizing specific plays as documentary theatre, the aim of this section is not to firmly identify which of these solo performances are autobiographical and which are not. Rather, the goal is to analyze the elements of autobiographical performance that are utilized within these one-woman shows as a tool to question the creation of collective identities. That is, the binary between the fictional and the real in a solo performance offers an opportunity to address both the construction of each sphere and the instability of the line that separates them. Heather Raffo, for example, believes that “*9 Parts of Desire* is autobiographical in the same way that a play like [*A*] *Streetcar Named Desire* could be considered autobiographical... The audience sometimes imposes autobiography upon Raffo, especially when she plays the character named ‘The American,’ whom Raffo asserts is really nothing like her at all. Instead of the term autobiographical, Raffo prefers to think of the piece as ‘deeply personal.’”⁸¹ Despite her intentions, it is nearly impossible to ignore the commonalities between *The American* and the information that Raffo has publicly shared about herself: a father who emigrated from Iraq, her mother’s family is based in Michigan, she lives in New York, she spent a significant amount of time watching the destruction of Iraq on television and worrying about family members there.

Production reviews and scholarly articles almost universally refer to these parallels between the real woman and the fictional one. Romanska refers to this persona as “Raffo’s alter ego,”⁸² Maria Beach’s review surmises that the

⁸¹ Najjar, 212.

⁸² Romanska, 229.

American is “presumably based on Raffo, whose father is from Iraq,”⁸³ and the critic from *The Chicago Tribune*, commenting on the final scene in which the American watches the bombing of Baghdad on television, writes that the woman, “it seems, is Raffo herself.”⁸⁴ Just as Heddon suggests, the audience forms its own conclusions about Raffo’s relationship to her characters, and the perception of their monologues as lived experiences seem to result in a more profound connection to the material overall. Beach’s review in *Theatre Journal* concludes with an observation that “Raffo’s concern for the people of Iraq is palpable, and she is such an engaging performer that spectators may leave the theatre feeling as if they also share a connection with the women who stories inspired this compelling play.”⁸⁵ The acceptance of Raffo’s play as a counter-narrative mediated through her own experiences, as well as her unique connection to Iraqi women, places her in a position of authority that is, in turn, perceived by the audience as a representative for a collective body.

The formation of this broader perception of Raffo’s collective identity over the course of her performance is created in conjunction with her diasporic identity, illustrating the fluidity of both constructions. Smith and Watson write that because solo performance is “a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices, autobiographical narration [therefore] offers occasions for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, and critiquing cultural norms and narratives. The life narrator selectively engages aspects of her lived experience through modes of

⁸³ Beach, 103.

⁸⁴ Chris Jones, “9 *Parts of Desire* gives women of Iraq many voices,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 2008.

⁸⁵ Beach, 103.

personal “storytelling”— narratively, imagistically, in performance.”⁸⁶ This idea of identity formation as a self-driven, ongoing process can be seen in both *9 Parts of Desire* and *Unveiled*, as the structure of each play offers opportunities for several kinds of dialogic exchange. The first is within the text itself, as the actresses shift from one persona to the next in each new scene; even though the characters do not interact with one another, we can see the relationship between their stories and circumstances that places the monologues in conversation with one another. The second is the exchange that occurs between the solo performer and the audience, whether it is in the form of a post-show talk-back session or in silence during the performance, a relationship that will be analyzed further in the subsequent chapter. The third, and perhaps most tenuous exchange, is that between the writer-performer and her work, which perhaps best exemplifies the mutability of the artist’s diasporic position. By this I mean that both Raffo and Malik created their plays in response to specific historical moments and first presented their plays in 2003 and 2009, respectively. When they perform the same material now, however, they are engaging with very different sociopolitical circumstances. Thus the performative reflexivity of the work, the way in which the performers relate to the material and the effect it has on the perception of their own hybrid identities, has likely shifted over time.

In her collection of performance pieces, Laila Farah attempts to capture the essence of this constant movement and transformation, both literally and figuratively. The four sections of *Dancing on the Hyphen*, as Farah describes them, “chronicle movement across various diasporic landscapes and the necessity

⁸⁶ Smith and Watson, 9.

for resistance discourse and action,”⁸⁷ all of which are based on her own lived experiences. Her aim overall is a bit more nebulous; she states that her “ultimate goal is not to have the audience ‘get it’ and stay static or complacent in their new knowledge, but rather to have them keep moving and expanding their own transformative understandings.”⁸⁸ While this objective is presumably shared by her contemporaries, Farah’s work differs substantially from that of Raffo and Malik in that it is presented as wholly autobiographical. She chronicles in her one-woman show her personal history as an American-Lebanese woman and the evolution of her identity in relation to global and local politics.

Dancing in the Hyphen is a particularly interesting case study when it comes to autobiographical performance, as it demonstrates the ways in which the concept of autobiography seems to precipitate identity formation for a diasporic writer rather than stem from it. Given the topics with which many Arab and Muslim American female artists wish to engage, it is often necessary for them to indicate in some way their own positionality (or that of their characters) in the context of their performance. While they then go on to question and dismantle these identities over the course of a production, they must begin with a moment of self-reflexivity and name themselves for the audience. In the essay published with the texts of her plays, Farah self-identifies as American-Lebanese as opposed to Lebanese-American. She writes that part of the decision “to portray my American roots as opposed to showcasing my Lebanese-oriented sensibilities” is because she wanted to “reach the widest audience possible within my means as of

⁸⁷ Farah, 318.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 320.

this writing.” She goes on to say that this self-positioning, as well as “the fluent, informal American-English vernacular that I employ, draws U.S. audiences into a liminal space that suddenly appears less ‘foreign’ to them, or so they have indicated in talk-back sessions following the performance.”⁸⁹ Before Farah can begin work toward the exploration and deconstruction of the hyphen that she alludes to in the title of her play, she feels that she must first define herself in a way that the audience finds familiar.

Just as Farah challenges the stereotypical elements of Scheherazade in the first section of her performance, the subsequent segment undermines the parameters of her identity that she herself laid out for us. Titled “Stars and Stripes Forever: Sheherazade’s Sequel,” this monologue addresses the racial profiling that was perpetrated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) under the auspices of following the Immigration and Terrorism Act of 1996. Farah describes for us her harrowing experience of being held in the Zurich airport, where she was attempting to change planes and head home to America after being abroad for several months. She does not mention where she had been traveling, but this omission itself is significant as it emphasizes the fact that it should not matter, given that she has a United States passport and is booked on a flight operated by an American carrier.

Farah self-identifies as American-Lebanese, and we know from the first portion of her performance that she grew up in the United States. Yet over the course of this piece we witness how that individual identity is challenged and undermined because of the ways in which it conflicts with an accepted collective

⁸⁹ Ibid., 318.

identity of Arabs and Arab Americans as potential terrorists. Moreover, in relating the details of her demeaning ordeal, Farah's language includes evocative imagery of traditional American symbols to reinforce the sense of "othering" that she experiences when her hybridic identity is broken apart by the customs official. She describes the moment after she hands over her documents, and sees on the officer's table

a visual image of this great country... something Betsy Ross could've been proud of, you see a bunch of brightly colored stars and stripes... and you *are* going "back home" and you *are* traveling on an American carrier after all, and having been away for a couple of months, the nostalgic feelings of patriotism might overwhelm you and make your breast swell... breathe in, breathe out, and then sharp intake... swwwwiiiiiiiihhhhh...

You see that the stars are actually asterisks on the side of a long list of names which comprises the flight manifest, and that these stars only grace the names of the chosen few, the special ones, and you realize that the stripes are made from a yellow highlighter to signify your exalted status, your particularity... only names such as your own could ever be chosen above the rest... yours and others that sound like Farah, Abdulrahman, and Shebadezeh [...] it's (humming "Oh Say Can You See") your very own private anthem... the now-alien anthem of stars and stripes forever... you see, it is based on the ancient adage of allness, of sameness [...]⁹⁰

Farah's changing perception of the passenger list mirrors the abrupt shift forced upon her own diasporic identity. She saw herself as American first, but as the official's questions push her to the other side of her hyphenated self, the elements of quintessential American-ness that once signified home begin to seem alien to Farah.

The structure of her narrative implicates the audience in the process of her "othering;" we are part of the Western society that has made these kind of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 327.

inherently discriminatory policies possible. Smith and Watson write that autobiographical acts that are explored through an ethnographic framework “force us as viewers, who are addressed in and by the works, to participate actively, and oftentimes uncomfortably, in negotiating the politics of subjectivity. They invite us to confront our own participation in ‘other’ the text, the image, and the ‘woman’ embodied before us.”⁹¹ This is not to say that Farah is trying to alienate her audience, but as a diasporic subject, she confronts in her work the most pressing issues facing immigrants and other members of diasporic communities, issues that necessarily include the social and political practices of the dominant culture. Farah draws attention to these challenges as a means of promoting audience participation in her acts of resistance; that is, she pushes her spectators to understand their current role in the construction of collective identities so that as they traverse borders with Farah over the course of her piece, they become inspired in some way to alter their own positionality. To further what she believes to be the transformative potential of this kind of theatre, Farah “require[s] a ‘talk-back’ session following each performance in order to make a space for such expansion of topics touched in the performance to occur.”⁹² In her work, she demonstrates how the political is personal to her, but she also attempts to make the personal more communal through her continued interaction with her audiences.

There’s a (Better) Place for Us...

⁹¹ Smith and Watson, 37.

⁹² Farah, 325.

In her book *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan analyzes the theatrical moments in which a production lifts the audience to a liminal space where they experience momentarily a palpable vision of how the world might be a better place. She suggests that these occurrences exemplify, in a way, Brecht's notion of *gestus*, in which certain elements of a performance come together to "crystallize social relations" and present them to an audience for their critical consideration. For Dolan, the moment in which the spectators receive this *gestus* represents a utopian performance, when "well-delineated, moving pictures of social relations become not only intellectually clear but felt and lived by spectators as well as actors. Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel."⁹³ This concept is both lofty and inherently personal based on the reception of individual audience members to a specific performance. And yet, it is hard not to consider the potential for these moments in the works by the female artists examined here.

The three plays included in this chapter are seemingly quite different in terms of their approach in confronting the formation of collective identities regarding Arabs and Arab Americans that quickly solidified in the wake of September 11. Raffo's work is primarily driven by the power of collective trauma, Malik's play focuses on the post-9/11 prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiment, and Farah's autobiographical monologues are as pedagogical as they are theatrical. But despite these variances, all three ask the probing question that can offer an opportunity for the moment of Dolan's utopian performatives: What

⁹³ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 7.

if? What if we as a nation begin to truly parse out the idea of collective identities, examining how they function in the formation of stereotypes but also their significance in contemporary diasporas? What if we shunned conveniently crafted media narratives that deal in broadly generalized “communities” and instead sought out stories of individuals? What if the notion of “hybrid identity” could be thought of instead as just “identity”? By presenting these questions within the framework of solo performances, these female artists places themselves in the center of such sociopolitical maelstroms to collectively (re)present revised theatrical depictions of Muslim and Arab American women which, in turn, effectively revises their own identity construction as well.

Chapter Two

Found in Translation: Cultural Mediation Through Performance and Pedagogy

“No, I’m not bald under the scarf / No, I’m not from that country
where women can’t drive cars / No, I would not like to defect /
I’m already American”¹

These lines, from Syrian American writer Mohja Kahf’s poem “*Hijab Scene #7*,” capture the kind of intrusive questioning that women of Arab descent, and particularly Muslim women, encountered following the events of September 11, 2001. Arab and Muslim women became a central part of the national narrative constructed after the attacks, occupying the role of the helpless and oppressed victims of both a terrorist regime and misogynistic religion. Muslim women in particular were, as Myra Macdonald notes, “rigidly and defensively essentialised [*sic*] by the Western media in their veiled representation, are rarely heard to speak, and hardly ever in their own words.”² This monolithic interpretation of all Arab and Muslim women as veiled symbols of terrorism’s systemic control was a tenet of the United States government’s interpretation of the September 11 events, an account that rapidly asserted itself as the dominant narrative in American political culture and news media. The administration’s message was so clear and so frequently repeated that there was little space for alternate narratives. Richard Jackson calculates that “[i]n the first three years following the attacks, the administration made on average 10 speeches, statements

¹ Mohja Kahf, *E-mails from Sheherazad* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 39.

² Macdonald, 15.

to the press, interviews, and the like, *per day* on the issue,”³ and the content of the government’s messages soon shifted from a focus on al-Qaeda to a more generalized interpretation of the Arab world as the source of the terror threat. In the time leading up to the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Western media “used women’s bowed and veiled bodies to confirm the urgency of rescuing them from their fate,”⁴ relying on a set of easily recognizable images to represent the plight of all Arab and Muslim women against which the military was supposedly fighting.

The increased visibility of their ethnicity and religion in the wake of September 11 is also a significant factor in the production of artwork and literature created by Arab and Muslim Americans. In the years following the attacks, there was a substantial rise in the number of productions of plays by Arab American writers. This can of course be attributed in large part to the plethora of material newly available from Arab American playwrights at this time, but it also reflects a developing interest in such work. The subsequent success of many of these productions demonstrates a growing desire within the American public to learn more than the information being shared by the media and the government. While the breadth of plays produced as part of the Arab American theatre movement after the attacks could be interpreted as largely a reactionary response to damaging portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the media, it can also (and perhaps more significantly) be viewed as an indication of a marked shift in the

³ Richard Jackson, “The 9/11 Attacks and the Social Construction of a National Narrative,” in *The Impact of 9/11 on the Media, Arts, and Entertainment: The Day That Changed Everything?*, ed. Matthew J. Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 29.

⁴ Macdonald, 10.

perspective of Arab American writers, which was a direct result of this amplified attention. That is, in contrast to the early Arab American playwrights whose work often looked to their homelands with longing or nostalgia, twenty-first century Arab American playwrights instead grapple with issues of conflict in their families' home countries, the formation of hybrid identities, and how to challenge discourses that limit them to stereotypes. After September 11, theatre became an effective arena for artists to stage personal stories of their cultures and religion, and to offer alternative narratives to those that dominated the nightly news broadcasts. "Because these performances often challenged the usual representation of Arabs," Dalia Basiouny notes, "the theatre of Arab American artists provided both a form of resistance and an opportunity to present their own experiences, redefining Arab identity for their audiences."⁵

Michael Malek Najjar observes that contemporary Arab American theatre, film, and performance is characterized by "the fact that these works spend less time dealing with issues of ethnic identity and more time dealing with the political implications of what it means to be Arab American, especially in the post-9/11 context."⁶ I would argue that within the plays analyzed as part of this project, the political implications of being Arab American cannot be separated from issues of identity, as the former is so profoundly influenced by the latter after the tragedy of September 11. In fact, issues of identity take on even more significance under these circumstances as a means of resistance against damaging generalizations and monolithic collective identities that force disparate peoples into broad

⁵ Basiouny, "Descent as Dissent: Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11," 145.

⁶ Najjar, 60.

categorizations. As Sabry points out, September 11 “further consolidated the binarisation of Arab and American identifications, validating discourses of supposedly clashing civilisations [*sic*]. Hegemonic discourses on American nationalism and patriotism post-9/11 served as the intersecting point where the discursive construction of crises and identity change crossed.”⁷ Under these circumstances, theatre by Arab and Muslim American artists, particularly one-woman shows, tend to foreground themselves as sites of resistance to such discourses, with the individual performer creating a revised Arab and/or Muslim American identity over the course of the show. Female solo performers, as detailed in the previous chapter, have historically been concerned with issues of identity, and the productions included here are no exception. Within these particular works, however, explorations of identity offer a pedagogical opportunity to share with the audience the specifics about their creators’ ethnicity or religion, educating spectators while simultaneously denying them the opportunity to read the Arab and Muslim artists as simply a representative of the whole. The focus in performance is on individuality and difference among the many voices in the script, but the result is a meticulously constructed web of common experiences that are made even more apparent through the widely varied ethnicities and cultural heritage presented with fastidious detail.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the ways in which these female playwrights attempt to navigate that space between themselves and their spectators, challenging the stereotypes that became so pervasive after September 11 through pedagogy and performance. Many of the writers here engage with

⁷ Sabry, 43.

emotionally and politically charged topics— everything from veiling to skin coloration— but their approach to these subjects is in many instances educational, offering the audience a chance to more fully comprehend a culture and religion that have been largely misrepresented in the Western world for hundreds of years. The writers and artists who continue to challenge these persistent Orientalist constructions are, in many ways, cultural mediators. As Layla Al Maleh explains:

These authors project the Arab by way of themes and types that negotiate between different cultures. They present not the exotic or alien, but the comprehensible and acceptable. Moving beyond an internal audience, anglophone Arab writers have the capacity to play a crucial role in disseminating through the wider world their images of hyphenated Arabs and of the Arab people as a whole, thereby fostering acceptance through understanding.⁸

There is, of course, some danger in this optimistic reading of the impact of Arab and Muslim American art and performance, as it positions the work as a kind of commodification of the Arab world for American consumption. As such, an evaluation of a play or performance might be constructed primarily through a Westernized framework, focused only on the piece's relationship to an American audience and how it can best serve them. Despite these potential pitfalls, however, Margaret Litvin asserts that there is a “more hopeful if paradoxical argument” to be made about the “expanded American market for Arab-themed performance.” She writes, “It has created new spaces (albeit sharply delineated ones) in which Arab artists and American audience members can have conversations enabled and framed but *not* directly mediated by journalistic and

⁸ Layla Al Maleh, “Preface,” in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), x.

academic US-based ‘experts’ on the Middle East.”⁹ As a whole, such performances have given general American audiences greater access to a wide range of complex and thought-provoking representations of contemporary Arab and Arab American realities. While it would be hard to measure the success of actually fostering the kind of acceptance that Al Maleh believes to be possible, the opportunity to engage in a dialogue that opens up the space for understanding is at the forefront of many twenty-first century Arab and Muslim American performances, and is a prominent feature of each play examined in this dissertation.

Beyond the Veil

As is true of any wartime narrative, the sweeping story of general terror and nebulous villains generated by the American government after September 11 is the kind that benefits tremendously from being properly branded, giving the public something specific on which to focus their energy. In this particular instance, it is the veil— as an individual article of clothing as well as part of a Muslim woman’s identity— that has come to symbolize the dangers supposedly presented by the Middle East. Sirma Bilge suggests that this image has become iconic in part because of its inherent paradox; the veiled Muslim woman is seen as both “a *victim* (passive) of her oppressive patriarchal culture/religion and male kin, and as a *threat* (active) to Western modernity and culture of freedoms” and

⁹ Margaret Litvin, “Doomed by ‘Dialogue,’ Saved by Curiosity? Post-9/11 Arab Performances under American Eyes,” in *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*, ed. Eyad Houssami (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 160-1.

has thus “been turned into an allegory for undesirable cultural difference.”¹⁰ This duality is what makes the veil such a potent signifier, as it can be employed by various agencies to elicit a wide range of responses regarding freedom, human rights, religion, feminism, and fundamentalism. Despite this presentational malleability, the veil refuses what Homi Bhabha refers to as “the play of difference,” reducing the representation of a group to a stereotype that is particularly damaging, not because it is a simplification but because it is “an arrested, fixated form of representation that... constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.”¹¹ That is, this kind of static signification that indelibly ties a specific marker, such as a veil, to fixed colonialist discourses negates a possible recognition of differences and stifles a subsequent liberation of a racial or cultural signifier from ideologies of cultural superiority.

The combination to which Bilge refers— of veiled women as both victims and a threat— has held a prominent position in Western attitudes towards the veil since its earliest appearances in art and performance. Akin to the lingering tropes stemming from the legend of Scheherazade that are addressed in the previous chapter, the veil can also be construed in a sexualized way. The notion of a harem as illustrated in many Western narratives and paintings combines both the seductively demure nature of the veil with the sexual fantasy of a carnal unveiling. One of the earliest and most pervasive introductions of harems to the

¹⁰ Sirma Bilge, “Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 2010): 10.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), 107.

Western world was as a popular subject for paintings produced during the Romantic period, an extension of the era's general fascination with Orientalism. Even the biblical story of Salomé and King Herod has been re-imagined through the "dance of the seven veils" as a kind of striptease, beginning with Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* in 1893. harems have also been brought to life as exotic settings for operas, novels, and films over the past two centuries, physicalizing the colonialist perception of these female collectives as evidence of women's forced separation from the public sphere occupied by men, as well as their sexually subservient role as existing primarily for male gratification.

While this kind of eroticization of Muslim women is no longer quite so explicit, the Western preoccupation with veiling and unveiling is still tied to issues of forced compliance by women and the lingering perception of Arab women as an exotic 'Other.' The fixed representation of foreign cultures that Bhabha observes is apparent here in the colonialist discourse on which the common reception of the veil is based, it has just been appropriated and newly packaged for a different purpose in our post-9/11 society. The generalities, however, remain the same, and it is the broadness of such characterizations that are truly damaging to the potential "play of difference," as one small article of clothing supersedes ethnic and cultural specificities. It thus becomes a unifying symbol for everything that "we" (as Americans) are fighting against, erasing any kind of diversity in a clash between "us" and "them." Sabry observes that "women wearing the headscarf can be interpreted as communicating their allegiance to a collective identity, with which they may not necessarily identify

completely.”¹² This forced collectivity is further complicated by the fact that much media coverage and political rhetoric concerned with the crisis of the veil does not even differentiate between the various styles of Muslim garments. Just as “Arab” and “Muslim” became (incorrectly) interchangeable after September 11, even in respected news outlets, the same negligence was applied to descriptions of women’s attire, as *burqa*, *hijab*, *niqab*, and veil were used indiscriminately to explain any kind of covering by Middle Eastern or South Asian women.

While the media representation of Arab and Muslim women has gotten marginally better and somewhat more specific over time, “primarily as a result of experience and constructive criticism from readers,” journalist Omar Sacirbey writes that “large swaths of the American public still assume that Muslim women are weak and uneducated.” He believes that such an assumption is heavily influenced by the “patriarchal enforcement of headscarves and burkas [*sic*]. Seen as instruments of oppression, these modest forms of clothing are used to link Islam with misogyny, violence, totalitarianism, and other negative aspects, Muslim women continue to be depicted as oppressed, ignorant victims.”¹³ By framing the act of veiling as a mandated practice imposed on Muslim women from without, the implication by Western journalists is that “*unveiling* marks a return to a ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ body, but *unveiling*, as [Meyda] Yeğenoğlu

¹² Sabry, 114-5.

¹³ Omar Sacirbey, “Images of Muslim Women in Post-9/11 America,” in *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*, ed. Faegheh Shirazi (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 262. These assumptions have remained prevalent since Sacirbey’s writing, but it will be interesting to see if there is a shift in the representations of Muslim women following recent news reports about female participation in terrorist attacks (such as those carried out in Paris and San Bernardino in 2015).

points out, is as much a discursive act as veiling: ‘the body that is not veiled is taken as the norm for specifying a general, cross-culturally valid notion of what a feminine body is and must be.’”¹⁴ It is these deeply ingrained associations, the product of years of politically and commercially motivated rhetoric, against which the playwrights included here are responding.

The action in each monologue of Rohina Malik’s *Unveiled* is driven primarily by the response the individual character receives to her specific choice of dress. The style of clothing varies from woman to woman (one wears American business attire, for example, while Maryam the dressmaker is described as wearing “very stylish Pakistani clothes”), but they all wear the *hijab* as part of their commitment to their Muslim faith. In choosing to represent independent women who are thriving in the professional world, Malik forces her audience to reconcile the loaded visual imagery of Muslim women in the *hijab* with Western notions of success and prosperity. It is the appearance of this specific garment, however, that triggers prejudiced and even violent responses against Malik’s characters. One woman encounters an anti-Muslim mob when she goes to pick her children up from school after the Twin Towers fall, another feels that she needs to remove her veil for her own safety after being accosted in the grocery store on the afternoon of September 11. The character of Maryam, as detailed in the previous chapter, is verbally abused and nearly assaulted by a man who screams at her, “Take that shit off your head!”¹⁵, while Noor loses her husband at the hands of anti-Muslim attackers. Yet despite the difficult circumstances

¹⁴ Macdonald, 12.

¹⁵ Malik, 4.

inherent in each character's monologue, their narratives become examples of strength and hope, offering the audience deeper insight into what has otherwise become a very divisive issue after September 11.

Through the widely varied accounts of her characters, Malik indicts the post-9/11 rhetoric that centers most discussions of Muslim women on the significance of veiling or unveiling. It is, in many ways, the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among Malik's female speakers that emphasizes the limits of the current media and political representation of veiled Muslim women, as they all offer detailed explanations behind their decisions to adopt the veil and what it means to the creation of their diasporic identities. For example, the youngest character in *Unveiled*, the West London rapper Shabana, introduces her religious devotion in perhaps the most engaging fashion of all. She raps, "I represent Islam / Respect it. / I wear Hijab. / I Don't neglect it. / You can call me oppressed. / But I won't be undressed. / I'm Not your bollywood erotic / Haram girl exotic. / Not your Arabian Nights / Kama Sutra delight. Hell no!" [playwright's spelling and capitalization].¹⁶ Malik makes it clear here, as well as in the monologues of her four other characters, that each woman *chooses* to wear the *hijab*; it is never forced upon them. Instead, we are taught that for these women, it is a decision reached after much consideration and one that is firmly rooted in deep personal and religious beliefs.

Shabana is the most direct in her challenge to the prevailing assumptions about her choice of attire. She responds to a reporter's question about her *hijab* with exasperation:

¹⁶ Ibid., 18.

Oh my God! I knew you were gonna ask me that. Why are you so bloody obsessed with Muslim women and the Veil. The veil is a symbol of controversy, right? Except if it's on a Nuns [*sic*] head. Yeah, Nuns can cover their hair, but a Muslim woman, she's oppressed. And this girl at school says, "Yeah, but Nuns wear it for God." Who do you think I wear it for? Her Royal Highness the Queen! It's about Modesty. You know, like, deal with my mind, not my body. This is *my* feminism.¹⁷

With such a succinct, frank response, Malik ostensibly negates most of the popular arguments leveled against veiling as a means of female oppression enforced by extreme Islamic traditionalists. Shabana is a young, urban woman full of artistic ambition who has a whole host of choices available to her. She is not even facing pressure from her family to wear the *hijab*; in fact, Shabana's mother is adamantly opposed to her daughter's veiling and tries to talk her out of it. Part of her mother's fear is that wearing the headscarf will potentially endanger Shabana's safety, particularly after the London bombings, but Shabana explains to her, "I put this Hijab on as a statement of solidarity with my sisters. I'm not gonna let my Muslim sisters face this hatred alone. This is between me and God, sorry, but it's got nothing to do with you."¹⁸ Here Shabana, like her literary creator, is negating attempts to fix the representation of young Muslim women within convenient categories as she demonstrates the complexities of modern veiling and the evolving meaning of the *hijab* to Muslim girls in the twenty-first century.

Inez, another of Malik's characters in *Unveiled*, furthers the destabilization of such ingrained binaries by sharing with the audience her somewhat unconventional relationship to the Islamic religion. Like all the

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Ibid, 20.

speakers in the play, Inez wears a *hijab*, but unlike the other women whose Middle Eastern or South Asian identities would likely make their veiling more expected to Western audiences, the stage directions indicate that Inez is African American and speaks with a Southern accent. She tells her friend that, at age twenty-one, she made the decision to “revert” to Islam:

You heard me correctly Honey, I said revert. That's right, I'm not a convert, I'm a revert. No, it's not the same thing. I don't care if the Pakistanis say convert, your community's got it wrong, the correct term is revert. Look, the prophet taught us that every newborn baby is born into Islam. No I don't mean newborns pray five times a day, and fast in Ramadan, don't be foolish. Well, if you let me explain, I will. A newborn, is in a state of submission, and that's what Islam means, submission to God's will. Just take a look at my Aneesa. (*looks at baby*) Look at her. She can't feed herself, can't change herself, nothing, completely dependent on others to survive. And in reality, we are all dependent on God to survive, therefore, I reverted to Islam. Don't call me a convert, honey, I am a revert.¹⁹

This particular monologue draws a sharp contrast to the others in *Unveiled*, and it maintains its distinctiveness when held up against the other works included in this project, as it is the only play to feature a character who was neither born in an Arab or South Asian country nor raised by a Muslim family. While all of the other women in Malik's play are born to immigrant parents or are immigrants themselves, Inez is the sole character whose American roots go back at least several generations. She is also an African American woman in the South which, as her grandmother told her at a young age, means she was born with “two strikes against” her.²⁰ Inez's decision to revert to Islam and adopt the veil is strike three

¹⁹ Ibid, 14-5.

²⁰ Ibid, 14.

according to her grandma, as it places her in another minority position and will present Inez with another set of challenges.

Her hybrid identity further complicates her experience on the morning of September 11 when she is confronted with accusatory stares and anti-Arab hate speech by her longtime neighbors; this vitriol frightens Inez enough that she decides to take off her *hijab* on her way home to protect herself and her unborn child from any potential attack. After the fact, Inez is incredibly disappointed in her own decision to remove her veil, but she is even angrier at the public reaction that led her to believe such a choice was a necessity. She laments that she felt as though her rights were taken from her “[b]y our fellow Americans! I took off my Hijab to look American so that I would live. But it was an American [*sic*]! I should have never had to make that decision. Not in this country.”²¹ Malik uses Inez’s American background to more pointedly address the swiftness with which much of the United States began to frame a Muslim woman’s veil as symbolic of the ideology that provoked the September 11 attacks. Through this narrative, Malik demonstrates the power and rapidity of racism; even the people who had known Inez for years could not look past a simple piece of fabric because of their own hyperbolic assumptions. By making Inez American, Malik gives herself a homegrown mouthpiece through which she can explicitly speak to ongoing issues of racism in her country: “Don’t think this is just a Muslim problem, or an Arab problem. This is EVERY American’s problem. We are *all* Americans, and we have to protect each other.”²²

²¹ Ibid, 17.

²² Ibid.

Like all of her characters in *Unveiled*, Malik is herself attempting to negotiate the multiplicity of her affiliations and what they mean to her— as well as in the eyes of the world— in the wake of September 11. By exploring autobiographical elements of her own history through a variety of female voices, Malik attempts to undermine conventional discourse about Arab and Muslim women, and uses such predetermined opinions as sites of contestation. She addresses almost every existing stereotype over the course of her play: Muslim women as oppressed victims, terrorist sympathizers, religious fanatics, Scheherazadian storytellers. In each monologue, her characters directly tackle each of these assumptions in a way that is sympathetic and emotional, yet also well reasoned and even pedagogical. Without sacrificing narrative style or dramatic impact, Malik’s storytelling structure appeals to our human desire for the “why.” Each character is distinct in the thought process that leads to her decision to wear the *hijab*, and Malik is methodical in making sure to foreground that decision as an unmistakable choice. The women of *Unveiled* are presented as intelligent, thoughtful, and spiritual, and all of them demonstrate that they have complete agency over their religious and cultural decisions.

The notion of agency is yet another concept that is often encumbered by different parameters and definitions depending on the agenda of its user, but its relevance to this analysis deserves some exploration. If agency is considered to be the free exercise of a person’s will in acting for him- or herself, it is not surprising then that “agency became a key concern for emancipatory politics, in anti-racist, feminist and anti-colonialist movements. Asserting and denouncing

women's lack of agency has been politically foundational for feminism,"²³ given that women have been historically excluded from such freedom of choice. Specifically, within the context of a discussion of Muslim women, the idea of agency is further complicated by its frequent use to discuss the process of veiling, the assumption in our post-9/11 climate being that veiled women are devoid of agency. Even in recent feminist scholarship, there seems to be a persistent dichotomy surrounding the rationale behind veiling; as Bilge summarizes, we are left with two choices, "the veil as a *symbol of submission* of women to men, and the veil as a *symbol of resistance* against Western hegemony, commodification of women's bodies and post-9/11 Islamophobia" [author's emphasis].²⁴

While both of these views attempt, in their own way, to speak for women who have routinely been marginalized, they can also be interpreted as an extension of the wider classification of Muslim women as either harem girls or terrorists. Despite the supposed feminist framing behind the assertions quoted above, the first option perpetuates the stereotype of women as subordinate victims, while the second positions Muslim women as continually antagonistic to Western nations and ideas. Furthermore, neither explanation acknowledges the religious or moral reasoning that may be behind a Muslim woman's veiling. Reexamining the veil through a pious or spiritual lens is in no way meant to overlook the fact that there are certainly extremist regimes who assert their power through mandates about acceptable female attire, using the *hijab* or burqa as a kind of ground weapon to control the lives of their people. However, Malik and

²³ Bilge, 12.

²⁴ Ibid, 14.

her fellow playwrights offer in their work a perspective that is part cultural translation and part educational instruction in an effort to dismantle the “either/or” classification that persists both in the public misunderstanding of Islam as well as in some contemporary feminist literature.

The presentation of this work to an American audience does potentially pose its own set of problems, however, even for an audience that is open to engaging in the cultural exchange the writer-actresses are providing over the course of each performance. Malik’s play illustrates the danger of what Fawzia Afzal-Khan describes as “a set of simplistic but compelling binaries,” the most significant of which

is the one that structures the question implicit in my ‘western’ audience’s eye/I’s: Are my ‘I/eyes’ those of a ‘Muslim (*read*: secularized) feminist,’ who is on the side of ‘(western) civilization,’ or are they veils that perform my identity as a figure of ‘Oppressed Muslim Womanhood,’ one that flips curiously into another trope, that of ‘Hijab-toting Terrorist Lover,’ an image simultaneously evoking horror and titillation, encapsulating the terror/erotic possibilities of a body veiled from the all-seeing I/eye of the spectator’s camera?²⁵

Though phrased here in a somewhat complex way, Afzal-Khan’s question is, in fact, a simple one: are these performances that present Arab and Muslim women in a manner that is visually traditional doing more harm than good by reinforcing this kind of physical representation in the Western cultural memory?

In *Afghan Woman*, the burqa again becomes the dominant symbol of silence and the site of conflict between East and West, but playwright-actress

²⁵ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, “The Female Body as Site of Attack: Will the ‘Real’ Muslim Woman’s Body Please Reveal Itself?,” in *Interventions: Activists and Academics Respond to Violence*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Janet R. Jakobsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 188.

Bina Sharif frames it in a much more pointedly political way, using that stereotypical visual as something to play against with the content of her monologue. Sharif's single character, unnamed beyond the descriptive title of the play, directly indicts the audience members for their roles— either active or complacent— in the American media machine that continues to depict Muslim women as ignorant and oppressed. Unlike the female personae created by the other playwrights whose work is discussed here, Sharif's speaker shares with the audience very few personal details and is costumed in a full burqa, with her eyes barely visible through a small, mesh-covered slit in the garment. This lack of specificity, both in terms of emotional and physical referents, about the woman speaking to us positions her as a kind of Everywoman. Yet while the initial presentation of Sharif's *Afghan Woman* appears to be that of a generalized collective identity, it is this traditional representation that gives Sharif the means through which she can dismantle the gendered subjectivity of Afghan women.

While neither the play's titular character or its author are ethnically Arab (Sharif was born and raised in Pakistan), the work is in direct conversation with the topics and ideas explored by the other writer-actresses covered in this study, as *Afghan Woman* addresses the remarkably stagnant and persistent Western (mis)perception of Muslim women. Over the course of her monologue, Sharif engages with the codification of the Muslim female body— specifically the veil— and its relationship to the U.S. involvement in the greater Middle East. Sharif, as a Muslim woman herself, addresses issues of religion and representation in all of her art, both theatrical and visual, as a way of providing a counter-narrative to

pervasive political rhetoric. In *Afghan Woman*, Sharif, more directly than many of her colleagues, explicitly confronts the political history of her country, detailing the policies of extremist leaderships and questioning whether or not the United States would be any different in their governmental approach in Afghanistan. A comprehensive look at the politics of the text will be included in the following chapter, but what is significant for the purposes of this particular section is her use of the burqa as a semiotic tool to engage with the fixities of the representation of Muslim women. It could be argued that this kind of stereotypical presentation, that of a woman completely covered in the most modest form of Islamic dress, reinforces prescribed gender codes and underscores the Western positioning of Muslim women as trapped, both within their patriarchal society and in the garments that they forced to wear. However, as Deborah Geis suggests, one way to subvert such ingrained social or theatrical constructions of gender is to empower a subject with a textual presence that voices multivalent subject positions. That is, even though Sharif's character seems to be representative of an essentialist version of Muslim female subjectivity, the content of her dialogue challenges these embodied culturally conditioned assumptions. Geis further asserts that the "plays that prioritize monologues (particularly audience-addressed monologues)" are particularly effective for women dramatists because, "[a]s an extended discourse, monologue continually threatens to halt the 'continuity of action' and 'to break away from its enunciator'"; it is, in effect, "an almost-literal seizing of the word."²⁶

²⁶ Deborah R. Geis, "Wordscapes of the Body: Performative Language as 'Gestus' in Maria Irene Fornes's Plays," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (October 1990): 293.

Sharif begins her monologue by telling the audience, “I am silent. My silence is silent. Silent is my silence. You stare at me from your bedroom through your colored TV screen.”²⁷ She is, of course, not silent, nor is she appearing through the mediated view of a television set. By literally playing the opposite, Sharif’s character is drawing attention to the proliferation of the stagnant photographs of Muslim women viewed at a distance by Americans in the comfort of their homes, as well as presenting the multi-vocal nature of her present discourse; she will speak for herself and her personal experiences, but she will also speak for those silent images on the screen. Sharif continues to emphasize this discordance between her appearance, her words, and her intention, seemingly imploring the audience to assist her: “You are a powerful human being full of freedom and democracy. Your power is not in silence. Please speak for me.”²⁸ Yet the fact that she is there, talking freely of her own accord and presenting spectators with stereotypes that would be familiar to most of them, forces audience members to reconcile their own preconceived notions about her appearance and ethnic background with the strength of her statements.

Such spectator self-reflection is initially prompted by Sharif’s boldly costumed form. As Rajini Srikanth observes, it is the “corporeality of the actors on stage [that] forces the audience members to confront their own reactions to

²⁷ Bina Sharif, *An Afghan Woman*, in *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan (Northampton, MA: Olive Brand Press, 2005), 246. It should be noted that the text as published in this volume is titled *An Afghan Woman*, whereas all other mentions of the play (production announcements, performance reviews, playwright’s biography on various websites) omit the “An,” referring to the show as *Afghan Woman*. As such, I include the “An” only in the citation of the text, and all other mentions of the play are in keeping with the more frequently used *Afghan Woman*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

female bodies of color.”²⁹ The notion of “color” here is a bit more complicated, however, as we cannot specifically determine Sharif’s race or ethnicity because of the extent of her garment’s coverage. Although an audience would have no reason to doubt that a play titled *Afghan Woman* would be performed by someone other than an actress of South Asian descent, the fact that they cannot specifically confirm the actress’ ethnicity may challenge the play’s spectators to more closely consider the ways in which we view and construct ethnic identity. Sharif further complicates our perception of color by choosing a vibrant blue silk as the textile for her character’s burqa rather than the traditional light blue shade worn by women in Kabul or the stereotypical black fabric ingrained in the Western perception of the garment. Sharif’s carefully constructed appearance would likely elicit an instinctive response, whether it be the comfort of recognition or unconscious double-take. Performing at Theater for the New City in January 2002, only four months after September 11, Sharif would likely be able to rely on a strong reaction to her choice of costume, trading on the knowledge that “because staged performance engages the viewer’s visceral reactions, it has the potential to effect a more total disruption of stereotypical and reductive perspectives than does a written text.”³⁰

Sharif uses the burqa as a kind of touchstone for her audience, locating her critique of the recent events in Afghanistan within the form of a recognizable referent, while simultaneously destabilizing the construction of that referent’s meaning over the course of her piece. She explains,

²⁹ Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 123.

³⁰ Ibid.

Every few years some corrupt thugs are given power in this country, my Afghanistan, and according to the wishes of whoever rules that year we wear a burqa or not wear a burqa. “To wear a burqa or not a burqa, that is the question.” And as far as the women of Afghanistan are concerned, that seems like the only question. With one leadership we are supposed to wear a burqa and be considered a slave and with the next not to wear a burqa and be free all of a sudden. Is freedom so limited for us?³¹

The burqa here becomes indicative of both a constructed collective identity and a shared national trauma, not because it may or may not be a sign of oppression but because it is representative of the way in which the citizens of Afghanistan, and Muslim women in particular, have seen their national identity reduced to one particular image. Sharif’s Afghan woman is very aware that she is being looked at, the object of Laura Mulvey’s proverbial “gaze,” and she uses that directed attention to undermine the audience’s predisposition to read the veil as its own visual text. By costuming herself in a full burqa, Sharif makes it nearly impossible for the spectators to see her facial expressions, thereby forcing the audience to carefully measure what she is saying against the ingrained implications prompted by her choice of dress. In *Afghan Woman*, Sharif complicates what is otherwise presented in many other mediums as a simple paradigm: the crisis of the veil.

Afzal-Khan addresses the Western obsession with “labeling the Muslim woman’s malaise as a crisis of the Veil” when she asks us to “[w]itness the titles of books and articles we have been barraged with lately: ‘Behind the Veil,’ ‘Beneath the Veil,’ ‘Beyond the Veil’; so many veils, veils everywhere”³² (an astute observation that, in all honesty, prompted the re-titling of an earlier paper I

³¹ Sharif, 251.

³² Afzal-Khan, 192.

wrote on this subject). There is an implication in these phrases that it is a mere piece of clothing that separates a “Western” woman from an “Eastern” one, and that the only thing standing between a Muslim woman and “freedom” is a simple removal of a single garment. Within the context of their solo pieces, the female artists included here attempt to contradict this lingering notion that persists more than a decade after September 11, as they simultaneously perform and embody the tension between the perception and the reality of veiling.

In *9 Parts of Desire*, Heather Raffo addresses this tension in a way that is a bit more understated than the approach taken by Malik or Sharif, as she does not explicitly address the conflict over veiling in the text of her play. The issue does, however, remain an equally significant aspect of her piece through her characters’ varying use of the *abaya* during their individual monologues. Raffo communicates each woman’s identity as a Muslim woman to the audience by strategically incorporating this garment into the performance of their narratives, but for most of her characters it functions less as a representation of their religious or spiritual identity and more as what Kimberly Wedeven Segall refers to as “an intimate use object.”³³ Segall does not elaborate much on what she means by this particular turn of phrase, but I think it is worth exploring in relation to the role of the *abaya* in *9 Parts of Desire*. If the idea of the intimate use object is interpreted as something that is imbued by each individual character with meaning beyond the way it is universally understood, then certainly Raffo’s diverse treatments of

³³ Kimberly Wedeven Segall, *Performing Democracy in Iraq and South Africa: Gender, Media, and Resistance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 65.

the *abaya* during her performance can be effectively viewed and more deeply analyzed through this particular perspective.

Unlike the consistently complete coverage supplied by the burqa, an *abaya* is somewhat more malleable, in that it can be worn as a kind of cloak (leaving the head uncovered) or loosely draped from the top of the head so that the face still remains visible. In the opening stage directions of her play, Raffo explains: “Throughout the play the woman uses an *abaya*, a traditional Iraqi black robe-like garment to move from character to character. Some wear the *abaya* traditionally and others use it as a prop.”³⁴ The artist Layal, for example, “wears the *abaya* loosely hanging off her shoulders like a dressing gown or painting smock,” using the piece of cloth to express her more relaxed, bohemian attitude. As she speaks and paints, she occasionally wipes her hands on the *abaya*, not in a purposefully defiant or disrespectful manner, but rather with an absent-mindedness that indicates the robe’s role as a functional garment for her particular line of work. Nanna, in contrast, “wears the *abaya* traditionally over her head so only her face and hands remain showing.”³⁵ While it may appear stereotypical to costume the play’s oldest character in the most modest form of dress, Raffo seems to undermine the visual representation of a pious grandmotherly type by casting Nanna as a street vendor, selling off other people’s belongings, items that she has collected after bombings and deaths. Nanna may be the most physically traditional, but her profession and her story certainly personify Raffo’s

³⁴ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

description of her in the text as “scrappy and shrewd” and some who has “seen it all.”³⁶

The *abaya*’s most profound impact, however, is in its use as a transitional object when Raffo shifts from one identity to another. She writes that the use of the *abaya* to “transform from character to character is key. It broadens and challenges the audiences [*sic*] understanding of the image.”³⁷ While each character wears or utilizes the *abaya* in a distinctive way, its shared use across the individual monologues becomes a physical representation of the connection forged among the women in the play, as well as within the collective of female survivors of war-torn Iraq. We meet, for instance, the character simply called The Doctor; Raffo’s stage directions note that before she can begin speaking to us, she is overcome by nausea and throws up, then washes her hands and dries them on the *abaya*. Once she cleans herself up, The Doctor turns to the audience and tries to explain the horrors she has seen over the last few years: seven-year-old girls with breast cancer, babies born with two heads, families in which every single member has developed a rare disease. All of these medical atrocities are, she explains, a result of residual radiation and uranium left from the violence and bombings in Iraq which are, in turn, poisoning the food and water supply in the area. Throughout her narrative, she uses the *abaya* to keep her hands clean, desperate to rid her body of the stench caused by backed-up sewers and the germs brought in by children playing in chemical-soaked playgrounds. As she continues to wipe her hands on the *abaya* and tend to her patients, the audience learns in the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 67.

final moments of her monologue that her heightened anxiety and frustration is not just because of the recent encounters with unimaginable birth defects, but also because she herself is pregnant.

The play then transitions to the narrative of its youngest character, listed in the published script as Iraqi Girl. Stage directions indicate that during her monologue, she “plays with the *abaya* wrapping it about her head like long luxurious hair and other times bundling it up to be her baby doll.”³⁸ She tells the audience that her name is Sammura, and that she lost all three of her older brothers and her father during the height of Saddam Hussein’s reign. She and her mother have hardly left their house in the last few years because of increasing violence and American occupation in their area; without male relatives, they are not guaranteed safety on the streets. Now an adolescent, Sammura is graduating from childhood naïveté to a more complete understanding of what has been happening in her country. She explains that she recently discovered her father’s journals and came across an entry he wrote, expressing his fear that he would be arrested for something Sammura said years ago when she was in primary school; as she has just revealed, we know that his concerns were valid and he was arrested by government officials, never to be seen again. As she shares her story, visibly struggling with the guilt of this new knowledge, she folds the *abaya* into a doll-like form, cradling the fabric as her father must have cradled her. Like many girls her age, Sammura wants to be treated like an adult, but we can see that she also wants desperately to hold onto the innocence of her childhood. Here the *abaya* takes on several transitional meanings for Sammura: it marks a change from

³⁸ Ibid., 26.

youthful inexperience to maturity, as well as evokes the shift from girl to woman that, in the Islamic faith, is often signified by veiling.³⁹

Segall asserts that in *9 Parts of Desire*, the veil “becomes a traveling symbol with distinct cultural capital.” Within performance, she suggests, the way in which “each woman decides to use and to change the meaning of the veil, upend[s] any simple orientalism [*sic*]. As a use object, the veil ties diverse female identities together, some religious ties, some not, in a sympathetic web—communal bonds, female histories, braided into a collective protest.”⁴⁰ This notion of the veil as a kind of protest may seem to promote the misleading interpretation described earlier in the chapter of its adoption by Muslim women to challenge Western hegemony. Raffo, however, is able to avoid any further promulgation of that notion while still using the garment as an object of dissent by assigning it meaning within different scenes that moves far beyond any traditional interpretation of the veil. As the scene shifts to introduce the character of Umm Ghada, for example, Raffo throws the *abaya* forcefully to the stage where it becomes, the stage directions indicate, “a black hole.”⁴¹ Staring into the mound of dark fabric on the floor, Umm Ghada shares the story of how she lost all of her children when the American military bombed the Baghdad shelter where she was staying with her family. For Umm Ghada, the *abaya*’s presence on the ground becomes a black void, a spot in the earth left by the bombs that destroyed her family and a hole in her own heart left by their deaths. Her trauma, detailed in the

³⁹ While there is not a mandated age at which a Muslim woman must begin wearing a veil, most cultures cite puberty as the dividing line.

⁴⁰ Segall, 74.

⁴¹ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 30.

first chapter of this project, has kept her rooted to the spot of this terrible tragedy, watching over the monument that she has created within the building's burnt remains. Thus, the *abaya* here is also a site of protest, as it memorializes a spot of extensive civilian casualties, the result of an event that was ostensibly dismissed by both the American and Iraqi governments. This dark open hole in the ground, existing in the space previously occupied by something else, can also be seen as representative of the erasure of the truth about this particular event in the narratives of both governments, as well as the lack of media coverage initially devoted to the devastation. These possible explanations are, in turn, indicative of the overall dearth of attention given to the general suffering of the Iraqi people during the various wars that have consumed their country in the past decades.

The exchange and progression of the veil among these three characters is perhaps even more significant for its representation of the mother-daughter bond that drives many of the play's narratives. The transition of the *abaya* from an expectant mother, to a child, then to a mother who has lost her daughter is, in this case, a literal tie that binds, and also one that physicalizes their shared struggles. The Doctor is pregnant with her first child, and her compulsive hand wiping on the *abaya* is a manifestation of her desire to protect the health of her unborn baby. In the arms of the Iraqi Girl, the garment is transformed into a baby doll, representing the innocent child she can no longer be thanks to the information she recently discovered about her father's likely death. For Umm Ghada, the *abaya* becomes a stand-in for the absent child, one lost in the violence of war. In performance, the *abaya* links three generations of Iraqi women from diverse

communities, all of who are bearing witness to their country's history of violence and loss. The veil here becomes a kind of memorial to these victims and the families that mourn them, but it is a specifically gendered form of remembrance as it is created by a woman's piece of clothing.

In this context, Raffo's use of the *abaya* functions as a form of resistance to traditionally masculinist narratives of conflict, finding an unconventional way to express the "collective memory of a particular group within a nation who may have been victimized."⁴² E. Ann Kaplan suggests that certain groups who experience collective trauma "may need to 'forget' traumatic events perpetrated on them, but even when these groups are ready to bring forth historical catastrophes, the nation as a whole (those in power especially) may not be ready to hear from the victimized."⁴³ For the women of Iraq, there have been few opportunities to share their histories with the world, but *9 Parts of Desire* is able to open up a space for them to tell their individual stories; at the same time, Raffo's treatment of the *abaya* asserts that the collective identities of her characters— as Iraqis, Muslim women, and survivors— are equally significant.

Raffo's exploration of religion throughout *9 Parts of Desire* is more peripheral than the intense focus devoted to the issue by some of her colleagues, in part because of her presentation of the veil as an intimate use object. However, the *abaya* does maintain a religious connotation in the monologues of The Doctor, Sammura, and Umm Ghada that connects the three women together. While the *abaya* can be seen as an element of Sammura's future as a Muslim woman, for

⁴² Kaplan, 67.

⁴³ Ibid.

both The Doctor and Umm Ghada it is part of their increasingly complicated relationship with their God. Umm Ghada, stricken with guilt and searching for answers that never came after the bombing, laments that she asked Allah repeatedly why she was the one who survived while her children and four hundred others died. The Doctor, faced with treating incurable diseases on a daily basis, holds the *abaya* as she dries her hands and pleads, “Look at us / look at us / *wayn Allah, wayn Allah* [where is God, where is God]?”⁴⁴ Through the stories of these women, Raffo uses the veil to subtly but firmly push back against the stereotype of the submissive Muslim woman who blindly follows the tenets of Islam. In the hands of several different characters and circumstances, the *abaya* is able to convey the varied relationships that these women of diverse ages and backgrounds have with their religious beliefs, fracturing the singular portrayal of the Muslim woman and reminding the audience that there are multiple sides to spirituality and suffering during times of war.

There are several other objects in *9 Parts of Desire* that further the formation of a collective identity among the women in the play, while still exemplifying the multiplicity of their experiences. Raffo writes in the Production Note at the end of the script that in performance, the focal piece of the set design was a river that ran across the stage, “a reminder of Iraq’s heritage as the cradle of civilization.” For future productions, she recommends the use of water somewhere on the stage, even in a bowl or vessel if building a river is not feasible, to symbolize the water’s “central function connecting all of the

⁴⁴ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 25.

women.”⁴⁵ A number of intimate use objects come out of the river over the course of the show and subsequently take on significance in each character’s life. In her opening monologue, Layal plucks her paintbrush from the river; this paintbrush later becomes the pen that Umm Ghada offers to visitors when she asks them to sign her witness book. In Nanna’s final monologue she pulls Layal’s “Savagery” painting from the banks of the river and tries to sell it to passersby, proclaiming it to be the artist’s final work, completed just before her death. Nanna also confesses that some of the trees in the painting are meant to be women, and that she herself is represented in the piece as the littlest tree. Both the paintbrush/pen and Layal’s artwork exemplify the multitude of connections between Raffo’s characters within the world of the play, but the use of actual physical objects to establish these commonalities is particularly significant in this context. These shared props became sites of recognition and, in many ways, witnessing, offering tangible representation of suffering and trauma that has largely been erased by the media. Pieces of each woman’s story are embodied in these intimate use objects, and the passing of such markers from one storyteller to the next visibly mirrors the structure of the play itself. While each woman has her own individual story to tell and uses the specific prop in a way that relates to her personal narrative, over the course of the play these objects become imbued with a collective meaning as a commemorative symbol of loss.

While Malik and Raffo’s work may include pieces of themselves in the women they portray, the focus of both plays is the malleability of identity through multiple characters. Laila Farah’s *Dancing on the Hyphen* differs some in that her

⁴⁵ Ibid., 67.

piece is entirely autobiographical and her depiction of transforming identities is based on her own personal evolution. Farah's approach is more akin to Stuart Hall's exploration of the transformative nature of cultural identity, in which he places just as much significance on the future as on the past when it comes to the shaping of one's identity. Hall argues, "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised [*sic*] past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."⁴⁶

Laila Farah elucidates this concept throughout the first section of her performance piece, subtitled "Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa," putting that transformative notion into action by using her veil to move through various identities during her performance. In the opening moments of her piece, as Farah argues with a customs officer over the legitimacy of her documents, she finally becomes so aggravated that she rips off her veil and shouts at the official, "Here is your damn paperwork... I am a dual national you bloody idiot... Yet when a woman unveils... tongues start wagging [...] How do you know who I really am?"⁴⁷

There is nothing liberating or feminist about Farah's unveiling in this moment; it is simply the culmination of sustained frustration. Through her actions here, Farah works to destabilize the seemingly monolithic status of the veil created by Western misconceptions, analyzing its role in the construction of collective identity, and also its impact on the individual diasporic position of Arab Muslim women.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1990), 225.

⁴⁷ Farah, 322.

Farrah notes in her stage directions that she uses her veil to demonstrate a variety of conventional representations:

(I manipulate the veil here from one image to the next while embodying each of the following:)
 the erotic/exotic harem girl
 the downtrodden peasant, veiled, illiterate, miserable, squatting in the field
 the Intifada woman throwing rocks in the street
 or Hannan Ashrawi paying homage at a religious site.⁴⁸

Here she acts in performance the transformative nature of identity to which Hall refers, articulating each individual stereotype as a way of emphasizing how the veil has historically defined women in passive roles, while simultaneously expressing the malleability of its meaning and how that continues to evolve over time. Although this particular quote is included in the first chapter of this project, it is worth repeating here for the way in which it foregrounds the reductive categories imposed upon Arab and Muslim women as a result of their veiling. Furthermore, it draws attention to “how Arab and Muslim-American women ‘articulate’ a collective identity in the diaspora, while simultaneously keeping the various aspects of their identity distinct so that collective identity is not reduced to essentialism,” which Sabry points to as a key issue that is most effectively explored through “Sheherazadian orality” because performance opens up “space for experimenting with redefinitions of identity.”⁴⁹

This section of Farah’s piece certainly addresses broader perceptions of her ethnicity and religion, exploring, as she notes, “the creation of the ultimate

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Sabry, 165.

other, the Arab Moslem woman.”⁵⁰ It does, however, offer a more personalized perspective as the writer-actress is specifically exploring the instances in which she herself has been viewed through such clichéd lenses. In “Sheherazade Don’t Need No Visa,” Farah’s construction of collective identity aligns with Avtar Brah’s assessment that “identity is neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a constantly changing relational multiplicity.”⁵¹ As she moves through various checkpoints during the piece, Farah’s experience as a veiled Arab American woman shifts depending on the year, location, and attitude of the person to whom she is speaking. Her identity— and the way in which the construction of that identity is tied to her veiling— is continually at play throughout her performance. However, as she is stopped at one roadblock after another, it becomes clear that the authoritative position within that “play” is often held by the official questioning her.

Within the context of these border crossings that Farah enacts, and specifically through her interactions with various customs officers, the veil becomes a site of contestation between notions of nationalism and patriotism. In Farah’s experience, wearing the veil leads officers at each checkpoint to more vigorously evaluate her passport, but also to question other aspects of her identity: her accent, her name, her “subversive” attitude, even the length of her nose. When the officials inevitably recognize that her credentials are legitimate, Farah is left feeling as though she is “passing” as a particular identity, rather than existing as one. Even as a young child, when she was evacuated from Beirut

⁵⁰ Farah, 321.

⁵¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 123.

during the American Marine mission in 1984, Farah felt the compulsion to “pass” as someone other than herself— specifically as a patriotic American, in this instance, taking on the assumption made by the soldier flying with her out of the city:

[T]he soldier looks at me wearing full Marine combat regalia (*mime this Rambo-like stance*) as the tears stream down my face, lips muted, and says, “Don’t worry little lady, we’ll get you outta here and home in no time.” But there is no relief on my face, only the bile rising, a searing pain silent behind shadowed eyes. I thought I was home.⁵²

The Orientalist-influenced interpretations of Arab and Muslim women as needing to be saved are here addressed in a way that illustrates the complicated relationship between veiling, diasporic identities, and nationalist affiliations. Though born in the United States, Farah spent most of her childhood in Lebanon; the forced rupture of Farah’s connection to the place she sees as home as part of her return to her legal homeland understandably impacts her sense of identity and continues to influence the way that she defines herself at every border she traverses. Her accounts of these interactions are framed as questions in her listing of each identity she assumes, a continuation of an earlier sentence in the monologue, which ends with “passing...”: “...as white?” “As American?” “As patriotic?” “As straight?” “As queer?”⁵³ By performing the exchanges that prompt such questions and the varying presentations of herself over the course of her solo show, Farah raises a number of more complex questions that drive diasporic writers: What does home really mean? Can I belong to more than one

⁵² Farah, 323-4.

⁵³ Ibid.

country? Will a simple article of clothing forever define me, regardless of where I live? How do I define my identity to others, as well as to myself?

The Art of Breaking Bread

Malik frames her resistance to the American resurgence of Orientalist rhetoric— and resists the potential “othering” of her characters and herself— by creating for her audiences a site of cultural translation in the context of her performance. As illustrated both in this chapter and the previous one, there are pedagogical facets inherent in many of the plays included here, but Malik’s work is unique among her peers for its emphasis on a referent that may be more accessible to a Western audience: food and drink. In *Unveiled*, every monologue begins with an explanation from the character about a specific beverage she is preparing— and subsequently serving— over the course of her story. These recipes, as the audience comes to learn, are deeply embedded in each woman’s cultural and personal history, and the preparation of them sparks specific memories that the characters share along with the cup of tea or coffee. For diasporic writers, the preparation and presentation of food can be interpreted as a sensory exploration of their hybridic identities, a more tangible representation of the intersection between their ancestry and their present circumstances.

The frequency of culinary references in the history of Arabic writing is extensive and well documented. Sabry Hafez lists a number of examples: “Classical Arabic literature used culinary codes in expressing various aspects of reality. Pre-Islamic and classical poetry is packed with culinary allusions and

terms. The Qur'an is also full of them and employs food and drink in its narrative of both the present life and the hereafter."⁵⁴ Scholarly attention to the continuation of this convention in contemporary Arab American writing is primarily centered on work of novelists⁵⁵, but Malik's focus on the relationship between food and identity positions her play as a significant part of this evolving tradition. Because Malik is able to demonstrate for her audience the making of each specific blend of tea, in addition to describing its taste and significance, she literally performs an act of cultural mediation during her show. In each monologue of *Unveiled*, Malik is able to explain specificities of Arab culture and the creation of Arab American identities through a comprehensible framework that bridges the gap between the familiar and foreign.

Her piece opens with Maryam, the designer of custom dresses whose violent altercation was mentioned earlier, explaining to a potential customer how to make authentic Pakistani *Chai*. She then discloses her own special recipe for making chocolate *Chai*, a blend that she developed specifically for her wedding as a fusion between her husband's desire to serve *chai* as dessert, and her own preference for chocolate as their final course. Through this simple anecdote, the potential in blending two separate components to form something new and unique is revealed, resulting in a drink that is distinctly Pakistani (*Dood Patti Chai*)

⁵⁴ Sabry Hafez, "Food as a Semiotic Code in Arabic Literature," in *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, ed. Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2000), 260.

⁵⁵ See, for example, the various academic articles on Diana Abu Jaber's novel *Crescent*: Brinda J. Mehta, "The Semiosis of Food in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*," in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009): 203-235, and Carol Fadda-Conrey, "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*," *MELUS* 31.4 (Winter 2006): 187-205.

flavored with an ingredient that is more familiar to an American audience (chocolate). For Maryam, *Chai* is a tangible link to the country she left reluctantly as a young bride, a piece of her old home to use as a foundation for her new one. She shares with her customer, and thus with the audience, the significance of tea to her culture as a whole, but also its place in her own newly hybridic identity as a Pakistani woman running a business in America. She explains:

I invite potential clients over for some *Chai*, and *Gup Shup*. *Gup Shup* is what you would call chatting, you know, getting to know each other. We will drink lots of tea, and eat lots of samosas and snacks. And by the time you leave I will know if I am going to design dresses for you. You see, it is not you who is choosing me, it is me who is choosing you.⁵⁶

For Maryam and the four subsequent characters in *Unveiled*, sharing a cup of tea and breaking bread with other people is a significant part of social interaction in their respective cultures. The presence of these elements within the context of the play is likewise significant, as the tea becomes a touchstone for the interaction between Malik and her audience in performance, and also gives the author an opportunity to explain details about her culture in an enticing way. It is through this kind of unique and personal engagement that Malik aims to dispel misconceptions about Arabs and Muslims; she has said that one of her primary goals as a writer-performer is education, but she realizes that “[a] lecture about the Muslim community can be so boring.”⁵⁷ To avoid an unappealingly didactic tone in her work, Malik draws attention to cultural specificities that are markedly

⁵⁶ Malik, 2.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Tim Smith, “*Unveiled*: A post-9/11 portrait of Muslim Women,” *The Baltimore Sun*, December 1, 2011.

different from traditions in the West while still seeming approachable. Carol Fadda-Conrey asserts that while food and, by extension in the case of *Unveiled*, drinks, can “mark[...] out difference” in Arab American writing, they also function as “a connective bridge that transcends the limitations that this difference might engender.”⁵⁸

During *Unveiled*, the audience witnesses this connective bridge being established between people of different cultures, even though Malik is the only actor on stage. Unlike *9 Parts of Desire* and *Dancing on the Hyphen*, which address the audience generally and are not delivered to any specific person, the characters of *Unveiled* are each speaking directly to a single individual who is identified in some way through their dialogue, yet never seen. Maryam, for example, is meeting with a woman who wants to hire her to design her wedding gown, and Noor, whose heartbreaking history is explored in chapter one of this project, is speaking with a client of her law firm. Over the course of the consultation with her potential customer, Maryam has shared with the bride-to-be the hate speech she endured in her adopted country, as well as the subsequent joy she felt in the comforting traditions of her home country once she made it to her friend’s wedding. As she reaches the end of her story, Maryam decides not to let that one horrific incident define her, and declares to her customer, “You know what? I will design your wedding dress.” To solidify their agreement, she suggests, “Let’s celebrate with some Chocolate *Chai*. Marriage is like Chocolate

⁵⁸ Carol Fadda-Conrey, “Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu Jaber’s *Crescent*,” *MELUS* 31.4 (Winter 2006): 202.

Chai, it is the fusion of two individuals, who in some ways become one.”⁵⁹ The same can be said of Maryam’s diasporic identity, the fusion of two worlds that, within her, have become one.

By anchoring each monologue with a seemingly traditional element of female domesticity, it may seem as though Malik is simply relying upon an accepted stereotype of limiting women to the private sphere. It is significant, however, that this mainstay of domestic propriety is being prepared and presented by successful women at their places of business, which offers a direct challenge to categorization of Muslim women as primarily relegated to the home. Noor brings these time-honored comforts into her law office as a way help calm a nervous client who is apprehensive about testifying against the man who raped her. She serves the young woman Moroccan mint tea and orange slices which, Noor tells us, remind her of her husband; for her, these seemingly simple refreshments are inextricably linked with memories both joyous and painful. Brinda Mehta posits that in Arab women’s writing,

Memory’s subjective presence in literature provides a medium of critical negotiation to highlight the richness and complexity of specific female-centered rituals and cultural traditions that constitute a source of creative agency for women despite hegemonic dominance. Ritualized acts such as cooking, bread making, weaving, purification rites, and beauty treatments demonstrate the sensory, embodied aspects of memory that connect women to their past as they reclaim their subjectivity...⁶⁰

In this way, the exploration of memory in contemporary literature by Arab American women offers an opportunity to demonstrate an evolving history, a way

⁵⁹ Malik, 6.

⁶⁰ Brinda Mehta, *Rituals of Memory in Arab Women’s Writing* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 4.

of reshaping the present while still retaining elements of the past. Noor and the other characters in *Unveiled* are sharing their tea and their memories as a means of reconstructing their own identities while they educate both the unseen character to whom they are speaking and the audience. Once the tea is ready to serve, Noor tells her client that because of her husband and what happened to him, she found her “purpose in life. And he made me see God in everything, even an orange. (She picks up an orange slice and takes a bite) *Yallah*, Let’s drink the tea, let’s drink it with lots of sugar. You have tasted the bitterness of evil, now taste the sweetness of hope.”⁶¹

Malik is able to draw upon the specific qualities of each kind of tea in a way that adds further dimension and complexity to her characters. Through these culinary particulars and the way that each woman relates to them, we learn more about their history than may otherwise be achievable in such short monologues. Mehta suggests that “[c]ulinary practice... furnishes the essential semiotic script of social meaning as an enduring signifier of cultural retention and identity.”⁶² Within the context of each woman’s story, the use of food and drink becomes its own form of literary language and generates a multiplicity of meanings in the individual narratives. Thus these shared cups of tea provide a semiology of expression within the context of the specific narrator’s experience, offering the audience a kind of code that allows them further insight into each character. Noor’s extra sweetening of the Moroccan Mint Tea is analogous to her healing process after her husband’s murder, and Maryam’s Chocolate *Chai* offers a

⁶¹ Malik, 14.

⁶² Mehta, 230.

nuanced representation of her post-9/11 hybridic identity in a way that a verbal description of events cannot.

This kind of culinary semiology is employed on a broader and slightly more abstract scale in the story of Shabana, the British rapper who we meet in the fourth monologue. She raps and talks about Kashmiri *Chai*, the color of which she describes as similar to the color of the sky right before the sun is about to set, that “beautiful intense pink that blazes the horizon,”⁶³ as she puts it. Shabana tells a reporter that her father, a native of Kashmir, taught her to make this tea “so that his daughter, born and raised on the racist streets of West London, could occasionally taste a cup of home.”⁶⁴ She implies that while England is her country of birth, she is still looking for her home, a function of the persistent prejudice that she has endured over the course of her young life because of her darker skin tone. The stories Shabana relates over the course of her monologue all share a significant commonality: each one tells of a moment in which color was an important factor. Such experiences, we learn, have prevented Shabana from feeling completely accepted at school, in the world of professional hip hop, and even by her mother. During her monologue, Shabana flashes back to a conversation with her mother in which she is horrified to hear that Shabana has a Bangladeshi boyfriend because “Bangladeshis have very dark skin!” Shabana, infuriated by her mother’s attitude, responds in anger:

That’s so racist Mum! No don’t walk away. You are obsessed with white skin.

Yes, you are! Remember mum, those lemons that you used to rub on my face?

⁶³ Malik, 19.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD! Your [*sic*] too dark Shabana, rub, rub these lemons on your face. The juice will make your skin fairer. Do you know what that did to me mother?⁶⁵

She explains to the reporter, “I just wanted her to understand her obsession with white skin. It’s a bloody global problem. I see it in the black community, the Latino community, it’s a global problem. People always talking about veils and oppression, but I know what real oppression is, and it’s called Racism.”⁶⁶

So much of what Shabana focuses on in her monologue and also in the rap she performs is her frustration about the lingering obsession with color that contributes to continued colonialist attitudes. Malik mediates Shabana’s awareness of such pervasive privileging of color in the character’s explanation of the Kashmiri *Chai*; Shabana’s first spoken dialogue after she finishes rapping is the description of the tea’s vibrant pink color, in contrast to the previous monologues that focus on the taste and ingredients of each variety of tea. In framing Shabana’s perspective through the lens of Kashmiri *Chai* as she describes it at the beginning of her piece, Malik’s work reflects Mehta’s assertion that “Arabic cuisine, as the manifestation of a particular worldview, provides the necessary codes to decipher the cultural, social, and racial markers of identity and group affiliation.”⁶⁷ However, it also takes this concept one step further by demonstrating how these codes can also challenge such construction of identity and group affiliation. The fondness with which Shabana speaks of the beauty of Kashmiri *Chai* deepens our understanding of just how profoundly the politics of

⁶⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Mehta, 230.

color within her own race— as well as on a global scale— have continually marginalized her, and also how intensely she wishes to change that.

Malik's evocation of food and drink in *Unveiled* is largely educational and, in some instances, even allegorical, in the way it mirrors the journeys of her characters. Bina Sharif's inclusion of food in *Afghan Woman* forges a similar path, as her primary culinary reference is held up as a symbol for the cultural history and widespread decimation of her home country of Afghanistan. Within her play, the title character's lamentations about the destruction of her hometown of Kabul are indelibly linked with her nostalgic recollections of the city's famous pomegranates, which become representative of the previously regal identity of the region, now lost in the rubble of war. While *Unveiled* uses culinary evocations as a way of connecting the characters' cultural past to their diasporic future, *Afghan Woman* initially draws upon the image of the pomegranate solely as a remnant of the past. She laments, "THE OLD, OLD KABUL. The Kabul of palaces, of fountains, of ancient statues, of pomegranates and grapes and CHAMAN... It was called, 'Shaman Key Angoor,' the best in the world, honey filled, melodious taste" [playwright's capitalization].⁶⁸ The narrator connects the beauty of the fruit to the words of the poets and melodies of great musicians who previously filled the city with art and culture, before the Taliban and the Northern Alliance and even the American forces indelibly altered the landscape of the area. She explains that their presence is a result of the booming poppy crop and its value in the drug trade, which have replaced the prominence of the pomegranate in Afghan

⁶⁸ Sharif, 248.

agriculture and also offer a clear metaphor for the way she perceives the evolution of her country.

Despite the negative connotations that accompany her first mentions of the pomegranate, the Afghan Woman later explains that she was very fond of the fruit as a child, and the function of the pomegranate in the narrative shifts from a symbol of what was lost to the embodiment of happy memories that sparks a small glimmer of hope for the future. The exploration of memory and its narrative significance cannot be overstated in the writing of Arab and Muslim women, according to Mehta. Framing their narratives in this way allows female writers to present a revised version of accounts that had largely excluded them, offering a counter-narrative to the essentialist and patriarchal representation to which they were previously subjected. “Memory becomes the medium to imaginatively reconstruct the future when the past has been destroyed, while at the same time providing the necessary motivation to survive the present. By inscribing itself within the negotiations of cultural and political identity, memory symbolizes an active stance of resistance to erasure, dispossession, and dehumanization...”⁶⁹ Through this connection of her personal memories to the pomegranate, a living organism that has endured despite the violence erupting around it, the Afghan Woman is able to insert her own story of survival into the wartime narrative of her city. She tells the unidentified individual to whom she is speaking that she will serve pomegranates when the person comes to visit her in Kabul, because it is “the greatest fruit. It’s the fruit of kings and the prince and the princess. Its color is the color of bright burgundy red. The color of blood.

⁶⁹ Mehta, 10.

Not the blood which spills on the dirt road but the blood which sustains a precious life with vigor and energy and joy.”⁷⁰ There is a spirit of hope and renewal that comes through in this statement, one that reflects the perseverance of the people of Kabul alongside its famous fruit; just as the pomegranates survived under such harsh conditions, so too can the Afghan Woman.

More Than Words

Like many other elements of these particular plays, the language of each piece offers another opportunity to engage and distance the audience simultaneously, to explicate as well as complicate. Many writers within the Arab and Muslim American diaspora include in their work phrases from their ancestral homelands, though the purpose of such language may differ among writers. Placing foreign words in an otherwise English-language narrative becomes even more complicated within the framework of a play, as the text is meant to be spoken aloud and therefore representative of the person’s daily speech. In some instances, such as in the case of *9 Parts of Desire*, several of the female characters in the play would realistically be speaking Arabic, but doing so would make it nearly impossible for most Western audience members to understand. Marvin Carlson addresses this issue of actual reality versus theatrical realism in his analysis of language in the theatre, writing “[a] character speaking an alien language is a particularly clear example of this ongoing struggle in theatre between verisimilitude, the actual or apparent utilization of the real, and artistic convention, which adjusts and qualifies reality in the interests of consensual

⁷⁰ Sharif, 252.

strategies of reception. The force of verisimilitude encourages the use of actual foreign languages on stage,” but the reality of performing for a primarily English-speaking audience necessitates “substitutions for or supplements to actual foreign speech.”⁷¹

In the context of the plays discussed here, however, the moments in which the characters slip into another language exist in a kind of liminal space between verisimilitude and theatrical conventions. That is, the inclusion of foreign words and phrases may be consistent with the character’s reality (and the presentation thereof), but because their use interrupts accepted theatrical conventions, it draws more attention to the presence of such words. This kind of heteroglossia emphasizes the cultural and linguistic hybridity of each show’s diasporic writer-actress, performing the elision of their multiple identities through the seamless transition between English and their second (or even third) languages.⁷² In some cases, it also deliberately excludes spectators from a complete understanding of what is being said onstage, consciously placing the audience in the position of the ‘Other,’ marginalized through their lack of comprehension. Even in these instances, when the character speaking does not translate her foreign phrases into English, the method of linguistic exclusion in and of itself often becomes a pedagogical opportunity to deepen the empathic response of the audience. Both inclusionary and exclusionary heteroglossic techniques are employed by many of

⁷¹ Marvin Carlson, *Speaking in Tongues: Language at Play in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 13.

⁷² My use of heteroglossia is based on Carlson’s exploration of the term in the above-referenced work, as he specifically explores the application of the concept to postcolonial theatre. His work analyzes heteroglossia as an amalgamation of the local language, the traditional language, and the colonial language, which is a useful lens in to employ in the examination of diasporic plays and performances.

the writers included in this project, the use of which demonstrates the global power and politics of language.

Much like their attempts at cultural mediation in the theatrical presentation of veiling and other cultural traditions, many of the playwrights included here frame their approach to language as an educational opportunity. In *Unveiled*, Malik makes use of almost every available occasion to give the audience an introductory Arabic lesson or, in the case of the dressmaker Maryam, an Urdu lesson. She also finds moments within each narrative to elaborate on the meaning of certain unfamiliar words by detailing their significance as a cultural practice. For instance, Maryam's monologue, the first of the show, is framed in such a way that it situationally necessitates detailed explanations at every turn because the potential client with whom she is meeting is an English-speaking American; the descriptions presented for the benefit of her fictional customer in the scene end up benefiting the audience as well. Malik's approach to translating these foreign phrases is most often to follow the foreign language utterance with its English equivalent. When Maryam is making Chocolate *Chai* for her guest, she says, "Nay, abi tayar nay hey. It's not ready yet. Just a few more minutes."⁷³ In the monologue that follows from Noor, she tells her parents that the man she loves had written her a note with a postscript saying "*Inti Jameela Jidden.*" Noor's father replies, "There was no need to write that Noor is beautiful."⁷⁴ The English, Urdu, and Arabic conversationally intertwined with one another and the frequent transition between such distinct languages verbalizes the hybrid existence of

⁷³ Malik, 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11.

Malik and her characters, offering a kind of commentary on their transnationalism that challenges the categorization of the 'Other' by emphasizing a sense of global identity. This is demonstrated through the varying ethnicities and countries of family heritage, from Morocco to Pakistan to Kashmir, but whose language connects them in their diasporic lives.

By purposely rooting her characters in such disparate backgrounds while also exploring their daily lives in America and England, Malik displays the increasing heteroglossic population in all corners of the world and introduces the notion of a global identity that is likely reflected in the makeup of her audience as well. "Heteroglossic cultures in the modern world are more common, more complex in their linguistic mixing, and more visible politically and theatrically than at any time in the past," Carlson notes, which he believes gives playwrights and directors the freedom to "in many cases assume a heteroglossic audience for heteroglossic theatre, or, as in the case of much postcolonial theatre, an audience that is at least partially heteroglossic, allowing plays to send different messages to different sectors of the audience."⁷⁵ This growing heteroglossic population, particularly people whose daily speech is a mix of two different languages, is evident throughout *Unveiled*, which as a whole challenges the very construction of the 'Other.' If, as Carlson and Malik seem to suggest, much of the world is closing the linguistic gap that so quickly identifies someone as a cultural outsider, then there will hopefully be a shift in public discourse from a focus on difference to one of commonality.

⁷⁵ Carlson, 17.

This exploration of her characters' linguistic hybridity does not, however, mean that Malik shies away from the opportunity to emphasize the power of exclusionary language. While much of *Unveiled* is structured in such a way that it is easily comprehensible for either a heteroglossic or a monolingual audience, there are several instances in which the dialogue is spoken only in Arabic, without the benefit of a translation. Erith Jaffe-Berg suggests that in such instances, the writers are “deliberately us[ing] language as a way to paradoxically occlude members of the audience from certain expressions, enforcing through this multilingual dramaturgy the stakes and politics of language.”⁷⁶ Malik's character Inez is conversing in her monologue with another woman who is fluent in Arabic, which results in some dialogue that is understood between the two women, but remains unclear to an English-speaking audience; these sentences are not even translated in the script itself. These unintelligible moments of the scene are only a few sentences long, but their presence is enough to push a significant portion of the audience outside of the realm of complete understanding, thus challenging the cultural dominance of monolingual (particularly English-speaking) populations. Though potentially distancing for spectators, such a confrontation is itself educational in the way that it draws attention to a scenario so common that it is often ignored. Like Brecht's notion of “making strange,” Malik presents a familiar occurrence—the exclusion of someone from a conversation based on language comprehension—in a manner that prompts the audience to see the situation with a new perspective. Here Malik reproduces the powerful effect of

⁷⁶ Erith Jaffe-Berg, “Deterritorializing Voices: Staging the Middle East in American Theatre,” in *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 203.

exclusionary cultural dynamics often rooted in language, but she does so by undermining the traditional dominance of English and repositioning the insiders as the outsiders.

Heather Raffo's approach to the complexities of blending two languages in *9 Parts of Desire* is, like Malik's, more inclusive than exclusive, and serves a similar pedagogical purpose. Her consistent use of "aa" and "la" become quickly identifiable as "yes" and "no," respectively, through frequent repetition and context clues, which gives the audience a basic yet significant level of understanding beyond the dialogue in English. There are, however, more complex phrases or words whose exact translation is never offered to the audience, but this does not suggest that Raffo is seeking to alienate her spectators in a way that excludes them from the narrative. Rather, in speaking an unfamiliar language to her non-Arabic speaking audience, she relies on inflection and physical expression to communicate a recognizable emotion, thereby demonstrating in these moments the possibility for a shared understanding even in the face of extensive linguistic difference. In the latter portion of her monologue, the Doctor, for example, expresses frustration and despair over the pain of her wheelchair-bound husband, her inability to help the people of Iraq despite her medical expertise, and the fact that her formerly first-rate hospital has been reduced to little more than a science experiment. She then implores "Look at us / Look at us / *wayn Allah, wayn Allah?*"⁷⁷ Those who do not speak Arabic might not comprehend her cries to mean precisely "Where is God?" but the intention behind the words is clear in light of the preceding dialogue and increasingly

⁷⁷ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 25.

frenetic emotions. Likewise, Layal's desperate cry just before her death of "yahoo yahoo," which Raffo explains as a "cry of disaster or tragedy,"⁷⁸ is far more powerful in its authenticity than if she had yelled something in English. Segall writes of this moment, "Loss if felt— even if the exact nature of the words is not known— in a cross-cultural claim... linguistic attachments of loss cross Western and Eastern lines."⁷⁹ These kinds of emotional exchanges between character and audience deconstruct the notion of 'Otherness' by reinforcing an empathic connection that transcends racial and ethnic divides.

The published version of *9 Parts of Desire* furthers these connections between Arabic and English speakers by including a glossary at the end of the script that both defines and contextualizes the Arabic words and phrases used in the play. The opening sequence, for example, specifies that the Mullaya enters the stage singing *Che Mali Wali*, a traditional Iraqi song. The character sings the entirety of the song in Arabic, which leaves the audience likely appreciative but without a true understanding of why the piece is significant in the moment. As Raffo explains in the glossary, the title of the song translates to English as "Because I Have No Ruler," and she parenthetically offers an alternate translation of the last word as "Protector." Raffo includes the full text of the song in Arabic as well as English, allowing the reader to more deeply comprehend and reflect on the lyrics as they relate to the Mullaya's monologue and the message of the piece overall. "Because I have no ruler / by God (In the name of God!) / I am tortured/suffering in my life / oh Daddy / because I have no ruler," she explains of

⁷⁸ Ibid., 60, 77.

⁷⁹ Segall, 71.

the song's first verse.⁸⁰ Much of this sentiment, expressed in the very first scene of the play, is carried through the rest of the monologues. Nearly all the characters in *9 Parts of Desire* lament the lack of leadership in their ravaged country, calling on God to help them since they feel there is no living person who can aid them in their struggles. While this thematic connection is apparent to an audience in production, the reader of the printed version is able to extend that message to the Mullaya's first appearance with the help of the glossary, and also expand his or her own knowledge of the Arabic language.

Jaffe-Berg suggests that “[b]ecause multilingualism enables the writers to represent characters in hybridic states,” it can be used “to suggest the interstices between the states of de- and reterritorialization without forcing their characters into one state or another. In the dramas and within the performance space, hybridic identities suggest that transnationalism comes at a cost and is not only a multicultural ideal.”⁸¹ In *9 Parts of Desire*, this is demonstrated through the telephone conversations that connect characters in far-reaching corners of the world. Like many of the props in the play, the phone functions as an intimate use object that, in this case, physicalizes the challenges of transnationalism, particularly during times of crisis. Conversations carried out on the phone are not always able to be completed with reliable clarity, as faulty connections and signals interrupted by bombings prevent the women from being able to communicate completely with their family members. Raffo, as a woman living in the diaspora yet maintaining relationships with her family in Iraq, legitimizes the

⁸⁰ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 71.

⁸¹ Jaffe-Berg, 202.

Arabic voices of her ethnic homeland and illustrates the significance of the language itself in the lives of those who no longer live in the country. The phone and the connections that it offers become a focus in the latter third of the play, as several of the women's monologues and a voiceover from the concerned uncle of the character simply called "The American" convey its significance in establishing bonds between countries. It also highlights the primacy of spoken language and the power that words hold in keeping families together, even when there are other available forms of communication today.

Within the context of these phone calls, the audience is presented with the most frequent occurrences of linguistic elision as those in Iraq speak to their loved ones who now reside in English-speaking countries. The Uncle, trying to reach his niece in New York, repeats "Hallo Hallo" at the start of each of his voiceover recordings, a common Iraqi-English word, while the American yells "*habibti, habibti*" into the phone once she finally gets a hold of her family.⁸² She then translates her own speech, saying "I love you" over and over again, "on and on like that/ five minutes, ten minutes/ until they cut the phones off."⁸³ On the phone with her daughter in England, Layal also repeats "*habibti*" to her child, trying to reassure her that everything is fine in Baghdad while working to dissuade her from coming home for the summer. Layal wants to keep her daughter safe, away from the increasing violence in the city, but the line goes dead in the middle of her seemingly lighthearted argument. Her repetition of the same hybridic word, "Hallo," after the connection drops becomes emblematic of the struggle of

⁸² Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 56-7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 59.

transnational families; they are connected through shared languages but divided by circumstances. There is no linguistic insider or outsider in these exchanges, just mothers and daughters and nieces who are trying desperately to express their love and concern through the sounds of war. The audience is privy to the full extent of these exchanges, brought into the emotional impact of the phone conversations through the inclusive use of language as well as the basic commonalities of familial connections that translate across all dialects.

You've Got to Be Carefully Taught

In the introduction to *O Solo Homo*, a collection of queer solo performance pieces, Holly Hughes and David Román write, “queer solo work is usually pedagogical. All of the artists in this anthology, for example, have something to teach us about what it means to be queer and how that aspect of their identity intersects with various other identity factors such as race— including whiteness— ethnicity, class, gender, and region.”⁸⁴ I believe that the same assertion can be made about contemporary Arab American solo performance; these works typically engage with similar questions of identity and community formation, and in doing so they inherently offer an educational opportunity for audiences. Furthermore, both queer and Arab American solo performances can be seen as products of marginalized groups who have historically been viewed with suspicion and/or disdain, and who wish to challenge that perception through performance. Nearly all of the playwrights included in this project have spoken

⁸⁴ Holly Hughes and David Román, *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 5.

publicly about their desire to create within their performances a space that is equally pedagogical and empathic, a balance which is achieved through the textual and technical production elements detailed above and furthered by the performers' continued interactions with spectators after the curtain comes down.

Of the writer-actresses analyzed here, Laila Farah is the most vocal when it comes to her instructional objectives as a playwright and activist. Even Farah's choice to publish her monologues as part of a longer article in *Modern Drama* speaks to the importance she places on theatre as a pedagogical tool; framing her creative work in this academic context also gives her the opportunity to provide commentary about her work and overall authorial intent. In the opening section of her published essay, Farah provides a full paragraph of what she believes she accomplishes with her performances, including her goal to "document the element most absent in the depiction of Arab women's lives— their multiple identities and the complexities located therein."⁸⁵ She furthers this exploration of such complexities after each presentation of her work through a post-show talkback with the audience; she requires such sessions as part of every performance "in order to make a space for such expansion of topics touched on in the performance to occur. Often," she writes, "these dialogic moments are filled with the most satisfactory pedagogical instances."⁸⁶ It is clear from Farah's writing— both creative and academic— that she very much looks to the theatre as a forum for social change, and she is able to extend the boundaries of her theatrical activism

⁸⁵ Farah, 317.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 325.

through the publication of her monologues and accompanying analysis in a scholarly journal.

Farah goes on in her article to detail theoretical perspectives about identity formation and diasporic subjectivity, which she applies to personal experiences and her theatrical retelling of those autobiographical moments. Given that she is herself a professor, it is unsurprising that Farah would want to engage with the current scholarly discourse on writing and performance in the Arab diaspora, and it is precisely her experience with both the personal and academic aspects of this subject that allows her to effectively navigate the complexities of such material. Farah articulates the positionality of many of the writer-actresses included here that makes their collective work so impactful. She notes that she has deliberately chosen to structure and present her work in a way that “may seem Amero-centric to the non-U.S.-based reader,” but she believes that “it is precisely in the local (U.S.) where these performances of resistance and contestation must take place. The dominant imperialist narrative is being generated in the United States, and thus, the roots of such mechanisms must be laid bare by dissenters *within* a U.S. context in order to have the most efficacy.”⁸⁷ Here, Farah captures the creation of a collective identity formed through dissent and advocacy, which has been instigated by the female playwrights explored in this project. Like the artists that Hughes and Román include in their anthology, these performers have created a space in which they de-marginalize themselves by sharing individualized experiences, yet simultaneously empower a more expansive community by contesting master narratives.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 317.

While we certainly cannot measure the effectiveness or long-term impact of the educational aims of these writer-performers and their work, a number of the artists whose shows are analyzed here have spoken about the kind of responses they have received, many of which indicate that their plays have successfully challenged prevalent stereotypes held by some of their audience members. In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Rohina Malik recalls a particularly poignant interaction with a spectator at one of her performances:

One night a young man was still sitting in the theater, even after the post-show discussion. He had been crying and said he needed to talk to me privately. He was going to college in a small town in Ohio and was on a trip with his schoolmates. He said that he hated Muslims and thought that we wore the veil to celebrate 9/11. At this point, the tears were streaming down his face. And he apologized. That changed something inside me. It changed me as an artist. I hear from people all the time that they considered themselves open-minded but realized, watching my show, that they did hold certain stereotypes of Muslim women.⁸⁸

The way in which Malik's performance was able to permeate and subsequently destroy such a deeply ingrained perception in the mind of this particular audience member is quite powerful, but perhaps even more significant is the remark she makes about the effect *Unveiled* has on those who already think they possess no assumptions about Muslim women. Somewhat akin to the earlier discussion of contemporary feminists who, in their efforts to challenge the perception of veiled women, actually aid in furthering some stereotypes, people who would classify themselves as unflinchingly liberal about all subjects can prove to be equally as detrimental in the perpetuation of generalities.

⁸⁸ Chad Jones, "Muslim writer-actress Rohina Malik on 'Unveiled'," *San Francisco Chronicle* online edition, September 8, 2011, accessed August 15, 2015. <http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/Muslim-writer-actress-Rohina-Malik-on-Unveiled-2310418.php>.

In presenting my research on these plays at various academic conferences, I have been asked several times if the performances I am studying have little influence, despite the playwrights' intentions, because they are simply "preaching to the converted." However, this generalization fails to consider the specificity of each individual play and the potential for a deeper understanding that goes beyond basic acceptance. For example, while the majority of Malik's audience may consider themselves to be civically minded and concerned about the ongoing prejudice against Muslim women, the five distinct characters in *Unveiled* offer an opportunity for these sympathetic spectators to see nuances in the women's choice to veil. Here, as in *9 Parts of Desire*, the veil ceases to function as a symbol or even as a catch-all term for any form of bodily coverage with fabric; instead, we learn the difference between the *hijab* and the *abaya*, which political regimes implemented regulations about veiling, and how the significance of each garment has evolved across geographical and generational divides. These works demonstrate that there is no singular narrative of the Arab and Muslim female experience, and they challenge even a well-informed audience to move past general tolerance towards a place of comprehensive knowledge.

Common Ground

In his work on identity formation, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that despite apparent gaps between people of different ethnicities or religious beliefs, there exists a potential for shared understanding through cultural translation, or what he calls a "cosmopolitan experience." This translation is established not

through common languages or values, but rather within the context of a narrative space that engages a reader's— or, for our purposes here, a spectator's— imagination. He writes that it is a “different human capacity that grounds our sharing: namely, the grasp of a narrative logic that allows us to construct the world to which our imaginations respond,” and that this “basic human capacity to grasp stories, even strange stories, is also what links us, powerfully, to others, even strange others.”⁸⁹ This kind of imaginative freedom not only accounts for differences among readers or audience members, but also draws upon them as a way of promoting conversation. As Appiah points out, we can “learn something about humanity in responding to the worlds people conjure with words in the narrative framework of the folktale, or with images in the frame of film: we learn about the extraordinary diversity of human responses to our world and the myriad points of intersection of those various responses.”⁹⁰ Within the context of the female solo performances discussed here, these opportunities are evident both in the narrative itself, particularly in the multi-character plays that explore a variety of responses from people who do share a common culture or belief system, as well as in the pedagogical relationship between actress and audience.

It is an agreement on particulars, rather than the universal, that Appiah finds to be more probable, a distinction that is significant when applied to the performances of diasporic women. The examples analyzed in this chapter certainly address broader concepts and beliefs (the practice of veiling within the Islamic religion, for example), but the focus of each writer-performer is on

⁸⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 257.

⁹⁰ Appiah, 258.

individual experiences and personal stories. The kinds of details presented in the plays analyzed here are microcosmic examples of the information that is often overlooked when human beings are confronted with people who are different from themselves, yet, as Appiah suggests, hearing and comprehending someone else's story creates a powerful link between individuals. Though seemingly counterintuitive, it is the exploration of these specific histories that results in the creation of a collective identity; the singular narratives of diasporic existence and hybrid identities reveal, in performance, commonalities that reach across racial and cultural borders. The pedagogical framework employed by these writers furthers such connections and presents the opportunity for a collective social consciousness rooted in the newfound knowledge of the particular customs and traditions that each artist elucidates on stage.

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter from Mohja Kahf's "*Hijab Scenes*" synthesizes the colonialist assumptions that have been imposed upon Arab and Muslim women for centuries, but which intensified after the events of September 11. In her poetry, she deconstructs these monolithic portrayals of Muslim women, challenging the prevailing attitude of holding up individuals as representative of all. Sabry believes that by taking the position of various narrators in her poems, Kahf "seeks to redefine the parameters of collective identity markers in the diaspora, opening up collective identity to nuances of difference and arguing for the possibility of remaining individual within the collective."⁹¹ The playwrights included in this project adopt a similar approach in their writing, dispersing the narration among various female voices and

⁹¹ Sabry, 103.

experiences in a way that troubles any attempt to construct a one-size-fits-all account. Their work draws upon the established rhetoric regarding Arab and Muslim women, but reframes it through both structure and style to highlight the tenuous nature of its construction. The exploration in performance of both individual and collective cultural traditions allows Raffo, Farah, Malik, and Sharif to forge a site of cultural translation that subverts such stereotypes and creates a new community with their audiences based on shared understanding and experiences.

Chapter 3

Politics, Patriotism, and Theatrical Protest: Gendered Political Performance After September 11

In *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater* (1998), editors Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer offer an interpretation of political theatre “as a cultural practice that self-consciously operates at the level of interrogation, critique, and intervention, unable to stand outside the very institutions and attitudes that it seeks to change.”¹ Within the framework of their definition, the genre of political theatre thus includes a wide variety of theatrical activity:

from theater as an act of political intervention taken on behalf of a designated population and having a specific political agenda; to theater that offers itself as a public forum through plays with overtly political content; to theater whose politics are covertly, or unwittingly, on display, inviting an actively critical stance from its audience.²

Such a broad characterization crystallizes the ambiguity of this theatrical form at the end of the twentieth century in America. It also reinforces the editors’ concerns regarding the diminishing ability of political theatre to promote meaningful social change and questions as to whether or not a concept that seems to elude definition can remain impactful. This apprehension was prompted by significant transformations in methods of communication at the turn of the century. Television news coverage was becoming a twenty-four hour event, and the technological advancements of the internet allowed for quick and easy data transmission. The increasing speed with which information was disseminated

¹ Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer, “Introduction,” in *Staging Resistance: Essay on Political Theater*, eds. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 1.

² Ibid.

created doubt about the relevance of political theatre in a world where the immediacy of the response was almost as important as its content.

Fourteen years after editing this volume with Colleran, however, Spencer returns to the subject of political theatre as the editor of another book with a similar focus, but this time with a revised view of the form's significance. Here she asserts that, while the term "political theatre" is neither "a distinct dramatic form nor a stable category of analysis," the specific sociohistorical context created by the September 11 attacks and the United States' pursuit of the War on Terror created an atmosphere for the production of "all kinds of politically engaged art, but especially for theatrical performance."³ Spencer posits that an environment so conducive to the resurgence of political theatre was generated in part by the theatricality of the terrorist attacks themselves, as well as the patriotic zeal with which the American and British governments responded to the threats and the increasing focus on nationalism. The connection between theatre and politics extended into the socioeconomic realm when New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani encouraged people to go to the theatre just a few days after September 11. In a press conference about the continuing rescue efforts at the World Trade Center, Giuliani, rather tangentially to the scheduled topic of his speech, proclaimed, "The best thing you can do for our city is to take in a Broadway show."⁴

³ Jenny Spencer, "Editor's Introduction," in *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent*, ed. Jenny Spencer (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

⁴ Joe Dziemianowicz, "Broadway pulled together to resuscitate New York City after Sept. 11 attacks," *New York Daily News*, Entertainment section, September 7, 2011.

Despite this enthusiastic endorsement of the power of theatre and the plethora of political actions on which to comment, the initial response by theatrical artists has been criticized as rather hesitant and measured. Allan Havis writes that in the eyes of “many political and cultural analysts, theaters reacted dully, cautiously, and slowly to the seismic action of the newly emerging threats from foreign terrorists and from our government’s responses to these threats. With hundreds of professional regional theaters scattered around the continent, few institutions commissioned or presented shows to acknowledge recent events.”⁵ In 2008, playwright Christopher Shinn lamented what he believed to be a crisis in the American theatre after the war, asserting that “American playwrights have fallen victim to what has happened in the culture at large: the oppositional voice has largely disappeared and been replaced by the dominant ideologies of our time— free market, apolitical, militaristic.”⁶ This conclusion is certainly valid when drawn from an analysis of commercial or larger non-profit productions in New York after September 11. The first post-9/11 performance to explicitly engage with its current sociopolitical climate came from London in the form of David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* (produced in Los Angeles in 2005 and New York in 2006), and several other politically-minded productions that garnered acclaim in the United States were also imported from across the Atlantic

⁵ Allan Havis, “Introduction,” in *American Political Plays After 9/11*, ed. Allan Havis (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 4.

⁶ Christopher Shinn, “Market Rules,” *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2008): 93. Shinn cites as one of his primary examples the New York Theatre Workshop’s cancellation of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* because of the theatre’s desire, according to Artistic Director Jim Nicola, to avoid “taking a stand in a political conflict that we didn’t want to take.”

(including *Black Watch*, which ran in New York and Los Angeles in 2007, and *The Great Game: Afghanistan*, which toured the United States in 2010).

However, productions responding specifically to the attacks appeared off-Broadway and in regional theatres with much greater speed and urgency. Anne Nelson's *The Guys*, for example, opened at the Flea Theater in New York only four months after the World Trade Center fell, and Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* (as detailed in this dissertation's introduction) premiered in 2005 at Theater Schmeater in Seattle. By August of 2003, Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* had already opened at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, and the show transferred to New York the following year. Also in 2003, the Culture Project committed to staging works about the war in Iraq and produced ten such plays in the following six years. Their ambitious slate of performances in particular was unparalleled in its political intervention and critique of the United States government. As Jeanne Colleran notes, "No other theatre in the U.S. or overseas has committed so much of its resources to responding to the conflict *as it was unfolding*" [author's emphasis].⁷ While *The Guys* may fall outside the realm of traditional political theatre parameters given its focus on the human side of the story in exploring the devastating personnel losses experienced by New York City fire departments, El Guindi, Raffo, and the playwrights produced by the Culture Project directly address the effects of September 11 in the United States as well as abroad.

⁷ Jeanne Colleran, "Why We Have Failed: Culture Project's Iraq War Plays," in *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent*, ed. Jenny Spencer (New York: Routledge, 2012), 128.

It is clear that September 11 indelibly altered the theatrical landscape, creating space for a reinvigorated form of political theatre, one that does not just protest or question, but also educates in its performance of resistance. The influx of new plays written from the perspective of people who were the subjects of the resulting social and political conflicts— specifically Muslim and Arab Americans— demonstrates a marked shift in the genre of political theatre. For the first time, the American theatre-going public was able to hear from people who were either born in, or had deep familial ties to, the region against which the United States was leading military operations as those events were actually happening. Within this particular sociohistorical context shaped by September 11, the works included as part of this chapter offer an alternative framework for evaluating the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In their solo performances, Rania Khalil, Bina Sharif, Heather Raffo, and Laila Farah actively challenge the master narrative perpetuated by the United States government and its use to enact targeted laws against Arab and Muslim Americans. The examinations and critiques of specific political policies presented through individualized narratives of female experiences will be investigated in this chapter, particularly with regard to the means by which such performances promote both critical analysis and ethical assessment. In the creation of their works, these female artists re-gender the traditionally male-dominated sphere of political engagement, writing themselves into the wartime narratives of both the United States and their ancestral countries abroad.

This section will also consider how political theatre functions in a post-9/11 world, one in which the mediatized interpretations of events often loom larger than the events themselves. Contemporary political theatre operates with an intense awareness of the media's influence, confronting in its theatrical resistance both governmental actions as well as the media's presentation of such incidents. The challenges put forth by the writer-performers in this dissertation not only draw attention to concerns within their communities that have been ignored by mainstream media, but also refocus conversations about issues that have become so omnipresent on television screens that no substantive discourse can occur.

Constructing the Great American War Narrative

“America Attacked.” “New Day of Infamy.” “Never Forget.”⁸ The headlines and slogans that strove to embody the pain and terror of September 11 were the first attempts at trying to describe events that seemed for many to be simply beyond words. They also represent the beginning of the national narrative about the terrorist attacks constructed by the United States government and subsequently perpetuated by the media. While it was clear within hours of the first plane crashing into the World Trade Center that this was a calculated disaster meant to cause widespread damage, it was not readily apparent why the attacks had been perpetrated, or how they were carried out. This lack of clarity and

⁸ These are several examples of the headlines in prominent news outlets on September 12, 2001. The first led ABC television news reports about the attacks, the second was on the front page of *The Boston Globe*, and the third, “Never Forget,” has become a tagline of sorts to promote remembrance of the attacks.

absence of information gave the government the opportunity to fill that void with their version of the narrative. Political theorist Richard Jackson writes that it was “into this collective silence that President Bush and senior figures in the administration, as powerful symbolic figures authorized to speak on behalf of the nation, began to articulate a very specific interpretation of the events. This interpretation quickly evolved into a large and powerful political and social narrative,”⁹ offering a succinct explanation of what had happened, who the villains were, the motives of those aggressors, and the force with which the government planned to respond.

Once President George W. Bush established the connection between al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that supported them— a relationship that he made clear in his speech to a Joint Session of Congress on September 20, 2001— the president was able to expand publicly the list of victims destroyed by this newly identified enemy. Now, in addition to avenging those who lost their lives on September 11, Bush was able to assert that American military operations in Afghanistan would rectify the prolonged abuse and exploitation of women by the Taliban regime. In his remarks to the Warsaw Conference on Combating Terrorism a few weeks later, Bush condemned the Taliban for imprisoning women in their homes and denying them “access to basic health care and education.” He offers as an example of their brutality an instance in which “a girl of seven is beaten for wearing white shoes.”¹⁰ On December 12,

⁹ Jackson, 26.

¹⁰ George W. Bush, “No Nation Can Be Neutral in This Conflict,” *Remarks by the President to the Warsaw Conference on Combating Terrorism*, November 6, 2001, accessed February 25, 2016.

2001, Bush signed the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act, which he explained was developed in an effort to combat a “regime at war with women.” The goal of the bill was to offer aid and support to the women of Afghanistan who “were banned from speaking, or laughing loudly. They were banned from riding bicycles, or attending school. They were denied basic health care, and were killed on suspicion of adultery.” Bush goes on to state unequivocally that the “central goal of the terrorists is the brutal oppression of women— and not only the women of Afghanistan.”¹¹

While the act of sending aid to a country in need is certainly admirable, the timing of this seemingly altruistic act by Bush and his administration raises questions about the nature of their intent. If, for instance, the United States was so concerned about the rights of women suffering from systemic abuse under the Taliban regime, why did the government not intervene sooner? The newly developed focus on the safety and freedom of Afghan women in the months after September 11 can be construed as an opportunistic exploitation of their difficult circumstances as a justification for war. In addition, the American government’s decision to back the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan was troubling to many, as the group’s leadership of the country in the early 1990s was known for its abusive treatment of women. Furthermore, the insinuation in Bush’s December 12 speech that terrorists are on a mission to control and oppress women throughout the

<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011106-2.html>.

¹¹ George W. Bush, “President Signs Afghan Women and Children Relief Act,” *Remarks by the President at Signing Ceremony for Afghan Women and Children Relief Act*, December 12, 2001, accessed February 25, 2016. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011212-9.html>

world reads very much like fear-mongering, a way of gaining support for his government's actions by instilling anxiety in the American people about what might happen if al-Qaeda attacked the United States. The Bush administration controlled the perception of September 11 and its aftermath by presenting its version of the War on Terror narrative early and often. Jackson calculates that “[i]n the first three years following the attacks, the administration made on average 10 speeches, statements to the press, interviews, and the like, *per day* on the issue” [author's emphasis].¹² Although the truth behind the American government's intervention on behalf of women in Afghanistan may never be known for certain, it is clear that women played a key role in the construction of the national war story. By embedding in his rhetoric ideas of women's rights and civil liberties, President Bush was able to confidently frame the war as a humanitarian rescue mission to liberate oppressed women around the world.

I Pledge Allegiance...

This penchant for stressing the significance of a particular concept through its ubiquity after September 11 extends to the pervasive displays of the American flag following the attacks. One of the most iconic images from September 11 is the photograph of three firefighters raising the flag over the rubble at the World Trade Center. Just over a week later, on September 20, President George W. Bush gave a televised address about the terrorist threat to a Joint Session of Congress while standing in front of an oversized American flag. Images of the flag also appeared across the nation in the form of pins, bumper stickers,

¹² Jackson, 29.

computer desktop wallpaper, umbrellas, and all types of attire, from underwear to sweaters. Almost immediately after the Twin Towers fell, the production and sale of American flags skyrocketed. *The New York Times* reported that “Americans started buying flags hours after the attacks. Wal-Mart sold 116,000 flags on that Tuesday and 250,000 on Wednesday, compared with 6,400 and 10,000 on the same days a year earlier.”¹³ The oldest flag factory in the nation, located in Verona, New Jersey, tripled its flag production to meet demand during the following weeks, and a small flag shop in Wisconsin required police to manage its influx of customers, selling three million flag and flag-shaped pins in the wake of the tragedy.¹⁴

These overwhelming displays of support for the United States in the form of the nation’s flag were the catalyst for the creation of Rania Khalil’s *Flag Piece*. Developed almost immediately after the events of September 11, Khalil’s short solo show is one of the earliest productions staged in response to the attacks; it is also the first post-9/11 performance created by an Arab American artist. Premiering on December 2, 2001, at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, *Flag Piece* explores the complex sociopolitical climate facing Arab and Muslim Americans after the sudden increase of nationalistic expression symbolized by the plethora of American flags. Born in the United States to Egyptian parents, Khalil is a visual and performance artist whose work explores her diasporic experiences living in New York City, Helsinki, and Cairo. Days after the attacks, Khalil was given a small American flag by a hardware store

¹³ Julian E. Barnes, “A Nation Challenged: Proud Spirits; As Demand Soars, Flag Makers Help Bolster Nation’s Morale,” *The New York Times*, Business Day, September 23, 2001.

¹⁴ Ibid.

owner “who felt she needed to show her support for Americans,”¹⁵ perhaps implicitly implying that he did not consider the possibility that Khalil herself was American. She decided to use this flag that was gifted to her in her silent solo performance, which lasts only about three minutes. She begins by wrapping her jacket around her head, covering her hair and neck to evoke an image of a Muslim woman wearing a *hijab*. Khalil then raises the small American flag above her head and smiles, but eventually brings the flag closer to her face and covers her eyes, then her mouth. She turns the flag horizontally and places the center of the stick in her mouth, using it to push down on her bottom lip and then rotating the bottom end so that it presses against her upper lip, distorting her expression as her head twists and arches back. Khalil draws the flag up her face, pushing her eyelids and brows up to further deform her features as her head remains titled, as though the flag were forcing her backwards as the piece concludes.¹⁶

Though brief in its staged performance, *Flag Piece* encapsulates through its powerful images several significant issues facing Arab and Muslim Americans after September 11. Khalil’s work explores the tensions between her hybrid Arab American identity and the increasingly vocal distrust toward people of Arab descent perpetuated in the name of patriotism. The oppressive movement of the flag across her face crystallizes the further marginalization of Arabs in America, and suggests the distorted perception of Arabs and Muslims developing in the national consciousness. It also physicalizes the emphasis on patriotism in the construction of post-9/11 American identity. As Edward Said noted, “culture is a

¹⁵ Sabry, 128.

¹⁶ A still image movie of *Flag Piece* is available at <https://vimeo.com/123656900>.

system of exclusions legislated from above but enacted through its polity.”¹⁷

Thus when the flag becomes a marker of one’s so-called Americanness, the identity of self occurs at the exclusion of others. The widespread explosion of flag fanaticism can be seen as a physical representation of the “us versus them” mentality, a purposeful exclusion of the terrorist groups that attacked the United States that simultaneously created a similar divide within the country itself.

Khalil’s use of two objects that were employed to promote the “othering” of Arabs and Muslims after September 11— the flag and the veil— create a visual language that reinforces the system of exclusions experienced by Arab Americans following the attacks. The way in which she covers her eyes and mouth with the flag almost immediately after waving it in the air with a smile also suggests the feeling of forced conformity by Arabs and Muslims in the United States post-9/11. A rise in violent hate crimes against people of Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian descent led to the display of the American flag in Arab communities as a demonstration of belonging. Dalia Basiouny notes that in the aftermath of September 11, “[t]he U.S. flag worn or displayed on the stores and houses of immigrant communities was an effort at self-protection from the defensive hatred of the ‘cult of origins,’” a concept conceived by Julia Kristeva to explore “hate reactions” against those who do not share the same backgrounds.¹⁸

When analyzed as a more global work of political theatre, *Flag Piece* offers a meaningful case study for the complex ideologies of nationalism and patriotism in a post-9/11 world. Though the terms are frequently conflated, there

¹⁷ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 13.

¹⁸ Basiouny, “Descent as Dissent: Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11,” 146.

is a distinct and significant difference between the two concepts. Patriotism is rooted in the pride of one's country and a belief in its ideals; this can be extended to the willingness to defend that nation under the threat of harm to its wellbeing or independence. Cultural studies scholar Phillip Bratta observes that for Americans, patriotism "often refers to redundantly expressed ideals— freedom or liberty, democracy, individualism, equality or egalitarianism, law, and the American dream."¹⁹ Nationalism, by contrast, is the self-perception of one's country as superior to all others, which is often accompanied by a campaign of aggressive actions taken to impose that nation's beliefs on other countries. Unlike patriotism, which allows for recognition of a home country's mistakes, nationalism is often defined by a culture of unquestioning support for the nation-state's leaders or government. In the weeks after September 11, patriotic and nationalistic ideologies became more malleable in the public consciousness as governmental and media rhetoric seemed to exploit the former to promote the latter. In his address to the aforementioned Joint Session of Congress, President Bush proclaimed that as a country, "we have found our mission and our moment... The advance of human freedom— the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time— now depends on us."²⁰ The President's statement, which was broadcast on television, frames the United States as the greatest arbiter of freedom in the world, a courageous leader against humanity's worst enemy; behind him throughout his presentation is draped an enormous

¹⁹ Phillip M. Bratta, "Flag Display Post-9/11: A Discourse of American Nationalism," *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (September 2009): 233.

²⁰ Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001."

American flag, the very symbol of that freedom, which he references several times in his speech.

The manipulation of expressions of patriotism to support imperialistic propensities of nationalism extended into the public sphere, as demonstrated through the fervent flag flying throughout the country. While the display of a national symbol in the wake of a tragic event is certainly understandable and even expected, the significance of that symbol as perceived by the American people became largely exclusionary. A national opinion poll of people who had chosen to display the flag conducted by Northeastern University in early 2002 revealed that 92 percent of those polled did so “to show national unity against the enemy.” The researchers also found a positive correlation between flying the American flag and believing negative stereotypes about Arabs. They reported that “[m]any flag-wavers believed they had to ‘keep an eye on Arabs in public places,’ some even saying, ‘I would exclude Arabs from my country.’”²¹ Khalil embodies this growing tension in *Flag Piece*, illustrating the transformation of the American flag’s implications through its interaction with her body. Though the flag begins as a relatively innocuous representation of American patriotism, the way in which it symbolically silences the veiled woman and gruesomely distorts her features provides a concentrated and powerful depiction of the treatment of Arabs and Muslims in both the United States and abroad.

²¹ Anny Bakalian and Medhi Bozorgmehr, *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 190-1. The study referenced was conducted by the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict at Northeastern University in January and February 2002.

“Please speak for me.”

Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel observe in their analysis of literature written about Bush’s War on Terror that “[w]omen, when and if they appear, are typically represented as being acted upon rather than as actors themselves.”²² Such passive positionality of women, argues Miriam Cooke, is a foundational tenet of what she calls the War Story, a narrative frame constructed to give “order to wars that are generally experienced as confusion.” She contends that “military historians force a grid on the anarchy; they arrange experience and actors into neat pairs: beginning and ending; foe and friend; aggression and defense... Emphasizing that such splits occur, they explain women’s need for protection as the reason men must fight.”²³ As discussed throughout this project, this characterization is particularly true when it comes to the portrayal of Muslim women by the United States government as oppressed and voiceless victims to justify the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a trope that became widely disseminated throughout the Western media. In Bina Sharif’s solo performance piece, *Afghan Woman*, she both personifies and dismantles the passive representation of women in times of conflict, attempting to combat in her play the silence imposed upon the women of her country by forces from around the globe. Written in direct response to United States military action in Afghanistan following September 11, Sharif’s play

²² Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel, “(En)Gendered War Stories and Camouflaged Politics,” in *(En)Gendering the War of Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics*, eds. Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 1.

²³ Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 15. It should be noted that at the time of Cooke’s writing, women were allowed to serve in the United States military, but their roles were limited. Only in 2013 did combat positions become available to women, a policy shift that is still being debated today in several branches of the military.

indicts the American military and Taliban terrorists equally in the oppression of Afghan civilians through the story of an Afghan woman whose name we never learn and whose face we cannot completely see; her entire body, except for her eyes, is covered by a burqa. Fawzia Afzal-Khan writes in her introduction to the anthologized text that the play, in both content and performance, “reveals the way Afghani women have suffered from the double-whammy of fundamentalist oppression— forcing them to become faceless victims of a rigid patriarchy— and the Great Game of superpower geopolitical control— reducing them to the status of pawns as Western politicians manipulate their veiled images in order to justify armed combat.”²⁴

In *Afghan Woman*, the titular character’s approach is not subtle in its criticism of Americans for their participation in the kind of ideology put forth by Mrs. Bush in her radio speech (referenced in this project’s introduction), during which she appealed to the “civilized people” of the world to come to the aid of women in Afghanistan. In performance, Sharif’s Afghan woman sardonically implores the audience, “I depend on you. On your freedom of thought. Please speak on my behalf.”²⁵ She then goes on to speak for herself, explaining the years of destruction and devastation that continue to cloud the daily lives of the people in Afghanistan. The audience is told about the rotating door of power in Afghanistan, as the woman explains how one group after another comes through the region to take control of her country and pillage its resources. She shares her

²⁴ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, “Introduction,” in *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan (Northampton, MA: Olive Brand Press), 16.

²⁵ Sharif, 246-7.

fear that an American defeat of the Taliban may result in further destruction rather than freedom:

It happened before—you didn't know so I am telling you. Only a few years ago the ruler was Northern Alliance, who will soon be jubilant coming back with the help of mighty military powers of the world. Every few years some corrupt thugs are given power in this country, my Afghanistan...²⁶

By including in her speech an acknowledgement of her audience's unfamiliarity with the complex political history her country, the woman is implicitly calling into question what her spectators think they know about Afghanistan. Long before September 11, she says, she had been beaten, stoned, and shot by the Taliban, yet no one came to her aid then. "How come you have taken so long to see me?"²⁷ she asks. She also describes the brutality inflicted upon the country by the Northern Alliance, detailing the repeated rapes of Afghan women by Northern Alliance officials as payment for what they claim to be the women's debt for their "liberation." American forces are equally at fault for the suffering of the Afghan people in the narrator's eyes, as frequent bombings by the United States meant to destroy the Taliban killed her children and destroyed the land. As the Afghan woman's story continues, it becomes clear that politicians, first ladies, television pundits, and journalists cannot begin to speak for the women who have lived through these wars. Instead, the women must be given the opportunity to use their own voices to convey such experiences.

The piece as a whole can be seen in many ways as rumination on the power of silence in times of conflict. Throughout her monologue, Sharif's

²⁶ Ibid., 251.

²⁷ Ibid., 247.

Afghan woman repeats the phrases “I am silent” and “my silence is silent,” a jarring juxtaposition with the stream-of-consciousness style delivery of the text in performance. The Afghan woman standing in front of the audience is anything but silent, yet her repetition and emphasis of this idea draws attention to the fact that she, as a Muslim woman in Afghanistan, has long been rendered voiceless in the seemingly unyielding conflicts plaguing the country. Instead, she exists as only a symbol for the agendas of various aggressors. This externally imposed silence strengthens the position of imperialistic foreign governments and powerful domestic terrorist organizations, as it allows them to manipulate the information and images projected to the world about the reality of the region’s circumstances. While this particular Afghan woman is finally able to share her experiences with a broader audience in the form of theatrical performance, the irony is that this kind of presentation would not have been possible without the brutal attacks of September 11 and the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan. Her story has been given a platform *because* of the opportunity that the world’s attention bestowed upon her circumstances. Although much of that attention initially came in the form of vitriol, blame, and an American invasion, the Afghan woman knows that her voice will only remain relevant so long as Afghanistan is occupied by outside forces. She tells the audience,

I hope that the war in Afghanistan goes on for a long time so I can see you and you can see me. Once the war is over and all its reasons achieved I will be completely forgotten like before. I am sure and so are you: The war in Afghanistan wasn’t fought to liberate an Afghan woman.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid., 253.

In this moment near the end of her monologue, both Sharif and her character together remark on the inevitable reality inherent in their positions. The character, as a symbol of a specific military operation, and Sharif, as a Muslim Pakistani woman capturing the zeitgeist of the sociopolitical climate in America, are both aware that they may only have a finite period of time in which to present their realities to the world.

The particular intersection of race and gender embodied in Sharif's performance emphasizes the significance of political theatre in its ability to shift from the micropolitical to the macropolitical. Michael Patterson, in his work on the political theatre of post-war British playwrights, describes a divide between what he calls reflectionist theatre, in which the aim is an accurate depiction of the external world (the most extreme form of this being naturalism), and interventionist theatre, which recognizes the futility in such a practice and instead seeks to challenge the audience's perception of reality. While the explanation of this distinction may sound reminiscent of a theatre history lecture on post-modern theatrical techniques, it takes on greater significance within the context of political theatre. The concept of interventionist performance as a means of creating a piece that provides recognizable referents to spectators, but simultaneously construes that representation of reality into something more illuminating and impactful than reality itself, is fundamental to the work of the artists included here. This particular genre also offers a counterpoint to verbatim or documentary theatre, which became a widespread theatrical response to September 11. As discussed in the first chapter of this project, some of the

monodramas by Arab and Muslim American female playwrights are frequently categorized as verbatim theatre, when in fact their creators firmly assert that, while their work is based on actual events, the resulting performance is not meant to accurately reflect this history. Instead their approach moves beyond the realm of representation to expose deeper layers of truth, as exemplified by Sharif in her performance. As Patterson notes, it is “the contention of most interventionist writers that they are the true realists, because their insights reveal things as they truly are rather than as they appear to be.”²⁹

In choosing for her narrator a singular character that remains relatively anonymous in both the presentation of her person and the content of her narrative, Sharif positions the Afghan woman as the representative voice for an entire people. As an interventionist play, the work maintains a credible and accessible touchstone for its audience— a veiled woman suffering under the brutality of Taliban rule— while opening up an arena for education and discussion regarding the larger implications of domestic political instability and interference from outside governments. The structure of Sharif’s performance demonstrates that the Afghan woman’s individual history, while significant, is not unique within the history of her country. Instead, she is able to illustrate for the audience a broader picture of Afghanistan, a place with an intricate political history and a population that has endured years of violence long before they became international icons on television after September 11. Furthermore, the play ardently addresses the concerns raised by Hunt and Rygiel about the ways in which the War on Terror

²⁹ Michael Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

has been “produced, constructed, and waged on highly gendered terrain.”³⁰ The use and manipulation of issues regarding the rights of women by the United States government and mass media framed the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as a mission to improve the lives of women in these countries. However, as Sharif’s perpetually silenced woman demonstrates, the women who were supposed to be aided by this intervention were never involved in the process. The Afghan Woman character makes clear that American intervention in Afghanistan is equally as destructive as the country’s sectarian violence, confirming Cooke’s assertion that “the violence of war is not so different from the violence of peace.”³¹

Wartime Narratives in the Digital Age

Sharif’s decision to frame her monologue as though she were speaking to her audience on television draws attention to the importance of the media in the construction of contemporary narratives of war. In the opening sentences of her speech, she positions her spectators as television viewers watching her in the comfort of their own homes: “You stare at me from your bedroom through your colored TV screen.”³² Throughout the monologue, Sharif continues to mention the mediated presentation of her appearance through the television, reminding the audience of their particular point of view. Without overtly stating the pervasive influence of the media, Sharif’s dialogue comments on the American public’s reliance on television, not just for their information but also for a determination of

³⁰ Hunt and Rygiel, 3.

³¹ Cooke, 43.

³² Sharif, 246.

what is politically and socially significant. The character of the Afghan Woman answers her own question about why the American people have taken so long to see her, responding “OH! YES, you are right. I wasn’t shown on your TV screen for a long long time.”³³

As *Afghan Woman* demonstrates, the media’s sudden interest in the women of Afghanistan is not reflective of the fact that they have endured for decades conditions that the United States deems abhorrent; rather, it is a function of the fact that the projected interpretation of their suffering as urgently deserving of American attention after September 11 creates a compelling narrative. Television’s inherent immediacy, in terms of its ability to quickly disseminate information as well as its accessibility in most American homes, further intensifies the impact of the stories that they choose to tell. Colleran’s concept of information that is “embedded in a mediatized reality” is apt here, as she uses the phrase to explain how “information is inseparable from the manner in which it is delivered” in the contemporary media coverage of war.³⁴ That is, the narrative constructed by the media, including its potential subjectivity or politically driven motive, is inseparable from the recitation or footage of the news itself. Sharif incisively draws a connection between this power of the modern media and the potential absence of critical assessment by individuals in the performance of her solo show. Her continual assertion that the viewers should speak on her behalf is, in large part, a commentary on the media’s appropriation of her story for their

³³ Ibid., 247.

³⁴ Jeanne M. Colleran, “Disposable Wars, Disappearing Acts: Theatrical Responses to the 1991 Gulf War,” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (December 2003): 614.

own particular purposes, as well as the viewers' willingness to accept this interpretation as fact.

Furthermore, while the Afghan woman's widespread presence on television may seem to possess the potential to encourage political engagement of the public, its pervasiveness effectively limits the opportunities for open discourse. Because of its constant mediation through screens, Janelle Reinelt notes that "[p]resent reality is thus experienced as a diffuse field of social forces rather than a codified and stable system of structures."³⁵ Without an understanding of the potentially manipulative practices of the media, specifically during times of war, the public may have difficulty identifying the intent of such social forces and accept the narrative as it is presented on television. Since the information needed to form unbiased judgments or evaluate the ethical implications of governmental actions was not readily available in an unadulterated form at the time, the mediated presentation of the story remained (and in many ways, still remains) unchallenged. As a result, the war story of the American military engagement in Afghanistan was able to construct its own identity of Afghan women, a portrayal against which Sharif, Raffo, and Farah actively rebel.

The ease with which this dominant narrative took hold is a product of an embedded media policy, a decision by the Bush administration and the Department of Defense in 2003 to place reporters on the front lines of combat. This program, as described by the Department of the Defense, was created in acknowledgement that media coverage has the power to "shape public perception

³⁵ Janelle Reinelt, "Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy," *Staging Resistance: Essay on Political Theater*, eds. Jeanne Collieran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 286.

of the national security environment now and in the years ahead... We need to tell the factual story— good or bad— before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions... Our people in the field need to tell our story.”³⁶

The policy was also meant to restore a positive relationship between the American military and journalists after a contentious first attempt to include reporters in overseas operations during the Gulf War in 1991. It appeared during the first Gulf War that the United States military had seemingly learned a great deal from their media missteps in Vietnam. While Desert Storm reporters were allowed to film battlefield footage, the military maintained tighter control over the images that were disseminated. Paul Patton notes that “procedures for controlling the media were developed and tested in the Falklands, Granada, and Panama,” strategies that were then employed in the Gulf War in order to produce for the masses a “‘clean’ war, with lots of pictures of weaponry [...] and relatively few images of human casualties, none from the Allied forces.”³⁷ Though they were supposedly reporting live from the battlefield, “the technological capacity to allow journalists to file their stories in a timely manner was insufficient” and the creation of “media pools” meant that a rotating group of reporters and photographers had to “input their information, which [was] then made available to

³⁶ Quoted in Krista Hunt, “‘Embedded Feminism’ and the War on Terror,” in *(En)Gendering the War of Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics*, ed. Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 52. Interestingly enough, the Department of the Defense website where the full explanation of this policy was made accessible (and which is quoted in a number of texts about the practice) is no longer available online.

³⁷ Paul Patton, “Introduction,” in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* by Jean Baudrillard, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3.

all accredited members of the press.”³⁸ The American public was thus presented with a kind of instant historicization of Desert Storm, one that was supposedly live, though not really, and had been filtered and formed into a coherent and digestible narrative for general audiences, much like a Hollywood film.

The embedded media program instituted over a decade later for America’s second invasion of Iraq certainly captured the immediacy of battle, but with the hindsight of today it seems likely that the Bush administration was more interested in generating support for United States engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan than in presenting a factual account of life on the front lines. In his 2003 analysis of the media’s role in the Iraq War, educator, former film producer, and current House of Lords member David Puttnam rather presciently writes

‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ was a war fought live on television; the propaganda war was largely fought *through* television. In fact, it’s probably something of a paradigm for the way mainstream television journalism will increasingly operate in the modern era. It exemplified the manner in which a combination of technology, a culture of instant gratification and the commercial fragmentation of the media have conspired to shape television news in modern times.³⁹

As a whole, the use of embedded media contributed to the establishment of the dominant narrative of the War on Terror, reinforcing, through its snapshot footage of the combat zone, the government’s adherence to the binaries of the traditional war story by positioning women as helpless victims and male soldiers as their defenders. The form and style of these reports exemplifies what human rights and feminist scholar Wendy Hesford identifies as “[c]onsumptive models of

³⁸ Ariel Garneau and Radu Venter, “Journalists, Embedded,” in *Encyclopedia of Military Science*, ed. G. Kurt Piehler (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013), 734.

³⁹ David Puttnam, “News: Do you want it quick or good?” *British Journalism Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June 2003): 50.

identification [that] dominate the US media, keeping audiences free from implication in the political, economic, and cultural forces that create or enable the conditions that the ‘other’ must confront.”⁴⁰ In the early years of the War on Terror, the American media participated in a twenty-first century form of imperialism perpetrated through video cameras and television broadcasts, appropriating images and experiences of Iraqi and Afghan citizens in order to produce a version of the conflict that fit the traditional model of a war story.

Like Sharif, Heather Raffo confronts the ubiquity of wartime media and the commodification of information through her solo performance. In *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo demonstrates the emotional and psychological toll of the televised war on her characters in an effort to humanize the effects of the Department of Defense’s desire to “facilitate maximum in-depth coverage of US forces in combat and related operations” by embedding journalists.⁴¹ Raffo explains on her website that she “intended to write a piece about the Iraqi psyche, something that would inform and enlighten the images we see on T.V. However, the play is equally about the American psyche.”⁴² The omnipresence of television echoes throughout the monologues of nearly every woman in the play, and the connection between the people of Iraq and America is forged through the images presented on the television screen as they witness extreme acts of violence perpetrated on each other’s countries.

⁴⁰ Wendy S. Hesford, “Rhetorical Memory, Political Theater, and the Traumatic Present,” *transFORMATIONS*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall 2005): 105.

⁴¹ Quoted in Hunt, 52.

⁴² Raffo, “About *9 Parts of Desire*.”

Raffo's analysis of the consumption of war narratives in the United States is particularly palpable through the words of *The American*, as the character comments on the rather detached nature with which the footage is presented on television, and the similarly nonchalant way in which people take in such distressing reports. She remarks that she "can watch it at the gym / people work out / to the war / on three channels. / They drink beer at the bar to the war."⁴³ Even she, a woman with family in Iraq about whom she is deeply concerned, realizes that she is engaging in a casual conversation about the war's rapidly rising death toll with a stranger while they are both getting pedicures. In contrast, whenever there is a crisis in America, the response is far more substantial in both action and emotion: "seven men get trapped underground / and we stop everything / we fly in engineers / to save / everything / we make a movie / we go on *Oprah*, we talk about it."⁴⁴ The lack of American understanding for the gravity of the situation in Iraq and the general attitude of detachment by her fellow citizens, juxtaposed with a twenty-four hour news cycle displaying footage of Iraqis searching for their loved ones in mass graves, eventually begins to cripple her psyche and makes her physically ill. Addressing the audience, the United States government, and her own distressed conscience simultaneously, *The American* asks, "Why don't we count the number of Iraqi dead?"⁴⁵

Just as Sharif indicts the ethics of the American media's use of her body as a symbol of war, Raffo questions the ramifications of real-time reporting from the front lines. As a significant and ubiquitous mechanism of representation in the

⁴³ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

twenty-first century, television maintains a powerful position in the public perception of current events. However, the saturation of content from the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as countless stories that were reported with authority only to be later deemed false,⁴⁶ ultimately made the power of television more problematic than useful during the War on Terror. The unrelenting influx of information (parts of which were factually untrue) kept viewers from engaging with any one story for longer than a few minutes at most, likely preventing any kind of empathic response or understanding of the gravity of the situation. Global media and communications scholar Daya Kishan Thussu points to “certain key features of the presentation of war on television that have emerged over the last decade,” such as “video/computer-game style images of surgical strikes by ‘intelligent’ weaponry” and “arresting graphics and satellite pictures,” that result in a “homogenization of coverage of conflicts— bloodless and largely devoid of any real sense of death and destruction” that can leave the audience “desensitized to the tragedy and horror of war.”⁴⁷ The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were framed on television largely as a series of rapid breaking news reports, only to be one-upped moments later by another attention-seeking headline. This breakneck journalistic speed is a function of what digital media scholar Andrew Hoskins refers to as the “three-minute culture” of contemporary

⁴⁶ This most glaring example of unsubstantiated reporting is the assertion of weapons of mass destruction hidden in Iraq, while others include claims of Iraqi drones sent to spread biological weapons in the United States, the presence of weapons-grade plutonium in Iraq, an uprising in Basra, etc. See Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer, “Rules of Engagement: Journalism and War,” in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, eds. Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer (Oxon: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁷ Daya Kishan Thussu, “Live TV and Bloodless Deaths: War, Infotainment and 24/7 News,” in *War and The Media: Reporting Conflict*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu and Des Freedman (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2003), 124.

society, which is “driven increasingly by a demand of and for the moment, producing (or produced by) distracted channel-hopping audiences.”⁴⁸ The lack of critical attention required by such reports and their casual presentation as background entertainment at places like the gym or the neighborhood bar strips the war of its significance in the moment, as well as minimizes its potential long-term implications.

While many of the other characters in *9 Parts of Desire* experience traumatic events related to acts of war within the geographical borders of Iraq, as analyzed in the first chapter, The American’s trauma stems from a combination of guilt and powerlessness instigated by the barrage of images on her television screen and the ease with which they are accepted by much of the country. She is devastated when she realizes that the initial continuation of her routine frivolities positions her as just another one of the detached Americans, despite her familial connections to the region. After that recognition, she spends much of the day at home, on her knees in the middle of her apartment, staring at the television and clutching her rosary. The continuous availability of troubling images from her family’s Iraqi neighborhood exacerbates The American’s struggle to reconcile her diasporic identity and furthers her feelings of alienation. She wonders, “How I can ever / go home again / and sit / in my *amma*’s kitchen / and say / I’m sorry / I’m sorry / I’m— .”⁴⁹ The televised war fractures her identity, causing her to reevaluate her patriotic and personal allegiances in the shadow of horrific violence. The trauma, as Magda Romanska suggests, comes from the fact that

⁴⁸ Andrew Hoskins, *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 59.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47-8.

The American “cannot escape the memories of what she has seen because escape means betrayal.”⁵⁰ It is, however, her position as a privileged American citizen, watching the war from the comfort of her New York City apartment, that feels to her like the more profound betrayal.

While The American and her father sit in front of the television, the screen glowing green with night vision footage of bombings in Baghdad, the audience learns of the effects experienced by Iraq citizens as a result of the United States bombardment. The Doctor explains the horrible birth defects and incurable cancers caused by chemicals released from American bombs dropped during the first Gulf War that continue to pollute the local water and food supply. Sammura, the young Iraqi girl, is so accustomed to bombings in her neighborhood that she can recognize the type of missile by the sound it makes as it hurtles toward the ground. And Umm Ghada, of course, describes the devastation of the bombing in 1991 that destroyed the Amiriyya bomb shelter and killed her family. While so many characters in the play speak to life under the constant threat of bombs, in performance their collective experiences are physicalized in Layal’s final monologue. As she proclaims her intent to create a mosaic of George W. Bush’s face on the floor of the Rashid Hotel in protest of his actions in Iraq, she becomes overwhelmed by the destruction she has seen in her country and the heartbreaking stories of the Iraqi women who feature in her paintings. Layal starts destroying her studio, smashing pottery and anything else she can grab, becoming more frenzied as she seems to physically embody the bombings in her country: “they’re making their own map of / me anyway— sure after every / bomb / first bomb

⁵⁰ Romanska, 230.

drilling bomb [...] second bomb come inside exactly the same spot [...] third bomb— boil the people.”⁵¹ Both her physicality and her language are repetitive and violent, mirroring the blasts happening throughout Baghdad as she speaks snippets of lines from the play’s other characters. Unlike her historic namesake, who was killed by an American bomb in 1993, Layal does not die at the hands of the United States government. Instead, Raffo writes in her production notes, “she willfully explodes under the weight of the many women she has taken on.”⁵² After her outburst, Layal turns to the audience and simply states, “I’m dead.”⁵³

Raffo’s use of the word “willfully” in this stage direction is significant. While the real Layla Al-Attar was considered by the American government to be collateral damage of war, Layal’s death in the play retains a sense of agency, a calculated statement made to draw attention to the complexities of the lives of women in Iraq. As Layal repeats the words of the other women in the play, she reinforces her assertion from earlier in the text as a representative of the characters’ collective trauma: “I am the body that takes the experience.”⁵⁴ In the final moments of Layal’s life, *9 Parts of Desire* shifts its focus from the detailed individual narratives to the larger perspective of interventionist theatre. The recognizable referents of Layal’s established character as developed throughout the play offer a sense of familiarity to the audience, but her death widens the lens from micropolitical to macropolitical as it becomes a larger protest against the prolonged silencing of Iraqi women. Layal’s death rewrites history in a way, as

⁵¹ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 60.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

through this character Raffo was able to give voice to an influential Iraqi artist who passed before her time. The fictionalized presence of the real Layla in *9 Parts of Desire* gives her the opportunity to speak for another generation of women fighting to survive in a country continually at war.

Furthermore, the moment of Layal's death in the play contradicts the proposed war story of institutionally submissive Iraqi women in need of rescuing. This sequence elucidates, as Hunt and Rygiel assert, that the dominant narratives of war are used "to camouflage a politics of control, that is a politics which depends on identifying outsiders, defined variously through the intersection of gender, race, religious, national, and class-based differences."⁵⁵ Within the traditional Western perspective of the war story, Layal would be framed as an oppressed Arab Muslim woman abused by Hussein's regime and utterly lacking in agency. This process of identification through "othering" allows the American government to maintain narrative control of the conflict. Although she does not survive the play, however, it would be reductive to categorize Layal as a victim. Through her artwork, she transcends death and memorializes the stories of Iraqi women, herself included, providing a resistance against social and political injustice that outlasts her corporeal presence.

A New Political Perspective

The available production reviews of *9 Parts of Desire* are almost universally consistent in their praise of Heather Raffo's balanced treatment of the politics surrounding the events she explores on stage. In her assessment of the

⁵⁵ Hunt and Rygiel, 15.

play for *Theatre Journal*, Maria Beach asserts that the piece is “a provocative work because of the multiplicity of ideas, emotions, and political viewpoints Raffo incorporates into her collective portrait.”⁵⁶ Charles Isherwood’s review in *The New York Times* warns that “Bush foes expecting a polemical broadside will be disappointed” because Raffo approaches her work like “a journalist, not a purveyor of propaganda.”⁵⁷ This is not to say that the play avoids criticism of the actions taken by Saddam Hussein or American military operations during the Gulf and Iraq Wars. As evidenced here, Raffo’s text does not soften the horrors that pervade everyday life in Iraq as she describes the brutal rapes of women, bombs that vaporize entire families, and the children who play with stray bullets tipped in depleted uranium. But despite the unapologetically frank way in which these gruesome effects of war are discussed, Raffo is deliberate in her assignation of responsibility to both American and Iraqi leadership. Given its equitable attention to the governmental actions of both the United States and Iraq, *9 Parts of Desire* may not seem overtly political in its content or performance. However, it is precisely Raffo’s evenhanded treatment of the play’s perspective that allows her to achieve perhaps the most revolutionary act of all of the pieces included in this study: the insertion of women back into the narrative of politics and power in Iraq.

The addition of the female voice into Iraq’s political history is explored most substantially in the character of Huda, an Iraqi exile living in London. The

⁵⁶ Maria Beach, “Nine Parts of Desire (review),” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 2006): 102.

⁵⁷ Charles Isherwood, “A Solitary Woman, Embodying All of Iraq,” *The New York Times*, Theater Section, October 14, 2004.

stage directions indicate that she is a woman in her seventies, a “whiskey drinker with over fifty years of smoking,”⁵⁸ and she describes herself variously as an intellectual, bourgeois, a communist, and always political. As someone who marched against the war in Vietnam and the violence in Beirut, Huda seems the ideal character to express vehement opposition to America’s siege of Iraq. Raffo subverts this expectation, however, and instead demonstrates through Huda the complexities of both sectarian and international conflicts that are often absent in anti-war protests. As a character, she functions as the source of institutional knowledge, having lived through several wars in Iraq and observed others throughout the world. Huda is a survivor from a particularly brutal era in Iraq’s history, and it is significant that Raffo situates the crux of her story within the context of the rise of the Ba’th Party and Saddam Hussein’s ascension to power.⁵⁹

Huda acknowledges her own hypocrisy in supporting the American invasion of her home country, but she cannot bring herself to side with those against the war because in her mind, such a stance is akin to siding with Saddam Hussein. As Huda explains, her inability to reconcile her moral opposition to war with her hatred of Saddam Hussein is a result of her own history as a young woman in Iraq. When the Ba’th Party came to power in 1963, they arrested 180,000 people in Baghdad— intellectuals, artists, and members of the elite, including Huda— because their personal ideologies stood in opposition to the new regime. In prison, Huda witnessed extreme acts of torture perpetrated against innocent civilians, describing for the audience horrific acts of degradation, rape,

⁵⁸ Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 22.

⁵⁹ “Ba’th” is alternatively spelled “Ba’ath,” but I am using the former spelling of the word here rather than the latter to remain consistent with Raffo’s usage.

and abuse. Though brutal in the treatment of their enemies, the Ba’th Party did initially instigate a number of social policies and programs, such as the General Federation of Iraqi Women, which increased the role of women in the government and the country as a whole.⁶⁰ However, the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and the Gulf War in the early 1990s crippled the economy in Iraq, which caused the position of the Ba’th Party to move away from many of its previously progressive social policies. Historian Nada Shabout writes that as a result of this political shift, “[i]nstead of being acknowledged as powerful contributors to nation building, Iraqi women were slowly relegated to being ‘mothers of future soldiers’ and eventually ‘mothers of martyrs.’ Women were no longer regarded as necessary civic participants.”⁶¹ With Saddam Hussein as the president of Iraq, a position he assumed in 1979, the rights of women were gradually eroded over his decades in power. Huda shares one particular example of a summer in which Saddam beheaded seventy women for being prostitutes, but, she explains, “he made them prostitutes.” His “stooges,” as she calls them, would kidnap a woman, hold her hostage as a sex slave, then tell her family that she was a prostitute, and

⁶⁰ The purpose and effectiveness of programs such as the General Federation of Iraqi Women remains a frequently debated issue, as some argue that as an extension of the Ba’th Party, the GFIW was not representative of the reality of women’s rights issues in the country and ultimately destructive to the progression of women’s freedoms. Others contend that despite the government’s ulterior motives, their emphasis on eradicating illiteracy and their implementation of job training programs for women did improve their economic and social position. Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali explores both sides of the issue in *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

⁶¹ Shabout, 150.

“behead her and put her head in the street. / There was no law if you are a prostitute you are beheaded.”⁶²

Huda’s self-imposed exile from Iraq during the Ba’th regime becomes a protest in itself against what her country was on the verge of becoming, a rejection of the fundamentalist mentality that was spreading across the nation towards the end of the twentieth century. Though she contemplated returning after Hussein was removed from power, she cannot bring herself to live where her freedom would be even more limited than what she previously experienced in Baghdad in her younger days. She explains that the young women in Iraq today “are too afraid to speak up / they are shell-shocked, all these girls / they’re going backwards [...] Their grandmothers are more liberated than them.”⁶³ She does not, however, lay all of the blame for the state of her nation on the Iraqi government. Huda is equally critical of the United States’ actions during the Gulf War, as the Americans’ promised assistance to the Shia’s internal rebellion against Saddam Hussein never arrived, and the uprising turned into a massacre; Hussein’s forces murdered tens of thousands of people and left them in mass graves. The isolationist policy instituted by the United States after these events is largely responsible for the increased brutality of Hussein and his government.

⁶² Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire*, 23. While I cannot verify this particular incident as specifically described in the play, there was a violent campaign against prostitution led by the Iraqi government in the mid-1990s that instituted such practices. Furthermore, there was a widely reported incident in October 2000 when a militia under the command of Saddam Hussein’s son, Uday, rounded up 300 alleged prostitutes and beheaded them. See Sadig Al-Ali, p. 201.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 39.

Huda's assessment of the situation is very direct, as she tells the audience, "this thirteen years embargo / just gave the fundamentalists their legitimacy."⁶⁴

Now in her mid-seventies, Huda uses a bottle of whiskey to cope with these memories as she tells the audience, "Myself, too, it takes a lifetime to be liberated."⁶⁵ In this moment, Raffo illustrates the central conflict inherent in the American mission to "liberate" the women of Iraq: even if the United States is able to help stabilize Iraq's government or encourage the restoration of women's rights to their previous condition, the trauma experienced by Iraqi women during the country's many violent wars will likely prevent those women from ever being truly free. Cathy Caruth's assessment of trauma, which is also referenced in the first chapter's discussion of Umm Ghada, is equally applicable to Huda here:

"The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess."⁶⁶

While Huda continues to struggle with the brutal memories of her past that still haunt her present, however, her appearance in the play is ultimately a commemoration of her survival. She is one of the few who can give voice to events that would otherwise remain unspoken, lost in the primarily male-dominated perspective of traditional war stories. Within the context of *9 Parts of Desire*, Huda becomes the political authority that she could never be under Hussein's rule in Iraq. In addition to providing a counter-narrative for the history of the events themselves, she also speaks to the effects of those political actions and policies on the women in her country. Just as Layal gives voice to other Iraqi

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁶ Caruth, "Introduction to Part 1," 5.

women through her paintings, Huda returns Iraqi women's wartime experiences to the country's political history.

Activism in the Diaspora

The works of Khalil, Sharif, and Raffo are undoubtedly political in their content and performances, offering substantive counter-narratives to the predominantly masculinist interpretations of war and conflict in the wake of September 11. Laila Farah, in her monodrama *Living in the Hyphen-Nation*, takes their interventionist approach a step further, framing her play as a piece of overt theatrical activism rooted in her personal experiences. As she explains in her introduction to "Resisting Arrest: Arresting Resistance," the fourth and final monologue in *Living in the Hyphen-Nation*, she believes that "the dangerous terrain of war, both psychological and physical, real and imagined, has to be understood by the audience members as a means of resisting it."⁶⁷ Through this final section of her performance, as well as the one that precedes it, titled "Adolescence in 'Absentia,'" Farah engages with the construction of war stories through a transnational framework. In these two sections of her performance, she draws compelling parallels between seemingly disparate events—connecting the invasions of Lebanon and Iraq in the "Adolescence in 'Absentia,'" and comparing the violent interrogation techniques at Abu Ghraib with those employed by police in Beirut in "Resisting Arrest: Arresting Resistance"—as a means of humanizing acts of war across the globe. By infusing these events with her personal experience, even those in which she was not physically a participant, Farah

⁶⁷ Farah, 335.

explores the effects of wartime violence and state-sanctioned intimidation on diasporic peoples.

Of all of Farah's deeply personal monologues, the story that she recounts in "Resisting Arrest: Arresting Resistance" appears to be the most difficult for her to share. Detailing her arrest and interrogation by officers at Karakol Hbeesh, Beirut's central district police headquarters, Farah notes halfway through the piece that the narrative as presented in performance is "my antiseptic 10-percent version."⁶⁸ The details of the story that she does reveal, such as hearing the screams of a tortured prisoner for six hours straight, being forced to watch the police beat a man with an electric cable, and the threat of rape from her interrogator, are gruesome enough that the audience can likely imagine the severity of the other ninety percent she has left out. Farah explains that her detention resulted from the arrest of one of her neighbors who was forced to watch the torture of her own brother until she gave up names of members of a drug gang; the girl "blurted out [Farah's] name as a person of foreign descent whose name she remembered."⁶⁹ Farah's arrest based on the accusation of someone who was herself tortured, supported only by the ethnicity of her name, echoes stories of the Abu Ghraib detention practices that began to circulate in late 2003, beginning with a report by Amnesty International detailing the extensive human rights violations committed at the prison. In creating this parallel, Farah's monologue becomes, as Collier and Spencer write of political performance, "an

⁶⁸ Ibid., 336.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 338.

apparatus for the construction of meaning rather than an index to it.”⁷⁰ That is, her examination of two distinct instances, significantly separated by decades and geography, allow for a multiplicity of meanings to emerge from both situations. The openness and opportunities for broader connections inherent in theatrical performance is a stark contrast to the singularity of traditional war narratives, which often reduce the identities of victims to facts and figures. Through the exploration of her own lived experience, Farah, as the work’s sole performer, positions her body on stage as a living, breathing representative for myriad bodies that have been victimized and tortured in the name of war.

The layers of storytelling in this monologue illustrate the ways in which “autobiographical narration offers occasions for negotiating the past.” As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note, within the presentation of personal experiences, “the autobiographical subject is in dialogue with her own processes and archives of memory. The past is not a static repository of experience but always engaged from a present moment, itself ever-changing.”⁷¹ The structure of Farah’s monodrama as a whole exemplifies this dialogic negotiation. Early in the play, she self-identifies as a Scheherazade-like figure, although the stories of Farah’s contemporary version of the myth are meant to promote activism rather than entertain a murderous king. This narrative framework allows Farah to depict a process whereby she is able to engage with recent experiences by contextualizing them through memories of the past, reclaiming agency for herself as well as for Scheherazade within circumstances that had previously relegated them to

⁷⁰ Colleran and Spencer, 1.

⁷¹ Smith and Watson, 9.

positions of passivity based on ethnicity and gender. In “Resisting Arrest: Arresting Resistance,” she tells the audience about her ability to spin a complex web of fiction over the course of eight intense interviews in prison to save herself from her interrogator. She then weaves into the narrative of this past experience the present (at the time of her play’s publication) account of similarly abusive interrogation techniques at Abu Ghraib.

The negotiation of her past trauma into a contemporary political statement demonstrates the potential in engendering war narratives: not only is Farah able to control the plot of her own war story, but her unique perspective creates a connection between the wartime conduct of two vastly different governments that challenges the ethics of the United States’ behavior. After describing some of the horrors she witnessed in Beirut, Farah argues against the American government’s use of torture at Abu Ghraib: “Our government responded by saying that we were still behaving better than Saddam Hussein did! What an excellent template for good conduct! [...] It wouldn’t be so bad if the U.S. government hadn’t been holding up a higher moral code and a superior sense of democratic process and justice for the Iraqi people.”⁷² Farah incisively reframes her experience as a political prisoner three decades ago to challenge the treatment of political prisoners in the supposedly more enlightened twenty-first century. In doing so, she succeeds in recasting the legendary Scheherazade in yet another unconventional role: that of human rights activist.

In contrast to the Scheherazadian tone of “Resisting Arrest,” “Adolescence in ‘Absentia’” engenders typical war stories in a way that perhaps more deeply

⁷² Farah, 340-1.

disrupts established hegemonic binaries than the work of any of her fellow female playwrights. That is, Farah's narrative not only adds a female perspective to existing accounts of a violent conflict, but she occupies within this narrative a role that is conventionally assigned to men. This particular monologue chronicles the years that Farah spent in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war, focusing in particular on the arrival of Israeli troops in 1982. In it, Farah describes a day at the beach with her friends that ends with them running from a storm of bullets in an almost action movie-style sequence. She tells the audience, "Suddenly, we are under fire, again. We run a zigzag to avoid being hit by the spray of bullets ripping the rock cliff above us; the pinging of metal hitting concrete where I have been just sunbathing gets so close that we can feel the bullets whiz by our heads."⁷³ Farah's recounting of this experience essentially situates her on the front lines of battle, dodging bullets from helicopters and shielding herself from explosions and debris. By inserting herself into stories of wartime experiences from which her gender would typically exclude her, Farah demonstrates the necessity for a revised approach in constructing the master narratives of war. Although their experiences may not provide politically or socially reassuring interpretations of conflict, it is clear that women are equally as involved in the violence and trauma of war as men. As Farah and her fellow female playwrights assert through their performances, the ingrained omission of their wartime narratives is no longer sustainable.

Farah's work also raises significant questions about the ways in which seemingly fixed definitions of home and community become more flexible

⁷³ Ibid., 333.

following such traumatic experiences. From the destruction of her childhood bedroom in the Beirut bombings, to her family's disdain towards her after bringing shame on them with her arrest, Farah details the ways in which violent conflicts can instigate a reevaluation of the concept of home. The sense of existing in between two worlds— whether they are physical locations or relational concepts of “before” and “after”— as instigated by the actions of nation-states committed during the course of war is presented as universal in Farah's performance. The international connections that she draws in these monologues emphasize the dialogic possibility of a broader conception of a diasporic community, one that is not based on a shared country of origin but rather a common political position. Through her analysis of diasporic communities, scholar Pnina Werbner asserts that “transnational diasporas do develop, over time, central focused concerns that animate their politics and aesthetics beyond the local.”⁷⁴ While Werbner is specifically addressing the tension between one's original homeland and a new homeland, her assessment can be expanded to include concerns shared globally by diasporic communities. Farah seems to echo this sentiment in her article through her concept of a “reflexive community,” which is “created by individuals who willingly throw themselves into dissent as a shared poetics of understanding within a particular community.”⁷⁵ Within this framework, the creation of a collective identity is established through shared values and an ethical stance about the so-called collateral damage of war. In this

⁷⁴ Pnina Werbner, “Introduction: The Materiality of Diaspora— Between Aesthetic and ‘Real’ Politics,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 2000): 17.

⁷⁵ Farah, 329.

way, diasporas become a site of resistance, simultaneously challenging the dominant narrative and empowering the people within these communities through shared histories. Their agency, in turn, becomes a kind of activism in itself, an argument for global human rights that is inherent in their traumatic wartime experiences.

(Re)Presenting History

If the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have taught us anything, it is that the very concept of war is substantially different in the twenty-first century than it was even a few decades ago. The fundamental notions of battle have been destabilized in recent years as the definitions of victory and peace— often considered to be the goals of war— have evolved and become less fixed. In a 2004 television interview, President Bush said of his War on Terror that he did not believe this particular kind of war could ever be won. While he later tried to backpedal on the conclusiveness of his comment, given that it came in the midst of his reelection campaign, the clarification of his statement by White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan highlights the unique circumstances of a conflict with wide-ranging adversaries and no defined geographical borders: “This is an unconventional war with an unconventional enemy. I don’t think there’ll be a formal surrender or a treaty signed.”⁷⁶ The United States has waged wars on drugs, gangs, cyber terrorists, extremists, and several other nebulous foes in recent memory, but the ways in which these wars are narrated and historicized has not changed all that

⁷⁶ Rick Pearson, “Bush: Terror war can’t be won,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 31, 2004.

significantly. As illustrated throughout this dissertation, conventional binaries are still employed to craft a male-dominated narrative of war, perhaps in part to offer some assurances regarding traditional gender roles and ideologies in the midst of conflicts that are otherwise challenging to define.

In contrast, political theatre after September 11 is multi-vocal, transnational, hybridic, and female-driven. The writer-performers whose work is analyzed here resist such master narratives by challenging stereotypical representations of Arab and Muslim women in the media as well as in official government communications, and they assert the significance of their wartime roles as civilians, mothers, activists, and survivors through intentionally gendered performances. Although Miriam Cooke was writing in the mid-1990s about the development of women's war stories during the preceding decades, her analysis of the significance of such counter-narratives remains applicable to the works discussed here. She observes:

Women in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s recognize the social possibilities inherent in political resistance and bring to their war participation the awareness that if political victory is to have any meaning at all, it must entail social transformation. Armed with this awareness, these women improvise ways of participating that are unlike those of their male counterparts, ways that do not negate their identities as women [...] These women write out of their own experiences, transforming the meanings others have traditionally attached to what they have done and to who they are, demanding recognition at the time of participation.⁷⁷

Khalil, Sharif, Raffo, and Farah's "improvised participation" in recent wars is accomplished through their solo performances, all of which foreground their experiences as Arab and Muslim American women during times of conflict. The

⁷⁷ Cooke, 11.

female perspective of the plays' creators, as well as the singular focus on female characters in each text, engenders war narratives in a way that gives voice to women who had previously been excluded from the story or used only to promote a political agenda. Together they destabilize the meanings that have been constructed on their bodies by both governmental and media forces, revising the representation of Arab and Muslim women on stage in an effort to challenge broader public perception. It is likely that only through hindsight will we be able to determine whether or not their work truly influenced the kind of social transformation referenced by Cooke, but there is no doubt that their solo performances have put to rest any concerns about the viability of contemporary political theatre. By staging resistance to hegemonic narratives, the multiplicity of these performers' voices and experiences demonstrate that there is no single knowable truth when it comes to the history of war.

Conclusion

The events of September 11, 2001, mark a significant turning point in the representation of Arab and Muslim identities in the United States. This is not to suggest, however, that Arab Americans went from invisible to visible after the terrorist attacks, an assertion made by several scholars and addressed here in the introduction. Nor does it imply that the existing representations of Arabs and Muslims shifted after 9/11 from largely positive to negative, as the prevalence of degrading stereotypes in American popular culture in the preceding decades is similarly demonstrated throughout this project. Rather, the turning point in the representation of Arabs and Muslims after September 11 is the moment that the United States government began relying on existing essentialist notions to publicly justify its military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As explored in the previous chapters, the gendered binaries already established in film and literature— Arab men as terrorist aggressors and Arab women as cultural and religious hostages— were manipulated by the American government and the Western media in a way that significantly influenced political and social attitudes toward people of Arab descent and practicing Muslims in the years after 9/11.

While the attention directed at Arabs and Muslims both in America and abroad after the attacks was largely negative and misguided, this heightened focus on specific representational tropes provided a concrete set of mass-produced referents against which writers and artists could rebel. The assertions about Arab and Muslim women in particular provided the playwrights in this study an opportunity to challenge these particular monolithic constructions while

simultaneously critiquing the ways in which gender is configured during times of conflict. Arab literature scholar Anastasia Valassopoulos suggests that “the circumstances of war are unique in that they may allow women to manipulate their own experiences in order to understand themselves as women and to re-interpret what they are capable of *outside* of the norms that govern societies in peacetime” [author’s emphasis].¹ Thus, within the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the writer-performers included here are able to explore the construction of their own diasporic identities, as well the global positionality of Arab and Muslim women, as a means of revising the representation of their ethnicity, gender, and religion on the American stage.

The significance of September 11 in the construction of Arab and Muslim American diasporic identities further demonstrates the indelible connection between the concept of identity in the diaspora and the sociopolitical climates of both the home and adopted communities. As such, diasporic identity involves a continuous process of reevaluation and reinterpretation that is often influenced by attitudes of the majority culture. Somaya Sami Sabry contends that “[r]acism works by affixing negative signifieds; however, undermining them is best done by not replacing those negative signifieds, but rather by drawing attention to the malleability of the signification process as a whole.”² After the events of September 11, the initial response from people of the Arab and Muslim diasporas with regards to identity construction was largely focused on what they were *not*: not terrorists, not suicide bombers, not anti-American, not Islamic extremists.

¹ Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (London: Routledge, 2007), 4-5.

² Sabry, 44.

The USA PATRIOT Act, special registration, and other government initiatives essentially forced many Arab and Muslim Americans to defensively self-identify in order to avoid further investigation. The works examined in this dissertation seemingly began with a similar oppositional approach, as the creators of these one-woman shows challenged many of the same assumed identities, as well as those specific to Arab and Muslim women. They are not, as their plays assert, oppressed, uneducated, or lacking in choice regarding their religion and its customs. Beyond these specific certainties, however, the performances by Raffo, Malik, Farah, and Sharif refuse the fixities of identification, whether self-determined or externally imposed, as Sabry suggests. Instead their work demonstrates the inherent, as well as the necessary, evolution of identity in the twenty-first century.

A Moment or a Movement?

While the productions of these female solo performers explore and extend the subversive potential of hybrid identities, questions have recently been raised about the flexibility and evolution of the Arab American theatre movement that was so widely touted at the beginning of the century. In the years following September 11, the mainstream media and academics alike described the proliferation of productions by Arab American playwrights as a new theatrical movement. An article in *American Studies Journal* article about Youssef El Guindi, for example, proclaimed “A New Arts Movement Is Born: Arab

American Theatre,”³ and *The New York Times* ran several articles about the significance of the emerging collective of Arab American playwrights.⁴ The idea of an Arab American theatre movement was further supported by the simultaneous development of a scholarly movement to advance the study of Arabs in the diaspora. In the wake of 9/11, universities began establishing Arab American studies programs and offering Arab Studies as an academic minor, and organizations such as the Arab American Studies Association were formed to further the advancement of research related to all aspects of Arab American identity. This emergence and support of a broader scope of inquiry is certainly an encouraging step toward dismantling many of the misinformed assumptions still lingering in the United States. However, in light of continuing reports of anti-Arab and Islamophobic aggression fifteen years after the terrorist attacks, it is sometimes difficult to determine if any truly substantive progress has been accomplished.

Jamil Khoury, the founding artistic director of Silk Road Rising and one of the earliest contributors to the proliferation of work by Arab American artists (both as a playwright and a producer), believes that the Arab American theatre movement has not yet fulfilled its revolutionary potential. In 2013, he wrote a mission statement examining the genre’s progress in the previous decade, taking into account the number of productions written by Arab American playwrights as well as the content of the plays themselves. In his assessment, although there

³ Anneka Esch-Van Kan, “Amazing Acrobatics of Language: The Theatre of Youssef El Guindi,” *American Studies Journal*, No. 52 (2008): 1.

⁴ See the articles by Liesl Schillinger and Dinitia Smith previously cited in the introduction of this project.

have been impressive accomplishments from a number of individuals, as a community Arab American theatre artists have fallen short in their efforts to challenge the theatrical status quo:

I want a lot from an Arab American theatre movement. My wants are not modest. I want Arab American playwrights and directors and actors and designers to be sought out for our excellence and ingenuity. I want Arab American producers to be power brokers and star makers. I want the inclusion of Arab American plays to be a given when curating a season. I want our stories to not just enter the mainstream, but to help define the mainstream. I want an Arab American theatre movement that is politically and socially progressive, and that aligns itself to other progressive movements, both in the United States and in the Arab World. I want an Arab American theatre movement that reflects our community's rich diversity and highlights our uniqueness within the global Arab community.⁵

Khoury places some of the responsibility for the lack of a fully realized Arab American theatre movement on the ingrained practices of theatres to appeal to their subscriber base and therefore avoid any plays that are potentially controversial. However, he most emphatically points to his fellow Arab American writers and producers as the people who he believes should be pushing boundaries to “emancipate [Arab American artists] from cultural distopia and political powerlessness.”⁶

Khoury's plea for a more significant contribution of cultural production and representation by Arab American theatrical artists, and the subsequent recognition of American theatre as a whole, seems to be gaining more traction. Stephen Karam, a playwright of Lebanese heritage, was a 2012 Pulitzer Prize

⁵ Jamil Khoury, “Towards An Arab American Theatre Movement,” July 11, 2013, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://www.silkroadrising.org/news/towards-an-arab-american-american-theatre-movement-text>.

⁶ Ibid.

finalist for his play *Sons of the Prophet*. The play, which has received productions throughout the country since its opening at the Roundabout Theatre Company in 2011, chronicles a growing list of challenges facing a Lebanese American family, yet retains a sense of humor and humanity in the midst of such suffering. Writer and actor Ayad Akhtar has, in the past three years, become one of the most prolific and lauded American playwrights. As a Pakistani American, he is not ethnically Arab, but his work addresses the complexities of diasporic identities and his Muslim faith in a post-9/11 world. A feature article in *The Washington Post* notes that the contemporary question of Muslim identity “informs all of his work. Akhtar himself has struggled to come to terms with his heritage, and his deeply personal exploration into his faith and culture have led him to an artistic awakening.”⁷ Akhtar’s play *Disgraced*, about issues of religious persecution and racial tensions that permeate an Upper East Side dinner party, received the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in Drama. After critically acclaimed productions in Chicago, off-Broadway in New York, and London, the show was produced on Broadway in the fall of 2014, receiving a Tony Award nomination for Best Play. *Disgraced* also reached the number one spot on *American Theatre*’s list of most-produced plays in the 2015-16 theatre season.⁸ His two other plays, *The Invisible*

⁷ Stephen Levingston, “Ayad Akhtar: On Muslim identity, and life in America,” *The Washington Post*, Entertainment Section, July 19, 2014.

⁸ Diep Tran, “The Top Ten Most-Produced Plays of the 2015-16 Season,” *American Theatre* online, September 16, 2015, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/09/16/the-top-10-most-produced-plays-of-the-2015-16-season/>. The article notes that this is only the third time since *American Theatre* started tallying productions in 1994 that a playwright of color has occupied the top spot (the other two were Lynn Nottage for *Intimate Apparel* in 2005-6 and Yasmina Reza for *Art* in 2000-01 and 2002-2).

Hand (2012) and *The Who & the What* (2014), both received successful regional theatre productions before moving to off-Broadway venues in New York in 2014.

Of the female writer-performers included in this project, many of them have sustained a consistently vocal theatrical presence and continued their challenge to the stereotypes of racial and gendered discourses. Rohina Malik, for instance, is currently the playwright-in-residence at the 16th Street Theater just outside of Chicago, where her play *Yasmina's Necklace* has just sold out its extended run. The play, about the son of an Iraqi father and Puerto Rican mother, explores the indelible connections to one's cultural heritage that cannot be erased even with the most persistent attempts at assimilation. *The Mecca Tales*, which was commissioned and developed at the Goodman Theatre, was produced in 2015 at Chicago Dramatists and nominated for a prestigious Jeff Award. As an advocate and activist, Malik continues to perform *Unveiled* and speak out against Islamophobia around the country, visiting universities, churches, synagogues, and mosques.

Heather Raffo in particular continues to push theatrical boundaries with her work, maintaining a connection to her Iraqi heritage while pursuing an extremely varied list of projects. In 2009, she developed a concert version of 9 *Parts of Desire* for the Kennedy Center called *Sounds of Desire*, which she has toured to universities and arts centers around the country. Raffo has also adapted Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* into *Noura*, a contemporary interpretation of the play focused on a family of Iraqi immigrants that has received staged readings in Washington, D.C. and New York. Most recently, she worked as the librettist for

an opera called *Fallujah*, which had its world premiere at Long Beach Opera in March 2016. The piece is based on the real-life story of Christian Ellis, a trained opera singer who joined the Marine Corps at age 19 and served as a machine gunner during Operation Iraqi Freedom. During the battle of Fallujah in 2004, his squad was ambushed; Ellis' spine was fractured by an IED and his best friend was killed. Ellis suffered from extreme PTSD, and after returning home he tried to commit suicide four times and ended up homeless. Raffo was commissioned to write the libretto for the musicalization of Ellis' experiences, a project that she says was "the hardest thing I had to do."⁹ Initially she was hesitant to humanize the American military, interviewing veterans for her research and hearing them talk about Iraq, knowing that their presence essentially drove her family from their country. In an interview with NPR, she said, "It's brutal right now, because almost all of my family is out of Iraq. It's not their home anymore: A hundred family members are down to four, and the rest are scattered all over the world. And I'm pissed." But then, she realized, "I knew I *had* to. And I thought, this is my opportunity to be a better human being, and a better artist. And— to love."¹⁰

Raffo, Malik, Sharif (who writes and performs frequently in New York), and Farah (who teaches full time in the Women and Gender Studies Department at DePaul University) continue to engage with the challenges of hybrid identities in a post-9/11 world. As solo performers, they connected their identities and histories with the current sociopolitical climate in a way that created pedagogical

⁹ Neda Ulaby, "An Iraq War Opera Finds a Vein of Empathy," *NPR* online, March 18, 2016, accessed March 19, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2016/03/18/470973622/an-iraq-war-opera-finds-a-vein-of-empathy>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

opportunities within their theatrical explorations of identity formation. Now, fifteen years after the terrorist attacks altered both their public and self-perception, these female artists continue to demonstrate that they are determined to finish the work they began all those years ago. These women continue to dismantle the negative implications of the mediatized collective identity of Arab and Muslim women and instead create their own collective of diasporic performers and educators.

Continuing the Conversation

Just as Khoury suggests in his open letter that greater progress needs to be made in both the productions and acceptance of work by Arab American playwrights, there is still improvement to be made in the scholarly consideration of work by Arab American theatre artists as well. One of my primary objectives in writing this dissertation was to put Arab and Muslim American female playwrights in conversation with one another through a detailed, comprehensive analysis of their work. At present, the scholarly material currently devoted to the work by Arab American playwrights is limited in both depth and breadth. By that I mean that the critical attention paid to this genre of contemporary theatre is generally relegated to academic journals or individual book chapters of an edited volume, the parameters of which inherently constrain the opportunity for extensive consideration of the subject. Furthermore, as stand-alone articles or chapters, these analyses are unable to engage with other similar works, beyond the broad theme of the particular journal issue or essay collection.

This kind of academic isolation, for lack of a better term, is evident even in several of the scholarly works consulted for this project. For example, in *Political and Protest Theatre After 9/11: Patriotic Descent*, edited by Jenny Spencer, the chapter addressing the work of Arab American playwrights is situated in a way that separates it from the supposedly “mainstream” topics of some of the other chapters. The book is divided into two sections: the first, entitled “Mainstages,” includes, among others, articles about Broadway musicals, Caryl Churchill, and the popular Scottish import *Black Watch*, while the second, “Alternative Spaces,” addresses varied topics, including the work of Eve Ensler, a revival of *The Brig*, and Dalia Basiouny’s article on two Arab American female playwrights. Given the collection’s broad focus on political theatre and the extremely diverse subjects of its individual chapters, the separation into two separate parts seems somewhat arbitrary. Whatever the reason behind this editorial decision, the classification of Basiouny’s article under the “Alternative Spaces” heading is inaccurate, as the shows Basiouny discusses are performed in standard theatrical spaces (small venues, but theatres nonetheless). More significantly, however, it continues the marginalization of Arab American playwrights and performers even in its attempt to be inclusive.

Although she was writing nearly a decade ago, Darcy Zabel’s concerns about the broad, historical-based approach of the contributions to the field of Arab American studies after September 11 remain largely true today. She writes that the scholarly focus on “countering anti-Arab American stereotypes” and “cataloging the long history of the Arab presence in the United States” attempts to

“justify or simply celebrate the Arab American presence in American, rather than to truly engage in scholarship about specific facets and representation of Arab culture in the Americas, which is, ultimately, the only way to advance the field of Arab American studies.”¹¹ It is my hope that this project answers Zabel’s call for an analysis of specific facts of Arab and, in this particular case, Muslim culture in the Americas, and that it contributes to the advancement of Arab American theatre studies. As I move forward in my research, I plan to apply this methodology to a more expansive list of works by Arab and Muslim American women playwrights. While the scope of my dissertation retains a tight focus on the solo performances that engage specifically with the events of September 11 and the ensuing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are many more one-woman shows by Arab and Muslim American artists that I wish to explore. The work created by writer-performers such as Leila Buck, Cynthia Sophiea, and Kayhan Irani, for example, follows the trend of the artists included here in that their solo performances name and claim a hybrid identity that undermines prevailing attitudes and engages the audience in the complexities of self-identification in the diaspora. The continuation of this manuscript will open up a dialogue between the one-woman shows that focus directly on September 11 and those that deal more specifically with development of Arab and Muslim American female identity in the twenty-first century.

Although the conversation focused on revising the theatrical representation of Arab and Muslim American women began nearly fifteen years

¹¹ Darcy A. Zabel, “The Arab in the Americas: Latin America, the United States, and Canada,” in *Arabs in the Americas: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Arab Diaspora*, ed. Darcy A. Zabel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006), 1-2.

ago, recent events have illuminated its significance and the necessity of making further progress. Just as anti-Arab sentiment and Islamophobia increased exponentially after September 11, the similarly vitriolic response following the terrorist attacks in Paris, San Bernardino, and Brussels confirms that in the public consciousness, there remains an indelible connection among Arab, Muslim, and terrorist identities. Equally egregious as the continued proliferation of negative stereotypes is the lack of media attention dedicated to terrorist bombings that have occurred outside of Western Europe. An ISIS attack in Beirut a week before the Paris bombings was only briefly mentioned in the media, despite the fact that 44 people were killed and more than 200 wounded. Bombings perpetrated by ISIS in Baghdad, the Ivory Coast, and several cities in Turkey during the first few months of 2016 also received minimal media attention. This absence of a global media response has prompted some critical headlines, such as the recent one from the BBC asking, “Do terror attacks in the Western world get more attention than others?”¹² If we need to ask this question in the first place, the answer is likely “Yes.” But I think the more important question is *why* these tragedies are deemed less significant in the eyes of the Western media. If, as I suspect, it is a function of institutionalized prejudice against Arabs and Muslims, then those who oppose this inequality need to demand more from media outlets and governments across the world. Perhaps the fervent theatrical response from Arab and Muslim American playwrights to the post-9/11 backlash will be replicated in the coming

¹² Mike Wendling, “Do terror attacks in the Western world get more attention than others?”, *BBC News*, March 25, 2016, accessed March 25, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35886051>.

years to counter continued injustices, hopefully broadening the conversation in a way that promotes lasting social and political change.

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