# Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11

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## Introduction

This article will examine the effects of 9/11 on Arab Americans and other minorities. 9/11 altered nearly all aspects of American life; even the so-called restoration of "the American lifestyle" is a contrived metamorphosis given the deliberate manner in which American leaders urged its convalescence. 9/11 and its aftermath leave social critics with a remarkably broad range of issues to examine, primary among them a more patriotic—some might say more defensive—sensibility among students and educators. This sensibility is especially *apropos* in relation to what is often referred to as ethnic or multicultural studies. (Even though both terms are problematic, I will use the more common designation *ethnic studies* to describe the area studies of non-White American ethnic groups.) Ethnic critics have long invoked and then challenged centers of traditional

(White) American power. They also have maintained strong ties to radical politics; ethnic critics, in fact, have been pivotal in unmasking the workings of American imperialism and in turn formulating alternative politics in response to that imperialism, both domestic and international (for instance, Edward Said, Vine Deloria, Jr., Robert Warrior, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Barbara Christian, Craig Womack, Lisa Suhair Majaj).

Because ethnic critics challenge the production and reproduction of American hegemony, we must explore how those challenges function in a newly reactive—indeed, at times oppressive—American atmosphere. After 9/11, dissent, a cornerstone of ethnic studies, was attacked as unpatriotic, a serious accusation in today's society. In modern American universities, which increasingly are seen as investments that ultimately must pay dividends, dissent—i.e., lack of patriotism—is conceptualized as irresponsible by enraged parents and conservative groups. Since dissent is inherent in ethnic studies, it is usually the target of the attacks (NoIndoctrination.org, for example, is filled with African American Studies courses). An American Indian Studies professor put it to me this way in a recent conversation: "How do we get people to understand the reality of American imperialism in Indian communities when imperialism is such a taboo topic now?" With the appropriate variations, this is a crucial question for any scholar dealing with domestic or international communities that are in some sort of conflict with the United States.

As an Arab American critic, I feel particularly affected by the question enumerated above. If we alter it a bit, we are left with the following: How do instructors of Arab American culture and society comprehend the position of the Arab American community in the aftermath of 9/11? How have Arab American culture and society changed? How, in turn, has the pedagogy of Arab America changed? And how, most important, do we find a viable space to develop Arab American Studies now that Arab Americans receive the sort of attention for which its scholars once clamored?

The last question is resonant, albeit extraordinarily complex. While Arab American critics once lamented a lack of Arab American issues in various disciplines, the sudden inclusion of those issues across the academic spectrum is at best ambivalent. Before 9/11, Arab American scholars were only beginning to theorize the relationship between Arab Americans and the field of ethnic studies (as well as other fields and area studies). We therefore have little prior scholarship with which to work in speculating how to position in the Academy what has become a highly manifold community after 9/11. In the following sections, I will summarize relevant issues in Arab America before and after 9/11; analyze the post-9/11 terminology that shapes mainstream perceptions of Arabs and Arab Americans; discuss theoretical issues that influence both the production and reception of Arab American scholar-

ship; and assess possible relationships among Arab American politics and the politics of other ethnic or minority groups.

### Arab Americans Before and After

It perhaps is foolish to discuss the development of a communal scholarship in the aftermath of a particular event. We would like to think, after all, that scholarship—its production and reception—is shaped by more than reaction. Many of us also promote the semi-idealized notion that scholarship shapes events just as much as it is shaped by them. Literary critics, in particular, have attended to questions of influence and resistance for decades, a process that raised more questions with few answers. The recent ascendance of ethnic literatures has both informed and complicated longstanding debates about the uses and usefulness of literature, which, before the rise of multiculturalism, focused almost exclusively on White authors of the traditional canon. That ascendance is especially resonant after 9/11, an event whose socio-political implications scholars and philosophers are only beginning to understand. I mention literature here because it is so often a site where cultural and moral conflicts are invoked and analyzed, indeed encoded. I want to explore those conflicts on their own in the hope that, later, we can better apply them to discussion of literature or the pedagogy of literature. More than anybody, Arab Americans experienced far-reaching socio-political implications following 9/11 without, unfortunately, generating a corresponding body of internally constructed—i.e., Arab American produced—scholarship to examine the rapid transformations occurring in the community. These socio-political implications are only now starting to develop into analyzable phenomena. Most important, though, Arab Americans did not have a mature scholarly apparatus before 9/11. It has proved challenging to develop one in response to an event that so drastically affected the makeup of the Arab American community.

The last point warrants some attention because it will be of central concern to my essay. In the years preceding 9/11, Arab American scholars from a variety of disciplines were discussing Americans of Middle Eastern background as *Arab Americans*—a development whose importance should not be underestimated—and assessing some possibilities of coalescing a distinct area study around that category. Literary critics undertook a majority of the attempts, but were buttressed—sometimes conjointly—by historians, anthropologists, creative writers, psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, lawyers, demographers, pollsters, and others. Although academic circles and American society in total occasionally acknowledged an Arab American entity, the community was largely, in Nadine Naber's words, "the 'invisible' racial/ethnic group" of the United States (2000, 37). 9/11 dramatically altered this

reality. Arab Americans evolved from invisible to glaringly conspicuous (whether or not the conspicuousness was welcomed).

Such a drastic evolution in some cases reinforced the salience of pre-9/11 scholarship, but in other cases rendered it antiquated or, worse, useless. Before 9/11 scholars examined Arab American invisibility or marginality—or whatever other term they employed to denote peripherality—but after 9/11 they were faced with a demand to transmit or translate their culture to mainstream Americans. The demand was matched by an insatiable curiosity about Arabs and Arab Americans; everybody from "everyday" Americans to high-ranking politicians wanted to know about the people who had irrevocably altered American life. Arab Americans suddenly were visible, and because of the pernicious intentions of various law and intelligence agencies, that visibility was not necessarily embraced. Indeed, it was often feared and deplored. These issues suddenly forced Arab Americans into a paradigm shift whose implications are enormous because there was no stable paradigm from which to shift emphasis in the first place. An area study that had been exploratory immediately became too much in demand for its own good.

Another competing but no less relevant factor deals with the political sensibilities of the Arab American community. Michael Suleiman (1999), Alixa Naff (1993), Eric Hooglund (1987), Nabeel Abraham (1994), and Nadine Naber (2000) all agree that before the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Arab Americans, who were overwhelmingly Christian at that point, tended to assimilate even while maintaining cultural features of the so-called Old World (e.g., food, theology, child rearing, family ties—the Arabic language, for the most part, was not passed down from immigrants to children). After 1967, however, many Arab Americans reclaimed a sense of nationalism. The nationalism, sparked in large part by glaring Arab dispossession, was reinforced by a new wave of Muslim Arab immigrants who had been politicized already in the Arab World and had no need, given America's fairly protected civil liberties, to hide their ethnic-religious identities. Newly arrived Christian and Druze Arabs did the same. A steady appearance of "pro-Arab" or "revisionist" historiography on the Middle East in the following years helped to instill ethnic pride in Arab Americans, who, prior to 1967, had virtually no representation in popular and political American culture. By the 1990s, a thoroughly *Arab* consciousness existed in Arab immigrants and American-born Arabs, who rapidly were expressing that consciousness intellectually and creatively.

Although no single form of consciousness—or conception of *Arab American*—can be said to have existed during this period, scholars were on the verge of critical breakthroughs in the years directly preceding 9/11. This fact was evident in the publication of Michael Suleiman's edited volume *Arabs in America: Building a New Future* (1999), Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash's *Post*

*Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999), and a series of theoretically sophisticated articles by Lisa Suhair Majaj. In the literary arena, Diana Abu-Jaber and Rabih Alamedine received wide acclaim for novels that invoked both Arab American and Middle Eastern themes. Vibrant gatherings to celebrate Arab cultures and discuss Arab American concerns occurred across the United States, in large cities and rural towns. College students with half or quarter Arab blood, some three or four generations removed from the Middle East (usually Syria or Lebanon), suddenly found value in being Arab American and reclaimed their ethnicity by visiting the Middle East to learn Arabic or work for NGOs in villages and refugee camps. This phenomenon can only be understood if we situate it with similar phenomena occurring with individuals from other ethnic groups—N. Scott Momaday's famous example of his mixedblood mother "choosing" to be Cherokee, for instance. It is no accident that such ethnic valuations, whatever their merits and problems, corresponded with the rise of the Black and Indian power movements of the sixties and seventies, as well as the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC], and various anti-war organizations (even virulently anti-Arab groups like Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League helped to create an atmosphere in which ethnic identity assumed great importance). While it is difficult to comprehend fully the effects of those movements, they often gave marginalized, lonely, or ambivalent youth (or adults in some cases) the illusion of stable identity or a feeling of belonging to communities distinguishable from mainstream society. The feeling was especially powerful for those displeased with certain American politics. This motivation has been particularly resonant in Arab America.

The reclamation or recovery of an Arab American identity is in many ways analogous to the social trajectories of other ethnic groups, and can therefore be considered typical of modern American acculturation and deculturation. And yet international relations have played a prominent role in the construction and consolidation of Arab America as a social and political unit. Nothing has been of more concern to Arab Americans since 1967 than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although Iraq has also been pivotal since 1990. American support for Israel has long enraged Arab Americans (and others), thereby providing Arab Americans with a tangible rallying cry and political purpose. The support also has been an important binding force for a community that, despite popular perception, is far from homogenous, containing as it does people with over twenty national backgrounds, a multitude of linguistic dialects, and numerous religions. Therefore, while Palestine may have expedited the coalescence of an Arab American identity, it in no way exclusively dictates or maintains it. Like any other ethnic group, Arab Americans

function as a communal entity based on innumerable factors, both cultural and political.

Ultimately, though, it can be said that no single event shaped the destiny of Arab Americans more than 9/11. After 9/11, the Arab American community, which consists of approximately five million people, was thrust into the spotlight. This attention represented a drastic change from the community's previous position, for during the times that Arab Americans attempted to be noticed—times generally related to their flagship issue, Palestinian independence—it was rare for mainstream forums to acknowledge them. When Arab Americans were acknowledged, it was usually in the form of ridicule, dismissal, or an outright racism that had long been considered an unacceptable way to address other ethnic groups. It is a general rule that ambivalence will follow when a once-ignored or outright slandered community is suddenly offered unceasing attention and is asked to define and redefine itself daily. The peculiar nature of the sudden attention after 9/11 only did more to catalyze Arab Americans into serious introspective glances. That attention was simultaneously an outpouring of hostility and kindness. On the day of the attack, Rudy Guliani and George W. Bush urged Americans not to engage in racial violence and to prevent any that might occur, as did practically every television commentator and politician of significance. For every racist comment and report of harassment, there were ten stories about "average" Americans going out of their way to make their Arab neighbors feel safe and welcome.

But what do those pronouncements actually reveal about the culture from which they were produced and the community at which they were directed? And what were their effects on both? First, while they were in some cases sincere when uttered by politicians and probably sincere in every case when uttered by civilians, the cultural impulses inspiring them cannot be considered altogether pure since they drew tacitly from a tradition of forced assimilation. (It is also problematic that such pronouncements needed constant repeating to begin with.) While the goodwill of everyday Americans cannot be called into question, one might look upon aspects of the discourse of American leaders with suspicion. They attempted to urge Arab Americans, before 9/11 generally anti-assimilationist and radical, into total assimilation. In this case, it was not a forced assimilation that other ethnic groups, primarily natives, have experienced. It took the form of the repeated statements: "They're American, too"; "They're American, just like you"; "They also love this country." The suspicion I cite should be drawn out briefly. A community can accept the call, whether or not it was solicited, to be absorbed fully into the politics of its surrounding society only if it assumes that the surrounding society's politics are amenable to the community. This has never been the case with Arab Americans because the American govern-

ment has long been involved in the Arab World in a way that most Arab Americans find invasive and unjust. Moreover, draconian legislation like the USA Patriot Act wholly contradicts the occasionally inclusive language of Congress and the Bush Administration.

The Patriot Act, however, is only the first legislative initiative of what many legal scholars fear will be a series of federal resolutions that might severely limit civil liberties. In January, 2003, Bill Moyers posted on the *NOW* website the text for the Domestic Security Enhancement Act [DSEA] (also known as Patriot Act II), which would further enable federal agents and intelligence officials to intrude in people's private lives and detain them for indefinite periods of time without legal counsel based solely on suspicion. This type of legislation may soon not be limited to visitors, immigrants, aliens, or permanent residents. American citizens also are under scrutiny. In February, 2003, *The Nation*'s David Cole revealed the purpose of the DSEA. He writes,

> If the Patriot Act was so named to imply that those who question its sweeping new powers of surveillance, detention and prosecution are traitors, the DSEA takes that theme one giant step further. It provides that any citizen, even native-born, who supports even the lawful activities of an organization the executive branch deems "terrorist" is presumptively stripped of his or her citizenship. To date, the "war on terrorism" has largely been directed at noncitizens, especially Arabs and Muslims. But the DSEA would actually turn citizens associated with "terrorist" groups into aliens. (Cole 2003, 4)

Cole later notes that suspect citizens "would then be subject to the deportation power, which the DSEA would expand to give the Attorney General the authority to deport any noncitizen whose presence he deems a threat to our 'national defense, foreign policy or economic interests'" (2003, 4).

The domestic environment, then, is one that terrifies many Arab Americans and keeps them from politics, especially Palestinian politics, because the fear of being harassed or arrested is more than mere paranoia. At the same time, Arab Americans feel that they have no real leadership on which they can rely. Nobody genuinely speaks their concerns in the media and nobody has the adequate power to protect them from FBI investigations should their names become suspicious to American officials. Arab Americans, and many others, are under the impression that speaking too loudly against the war on terror or American support for Israel is a viable cause for suspicion. In addition, Arab Americans cannot discuss on campus the conditions of Palestinian life in the occupied territories without harassment, complaints of anti-Americanism, or, worse, accusations of anti-Semitism.

All the issues enumerated above have appeared in Arab American literature. Directly following 9/11, Palestinian American poet Suhair Hammad

penned a widely circulated poem, "First Writing Since," that explored her shared ethnicity with the hijackers and her shared nationality with their victims. The Arab American literary journal *Mizna* has run poems, short stories, and essays that deal with the effects of 9/11 on Arab American identity and on the relationship between Arab Americans and their Arab brethren (the first issue after 9/11 was devoted entirely to the attacks). The themes are constant and usually didactic: The authors feel closer to the American polity and concurrently isolated from it. That sort of theme denotes, as Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia have described of Edward Said, the paradox of identity. In the year after 9/11 no critical study of identity in the Arab American community was published in a sociological, psychological, historical, or literary journal, with one exception: A *Middle East Report* devoted to the influence of 9/11 on Arab and Muslim Americans. This lack of critical inquiry is, of course, highly problematic, as the Arab American community continues to enhance its ambivalence by allowing the dominant society to define it and speak on its behalf. Arab Americans seem on the verge of borrowing from the sensibilities common among scholars of other ethnic groups in proclaiming that no matter how well-intentioned the speaker, when it comes to community issues, it should be Arab Americans who have priority in speaking. One often finds this sentiment expressed in literature, since numerous Arab Americans find it the last haven of articulation that still belongs to them. Cultural journals such as *Mizna, JUSOOR*, and *al-Jadid* have therefore assumed great importance in the community during the past few years.

## "The American Way of Life"

Some years back, I published a column in the *Palestine Chronicle* urging Arab Americans to reformulate a self-image by rejecting the vocabulary of "terrorism" employed so uncritically in today's United States. My columns for the paper usually elicited passionate reactions, but this one provoked outright anger from a few American readers whose vocabulary I had attacked. One reader demanded to know why I "split time between the United States and the Middle East," as my author bio explained. The message claimed that discomfiting motivations were evident in my article: "Apparently your dislike for the American way of life and the determination of the current administration to keep it that way, even if it means war, is a problem for you."

This formulation in many ways accurately highlights the relationship between Arab Americans and the larger society in which they live. Often accused of dual sympathies, Arab Americans feel sometimes as if they are removed (of their own accord) from the Middle East, but equally removed (not of their own accord) from the United States. Xenophobia certainly plays a role in the isolation many Arab Americans feel, but it would be foolish to

limit our analysis to either xenophobia or racism. While the respondent to my article is most likely xenophobic and perhaps racist—would she have objected had I split time between the United States and, say, Britain?—her sensibilities can be attributed to a more profound phenomenon dating to the settlement of the New World.

I speak about a particular type of discourse that, with technical and temporal variations, has existed continuously in the United States, what I term *imperative patriotism*. Imperative patriotism assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory. It is drawn from a longstanding sensibility that nonconformity to whatever at the time is considered to be "the national interest" is unpatriotic. Imperative patriotism is most likely to arise in settler societies, which usually need to create a juridical mentality that professes some sort of divine mandate to legitimize their presence on indigenous land. The juridical mentality impresses conformity on the settlers, who might otherwise demur when being asked to slaughter indigenes or when absorbing attacks by them. Hilton Obenzinger demonstrates that this mentality existed in early America, where settlers "invested New England settlement, and by extension all of America, with a sense of religious destiny: that the new society extinguishing the various indigenous peoples' claims to land and independence was a re-creation of the scriptural narrative of covenantal, chosen-people identity" (1999, 24).

This sensibility has evolved into a detectable feature of modern American politics. When one hears George W. Bush present war on Iraq as a "war for civilization" and make statements such as "either you are for us or against us" and "God is on America's side," it becomes clear that early settler ethos, in which the settlers were conferred a divine mission, continue to influence American discourse—and, more important, American morality. Imperative patriotism arises in this context. I prefer the phrase *imperative patriotism* to the unmodified *patriotism* because the word *imperative* insinuates necessity and purpose. It further denotes a particular set of American desires (enumerated below) that connects to a historical dynamic. In modern America, while imperative patriotism functions at the levels of discourse and philosophy, it generates its strength most consistently at the level of morality. Imperative patriotism manifests itself most explicitly during wartime or domestic unrest. Ethnic nationalist movements, such as the American Indian Movement and Black Panthers, were widely considered to be inimical to American values and therefore also caused the manifestation of imperative patriotism. (Even movements using less nationalist rhetoric, such as the SCLC and Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, evoked fear in many Americans.) Moreover, imperative patriotism both informs and is derived

from colonial discourse. Politicians frequently speak about the need to occupy Arab countries and "civilize" them by introducing the natives to "democracy." (Like the colonial discourse before it, this one rarely mentions the actual motivation for intervention: The plunder of resources, in this case oil.) Americans today hear so much about the need for their government's "leadership" in all areas of the world that most, like the Europeans before them, automatically equate colonization with generosity and moral strength.

Yet perhaps the most crucial (and discomfiting) feature of imperative patriotism is its relationship with xenophobia. While imperative patriotism has a symbiotic moral association with colonial discourse, it is more disconnected from xenophobia because it does not actually arise from xenophobia, which is a phenomenon that, to a degree, has its roots in European contact with Indians, but more traditionally has resulted from animosity over (perceived or real) economic disparity. On one level, xenophobia is a less vicious form of colonial discourse, but it more often results from a certain type of fear that is generated when people feel that their economic stability (or the possibility of it) is threatened—as, for instance, when laborers battle with immigrants over blue-collar jobs or when middle- to upper-class Whites complain to city councils about immigrants moving into their neighborhoods. Imperative patriotism, however, tends to inform xenophobia, a fact that is expressed in statements such as, "If you don't like America, go back to where you came from"; "If you don't agree with the United States, why don't you just leave?"; and "A real American works hard and doesn't complain." These statements insinuate that "American" is a stable, fixed identity rooted in a physical and cultural Whiteness for which many immigrants do not qualify. They also indicate that in xenophobia narrow political suppositions often govern social behavior: To dissent against the imagined mores of America is to forfeit identification as American. Leaving the United States then becomes the only logical option.

It is easy to see how these suppositions are played out in the reader's complaint that I "dislike the American way of life." The reader assumes that only one or few forms of thought and/or behavior constitute "the American way of life." This sensibility has long been common in the United States and has proliferated since 9/11, in no small part because of the colonial discourse arising from hawks in Washington. And yet it would be reductionist to attribute the sensibility to a crude xenophobia informed by imperative patriotism. It is better conceptualized as an articulation of imperative patriotism that appears at first glance to be crude xenophobia, but in reality brings to mind remnants of settler discourse with its rigid juridical undercurrents. One might argue that it is impossible to define "the American way of life" since the United States is a multicultural society with thousands of subcultures (not

to mention the fact that numerous Central and South Americans also consider themselves to be "American"). Nevertheless, at the popular level, it is assumed that a "true" American is (or should be) patriotic and capitalistic, and, less explicitly, Christian and White.

Arab Americans exist as a composite of postmodern Americana and American subculture in this complex of issues. To various degrees, their positioning in the United States has been highly complex for some time, but 9/11 exacerbated the complexities by simultaneously endowing the community with sympathetic gestures and amplifying xenophobic outpourings of imperative patriotism, a mindset that is by its very nature antithetical to the Arab American experience. The irony of this positioning became evident when Doug Marlette, a senior writer for the *Tallahassee Democrat*, portrayed Mohammad as a terrorist driving a truck loaded with nuclear bombs, a portrayal for which the *Democrat* refused to apologize. Three weeks later, a church in Jacksonville, which has a sizeable Arab American population, posted a sign claiming that Mohammad condoned murder. While Arab Americans protested these stereotypes, it was another Christian conservative, radio columnist Andy Martin of Florida, who offered the most vocal response: "I thought we were past that kind of bigotry and ignorance in Florida. But apparently not. . . . Any religious leader who fosters bigotry is not a religious leader; he or she is espousing evil."

It is difficult to determine whether the discourse seen in the *Democrat* and on the Jacksonville church sign might accurately be construed as racism. *Racism* is a complicated term, and ethnic studies scholars do their communities little favor by applying it loosely and uniformly to a wide range of discursive phenomena. In defining the Jacksonville discourse as racist, one also must contemplate whether all agents of imperative patriotism are racist. We are then left with questions about whether forms of racism expressed unconsciously are as pernicious, in intent and action, as outright racism. The same concern exists with xenophobia. It would be foolish to decontextualize these issues from the founding narratives of the United States. If ethnic cleansing and slavery, among other odious practices, played a salient role in the physical and psychological formation of the United States, then it should be no surprise that various types of racism survive. Indeed, one could claim that the United States has a collective sickness that results from never having officially confronted its destruction of Indian nations, and that this sickness accounts, however abstractly, for many persisting social problems (imperative patriotism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, discrimination). Rather than arguing that various types of racism actually exist, we are better served understanding the actual extent of their existence.

Arab Americans are in a special position to assist in that understanding. First of all, I would argue that the Jacksonville discourse is racist precisely because it cannot be decontextualized from (admittedly more noxious) incidents in the American past. When considering this sort of argument, our analytical framework should include the peculiar amalgam of millenialism, messianism, and extremism that marked European settlement of the New World, particularly in New England. Modern American racism developed as a result of the imagery of Indians and Africans promulgated by White settlers—a process that continues into the present—in addition to foreign intervention and biological determinism. Indeed, the covenantal messianism with which early American settlers invested their identity invents and reinvents itself based on deeply encoded notions of racial superiority. Those notions have been modernized, sometimes disguised as pragmatism, and manage to pervade a surprisingly large portion of mainstream American discourse. The label of *racism* can thus be applied to anti-Arab vitriol independent of the severe dehumanization that occurs by construing a religious group's prophet as a pedophile. If, after all, Mohammed is portrayed as subhuman, what does it imply about those who follow his religion?

Obviously, Arab Americans interact with the dominant American culture based on the specifics of Arab immigration and the subsequent development of the Arab American community. But once Arabs formed a distinct communal identity, as do all American ethnic minorities, they inherited a centuries-old history of ethnic-mainstream conflict that has yet to be assessed in detail, either before or after 9/11. Settlement, dispossession, slavery, and overseas imperialism all are included in that inheritance. The overseas imperialism has traditionally been most resonant in the Arab American community and is the centerpiece of the community's current reorganization. Like most other minorities, Arab Americans "piggyback" the ethnic tensions that were developed uniquely in the United States based primarily on the oppression of Blacks and Indians. Imperialism, however, is the most immediate issue facing Arab Americans, since much of the imperialism is directed at the Arab World (especially if we consider, as I do, Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to be an aspect of American imperialism).

Based on this formulation, I reject the notion that anti-Arab racism was formed and has evolved based solely on social features (primarily geopolitics) detectable in the interaction of Arabism and Americana. We are better served looking at that racism as a continuum with roots in settler colonialism. A correlative settler colonialism in the West Bank, after all, accounts for much of the tension between the United States and Arab nations—and, by extension, Arab Americans. American racism had thrived for years before the first Arab arrived in North America; Arab Americans have faced an evolution of that

racism since they began to vocally articulate a Middle Eastern identity after 1967 (which rehashed some of the tensions developed between America's Founding Fathers and Muslim pirates off the Barbary Coast 200 years earlier). It is not necessarily a modern racism, but one that has been perpetually reformulated based on contemporary popular and political sentiment and a failure by American leaders to adequately confront the past, in philosophy by apologizing and erecting monuments, or in practice by eliminating colonization and dispossession in other parts of the world.

9/11, according to this analysis, did not really disrupt anti-Arab racism in any momentous way. Rather, it polarized attitudes that had been in place years before the word *terrorism* became common parlance. While 9/11 forced most Americans to confront issues—foreign policy, civil liberties, immigrants, minority rights—that had often been muted or ignored, a detectable pre-9/11 trajectory has reasserted itself: Those who were prone to racism or xenophobia before 9/11 (mainly the advocates of imperative patriotism) found a justification for them; conversely, those who were prone to support multiculturalism (mainly left-liberals and liberal arts academics) have used the 9/11 backlash against Arab Americans to argue in favor of cosmopolitanism and the retention of civil liberties. *New Republic* editor Martin Peretz, for example, has long articulated anti-Arab racism. In 1995, he proclaimed "that there is a convulsion in Islam, whose particular expression is terror" (1995, 47). Alerting Americans to "the very real phenomenon of an international killer jihad," he later wrote, "[S]o much of the spate of terror the world has witnessed [in the past] had been wrought by Arabs" (1995, 47).

These sentiments played an enormous role in creating the sort of xenophobic culture that prompted physical attacks—leading, in some cases, to murder—on Arab Americans and those perceived to be Arab American (Sikhs, South Asians, Central Asians, Hispanics) by Americans determined to preserve imperative patriotism. Four years after Peretz's article, in a piece chillingly titled "Terrorism at the Multiplex," Joshua Muravchik echoed Peretz by announcing that "the image of Middle Eastern terrorists wreaking havoc in the streets of America is both compelling and only too plausible" (1999, 57). After 9/11, the same set of stereotypes expressed with an almost childish vocabulary—"international killer jihad"?—continued unmolested, only this time with a rhetorical trope the authors considered infallible. Congressman Howard Coble (R-NC) stated on a radio call-in program that internment of Arab Americans is worth discussion because "some of these Arab Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us." Coble's use of the pronoun "us" is noteworthy. It indicates, much like the message I received in response to my *Chronicle* article, that according to the ethnography of imperative patriotism Arab Americans are not actually American. "Us" denotes dif-

ference, alterity, even though Coble contradicted his own grammar by adding "American" after "Arab" in juxtaposition with the pronoun "us." Coble's invocation of Japanese Americans also illustrates, with frightening clarity, that negative attitudes about Arab Americans exist in a historical continuum that in many cases led to horrifying behavior.

### Unreasonable and Pragmatic

The post-9/11 racism enumerated above is not limited to politicians' blunders or marginal and/or jingoistic publications. It made its way, for instance, into what first appeared to be an evenhanded analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the op-ed page of the *Washington Post* by former editor Stephen S. Rosenfeld. Displaying a remarkable, if unconscious, propensity for turn-of-the-century anthropological essentialism, Rosenfeld attacks what he dubs "the Palestinians' killing wing" by explaining, "[T]he Palestinians' truest weapon is their high birthrate. It emits a seemingly unstoppable flow of adolescents trained in murder" (2003, A25). Rosenfeld's statement is at base no different than that offered in 2002 by prominent anti-Arab racist Daniel Pipes: "[I]n the most elemental terms, we see here [on college campuses] the contrast between the civilized nature of Israel and its friends and the raw barbarism of Israel's enemies" (2002, A22). It is worth noting that Pipes, whose brand of extremism exemplifies the very worst facets of imperative patriotism, was generally dismissed as a zealot until 9/11, after which he became popular among media in search of sensationalistic evidence of Islamic aggression or "fifth-column" Arab Americans. (The "fifth-column" charge can be found all over Pipes's website by enraged readers who deplore the sensibilities of Arab and Arab American scholars.) In fact, Pipes, along with cohorts Stanley Kurtz, Martin Kramer, Steve Emerson, and Bill Kristol, as well as a litany of fundamentalist Protestant leaders, exemplifies the stereotypical discourse inherent in the post-9/11 backlash against Arab Americans.

About Pipes, Ian Lustick observes that he "takes views that no responsible academic would ever articulate. He's so far outside the pale of mainstream scholarship, yet the [American news] networks need people to give this view because it's a popular view. A reasonable position they can get anywhere. What they're looking for is an unreasonable position" (qtd. in Brook 2002). We can add to Lustick's analysis. What he calls an "unreasonable position" is, after 9/11, perfectly reasonable according to the pragmatism of a political culture that suddenly found in Arab Americans an excuse to increase federal interference in civilian privacy by inducing fear and then working to reduce that fear through what is justified as practical means; e.g., ethnic profiling, surveillance, citizen spying, detention—things that have occurred recurrent-

ly throughout modern American history (with, most prominently, the American Indian Movement and Black Panthers). And all are, of course, purportedly done with great regret, in order to preserve the impossibly abstract but highly compelling "American way of life" (a phrase Pipes and similar writers use incessantly). I would replace Lustick's use of the word "unreasonable" with "pragmatic." Imperative patriotism relies on a perceived pragmatism in order to command moral legitimacy. Today, the most conspicuous feature of the pragmatism is the word *terrorism*, which is used uncritically to describe anybody (of the requisite Arab background) who contests either domestic or international American hegemony. A set of common assumptions must exist between speaker and audience when *terrorism* is employed without analysis or qualification. Those assumptions, based on the notion that terrorism is a morally repugnant and inexplicable act exclusive to the East, survive only in the framework of a corresponding assumption, that Arabs are inferior in culture and intellect to Americans (read: Whites).

9/11, as I mentioned above, did not produce these assumptions, although it did provide them with pragmatic legitimacy to advocates of imperative patriotism already predisposed to anti-Arab racism. The stereotypes underlying the assumptions have long existed and have been expressed through popular American culture in, among other media, television and film, as the journal *Cineaste* (1989) and media critic Jack Shaheen (2001) have recorded. In a detailed study of "the Arab image" in the United States, Ronald Stockton surveyed hundreds of representations of Arabs in numerous media, including negative statements made by presidents and prominent government officials, and concluded that "[t]he generic Arab shares with [the stereotyped] Jews thick lips, evil eyes, unkempt hair, scruffy beard, weak chin, crooked nose, vile look. He also shares with [the stereotyped] Blacks thick lips, heavy brow, stupid expression, stooped shoulders" (1994, 135). Stockton advises "that images of Arabs cannot be seen in isolation but are primarily derivative" (120) and illustrates the dangers inherent in negative ethnic imagery:

> It is important to remember that while government policies are not simple outgrowths of public opinion, governments operate within parameters defined by what the public will tolerate. If the public is willing to dehumanize a population—be it domestic or foreign—then exceptional latitude is allowed where human rights are concerned. Slavery, brutal war, mass murder, assassination, and indifference to suffering become more acceptable. (Stockton 1994, 150)

Stockton, whose essay was published in 1994, offers a portentous analysis, especially his caution about depleted human rights and indifference to suffering. In the same year, Nabeel Abraham similarly cautioned that "anti-Arab racism . . . permeates mainstream cultural and political institutions" in the

United States (1994, 159). Stockton's invocation of Jewish stereotypes is note-worthy because, ironically, anti-Arab racism is derived from the same attitudes that produced American anti-Semitism. I dub this situation ironic because one way Americans now marginalize Arabs is by labeling them anti-Semitic when they articulate their (legitimate) political sensibilities. Imperative patriotism, this example illustrates, has the potential to be pervasive.

Turning back to foreign policy the United States has often fostered hos-tility with Arabs since the eighteenth-century military engagements off the Barbary Coast and has long had economic interests in the Middle East. It has therefore long been in conflict with various Arab nations, and so critics never had the ability—or in some cases the motivation—to assuage the anti-Arab racism Stockton and Abraham describe. More important, since that racism can be identified as analogous to traditional forms of racism in existence since the settlement of North America, the political culture of the United States does not generally inspire a significant oppositional dialectic. Arab Americans, then, occupy a critical, if complicated, position in the modern United States: They connote how, where, and in what conditions a regener-ative racism can transmute from tacit to explicit; and they offer ethnic, cul-tural, and postcolonial studies scholars a remarkable range of social and the-oretical questions to analyze, all of them central to the understanding and development of literary theory.

Because Arab Americans have difficulty alleviating an anti-Arab racism sustained partly by attacks by Arabs on the United States and the correspon-ding American interests in the Arab World, they have an elaborate relation-ship with the dominant American culture, which is made even more elabo-rate by the outpourings of sympathy Arab Americans received immediately after 9/11. (Those outpourings have waned considerably four years later.) As a result, Arab Americans embody what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1988) calls the *differend*. The differend arises when conflict between two or more groups cannot be resolved because of divergent vocabularies representing incongru-ous sensibilities. Each side of the conflict subsequently feels as if the language of dialogue precludes it from receiving justice. Lyotard wanted to revolt against both the concept and use of universal language. He believed that to overlook the differend in social analysis is tantamount to the denial of justice because such an omission denies difference. The differences Lyotard discussed are neither primal nor predetermined—that is to say, difference is not an unalterable human feature that prevents rapprochement or unity. Rather, the acknowledgement of difference—in action and language—is a precondition for rapprochement or unity.

With appropriate variations, we can look at the differend to partially elu-cidate the relationship among Americans and Arab Americans. Much of the

tension I have explored exists because of a specific vocabulary directed at Arab Americans. The vocabulary becomes particularly troublesome when it is used to explain Arab culture or, more causally, Arab "behavior" to a curious public. This is where anti-Arab racists, posing as responsible analysts, poison American-Arab American relations. When scholars and commentators denounce Arabs and Arab Americans as "terrorists" and threats to "American national security" and "the American way of life," to borrow from Campus Watch parlance, a profound defensiveness arises in the Arab American community. That defensiveness, coupled with a longstanding ambivalence about an identity that traverses the Atlantic, reinforces the influence of the differend, which in turn reinforces the inability of Arab Americans to fruitfully navigate the metaphorical spaces between center and margin in the United States.

### Arab Americans and Ethnic Studies

Ethnic studies scholars have great impetus to invoke these complexities and discuss them to broaden our inquiries of racial and cultural dynamics in post-9/11 America. In a time of such tense politics and furious debate over the government's management of domestic affairs, the United States is a rapidly changing nation. Numerous changes are the result of a small but pivotal community whose origin lies in the region that indirectly enkindled many of the domestic transformations enumerated above. As a young Arab American professor, I struggle with the same questions that have occupied countless scholars of other ethnic groups: How can I adequately respond to the racism directed against my community? How does that racism sustain itself and inform various aspects of popular American culture? What can my community do to embolden and empower its youngsters and academics? Where does my community fit in the ever-changing panorama of American multiculturalism? Where should it fit?

These are not easy questions to answer. Entire area studies, after all, have been constructed in the past forty years in order to explore them. For Arab Americans, one thing is clear. Even if solutions to the questions are difficult to ascertain, it is not difficult to ascertain a starting point: The creation of a vocabulary geared toward eliminating the differend that obstructs productive dialogue with other ethnic groups as well as the American polity in total. In order to create that vocabulary, Arab Americans must successfully challenge anti-Arab racists such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, David Horowitz, Steve Emerson, Ann Coulter, Martin Kramer, Stanley Kurtz, and Daniel Pipes.

How can they be successfully challenged? This question belongs squarely in the realm of ethnic studies, with the burgeoning Arab American Studies playing a crucial role in an intellectualization of America's popular and polit-

ical cultures. While many of the issues I have discussed arise because of specific features in the relationship between Arab and non-Arab Americans, they are by no means the dominion of Arab American critics. They existed before Arab Americans raised their voices as a distinct community. Since the racism Arab Americans face is also directed at other minorities, it seems only logical for Arab Americans to demystify stereotype in conjunction with the minorities at whom racism has traditionally been directed. More crucial, given the current deterioration of civil liberties and the precedent created by intense surveillance of the Arab American community, it would appear foolish for other ethnic groups—many of them long suspected of subversion—to ignore Arab America. In any case, it is not necessarily a particular reaction to a particular event (9/11) that is of immense concern to Arab Americans; it is an entire culture of imperative patriotism—and all its attendant manifestations—that existed years before 9/11 and was merely strengthened by the anxiety manufactured in the aftermath of the attacks.

More important, the Arab American community is far from ethnically homogenous. Not all Arab Americans, for instance, oppose war in Iraq, as was made clear when Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz visited an Iraqi American community center in Detroit to great fanfare. Nor are they in agreement about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; opinion ranges from a desire for the total destruction of Israel to support for binational coexistence to accommodation of Israeli settlements in return for a Palestinian state. Some Muslim Arabs prefer "Muslim" as their primary identification, which places them in a mostly non-Arab community. Similarly, many Lebanese Christians prefer to be identified as "Lebanese," "Maronite," "Christian" or even "Phoenecian" rather than as "Arab," even though Middle Eastern ethnicity is apparent in Lebanese Christians culturally and physically. Since they comprise the largest demographic in Arab America—with luminaries such as Frank Zappa, Danny Thomas, Ralph Nader, Kahlil Gibran, Helen Thomas, and Jamie Farr—the term *Arab American* is anything but trenchant. Some Coptic Egyptians, a growing demographic in the Detroit area, are likewise apt to call themselves "Copts" before "Arabs." Non-Arab Middle Easterners, as I have noted in a previous study, also complicate the Arab American ethnicity, since they are often categorized, of their own accord or according to stereotype, as Arab. These non-Arab Middle Easterners include Iranians, Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Berbers, Circassians, and Central Asians. Certain Mizrahi/Sephardic Jews in the United States also retain an Arab cultural taxonomy, either in addition to or instead of a Jewish identity.

Given these diversities, I am hesitant at this point to theorize new directions in the Arab American community, although it is clear that 9/11 affected to varying degrees every demographic within Arab America. Because of

this fact, all Arab Americans have a stake in examining the community in order to formulate material and academic strategies for awareness, empowerment, and reconciliation. Arab Americans—and, indeed, everybody concerned with the racist undertones of a strengthened imperative patriotism after 9/11—can begin by complicating the simplification of ethnic categories that informs the pragmatism of foreign intervention and depleted civil liberties. I suspect that inter-ethnic dialogue, rather than colloquy with the dominant society that grants credence to anti-Arab racists, is a useful place to begin—and one that will bestow on ethnic studies educators an important material politics to discuss.

## Arab Americans After and Beyond

Arab Americans are not without a foundation in undertaking political action and social analysis. Nor are they strangers to hate crimes as a result of American-Arab antagonism. *The Nation, The Quill, The Progressive, School Law News, Newsweek, The Economist,* and even *Sports Illustrated* and the Zionist-edited *New Republic* have published stories in the past few decades about how, as James Abourezk puts it, "when the heat is on, Arab-Americans lose their rights" (1993, 26). Neither were they totally silent or invisible before 9/11. Lawrence Davidson (1999) has shown that Arab Americans were active in protests against Zionism as early as 1917, the year of the Balfour Declaration. In modern times, Arab Americans were on the verge of viable political influence until it was interrupted by 9/11. In the lead-up to the 2000 presidential election, the *Christian Science Monitor, White House Weekly, Middle East,* and *Economist* ran articles about the Arab American demographic with titles such as "The Birth of an Arab-American Lobby" and "Arab Americans Emerge as Key Voting Bloc."

Nevertheless, there are unexamined features in Arab America that, if examined, could lead to a more developed understanding of the community's role in the complex of mainstream-ethnic relations. The popularity of hip-hop and the widespread use of urban dialects among young Arab Americans, for instance, indicate that Arab Americans indeed "piggyback" Blacks in expressing their displeasure with a type of oppression they identify with Black history. A Palestinian American rapper calling himself the Iron Sheik recently released a self-made album with extraordinary range and depth. The Iron Sheik, influenced by multiethnic forebears, raps about Palestinian liberation, the oppression of Arab Americans, the loss of civil liberties, and Arab American identity, and connects Arab American discourse in remarkable ways with injustices in the Hispanic, Black, and Native communities. Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad is a performer in Russell Simmons's Broadway show, *Def Poetry Jam.* The late Edward Said, another

Palestinian American, was a groundbreaking cultural critic whose reformu-lation of the term *Orientalism* is employed frequently in Native and African American scholarship. These cross-cultural efforts are not new, however. Lebanese American civil rights activist Ralph Johns encouraged the famous 1960 sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro. Palestinian American George Shibley defended innocent Mexican Americans after the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots of the 1940s. Based on these examples, it might be said that a common ground among ethnic groups already exists; we sim-ply need to find a language to acknowledge it.

Perhaps, however, the most favorable possibility for Arab Americans to engage interethnic dialogue lies in their opposition to Zionism. More than any other issue, Palestine mobilized Arab Americans to reject total assimila-tion and embrace an alternate cultural positioning based on identification with the Middle East. By virtue of America's uncritical support for Israel, Palestine necessarily transformed Arab Americans from a rapidly acculturat-ing immigrant group into a radical, anti-mainstream community. By exam-ining how this positioning functions in their interaction with other radical communities of color, Arab Americans can gain the type of recognition they actually seek, rather than unwanted post-9/11 platitudes, and in turn gain more support for reducing American patrimony in the Middle East. If they manage to illustrate through activism and scholarship that Israel's occupation is a classic form of colonization rather than a benign security mechanism, then it is not unthinkable that a broad coalition can be formed to challenge the imperative patriotism that seems now to threaten only domestic Arabs, but in reality endangers all Americans. This possibility is particularly fruitful when we examine the colonization of North America and identify how it continues to influence the discourse of foreign intervention.

Since what has been called decolonization of the mind is so central to the pedagogy of ethnic studies, Arab American concerns reach beyond the Arab American community. Yet the extensive reach of those concerns will not be acknowledged by chance. Arab Americans must force their recogni-tion. Ethnic studies scholars, for their part, can find critical intersections of race, culture, and representation in the Arab American community. Minority scholarship has illustrated in the past twenty years that issues within different ethnic groups are never mutually exclusive, nor are the respective scholarly apparatuses in place to address those issues. If ethnic studies scholars are con-cerned with community activism in addition to professional work, then America's rapidly changing social dynamics after 9/11 are ripe for assessment with priority on response, especially if we manage to transform "the American way of life" into "American ways of life." It is not by accident that I see ethnic studies as a possible solution to the differend and the pragmatic

strength of imperative patriotism, because if there are no solutions to be found in the field, then the field will have failed in its stated mission.

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