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In-betweenness: Religion and conflicting visions of literacy

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the multiple uses of religious and secular text at school, home, and in the community. Specifically, I focus on how Yemeni American high school girls employ religious, Arabic, and secular texts as a means for negotiating home and school worlds. The frame of reference—in-betweenness—is a powerful heuristic with which the contextual uses of texts and language among the Yemeni American students can be delineated. In-betweenness signifies the immediate adaptation of one's performance or identity to one's textual, social, cultural, and physical surroundings. During 1997–1999, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Yemeni and Arab community in southeastern Michigan. I examined the literacy practices of the Yemeni girls in and out of school by considering more closely both their use of language in the cultural and religious locus and their use of texts. I did this by exploring the hidden texts in their high school, the texts of weddings and parties, the texts of Arabic school, and the texts of *muhathara* (lecture). Within these spaces, the girls' identities shifted to reflect their textual interpretations as either Yemeni or American. The texts were manifested in different contexts and served to bridge, subvert, and recreate Yemeni and American social and cultural norms. I argue that in order for researchers and educators to support diversity in public schools, they must be aware not only of its existence but also of its manifestation and acknowledge that diverse literacy practices are part of a larger geopolitical way of life. Awareness is the first step toward schools that not only focus on individual students but that also privilege those students' communities. Knowing that there are conflicting visions of literacy and that there are multiple ways to enact them is crucial to the development of powerful and engaging social and academic curricula.

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Saba (pseudonym) and I went shopping at the mall. She wanted to buy gifts for her friends and family for the El Eid holiday. I parked the car in the lot in front of JC Penney and moved to open my door. Saba raised her hand without saying anything and I stopped moving. She closed her eyes and her mouth began to move silently. I surreptitiously glanced at my watch and saw that it was nearly noon. Saba was doing her noon prayer right in the front passenger seat, while I sat there not knowing what to do. I caught a few sounds, but her lips moved silently for 10 minutes. When she finished, Saba praised God aloud, took off her seatbelt and unlocked the door. (Field notes, 1/15/99)

In-betweenness describes the textual space in which Yemeni American girls make sense of their lives as high school students and good Muslim daughters, sisters, and mothers. In this ethnographic study, I examine the multiple uses of religious and secular text at school, home, and in the community. Specifically, I focus on how Yemeni American high school girls employ religious, secular, and Arabic texts as a means for negotiating home and school worlds. By home and school worlds, I mean the various institutional, cultural, familial, and linguistic relationships these girls have in spaces normatively construed as *home* and *school*. Home and school spaces often overlap one another and are inherently related; therefore, the boundaries between them shift constantly as the girls in this study negotiate social, academic, and cultural norms.

During 1997–1999, I was immersed in the Yemeni and Arab community in the Southend area of Davis, Michigan, a poor ghetto-like enclave that is separated from the rest of Davis by tall factory smokestacks. I conducted ethnographic research in the Southend and at the students' school, Cobb High School (pseudonym). Southeastern Michigan has the largest population of Arabic-speaking people (300,000) outside the Middle East. It was an interesting time to do research at Cobb High School because the minority population of Yemeni and Iraqi Muslim students was increasing in number—40–45% and more—and tension developed between the white non-Arab and the Arab students in the school. With 1,420 students and a bilingual program whose main population of students were newly arrived Yemenis, Cobb struggled to facilitate communication among teachers and non-Arab, Yemeni American, and Yemeni students. Though Cobb relied primarily on transmission-oriented and teacher-centered teaching, some teachers and administrators attempted to find ways to accommodate all students, and in particular, the Muslim students (see Sarroub, 2001).

In the Southend and at the high school I introduced myself as a researcher who wanted to learn more about what it meant to be successful at home and school for Yemeni Muslim adolescents. I gained access to the community after making contact with individuals who worked in the community center in the Southend. These key informants facilitated my initial meetings with the girls in the study and their parents. I lived in the community while I conducted my field work, and my native knowledge of Arabic and my college study of *Fous'ha*, or literary Arabic, and general familiarity with Islam facilitated my access to the Southend, people's homes, the mosque, social gatherings, and Arabic school. When asked about my religious and national background by parents, the girls in the study, and community members, I responded that my parents are Christian and Muslim, that I was born in Algeria, spoke French and Arabic, and lived there nearly 10 years before my family moved to the U.S. and I learned English. I became known as "that Algerian woman" in the community. Initially, my field work entailed learning about both boys' and girls' lives in the Southend, but as a woman researcher in her mid-20s, it proved difficult for me to gain access to the male domains. The data I gathered in the girls' and women's domains is far richer and more complete than what I could gather about the boys and men. My own mixed ethnic and religious identity was problematic at times, as some community members and even a few of the girls in the Southend attempted to change my nonreligious stance to that of a devout and practicing Muslim. As I describe below, cultural and religious practices were often intertwined in the Yemeni community, and although I was familiar with and had read about many Islamic traditions, the particularities of Yemeni religious and cultural life were often alien to me and I was very much an outsider in that respect. In many ways the girls were my teachers of their culture and trusted me to learn from them. I will always be grateful for the opportunity.

My interest in the girls' uses of text in multiple contexts stems from my observations (during 26 months of field work) that these texts are integral to their social and academic success. In this article, I offer an anthropological view in which literacy is conceptualized from a sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and ethnographic perspective. I illustrate the importance of in-between texts at home and at school, and I show how these youth construct gender, ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious identities that allow them access to taboo topics and mainstream U.S. cultural practices. I also use the term *in-between* because the girls often used it to describe themselves. For example, when Aisha, an incredibly motivated and bright student, described herself to me and explained that she did not meet her mother's expectations of a good daughter, she shook her head and said, "In-between. Not what she'd want me to be, you know" (Interview, 10/26/98). Her mother preferred that Aisha be more Yemeni and less American. I also argue that

educators and researchers should be aware of these youths' textual practices in light of the fact that they have a powerful impact on participation in school and classroom life.

Framing and theorizing in-betweenness

Within the larger frame of research on youth, the notion of in-betweenness contributes to a body of research that has in recent years placed greater emphasis on adolescent literacy practices outside of school and the notion of existence in multiple worlds (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Moje, 2000). Defined as such, the notion of in-betweenness and in-between texts can be characterized as a powerful heuristic that adds important insight to our understanding of literacy and discourse. As I show in this article, the Yemeni girls used secular and religious texts to negotiate appropriate social and academic spaces for themselves in and out of school. The notion of in-between distinguishes these texts from other ways of being. The texts that the Yemeni American high school girls used can be described as in-between texts because they are forms of discourse that are manifested in different contexts and bridge, subvert, and re-create Yemeni and American social and cultural norms.

By discourse, I mean more than talk or speech acts. For example, Gee (1989) distinguished discourse (stretches of language) from Discourses: "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (p. 6). Gee (1996) asserted further that a Discourse is an "identity kit" that a person takes on as a role and that is immediately recognizable to others (p. 7). In the tradition of Goffman (1959), who argued that participants' actions, talk, and performances are intimately connected and related to those with whom they share the interaction, Gee suggested that Discourse is really a presentation of the self, both past and present. Goffman (1981) and Davies and Harré (1990) described the presentation of self and identity as relational activities in which textual performance is mediated by the space participants occupy. However, whereas Davies and Harré argued that participants' positioning is guided by their own autobiographical perceptions, Goffman's view suggested that positioning, or in his words, *footing*, is a relational conceptualization of interaction rather than a state of mind. By its very nature, *relational* presupposes a priori experience as well as the present, coconstructed experience of interaction. Goffman (1959) noted that "when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have" (p. 6). Goffman went on to say that sometimes individuals

intentionally express themselves according to the traditions of the group to which they belong in order to create a favorable or necessary impression. In a very real sense, Goffman's notion of interaction is connected to Gee's definition of Discourse in that both describe culture and participants' related textual practices.

According to Geertz (1973), culture "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life" (p. 89). Hence, culture is both a temporal and local phenomenon. It is certainly not static because the enactment of Discourse or culture as performance is localized continuously over time and is therefore dynamic. The locus of such a performance can be an individual or group of individuals, who assume culturally laden roles that require certain texts, behaviors, and mannerisms. The example of Saba (a 12th grader), whose experience I chose as a symbolic entrée into this article, illustrates that she, as a devout Muslim, is following the strictures governing the five pillars of Islam—one of which is prayer five times daily—closely. At the same time, her oral text is mediated by the space she occupies and creates something that is representative of both her surroundings and her culture. Saba's discourse can be described as in-between, and her performance is symbolic of adaptation to her immediate context. The cultural pattern is explicit yet somewhat changed to account for difference, both in identity and in space. She bridged and re-created her American and Yemeni identities in the car.

This frame of reference—in-betweenness—is an especially helpful heuristic in delineating the contextual uses of texts and language among the Yemeni American students. For example, the use of Arabic in school serves important functional and religious purposes as students attempt to maintain dual identities. It is not clear, however, whether cultural differences in communication style between home and school have a direct cause and effect relationship on school achievement (Erickson, 1987). While in the field, I observed that communication style is important in making social adjustments—within the school setting and, in particular, in the classroom—but not necessarily in academic performance. For these students, social success in school (behaving and communicating appropriately according to cultural and religious traditions) is as important as academic achievement, because the enactment of appropriate social mores in and out of school determines status as well as degrees of shame and honor.

The localization of Saba's prayer was unexpected, at least to me, as we sat in the mall parking lot, yet her actions symbolized an identification with something other than the tangible objects in the immediate space of the car. Under normal circumstances, Saba would have found a quiet area at home

or at the mosque, washed her hands and feet, laid out a small rug, and knelt facing east on her knees to do her prayer. Instead, she improvised as best she could and made use of the car, which was facing east toward Mecca, and prayed silently in Arabic. This improvisation, a performance, identified Saba solidly with a people and a religion.

As Goffman (1959) noted, Saba wanted to create the right impression during this interaction even though I am not a Yemeni or Muslim member of her community. Her actions, which were both textual and spiritual, transcended her immediate space and occupied an in-between space that was neither Yemeni nor American but was, instead, a hybrid, an alternative possibility carved out of a particular time (afternoon) and place (the car outside the mall). Bhabha (1994), who has written extensively on culture in the postcolonial era and about the boundary spaces that minority populations occupy, characterized this inbetweenness as the locality of culture. He noted that locality is “more...more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism” (p. 140). In other words, in-betweenness or the locality of culture signifies the immediate adaptation of one’s performance or identity to one’s textual, social, cultural, and physical surroundings. Saba engaged in ritualistic performances that were influenced by the immediate conditions of the interaction. In effect, the result was neither conventionally Yemeni and Muslim nor was it commonly American, but somewhere in between.

In the remainder of this article, I examine the literacy practices of the Yemeni girls in and out of school by considering more closely both their use of language in the cultural and religious locus and their use of texts (reading, writing, and oracy). Insofar as literacy is concerned, and as the title of this article implies, visions of literacy do conflict with one another because the girls occupied the in-between spaces of two cultures, and this necessitates negotiation, which, in turn, influences ritual performance.

Method

Ethnography is both a theoretical and methodological stance. In my attempt to understand the lives of Saba and her peers, I found that meaning is both uncovered and recovered. At times this was as simple as wearing or removing the *hijab* (scarf) from one’s head—the girls were otherwise covered from head to toe. In other instances, actions, words, or the cast of one’s eyes indexed the undercurrents of meaning. Telling this story means being able to navigate among meanings, and therefore, it is no coincidence that I chose to write an ethnography. As Clifford and Marcus (1986) noted:

Ethnography is actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and re-codes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes a process of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes. (p. 2)

Miles and Huberman (1994) described ethnography as “extended contact with a given community, concern with the mundane, day-to-day events, as well as the unusual ones...” (p. 8). To understand the Yemeni American girls in the context of the Southend, I focused on the quotidian as well as the unusual occurrences in that community. Therefore, the methods in this study espouse a naturalistic perspective. In order to understand as much as possible the lives of the Yemeni within the contexts of school, home, and community, I apply a broad methodological approach that relies on *thick* description (Geertz, 1973) based on rigorous observation, participant and nonparticipant observations, formal interviews, and informal conversations. Wolf (1992) has claimed that “an anthropologist listens to as many voices as [he or] she can and then chooses among them when [he or] she passes their opinions on to members of another culture. The choice is not arbitrary, but then neither is the testimony” (p. 11). In many ways there is really nothing arbitrary about the site or the participants chosen to participate in this study. They are not representative of all schools or teachers or students across the U.S. They were chosen because they are unique. At the same time, however, they belong to larger communities that are not at all unique in that their geopolitical relations are similar to those of others. The children go to public school as other children do. Their teachers deal with cultural and linguistic differences as do teachers in different settings. Their parents worry about their children as do other parents.

Without exhausting the list of congruencies and similarities, it is important to note that like many other ethnographies, the value of this study lies in its ability to further develop constructive ideas and theories about larger issues and problems with which educators and researchers grapple. This is done by paying attention to the particulars. The point is to get to the heart of the matter, if possible (Geertz, 1983; Wolcott, 1994).

Participants

Six high school female student participants were contacted as key informants at the community center in the Southend. I obtained verbal and written informed consent from both the parents and their children to participate in the study. The six girls were tutors in a reading and writing program at the

Table 1. The six high school hijabat

Nadya (Grades 9 and 10)	Below average to average achiever
Aisha (Grades 10 and 11)	High achiever
Layla (Grade 10 and 11)	Average achiever
Nouria (Grades 10 and 11)	Average achiever
Saba (Grades 11 and 12)	Above average achiever
Amani (Grades 11 and 12)	Above average achiever

community center and helped newly arrived elementary and high school age Arab immigrants with English and math. I spent most of my afternoons at the community center getting to know the students, and I was invited to parties and other social occasions in their homes. I attended religious services at the local mosque, went to Arabic school with the girls on weekends, and accompanied them to the mall.

Data collection

Field work at the high school consisted of observation in all school premises—the halls, cafeteria, teacher lounges, administrative offices, bathrooms, and classrooms. The six girls, all of low socioeconomic status and representing a range of academic ability and an array of dispositions toward their home and school lives, were each formally interviewed in the community and school twice (see Table 1). Although the girls knew one another, they were not all friends and had their own peer groups within the school and community, so I also had the opportunity to know many other Yemeni American girls. Frequent and informal interviews were conducted on a weekly basis during field work and were carefully recorded in extensive field notes. The girls were either born in the United States or came to the U.S. at a very young age and are fluent speakers of American English, so I conducted most of the interviews in English, but at times it was necessary to use Arabic, especially with some of the parents. This did not pose any translation problems for me because I was able to check my translation with key informants at the community center when necessary. At the high school I interviewed 22 teachers and counselors over the 2 years of field work, and during field observations I informally interviewed 75 of the 90 teachers. Teacher and counselor participants were chosen in accordance with student participants. Teacher participation was voluntary and was mediated by the district and school administration.

I adopted the tools of critical ethnographic method—field notes and interviews—described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995); Hammersley and

Atkinson (1995); and Spradley (1979). I also conducted two formal, semi-structured interviews with open exploratory questions with each of the girls. Funneling (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995) was the main organizing technique for interview questions. I spent 4–5 days each week at the high school, all day for 16 months. The girls were shadowed at school four times each; I followed each of the six girls all day from the time they left home to the time they turned in to sleep at night. Artifacts such as schoolwork samples, personal work samples, community demographic information, daily bulletins, memoranda to and from the district superintendent and principals, memoranda from principals to faculty, memoranda from the community liaison, and media information were collected. Administrators at Cobb were generous with their time and artifacts and let me photocopy whatever pertained to the Arab population in the school while I was there.

Intensive field work took place over 26 months in the community. I was invited to homes on social occasions where I talked to mothers informally. I formally interviewed four parents and informally interviewed the rest. All social occasions that took place in the home were with women, since men and women do not socialize together openly. At the community center I participated in activities such as delivering food to poor Iraqi families during holidays, community center dinners, and reading and writing sessions with the tutors. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

Data analysis

A critical ethnographic analysis of the interviews included audiotaping, transcription, and coding based on domain, taxonomic, componential, and theme analyses (Carspecken, 1996; Spradley, 1979). Observation field notes were also analyzed through a process of open and focused coding in which I paid particular attention to the informants' use of culturally relevant terms and meaning making (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I wrote analytical memos that served two functions: (a) They related the data to the formulation of theory, and (b) they helped me gain analytical distance from the field itself (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, a case study design (see Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Erickson & Shultz, 1992) was used to document the discourse practices of each of the Yemeni students and to obtain a deeper and richer understanding of their day-to-day lives at home and school. Attention to the particulars of each case illuminated their construction of their identities across contexts. Triangulation of codes and themes was applied among interviews, field notes, and various artifacts. A constant application of member checks (with teachers, students, parents, and community members) across time was conducted. I did this by sharing ethnographic reports with administrators, teachers, and the girls.

Limitations

In this study, I examine the literacy practices of Yemeni American high school girls. Although I spent 2 years in this community, it is impossible to fully explain the complexity of life there and at the high school. The analysis focuses on six girls and their Yemeni and Yemeni American peers, but it does not deal in much detail with their non-Arab peers, who were the majority population in the school. Also, this study in no way captures the full array of literacy practices as experienced by girls in Yemen and United States. Finally, my own role as a woman researcher in the community limited my access to male domains both at school, in spaces such as the cafeteria; and in the community, in places such as coffee shops and the mosque. Consequently, the discourse and literacy practices I discuss are limited to the spaces to which I had access.

Ethnographic findings

Although I call this section “Findings,” this is a problematic term because ethnographic research relies on the description of a cultural site in a given moment and an analysis of “Ah ha!” moments during that time (Willis & Trondman, 2000). Findings suggest a rather static view of a culture, so I use the term here with reservation. One way to frame the analysis that follows is to use Scribner’s (1984) definition of literacy as three metaphors—literacy as adaptation, literacy as power, and literacy as a state of grace. This is apropos in the case of the Yemeni American girls because their discourse reflected their attempts to adapt to both American and Yemeni norms, to achieve power in being print literate in both Arabic and English, and to be full of grace through reading and embodying religious text. Scribner argued that “literacy has neither a static nor a universal essence” (p. 8). In describing the Muslim Vai people of West Africa, Scribner and her colleagues attributed various literacy practices to cultural competencies required in different contexts. Literacy as adaptation, for instance, “is designed to capture concepts of literacy that emphasize its survival or pragmatic value” (p. 9). Literacy as power, according to Scribner, focuses on the relationship between group mobilization and literacy. The third metaphor, literacy as a state of grace, emphasizes the notion that the literate person is endowed with special virtues. Scribner noted, for example, that “memorizing the *Qur’an*—literally taking its words into you and making them part of yourself—is simultaneously a process of becoming both literate and holy” (p. 13). I will use these metaphors as I describe the girls’ uses of text in several places and how in-betweenness was manifested at school, weddings and parties, Arabic school, and *muhathara* (lecture).

Hidden texts in school

Scribner (1984) wrote that the “the single most compelling fact about literacy is that it is a social achievement” and importantly, that “literacy is the outcome of cultural transmission” (p. 7). Among the Yemeni students in the Southend, being literate meant being able to call upon multiple literacies in order to perform appropriately in the contexts they inhabited. School, for example, may have created an imbalance in the lives of Yemeni American students by challenging their cultural traditions and by challenging their primary (or home) Discourse (Gee, 1989). Whereas the Muslim Yemeni family promotes loyalty based on kinship ties, schools in the U.S. tend to privilege individual opportunity over collective responsibility. U.S. schooling teaches youngsters to value personal response, individual reasoning, and the expression of a highly personal voice (Graff, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

An example of this is found in the 1995 Michigan English and Language Arts Framework standards. Students are strongly encouraged to form an individual voice such that they can question texts and form arguments about them, often disregarding their own beliefs or values about the content and ways to talk or write about it. Home or family culture is necessarily divorced from the students’ learning at school in order for knowledge to be disseminated most efficiently. This type of critical reading of texts, when it does take place and which Gee (1989) called “a liberating metaknowledge or literacy,” carries an ideological message that may run counter to Yemeni Muslims’ views about the sanctity of religious text (i.e., the *Qur’an*) in relation to their quotidian Discourses both at home and at school. (It is important to note that Anyon [1981] argued that the critical analysis of texts in the classroom is rare and is influenced by social class practices. Her research shows that knowledge is often fragmented and isolated from meaning.)

Knowing how to read at school is different from knowing how to read at home, where the *Qur’an* is the primary source of reading. Reading the *Qur’an* and being able to recite it endow a person with both knowledge and holiness, or, in Scribner’s (1984) words, a state of grace. In fact, in the *Qur’an* itself, there is a passage that states, “This is a perfect book. There is no doubt in it,” which makes it impossible for students to be critical of the word of God. Both Yemeni boys and girls at Cobb High School told me that all I needed to do was to read the *Qur’an* in order to know what success is. In other words and according to them, the text of the *Qur’an* contains all, and if one reads it, that person assumes that same knowledge.

The literacy practices that I am about to describe and with which the *hijabat* (Arabic feminine plural for girls in this community who wear the head scarf) engaged were clearly influenced by their religion. Street (1995) defined literacy practices as “behaviour and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing” (p. 2).

They incorporate literacy events, which refer to how a piece of writing is integral to a reader or writer's interaction or interpretation of it (Heath, 1982). Street's definition of literacy practices is part of a larger framework stemming from various disciplines called New Literacy Studies. According to Gee (1999),

The New Literacy Studies approach literacy as part and parcel of, and inextricable from, specific social, cultural, institutional, and political practices. Thus literacy, is, in a sense, "multiple": literacy becomes different "literacies," as reading and writing are differently and distinctively shaped and transformed inside different sociocultural practices. Additionally, these sociocultural practices always have inherent and value-laden, but often different, implications about what count as "acceptable" identities, actions, and ways of knowing. They are, in this sense, deeply "political." (p. 356)

In other words, as Barton and Hamilton (1998) have pointed out, literacy is integral to its context. At school, where the intersection of multiple cultures and literacies was most evident, Yemeni American girls learned to adapt various texts to different situations. The most direct way that they did this was by organizing some behaviors and speech events into three categories that stem from the *Qur'an* and religious teachings. The three categories were *haram*, meaning forbidden; *halal* meaning lawful; and *mahkru*, meaning not written as forbidden in the *Qur'an* but condemned by the Prophet Muhammad. All things *haram* are written in the *Qur'an*. Drinking alcohol, for example, is *haram*. Things *halal* are good deeds, which include learning and being learned. Things *mahkru* include wearing make-up before marriage or listening to music. The *mahkru* category is controversial. Many of the hijabat wore nail polish or eye liner even though the Prophet forbade it. However, because nothing is written in the *Qur'an* about such things, Islamic scholars and ordinary Muslims debate these issues constantly.

At school, the hijabat used *haram* and *halal* liberally, especially when one's modesty was in question. The students argued about what was *haram* when something was called into question, and advice was often sought from people like Saba, who was respected for her knowledge of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (recorded words, actions, and sanctions of the Prophet Muhammad). Girls who were pious or wanted to appear pious did not do or say anything that was likely to be considered *mahkru*. In fact, except for some girls who studied and read the *Qur'an*, the category *mahkru* was not known or well understood by most girls and boys. For the hijabat, most of life fell under *haram* or *halal*, and when scripture did not provide an answer, there was always what they called the Yemeni "folk Islam," occult beliefs (or magic) that helped explain and remedy problems.

Arranging school life into religiously motivated textual categories gave the hijabat the opportunity to maintain Yemeni social status and norms within the confines of school. Yet school also gave the girls the chance to stretch home- and community-imposed limits. For example, unlike most teenagers, the hijabat were often not allowed to listen to American rock or pop music (in the mahkru category), and they were also not allowed to read teen magazines or anything that might be sexually explicit or imply sexuality. At school, however, whereas the hijabat and some of the boys were familiar with movies that teachers discussed in class, in general, girls in the Southend were not allowed to go to the movies. There was a significant amount of underground reading that took place during lunch, the most social event of the day. I observed that the active engagement with text that took place outside the classroom was not usually present in relation to subject matter within the classroom because the girls often avoided openly discussing taboo topics. In fact, the hijabat sometimes refused to participate in watching films or discussing texts if the content was risky, meaning that it crossed a certain religious or cultural boundary. This lack of engagement in the classroom usually occurred in the presence of boaters (pejorative term used at Cobb High to denote new male immigrants in the ESL/Bilingual program), and the hijabat had to maintain a proper social performance while the teacher tried to engage the class in the text. Socially, the classroom was still an oasis for the hijabat, but different rules applied under specific conditions, and therefore, their experiences in class were not uniform.

The merging of identity and literacy was quite complex and multifaceted in all of the contexts the hijabat inhabited. In their cafeteria cluster of tables, which was buffered by non-Arab students from the Yemeni American boys and boaters, the girls brought forth their contraband: teen magazines, yearbook pictures, and fable-like poems and stories (such as chain letters) about girls who misbehaved. They gossiped around these texts, sharing personal information about their marriages, their families, the men they would like to marry (often in opposition to the ones to whom they were married), and their friends. During one such instance, both Aisha and Layla, two 11th graders, suggested that I read *Princess* by Jean Sasson (1992) because “then [I will] really understand what it can be like to be them.” This is a popular biography about the tragedies experienced by a Saudi Arabian princess who managed to escape her family and country to tell her story. Both Layla and Aisha identified strongly with the woman in the story and talked about her at length. This was not a book they openly discussed or read at home because, as Saba noted, “It makes Islam and Muslims look bad” (Field notes, 11/20/98). All of the hijabat in this study reiterated that there is a difference between religion and culture. They argued that *Princess Sultana’s* story by Sasson is a story about culture and not about religion: “there’s only one

true Islam and that's in the *Qur'an*, and not in that book," Saba said firmly (Field notes, 11/20/98).

The distinction made by the girls between religion and culture is an important one to them. It means that while their religion and their Holy Book cannot be questioned, their culture and cultural acts can. For instance, when the hijabat were upset or angry with family decisions about education or marriage, they were very careful to blame it on Yemeni culture and not on Islam. According to them, religious texts sanction meaning, but people were likely to misinterpret words and actions found in the *Qur'an*, and therefore, the girls limited their public discourse and interaction with others in order to protect themselves. It is easy to see, then, the significance of the relatively safe classroom or the isolated cluster of hijabat within a crowded cafeteria. Those places offered a haven for sharing secret texts, texts that were American and represented American values. Sometimes, however, these texts reinforced Yemeni cultural values. Here is an example about dating taken from field notes:

I sit with Amani and the other girls during lunch. A poem written in English from the Internet is passed around the table about a girl who goes out with a boy even though her parents don't allow her to date and expect her to be at a school dance that night. The boy has been drinking heavily and crashes into another car. At the hospital, the girl asks the nurse to tell her parents that she's sorry. The nurse doesn't say anything as the girl dies. It turns out that the car into which the girl and her boyfriend crashed was occupied by her parents, who were both killed instantly. All the girls around the table react to this poem with loud exclamations of "haram!" They say that hurting their parents through their actions is forbidden. They admire the girl for taking a risk, but they all agree that it's better not to take such a risk and that "religion knows what's right." The poem is folded and put away and is shared again later in the classroom with other girls. (Field notes, 9/17/98)

The conversation about dating illustrates the significance of private spaces (a small cluster of girls in a large cafeteria) within the school, and it reinforces the teachings of the *Qur'an*. It also re-creates, bridges, and subverts different cultural norms and is therefore a good example of in-betweenness. As such, it also allows the girls to adapt pragmatically and hypothetically through text to a possible American social situation in which they realistically cannot take part. Private spaces were places and times during which the hijabat could voice their concerns, reify their beliefs, and sometimes put their doubts to rest. Public spaces (the cafeteria in general or the

hallways), however, were indexed only by the culturally laden roles and by religious texts spoken in Arabic or in the English translation, which was not typical of everyday American English speech. For example, some girls not only memorized the *Qur'an* in Arabic, but could also recite it in English. In other words, throughout the day and regardless of teachers' disapproval, the girls' talk was peppered with Arabic and English excerpts of the *Qur'an*, and the use of "haram" and "halal" was rampant. At the same time, the hijabat found moments during the school day to address topics and issues that were never discussed at home or in their community. The combination of religious textual reference and the clandestine quality of the hijabat's use of nonreligious texts was unique at Cobb.

Even though the hijabat claimed that their culture was independent of their religion, the evidence suggests that the two were intertwined in very elaborate ways. If culture can be defined as performance according to both Goffman and Gee, then so can religion, which is a very specific set of symbolic actions. Geertz (1973), who has written about religion as a cultural system, defined it in the following fashion:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (italics in original, p. 90)

The hijabat were not only visibly symbolic of their religion because of their dress, but also embodied their religion with their actions and speech. For example, to Saba, religion was her life, and she talked the talk of militant Muslims: "Islam has permanent solutions to primary problems" (Interview, 2/3/98). Saba, like all the hijabat, strove for a state of grace in her daily life especially as she struggled to persuade her family to allow her to marry a young black man who had converted to Islam. She retreated into the text of the *Qur'an* not only for spiritual reasons but also as a means of protection and power against her family's racial prejudice. By embodying the work of the *Qur'an*, she did not think that her family could hurt her. The text sanctioned her relationship to the young man even if her culture and family would not.

Reading the *Qur'an*, as Saba did each day or as Layla did with her father each night, led to three results that relate to Scribner's (1984) metaphors: being more knowledgeable about the contents of the *Qur'an* and therefore more respected by one's family and community, reaching a state of grace by virtue of the fact that reading it endows a spirituality or holiness, and empowering one's self against culturally biased acts. In fact, parents took pride

in the fact that their sons and daughters, but especially their daughters, read the *Qur'an* and prayed. At a parent meeting about school violence, one father praised his son's success (high grades) in school but chose to describe his daughter's success at being prayerful, "She prays more than I do" (Field notes 3/24/98). In other words, although most of the Yemeni families desired both their male and female children to know the *Qur'an* and to pray, these characteristics were especially valued in girls because they reflected on the family's honor.

It was the girls' responsibility to maintain religious values, thus reinforcing a gendered notion of religion. The girls knew this and were genuinely involved in their religious practice, but they were also cognizant of the power one assumed with the thorough knowledge of the *Qur'an*. If reading the *Qur'an* incited a state of spiritual grace and power, reading other texts allowed the hijabat to adapt and become part of American social and cultural life. This was most easily done at Cobb High School, where the interaction among public and private spaces allowed the girls to maintain cultural and religious norms and to indulge in the same texts, both oral and written, that other students did.

Music: The text of parties

As a contrast to school life and reading the *Qur'an*, it is important to consider other social settings within which the hijabat enacted cultural or religious performance through texts. Parties, which often took place within the Southend, were segregated according to gender, and the most controversial text was the music to which the girls listened or danced. Parties were often organized around birthdays and weddings. The girls printed out invitations (written in Arabic and English), which were passed out at school. For weddings, everyone in the Yemeni community was invited. These were important occasions, and the entire Yemeni community knew about them. Even though parties took place in the privacy of Yemeni homes and were segregated by gender, they did in fact manifest in-betweenness in concrete ways, through clothing, talk, and music. For instance, most of the hijabat removed their scarves and *abayas* (loose dresses), revealing American clothing—jeans and shirts— which was quite tight underneath. Their hair, although long, was done in the latest fashion: straight or up with wisps of hair around the face. Some of the young married women did not remove their scarves and talked instead about the lyrics in the songs, describing them as haram because of the sexual messages in them. Most of the high school girls could not listen to this music at home and dared not tell their parents that they did sometimes at parties. Other girls openly opposed the music and remained covered. Saba, who wore very tight outfits at parties and who was proud of

her figure, had turned away from popular music. Her explanation below reflects and represents other girls' perceptions, misgivings, and doubts about both American and Arab music.

I used to listen to regular music such as, you know, FM98 and tapes and stuff. But I stopped and now I listen to only Islamic music. And Islamic music is only, is only the drum but nowadays there's so many groups of talented Muslim, like rappers, singers, that the music is so beautiful that you can really dance to it. (Interview, 2/3/98)

Saba explained further that there are American or Western musicians and singers who make music to which she can listen because it is based on Islamic teachings. She gave singer Cat Stevens as an example and shared with me a newspaper article about him in which he explains the reasons for his conversion (Stevens, n.d.). In effect, Saba listened to a hybrid type of music, music that is composed of Islamic teachings and Western rock. Again, in-betweenness characterized the music and musical texts to which the hijabat listened, danced, and sang. Saba pointed out that she listened to Islamic music because it connected both American and Yemeni cultural and religious spaces: "It's Islamic music but it's American" (Interview, 2/3/98).

Saba and most of the other hijabat did not listen to other types of American music because of the possible negative consequences on their reputations.

Because I, sometimes you can say probably like if there's, from the olden days, it's a nice, decent song. Innocent, it deals about like love, it's nice, it's beautiful. Because nowadays, I find that music nowadays is very distracting in a way where they have like things that, I don't know. I'm a very modest person and I don't like to hear like I wanta, you know, this and this and that. Because I don't, I don't think that's modesty and I just, I prefer to listen to something I can benefit from. And I prefer to listen to something that won't be held against me in a way like...you know, 'cause you control what you hear, you control what you see, you control what you say. So if I can control to hear something good than negative, then why not. The main music nowadays is not innocent, not decent. (Interview, 2/3/98)

Music among the hijabat served one main purpose: It helped connect American and Yemeni life more concretely and it preserved cultural and religious standards for good behavior, such as modesty and control over one's

actions. The hijabat listened to other music but not openly, and they certainly did not talk about it at school. Nouria said, "I cover my ears on the bus home, if the music is 'specially bad and the boaters are staring at me." Because parents did not usually approve of American music (and the Imam, the religious leader at the mosque, was against it), the hijabat compromised by listening to in-between music. This type of music often included Arabic and English lyrics and sometimes French ones. The music had a fast beat, but it contained musical influences from the Middle East or North Africa that were immediately recognizable as Arab and were therefore deemed appropriate by the girls, even if their parents disagreed. Within the basement spaces at parties, the girls enjoyed this music without worrying about being either too American or not American enough.

Weddings were another type of special occasion during which the hijabat indulged in unrestricted behavior and listened to different types of music and inbetween lyrics. At school, the girls talked of nothing else but the upcoming wedding, whether the bride and groom (who are already married) are cousins, whether the marriage would be consummated during the night of the party. This talk was preceded by the bride handing out invitations, written in both Arabic and English script, to all of the Yemeni girls at school. These invitations were symbolic of the bride's new status and success as a young Muslim woman. The girls pored over the invitations throughout the school day, and then showed and read them to their mothers, who could not read in Arabic or English. In this fashion, the news of a wedding spread quickly and efficiently. A wedding was a community affair in the Southend, and generally everyone was invited.

Because many families were related or had village affiliations in Yemen, it was taken for granted that everyone would send someone from the family to the wedding. The example of an invitation in Figure 1 begins with a short prayer in Arabic praising God and is followed by the announcement of marriage and its locations in both Arabic and English. The celebration is to take place in two different places, one for men and the other for women. At the bottom of the invitation, the families request in Arabic that small children be left at home. The wedding invitation is an example of an in-between text in both language and form. It is clearly symbolic of the girls' literacy adaptation to the commonly enacted wedding invitation genre in the U.S. This is not a prevalent practice in Yemen, where many of the girls are betrothed.

At one of the weddings to which I was invited (see Figure 1) at least 200 women attended (Field notes, 11/1/98). They danced the debka (a line dance), and couples belly-danced. Each girl danced with the bride— hand and hip movements to the beat of the music. One of the girls commented that dancing to flute music is haram because it makes people do things, yet the women and girls danced to many kinds of music throughout the



Figure 1. Wedding invitation

evening. Every time the (male) manager of the hall walked in to check that all was well, the women would hurry to cover their heads, sometimes with the table linens if the hijab was not immediately available. When the groom came back to cut the cake, all the women covered for the duration. There was no advance warning, so there was a flurry of activity in getting heads covered. Throughout the celebration, it was evident that a conflict over music had ensued near the audiotape player, and the hijabat soon left the table to take part in the argument. The older women wanted traditional Yemeni instrumental music so that they could linedance, and the younger women wanted fast Arabic music and Raï music, a mixture of Algerian popular songs and rhythms, American disco, Egyptian instrumental interludes, songs of Julio Iglesias, and Moroccan wedding tunes. For example, one of the songs to which the girls wanted to listen has a combination of French and Arabic lyrics. The older women refused to dance to it, and

the younger women refused to dance to traditional Yemeni songs. In the end, a variety of songs were played, and each group of women danced to different appropriate songs.

It is clear that weddings and parties offered special social and intertextual opportunities to the hijabat. In these situations, the girls' performances were private ones, where dancing and a variety of talk about school, Yemen, the bride's wedding night experience with her husband, and listening to music could take place without serious infringement upon their public reputations. The Discourse surrounding the various texts—music, print, or talk—can be characterized as in-between or a hybrid of two cultures and languages. Furthermore, the locality of this performance was expressed through states of dress. The hijabat were always wearing both Yemeni Muslim and American clothing (Western clothing under their loose dresses). This was one way they adapted to being both Yemeni and American without disgracing themselves in their community. This setting also gave them a sense of power. In being able to remove certain layers of clothing, they could express themselves differently and more openly and engage in taboo topics with other women from the community. Their appearance was dependent on the context, both temporal and situational, of the performative event, such as a dance or talk about relationships. Conflicting ways of being were resolved by the adoption of certain musical texts to the exclusion of others, or a blending of texts. This facilitated life at home and school and empowered their sense of selfhood in multiple contexts.

The texts of Arabic school

Arabic or Islamic schools have a long history. The golden age of Islam (A.D. 750–1150) was marked by the establishment and maintenance of a large network of educational institutions, including Islamic schools (Shamsavary, Saqeb, & Halstead, 1993). Classical Islamic education was organized into six types of schools, all of which were primarily religious and most of which taught boys. Remnants of these schools are still visible, both in the Middle East and North Africa, and in the United States. In the Southend, Arabic school was a blend of the *maktab* school, which focuses on reading, writing, and manners; and the *masjid* school, which combines learning with religious education (see Sarroub, 2000). Arabic school was also organized according to gender and ethnicity and was located in the mosque. There were several Arabic schools in the Arab community of Detroit, but in the Southend, because of the predominance of Yemenis in the community, almost all of the students were Yemeni, while the Lebanese and Iraqis attended other schools. The boys entered from one side of the mosque and the girls from the other. The girls were always covered from head to toe in abayas or very

loose long shirts and pants and the hijab, while the boys generally wore Western clothing but never shorts. Arabic school included grades K-7 and met on the weekends from 8:30 a.m. until noon for instruction, after which lectures were scheduled.

Each grade was organized by literacy level in Arabic rather than by age, so some of the hijabat such as Nouria, a 10th grader, were in the fourth grade. Each grade level had one room, and the small rooms were quite overcrowded. The desks stood against one another, making it almost impossible to stand. Anyone from the Yemeni community could register for Arabic school, and therefore, there were often students of various ages at each grade level, and if the girls failed a grade, they repeated it until they passed.

Each morning before classes began, the teachers, who were Yemeni, Egyptian, and Iraqi, met in the teachers' room. They sat on chairs arranged along the perimeter of the room, facing the principal's desk. When the bell rang the teachers went to their respective classes. After midmorning recess, the teachers changed rooms as they switched from teaching Arabic to religion or vice versa. The students remained in the same rooms. This organization was modeled upon schools in the Middle East and in Europe. The teachers moved from class to class, while the students remained in the same room.

All of the instruction revolved around reading, writing, and the *Qur'an*. In effect, the students were taught to read and write in Arabic so that they could read the *Qur'an*, and in the upper grades the *Qur'an* was used as the main textbook. In the lower grades teachers helped the students to memorize various verses from the *Qur'an*. Oral production, recitation, and listening were emphasized in all grades.

Importantly, because Arabic vocabulary is based upon a three-letter root system to which affixes are attached, much time was spent learning different roots in the younger grades. For example, in the second grade, the teacher passed out a worksheet on which was listed sets of three letter sounds out of order, and the students were to recognize the sounds and the words they made. So, from the sounds /th/, /h/, and /b/, make the word *thahaba*, to go (Field notes, 10/24/98). The children learned that any word with these three sounds in that order will have one basic meaning, "going." Other exercises include syntactic sequencing and conjugation of verbs. The upper grades focused more on grammar, such as learning the parts of speech by rhyme, and spent most of their time reading the *Qur'an* and memorizing it.

Instruction at Arabic school was all teacher centered. The students did not address their teachers by name but as "Teacher" or *Moualima*. Because the classrooms were so overcrowded and it was so easy for the girls to talk to one another, the teachers usually yelled at the top of their voices during the lessons. In fact the hijabat were much louder and laughed more in Arabic school than they did at their high school. The teachers were often aghast

at their behavior and became harsher, calling the girls donkeys or camels in front of the whole class. Literacy instruction took the form of the teacher telling the girls what to do and how to do it with little opportunity for discussion or questions. For assessment, the teachers gave the girls homework such as grammar exercises and verses from the *Qur'an* to memorize for the next class.

Each month, the upper grades took an oral exam, which consisted of reciting from memory different parts of the *Qur'an*. The hijabat often grew impatient with this type of instruction and constantly criticized the teachers for their lack of innovation. But there was little they could do during literacy instruction. However, during religious instruction, they tended to ask many questions about the text and demand an explanation from their teachers. This was distinctly different from classroom instruction at Cobb, where questioning the text and the author was taken for granted because the teachers usually asked questions. In the context of the *Qur'an*, the hijabat were willing to accept it as the word of God, yet they wondered at the reasons behind their religious practices. For instance, a seventh grader in her late teens asked the teacher why she could not wear a ring on her index finger. The teacher explained that wearing a ring on that finger is mahkru because that finger is used during prayer and signified one God. Therefore, it was better if it was not adorned (Field notes, 10/24/98).

Religious instruction in Arabic school was characterized by a more open and teacher-centered environment and by the chanting of various sections of the *Qur'an*. This was especially so at the upper grades, where some of the hijabat were young mothers. There was more discussion that was generally led by the questions the students asked, although the teachers definitely transmitted all new knowledge. The teacher reminded the hijabat in Arabic and broken English to wear their scarves wherever they went and to pray five times every day so as to be good role models to the younger girls. I include excerpts taken from field notes of a fourth-grade classroom during which one teacher lectured and led a discussion on the hijab and modesty.

After chanting a verse about charity in Arabic, the teacher asks the class in Arabic and English, "If someone asks you why you wear a scarf and why you're covered, what do you say? You may say it's because of my religion." The teacher then makes an analogy. She says that "expensive chocolate is covered—in olden times good, expensive chocolate was covered. Allah created feelings in a man. Even if a woman is completely covered, a man can smell her perfume, and his feelings will cause him to harm her. We have to cover ourselves. We have to protect ourselves like candy

to keep the flies away. In the old days, in the U.S., there was less rape because women wore long dresses and skirts and this kept men from raping women. *Little House on the Prairie*, *Dr. Quinn* are examples of women who cover themselves and avoid harm. Girls today should cover for the same reason. Among women, women have to cover themselves from waist to knee, or in some cases, from chest to knee. In front of men everything must be covered, like expensive chocolate.” The girls listen to what the teacher says with avid interest, but they do not all look convinced. (Field notes, 11/1/98)

The teacher in the excerpt above was obviously interested in the girls’ safety, and by using examples from American media and Muslim teachings she interacted with the girls with a mixture of in-between texts. Her words carried a greater import in the context of religious instruction, and her use of popular media to persuade the girls of her viewpoint helped her identify with their daily lives.

The hijabat learned and improved their Arabic, but they also heard and learned lessons that were not easily reconciled with those they learned at their public high school or through American media. The oral and written texts with which the hijabat engaged allowed them to connect their religious practice to their identities as teenagers, but they also positioned them as powerless girls whose femininity and education could be a liability. For example, Nouria explained that her goals were at odds with those her male peers had for her. “The Arabic boys, I guess, want [us] to follow the old tradition. You know, don’t talk to boys.... You’re not supposed to be in school. You’re supposed to be home cooking and cleaning and raising a family.” In some ways, the teachers at Arabic school supported this view. According to these teachers, reading the *Qur’an* and chanting verses presents an antidote to the influences of the outside world. In Scribner’s (1984) sense of literacy as social practice, the discursive reading of the *Qur’an* empowers the girls with social and intellectual grace, but it paradoxically reifies their marginality as members of American public schooling and society.

Muhathara

So far, I have examined textual practices at Cobb High School, at parties and weddings, and Arabic school. Within those categories, I have touched upon literacy practices within the home, such as reading the *Qur’an* or knowing it well enough to argue one’s case during conflict. One of the most salient literacy practices within the home was the reading and paying of bills. Every single girl in this study had the responsibility of informing her parents

of incoming information in English and in Arabic. One of the hijabat, Aisha, for example, kept records and did the accounting for the rental properties her father managed in the neighborhood. The hijabat were all aware of their parents' financial status because the parents were not print literate and relied on their children to read and write for them.

In addition, the girls also followed the academic progress of their siblings and were responsible for ensuring their success in school by helping them with homework. Generally, they also helped their male siblings before turning to their own homework. Therefore, in order for these Yemeni families to survive in the United States, their daughters' (sons usually work outside the home) knowledge of English and Arabic was crucial.

These literacy tasks, characterized by Scribner (1984) as adaptation, enabled the Yemeni families to fulfill mundane tasks, such as signing papers sent home from school or paying the electricity bills. Yemeni parents, however, also encouraged their daughters to be just as versatile in Arabic as they were in English. Consequently, the hijabat attended Arabic school to the seventh grade, and they did this on Saturdays and Sundays. Some of the girls also attended *muhathara* (lectures) and discussions organized by women in the community. Arabic school and *muhathara* emphasized knowledge of the Arabic language and religious education and morals. In both of these settings, reading, writing, and recitation of text from memory were key practices, and because parents were fearful that their daughters would become American, they insisted on such instruction for as long as possible before marriage.

Muhathara was a unique space for the hijabat. It was a time and place for learning and socializing within the context of reading. The lectures, which a few groups of girls attended, took place either at the mosque or in a private home. The ones at the mosque functioned much more like a traditional lecture, where a woman speaker addressed women's issues in front of an audience and the audience participated in a discussion at the end. The *muhathara* held in someone's home, however, was quite different. In the Southend, I was introduced by Saba to Mrs. Bouzain, a woman who led Saba's lecture group. Once a week on Mondays, five to eight high school hijabat and young women (some of whom had dropped out of school) from the community gathered in Mrs. Bouzain's basement from 5:00 to 7:00 in the evening. The girls arrived and removed their shoes, and because it was time for evening prayer found a quiet corner and prayed before the lecture and discussion began. After the early evening prayers, the lecture began. Each of the girls brought something specific to read from the *Qur'an* or from a book on Muslim religious conduct. This group functioned much like a book club, but reading or reciting text aloud was emphasized and was followed by a lecture on morality.

During one meeting, Saba began the lecture by reading a prayer from the *Qur'an*. Mrs. Bouzain mouthed the prayer silently with her eyes closed as Saba read. Then, Saba recited a hadith in Arabic and its translation in English. This particular hadith dealt with being thankful. Mrs. Bouzain proceeded to explain the hadith, its meaning, and why expressing thanks is important. She admonished the girls in English and Arabic, "You should not be as you are in school.... You should bring your hearts to Allah. You're teenagers and you love life, but you have to be serious. In the Arab community, you have to be like a queen. When you walk, people will watch you walk and talk about you" (Field notes, 11/2/98). Mrs. Bouzain reiterated the girls' biggest fear: being watched by community members. Because she had daughters at Cobb, Mrs. Bouzain understood that the girls were much more open and perhaps less vigilant about their reputations while at school. Therefore, she used Saba's reading from the *Qur'an* as a segue into a lecture on modesty and good behavior. Mrs. Bouzain exclaimed that "a girl is like glass. If you break it, you can't put it back."

Muhathara gave some of the hijabat the opportunity to socialize but within a strictly textual and religious context. There was no room in this setting for outsiders who did not want to learn the *Qur'an*. Although I had inquired about the meetings, I was not invited to attend until my second year in the community, when it was established that I wanted to learn more about reading the *Qur'an* in this context and could be trusted to participate accordingly. Muhathara was also a haven for the girls because they trusted Mrs. Bouzain to keep secret their confidences. Although there was an explicit emphasis on recitation and the *Qur'an*, much more took place implicitly during these meetings.

Muhathara provided an occasion for textual inquiry and response. The hijabat felt they could talk to Mrs. Bouzain because she had daughters their age in their school and, importantly, because she was learned. Unlike many of the women in the community, she could read and write in Arabic and recite the entire *Qur'an*. She had achieved the state of grace and power into which the girls wanted to enter. She was a teacher to them and a friend who did not betray them to their parents. In Mrs. Bouzain's basement and in the context of reading from the *Qur'an*, one could openly discuss the in-betweenness the girls experienced in and out of school. Although the girls did not disagree with the text of the *Qur'an*, they sought to understand it in the context of their daily lives.

Muhathara was important for another reason. In a world of fast-paced multimedia, the sanctity of the *Qur'an* was preserved both emotionally and intellectually, as well as physically. I include here an excerpt from my field notes. It illustrates the powerful connection the hijabat made between purity of mind and body. Reading was delimited in unusual ways that suggest

a clear link between the purity of the Book and those who read it. This excerpt also shows the intertextual nature of reading, religious talk, and gossip within the group.

At Mrs. Bouzain's the girls recite *surat* (verses from the *Qur'an*) one after the other in round-robin fashion and refer to the text only when they forget the words. The *Qur'an* is passed around but Saba doesn't touch it. I volunteer to read and the girls inquire if I can touch it. I realize, then, what they mean. I read the text in Arabic, while Saba recites next from memory.... Purity and "touching" is the next topic of conversation. We talk about why the girls don't shake the principal's hand. Touching, Saba says, is disrespectful and she shouldn't have to lose respect for herself by shaking a man's hand just because he's Dr. Principal.... We talk about the scarf. Mrs. Bouzain says, "When a woman covers herself, she respects herself. She feels better about herself, more secure. When she's covered, she's pure." (Field notes, 11/16/98)

Within the repeated Monday event of *muhathara*, the hijabat constructed a routine: late afternoon prayer, recitation of text, lecture from Mrs. Bouzain, gossip and discussion, and conversation with gossip during dinner. The pattern did not change and became more significant as the hijabat continued to meet. In effect, *muhathara* became a system of communicative forms, or genres. In describing genre as dynamic, fragile, provisional, and plastic, Freedman and Medway (1994) pointed to the social interplay between text and context. Clearly, prior knowledge, such as knowing the *Qur'an*, served to shape the genres of *muhathara*. Interestingly enough, genres have boundaries or limits that make them recognizable (e.g., a wedding invitation or one of the verses in the *Qur'an*), but these boundaries are permeable, allowing for individual or group appropriation within specified contexts. According to this view of genre, the composition of texts, oral or otherwise, becomes a social process, whereby knowledge is created and re-created. In the case of the hijabat, they learned something new every Monday night by attending *muhathara*, but the system by which they communicated remained consistent as did their intention.

Bazerman (1994), in his analysis of U.S. patents, has thoughtfully described this form of enactment of genre as "the intention, the recognition of the intention, the achievement of the intention with the coparticipation of others, and the further actions of others respecting that achievement" (p. 82). Bazerman's observation accurately describes the intentioned realization of the interactions set in motion every Monday night by the hijabat and Mrs. Bouzain.

It is clear from the example of one of the muhathara meetings at Mrs. Bouzain's house that the hijabat's culture and religion had a tremendous impact on their school lives. Many teachers simply did not understand the cultural and social limits within which these Muslim girls negotiated their American and Yemeni selves. It is fair to say that community and family values (both implicit and explicit ones) sometimes differed significantly from those at school. Literacy as social practice during muhathara became meaningful because it endowed a state of spiritual grace upon the girls and also allowed them to talk openly about their religious or cultural concerns. This was very different from conversation at lunch around magazines or other contraband. The conversations during muhathara were characterized by the girls as more intellectual and religious. They saw the reading of the *Qur'an* and the conversation that ensued around the readings as knowledge to be learned rather than just talk among friends or "stuff you learn at school." These groups of girls grappled with disturbing religious and moral issues for a purpose: to stay true and pure to Islam, to show their community that they were good Muslim girls, and to socialize about risky topics they could not openly discuss in school or elsewhere.

On the one hand, muhathara was an empowering space because it offered the hijabat a venue for both social and intellectual activity. On the other hand, as with Arabic school, this setting also marginalized them by mitigating their femininity to the expected religious and cultural standards of the Yemeni community. For example, Layla spoke candidly about what was expected of her,

They [parents] think ... Arabic girls are not supposed to have, like, they try to seclude us from anything. Like, from guys or from anything. They don't want us to have, like, the natural feeling of anything. You know. That's why they'll be, like, you know, never talk to guys. Put your head on the floor. Like when I was in the mosque, I remember like, like the teacher, she'll tell us that you know, when you walk in the hallways, you should have your head on the ground. Because the guys don't look at, they'll look at you and they'll get evil thoughts." (Interview, 2/11/98)

As such, she and the other hijabat maintained a rather fragile balance between their Yemeni and American identities through the social practice of textual inquiry.

Discussion

Many ethnographies, monographs, and histories have been written about people who occupy the often figurative and sometimes physical border lands (Carger, 1996; Hall, 1995; Raissiguier, 1994). I chose in-betweenness as a concept for the hijabat because it ties together notions of text, literacy, space, gender, ethnicity, and identity. It is also a concept that some of the hijabat used when I asked them to describe themselves within their Yemeni and American worlds. In-betweenness, as a heuristic, attempts to create real or imagined boundaries to describe what people do to survive and get along with one another on a daily basis. The use of such a concept demarcates, however peripherally, an epistemological if not situational marker for understanding home and school worlds as a set of relationships in the hijabat's lives. As such, inbetweenness is a nebulous concept, but it is a useful analytical lens through which various literacies can be understood. The implication of this characterization is that for in-betweenness to remain in between, it must shift as its borders shift. I suspect that this occurs over time and with each succeeding generation of immigrants.

The lives I uncovered while I lived among the hijabat in the Southend are among the most dynamic I have ever experienced. The hijabat dealt with conflicting visions of literacy on a daily basis. However, they adapted to their situation by adopting an in-between text. This allowed them to perform successfully or to enact cultural norms that were acceptable and valid in the given context. At the same time, however, striving to be both American and Yemeni, boy or girl, could be a struggle. The Discourses that accompanied these identities are complex and complicated, affording the hijabat little power but endowing them with grace within public spaces. Knowing the *Qur'an* and being modest bestowed grace upon the individual.

Within the private spaces, whether at school or elsewhere, grace often fell by the wayside as the hijabat attempted to connect and adapt their Yemeni to their American selves. This could be as easy as shedding a layer of clothing at a party or as difficult as reading a book or poem clandestinely. In either case, the girls were told at muhathara and Arabic school that these actions were wrong and perhaps sinful. Yet the hijabat continued on, finding more and more in-betweenness situations within which to live.

Scribner's (1984) work illustrated the importance of varieties of literacies for the survival and socioeconomic success of communities. One example of the enactment of language and cultural competencies that cuts across socioeconomic background and ethnicity in schools and that facilitates textual practices within in-between spaces comes from Luis Moll's Funds of Knowledge project within working-class Latino populations and their experiences with non-Latino teachers (Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff,

& Gonzales, 1992; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). Moll et al. (1992) defined funds of knowledge as “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). The funds of knowledge perspective acknowledges that social class can be an impediment to or a catalyst for learning and achievement. However, “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive” (Moll, 1992, p. 21) are part of wider social networks and are required by diverse labor markets.

In other words, Moll suggested that if schools could find a way to explicitly privilege cultural tools of minority populations, the range of students who could rely on cultural knowledge to engage in successful school practices would be expanded. Therefore, schools and teachers would do well to become familiar with these funds of knowledge simply because they represent “a *potential* major social and intellectual resource for the schools” (1992, p. 22). Moll’s research illustrated that when schools make attempts to understand the underlying social, cultural, and language networks of the populations they service, it is more likely that there will be congruence between what and how content is taught and students’ ability to learn, thus broadening the definitions of privileged cultures and tools to include more than just social class distinctions.

An example of these underlying networks, although not representative of the funds of knowledge perspective, comes from a study in which the researchers observed that there was a mismatch between the teacher’s expectations for classroom behavior and her students’ (who were Italian Americans) knowledge of the required norms for proper behavior (Shultz, Florio, & Erickson, 1982). Shultz and his colleagues found that although the students’ social etiquette was perfectly acceptable at home, it did not meet the expectations of the classroom. They concluded that teachers and researchers need to “understand more fully children’s socialization into communicative traditions at home and at school, traditions that may be mutually congruent or incongruent” (p. 91). Researchers who have studied the impact of home cultures and social class on success at home and in school deduced that although socioeconomic standing is a useful tool, it does not always explain how individuals learn, produce knowledge, and sustain cultural or social identities in multiple worlds. Heath (1982), for example, showed that the complex language socialization process is “more powerful than single-factor explanations accounting for academic success” (p. 54).

Scribner (1984) pointed out that

as ethnographic research and practical experience demonstrate, effective literacy programs are those that are responsive to perceived

needs, whether for functional skills, social power, or self-improvement.... The road to maximal literacy may begin for some through the feeder routes of a wide variety of specific literacies. (p. 18)

The hijabat were all highly literate and engaged with their religious text, which pervaded much of their lives. This specific literacy could be both liberating and oppressive. For example, like the muhathara, Arabic school in the Southend used the context of reading to instill fear and mistrust. This had grave consequences. When the girls were told to think of themselves as wrapped chocolate or as fragile glass, the implication was that they did not have power and therefore they could be hurt. It is no wonder that they were so frightened of marriage or of talking openly in the school cafeteria. Arabic school did offer them the opportunity to discuss many important issues relating to their religion, and they did so boisterously and with a certain level of irreverence for their teachers, but they also received mixed messages about their status as women, their education, and their futures as workers in the world or the home.

Arabic school was an in-between place where the girls interacted intellectually with their teachers. The discourse of Arabic school, much like that of muhathara, was a threatening one, for it positioned the hijabat as victims of society, and in some ways, it hindered the negotiation process of living in two worlds. Public school, on the other hand, offered a mixture of possible discourses and certain freedom to choose among them to reach both academic and social success, from classroom content (even if most of it was teacher centered in presentation) to cafeteria conversations around secret poems. It is no wonder that the hijabat preferred that space to Arabic school, even though they all agreed that knowing Arabic was important to them and to their families.

It is clear that the hijabat negotiated their home and school lives in unique ways. They adapted to a given situation by creating or adopting in-between texts that helped them bridge two cultures. As educators and researchers, it is important to be aware of the texts youth employ to make sense of their world. As I reported elsewhere (Sarroub, in press), all too often most teachers remained ignorant of the girls' community, their religion, and their struggle to be both American and Yemeni. They had no idea of how the hijabat were positioned and how they were positioning themselves within their various interactions and ritual performances in and out of school. If researchers and educators are to support diversity in public schools, then they must be aware not only of its existence but also of its manifestation and acknowledge that diverse literacy practices are part of a larger geopolitical way of life.

Awareness is the first step toward understanding and perhaps a first step toward a pedagogy of specific literacies, to use Scribner's (1984) term, that not only centers on individual students but also privileges those students' communities. As Street (1995) noted, in order to develop better curricula, the wider socioeconomic and political context is integral to the process. Knowing that there are conflicting visions of what it means to be literate and what it means to enact multiple literacies seems to me to be crucial to the development of critically responsive pedagogy and powerful social and academic curricula.

In the case of the hijabat, who come from low socioeconomic status homes, I found that they managed a demanding academic schedule while they simultaneously performed tasks and lived up to family responsibilities unknown to most adolescents. Yet they did this on the margins and were further marginalized both in their own community and in their school. This prompted them to actively seek ways to succeed in multiple contexts. When I left the Southend, teachers were only beginning to learn about how rich and demanding these girls' lives were in and out of school. As in the example of Saba and her prayer in the car, in-between spaces and texts helped satisfy the demands that the girls faced as they attempted to succeed at being good Muslims, good daughters and wives, and good students. As they continue to navigate home, and perhaps school spaces, I remain optimistic that schools will also experience shifting in-betweenness that will privilege their students and communities' texts.

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