

Lisa Suhair Majaj

New Directions: Arab American Writing Today¹

Arab American literature has gone through many shifts since the early decades of the twentieth century, when Khalil Gibran and other *Mahjar* writers in New York formed *Ar-Rabitah*, the Writer's Guild, and began to publish poetry and prose that changed the face of Arabic literature even as it initiated a century of Arab American literary endeavors throughout the Americas. But in many ways the issues that confronted the *Mahjar* writers continue to confront Arab American writers today. Whether or not contemporary writers struggle with the *Mahjar* writer's dilemma of which language to write in (for many the choice is not theirs to make) they, like their predecessors, inhabit multiple cultures and write for multiple audiences: American, Arab, Arab American. And despite the growing consolidation and visibility of the identity "Arab American", this negotiation of cultures has often resulted in a form of split vision. Like other hyphenated individuals, Arab Americans seek to integrate the different facets of their identities, experiences, and heritages into a unified whole. But too often there remains a schism between Arab and American, east and west. Authors turn one eye to their local context while keeping the other eye on the Arab context of origin. But in the process of turning the gaze in two directions at once, what is sometimes overlooked is the ground beneath their feet.

Although the Arab American experience in both Northern and Southern American contexts has come to greater visibility in the past several decades, providing far greater space and support for Arab American articulation than was previously the case, the conflicts which confronted the early *Mahjar* writers continue to inform current literary and cultural expression. In this essay, I focus on U.S. Arab American writing, a literature which has largely been produced in

¹ This is an update of Majaj (1999).

English. The U.S. experience is of course but one facet of Arab American experience as it is played out in North and South American contexts, languages and cultures, and a full investigation of the points of contact between “Arab” and “American”, although beyond the scope of this essay, must inevitably move beyond the limitations of the U.S. sphere. The workshop *ArabAmericas, Transatlantisch* (Berlin, June 16-17, 2005) provided an excellent starting point for such a discussion. I am particularly grateful to Professor Ottmar Ette for his insistence that the term “Arab American” be broadened to encompass both North and South America, and that the fallacy of using the term to refer only to the U.S. context be made explicit.

The sense of split vision which has so often informed U.S. Arab American literature has typically been expressed as a tilt toward one side of the hyphen or the other. Although the New York school of *Mahjar* writers were influenced by their American literary and social contexts in ways which have not been fully explored, they were nonetheless primarily expatriate writers: exiles who wrote largely in Arabic and whose vision and attention were largely directed toward the Middle East and its literary and political contexts. On the other hand, immigrant autobiographers writing in English sought to orient and ground themselves within the U.S. context by drawing on the conventions of American immigrant autobiography, claiming their credentials as U.S. citizens and virtually writing themselves into existence as Americans. In texts such as Abraham Mitrie Rihbany’s 1914 autobiography *A Far Journey* (Rihbany 1914) and Salom Rizk’s 1943 autobiography *Syrian Yankee* (Rizk 1943), for instance, Arab identity is mediated through strategies of containment and distancing and situated within a broad claim to American identity. Such focus on Americanization was a natural result of early nineteenth century xenophobia, the restrictions on immigration to the U.S., and various tensions over who was to be included in the definition “American.” Indeed, a series of legal cases in the second decade of the 20th century questioning the “whiteness” of Arab immigrants and hence their eligibility for American citizenship, helped set the stage for this anxiety about American

identity – an anxiety which was to leave a distinctive mark on Arab American writing.²

In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, the emergence in the U.S. of a pan-ethnic Arab American identity bridging different national and religious backgrounds helped set the stage for a new kind of literature affirming and engaging Arab and Arab American identity. Situating this emergence of Arab American identity on both literary and cultural levels were a number of events. First, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and the ethnic “roots” phenomenon which gained ground in the 1970s provided the foundation for affirmation of multiculturalism in the U.S. and opened new spaces for the so-called hyphenated genres of American literature: African-American, Asian-American, Jewish-American, Italian-American and others. The arrival of more educated, politicized Arab immigrants after 1960, including greater numbers of Muslims, spurred settled Arab Americans to a new engagement with their cultural identities. At the same time, the establishment after 1967 of an institutional framework for Arab American life through national organizations such as the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG), and the Arab American Institute (AAI) helped to encourage ethnic pride as well as pan ethnic identification.³ And finally, the impact of wars and other political events (including the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the Lebanese civil war, the Israeli invasions of Lebanon, the two Gulf Wars, the oil embargoes of the 1970s and hijackings and bombings in the 1980s and 1990s, the destruction of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001) have forced Arab Americans to grapple with their identity and with the “write or be written” imperative: Define yourself or others will define you.

The poetry and prose published in the U.S. from the late 1960s onward by Arab American authors engaged increasingly with issues of

2 For a discussion of these legal cases and their implications for literature, see Majaj (2000).

3 The institutional life of Arab American has in recent years expanded into the cultural sphere. Examples include the Arab American Museum in Detroit, Michigan; publications such as *Mizna: Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America* and *Al Jadid: A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts*; and literary organizations such as RAWI: Radius of Arab American Writers and the Arab American theatre collective Nibras.

ethnic and cultural identity. But for many years this writing was limited and hard to find, and remained largely unrecognized as a body of literature. Until the late 1980s it was not even possible to search under the category “Arab American literature” in U.S. libraries: there was no such classification. Things began to change with the publication in 1988 of Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa’s groundbreaking anthology *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (Orfalea/Elmusa 1988) – a collection spanning the *Mahjar* period to the late 1980s which quite literally put Arab American literature on the map. Since then, Arab American literary anthologies have seen a relative proliferation: subsequent collections have included Joanna Kadi’s 1994 collection *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Kadi 1994), Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash’s 1999 *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (Mattawa/Akash 1999), Pauline Kaldas and Mattawa’s *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (Kaldas/Mattawa 2004b), and forthcoming anthologies under preparation.⁴ There have also been several collections which have linked Arab and Arab American literature: notably Naomi Shihab Nye’s *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East* (Nye 1998) and Nathalie Handal’s *The Poetry of Arab Women* (Handal 2001). Meanwhile, of course, the number of individual author’s texts has grown precipitously. Once largely invisible, Arab American literature is on its way to becoming a recognized sub-genre of American ethnic literature.

Yet the split context within which Arab American literature emerged – a focus on cultural affirmation in the American context on the one hand, and attention to political events and events in the countries of origin on the other hand – continues to shape this writing not only in theme but also, perhaps, in form. The fact that Arab American literary production has until recently leaned heavily toward poetry has often been noted. Although at the moment we are seeing a surge of fiction and memoirs as well as forays into relatively new genres, as drama and comedy, poetry remains the predominant Arab American literary genre. The usual, somewhat essentialist explanation put forward for this dominance has been that Arabs have an intrinsic cultural

4 See Handal (forthcoming) and Charara (forthcoming).

propensity towards poetry. Indeed, in the preface to *Grape Leaves*, the editors quote the eleventh century scholar and critic Ibn Rishiq: “The ancient Arabs wish one another joy but for three things – the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet, and the foaling of a noble mare” (Orfalea/Elmusa 1988: xv). In other words, it is suggested, as a group Arab Americans have produced more poetry than prose because poetry is somehow “in our blood”. This intrinsic link to poetry is often claimed even when the writers in question do not read Arabic and have no direct relationship to the tradition of Arabic poetry.

Another explanation sometimes put forward is more sociological in focus: that U.S. Arab American writers have produced more poetry than prose because, as a small and beleaguered ethnic group, writers have only recently begun to feel established enough to turn to serious literary endeavors and have not, therefore, set in place for themselves the kind of support systems, both economic and social, needed for the writing of fiction. It is arguably true that as a genre, book-length fiction may demand a more extended focus than poetry, and that publishing novels is more difficult than publishing individual poems (although not harder than publishing books of poetry). However, despite the particular problems confronting the novel writer, this theory does not explain why Arab Americans as a group have until recently produced not only so few novels, but also so little **short** fiction as well.

There is another possible explanation, however, one connected to the ways in which U.S. Arab American culture has been shaped by the historical legacy of split vision. Arab Americans have traditionally focused on poetry, it might be argued, because poetry is the genre best suited to their experiences of celebration and mourning, affirmation and loss. Throughout the twentieth century Arab Americans have been situated between an ethnicity defined through intense familial and communal relationships and an equally intense (if often unwilling) engagement with political events. These dual orientations are linked by the literary genre typically used to articulate intense emotion: that of the lyric. Defined as a poem that expresses the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker, the lyric as a literary mode is particularly effective in articulating moments of intensity and illumination. It provides a ready vehicle not only for nostalgic celebrations of family and community, but also for anguished depictions of war and suffering, both of which have played such large roles in Arab American experience.

What the lyric mode does less well, though, is to provide a broader forum for representation, analysis, discussion and critique. Its poetic compression favors vignettes rather than narratives, moments of insight over sustained analysis; as a result it tends to evoke rather than explain. The predominance of the lyric mode in Arab American literature might therefore suggest a group focus on self assertion and expression rather than internal analysis and critique. After all, only after the self – personal and communal – has been established as a presence can it be examined and questioned.

Given the U.S. Arab American history of invisibility, exclusion and stereotyping, as well as the repercussions of war and occupation in Arab lands, it is no surprise that writers have felt the need to assert identity and mourn the ravages of political events. But as a genre, poetry, while powerful and eloquent, has not always provided an adequate forum within which to probe the full complexity of Arab American experience. As Arab American identity has become increasingly visible on the U.S. landscape, simply to be an Arab American is not an anomaly anymore. As a result, Arab American writers confront the need not just to assert their presence, but also to explore, question and critique their own identities and relationships with others. At the beginning of the 21st century, perhaps what is most needed is not just an examination of who Arab Americans are and where we have come from, but an exploration of where we are going and who we hope to become.

In the introduction to their anthology of short fiction, *Dinarzad's Children*, Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa link this issue of form to representational tensions. The lyric poem, they note, afforded Arab Americans

a way to speak as individuals to individuals, and a way to affirm that they were speaking for themselves even when their poems contained the concerns of multitudes around the world [...] [but] in shying away from fiction and prose narrative in general, Arab American writers may have wished to exert greater control over the representation of their community (Kaldas/Mattawa 2004a: xi).

Indeed, there has been a certain reluctance among Arab Americans in general to openly discuss issues which may reinforce prevailing negative stereotypes of Arabs. Given the political and social pressures facing Arab Americans in the U.S., writers may feel, and readers may

expect, that their task is to affirm Arab identity and to translate this identity to outsiders, not to lay bare divisive or problematic themes for the scrutiny of others.

Since the original writing of this essay, there has been much debate within the U.S. Arab American community on the need to move beyond both nostalgia and the reactivity generated by political pressures (greatly accentuated in the post 9-11 context) toward a more critical, reflective, creative and transformative engagement with the many strands of Arab American experience (including the Arab cultural and literary heritage, which is paid lip service to by many but rarely explored in any depth). Mattawa has addressed this issue with particular directness and fruitfulness. In his essay “Arab American Writing and the Challenge of Reinventing Tradition”, Mattawa notes that Arab American literature largely emerged as a “survival mode of writing” (Mattawa 2003: 16) in which authors write out of a sense of political and ethnic crisis. Yet in confronting the existential need to assert their humanity in the face of a culture that dehumanizes them on ethnic, racial and political grounds, at the same time as they mourn a receding old-world culture, Arab American writers run the risk of becoming trapped within a Manichean formula: one which pits a dehumanized American present against a nostalgic, romanticized Arab past. Not only is the schism a reductionist one, the role of victim allows a writer room for little except bemoaning their fate. The result of such alienation, Mattawa correctly argues, is a sort of cultural protectiveness which leads to “philosophical and ethical vagueness”:

We fear airing our dirty laundry because we fear the very likely possibility of that information being used against us. So we have not taken on our communities – and the materialistic and spiritual depravity that can be witnessed throughout our so-called events and festivals [...]. And so many of our flawed cultural practices have not been confronted – the rampant misogyny and chauvinism that still define masculinity in our subculture, the forced marriages, and racism, particularly the problematic role Arab-American entrepreneurs have played as middle men between American corporate capital and America’s downtrodden (Mattawa 2003: 16).

To move away from defensive nostalgia and stereotypical “ethnic” themes, however, toward more intellectually and thematically daring material, arguably requires an expansion not just of theme but also of literary style and genre. As Mattawa and Akash point out in their introduction to *Post Gibran*, “Changes in form [...] are important signi-

fiers of changes in subject matter and in tactics” (Mattawa/Akash 1999a: xiii). Conversely, different literary genres make possible different kinds of conversations. It is noticeable, for instance, that the emergence of a body of feminist Arab American writing, as well as growing attention to issues of race and class, corresponds with a shift toward prose writing, both fiction and nonfiction. Overall, it is as if to move beyond simple celebration toward more rigorous and self-critical explorations mandates a move away from the lyric compression of poetry toward the more expansive and explanatory medium of prose.

Hand in hand with this move toward different genres and themes has come a small increase in critical writing about Arab American literature. Critical discussion is necessary for several reasons. For one thing, a literature which is not critically analyzed possesses less stature and visibility in the literary world: its texts will be less well known and less likely to be read outside the local community. Critical discussion also helps to make visible the kinds of literary and cultural traditions upon which Arab American writers draw: this discussion is useful not only for readers (and teachers) but also for writers. And while criticism has a crucial role to play in highlighting not just the cultural and sociological, but also the literary dimension of Arab American writing, a body of informed and nuanced literary criticism could play a significant role in situating Arab American literature for both Arab and non-Arab readers, lessening somewhat the pressure on Arab American writers to serve as “translators” and guardians of their culture.

The 1999 version of this essay concluded by outlining some areas in which I thought U.S. Arab American literature could productively move. Although we have made progress in the last few years, there is still a substantial way to go, and these areas remain important ones for Arab American writers. I therefore believe it is not out of place to outline these areas again:

1. We need to continue to move away from simple nostalgia and toward a more direct confrontation with the Arab American past. This is not to deny the importance of cultural, communal and personal affirmation, especially in the current political climate. Rather, it is a call for greater complexity. U.S. Arab American

history is not limited to upward mobility on the one hand (the classic American success story favored in most of the community's autobiographies) and cultural loss on the other (the underside of assimilation). Nor can Arab American experience be adequately portrayed through a simplistic cultural celebration that centers upon food and dance (the hummus-and-tabouleh version of ethnicity). Rather, the experiences of Arab Americans in the U.S. have been at once more complex and more painful than any of these narratives suggest. One task confronting Arab American writers is that of exploring not just ethnic celebration and entry into white middle class America, but marginalization, poverty and exclusion – not only in the broader American society but within Arab communities as well. (The latter project remains particularly unvoiced to date. For instance, as Mattawa has noted, the true subalterns in the Arab American community are the Yemeni migrants – a group that remains practically invisible in discussions about the Arab American community.)

2. We need more attention to the ways in which U.S. Arab Americans have been racialized in the American context. For too long Arab Americans have tried to escape into white ethnicity, a flight made more possible by legal definitions of Arabs in the U.S. as “white.” But history has shown, time and again, that this formal status of “whiteness” is merely honorary and is quickly revoked in the wake of political events in the Middle East as well as in the U.S. Not only would Arab Americans do well to grapple with the implications of this racialization, we would also do well to explore the ways in which it provides new grounds for solidarity with other groups of color.⁵
3. We need a stronger, more nuanced and less defensive articulation of feminism. Arab American feminist critique has traditionally been hampered by the overwhelming array of orientalist stereotypes about Arab culture at play in U.S. contexts. When Arab and Arab American women give voice to feminist concerns, they are too often assumed, both by their own communities and by outside

5 This call for acknowledging Arab American racialization and forging connections with other communities of color has increasingly been raised in recent years. Of particular note is the forthcoming collection Jamal/Naber (under review).

observers, to be rejecting their own cultural traditions in favor of a more “liberated” western culture. Depending on the stance of the observer, this is viewed either as an escape or as a betrayal. The result of such over-determined discourse has often been a pressure toward silence, with accompanying community censure of those writers who do attempt to publicly explore more problematic aspects of Arab and Arab American culture. As Arab American writing is read by a widening audience of readers with no prior knowledge of Arab culture, such representational difficulties multiply. Yet to succumb to silence in order to escape being misunderstood is in its own way a form of self-betrayal. What Arab Americans need is not less but **more** representation – for only when there is a wide array of depictions of Arab American experience and culture will writing that is self-critical be understood for what it is: an effort at self-transformation.⁶

4. We need more social criticism in general. Although U.S. Arab Americans have often liked to celebrate their law-abiding record, strong family structures and so on, we confront, as much as any other community, internal problems linked both to our Arab and our American identities and contexts. Arab Americans are not free of domestic violence, drug use, gang participation, and so-called “honor killings”. All too often racism, sexism, classism and especially homophobia go unquestioned. While literary texts are not social exposés, they nonetheless provide a forum within which social questions may be probed: this role should not be forgotten or ignored.
5. We need to take a closer look at the complexity of Arab American identity. To identify simply as Arabs in the U.S. or as Americans of Arab heritage is in some ways to gloss over this complexity: although both identities are accurate, Arab Americans are also engaged in the process of ethnogenesis – the creation of a new culture drawing on both past and present contexts. The legacy of split vision, of being torn between the Middle East and the U.S., has had direct and pragmatic impact on the evolution of this identity. But Arab American authors do not simply write Arab literature in

6 For a recent publication which grapples with issues of Arab American feminism, see Abdulhadi/Naber/Alsultany (2005).

English (as was once suggested to me): they do not simply translate from culture to culture. Arab American literary works need to explore ethnicity as something altogether new: something that is in the process of creation.

6. We need to pay more attention to who is excluded by existing definitions. Does Arab American literature reflect the diversity of Arab American experience and identification? When we talk about Arab Americans, are we including people of mixed heritage, religious and racial as well as national? Are we including Arab Jews who identify with their Arabness? Are we including those who don't know any Arabic? Those originating from Arab countries aside from the common origin points of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq? And perhaps most importantly, are we including homosexual Arab Americans, whose experience has been for all practical purposes silenced in discussions of both Arab and Arab American culture? Although the emergence on the literary scene of a number of openly gay-identified writers has begun to challenge the silencing of alternative sexual identities in Arab American cultural life, there is still scant room for such voices.⁷
7. We need to continue to infuse our work with new cultural forms and genres, to become more self-conscious about the diverse cultural traditions within which we are writing, Arab and American, and to turn more consciously to literary experimentation. For instance, rap music and hip hop are clear influences on the work of some younger Arab American poets. Similarly, a few writers are fruitfully mining the relationship with Arabic language, experimenting with bilingualism, in much the way Latino/a writers have done, and exploring happens when Arabic enters Arab American writing, both on a linguistic and a visual level. Such experimentation is vital, because it helps Arab American writers connect to the richness of both their past and their present.
8. We need to keep in mind our multiple audiences without being stymied by them. When we write and publish, we speak both to and for Arab Americans. But we also address readers within and without our many other communities – national, gendered, cultur-

7 One important resource on gay Arab life is the internet publication *Bint el Nas*, found at <<http://www.bintelnas.org>>.

al, political and literary. Consciousness of this diverse readership can have a significant impact on how and what Arab Americans write. While the pressure to represent Arab culture in a positive light can have significant impact on the willingness to be self-critical, we need to remember that literary and activist concerns are interrelated but not identical.

9. At the same time, however, we need to acknowledge our implicit activist role. Writers writing fluently in English have a chance to reach broader audiences than translations ever could. We need texts that will translate Arab political and social realities into human terms and that will create a space for empathy on the part of readers who might otherwise remain indifferent. Given the depth of ignorance and misinformation about the Arab world, we are particularly in need of narrative prose – writing that is capacious enough in form to convey fact as well as emotion. An example might be historically-grounded novels capable of narrating Arab realities to American readers without sacrificing literary quality to didacticism that will tell a compelling but also informative story.
10. We need more children’s literature that portrays the Middle East in human terms and more children’s literature depicting Arab American experiences. Children and young people in the U.S. are barraged with negative images of Arabs by way of comic books, cartoons, movies and even textbooks. Until recently there has been little literature geared at younger readers that could offset these images, although Naomi Shihab Nye’s publications have been groundbreaking. In addition to portraying Arab Americans and the Arab world in non-stereotypical ways, children’s literature also offers exciting possibilities for collaboration between writers and visual artists, collaborations that might lead to other kinds of aesthetic experiments and innovations.
11. And finally, we need to reclaim the personal. As Arab Americans we have many concerns, and not all of them can be contained within the rubric of the communal. While Arab American identification has had a huge impact on us, we need to recognize the ways in which the personal dimensions of our experience can also illuminate our understanding of communal concerns. Our lives are inflected and informed by ethnicity, but not limited by it. In segregating those aspects of our lives which do not seem “Arab” from

our definition of Arab American identity, as we so often do, we diminish both our writing and ourselves.

Although the post 9-11 period puts Arab Americans under renewed pressure to assert their identities, I believe that our task nonetheless remains that of expanding and transforming ethnic boundaries and definitions. In broadening and deepening our understanding of ethnicity we are not abandoning Arab or Arab American identity and experience, but making room for the complexity of our experiences. To shift focus from preservation to transformation is not to dilute Arab American identity, but to make it more viable. At the beginning of the 21st century, the split vision we have possessed since our arrival in the Americas may be our most important legacy, forcing us to direct our gaze not only backwards to the past, but forward to a future we are engaged in writing ourselves – and to do so with our feet planted firmly on the Arab American ground beneath our feet.

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