Race and Post-9/11 Arab-American Identity: Contestatory Agency and African-American Metaphors in the Poetic Discourse of Suheir Hammad and Andrea Assaf

Omar Baz Radwan

Before 9/11, Arab-American scholars and writers used the trope of "invisibility" to refer to the place of their pan-ethnic community within American discourses on race and ethnicity. 9/11 consolidated the racialization of the category "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" as a signifier of non-white Otherness (Salaita; Maira and Shihade; Naber). Among the violence in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon has been an unrelenting, multivalent assault on the bodies, psyches, and rights of Arab, Muslim, and even South Asian immigrants as well as American citizens pertaining to these categories. For example, Muneer Ahmad, in his study, "Homeland insecurities: racial violence the day after September 11", contends that:

> Restrictions on immigration of young men from Muslim countries, racial profiling and detention of "Muslim-looking" individuals, and an epidemic of hate violence against Arab, Muslim and South Asian communities in the wake of September 11 recall the long history of racialized U.S. immigration and immigrant policy, [...]. They also recall the more recent national heritage of racialized infringements on citizenship and belonging. (338)

This observation is borne out by the "national security" measures undertaken by the U.S. Justice Department during the first months after the attacks. The State security apparatus targeted almost exclusively people from the Middle East and South Asia, and led to the incarceration, deportation and interrogation of numerous individuals from the above-mentioned categories (Hassan). Arabs and Muslims who are U.S. citizens have also been affected, albeit indirectly, by these anti-terrorism measures. Although Arabs and other people from the Middle East are classified racially as "white" by the U.S. Census and most affirmative action forms, the U.S. government has unofficially constituted them as a distinct racial group by associating Arabs with terrorism and threats to national security (Hassan).

This article focuses on representations of racial formations in contemporary, post-9/11 Arab-American poetry. Using imagology as a literary tool, I will analyze the works of two contemporary Arab-American Performance Poets, namely Suheir Hammad's "first writing since" and Andrea Assaf's "Quadroon/*Shatti Ya Dunya*". Hammad and Assaf both utilize African-American racial metaphors in their construction of group agency. Performance poet, Suheir Hammad's piece "first writing since" from her collection *ZaatarDiva* (2005)[1], written shortly after the events of 9/11, won her popular acclaim on the hip-hop/spoken word poetry scene in Russell Simmons's *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway.* Andrea Assaf is a spoken word poet, performer, and cultural organizer. A co-founder and artistic director of Art2Action, a theatre work and interdisciplinary performance arts platform based in New York City, Assaf's performance work ranges from solo collaborative productions, to spoken word and community-based arts. Comparatist literary imagology studies the origin and function of characteristics and images of the "Self/Other", "as expressed textually, particularly in the way which they are presented in works of literature, plays, poems, travel books and essays" (Beller 7).

This notion of representation of the "Self/Other" in literature is a historical phenomenon which dates back to the "late classical topical technique of legal reasoning in which a tradition of topoi has developed concerning the characteristics of various peoples and places" ever since the Enlightenment in Europe (Beller). Building on imagological constructions of cultural hetero-images as well as auto-images and ethnic studies theories, this article addresses cultural representations of Arab-Americans evident in the subjective textual negotiations presented in the relevant literary discourse.

RACE AND ARAB-AMERICAN LITERATURE

"Arab" as racialized minority

Arab-American literature both reflects and is situated within a historical context of contested racial, cultural, and political categories (Majaj; Ludescher; Hartman; Al Maleh; Fadda-Conrey). The literary texts produced by Americans of Arab descent from the first half of the 20th century make clear the anxieties of early Arab immigrants as they struggled for inclusion as "white" Americans. Aware of their contested racial status in the American context, early Arab-American authors tended to emphasize those aspects of their identities more likely to gain acceptance by white America (Majaj). But while the definition of Arab immigrants as "non-white" in the early period reflected a politics of exclusion, the contemporary location of Americans of Arab descent as a "white" racial category is felt by Arab-Americans to obscure their realities (Majaj). The inadequacy of the category "white" to account for Arab-American experience in light of the political and cultural clashes with American foreign policy in the Middle East as well as issues of representation and inclusion into the mainstream at home in America underlies the growing search among contemporary Arab-American writers for categories of identification able to account for their realities.

In this context, the assimilationist impulse of early Arab writers in America is largely absent in contemporary writing. Contemporary writers challenge the Othering process that the American nation subjects them to, but they are not willing to submerge their identity in order to claim inclusion or American identity. Both, pre- and post-9/11 Arab-American literature confronts a cultural, political, and social context fraught with tension. As part of this literature, poetry produced by Arab-Americans expresses this sensibility. Although Arab-American poetry has been in existence in America for over a century, it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America (Al Maleh). Arab-American poetry today still is a racialized "ethnic" literature, just beginning to emerge from its chrysalis to spread its wings for scholars and serious readers and critics, much less for the general reading public. The burgeoning of this literary orientation reflects in part the historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression. In a more contemporary context, then, Arab-American poets find themselves engaged with elements of Arab-American identity that have historically been silenced, especially that of race. In fact, Majaj contends:

> After the early tensions around race had subsided, the settled Arab-American community largely attempted to pass for "white". But in recent decades, with the politicization of Arab identity to the extent that even non-Arabs fall afoul of anti-Arab racism, "passing" has proved impossible. [...]. During crises, Arabs [in America] can be reassured we exist as a distinct racial group. (para. 23)

This shows that perceptions of race shape contemporary Arab-American poetry and vice versa, whether directly or indirectly. Realizing that "American" meant Christian, European, western, and white, contemporary Arab-American poets increasingly interrogate and challenge

American racial hierarchies. Thus, the poetry of Arab-Americans proclaims a revision of nationalism based on the redefinition of the national/racial/ethnic Self which became necessary for these poets after 9/11. A general need to (re-)define boundaries has risen. In line with that, Charara claims that the idea of a single Arab-American poetry is shot through with varied and complicated engagements with language, style, form, meaning, tradition, class, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, history, ideology, and of course the self. According to this postulation, the reconstruction of the image of their community has been a primary objective for contemporary Arab-American writers in general, and poets more specifically. Writing as an Arab-American becomes defined as accountability to boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. These authors interrogate the grounds of their cultural location, their relationship to intersecting contexts, and the ways in which the process of transiting boundaries yields possibilities for agency and activism.

Racial Hetero-images: Literary representations

An Arab-American racial formation in a post-9/11 American national context is dealt with by way of critical analysis of representative literary texts. The selected poets are situated on the intersection of poetical (i.e., formal-literary) and ideological (i.e., historical-theoretical) tensions. The fundamental method applied is that of imagology, specifically designed to address the discursive manifestation of cultural difference and national identification patterns (Leerssen). In Beller and Leerssen's *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters, a critical survey*, imagology is defined as the critical analysis of national stereotypes in literature and in other forms of cultural representation. The term, according to Beller and Leerssen, is a "technical neologism" which "applies to research in the field of our mental images of the 'Other' and of ourselves" (xiii). Imagology is not a form of sociology, "even though it is situated in the broader interdisciplinary field of the human, cultural and social sciences" (Beller and Leerssen.). Imagology aims at analyzing commonplace, subjective and imagined (i.e. fictional) representations of national stereotypes and images rather than presenting "empirical observations or statements of fact" (Dyserinck 198). It is therefore a critical analysis of literary and cultural representation and construction of purported national/cultural/ethnic character. Moreover, "ethnotypes", defined by Beller as stereotypical characterizations attributed to ethnicities are representative of ethnic literary and discursive conventions. These characterizations are "imaginated" to the extent that they lie outside the area of testable reports or statements of fact. They are literary discourses which describe a given group of people while relying on imputations of national, ethnic and/or cultural character. Accordingly, "imaginated" literary discourse offers characterological explanations, commonplace subjective images of cultural differences, and aims at an analysis of identity constructs in literary representations which are silhouetted in the subjective context of the representing texts. The ensuing analysis will draw on the dynamics between hetero-images and self-images or auto-images. The restricted imagological representations that ensue will be utilized to reach initial theorizations of racial images of the ethnicity under study within the larger scope of American racial formations. In order to make a coherent construct out of the texts chosen as discursive representations of Arab-American identity within post-9/11 American national/racial paradigms, what is needed is a "syntax," what Leerssen describes as "a mode of defining the interrelations between the different constituent units" (215). Imagologically, textual expressions of the Self (auto-images) and the Other/foreign (hetero-images) result in a "community of attitudes" which a given tradition of writers share. Shared (inter-)textual tropes result in an image (imagotype) which may, like other literary or discursive topoi, enter a textual

tradition and become "common-place" textual expressions of group identity (Leerssen). As such, imagotypes can be regarded as the concrete expression of an abstract idea, or as "an idea that only exists in as much as it is expressed" (Leerssen 4). Leerssen asserts that "the imagotypical characterization of a certain group may often be found to serve [...] as the defining criterion of the membership in that group" (11). The imagotypes presented in the texts therefore should be understood within both American ethnic and racial paradigms, with specific politico-historical focus on Arab-American sensibilities. Moreover, the events of 9/11 place the historical contextualization of the relative imagotypes within focus.

Hammad and Assaf are both Slam poets and both poems analyzed herein have been performed in public gatherings in the presence of a multicultural audience. According to Dowdy, Slam/Spoken Word or Performance Poetry, like hip-hop shows (in the African-American tradition), become existing sites "where rank and file citizens [of diverse racial and ethnic origins] can participate in a coordinated political practice that generates collective agency" (167). Moreover, according to Motyl, Performance poets, in the tradition of hip-hop artists, usually use the spaces created in Slam scenes to address socio-political topics that are usually not adhered to in mainstream culture and News platforms. Topics of concern, which are usually political by nature, range from racial oppression in America all the way to sexuality and gender equality statements. Both Hammad's "first writing since" and Assaf's *Quadroon* appropriate the "sounding spaces of opposition" reserved for Spoken Word poetry and find inspiration in the growing influence of Black hip-hop arts movements and performance and the post-9/11 "rhetoric of loss and violation" (Baker, Jr. 68). Moreover, in his seminal study, *American political poetry in the 21st century*, Michael Dowdy informs us that in the aftermath of 9/11 and the events that have followed, the role of poets "has rekindled some of the public spirit of 1960's [*sic*] poets" (8). Dowdy appropriates political poetry's engagement with the social and political spheres (i.e., poetry as action) to that of the burgeoning influence of African-American hip-hop. Like hip-hop, Dowdy contends, poetry as action can be both creative and referential, calling future action into existence. In this sense, political poems make conceivable in language what is difficult to achieve in the "real" world. Moreover, Dowdy posits that the signifying effect of political poetry or agency provides the strategies for engagement. Agency provides a way to generate categories of political poetry through a formulation of the various types of agency (or action) represented in a poet's strategies, specifically in the poetic voice. Dowdy provides four major types of agency in his model for contemporary political poetry in America: Embodied Agency (both, *experiential* and authoritative); Equivocal Agency; Migratory Agency; and Contestatory Urban Agency. Hip-hop and performativity, according to Dowdy, exemplify political poetry of Contestatory Urban agency. Dowdy argues that hip-hop, "especially when performed live at small clubs, has the most political power of any contemporary poetry because it can activate a powerful collective agency and a participatory political experience" (29). Agency is thus constructed against socio-political norms which are collectively identified as "mainstream" and "hegemonic" (Dowdy).

Moreover, Imagologically, both poets reiterate racial tropes "imagotypes" evident and recurrent in Arab-American literature, even prior to 9/11. In her poetry collection *Born Palestinian, born black*, Hammad reiterates the marginalization of Arab-Americans and specifically Palestinians by merging Arab-Americans with African-American voices of dissent. Hammad creates a simultaneity between past and present, i.e. traces the present condition Palestinians find themselves in to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and to the occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1967 – just like black rappers have traced the precarious position many

African-Americans find themselves in to the traumatic origin of their community: slavery (Motyl). Assaf, on the other hand, engages with American racial classification schemes in her attempt to highlight anti-Arab/Arab-American racism. Assaf's *Quadroon* makes use of American racial classification schemes of hypodescent whereby "any person with a known trace of African ancestry is black, notwithstanding that person's visual appearance" (Gotanda 258). The *rule of descent* quoted here and the *rule of recognition* whereby "any person whose black-African ancestry is visible is black" (258) are formal rules of American racial classification schemes of hypodescent, a concept developed shortly in light of Andrea Assaf's discourse. In metaphorically claiming ¼ Black ancestry (i.e. a quadroon) as an Arab, Assaf refutes the "honorary white status" relegated to Arab-Americans and the lack of representation of the Arab-American community within post-9/11American racial hierarchies. Other writers also highlight the racialized status of Arab-Americans prior to 9/11. For example, in his poetry and prose, Lebanese-American poet Lawrence Joseph simultaneously claims and critiques Arab identity as he makes clear that the Arab-American experience must be situated within a broader American context of black-white racial tensions (Majaj). As early as 1988, Joseph's poem "Sand Nigger" from *Curriculum vitae*, for example, probes the racial and cultural boundaries that delineate, situate and inform Arab-American identity discourse within racialized American minority rubrics. Egyptian-American, Pauline Kaldas's poem "Exotic", on the other hand, explores the ways in which "[Arab-American] women are excluded from "white" American identity, yet simultaneously recuperated into its domain through a neocolonial gesture of possession" (Majaj 331). These textual references evoke the racial classification tensions experienced by Arab-Americans. Arab identity in these cultural productions challenges the boundaries of available "Arab" racial and ethnic classification as "white", portraying images of an Arab-American identity contained only by exclusion.

IMAGOLOGICAL ANALYSIS: PRIMARY MATERIAL

Suheir Hammad: "first writing since"

Hammad's voice and rhetorical strategies in "first writing since" articulate imaginated tropes of racial injustice which permeate mainstream post-9/11 anti-Arab discourses. She does so through what Dowdy emphasizes as the necessary, yet not exclusive, conditions for contestatory urban agency, "namely, call for action, vigilance, protest, and group agency within the constraining contexts of racism, economic, and power inequalities" (158).

Hammad's poetic discourse is immersed in black hip-hop and rap music culture. Commenting on African-American cultural venues, Somers-Willett contends that contemporary American performance poetry, like hip-hop, uses the "cultural rubrics of race and identity" to gain authenticity and repertoire with the audience (10). Somers-Willett points out that the popularity of hip-hop music and culture has helped funnel poets and audiences into the slam, and this may be one reason why African American identity is so often articulated and rewarded on the national slam scene (12). Slam poets relate to African-American historical racialization in their attempt to gain "authenticity" and agency by which marginalized identity in general and racial difference in particular are given in slam circles.

Hammad intentionally articulates Arab-American identity within the marginal spaces of minority racialized discourse articulated via rubrics of race and identity reflected through performance poetry. The poem, composed of seven parts (numbered, 1-7) and written to be performed on stage, opens with a solemn tone, ominously situating the speaker-poet in a grim post-9/11 urban setting:

1. there have been no words.

i have not written one word.
no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.
no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.
not one word.

today is a week, and seven is of heavens, gods, science.
evident out of my kitchen window is an abstract reality.
sky where once was steel.
smoke where once was flesh. (“first writing since” 98)

These opening stanzas articulate political agency, situating the poem outside of language within the scope of action. “Words”, the speaker-poet seems to hint, are no longer sufficient or capable of vividly expressing the burden of the situation, an “abstract reality” evidently immersed in violence and discrimination. Later on, in stanza 3 of part 1, the situation is personalized suggesting a shift from the general “American” to the private “ethnic” space: “fire in the city air and i feared for my sister’s life in a way never / before. and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us” (“first writing since” 98). The personal pronoun “us” separates those whom the speaker-poet “fear[s] for” from the rest of society. The significance of the personal pronoun “us” becomes clearer in the ensuing stanzas from part 1. Directly alluding to the events of the 9/11 attacks, the speaker-poet points out an ethnic, specifically Middle Eastern, racial category through the use of phenotypical and national signifiers:

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot’s heart failed,
the plane’s engine died.
then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.
please god, after the second plane, please, don’t let it be anyone
who looks like my brothers.

And,

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill.
i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger
i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen.
not really.
even as a woman, as a palestinian, as a broken human being.
never this broken. (“first writing since” 98)

Here, two images are juxtaposed. The first image is that of those who “look” like the speaker-poet’s brothers and the sister, whose life the speaker-poet fears for. This image is a clear evocation of Arab/Middle Eastern ethnicity based on national (Palestine) and phenotypical features (family, looks). This auto-image diversifies the narrative of fear propagated by the attacks extending it to Americans of Arab descent whom the speaker-poet identifies with, and separates the speaker-poet and the community she represents from the acts of non-representative individuals responsible for such horrific actions. The second image which the speaker-poet adopts into the category, “us”, is that of the culturally marginalized, women and the “broken”, thus aligning herself and her ethnicity within rubrics of subjugation. The auto-image, the “us”, is clearly drawn out in the aforementioned opening stanzas of part 1, setting “us” against them. The speaker-poet fears for the “us” connoting that “they” are the ones in control, perhaps the power brokers, the majority. The speaker-poet identifies with a marginalized ethnic auto-image, setting that image within a contested/ambiguous location designated by fear, perhaps of the racialized image of the Arab “Other” readily used by mainstream American society. Moreover, the signifiers, “woman”, “Palestinian”, and “broken

human being" highlight the material actuality of subordination within an American national culture historically embodied in the particulars of a hegemonic, male, white, European morphology. The speaker-poet, from the beginning, aligns herself and those she represents within the socio-political conditions by which minority subjects come into being in an American national landscape and with the possibilities for agency and transformation available to the minority subject (in this case Arabs, women, the poor) once it has come into being. This is further elaborated in the last stanza of part 1 in the poem:

> more than ever, i believe there is no difference.
> the most privileged nation, most americans do not know
> the difference between indians, afghanis, syrians, muslims, sikhs, hindus.
> more than ever, there is no difference. ("first writing since" 98)

The speaker-poet's "fears" are clearly elucidated in the above lines. The conflation of different national/religious groups into one category foregrounds racialized national attitudes that place disparate identities squarely within the rubric of non-white Other. The images alluded to here refer to the immediate public backlashes following the attacks as well as government tactics (i.e., incarceration and surveillance) and racial profiling of "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" looking people, placing this category in a distinct racial formation, that of the minority subject, the "enemy within". The racialized auto-image constructed in Hammad's opening stanzas designates Arab ethnicity within racialized categories. This binary logic creates cross-ethnic reference to the histories of other racialized minority groups in America, specifically non-white immigrant groups that have been historically excluded on the basis of race. By so doing, Hammad situates Arab alterity and alienation within the confines of hegemonic conceptualizations of American citizenship and belonging, distancing herself and her ethnic community from a mainstream American mindset steeped in suspicion and xenophobia; a mindset that uses religious and racial markers as yardsticks for determining the "American" from the "un-American". Hammad constructs an imaginated identity in opposition to the coercive white hegemony that forms American citizenship and national belonging. She assertively appropriates anti-Arab racism in America to the reality of other non-white groups that have been similarly subjugated by an American racial hierarchy.

The next stanzas from part 4 of the poem complicate this position, situating the discourse of identity construction in what Crystal Parikh in *An Ethics of Betrayal: the Politics of Otherness in Emergent U.S. Literatures and Culture* identifies as "an ethics of betrayal" manifest in minority discourse. Hammad continues:

> 4. ricardo on the radio said in his accent thick as yuca, "i will
> feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there. and my friends feel the
> same way."
> on my block, a woman was crying in a car parked and stranded in hurt.
> i offered comfort, extended a hand and she did not see before she said,
> "we're gonna burn them so bad, i swear, so bad." my hand went to my
> head and my head went to the numbers within it of the dead iraqi
> children, the dead in nicaragua. the dead in rwanda who had to vie
> with fake sport wrestling for america's attention.
>
> yet when people sent emails saying, this was bound to happen, lets
> not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second i felt resentful.
> hold up with that, cause i live here, these are my friends and fam,
> and it could have been me in those buildings, and we're not bad

people, do not support america's bullying.
can i just have a half second to feel bad?
if i can find through this exhaust people who were left behind to
mourn and to resist mass murder, i might be alright. ("first writing since" 99-100)

Reinforcing Arab-American inclusion, Hammad's speaker-poet refutes assimilatory discourse, which Parikh identifies as a discourse which betrays self and others in an attempt to assimilate to the nation. "[R]icardo", whose accent is "thick as yuca" personifies an ethnic signifier, perhaps South American. Ricardo's public announcement encouraging violence "over there" (possibly the Arab World) as an immediate backlash to the attacks manifests what Parikh identifies as "assimilatory betrayals" embedded in model minority discourse (22). Investigating the structures of knowledge and feeling upon which ethnic assimilation in the American context is constructed, Parikh defines "betrayals" as manifest "performances of certain kinds of difference attributed to an alien, unidentified and perpetual Other" (11). Within such formations, the racialized subject is engaged in politics which "blame the victim" in order to belong (13). Racialization, embedded within such politics, thus inherently questions the national allegiances of "alien citizens", rendering them always as potential threats and "traitors who must prove their loyalty to the U.S. by being assimilated to the nation" (13). Ricardo affirms his belonging to the nation by announcing his allegiance to a rhetoric which instigates violence against the Other, thus proving his allegiance to the American Self. Ricardo assumes a "model minority" position of one who has not only assimilated but also euphorically sings the praises of the American way (Cheng). Such discourse of American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism and inclusion force a misremembering of a history of American institutionalized exclusions, and erases repressed histories and identities in America (Eng and Han).

Hammad refutes this kind of assimilatory, if not apologetic, position by pointing out that her loyalty to the nation lies in refusing violence and mass murder, regardless of its source. She aligns herself both with the innocent victims of international American transgressions (the children of Iraq, the dead in Rwanda and Nicaragua) as well as a minority coalition pitted against racialized mainstream subjection towards various minority groups in America. The speaker-poet readily constructs an auto-image whereby marginalized subjectivities in the American national landscape, the "us", are pitted against both the dominant White discourse and the terrorist Other, while at the same time, distancing herself from state-backed aggression and discourses that legitimate retaliation.

This stance is further elucidated in the final stanza from part 4 of the poem:

thank you to the woman who saw me brinking my cool and blinking back
tears. She opened her arms before she asked "do you want a hug?" a
big white woman, and her embrace was the kind only people with the
warmth of flesh can offer. i wasn't about to say no to any comfort.
"my brother's in the navy," i said, "and we are arabs".
"wow, you got double trouble." [...]. ("first writing since" 100)

The image of the "big white woman" whose "embrace was the kind only people with the warmth of flesh can offer", accentuates American racial formations within the white/black color line. Hammad's speaker-poet is engaged in what Omi and Winant define as "war of maneuver" within structures of racial formation whereby subordinate groups seek to preserve and extend a definite territory, to ward off violent assault, and to develop an internal society as an alternative to the repressive social system they confront. The image of "whiteness" directly alluded to here

calls forth vigilance to the subtle racial undertones that pervade American national structures within the confines of American racial formations. By stressing that her brother is both in the navy and is Arab ("double trouble"), Hammad contests essentialist/racist representations of the Arab/Muslim Other. By mobilizing the image of the patriotic-Muslim brother who serves in the American navy, Hammad constructs alternative spaces of inclusion, spaces that incorporate both, Arab ethnicity and Islam, into the nation and distances these categories from accusations of Otherness. She destabilizes the "us/them" binary defining limited forms of national belonging, while at the same time refuting pervasive post-9/11 stereotypical representations of Arab alterity.

This stance is further elucidated in part 5 of the poem. With heightened tone and charged language, substantial to spoken word potency and ethics of resistance, Hammad continues:

> 5. one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.
> one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.
> one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed.
> one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people.
> or that a people represent an evil.
> or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page.
>
> we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma.
> america did not give out his family's addresses or where he went to
> church. or blame the bible or pat robertson.
> and when the networks air footage of palestinians dancing in the
> street, there is no apology that hungry children are bribed with
> sweets that turn their teeth brown. that correspondents edit images.
> that archives are there to facilitate lazy and inaccurate
> journalism.
>
> and when we talk about holy books and hooded men and death,
> why do we never mention the kkk?
>
> if there are any people on earth who understand
> how new york is feeling right now,
> they are in the west bank and the gaza strip. (100)

What these lines suggest is that by essentializing all Arabs as "evil", major post-9/11 mainstream media, public, and government discourses are engaging in a "racist project". One that essentializes and demonizes a whole people based on a specific event: here, the attacks of 9/11. Through her references to Timothy McVeigh, Pat Robertson and the KKK, Hammad explicitly conjures various facets of historically grounded structures of white (i.e. dominant) racial ideologies which pervade American society and which prevail in the present, though in a subtler nuanced manner. In other words, Hammad constructs an auto-image of Arab-American ethnicity in contrast to racist notions of the Other. Notions of exclusion rooted in historical ethnic-mainstream conflict perpetuated by Euro-American White patrimony spurred by colonialism, capitalism, and exceptionalism. In the case of Arabs/Arab-Americans, such dehumanizing enterprises are evident in neo-colonial discourses initiated by American foreign interest in resources from the Middle East as well as American support for Israel's presence in Palestine. Vilifying Arabs, according to this discourse, facilitates American military

intervention in the region and justifies Israeli violence in Palestine. Removing the distinction between "Arabs" and "terrorism" is central to this philosophy of American foreign policy in the Middle East. By instigating America's racial history, Hammad aligns Arab-American ethnicity with other minority/immigrant groups who have been historically racially subjugated and excluded from the confines of national belonging. She deconstructs post-9/11 mainstream discourse which vilifies Arabs as the "evil" Other, detrimental to American democratic ideals. By constructing a common denominator between the suffering in Palestine, specifically the West Bank and Gaza strip, and the suffering in New York, Hammad highlights anti-Arab propaganda initiated by pro-Israeli/neo-imperialist politics in America. Because Israel is a staunch ally of the United States and is the subject of much media coverage, Palestinians are represented overwhelmingly in American media. These representations, which often marginalize Palestinians by privileging Israeli narratives of suffering and American-style pioneering, produce a rhetorical framework in which anti-Arab racism flourishes.

The poem ends on a positive note insisting on the triumph of life over violence:

> 7. [...]
> i have not cried at all while writing this. i cried when i saw those
> buildings collapse on themselves like a broken heart. i have never
> owned pain that needs to spread like that. and i cry daily that my
> brothers return to our mother safe and whole.
> there is no poetry in this. there are causes and effects. there are
> symbols and ideologies. mad conspiracy here, and information we will
> never know. there is death here, and there are promises of more.
> there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting,
> but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will
> shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the
> rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen.
>
> affirm life.
> affirm life.
> we got to carry each other now.
> you are either with life, or against it.
> affirm life. ("first writing since" 102)

The dialectical tension between life and death, continuity and rupture, designated throughout the poem through transnational modes of identification between Palestine/"third world" and Black America, are reconceptualized through the affirmation of life against all violence: state violence as well as fanaticism.

In "first writing since" Hammad makes larger connections about poetry and current global, political issues. Against a backdrop of transnational modes of identification, relating Palestine and the developing world's condition to domestic American racial formations and state abandonment of Blacks and the poor and subjugated, Hammad's discourse animates the discursive tension between individual agency (as an Arab/Muslim/Palestinian-American) and structural oppression (American racial hierarchies) embodied in black cultural productions. Hammad speaks truth to power by relating a history of displacement and political as well as humanitarian crises around the world to domestic American racial formations. In her discourse, racial expression set the parameters of American nationhood and inclusion set against a dominant white culture.

Similar to Suheir Hammad's "first writing since", *Quadroon*, written to be performed, takes on the political form of contestatory urban agency. The opening lines of the poem allude to American racial classifications:

Every fourth drop is from there…
    if blood can be calibrated.

Every fourth drop
    carries the desert,
    drips from the cedar,
    stains a small rock on the shore.
Every fourth drop
    knows the intimacy of sirens,
    the smoky trail of hookah,
    and wrinkled hands hard as olives, freshly picked.
If blood, indeed, can carry such things … ("Quadroon")

The images here function on more than one level. On a legal, constitutional level, the auto-images constructed point toward the underlying structure of race relations in America. The racial image, "Every fourth drop", foregrounds the constitutional and legal practice of using "race" as a commonly recognized social divider in contemporary American society, as we saw earlier. In his legal commentary, "A critique of 'Our Constitution is Color-Blind'", Critical Race Theory and legal scholar, Neil Gotanda, posits that while the social content of race has varied throughout American history, "the practice of using race as a commonly recognized social divider has remained almost constant" (258). Within American black-white racial categories, blood-lines and ancestral descent are of significant social and legal value. According to Gotanda, the American racial classification practice has included a particular rule for defining the racial categories black and white. That rule, which has been termed "hypodescent", imposes "racial subordination" through an implied substantiation of "white racial purity" through blood-relations (259). The rule of hypodescent holds both, that any person whose Black-African ancestry is visible *is* black (recognition), and that any person with a known trace of African ancestry *is* black (descent), notwithstanding that person's physical appearance. The metaphor is one of purity and contamination: white is unblemished and pure, so one drop of ancestral black blood renders one black (Gotanda). Under hypodescent, then, the moment of racial recognition is the moment in which is reproduced the "inherent asymmetry of the metaphor of racial contamination and the implicit impossibility of racial equality" pertaining to white-black relationships of subordination (259). Thus, under this system of racial classification, claiming a white racial identity is a "declaration of racial purity and an implicit assertion of racial domination" (295). Within such relations, a quadroon, expressed in the title and underlying structure of the poem, is an example of historically documented nonbinary schemes to categorize mixed-race offspring. Falling under the category "Named fractions", a quadroon is one-fourth black and three-fourths white.

On a more specific racial, ethnic level, the images presented in the opening stanzas of the poem shed light on the specific racialization of Arabs in America in a post-9/11 setting. While clearly distinguishing an Eastern, Arab, geographical/natural landscape: the desert; the cedar; the olive tree, and an Arab ethnic signifier: the hookah, the images evident in the opening lines of the poem are constructed in line with metaphorical American racial

categorization schemes. By aligning Arab ethnicity in America within a "contaminated" mixed racial category, a quadroon, the speaker-poet highlights the "honorary white" status of Arab-Americans. Moreover, even though the 9/11 attacks do not mark the first or single event of anti-Arab discrimination in America, the event has highlighted the contested nature of Arab-American national belonging and citizenship status. For example, commenting on the reductive and exclusionary conceptualizations of post-9/11 Arab-American citizenship, Fadda-Conrey asserts that "the difference allocated to a "them", who are positioned as backward and uncivil Arabs over there in the Arab/Muslim world, is simultaneously inscribed on the racialized bodies of Arab Americans over here in the US" (534-5). In line with this assertion, Assaf's discourse relates the "honorary white" status of Arab-Americans to political racism within transnational spaces. The constructed ethnic/racial auto-image perceived in the opening lines of the poem both confirms this argument and grants agency to the collective identity, Arab-American, by relegating the "honorary" whiteness of Arabs in America in favor of a coalition with black America. Assaf declares that, as an American of Arab descent, she is ¼ Black, a quadroon. By appropriating "Arabness" to blackness, Assaf negotiates a type of Arab-American citizenship and belonging that transnationally bridges the gap between the American transgression in the Arab world and racial injustice in America. In addressing such connections, Assaf complicates the post-9/11 construction of "national [U.S.] identity through discourses of political freedoms and liberties" (Grewal qtd. in Fadda-Conrey 156) and engages with a form of American citizenship that demands a critique of the racist and imperialist agendas imposed by the state. This stance is further elucidated in the following stanzas in the poem:

> And they say it can:
> those same who lift our arms and pass radar through our bodies at the gate,
> those same who swear they will never forget and daily do,
> those same who point flags like arthritic fingers, gnarled and tight.
>
> They search my face for it.
> They count every fourth drop.
> They believe in the calibration,
> the undeniable evidence
> that I am,
> one fourth,
> *from there* ("Quadroon")

Through the use of the third person, "they" / "those", the speaker-poet directly refers to post-9/11 government initiatives targeting American Arabs/Muslims, and these include mass arrests and profiling, airport security measures, roundup and detention, track down and deport, and special registration programs. The auto-images constructed here directly allude to the racialization of Arab-American ethnicity, while denoting historical corporeal and state-organized racial discrimination at large. By so doing, the speaker-poet both destabilizes post-9/11 official rhetoric which situates "Arabs/Middle Easterners/Muslims" as "the enemy within", as a backward essentialized and perpetual Other to the American nation, while at the same time, grants agency through the black/white racial metaphor which pervades American society. Instead of denouncing her Arab ethnicity/roots, the speaker-poet constructs an imaginated identity within racialized spaces of "contamination". As such, agency is granted

through the negotiation and contestation of state-induced racism which pervades American society.

Based on essentialist stereotypes of Arab ethnic archetypes in America, the construction of a racialized Arab-American auto-image presented in Assaf's poem is an attempt to reveal racist undertones pervading discriminatory official, media and mainstream discourse against Arab-Americans. The extension of eligibility to all racial groups in America has been a historically slow process in a racial state wherein racial categorization is prevalent (Omi and Winant). By referring to "those same who lift our arms and pass radar through our bodies at the gate", as well as those who "search my face for it" and who "count every fourth drop", the speaker-poet deliberately recalls racist attitudes that historically haunt American society. She shifts the ontological structure of Arab-American exclusion from a purely political/cultural axis to a racialized one, in opposition to whiteness. Accordingly, the binary logic shaped by post-9/11's "citizen-patriot" dictum whereby national belonging is induced through vigilant citizenship and the Othering of Arabs/Muslims, is reverted into black/white racial distinctions in Assaf's discourse. Situating Arab-American ethnicity within racialized rubrics, the speaker-poet sheds light on the discrimination practiced against this community in post-9/11 America and reconfigures hegemonic American citizenship. As such, Arab-American ethnicity is no longer a cultural, political and epistemological antithesis to American citizenship, but another minority group that suffers from a racialized "structure of feeling" within the confines of the racial state.

The poem concludes as it began, reaffirming a "contaminated" racial category as an American of Arab descent, claiming that:

> I am the fourth drop:
> every fourth drop,
> ringing through the desert,
> not knowing how anyone will ever hear …
>
> So I count
> each drop of blood
> that falls, and ask:
> If every fourth drop ran together
> and infused the other three,
> until all were four, and one were one …
> *Would I be a different person?*
> *In a different world?*
> *Would it have been a different day?*
> *Or would I be …*
>
> *September?* ("Quadroon")

Using a contestatory agential stance, Assaf responds to the post-9/11 political and racial terrain in America by challenging racial stereotyping of Arab-Americans and redefining exclusionary conceptualization of American citizenship. Positioning Arab-American racial/national identity within the confines of blackness, the poem contests limited forms of national belonging based on racial subordination.

Imagological Discussion: Conclusions

The recurring discursive trope – racialized identity – is evident in the analyses of the textual discourse and sets the syntax for discussion. The imagotype of the Arab-American Self represented in the relevant discourse within the syntax of racialized minority identity is that of the Other/foreign. In the case of Arab-American ethnicity in a post-9/11 context, this Otherness is marked as "the enemy within" (Jamal and Naber), an enemy which is excluded from the national imagination on the basis of political and racial instigations. The dominant imagotypical characterization presented in the representative texts situates Arab-American ethnicity within marginalized spaces of national affiliation. The poetical constructs presented in the texts all defy dominant, post-9/11 discourses of exclusion attributed to the racial state (Omi and Winant), and signify an authentic belonging to the nation by strategically aligning Arab-American ethnicity within what Naber identifies as "people of color" coalitions. The discourse of representation presented in the texts revolves around notions of American racial formations. In other words, the dominant post-9/11 discourse, whether official, media-oriented, or public, of Arab-American exclusion attributed to the racial state becomes a bridge between Arab-American ethnicity and other minority groups in negotiating a national identity, specifically African Americans.

Suheir Hammad's countercultural performance in "first writing since" is a statement of defiance/protest against the racial order which structures and maintains the major institutions and social relationships of American society. Hammad incorporates an Afrocentric rhetorical approach in her manifestations of identity formation, particularly in relation to race and racial hierarchies. The auto-images constructed in Hammad's poem, "first writing since", incorporate blackness as an authentic performativity of a marginalized Arab-American national/racial identity. She does so by creating a terrain of relation by which post-9/11 racial profiling of Arabs/Arab-Americans comes to signify racist exclusionary practices historically inflicted on other minorities by the racial state. By appropriating African-American sensibilities by both distancing Arab-American identity from the mainstream and by emulating African-American rhetorical manifestations evident in such performances, Hammad constructs an ethnic auto-image which gains authenticity through her performativity of a racialized identity.

Similarly, Andrea Assaf's *Quadroon* opts for an identity construction built on the subjugation of minority groups. By affiliating Arab-American identity with a "contaminated" (read impure/non-white) racial formation, Assaf aligns Arab-American national/racial identity with that of racial subjects. Through structures of "hypodescent" (Gotanda 264), Assaf reiterates the historical-race usage of "black" as the reification of subordination and racial contamination. Under the American system of racial classification, claiming a white racial identity is a declaration of racial purity and an implicit assertion of racial domination. By incorporating a "contaminated" racial identity, Assaf rejects racist notions of "purity" and aligns Arab-American identity within racialized minority formations. This coalition is predicated on the "honorary white" status historically affiliated with Arab-American inclusion (Morsy). Focusing on post-9/11 U.S government anti-Arab-American scrutiny (specifically at airports), Assaf accentuates state-backed institutionalized racism. By so doing, she invokes the historical development of racist policies in America. Assaf's invocation of "unstable equilibrium" under hypodescent thus highlights the institutional and structural dimensions of racism, and, by opting for a "contaminated" racial inscription, aligns Arab-American identity within a black racial categorization. By insisting on a racially categorized Self, Assaf constructs Arab-American realities within the racial order as a "marked" racialized minority. To be

"marked" on these terms is to be recognized as a group whose experience of exclusion and discrimination is unjust, authentic, and deserving of correction (Shryock 105).

The images presented in the two texts display Arab-American identity within an ambiguous state of racial belonging to the nation. This ambiguity is certainly addressed in subtle underpinnings of a racialized and subaltern Arab-American reality within a post-9/11 context. Homogenized depictions of Americans of Arab descent under an alien cultural premise and politicized discourse simplify the complex racialized reality of this category and place it outside the boundaries of the concept of the American nation, though it exists under the assumption of legal citizenship. Arab-Americans find themselves negotiating their identity within rubrics of "people of color" coalitions (Naber). Homi Bhabha, in his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, emphasizes the ambivalence of the image of the nation: "It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that [...] the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality" (1). The nation therefore is not a static idea fixed in time but a transient construction capable of being re-imagined under prevalent circumstances. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were certainly a deluge that wiped away what Arab-Americans took generations to construct, assimilation within the U.S. (i.e. white) context and preservation of their Arab heritage. The texts also reveal strategic shifts within racial/national identity constructions that could be summarized as a shift from assimilation into white, Eurocentric America to resistance associated with racialized minority groups. The methodological inclination of the imagological analysis of imagotypes presented in the poetic discourses of the texts here examined validates a literary perspective to the theoretical reality of what Fadda-Conrey labels as a provisional nature of American belonging for Arab-Americans.

Works Cited

Primary Material: Poetry

Assaf, Andrea. "Quadroon/*Shatti Ya Dunya*." *Eleven Reflections on September*, Art2Action, CD-ROM, 2011, Track 3.

Hammad, Suheir. "first writing since." *ZaatarDiva*. Cypher Books, 2005, pp. 98-102.

Secondary Material: Theory

Ahmad, Muneer. "Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day after September 11." *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, vol. 4, no. 3, Summer 2011, pp. 337-350. *Project Muse*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rac/summary/v004/4.3ahmad.html.

Al Maleh, Leila. "Anglophone Arab Literature: An Overview." *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, edited by Leila Al Maleh. Rodopi, 2009, pp. 1-63.

Baker, Jr., Houston A. *Black Studies, Rap, and Academy.* University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Beller, Manfred. "Perception, image, imagology." *Imagology: the cultural construction and literary representation of national characters: a critical survey*, edited by Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen. Rodopi, 2007, pp.3-16.

Beller, Manfred and Joep Leerssen. *Imagology: the cultural construction and literary representation of national characters: a critical survey*. Rodopi, 2007.

Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. Routledge, 1990.

Charara, Hayan, ed. *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*. The University of Arkansas Press, 2008, pp. xiii-xxxiii.

Cheng. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

Delgado, Richard and J. Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press, 2001.

Dowdy, Michael. *American Political Poetry in the 21st Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Dyserinck, Hugo. Imagology and the problem of ethnic identity. *Intercultural Studies: Scholarly Review of the International Association of Intercultural Studies (I. A. I. S.)*, no. 1, 2003, pp. 69-96. http://www.intercultural-studies.org.

Eng, D.L. and S. Han. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." *Loss: The Politics of Mourning,* Edited by D.L Eng and D. Kazanjian. University of California Press, 2003, pp.343-371.

Fadda-Conrey, Carol. *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York University Press, 2014.

Gotanda, Neil. "A critique of "Our Constitution is Color Blind."' *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, edited by Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas. The New Press, 1995, pp. 257-275.

Hammad, Suheir. *Born Palestinian, Born Black*. Harlem River Press, 1996.

Hartman, Michelle. "'This Sweet / Sweet Music'': Jazz, Sam Cooke, and Reading Arab American Literary Identities." *MELUS,* vol. 31, no. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 145-165, *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029687.

Hassan, Salah D. "Arabs, Race and the Post-September 11 National Security State." *Middle East Report*, no. 224, Autumn 2002, pp. 16-21, *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559418.

Jamal, Amani and Nadine Naber, editors. *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*. Syracuse University Press, 2008.

Leerssen, Joep. *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986.

Ludescher, Tanis. "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature." *MELUS*, vol. 31, no. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 93-114, *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029684.

Maira, Sunaina and Magid Shihade. "Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies: Thinking Race, Empire, and Zionism in the U.S." *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, June 2006, pp. 117-140, *Project Muse*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jaas/summary/v009/9.2maira.html.

Majaj, Lisa Suheir. "Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race." *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, edited by Singh Amritjit and P. Schmidt. University Press of Mississippi, 2000, pp. 320-337.

Morsy, Soheir A. "Beyond the Honorary "White" Classification of Egyptians: Societal Identity in Historical Context." *Race*, edited by Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek. Rutgers University Press, 1994, pp. 175-198.

Motyl, Katharina. "Born Palestinian, Born Black – Hip Hop as a Means of Criticism of Palestinian Marginalization in Suheir Hammad's Breaking Poems." *UPenn-English*, University of Pennsylvania, https://www.english.upenn.edu/sites/www.english.upenn.edu/files/intersections-motyl-breaking_poems.pdf.

Naber, Nadine. "Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations." *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, edited by Amani Jamal and Nadine Naber. Syracuse University Press, 2008, pp. 1-45.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. Routledge, 1994.

Parikh, Crystal. *An Ethics of Betrayal: The Politics of Otherness in Emergent U.S. Literatures and Culture*. Fordham University Press, 2009.

Salaita, Steven. "Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11." *College Literature*, vol. 32, no. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 146-168, *Project Muse*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lit/summary/v032/32.2salaita.html.

Shryock, Andrew 2008. "The Moral Analogies of Race: Arab American Identity, Color Politics, and the Limits of Racialized Citizenship." *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, edited by Amani Jamal and Nadine Naber. Syracuse University Press, 2008, pp. 81-113.

Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. The University of Michigan Press, 2009.