

# FARAH AL QASIMI:

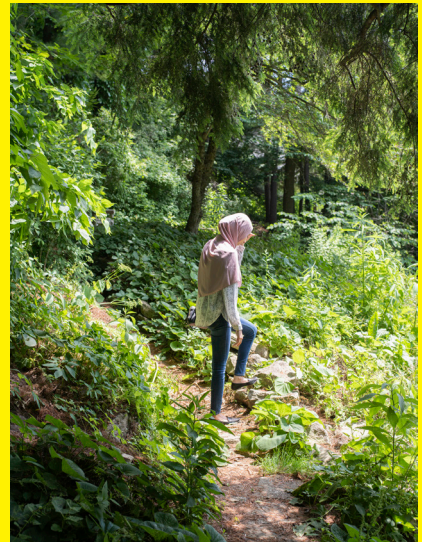


*Changing Room, 2019*

# BROTHERVILLE



*Members of Mawtini Dance Troupe Meeting  
before Performance at a Wedding, 2019*



*Sally at the Ford Estate, 2019*

2019–2020

## INTRODUCTION



Abdullah's Salon, 2019

Farah Al Qasimi's exhibition *Brotherville* features work created during her one-month residency spent photographing Detroit's Arab American community. This exhibition uses her art as a tool to influence the perception of culture, race and belonging, as well as to reflect the richness of Detroit's Arab American communities. This program serves an important civic purpose far beyond beautification by using **photography** to communicate important information in the public realm.

The Knight Foundation grant, *Between Two Worlds: Arab Americans in Detroit*, has provided a unique opportunity for a collaborative partnership between the Wayne State University Art Collection and the Library System. This distinctive program brings together the shared visions of Library System Dean Jon E. Cawthorne and Art Collection Curator Grace Serra: to use art in the library setting as a tool to create dialogue and connect people with information. Both Cawthorne and Serra believe that the library is the perfect venue to expose the entire community to art, as it takes it beyond the walls of a gallery and brings it into an open, neutral space where creativity, exploration and discovery is nurtured.

When Dean Cawthorne joined Wayne State in 2017, he introduced four visionary pillars: student success, scholarship, people and culture, and community engagement. To advance the libraries' engagement with the community, Cawthorne has opened up more library spaces for non-traditional events by local organizations and projects in order to establish the libraries as a welcome, safe space for the entire Detroit community. An institution that celebrates diversity, inclusion and exploration, the Wayne State Libraries are a blank canvas for people to bring ideas, viewpoints, creativity and community.

We invite you to enjoy the exhibit and explore the David Adamany Undergraduate Library to experience more art from the University Art Collection.

Jon E. Cawthorne

Grace Serra



# BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:



*Fourth of July Fireworks, 2019*

## ARAB AMERICANS IN DETROIT

DORA APEL

The summer night air is suffused with smoke and greenish light as four young men, Arab Americans, set off fireworks on the Fourth of July for fun, a day that publicly commemorates national belonging and independence. Unseen in the photo, the local Arab American families in Dearborn have come out to watch and celebrate on this American holiday. The image suggests a melding of cultures and identities. Yet we might wonder if there isn't a certain irony attached to this holiday festivity following two decades of suspicion, harassment, and the demonization of Arab Americans since the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon.

The photograph was taken by Farah Al Qasimi, who came to Detroit through a Knight Foundation Grant awarded to the Wayne State University Art Collection. They partnered with the Arab American National Museum, which provided a month-long residency at the AANM while serving as a conduit between the artist and the Metro Detroit Arab American community, whose culture and diverse identities are the focus of Al Qasimi's work. Her photographs, while culturally specific, engage with issues that are central to immigrants and second generations everywhere—home and belonging, assimilation and difference, the competing pressures of different cultures, customs, and conventions.

Al Qasimi explores Arab American identity from the inside. Through intimate moments that capture the mix

of Arab and western aesthetics and the tensions of gendered and religious expectations in Arab American culture, Al Qasimi moves between public and private realms while disrupting an easy reading of the images in ways that mirror the complexities of acculturation. Herself the daughter of a Lebanese American mother and Emirati father, Al Qasimi grew up in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, went to school at Yale University, and now lives in New York City.

Of the twenty-two countries belonging to the "Arab World," as defined by membership in the League of Arab States, seven—Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen—are prominently represented by immigrants in Metro Detroit. The Arab American community is also diverse in its religious representation, with Islam and Christianity in their Middle East versions represented by a variety of sects, denominations, and groupings including Chaldean, Coptic, Druze, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Melkite, Shi'a, Sunni, and Syrian Orthodox. But the most visible component is the Arab Muslim sector in eastern Dearborn, where Arabs began arriving in earnest in the 1920s—their numbers increasing greatly in the second half of the twentieth century when quotas by country were abolished—as Lebanese Shi'a Muslims moved there to be close to their employer, the Ford Motor Company, which built a massive industrial complex along the banks of the Rouge River.



*Marwah Braiding Marwah's Hair, 2019*

Following close behind the Lebanese were Yemeni Sunni Muslims who also sought employment in the growing automobile industry, followed by Palestinians and Jordanians, primarily Orthodox Christians but also Sunni Muslims. Finally, large numbers of Iraqi Shi'a immigrants and refugees came to Dearborn, not for economic but for political reasons, having been expelled from Iraq after failed attempts to oppose Saddam Hussein at the end of the Gulf War in 1991. But Arab immigrants became integral to Detroit's history and economy.

Dearborn's main thoroughfares—Warren Avenue, Michigan Avenue, Ford Road, and Schaeffer Road—all bear the evidence of this large Arab community, with stores, supermarkets, restaurants, hair salons, and the Arab American National Museum, the first of its kind in the nation, which opened in 2005 and focuses on the incorporation of Arab Americans into the American nation.<sup>1</sup> The city of Hamtramck also has become known for its thriving Muslim community and in 2015 elected the first-ever Muslim-majority city council in the United States, in which four of six council members were Bangladeshi or Yemeni Muslim

In Al Qasimi's photo of a supermarket in Sterling Heights, a mostly Iraqi Chaldean (Catholic) enclave, Arab American women appear in scenes painted on the walls above the fruits and vegetables, allowing those who shop in the aisles to see themselves publicly represented

and welcomed, while wavy mirrors below the pyramidal scenes reflect distorted images of paintings on the opposite wall—perhaps inadvertently reflecting the ongoing sense of displacement and dislocation these same women feel.



*Dream Market, 2019*

A sense of displacement is also conveyed in Al Qasimi's photo of Marwah braiding Marwah's hair, portraying two sisters who are recent immigrants from Syria as reflections in a mirror, secondary to the bright red stuffed Elmo at the center of the composition, and the large blonde-haired doll hanging from the window. It seems only natural that a hybridization or mixing of cultural forces takes place, though what is acceptable American culture may be highly regulated by parents and community organizations in an attempt to manage assimilation and acculturation.

Some Arab Americans are fully acculturated and secular, but many find themselves somewhere between the ethnic enclaves and the "assimilated" in a kind of gray area. These are pri-

marily the young sons and daughters of immigrants who either came to the United States when they were young or were born here. Their parents and new immigrants often view this gray area as a battleground where Arab and American cultures come into conflict, each vying for cultural supremacy, while the youth attempt to incorporate aspects of both American and Arab cultures. This hybridization is seen as promoting a kind of assimilation and acculturation that encourages the incorporation of positive Arab, Muslim, and American cultural characteristics, often seen by members of the community as the desire for youth to “become American,” but not “become Americanized.”<sup>2</sup>

Arab Americans maintain deep ties within their own communities, in part as a result of social prejudice. Because of discriminatory experiences, Arab immigrants may feel rejection and isolation, thus lessening the degree of acculturation. In an article from the Arab American Institutes, Arab Americans reported grief, anxiety, and trauma as a result of the responses to the attacks of September 11, and anti-Arab discrimination created fear, anger, confusion, hopelessness, and guilt that influenced the self-esteem of Arab Americans. Anti-Arab images and discriminatory government programs seemed designed to intimidate and discourage Arab American resistance to U.S. policies in the Arab world.

In the early twentieth century, Arabs were regarded as marginally “white,”

but beginning in the 1960s, they became racialized because of political and economic events in the Middle East. These included the oil crisis of the 1980s, seen as an effect of “greedy oil sheikhs,” and opposition to the Israeli military occupation and dispossession of the Palestinians, which was constructed as “antisemitic.” By the 1990s, Arabs and Muslims were positioned as innately and culturally “other” by the rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations,” a racist hypothesis that world conflict would come down to an irreconcilable Western-Islamic confrontation (which posits fixed and monolithic Islamic and Western civilizations while ignoring the dynamic interdependence, interactions, and influences among cultures).<sup>3</sup> Construed as opposed to core American values and socially isolated, Arab American communities were easily held collectively responsible for the 9/11 attacks and transformed into a threat to the nation. Despite the fact that in 2000, the proportion of Arabs with high school diplomas and bachelor’s degrees was higher than that of the total U.S. population, Arab Americans were stereotyped and racialized as uneducated, inherently violent, and innately different.

Since the 1990s, with the influx of new immigrants and in the face of even more entrenched American prejudice, Arab American Muslims have become more religious. Some have argued that this creates an ironic paradox in which Muslims, as a religious group, are able to achieve greater acceptance than Arabs as a racialized ethnic group because

the social inclusion of new religious groups in American society rests on the foundation of freedom of religion, while the social inclusion of negatively racialized groups has been historically more difficult to accomplish. Arabs have been excluded both from the full benefits of whiteness and from mainstream recognition as people of color. Officially “white” on U.S. census forms, they are nonetheless victims of racist policies and not treated as white, yet their experiences of bigotry have been rendered largely invisible in the dominant culture.<sup>4</sup>

Racialization and racial identity formation, however, must be seen as ongoing and socially constructed processes that have a long history. In response to industrialization and globalization, the U.S. adopted the nativist Immigration Act of 1924 in which immigrants were restricted by country of origin based on perceived racial desirability. The act restricted Africans as well as Italians, Slavs, and Jews, who were not considered “white,” but Arabs and Asians were outright banned—demonstrating the contingency of the category of “whiteness.”

In an article about Muslim Arab second-generation youth in Dearborn, Gary David and Kenneth Ayouby show that these youth have created their own local Islamic culture. Although drinking, smoking, and dating are not permitted, they drink, smoke, and date in secret; they get tattoos, but with Islamic words or symbols; girls frequently wear

the *hijab* (head covering or scarf) but accompany it with full make-up or tight clothing. David and Ayouby explain that “in the minds of the Arabic youth, none of this makes them ‘bad Muslims.’ Rather they are simply carrying out their localized cultural variant of Islam.” Second-generation Muslim Arabs attempt to create a bridge between their parents and the American culture to which they belong.<sup>5</sup> Al Qasimi observes, “I think young people will always do these things. There’s a joke floating around the internet that goes something like, ‘If you don’t have a secret life, are you even an Arab?’ I think everyone has to navigate their own changing values while still respecting tradition.”<sup>6</sup>

For some, the hijab is as much a fashion statement as it is a religious one and has become another form of expression. Traditionally, the hijab is supposed to be a display of modesty in one’s appearance, but it not uncommon to see a young Arab American female wearing the hijab with lipstick, black eyeliner, and mascara as we see in Al Qasimi’s photo of Sally doing her make-up. Sally is a young fashion-conscious Iraqi woman studying psychology in college and an advocate for mental health awareness. In another interplay with a mirror, the image suggests the ongoing slippage between how we see ourselves, how we want to be seen, and how others see us. It also portrays the vibrant patterns and colors that are characteristic of Arab culture, a pervasive theme in Al Qasimi’s work.



*Sally Doing Her Makeup, 2019*



*Members of Mawtini Dance Troupe Meeting before Performance at a Wedding, 2019*



Two Women Taking a Selfie at a Hookah Bar, 2019

In her photo of the Mawtini Dance Troupe, hanging out before a performance at a wedding, Al Qasimi reproduces the black and white patterns of the men's traditional *keffiyas*, their striped robes, and black belts against a dark background as they confer around a small table, almost a single fantastic abstract form enlivened by the amused anticipatory expression of the dancer in the center whose interlaced fingers add a horizontal counterpoint to the vertical stripes of the garments. The local Dearborn troupe performs Dabkeh, Arab folkdance that combines circle and line dancing and is widely performed at joyous occasions such as weddings.

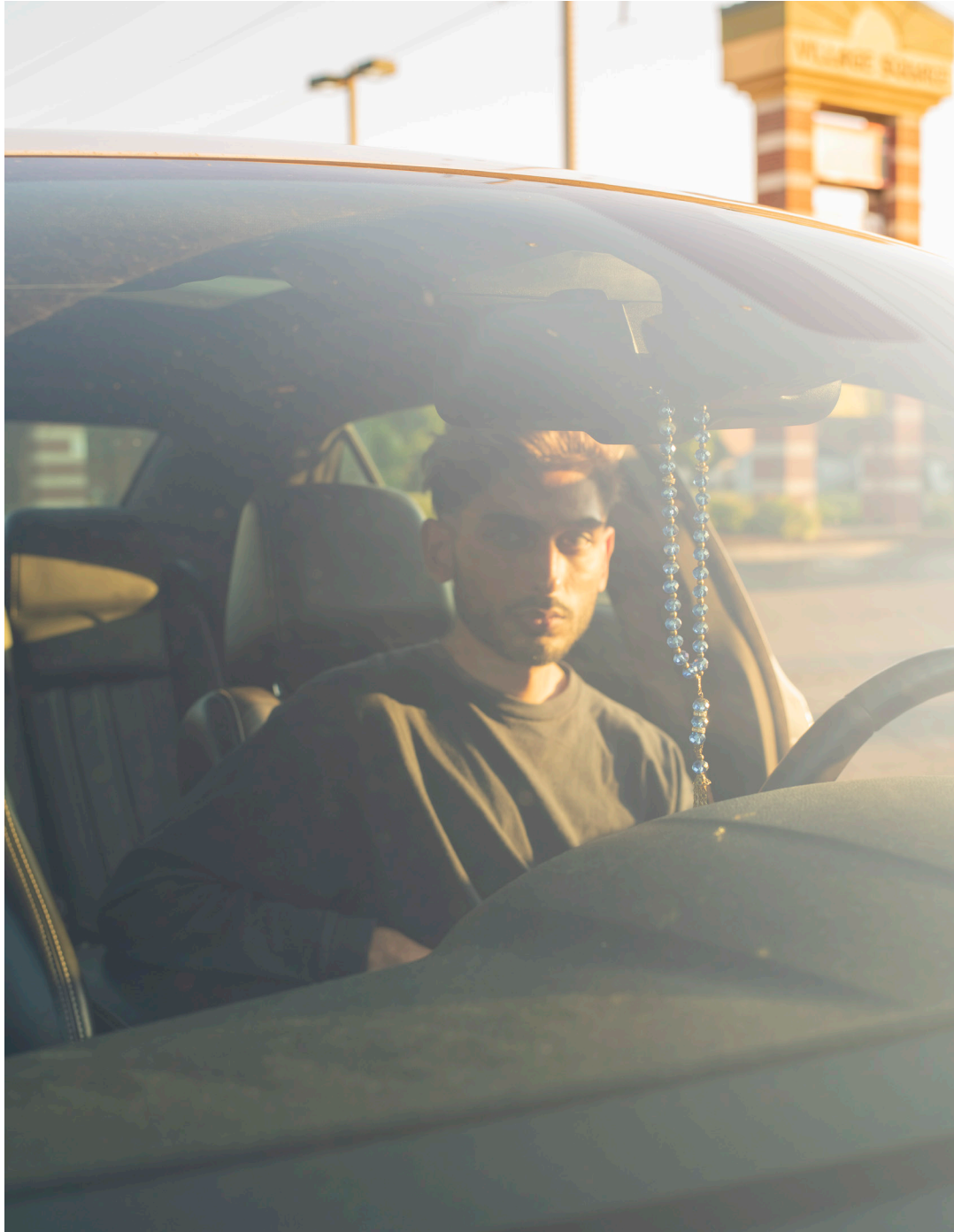
Hookah bars proliferate in Dearborn, where flavored tobacco may be smoked through water pipes as a way to socialize with friends (and also, perhaps, because there is a misconception that hookah is a safer way to smoke tobacco, though it isn't). Food also may be served. In Al Qasimi's photo of two women taking a selfie at a hookah bar, we see a different, secular side to Arab American culture, the women's long hair gleaming in the light of the dark lounge as one holds the hookah hose and the other a pink cell phone. Muslim Arabs differ on whether smoking tobacco and weed is *haram* or *halal*, forbidden or allowed.

Despite the stereotyping of Arabs as terrorists, of the more than 200,000 Muslims, Arabs, and persons from Muslim majority countries in Metro

Detroit who were forced to register with the government following 9/11, less than fifty were found to have criminal records. This did not prevent the rounding up for removal of more than 14,000 persons for visa violations, or the creation of other post-9/11 policies and programs linked to the racialization of Arabs and Muslims and the assumption that they possess certain innate characteristics that make them a security risk. These programs, institutionalized through homeland security and war-on-terror policies, have found an eager champion in Donald Trump, who as U.S. president once again proposed banning immigrants altogether from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Something of this insecure status and continued precarity in American life may be seen in the wary face of Muhammed, Al Qasimi's photo of a man in a car. Muhammed is Pakistani, not Arab, but he frequents the hookah bars and, as Al Qasimi notes, "seems to embody the cross-cultural values that people in Dearborn do." Given how easily he might be mistaken for Arab, Muhammed surely knows that he need do nothing wrong for the state, at any moment, to suspect him of wrongdoing.

Farah Al Qasimi's work brings to light the way Arab Americans negotiate life in a country where assumptions and stereotypes are often hostile; she captures telling moments in the lives of second-generation youth who cultivate identities more likely to fit into both the



Man in Car (Muhammed), 2019

Arab American community and American society as a whole, producing a kind of “third Arab American community, symbolically situated between East and West,” but able to function within either.<sup>7</sup> Her images represent a diverse community undergoing acculturation and transformation. By bringing the viewer into close contact with Arab American life, Al Qasimi’s work showcases its pleasures and anxieties, its colorful aesthetics and customs, its degrees of assimilation and difference in ways that are revealing yet subtle, evoking an affective empathy with her subjects, who, like all of us, want to belong.

Dora Apel is a cultural critic and art historian whose work centers on politics, culture, and visual imagery. She is the author of numerous essays and five books, including *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline*; *War Culture and the Contest of Images*; *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*; *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*; and *Lynching Photographs* (with Shawn Michelle Smith). Her book *Calling Memory into Place* is forthcoming in 2020. She is Professor Emerita and the former W. Hawkins Ferry Endowed Chair in Modern and Contemporary Art History at Wayne State University.

#### ENDNOTES

1 For a thoughtful review of the museum, see Rachel Yezbick, “The Arab American National Museum: Sanctioning Arabness for a Post 9/11 America,” 287-314, in *Arab Detroit 9/11: Life in the Terror Decade*, edited by Nabeel Abraham, Sally Howell, and Andrew Shryock (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).

2 Gary Christopher David and Kenneth Kahtan Ayouby, “Being Arab and Becoming Americanized: Forms of Mediated Assimilation in Metropolitan Detroit,” in *Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible*, edited by Y.Y. Haddad and J.I. Smith (Walnut Creek, Ca.: Alta Mira Press, 2002), [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net), 8-9.

3 See Edward W. Said, “Clash of Ignorance,” *The Nation*, October 4, 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance/>

4 Louise Cainkar, “The Social Construction of Difference and the Arab American Experience,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 25, no. 2-3 (Winter-Spring 2006), 243-278.

5 David and Ayouby, “Being Arab,” 27-28.

6 Email to author, October 24, 2019.

7 David and Ayouby, “Being Arab,” 8.

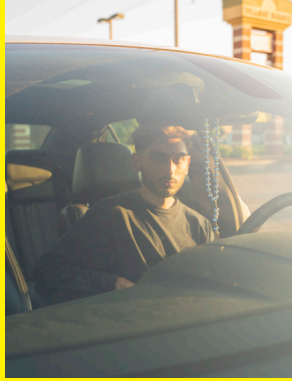
#### DESIGN & PRINTING

Designer: Bianca Ibarlucea

Typeset in *Union* designed by Radim Pesko

Printing by Graphics East, Roseville, MI







Tarous  
حورن  
\$0.77

Honeydew  
\$1.77

NO. 1000  
SUNSHINE BROTHERVILLE  
1000 S. SUNSHINE BLVD. BROTHERVILLE, CA 95602  
TEL: 916.486.1111