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From Aloneness to All-Oneness: Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab* as a Site of Settled Places and of Border-Crossings

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Introduction- Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab* (1997),² which follows the journeys and un/homed experiences of three generations of Arab-American women and their search for self, identity, and voice, puts a "human face," to borrow Taynyss Ludescher's words,³ on Arab-American fiction, and presents multiple perspectival narratives and subject positions which depict the stories, utterances, fractures, slippages, and exilic consciousness of Arab- American women and their attempts to negotiate an in-between space for themselves in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce. Shakir's narrative not only seems to echo Bakhtin's "heteroglossia," as it "permits a multiplicity of social voices,"⁴ but it also seems to resonate with recent scholarship on the ethics of literature, particularly with Martha Nussbaum's claim that narratives formally construct empathy and compassion "in ways highly relevant to citizenship."⁵

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From Aloneness to All-Oneness: Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab* as a Site of Settled Places and of Border-Crossings

Rula Quawas

Our struggles continue but our silence is forever broken. We are telling our stories and we are recording our triumphs and, by virtue of our presence, we are challenging our surroundings.

Teresa Cordova¹

Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab* (1997),² which follows the journeys and un/homed experiences of three generations of Arab-American women and their search for self, identity, and voice, puts a "human face," to borrow Taynys Ludescher's words,³ on Arab-American fiction, and presents multiple perspectival narratives and subject positions which depict the stories, utterances, fractures, slippages, and exilic consciousness of Arab-American women and their attempts to negotiate an in-between space for themselves in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce. Shakir's narrative not only seems to echo Bakhtin's "heteroglossia," as it "permits a multiplicity of social voices,"⁴ but it also seems to resonate with recent scholarship on the ethics of literature, particularly with Martha Nussbaum's claim that narratives formally construct empathy and compassion "in ways highly relevant to citizenship."⁵

Within American racial and cultural discourses, Shakir shows how the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and nation crucially inform the lives of Arab-American women and how a hyphenated identity is as much about difference as about shared belonging and social consciousness. A multi-vocal text about Arab-American women and their double veil of gender and culture, *Bint Arab* is not only a site of conflicting discourses of nationalism, traditionalism and Americanization, but it is also a space for "Arab cultural

re-authenticity," which is, in the words of Nadine Naber, an Arab culture that "emerges as a reaction or an alternative to the universalizing tendencies of hegemonic US nationalism, the pressures of assimilation, and the gendered racialization of Arab women and men."⁶

Even though Joanna Kadi, an Arab-American and the editor of the feminist anthology *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, describes the Arab-American community as "the Most Invisible of the Invisibles"⁷ and believes that Arab-Americans are not only made invisible by white Americans but also by people of color, Latinos, Africans, and Asians,⁸ Arab-American writers, in their new constructed space and through forms of resistance writings, are producing ethnographic texts about the Anglo-Arab encounter and the voices of Arab writers in diaspora. They are creating counter narratives of their own and are rewriting their stories by challenging the hegemonic and homogenized image of them in Western discourses and by reinventing themselves within the crucible of human consciousness; in other words, they are offering an alternative history and an alternative truth to the demonization of Arab-American women and to the prejudicial readings of the Arab-American culture as a whole.

Steven Saliata, in his "Vision: Arab-American Literary Criticism," rightly argues that Arab-American writers are "build[ing] a heritage identifiably linked to the Arab world but that is nonetheless their own."⁹ As Evelyn Shakir herself explains, in her "Coming of Age: Arab American Literature," members of the third wave of Arab-American writers have expressed a distinct Arab-American identity in their works. Arab-American literature published since the 1980s, Shakir argues, testifies to "a sea change" in the way Arab-Americans have begun to

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¹ Teresa Cordova, "Roots and Resistance: The Emergent Writings of Twenty Years of Chicana Feminist Writing," in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Sociology*, ed. Felix Padilla, (Houston, Texas: Arte Publico Press, 1994), 175.

² Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997).

³ Taynys Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature," *MELUS* 31 (2006): 94.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263.

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 10.

⁶ Nadine Naber, "Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore," *Feminist Studies* 32 (2006): 88.

⁷ Joanna Kadi, Introduction to *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), xix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁹ Steven Saliata, "Vision: Arab-American Literary Criticism," *Al Jadid Magazine* 8 (2002): paragraph 7 of 22, accessed April 22, 2009.

<http://www.aljadid.com/features/VisionArabAmericanLiteraryCriticism.html>

perceive their identities and see themselves.¹⁰ These Arab-American writers "rekindle a sense of ethnicity in the established community and promote a sense of kinship with the Arab world in general."¹¹ Shakir describes the time as "an exciting moment,"¹² or as Elmaz Abinader puts it, a "Renaissance,"¹³ with Arab-American literature showing every sign of coming into its own, "and with new writers . . . surfacing, new voices . . . sounding."¹⁴

According to Taynyss Ludescher, in her article "From Nostalgia to Critique: Overview of Arab-American Literature," many Arab-American immigrants have faced challenges in gaining acceptance into the larger American community despite the fact that, as a group, they are remarkably diverse, and reflect the complexity of Arab-American identity.¹⁵ Arab-Americans hail from a heritage that exemplifies common linguistic, cultural, and political traditions. Scholars traditionally divide Arab immigrants who have come to the United States into three distinct waves. The first wave consists of immigration from Greater Syria (Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon) where hunger ravaged that region as a result of World War I. The Second wave of immigration began right after World War II. Unlike the first wave, which was predominantly Christians, the new wave included a significant number of Muslims. This wave of immigrants consisted of educated, skilled professionals who were more familiar with nationalist ideologies that infuse the Arab world. Moreover, a wave of Palestinian refugees who were stateless as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War fled to the United States. Most of these Muslim immigrants were well-educated, professional and skilled immigrants.¹⁶

¹⁰ Evelyn Shakir, "Coming of Age: Arab American Literature," *Ethnic Forum* 13 (1993): 70.

¹¹ Ibid. 70.

¹² Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to our Multicultural Literary Heritage*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 3.

¹³ Elmaz Abinader, "Children of Al Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century," U.S. Society and Values (February 2000), <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0200/ijse/abinader.htm>.

¹⁴ Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to our Multicultural Literary Heritage*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1996), 3.

¹⁵ Taynyss Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature," *MELUS* 31 (2006): 93-114.

¹⁶ For more details on the matter, see: M. Faragallah, et al., "Acculturation of Arab-American Immigrants: an Exploratory Study," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 28 (1997): 187-203. See also: Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: from Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008). See also: Eva Veronica Huseby-Darvas, "'Coming to America': Dilemmas of Ethnic Groups since 1880s," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 9-21. See also: Randa Kayyali, *The Arab Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

In *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, Michael Suleiman argues in his "Introduction: The Arab Immigrant Experience" that World War I was a turning point in the history of the Arab-American community during the second phase of Arab-American immigration. Most Arab-American immigrants considered themselves as temporary workers, people who were in, but not part of American society.¹⁷ Drastic changes took place during World War I, where communications with the homeland were cut off and the community had to fall back on its own resources. Only after World War I, Suleiman notes did "the Arabs in the United States become truly an Arab-American community."¹⁸ They were forced to deal with crucial issues about their identity as Arab-Americans and their relationship with America. A warm sense of community and solidarity sparked a feeling that they were now part of the American community.

American women writers, who hail from a variety of countries, frequently Muslim, grapple with their identity and with what Lisa Majaj calls the "write or be written" imperative: define yourself or others will define you.¹⁹ Authors like Diana Abu-Jaber, Nathalie Handal, Mohja Kahf, and Suheir Hammad shift their writings into new directions that come to form entirely new subjectivities. Although their works move beyond the traditions of Arab-American writers such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Samuel Hazo, and Elmaz Abinader, they have not been rigorously analyzed or given adequate attention in literary studies. Through her books, Abu-Jaber, for example, examines the interconnectedness of the past and the present in the making of the Arab-American female self and creates a space of self-invention for Arab-American women where they collaborate on a new sense of self in the layers of a buried ethnic and female past. She uses memory, the kitchen culture, and the journey to the past of her female family members and fictional characters respectively in order to examine the illusions of her own ambivalent perceptions of self and to invent a constructive way of dealing with the present. The reclamation of the Arab past by Abu-Jaber and its reconstruction from a female perspective is instrumental for other female writers and for the empowerment of her Arab-American women characters.

At one time, America was seen as a "Melting Pot." According to the First American Supreme Court Chief Justice, the phrase "Melting Pot" is a metaphor that implies that all immigrant cultures are mixed and amalgamated in one country without state intervention.

¹⁷ Michael Suleiman, "Introduction: The Arab Immigrant Experience," in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. Michael Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 1-25.

¹⁸ Ibid. 22.

¹⁹ Lisa Majaj, "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Development," *American Studies Journal* 52: Paragraph 7, accessed January 2, 2013. <http://asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html>

The Melting Pot implies that each individual immigrant and each group of immigrants assimilate into American society at their own pace and in their own manner. This popularized concept of the Melting Pot is frequently equated with "Americanization," meaning cultural assimilation by many "old stock" Americans. It implies that the country is a pot in which all ingredients blend together to make a deliciously warm meal. The notion of a "Melting Pot," in which different cultures, races, and religions are combined to develop a multiethnic society, is often used by prominent sociologists to describe societies experiencing a large scale immigration from many different countries.

Peter Salins, in *Assimilation, American Style*, argues that critics have mounted different lines of attack on the phrase "Melting Pot."²⁰ Indeed, evidence shows that the Melting Pot was not working as predicted, as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan have concluded in *Beyond the Melting Pot*.²¹ Obviously, there is no reason for other cultures to give up any part of their cultural attributes to melt into the amalgam. If true assimilation were to occur, then immigrants would have to dispose of all their cultural belongings and conform to American ways, an act which is probably impossible in its own right. A great American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, once said that the United States ought to be described as a "salad bowl" rather than a melting pot. Americans, who constitute many different ethnicities and cultures, are like a mosaic, heterogeneous and multicultural. Each group has its own special qualities and may express those qualities in distinct ways throughout history. Indeed, America can be viewed as either "melted" down or "mixed" together while representing a broad range of identities. It is a nation of many voices, of diverse cultures, and of strong ties to a foreign past. America is a weave of many different and distinctive strands from which it is woven.

Intricately complex questions related to Arab-Americans and to their assimilation, their cultural identity, their national belonging, and their citizenship are part of the warp and woof of *Bint Arab*. *Bint Arab* is, what I would like to call, an "autogynationgraphy" which is, in simple terms, a historical narrative punctuated by and infused with personal/self vignettes of the speaking and telling lives of Arab-American women and of their encounters with Anglo-American society. The book, which is not about what happened but about how what happened affected people, embodies pieces of Arab-American women's testimonial stories, which are colorful quilts inter/threaded together to form a weave for every Arab-American. The weave shows the often forgotten or

glossed over inter/threaded stories of Arab-American immigrants to the United States of America. Of course, the exact correspondence between these stories and the real life of Arab-American people is very strong and communication about a non-textual reality is possible. Even though realities are mediated by different forces, discourses and ideologies, the implied reader is encouraged to accept that there are Arab-American women in the real world whose lives might be similar to the women portrayed in *Bint Arab*.

Nancy Miller, in *Getting Personal*,²² identifies autobiographical narratives with the personal and the confessional. In the face of what she says, *Bint Arab* reveals glimmers of the lived experiences of Arab-American women and of their personal voices which shape the context of the book itself. *Bint Arab* also insists on multicultural and multiracial perspectives and analyzes how Arab-American women not only tell their stories in the interval between different cultures across different nations, but how they also come to share not just conflicts and dilemmas but common concerns, strategies, and ways of coping. As they freely traverse between disparate cultures, Arab-American women come to foster a scrupulous subjectivity, independence of mind, critical perspective, and originality of vision. Writing the self, in an "autogynationgraphy," is an activity and a performance far more complex than getting only personal in an autobiography. It is a process of simultaneous shedding and accretion, a plotting of one's life story around a pivotal event of departure and a present condition of absence from one's native land. It is an act of survival in which Arab-Americans not only map the spaces in which they dwell and provide accounts of how to cross to other spaces, but in which they also reveal their yearnings to belong to a particular homeland as well as their desire to cross over to other places, both geographical and metaphorical.

In *Bint Arab*, Shakir introduces her grandmothers, the representatives of the first Arab-American generation, who came to the USA in the nineteenth century. Going down family memory lane and through re-membering lives and reminiscing, she explores and depicts their motivations for immigration and how they and their subsequent families adapted to the new country which they have come to call home. She does not brush off the grueling problems these women had with their patriarchal-minded males. She also registers their triumphs in redefining their roles as women who are able and willing to run their lives with no inhibitions. A case in point is the author's industrious mother who sets up a successful clothing factory in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Hannah, the author's mother, is self-employed and dedicates her life to her factory: "In the morning she was full of projects and

²⁰ Peter Salins, *Assimilation, American Style* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

²¹ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1963).

²² Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

plans she had cooked up during the night, not just for herself but for everyone she cared about. She could not let well enough alone."²³

Shakir also shows how second generation Arab-American women have navigated their lives between the Arab and American cultures. She gives the reader lengthy transcriptions of Arab women's accounts of their multifarious experiences, gleaned from interviews or, in one case, from a long conversation amongst four sisters. She lets these spirited women speak for themselves by bearing witness to their lives and by speaking their truth and reality. Later, Shakir moves on to show vividly how third generation Arab-American women connected or reconnected with their roots and heritage and how they attempted to forge their beingness. The text concludes with women who have emigrated over the last quarter century from many Arab countries, particularly Palestinians.

Throughout her "autogynationography," Shakir gives voice to Arab-American women and inter/weaves a vivid tapestry of their beingness and their becomingness, of their families and traditional values, of their ethnic communities, of their business entrepreneurship, and of their interactions with Anglo-American society and their exposure to a new set of social and cultural codes and scripts. She depicts with authenticity and genuineness the ways these women shape or reshape their roles as women, and she probes deeply into the ever-evolving process of immigration and acculturation. The women's plethora of stories are those of empathic love and reconciliation, willful agency, ebbs and flows of re/negotiations as well as learning and unlearning, but more often than not, of imagination, of healing and of renewed hope.

In an interview with the *Boston Globe* in 2005, Shakir commented, "I don't think there's ever been much recognition of Arab-Americans as a part of the American mosaic, even though we've been here for well over 100 years. . . . Arabs have been thought of as an overseas, alien people, without recognition that we've been a part of the American family for a long time." Even though many Arab-American women are born and raised in the United States, and are strongly tied to life and culture in America, the Arab component of who they are is regarded by others as anti-American. They are always regarded as "foreigners-Arabs, not Arab-Americans."²⁴ The stereotypical images of Arab women in American culture and media include those of belly dancers, harem girls, or submissive women clad in black from head to toe. In her article "The Arab Woman in US Popular Culture: Sex and Stereotype," Marsha Hamilton notes that the stereotype of Arabs as "billionaires, belly dancers, and bombers" has been previously discussed

and documented by Jack Shaheen in *The TV Arab*.²⁵ For Shaheen, Arabs are seen as having no identities whatsoever and they are always mute. The oppression of Arab women is clearly a prominent western stereotype of Arab cultures, as critics like Lila Abu-Lughod point out, for example, in "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving."²⁶ Understandably so, stereotyping, as Nik Coupland claims, is one of the discursive manifestations of othering, which is defined as "the process of representing an individual or a social group to render them distant, alien or deviant."²⁷

Our very own Edward Said was caught up at the very heart of the ongoing debate about the empowering effect of diasporic experience and the fleeting aspects of identity since the beginning of his literary career in the United States. Said often called himself an outsider/insider influenced by both Arab and American cultures, but belonging to neither.²⁸ He once described himself as living two separate lives, one as an American university professor, the other as a fierce critic of American and Israeli policies in the Middle East. His autobiography, *Out of Place: A Memoir*, is central to his identity revealing his yearning to 'belong'. His life of exile, travel and immigration in the end shaped his identity. "To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years."²⁹

Also, Leila Ahmad, in her memoir *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey*, negotiates many cultures on her quest for identity formation and depicts her trials and struggles with issues of Arabness, Islamness, and Westernization.³⁰ As an expatriate, she relates how she has experienced at certain times in her life cultural alienation, racism, and "othering" at the hands of scholars and friends, and explains the double consciousness that she has increasingly experienced as an Arab living in the West. Throughout her journey, Ahmad goes through an existential crisis as she tries to define her identity, and as W. E. B. Du Bois puts it, this feeling of anxiety or double consciousness is a "sense of always looking at

²³ Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab*, 57.

²⁴ Nada Elia, "Islamophobia and the 'privileging' of Arab American Women," *NWSA Journal* 18 (2006): 156.

²⁵ Marsha Hamilton, "The Arab Woman in US Popular Culture: Sex and Stereotype," in *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 173. Also see, Jack Shaheen, *The TV Arab* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984).

²⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104.3 (2002): 783-90.

²⁷ Nik Coupland, "Other Representation," in *Handbook of Pragmatics*, eds. J. Verschueren, et al. (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Benjamins, 1999), 5.

²⁸ Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁰ Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."³¹ At the conclusion of her memoir, Ahmad comes to grips with the fact that her life is multifaceted and she is all the better for it, and she concludes that her story is all about the increasing fluidity or porousness of borders and boundaries.³² She embraces her insider-outsider perspectives and her epicist female experiences and hybrid culture, and effects her entry into a new space, the open space of her own authority.

Bint Arab's interwoven stories, intimately stitched and patched with personal history and shifts through the multiple vantage points of many different characters, with sorrows and joys, with historical facts and noises from several different cultures, and with interviews and robust conversations, give the narrative breadth and inclusiveness and introduce the reader to the un/veiled story of the female Arab immigrant and to the demanding duality of Arab and American cultures. The book does not tell an extraordinary story that looks to the glamorous and romanticized aspects of arriving in a new place. Rather, this book focuses on normal, human aspects of life which reveal some outcomes at the beginning but ends without resolution. Although not as glamorous, the regular aspects of life can hold more significance in self-discovery and in self-formation and do become pieces of an emerging glocal world.

Since Americans had been hostile towards Arabs, stereotyping them and painting them as terrorists, Arab-Americans, particularly women, have often felt that they are not "fully" American and that they will never be accepted as such. These women have had to engage in soul-searching, and have often become interested in turning back to their grandparents' and parents' homes for answers and in connecting with their roots without being bound by them. In her essay, "Exile, Responsibility, Destiny," Jan Vladislav beautifully writes, "Our home is the place from which we originate, and toward which we turn to look from an ever-increasing distance. Our home is a point in time which we have lost, but can always rediscover, along with details which we would not even have noticed *then, on the spot.*"³³

While Sammar, in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, finds herself caught up in-between two worlds, trying to translate meanings, not words, from one culture to another, many second and third generations of Arab-American women similarly feel that they are suspended in the seemingly empty space between "Arab" and "American." Many descendents of immigrants are torn between the ties to their ancestral

home and place of birth, between their sense of unbelongingness and re/connecting with their ethnic roots. For immigrants and their descendents, this identity conflict presents confusing and conflicting challenges which can be hard to reconcile. Arabs are relatively new to America, and special cultural or religious considerations have made the transition harder than other immigrant groups. Yet Shakir brilliantly weaves a picture of the contributions of Arab women in the United States, showing they have always been part of the cultural landscape and social fabric of America. In fact, the Arab-American women we see in the book are fierceless in maneuvering between cultures and refusing to fit somebody else's idea of what they should look like, or how they should behave.

The emerging voices of Arab-American women in *Bint Arab* try to carve an autonomous space through which they redefine themselves and their identities. Through this space, they unsettle hegemonic perceptions of Arabs and Muslims in an attempt to resist Western domination and right the records about their lives and histories. Their alienation from their home countries as well as from their host country allows them to carve a self-sufficient space, a new home, necessary for their preservation and endurance anytime, anywhere: the human self. Once they birth that self, they, in the words of Iain Chambers,

acquire more ductile understandings, associated with asymmetrical powers and differing senses of place, in which culture is considered as a flexible and fluid site of transformation and translation rather than as the ontological stronghold of separate traditions, autonomous histories, self-contained cultures and fixed identities."³⁴

The Arab-American women who populate *Bint Arab* face the fear of being caught up between two cultures and two states of mind or two nations of heart and act in a way that moves beyond the narrative of victimization and prejudice and create for themselves a "conceptual community" or a "psychic space in which individuals feel rooted and to which they feel they belong."³⁵ This space is one of empowerment and re-territorialization from which they can speak for and against the different cultures with which they are affiliated. Gloria Anzaldúa captures this essence when she states,

Petrified, she can't respond, her face between *los intersticios*, the space between the different worlds she inhabits . . . And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible

³¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Random House, 1993), 38.

³² Leila Ahmed, 296.

³³ Jan Vladislav, "Exile, Responsibility, Destiny," in *Literature in Exile*, ed. John Glad (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 15.

³⁴ Iain Chambers, "Leaky Habitats and broken Grammar," in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, eds., George Robertson et al. (London: Routledge, 1994), 247.

³⁵ Miriam Cooke, "Reimagining Lebanon," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94.4 (1995): 1076.

and to blame . . . or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control.³⁶

In *Bint Arab*, Arab-American women navigate the turbulent reality in which they exist, create a new space in the in-between, and view their cultural hybridity and border crossing as a profound and empowering effect of their diasporic experience. They cross the great divide of otherness and become midwives of souls whose privilege is being who they are in spite of boundaries. The book comes to challenge the existing hegemonic hierarchies through difference and enables the creation of new spaces of self-invention and transformation from which the new "border-crossing identities" of women speak. The Arab-American women's "border-crossing identities," a term I am using here, are reminiscent of Anzaldua's Indian-Mexican-American "new mestiza," the hybrid woman who refuses to be restrained by any one world-view and who realizes that ambiguity is a fact of her multi-faceted world. In *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Anzaldua writes,

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. . . She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.³⁷

Simply, as Heidi Safia Mirza astutely puts it, "Cultural hybridity, the fusion of cultures and coming together of difference, the 'border crossing' that marks diasporic survival, signifies change, hope of newness, and space for creativity."³⁸ It is perhaps relevant also to say that this fusion of cultures additionally signifies the forging in the smithy of human souls an expansion of our capacity for radical empathy and for the lure of becoming the sheroes of our own life stories.

In *Bint Arab*, Shakir clearly and blatantly engages in the rhetoric of displacement, exile, diaspora, and the dilemma of inclusion and exclusion in America's culturally diverse society and deals with America's attitudes toward ethnicity, marginalization, and recognition. Within the annals of history, many Americans pride themselves on being a nation of immigrants where cultural cross-pollination has occurred, yet in this politicized time and age, some old-stock Americans still feel that immigrants will not be able to integrate into American culture for they come from alien cultures and mindsets. In more than one way, this unfortunately does not reflect the sense of double consciousness and in-betweenness that characterizes

the present age, which Michel Foucault described as "the epoch of simultaneity . . . the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."³⁹

In her "autogynationography," Shakir writes the stories of Arab-American women who name and describe their diverse and rich experiences, which is, understandably so, an important epistemological act that contributes to achieving relatability as well as subjectivity. In "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," Gloria Anzaldua states that women have to re/write the stories others have miswritten about them. Writing one's story is "to become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve autonomy."⁴⁰ By writing their own stories and by sharing their lived experiences, Arab-American women are making sense of lives and cultures and are helping to bridge the knowledge gap between the Arab world and the West and to nurture a psychology of tolerance, not intolerance. Their writing is a site for self-expression, for self-definition, for critical consciousness, for subversion and resistance, for social and political change, and for re-visioning the cultivation of beingness and the assertion of becomingness.

Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, many Arab women, as we are shown in *Bint Arab*, left their homelands in Greater Syria to seek livelihoods and wage employment in the north and south cities of the United States. These women were an integral, yet often unnoticed, part of a migrant stream responding to the call of willing labor in various parts of the country. They have migrated initially to find work in the land of opportunities, and they have sometimes used traditional values to justify their "bold new undertakings,"⁴¹ using the notion of self-sacrifice for one's family to justify migrating. As peddlers, mill girls, factory hands, and entrepreneurs, they have succeeded in becoming settlers and in establishing families and in building communities in their new surroundings. Over time, they have gained autonomy and community leadership positions and forged and sustained multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.

For these women, being an Arab-American does not necessarily describe identity per se but rather an attitude and intention to seek possible speaking positions that enable women to emerge into self-representation. Marie El-Khoury, a Syrian socialite in

³⁶ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 43-44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁸ Heidi Safia Mirza, *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 16.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22.

⁴⁰ Gloria Anzaldua, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," in *Women Writing Resistance: Essays on Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004), 84.

⁴¹ *Bint Arab*, 30.

New York and the best-known Arab-American jewelry designer, is an empowered, mobile, and creative woman. She has positioned herself within the socio-cultural contexts of New York City and, through the preservation of cultural differences, she has managed to host a literary salon. Her position of privilege, along with her intellectual vigor, has allowed her to know, to understand, to authorize, and to have power over her Arab-Americanness. As "the most colorful personality ever to live in New York,"⁴² she rewrites both Western and Eastern traditions and discourses and opens up new conversations and spaces for female agency and cross-cultural, transnational contact.

The women who migrated from Greater Syria have stretched the boundaries of their traditional roles as Arab women, indirectly challenged power inequalities between women and men, and experienced a different way of being. With time, they do not fade into private life or demobilize; in fact, they identify with a diverse set of communities and hold themselves accountable to the multiple publics with whom they interact. Empowered through their work, they create their own authentic script and initiate new forms of conversations across what people thought were unbridgeable chasms. As part of the political generation, the Palestinian active generation, Mona redefines the concept of honor through her political work and locates it in her homeland, "how much you were giving to the cause, not the woman's sexuality."⁴³ She realizes that identifying as an Arab-American does not mean that "you're not a good Arab" or that "you're not a good American," but that "you get the best of both worlds."⁴⁴

Shakir finds contradictions in Linda Simon's claim that "working for women's rights and working for Arab rights are two expressions of the same battle for human dignity," since many Arab-American women in *Bint Arab* have not always found it comfortable to be both feminist and ethnic.⁴⁵ As a lesbian, Cheryl Qamar is torn asunder between the two competing communities, Lebanese and lesbian, to which she belongs. She claims that "my heart's with the lesbian community, but my soul's with the Arab community."⁴⁶ Rather than capitulating to or privileging the discourse of honor within her Arab culture and succumbing to her mother's entreaty to change her name since she has tarnished the family's reputation, she manages to negotiate a new vision by choosing to use both her family name and her adopted one. She carefully subverts the authority invested in Arab family names and provides an alternative to the acceptable public discourse inherent in Arab narratives. Cheryl's aim is to

express a valid way of life beyond the stereotypical images of Arab women and to assert the validity of her own Arab and American worldview. She offers herself a space for agency, a space she has hitherto been denied and maintains a liberatory role for herself as an Arab-American woman.

Arab-American women are not absent or missing or erased from the American scene. Shakir gives voice to Arab-American women and engages them in a conversation. The most striking point about *Bint Arab* is the diversity of the voices of Arab-American women that it presents and the array of themes it portrays. With each new generation of immigrants, there seems to be new levels of assimilation, reconciliation with Arab identity, and reconnection with roots and generational conflicts. Paula notes that her ethnicity is a "basic tool that [she] used to measure the world."⁴⁷ Shakir lets the reader dwell on whether our ethnic identity is a permanent lens through which we view and make sense of our surroundings. If not, how do we use and remove this lens to create a peripheral understanding of the world we live in, Shakir asks. Another Arab-American woman, Khadija, asserts that the hijab is a protection, but then notes that "these Muslim men were threatened by it."⁴⁸ She states that "How you dress makes a big difference . . . when you dress sexy, you feel sexy, and you go out and anything can happen to you. But when you're all covered up . . . you're so pure and protected in your mind."⁴⁹ One cannot help but pose the following questions. Does adopting a certain style of dress entail adopting a particular set of behaviors, too? In addition, can dressing a certain way make us "ambassadors" to a particular culture or perceived lifestyle?

It can be argued that Arab-American women in *Bint Arab* are not a monolithic, fixed category. Rather, the "autogynationography" narrative shows the potential of a relationship between and across borders, identities, faiths, cultures and traditions. Stuart Hall is right when he sees a close and warm relationship between identity and representation. According to him, "identities are . . . constituted within, not outside representations," which embody discourses and ideologies.⁵⁰ He further says that "identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions."⁵¹ Identity is then the result of self-introspection, self-reflection, subjective perception and external circumstances such as the socio-cultural environment.

⁴² Ibid., 46.

⁴³ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 164.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. P. Du Gay and S. Hall (London: Sage, 1996), 4.

⁵¹ Ibid. 4.

A notion of identity that sees it as unified and fixed is no longer tenable, and especially based on the views of poststructuralists, identity now is conceived as "becoming" rather than "being," evolving, and always in a state of flux, of being re-constructed.⁵² According to Gayatri Spivak, identity is not predetermined but is multifaceted and variable. In her words, "there are many subject positions that one must inhabit; one is not just one thing."⁵³ In this regard, Satya Mohanty argues that "identities are ways of making sense of our experiences. They are theoretical constructions that enable us to see the world in specific ways."⁵⁴ According to her, people with different identities or with hyphenated identities can have different interpretations of who they are and of the world at large.

Bint Arab, which is based on multiple experiences of Arab-American women, is a polyvalent text that unsettles the notion of migration and makes readers rethink their view of the world. The book plunges into the lives of Arab-American women and offers the readers insights difficult to find in Western hegemonic discourses. Chandra Mohanty, who especially focuses on the experience-oriented texts of third-world women, describes such texts as "significant modes of remembering and recording experience and struggles" and as "a site for the production of knowledge about 'lived relations'."⁵⁵ Related to this point, *Bint Arab* helps readers to see reality from the standpoint of the lives of Arab-American women. In other words, it is possible, through an act of self-representation, to provide access to reality, which is, as we know, an interpreted reality within an interpreted world, which is ostensibly mediated by mediatory discourses and by human consciousness. What is important is the way in which *Bint Arab* is read and understood, and the impact it has on readers. Chandra Mohanty is right when she says that "the point is not just 'to record' one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant."⁵⁶ *Bint Arab* can show tensions within experience, "tensions that reflect the kinds of agency, community, or consciousness" that hegemonic discourses do not often represent.⁵⁷

⁵² Michele Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 250.

⁵³ Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, and Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 60.

⁵⁴ Satya Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition" *Cultural Critique* 24 (1993): 55.

⁵⁵ Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Mohanty, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 33, 35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁷ Shari Stone-Mediatore, "Chandra Mohanty and the Revaluing of Experience," in *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, eds. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 123.

Part III of *Bint Arab* invokes the history of Muslim Palestinian women immigrants to the United States, who have become reduced to a political body in the grasp of the American state. Stripped of their strength and power, many of these Muslim Palestinian immigrants think of themselves as a "community in exile,"⁵⁸ and they speak longingly of the day of return to a liberated Palestine. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has remained deeply controversial in part because tensions between Palestinians and Israelis are deeply entrenched in ethnic chauvinism and in a culture of injustice. Even though America is heterogeneous and hybrid, mixing cultures, religions, languages, and ethnicities, its relationship with Palestinian immigrants articulates a version of diasporic and exilic consciousness in the narrative perspective which resists unity, rejects wholeness, and finds joy, and to some degree redemption and healing, in intense perception.

Shakir narrates the particular stories of many Muslim Palestinian immigrants, who are strongly rooted in political and social constructions of the homeland they have left behind and who recover fragments of the past. For sure, telling stories empowers women characters in *Bint Arab* and contradicts what Spivak leads us to expect when she identifies "one of the assumptions of subalternist work: that the subaltern's own idiom did not allow him to know his struggle so that he could articulate himself as its subject."⁵⁹ In moments of self-construction narration, Muslim Palestinian women overcome pressured silences that have amounted to lies about what has happened to them. Emily Shihadeh, to choose a distinguished example, finally gains a voice and presence in America and narrates the story she believed she had to repress in order to secure a place in her new homeland. She has evaded and misrepresented her history to herself and others, and she permits the silences and distortions to pass unquestioned; but then she survives in speech and through humor, which are for her, "almost cathartic."⁶⁰ As she sifts through her life, she feels "as if my arms were tied behind my back and now they're loose."⁶¹ Because she remains in language, she is re-turned as a liberated subject evolving in feminine subjectivity.

For Palestinian women living in America, the so-called threat of "cultural contamination" may seem especially real and the need to resist it more urgent.⁶² Ihsan, who comes from a relatively privileged Palestinian Muslim family, has seen unsettling connections between her personal narrative and communal or national ones.

⁵⁸ *Bint Arab*, 127.

⁵⁹ Gayatri Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's 'Stanadayini'," in *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1987), 111.

⁶⁰ *Bint Arab*, 129.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 129-130.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 135.

Aware of the potential for a changed Arab-American community, she makes visible the legacies of patriarchal arrogance, racism, and gender oppression that run through several generations of Palestinian Americans, and she envisions altered configurations of home in new ways. As she becomes increasingly enlightened by her experiences and the events that have blighted her life and as she comes to find a private safe space away from home, she comes to "feel out of place in the land of one's birth, the very place one has so longed for from far away."⁶³ For Ihsan, one way or another, America has fulfilled the homing promise implicit in the "baseball cap."⁶⁴

The beautiful thing about *Bint Arab* is the collage section which Shakir creates at the very end of her book, a section in which she contextualizes the Arab-American experience and culture and provides a wide range of non-monolithic images of Arab-American women. In that section, Shakir emphasizes that being Arab-American is always a process, a complex structure of experiences, relationships, and activities with specific and changing pressures and limits. The unfolding stories, which reflect retrospectively and introspectively on the new homeland that has shaped the protagonists, are all about Arab-American women known for their intellectual heft, resilience, drive and empathy. These stories, which are so personal and individual, so focused and ferocious, are narrated in first person, and we see the characters at times wrestling with an "I," which they desire to own. Enacting a repeated remembering of the protagonists' minds and hearts, they can be understood as narratives of the formative education of Arab-American women into their roles in the new homeland. When Arab-American women learn new tutorial lessons, they know the new world and their place in it. They know how to re/birth or re/create new selves and to forge new identities.

Intermixed with discriminations of race and class, the Arab-American women in the last section confront sexist hierarchies, double standards, othering and self-censorship, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination against women. Karima feels cast off as a female child; Hind, Leila, and Helen feel stigmatized by their actions; Fatan is overwhelmed by guilt that eats away at her soul every time she ventures out, and Suad admits wholeheartedly that there is a price for everything. These Arab-American women, in addition to many others in the same section, create a home space, speak for themselves, and insist on being heard. They also make clear that the Arab-American identity is always evolving in development and in re/negotiations, and they make visible their social and cultural surroundings and structures. This visibility is crucial to Arab-American women as a step forward toward social

transformation and a rejection of marginalization and silence. It also contributes to the strengthening of their sense of self and personal voice.

Bint Arab features the authentic and agentic voices of Arab-American women who just speak from their heart and who share their experiences and structure of feelings by saying their multiplicity. The book makes visible an Arab-American women-centered community which reflects and perpetuates a habit of seeing, a way of looking at life, its absent presence and its present absence, through the fractured struggles, the grueling pains and the crowning triumphs of Arab-American women. By bringing into view the wide-ranging, lived experiences and polyphonic voices of Arab-American women, Shakir offers a more comprehensive, less distorted, empirically richer vision of the world of Arab-Americans, a space of settled places, locations, and homes, but also a space of diasporic, transnational movements, of border-crossings, of the *unheimliche*.

Arab-American women in *Bint Arab* are people who belong to more than one world, speak more than one language or one cultural repertoire, inhabit more than one identity, and have more than one home. These women have learned to negotiate between cultures, and they have also learned to speak from the in-between of different cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, and thus finding ways of being the same as and at the same time different from the others among whom they live.⁶⁵ As an Arab-American writer, Evelyn Shakir, who creates in her multivocal work a space for Arab-American women to make their stories accessible to other American and Arab communities, succeeds in giving birth to images of humanness about Arab-American women. As Gregory Orfalea says, the closer an Arab-American writer "gets to what is real, the closer he [she] gets to justice and redemption."⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Verso, 1994).

⁶⁶ Gregory Orfalea, "The Arab American Novel," *MELUS* 31 (2006): 117.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 134.

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