I'm More Arab Than You Are! Identity and Cultural Production in Diaspora

In the early 2000's, I led a series of art workshops for Arab and Muslim youth in San Francisco, California. At the beginning of each cycle, I would ask the participants to draw images that represent their identity as a way to investigate the concepts of self and society that they had. Along with graffitied names and symbols such as suns and happy faces, they consistently drew the Palestinian flag. Not only did these young people draw the flag in response to the exercise, but I would often find it doodled on notebooks-backpacks and papers the way a teenager dreamily writes the name of his or her first love, over and over again.

The groups seemed intimately familiar with the flag as a visual marker of identity weighted in historical, political and cultural significance. It was possible that some of the participants had been exposed to it at home as a large number of them were born in the United States to Palestinian parents. Others were recent immigrants from Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco and Yemen and they could have encountered it daily, on an institutional building, through a media source or also at home. They all could have seen the flag during local protests, which at the time had been occurring regularly in support of the second Intifada or against the U.S. war in Iraq and Afghanistan. As one young man stated during a recent interview: "Growing up as an

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Iraqi, Palestine was a huge deal for us, and now as an Iraqi refugee, it was even more real for me".

This identification led me to a number of questions about the formation of identity. While I understood that it was charged with their relationship to the collective, empowered, and even resistant whole, I wondered about this particular symbol as was an important visual mechanism. Was it then the role of cultural production to insert new ways of understanding by translating representational images into the specificity of experience? How could cultural production acknowledge its importance while also allowing young people to live in a present situation that moved beyond cultural symbolism?

As Miwon Kwon suggests, "while the accelerated speed, access, and exchange of information, images, commodities and even bodies is being celebrated in one circle, the concomitant breakdown of traditional temporal-spatial experiences and the accompanying homogenization of places and erasure of cultural differences is being decried in another". This (often dichotomized) simultaneity might be best addressed through the localization of resources and ideas and by utilizing art practice and production as the third language or as Homi Bhabha proposes the "third space".

For this diverse group of young Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans, the space of re-making identity emerged in the art workshop setting, one that allowed them to keep moving between an individual/internal and a larger collective space. When asked why she decided to participate in the workshops, one of the young women notes: "I joined, because many of my friends had. Initially, I thought it was just a good pastime but towards the end of the workshop, I saw the impact it had on the youth as they could freely express themselves."

As an artist and a writer whose work is driven by a practice- to- theory driven model, I am interested in the ways that the act of making has the potential to reveal nuances that would otherwise remain buried or still. In particular, as a Lebanese artist based in the United States, I would like to explore the ways that these ever-shifting notions of identity can be understood through the process of cultural production.

I will focus on this series of art workshops for youth held in San Francisco, California during the years 2002-2005 as a case example during a particularly volatile time period between the East and West. The workshops centered on culture and community engagement through the arts (drawing, painting, writing, video and photography). Based at the Arab Cultural and Community Center (ACCC), they were also a pilot program aimed at furthering art- based education in the local Arab and Muslim community. The workshops were held once a week consistently for four months and were designed for the youth to connect with each

other through the creative process. The length of time was an important factor in assuring that the group built trust and had time to expand their skills. Throughout the workshops, the lived experiences of the youth was manifested in their art works and revealed through a multiplicity of engagements that gave them the opportunity to account for their own story. The program included art and writing projects in a variety of mediums such as drawing, painting and collage. In order to integrate the continuum of self-reflexivity, photography and video were used as interrogations of the still and moving image.

The experience allowed me to have a critical insight onto the ways in which young people negotiate identity in the context of the Arab diaspora. I will base my analysis on reflections from my time teaching and working with a group, as well as on a series of recently conducted interviews with staff and participants. In order to address the impact of this ever-shifting and formulated identity, I will map the externally construed understandings as well as the internal complexities. The interviews and anecdotes will serve to demonstrate the impact that the methodologies in the art production provided for this particular group of young people.

Arriving at Arab-ness: What's Pride Got to Do With It?

During the workshop series, I worked in conjunction with the Arab Cultural and Community Center staff and in particular with Suzy Abu-Nie, the Youth Program Coordinator. During a recent interview, she described identity as "very important" and went on to explain: "As was pride—— having pride about being Arab as defined by the youth themselves-speaking the language, coming from West Asia or North Africa or any Muslim country. The youth who weren't ethnically Arab or from mixed ethnic families were proud to be part of the larger Arab world and felt as though they were a part of the Arab identity, regardless of where they came from".

Abu-Nie's claim places identity as a proactive and constructive categorization. She also marks an important conflation of identities. Though it is significant to note that the youth who participated in the workshops were recruited through high schools, universities, churches, mosques and mostly through word-of-mouth, there never was a requirement that they be from Arab countries or belong to a particular community or religion. This meant that some of the participants were from a range of countries in West Asia, including Kurdistan and Iran.

Abu-Nie's statement also addresses the concept of pride—a crucial and much more complicated and nuanced assertion than it first appears to be. To have pride as a young Arab immigrant or Arab American demands a kind of social and political of worth and value that is difficult to attain. It requires strong familial

and community-based assertions that counter the daily difficulties and negative discourse found in the mainstream media.

Overall, the art workshop - a signifier of culture and a potential means to move beyond speech acts and into more subtle discursive forms - was a forum for these young people to tell a story that challenged the ways in which ethnicity or race becomes reduced to mere tropes.

Arab & Arab-American Identity Formation in the United States

For Arabs and Arab-Americans living in the United States, identity functions via multiple categories of being (race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, age, nationality and immigration status) that are inserted in close proximity to each other. These constructed multiplicities are defined by both external (society, government, quotidian language, media, and education) and internal factors (family and community in Diaspora and in states of origin). They also shift according to the geographic location and the socio-political moment. The result is an ever-evolving understanding of personal and collective identity.

Despite all of the centrality that the concept of Arab-ness has played in the mainstream U.S. media since September 11, 2001, very little consensus exists as to what this term demarcates. When attempting to determine exactly what is being referred to when the word Arab is mentioned in daily discourse, one finds little exaction and a great deal of conflation. The multiplicity of geographic terminology - the Arab World, South Asia, West Asia, North Africa and the Middle East- all signify the confusion about how to group of people with nuanced ethnic, linguistic, social and national boundaries. They become a murky combination of races and ethnic and religious groups.

This is particularly delineated in the context of religious categories in the Arab region. For the most part, Arab is equated with Muslim and vice versa. By default, Islam becomes devoid of geographic and historical relevance. This is not merely a question of external ignorance of an internal fact: the blurred lines of religion are equally contentious for the community of Arabs and Arab-Americans residing in the U.S. As Nadine Naber demonstrates, categorizations of race and ethnicity in the context of Arab-ness are inseparable from the historical-political realities that define their contours (Naber forthcoming, 56). She notes, "In the U.S., Arab national and religious categories take on new meanings in the light of dominant U.S. discourses about Arabs and Muslims; Muslims and Christians; Palestine and Israel; and other dominant U.S. imperialist discourses about the Middle East".

Simultaneously the gendering of Arab identity in the United States is pervasive and often devoid of class, age and nationality. "Arab woman" as a

category is riddled with misconceptions about the level of oppression and violence experienced at an individual and collective level. These framings of Arab-ness, as Lila Abu-Lughod points out, prioritize imagined and essentialized cultural explanations and ignore the political and historical realities that shape every day life and experience. They allow institutions and actors to bypass the "global interconnections" that shape the Arab Diaspora and instead create narrow and rigid imaginary geographies, one of "West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around in *burqas*" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 783).

In lieu of a set standard of participation in family or community activities, young people in the U.S. develop skills and social networks in after-school programs. This creates a disadvantage for the youth who cannot participate and are left out of social and cultural activity. With this in mind, the workshops were held in the afternoons during after-school hours and during the weekend in order to maximize participation.

The class factor was most visible with the young people who worked after-school jobs and this affected recent and more established immigrants in different ways. There are several established families, neighborhoods and clusters of the Arab community, mostly Palestinian with some Lebanese, Yemeni, Egyptian and Iraqi families who have local small businesses such a deli, coffeehouse, liquor stores, mini-markets and retail shops. These second or third generation children were often expected to take over the family businesses. This affected the dynamics of the workshops when there were a few times that the youth decided not to work in order to attend a workshop or event. It created conflict with the family but ultimately served as a platform for the young to initiate a discussion about their larger life goals (for example- their hesitancy at taking over the family business because they witnessed their parent's arduous life or because they had different personal ambitions).

The newer immigrant population of Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian and North Africans were geographically dispersed and often faced much more strenuous economic hardships as recent immigrants with little or no access to language or economic resources. They had difficulty attending workshops and the language differences created gaps between them and the 1.5 or second-generation youth who had less difficulty with the language. The Arabic language was therefore consciously built into the curriculum as an advantage. The youth integrated the language into their work by writing in Arabic as part of a visual work or speaking in Arabic during the drawing and painting activities. These were some of the few instances where the recent immigrant was placed in a position of greater access and their language skills were made advantageous.

During the art workshops, not only did ethnicity & race, gender, language

and class impact the methodologies and inner workings but age also took on a significant role as a collective identity. The group who participated in the workshops ranged from 14-20 years of age. As teenagers and young adults, they were at a vital point in the course of their identity formation and were experiencing psychological, physical and sociological change on a daily basis. Shalini Shankar proposes that "analytical categories" of second generation or assimilated groups, prove to be far "less relevant than the cliques and communities that youth themselves create" (2008, 16). In a context like the United States, where racial and ethnic hierarchies of difference govern interpersonal and institutional relations, these constructions become heavily "implicated in identity development during adolescence and young adulthood" (Sundar 2008, 252).

As a way to ground the youth in a regional context and build connections with other groups of young people, the ACCC hosted a youth dance troupe from a refugee camp in Bethlehem. Abu-Nie named this exchange "as one of the highlights of the program because our local community was able to be with their international peers, share common experiences and create friendships across international borders". The group was invited to perform but also spent time with the youth socially. Though the young people in the refugee camp lived in a specific set of circumstances, they related to one another as a generation whose cultural mannerisms (language, history, rituals) was expandable and potentially viable outside of their daily and local context.

The Significance of Site

A localized sense of community also allows for identity not to remain ascribed to a national or global idea but instead to be thoroughly situated in contextualized realities. In the San Francisco Bay Area, where the art workshops took place, the fact that "community networks are predominantly Palestinian, but also Jordanian, Lebanese, and Syrian Arabs" reflects how local community becomes imagined and identity thus becomes realized as a shifting hybrid of the singular and multiple (Naber forthcoming, 56), Naber's research further complicates not only the national-level U.S. discourses but also problematizes terms such as "community", demonstrating how local formations are neither singular nor homogenous and instead function as a space where multiple categories - often contradictory - converge, co-exist and conflict.

The specificity of site of cultural production also serves as an important marker in delineating its function as a physical "third space". The workshops were held at the Arab Cultural and Community Center, a nonprofit organization whose mission statement is to be devoted to promoting Arab art and culture and enriching the lives of the Arab American Community. Their youth programs

concentrate on both academic empowerment and cultural enrichment activities. The Center has services such as school homework assistance with special attention given to students with limited English language competency and they also host Arabic language classes for youth focused on teaching the basics of speaking, reading and writing Arabic. The curriculum includes language, culture, music, art and calligraphy.

The Center is based outside the city center and therefore holds a complicated position. On the one hand, it is not in a location where it is susceptible to urban political and religious divides. For example, there are several mosques and churches in the area around downtown San Francisco and the proximity of the ACCC to these religious institutions could lead to interpretations about affiliations or could make the center more/less accessible to each population. On the other hand, the site is in a less urban part of the city and that creates different accessibility issues based on lack of reliable transportation or the intimidation of traveling to a new or unfamiliar neighborhood.

The location of the ACCC is particularly significant for young people in San Francisco who have a varying degree of freedom of movement based on identity factors such as gender and class. Young men are more capable of moving freely between neighborhoods, taking public transportation or participating in late or after-school activities than young women. Young women frequently have to be accompanied by a parent, a relative or a friend. They are also expected to consistently contact their families letting them know their whereabouts and activities.

As an example, the gendered dynamics were experienced differently within the workshop site. According to Abu-Nie, "the female youth members were more proactive and vocal than most of the male youth members." Once inside the classroom, the young women would often take the lead not only during discussions or critiques but they also often planned events and outside activities. These ranged from social engagements such as picnics to setting up informational talks in high school classrooms about Arab history and contemporary identity.

Moving from Acquired to Created/Realized Images

The Arab community as a whole faces a number of other challenges in regards to the larger culture in the United States due to factors such as language, economic and cultural barriers. Therefore the space in which Arab-American identity and Arab immigrant identity begins to be shaped is the geo-political & economic state that is transmitted through images. How that happens and how that directly impacts the understanding of identity is crucial. Identity is neither an

automatic and intrinsic concept nor does it arrive when crossing an imagined border. Identity- in this case, the identity of young people in the San Francisco Bay Area - becomes a dialogue with the present and the past politics of economics, ethnicity, race, migration and gender in the U.S. It is a living, breathing relationship.

The process of uncovering external factors requires a critical eye to institutions, structures and histories. For a number of years, the question of constructing identity in the U.S. was simply left to a vague and undefined process of assimilation. As Nagel (2005) points out, the once-dominant public discourse of immigration assimilation - which governed for many access to and inclusion in a dominant national narrative and ideal of U.S. citizenship - has been weakened by a variety of histories and realities of racialization as well as the structural factors of exclusion targeted towards Arabs and the majority of recent immigrants to the U.S. In other words, it becomes difficult to speak of "integration" when a host of legal-political institutions and public discourses are creating alarming rifts between immigrants from the Arab world, Latin America, Asia, and even the former Soviet states - and the imagined de-racialized, de-ethnicized "American" citizen.

As a way to counter these generalizations, several projects were devised to interrogate the reflected and reflexive self via still and moving images. For one project, the youth were given disposable and digital cameras to take images of their communities. This series of still photographs functioned as a chronicle and a narration of their everyday encounters. One participant photographed the inside of his father's deli, beer bottles, a cash register and bright fluorescent lights. Another only took images of the streets as abstract representations of bodies and movement. A young woman only took photos of the sports teams in which she participated. These images became a map of the way they saw themselves moving through their environments and for the relationship of their bodies to space. We printed the images and displayed them in several public spaces including schools, mosques and community centers. The result was an asserted quotidian presence in the places in which they most often found themselves.

Another activity was a video project where the young people interviewed each other and presented three to five-minute videos. The goal was to learn how to introduce themselves and each other in a short span of time while also thinking about the ways that their image/actions are translated into the moving image. The act of setting up the scene (where to place the camera, lighting, directing the interview) turned out to be as significant as the video itself. Through the process, they learned leadership skills and had the opportunity to get to know each other on their own terms and as members of a similar age group that had shared experiences beyond racial/ethnic identities. A few of the participants were

challenged by the limitations. One young man recalls his frustrations with the project. "Whenever I said something, and watched it later, it didn't have the same impact as what I meant". This difficulty with time lapse and perception then became an integral part of later discussions where we deconstructed Western media images of Arab world. When we watched the video clips they had produced, we compared the experience of making the video with watching it, and then addressed the passive and active roles of viewers and producers. This was pivotal for them to begin to see and understand themselves not only as consumers (or targets) of media but instead as makers of media.

Building The Box In Order To Undo It

Inherent in mainstream discourse about migrant identities is the "implication that an immigrant group consists of a single, unified cultural body with set cultural components transferred from one generation to the next" (Aparicio 2006, 25). This assertion is crystallized in the situation of Arab-Americans and Arab immigrants where as noted earlier, the public image of a monolithic and static Arab identity is precisely that - an imaginary deployed by numerous actors towards particular ends.

Hyphenated and dichotomous identities such as Arab-American or Arab-immigrant have become important signifiers as a means to speak more directly to the lived experiences of immigration. Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Sazton argue that immigrants are "trans migrants", who "develop and maintain multiple relations - familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political - that span borders" (1992 a:ix). Migrants - especially in the first generation live in two worlds and Diaspora becomes a part of every day life.

At first glance, the possibility of living in between two worlds seems appealing, even comforting, but it is complicated by the realities of immigrant life in the U.S. Fluctuating class positions, limited work-life choices and state control over migration, all conflict with the romanticism of a life without borders sometimes purported transnational migration studies claim (Torres-Saillant 2000). As Nadine Naber proposes, it is difficult to address the positioning of Arab "trans migrants" without also talking about class, gender, religion, political-economy, race, and the complexity of diasporas' life (2006).

One of the most challenging aspects of Diaspora is dispersion and the ways that the collective no longer functions as a (familial, local, or national) unit. In order to address this complexity, one of the sculptural objects created during the workshop was a box that was constructed from found material and collaged with images. A young man participant recalls the impact of the project on the way he understood his role in his family, and as an Iraqi who left at the age of ten (he

participated in the workshops from the time he was 15-17years old) and remained emotionally and culturally attached to his country.

"I remember we had to make a box and what we put on each of the sides had to be images that meant something to us. One of the biggest things I drew was the Iraqi flag. I was going through a religious tide and I took that feeling and made it connect with my family as what was important to me. All of a sudden, this made me realize my responsibility as the only and oldest son. I have four younger sisters and who I am, will reflect on them. I realized that I needed to create a foundation to understand where I came from. I was a big brother. It clicked for the first time. Reality check".

This reflection on the making of the objects highlights the ways that the process of creating a holistic reflection of oneself can elucidate the most significant parts of oneself.

While interviewing various groups from the Arab and Arab-American community living in the San Francisco and Bay Area, Naber discovered that they defined "Arabness" as it "draws upon long-standing sensibilities about relation-ships, loyalty, affiliation, and belonging that have proliferated the Arab world for centuries". The terminology and its impact are articulated in relationships and relationality that she demonstrates in the following excerpted answers:

"Arab culture is about family and the closeness of people".

"Arab culture is family oriented".

"Arabs are supposed to have connections with cousins, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles".

"Arab culture is about family ties and family values...an attachment to family and the love of children".

Similarly, Arab migrants and second-generation young adults in the Bay Area referred to concepts of family ties, loyalties, connections, and attachments as crucial to the concepts of selfhood that their parents' generation inherited from their homelands.[2] The vital question that Naber poses regards "structures of feeling about relationships that people critically inherited from Arab homelands and categories of identity that become available upon migration and displacement to the U.S." These do not simply emerge out of space-time, or out of the imaginations and fabrications of individuals; they are born "in the context of Diaspora out of engagements with dominant U.S. categories of cultural identity" (Ibid, 10).

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(1)   Suad Joseph's research in Lebanon shows that idealized notions of family are inscribed in national institutions, and that these ideals are sanctified by the state and by religion (S. Joseph 2000, 108).

Along with the sculptural work, the art projects were designed to create visual references that would allow the young people to narrate their familial experiences using different types of imagery. They worked on a series of drawings that had to be devoid of bodies, symbolism or externally acquired images and that only consisted of architectural and spatial drawings of their current homes. They were required to draw the home from various perspectives (interior, exterior, objects, light/shadow, and the movement of elements in the spaces). They then did the same exact drawing of either their home before they immigrated or their parent's home before moving to the U.S. The architectural representation of their multiple homes was directly linked with follow-up conversations about the relationship of space, movement and memory.

In another project, collage was used as a way to highlight and analyze their multiplicities as individual selves and as a group perceived by others. When naming one of the most meaningful moments during the workshops, a young women participant cited the collage project. She states: "my favorite project hands down was the one when we had to cut out magazines and make a collage of how others see us and on the back side of it, how we see ourselves. That was the first time I ever expressed myself publicly as I am a very private person. But through these projects I was in my comfort zone and didn't feel like I was being judged".

As she thought about the ways that this has continued to affect her, she responded "people always see me as a strong confident person that doesn't ever let anyone get to them. As much as I wish I was like that, I am just the opposite. Just like any human being, I have feelings and tend to take things to heart. I reflected that in my project. This particular project had such an impact; the young had a long discussion about it for days! At times, I still think about that".

Visibility Never Goes Out of Style

Abu-Nie believes that the workshop was "a venue for the youth to express themselves and their identities through artistic and creative ways". She goes on to say that "The value is that your creativity is seen, heard or read by your audience, therefore making a much bigger impact on one's message". Her assertion reinforces the notion that visibility is invaluable in this process.

During the final cycle of each workshop, the young learned to curate an exhibit. They were in charge of hanging their work and promoting the show. This created an opportunity to involve the larger community and ask them for the support of their work. They undertook the process of curating which involved making choices and editorial decisions such as theme, placement of the works as well as organizing the event, including a reception. The exhibits were often

attended by their families, community members and other young people from the San Francisco/Bay Area. By the time the exhibit was taken down, they had experienced what it meant to be visible agents in their lives through their art work.

At the time the workshops were taking place, these young people existed on a complex stage on which they negotiated their identities as their behaviors, habits, and actions were watched and analyzed. They were targets of public discourse while not being a real and self-identified part of their communities. These factors necessitated a new way of being engaged in shaping their identities, and cultural production offered such a model. It was holistic and demanding and it allowed for assertions that were complex and true to their multiple and ever changing selves.

Before the final exhibit, the groups participated in a last group exercise that took place as an exquisite corpse collective drawing on a roll of paper several meters long. The process involved drawing one thing right after the other and creating visual (conscious and subconscious) relationships between the marks and ideas and themes. By the time the collective drawing took place, the symbolism they had started with had often transformed into specific illustrations of each other's character (such as mannerisms or specific humorous, embarrassing or intimate incidents) as well as drawings of their homes and schools. And most of the time, the flags had quietly disappeared.

One of the young men determined that what changed for him through the art workshops was not his sense of cultural attachment but the relationship of cultures to each other, and the relation of himself to the collective.

He notes: "I am now more capable of creating a balance between my Arab/ Muslim and my American identity. When I went back to Iraq in 2005 after having left more than ten years before I was proud of being Iraqi and coming from a Mesopotamian history. I found out that things were not the same. Between 1994 and 2005, a lot had changed".

He goes to explain how he no longer felt that he had to overtly assert his Arab-ness: "I learned that I could take the parts of the culture that I liked and let go of the rest. This created awareness about the decisions I make and about the way I deal with people, my social interactions, in a predominantly Western environment".

I then asked him if the Palestinian flag continues to be important for him and he responded, "Yes of course. If you come into my room, it's still hanging there on the wall over my bed".

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