

VIOLENT INTERSECTIONALITIES AND EXPERIENCES OF MARKED ARABNESS IN RANDA JARRAR'S *A MAP OF HOME*

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Abstract: This article proposes an alternative analytical model to examine the shifting devaluation of racialized, classed, and gendered lives in Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*. As the novel depicts powerful instances of nonnormative practices, it lends itself to new analytical approaches for understanding the relationship between power, normativity, and value in Arab American fiction. The intellectual and political frameworks that inform this reading of the novel draw on Arab and Arab American feminisms, women of color feminisms, and queer of color critique. This emphasis marks a shift from existing criticism in proposing to interpret the characters' experiences, not as struggles of identity and belonging but as tense processes of gendered and classed racialization, self-representation, and political determination. In doing so, the discussion moves toward a critique of coercive practices that render Arab and Arab American lives in the United States vulnerable to threats of violence/exploitation in the context of neoliberalism.

Keywords: Arab American literature, violence, gender, sexuality, class and race, Randa Jarrar, Arabness, feminism

A quick survey of Arab American literary criticism in the late 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century reveals a collective sense of urgency in the identification and representation of a multitude of Arab American experiences within the fabric of the United States. A number of articles focus precisely on highlighting such representations and reclaiming a sense of Arab American identity. For instance, Lisa Suhair Majaj's "The Hyphenated Author" (1999) holds that

Arab-American writers write out of their Arab identity, out of their American identity and out of the identity produced when these two cultures come together. The art that results is Arab-American because it arises from the experience of Arab-Americans—personal or public, "ethnic" or not.

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Another example is Nathalie Handal's introduction to *The Poetry of Arab Women*, where she says,

Arab Americans investigate their doubleness and cultural inbetweenesses in their writing. They experience an on-going negotiation of the self as they explore their many experiences, visions, and heritages, and bring wholeness to their multiplicity. They affirm their ethnicity, their Arab and American identities, their national and religious identities. (47)

Reflecting such focus, analyses of Arab American literature typically look at characters' assertions of Arab American identities and examine these characters based on whether or not they can continuously affirm the diversity of American life, all the while claiming identities that are rooted in Arab heritage and culture.¹ In a post-9/11 world and with such challenging circumstances, it is no surprise that authors and literary critics alike would rush in attempts to counter essentialist readings and understandings of Arab American literature.

This article builds on the introduction of the 2006 special issue of *MELUS* on Arab American literature—where Salah Hassan and Marcy Knopf-Newman identify “a disabling disconnect between the political determination of Arabs in the US, their cultural production, and the academic study of Arab Americans.” In binding together a coherent Arab American literary tradition, academic work remained, to a great extent, highly focused on framing the field's cultural production under “the unifying story of migration, and the concomitant stories of assimilation and acculturation” (5). The work of Lisa Suhair Majaj (2008) and Steven Salaita (2011) is in fact frequently used to reference “the unifying story” of the three waves of migration to the United States. Such a story in many ways relates to how the hyphen seemed to have manifested itself within the Arab American literary imagination throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century. This mission—to analyze what is often described as the historical and multi-layered struggle of Arab Americans—seems perhaps essential as a starting point. However, it is a rather defensive standpoint that relies heavily on a process of reclaiming space within the United States by recovering a sense of legitimacy in asserting (neither Arab nor American but) Arab American identities. It is a reactionary stance at heart, and while seemingly necessary to dispel stereotypes and myths surrounding Arabs in America, it unfortunately holds damaging and essentialist understandings of Arab Americanness.

Indeed, historically informed portrayals of “Americanness” and “Arabness” mark an acknowledgment of Arab Americans' alienation and distance from “the old country” as well as their marginalization in “the new world.” This particular location is nevertheless not lamented or understood strictly as a category of

identification—as it is often described—but is rather portrayed as a tactical positioning of the self, with Arab Americans anchored in a dynamic state of mediation, reflection, and dialogue. Because this continuing process of negotiating with pressures to perform and conform is visible through discursive, institutional, and cultural practices, these portrayals ultimately stimulate the development of compelling analyses surrounding the mechanics of discrimination in the United States. As their lives repeatedly intersect with those of secondary characters who are performing scripted ideas of American and Arab identity, protagonists are often in situations where they explore and play out what it means to be American/Arab, White/ethnic, heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, and upper/working class. Such performative reiterations are meant to locate them within highly hierarchical social landscapes, which in turn causes them to reflect on and express tensions ensuing from these various interactions. These sites of instability, where the constructedness of identity becomes visible, must not only be understood as indicators that Arab Americans are struggling and navigating through multiple identities. They are rather powerful vantage points in identifying alternative ways of understanding the complex power structures surrounding this emerging literary tradition.

If as Hassan and Knopf-Newman say, “any effort to challenge a myth by asserting a more authentic representation risks the production of a new myth”—how then, would we reframe the discussion on Arab American literature and narrow the gap between literary production and criticism? The introduction to the *MELUS* special issue offers a few recommendations in stating that “the disconnect can only be overcome through an unrelenting critique of the racialization of Arabs in the US and at the same time a thoughtful scrutiny of the political and cultural self representation of Arabs” (5). Arguably, probing the racialization of Arabs in the United States and examining processes of self-representation intersect in that they reveal forms of interaction between (broadly speaking) external and internal structures of power. Scrutinizing such intersections allows for a more nuanced characterization of how processes of self-representation are involved in complex negotiations of gendered, racialized, and class-related formations.

A focus on such questions does not only complicate approaches to Arab American literary criticism but also challenges some of its major trends and directions. In fact, and particularly after 9/11, this form of criticism focused on interpreting Arab and Arab American experiences through the lens of diversity and multiculturalism.² Identifying and making sense of complex processes of self-inscription in Randa Jarrar’s *A Map of Home* (2008), this article illustrates an approach to Arab American criticism that heeds the call of Hassan and Knopf-Newman to adopt a flexible interpretive model, away from simply essentialist, celebratory, or reclamatory approaches to ethnic identity and location. As such, we propose an alternative mode of analysis that examines the characters’ experiences,

not as typical struggles of identity and belonging but as tense processes of gendered and classed racialization, self-representation, and political determination.³

A Map of Home is the coming of age story of the novel's narrator and protagonist, Nidali Ammar, born in Boston in the early 1980s to an Egyptian Greek mother, Fairuza (or Ruz), and a Palestinian father, Waheed. The family moves to Kuwait shortly after Nidali's birth, and is displaced to Alexandria, Egypt, with the Gulf War. At the age of 14 years, Nidali and her family move yet again, but this time to Texas. As they grapple with the injustices and realities of colonial dispossession and war, Waheed and Fairuza struggle to make ends meet. In Texas, Fairuza gives piano lessons, and Waheed, a poet-turned architect, works 16 hours a day and is still unable to get a housing loan approved.

Framed by Arab and Arab American feminist articulations, and working within the intersecting frameworks of women of color feminisms and queer of color critique, our discussion of *A Map of Home* probes the limitations of nationalist and identity-based forms of collectivity. In this context, we draw on Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson's reading of women of color critique as a practice which "question[s] nationalist and identitarian modes of political organization and craft[s] alternative understandings of subjectivity, collectivity, and power" (Hong and Ferguson, 2011: 2). Moreover, through a careful examination of the construction of violence in *A Map of Home*, we underline the urgency of incorporating alternative modes of analysis that can also probe (and contain) shifting configurations of power between and within racialized communities.

Our analysis draws on insights first articulated by feminists such as Joe Kadi⁴ and Mervat Hatem after the Gulf War, in the mid- and late 1990s. In recognizing the often ambiguous racialization of Arab Americanness, the 1994 publication of *Food for Our Grandmothers*, edited by Kadi, is perhaps the first contemporary Arab American feminist anthology that truly begins to explore intersecting structures of power and privilege. Kadi not only questions processes of normative assimilation but also draws parallels between his own experiences as an immigrant and those of people of color in the United States and Canada. Hatem goes even further and looks inward to critique what she calls "a naive liberal feminism" (383) adopted by some Arab American authors. "This school of Arab-American feminism," she says, "internalizes U.S. views of Arab culture as patriarchal/restrictive and of Arab women as its submissive victims and legitimate objects of U.S. criticism and attack. Assimilation into U.S. society has been seen as a means of combatting Arab sexism and of claiming for Arab American women the privileged status of Western feminists" (382). Indeed, such misinformed gender-based alignments, within and across Arab and Arab American communities not only perpetuate dangerous hierarchies but also legitimize further racialized violence. In this respect, Hatem's critique significantly redefines the way gendered and ethnic

political tensions are understood and signified within the American (and Arab American) imaginary. The debate shifts the conversation from superficial interpretations of struggles of identity and sameness to a rigorous examination of intersecting privileges and oppressions.

More recently, Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber (2011) have strongly re-affirmed a collective commitment toward building knowledge that deviates from “conventional women’s studies approaches that attribute any victimization of women, regardless of the cause, to gender equality” (xxi) and that goes “beyond liberal multicultural notions of *adding* Arab and Arab American feminist perspectives to the landscape of existing models of U.S. feminisms” (xxx; emphasis in original). Almost a decade in the making, *Arab & Arab American Feminisms* is the synthesis of ongoing conversations that discern a set of post-colonial, queer, and feminist guiding principles for analysis building and political engagement. “Our analysis,” Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber say, “is based on a historically specific logic approach toward gendered racialization that assumes that racial logics are flexible and mutable to accommodate imperialist power in different temporal and spatial contexts” (xxii). Indeed, strong linkages are drawn between “the necessity of resistance against hegemonic liberal U.S. feminisms that reinforce Orientalist and racist discourses on Arab and Muslim women” and the generation of “a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and transgender people ‘over here’ and ‘over there’” (xxxv).

In setting such assertive terms of engagement, feminists such as Hatem, Abdulhadi, Naber, and others ultimately contribute to the historical efforts of radical women and trans people of color to critique and dismantle interlocking and deep-rooted systems—namely patriarchy, imperialism, and neoliberalism. The importance of this mode of analysis lies in its potential to discern shifting configurations of power. More significantly, this potential, as Hong and Ferguson (2011) say, reveals “the processes by which subjects, within racial collectivities, are differently incorporated or excluded from the class, gender, and sexual norms of respectability, morality, and propriety and thus placed on different sides of the dividing line between valued and devalued” (3).

Studies of *A Map of Home* have overlooked the importance of adopting an analytical lens that probes such shifting figurations and modes of operation of power in the novel. They rather examined Jarrar’s work, not unlike many other critical analyses of contemporary Arab American novels, largely through the framework of identity formation (Marta Cariello) or assimilation (Mohammed Albakry and Jonathan Siler). In this context, Cariello (2014) stresses the role that this semi-autobiographical novel plays in consolidating “individual and collective identity formation” and challenging the notion of “fixed, universal

subjectivity” (268). She demonstrates how Jarrar’s negotiation of individual and collective memories is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the tropes of home and narration (271). While Cariello’s exploration of the connection between the silencing of Waheed (the protagonist’s father) and Nidali’s act of narration brings out intimate ties between gendered formations, Palestine, and narrative voice, this analysis does not account for tense narrative moments and family relationships. A study politicizing the process of narration and its gendered dimensions would arguably be enriched by the examination of forms of narrative tension to show their political significance in relation to shifting configurations of power and dominance. At another level, the article gestures toward the importance of rethinking the links between masculinity, Palestine, and exile; however, it mainly probes such formations to show that the disorientation of the different characters is used to reflect “the collective exile of the Palestinian people” (279). Arguably, an in-depth discussion of the notion of class as a significant vector of power would help nuance the various social, political, and historical dimensions pertaining to Palestinian exile as well as “unresolved issues of masculinity” (279) examined in the novel.

Focusing on issues of ethnic negotiations and mediation in the novel, Albakry and Siler (2012) offer a linguistic analysis of *A Map of Home* as a “borderland narrative.” They state, “Arab writers who use English as a medium of creative expression are mediators who, by bypassing the need for translation and speaking directly to Western audiences, popularize and humanize their culture to non-Arab readers.” In this context, eagerness is sensed among critics for Arab American authors to embody the role of a bridge between their communities and so-called Western audiences. “Jarrar’s accomplishment,” Albakry and Siler conclude, “should be considered as a window for Western readers to experience a particular instance of Arab-American experience so as to encourage communication and mutual understanding” (120). In this context, it is worth noting that the assumptions regarding Jarrar’s choice of language are at odds with the novel’s critique of the normalcy of learning English as a standard classroom language in Arab societies. In fact, since her schooling days in Kuwait and Egypt, Nidali continuously questions not only the use of English but also her schools’ foreign curricula, which ultimately stand in the way of students’ ability to conceptualize their thoughts in their native language.

Moreover, a pertinent question relating to the above-mentioned argument is why Arab American experiences, such as those described in *A Map of Home*, in fact need to be validated by Western audiences, if at all. The presentation of Jarrar’s role as being associated with “humaniz[ing] . . . [Arab American] culture to non-Arab readers” overlooks the importance of the novel’s critique of mainstream processes of severe dehumanization and replaces them with celebratory statements pushing toward reclamation and integration. By exclusively focusing

on Western readers' experiences of the novel, Albakry and Siler's analysis thus re-centers middle-class whiteness and overlooks the devaluation of racialized and gendered lives.

Against such logic leading to the recentering of whiteness, our analysis stresses the importance of examining the shifting and uneven devaluation of racialized and gendered lives in *A Map of Home*. Nidali Ammar's testimonies are taken as creative forms of engagement and participation in public debates on alternative feminist politics and violence within and across Arab and Arab American communities. These stories, as described by Jarrar, are fictionalized reconstructions of her own history. In an interview with *Beirut39*, Jarrar says,

A Map of Home is the fictionalization of mostly my grappling with my loyalty to my parents and culture. If I wrote it another way, it would have been about my sexuality. If I wrote it another way, it would have been about my parents' eating disorders and how they forced them on me for years. And yet another way, it could have been about being a young mother. I chose to limit my perspective and focus on the voice. Everything else followed from there. By choosing to tell my version of history—the fictional version—I have managed to talk about all these things at once.

In light of these comments, Nidali's character, as well as others, become a mesh of textual locations, a creative strategy, through which political articulations are explored and negotiated through fiction. In writing this novel, Jarrar tries to make sense of the complexities surrounding ambivalent experiences that often reflect uneven devaluations of gendered and racialized lives. Instances of nonnormative practices in *A Map of Home* are especially relevant to examine here, not only because of their subversive potential but also for their ability to bring new understandings of the relationship between value and power to light.

Divided into 15 short fragments, the chapter entitled "The Shit No One Bothered to Tell Us," for instance, gives readers insight into backbreaking lessons that Nidali and her family learn throughout their third year in the United States. It opens with a poignant description of the life of Waheed Ammar—Palestinian refugee, melancholic poet-turned architect, and Nidali's sentimental and abusive father. The entire Ammar family seems to be coming to grips with multiple modes of homelessness. For both of Nidali's parents, this translates into an urge to buy a house and finally settle down. When Fairuza, Nidali's mother, applies for a mortgage, she learns that she should have paid taxes for having earned money through teaching piano lessons. This puts her in debt; she has to use "the money from the next 133 lessons to pay for her back taxes so she won't go to jail" (244). Trying to buy a home, Waheed gets rejected again and again by loan agents who remind him

of the soldiers at the Allenby Bridge, the only (Israeli-designated) entry/exit point for Palestinians living in the West Bank. He also associates these soldiers with “the suspicious security agents at the airports.” The new olds, which he buys for his wife to build his credit as required for loan eligibility, reminds him of the one he had to leave behind, “even though Egypt is for sure within driving distance from Amman.” He still has to take the bus to work, where he spends 16 hours a day, and then “comes home and screams at his daughter, who is turning into a slut, he’s sure of it” (243).

Because of colonial dispossession, as a Palestinian, Waheed is stripped of his right to return to his homeland. If this is not traumatizing enough, as an immigrant, his right to an acceptable standard of living is perpetually threatened in the United States. Waheed continues to perpetuate this violence by abusing his wife and aggressively trying to regulate his daughter’s budding sexuality. As a first generation Palestinian immigrant to the United States, negotiating the burden of homelessness, for Waheed, involves a great deal of anxiety and antagonism. In the first chapter, Nidali shows sympathy toward him when she remembers the usual bedtime story he would recount to her at the age of 3 years. “Moving was part of being Palestinian. ‘Our people carry the homeland in their souls,’” he says. In retrospect, she reflects, “it helped to know this when I was little, forced me to have compassion for Baba, who, obviously, had an extremely heavy soul to drag around inside such a skinny body” (9). Nevertheless, Nidali is unapologetic when it comes to her father’s abusive behavior. She consistently calls him out on his violence, like when he painfully punishes her for sexual aggressions committed against her (248).

In fact, Nidali Ammar’s sexuality emerges as one of the strongest points of tension in the novel. From a very young age, she begins to understand how her own sexuality is often rearticulated as a site of collective ethnic identity. When she shares with her father an anecdote that (the boy whom she would have liked to be) her boyfriend says on the school bus, a revealing exchange takes place:

“Nidali,” he said, his face changing a bit, “we don’t have boyfriends.” “We?” I asked. “What do you mean?” “I mean,” he said, “boyfriends are fiancés, and then you marry them. You are only seven. How can you get married now? So you see, my little moon, you cannot have a boyfriend yet!” (16)

In the above scene, Waheed is trying to teach his daughter that for young Arab girls like herself, respect and social worth are directly tied with moral virtue and, ultimately, virginity. For the most part, Waheed’s understanding of his daughter’s respectability is informed by his own perception and experiences of Arab fatherhood. At times, it seems as though for him, Nidali’s access to opportunities and

upward mobility is more likely to happen through marriage, and therefore it depends on her ability to preserve her integrity through sexual abstinence.

With such telling confrontations, Nidali slowly begins to learn the complexities of gendered regulation and violence. Throughout the novel, she tries to challenge common practices and experiment with new ways of narrating and practicing herself. A year after the above conversation, at the age of 8 years, still in Kuwait, she excitedly enters a Koran recitation contest at school. When told that girls must cover their hair during the competition, Nidali's father says to her, "What? Don't even consider it . . . Forget those retarded idiots! You must be cleansed to read the Koran, but no one ever said you had to be covered" (49). In this scene, her father's progressive understanding of Islam is contrasted with that of his young conservative nephew, Esam, who had just arrived from the West Bank. The next day, when she goes to the competition, there are 15 boys and 1 other girl. Nidali says, "I was disobeying my father, my hair was covered in Mama's handkerchief." In other words, Nidali passes as a veiled girl against her father's will, to be eligible for the Koran recitation contest.

Even though she wins the boys' contest—certainly an accomplishment—the process still involves compromises on her bodily integrity to the point where she cannot bring herself to own her victory. Indeed, while Nidali struggles to memorize the correct pronunciations before the contest, her father becomes violent and repeatedly whips her back with a hanger. As she tries to utter the right words, she cries and remembers violent episodes where her father would "become this monster . . . sometimes he'd do this to Mama, just drag her on the floor, and she'd cry and tell him to stop" (50). Her stream of consciousness is interrupted when her father tells her to start reciting from the beginning. She stops crying, and her reflections concentrate on her sensations and parallels between her pain and the verses. She says, "my recitation became the most powerful when I recited: 'With every hardship there is ease. With every hardship there is ease'" (50).

When her certificate arrives in the mail, it says, "This certificate is awarded to the student Nidali Ammar in recognition of h--er winning the Koran contest. Signed, Headmaster of the City Boys' School, Kuwait." Her parents, incredibly amused, explain to her how "the judge had been forced to alter the word and add a feminizing *ha* to make the male student, the *tilmith*, a *tilmitha*." She understands that her victory is gendered. At the same time, however, she also sees that her success had been appropriated by her father's sense of accomplishment, "it was almost as though *he'd* won," she says (57; emphasis in the original). With both her parents completely taken by this victory yet nearly ignoring her, Nidali is not sure how to feel about winning that contest anymore (58). Whether through the mandatory veil, which she willingly experiments with, or her father's abusive behavior and sense of entitlement, Nidali's body had been regulated and her sense of autonomy deeply threatened.

The above-discussed episodes of gender regulation and violence are not limited to the Ammar family, nor are they specific to Arab communities. As a matter of fact, “racialized communities,” according to Hong and Ferguson, “have always policed and preserved the difference between those who are able to conform to categories of normativity, respectability, and value, and those who are forcibly excluded from such categories” (2011: 2). Such conformity re-affirms a commitment to normative social standards, which in turn would presumably result in “greater access, opportunities, and mobility” (Cohen, 2004: 31). Interestingly, however, the reverse is true for Waheed, who, to a great extent, is still operating within normative standards that lean closer toward those of Arab cultures. In this respect, *A Map of Home* suggests a new understanding of the distinct location of marked Arabness vis-à-vis other racialized communities within the context of the United States.

This Arabness haunts Nidali and defines the contours of her various experiences. For instance, as she is about to have sex with her classmate Medina at the age of 16 years, she first imagines herself dying a virgin instead because her father would have killed her for no reason, “just because he was Arab” (273). She remembers the day her social studies teacher, Mrs. Ruben, brought a magazine to class to discuss the story of the Arab father of Palestinian descent who had murdered his daughter for “dating a black kid and working at a drive-thru” and made the cover of the magazine. Nidali describes the scene as follows:

Out of the blue it seems, Mrs. Ruben, who, up to then, I thought really liked me, asked me to stand up and say a few words about my Palestinian dad. It took me a few moments to register if she was trying to make the class understand that not all Palestinians were bad or if she was simply reducing me to my Palestinianness. Either way I hated her. I couldn't imagine her bringing a statistic about a black or Latino criminal then asking a black or Latino kid to stand up and defend his entire race. (273)

In the above scene, Mrs. Ruben tries to impose on Nidali the strains of having to single-handedly represent socially acceptable forms of Arabness. What determines whether or not she is “liberated” is her willingness to perform, for the imagination of her fellow students and teacher, whose life is valuable and whose is not. In the process, Nidali is practically asked to internalize normative judgments and contribute to liberal narratives that continuously pathologize and marginalize Arab masculinity. Within white communities, because race is made so undetectable, such incidents of violence would be perceived as unfortunate and isolated events. But in comparison with other racialized communities, as Nidali is strongly suggesting with her reference to Black and Latino experiences, the devaluation of Arabness is still far more pervasive and normalized. Here, Arabness is in itself coded as a nonnormative category of identification, one that is currently rather

difficult, if not impossible, to render invisible (for the sake of privileges) or to integrate within the mainstream fabric of the United States.

Eventually, Waheed is unable to buy his family a house because of his criminal record. This is due to the fact that after a violent episode, Nidali finally calls the police and reports her father. She says, “daughters in America can teach their parents lessons. Cops in America don’t like Arabs and they definitely don’t like Arabs who hit their teenage daughters and chase them around the house with knives” (249). In this scene, Nidali, a teenager who had just been sexually abused and then punished for it, is left with no choice but to punish her father. She does so by exploiting, in this specific instance, the tools of the dominant system and uses what Hong and Ferguson term “neoliberal modes of power” which police the racialized poor through violence in the name of ideals of individual freedom and responsibility (2011: 2). To protect herself as an individual, Nidali resorts to such modes of power that criminalize the model of Arab masculinity that Waheed embodies. Within this neoliberal framework of state surveillance and discipline, Waheed’s aggressive behavior functions as yet another re-affirmation of preexisting narratives on racialized men and their propensity for violence.

“At the root of such judgments,” says Cathy Cohen (2004), “sits an unexamined acceptance of normative standards of association, behavior, and even desire that limits our ability to respect the subjects under consideration and to explore their lived decisions with an eye toward its transformative and oppositional potential” (37). Given this, a question worth exploring here would be to ask what a transformative alternative to the vilification and punishment of Waheed Ammar would look like, when regimes of power naturalize his exploitation and undermine him as an individual, on a daily basis. The violence that Nidali experiences because of her father is one that, as feminists, we learn to name and address. But in rectifying silences around gender-based violence, it is essential that we generate what Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber refer to as “a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and transgender people ‘over here’ and ‘over there’” (2012: xxxv). This means that our political project must not stop at the violence that a character such as Nidali experiences because she is a young woman, but we should push further and interpret the gendered and sexualized dimensions of racialized devaluation.

The above-discussed episodes all embody the urgency of building more nuanced and alternative modes of analysis that can explore shifting configurations of power within and across racialized communities. In highlighting such *differences* within Arab American communities, critics would be able to steer clear of falling into the trap of creating new myths based on idealized identities. According to Hong and Ferguson,

this is the definition of difference for women of color feminism and queer of color critique: not a multiculturalist celebration, not an excuse for presuming a commonality among all racialized peoples, but a cleareyed appraisal of the dividing line between valued and devalued, which can cut within, as well as across, racial groupings. (2011: 11)

It is therefore not enough to celebrate the diversity of Arabs and Arab Americans, without a real engagement with processes of (de)valuation that compel most critics to take defensive stances against Orientalist academic analyses of Islam and Arab cultures. As Nadine Naber points out, “This has contributed to the problem among many feminists like myself of remaining silent about intra-communal matters for fear that there is no way to do so that will not reify Arab-bashing, Orientalism, or Islamophobia” (2012: 248).

With vivid incorporations of severe instances of family violence in *A Map of Home*, Jarrar complicates the familiar process of asserting and reclaiming identities and makes the analysis of the novel a more daunting task to undertake. Reluctance here is understandable, especially when issues of gender-based violence within racialized communities are commonly exploited to validate more brutal discrimination. This is certainly not exceptional to Arab Americans—for women of color especially, dramatizing domestic violence and misogynist behavior often comes with a backlash. Evidently however, due to the complexity of Waheed’s experiences with regulatory violence, he cannot be essentialized and dismissed as an abusive husband and father, in every respect. As desperately as he tries, Waheed does not even have the privilege or ability to assimilate within normative American culture. Hence, special attention needs to be given to those, like Waheed, whose “lives are indicative of the intersection of marked identities and regulatory processes, relative powerlessness and limited and contradictory agency” (Cohen, 2004: 29). While his behavior may not be radically transformative, it still unravels alternative ways for us to rethink the conditions under which such transgressions are triggered and practiced.

At the same time, it would be false to describe Nidali’s character as a victim who unflinchingly resorts to neoliberal modes of power for safety and protection. Through her relentless search for new fields of experience, Nidali continuously opens up spaces that de-naturalize the intimate workings of power and that contest its ostensible historicity. While this usually gets her into trouble, such contestations carve out alternatives that would otherwise be unreachable to her. Her raw experiences, reflections, and memories are often told against a backdrop of increasingly violent and traumatic historical events. Her ongoing negotiations with her father’s abuse, in particular, are frequently set within larger frameworks of structural violence.⁵ This creates for Nidali a sense of textual authority and

agency in defining *when* and *how* constructions of violence are rendered visible and contestable. Her father's aggressive potential, his nephew Esam's conservative stances, for example, and stereotypes of "angry Arabs" and "terrorist Muslims" are disentangled from each other. Yet they are still deeply connected through Nidali's critique of, and her rightful issues with, the politics of ethnic representation and the dangers of essentialism. Just as her resilience is juxtaposed with her father's abuse during their rigorous recitation exercises and as his abuse is distinguished from Esam's conservatism, Nidali recalls the structural violence she endures because of her teacher, Mrs. Ruben, and Waheed's abusive episode with Ruz, during her first sexual experience. The fusion between the narration of her memories and her stream of consciousness as events seem to occur is a powerful means of historical recovery and a strategy that resists patterns of victimization and essentialism.

When she describes her first sexual encounter with her classmate Medina, for instance, the imagery is rather imbued with Arab and Muslim tropes. Reducing "Arabness" to images that would exclude nonnormative experiences would therefore be a deliberate attempt at sustaining essentialized cultural projections that cannot contain lived realities. As they are about to have sex, she tells Medina, "You're probably part Arab . . . somewhere up the line, if you think about it, there was an Arab *abuela* in there. Your last name means 'city' . . . it does in Arabic" (274). "Medina"—also coincidentally the name of Islam's second holiest city after Mecca—unfolds for Nidali a significant metaphor. A rapprochement is gently fashioned between the Muslim performance of the pilgrimage to the *Kaaba* and (what she describes as) Medina's "pilgrimage from my clit to my insides." With this rapprochement comes an unexpected framing of experience: Nidali takes what is commonly perceived today in the West as a conservative Muslim symbol, the *Kaaba*, and frames it using a lesser known aspect of the Arab and Muslim literary tradition as an intertext. This tradition gave rise to a specific form of *ghazal* established by the infamous poet from the Quraish tribe of Mecca, Umar Ibn Abi Rabiah, who celebrated in his poetry the amorous affairs he had with "women who visit[ed] the town [of Mecca] as pilgrims" (Van Gelder, 2012: 31).⁶ Nidali's reference to pilgrimage evokes such intimate and sexual character, but it also revises Umar Ibn Abi Rabiah's approach in that it is articulated in a feminine voice and described from her own perspective. As she continues her thorough description, her own climax and that of the scene are both focused on how Medina pronounces Nidali's name "perfectly over and over and over again" (275). Nidali's concentration on the roots of Medina's Arabic name and on his perfect pronunciation of her name intensifies the two lovers' newfound closeness. What is rather striking in this scene is Nidali's ability to linguistically create a complex symbolic web through which she constructs and relates to the reality around her. It is through her

construction of a sense of Arab familiarity that she is able to contain and enjoy the intimacy of the moment. Nidali's linguistic constructions hence generate familiar meanings as she utters words that not only shape the realities of those involved but also define their experiences of each other.

Slowly, and in line with how Jarrar intends it, instances of rapprochements between ethnic experiences in the United States and Nidali's relationship with her Arabness begin to emerge. In an interview with Jessica Hoffmann, Jarrar says that her own experiences coming to America had scarred her because her family first landed "in Greenwich, Connecticut, one of the whitest, most elitist parts of the country," and she did not want Nidali, the protagonist, to go through that. She says, "I had her move to Texas, which is where I've felt most at home in the U.S. The proximity to the border, the ethnic makeup of the state, and its Southernness all lent Texas a great 'Arab' feel. I wanted to write about how such an American place can also be so Arab, or Other" (Hoffman, 2009: 62). When Nidali's family moves to the United States, Nidali meets Dimi, Camilla, and Aisha at school, and every few minutes, they corrected her English. "This one talks like she's on a public radio," they would tell each other. In Egypt, this line would have meant that Nidali spoke a lot. But in the United States, she says, "they meant I spoke like a white girl on NPR, all boring and with nary a crazy emotion." Such incidents take Nidali back to her days in Egypt:

I remembered how in Egypt I listened to Voice of America and tried to speak like the girl on the radio. And how in Egyptian my language was full of songs and lilts and catchy turns of phrases. I wished, then and for many months later, that I could translate my old way of being, speaking, and gesturing, to English: To translate myself. (225)

Between Voice of America, her Kuwait schooling where she learns about Vikings, and the hours spent on French history in Egypt, Nidali is lost in translation. She continues, "I had even taken to talking to myself, keeping me company, narrating my own movements. In this way, *me* became *her*, *I* became *Nidali*, *you*, *she*" (231; emphasis in the original). After this line, and throughout the following chapters, especially in "The Shit No One Bothered to Tell Us," she shifts from narrating in the first person to the second person.

Commenting on the protagonist's narration, Yaman (2009) (in an interview with Jarrar) notes that this episode in Nidali's life reflects "particularly painful moments . . . the sense of detachment (and maybe it's a defensive mechanism) is so severe. Yet as detached as Nidali becomes from herself . . . it's almost like you enter Nidali's state of mind." Yaman also underlines the reader's overwhelming sense of lack of choice because "the text is telling you what you feel and what you're going through." Jarrar answers that this abrupt shift is in fact intentional

since she wanted readers to feel the emotional violence associated with “how it feels to be an immigrant.” She continues to say that because Nidali’s “identity becomes fragmented . . . the text needed to be fragmented too” (Yaman, 2009). Yet, it is Nidali’s hypersensitivity to her gendered and ethnic fragmentation that enables her to focus on her voice and re-assemble, in retrospect, her experiences and memories into a powerful narrative of her own.

Storytelling is her strategy of choice—a craft she slowly learns to master. Her desire to become a writer is gradually amplified throughout the novel. In fact, her childhood urge to bear witness and to document—“to draw all these things . . . to record them, to make order of my surroundings” as she says while her family travels through checkpoints to reach her grandfather’s funeral in the West Bank—is re-affirmed through the very last sentence of the novel. As the narrative ends with an abrupt metafictional breakdown, we understand that this desire is being fulfilled. When Nidali says, “I catch the pen now and listen to all our stories,” she reveals herself as the narrator and takes us back to the beginning of the novel when her father is at the hospital, also holding a pen, and writing out her new name (290). Jarrar names this “a meta moment” where the narrative ends with “a feminist exchange” between Nidali and her mother (who throws her the pen), with Nidali asserting a sense of growing authority over her own life and the stories she has so far told (Yaman, 2009).

Jarrar ultimately draws characters that experience the painful circumstances of war, dispossession, and immigration directly and who understand them with a sensibility to the workings of imperialism and neoliberalism. Protagonists are repeatedly compelled to emulate mainstream American norms and are often punished when they refuse to do so, or when they cannot. Nidali is persistently interrogating hegemonic notions of Americanness as she makes sense of her own racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference in the context of the United States. For example, her Americanness is made suspect on her very first day of school in Texas, when her classmates all stand up to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Assuming it is a prayer, she does not join in. When the teacher “sternly” asks her if she had filled “a conscientious objector form,” she apologizes and explains that she “didn’t want to pray.” He tells her, “It’s not a prayer. No. It’s a patriotic thing” (220). Questioning routine neoliberal practices, such as the Pledge of Allegiance in a public school setting, becomes almost unthinkable. To her teacher, Nidali’s small act of dissent is no sign of democratic practice; it is rather one new immigrant student’s shameful transition into the category of “suspicious Arab in the making.”

By looking at intersecting structures of discipline, regulation, and violence in *A Map of Home*, this article ultimately puts forward a mode of analysis that contributes to the epistemological project of women of color feminism in trying to make sense of ambivalent experiences and interpretations. This project’s significance

lies in its ability to identify processes through which political consciousness is shaped and different categories of identification are gained and exercised. When examined closely, racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference reveals new understandings on the relationship between shifting configurations of power and the ascription of value. Such emerging complexities call for alternative formulations of power, ones that offer historicized perspectives on the interplay between class, race, gender, sexuality, and nation. The limitations of multiculturalism and diversity as analytical approaches are fictionalized in *A Map of Home* and discerned through close readings of characters such as Nidali Ammar and her father, Waheed. After all, one cautionary tale that the Ammars could potentially pass along is on the imposition and pervasiveness of intersecting normative and regulatory structures in everyday life.

Finally, the urgency expressed in honing such nuanced analyses cannot be disentangled from reflections emerging from the midst of the very real and tangible changing realities and configurations of power, especially in the wake of movements against the global neoliberal economic order and its link with imperialism and political oppression. In particular, Waheed Ammar is a striking and tense embodiment of the nexus between colonial dispossession, regulated migration, as well as racialized and gendered violence. The role of bank loan agents, Israeli soldiers, and airport security agents, for instance, is continuously re-formulated through Waheed's experiences of racialized regulation and discipline with each, and in relation to his own propensity to inflict gendered violence on Ruz and Nidali. Alternative modes of analysis must thus be able to account for the Ammars' histories and lived experiences, as well as ensuing points of tension emerging from shifting configurations of power.

Indeed, the embrace of harmful structures for the sake of inclusion and recognition has only failed and served to justify their violent expansion. But in a sense, whether or not Arabs and Arab Americans have chosen to try and emulate dominant norms, or contested them, has been beside the point. Our critical engagement has been to reconceptualize the imposition of norms that render Arabs and Arab Americans more vulnerable to threats of violence and exploitation in the context of neoliberalism. Ultimately, the analysis brings the attention back to the nexus between law, power, knowledge, and norms that perpetuate the injustices and realities of war, dispossession, settler colonialism, white supremacy, poverty, and heteropatriarchy in the precarious lives of Arabs and Arab Americans.

As this article has shown, identifying the uneven and shifting devaluation of racialized, classed, sexualized, and gendered lives in *A Map of Home* requires a complex and nuanced understanding of power, agency, and political determination. This understanding is arguably complicated by the relationship between cultural, historical, and political variables in the emerging field of Arab American literature. Choosing to neglect these complexities and to simply enlist the

devaluation of Arabness in the service of neoliberal demands for inclusion and incorporation is a denial of the police brutality, imperial racism, and military violence that increasingly targets marginalized low-income Arabs, among other racialized communities, on the basis of sex, gender, class, ability, national origin, and religion. Ultimately, such demands, in their stark collusion with regulatory and normative power structures, bolster patriarchal and racist norms and violence against Arabs in the United States and beyond.

Notes

1. Pauline Kaldas' (2006) analysis of Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (2003) and more specifically of Fatima's visit to the Thanatoulos Bakery is a good example here. She says,

Fatima is perhaps the character who understand [sic] most fully the multicultural nature of the United States, with its possibilities and limitations . . . Fatima's critique of this family re-defines American culture as one that requires the infusion of non-Western culture in order to survive . . . As Fatima embraces this space with its diverse owners, she succeeds in doing what Majaj argues is essential for Arab Americans, "establishing diverse and complex connections across borders" . . . [T]he Ramouds . . . are not only welcomed but what they have to offer is viewed as crucial to the making of American identity. (182–183)

2. We are in agreement with Carol Fadda-Conrey, Nadine Naber, Steven Salaita, and others, who have resisted responding to anti-Arab racism as though it were "a byproduct of 9/11" (Salaita, 2006: 110). Naber calls the attacks "a turning point, as opposed to the starting point, of histories of anti-Arab racism in the United States" (2008: 4). Similarly, Fadda-Conrey points out that, "they are in fact a recent installment in a long history of national and international crises and conflicts that have repeatedly and consistently underlined the provisional nature of US belonging for Arab Americans" (2011: 533). Within this context, Salaita argues,

This swell in Arab American scholarship indicated that on the eve of 9/11 a serious discussion of the probity of an Arab American Studies was imminent, even if the critical apparatus on which such an endeavor would be based was still relatively immature. After 9/11, though, Arab American scholarship assumed something of a chaotic disposition. A community that once was virtually invisible suddenly became the object of much (often unsolicited) curiosity. In the year following 9/11, reactions from Arab Americans in scholarly publications were scarce, although by now a broad range of inquiry exists and touches on everything from the effects of 9/11 on Arab American politics to the post-9/11 challenges of acculturation and integration. (2006: 27)

3. In her article "Naming Oppressions, Representing Empowerment: June Jordan's and Suheir Hammad's Poetic Projects," Sirene Harb (2014) draws on women of color and queer of color critique to examine the poetic projects of June Jordan and Suheir Hammad. In this respect, she shows how these poets' work "is inscribed in a comparative analytic inspired by women of color critique, which names formations like minority and bourgeois nationalism to make evident their connection to neoliberal modes of power, as well as notions of normativity and value" (73). Harb's analysis underlines the importance of this model for examining the politics and poetics of feminist solidarity and resistance in Arab American and African American *poetry*; however, there are, to date, no existing studies that use this model to probe Arab American novels and fiction, a significant part of Arab American literature.

4. Previously known (and published) as Joanna Kadi.
5. Paul Farmer, medical anthropologist, defines structural violence as “historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces [that] conspire to constrain individual agency” (2001: 79).
6. For an example of this poetry and its description of amorous encounters, see Umar Ibn Abi Rabiah’s “*Qif bil Tawafi*.”

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