IMMIGRANTS, CITIZENS, AND DIASPORAS: ENACTING IDENTITIES IN AN ARAB-AMERICAN CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Many of our global economies are driven by migrant, transitory labor. Travel, displacement, and relocation have put tremendous pressure on identities, particularly national identities. As such, theories that assume that identity is bounded, discrete, and autochthonous are problematic. Diasporas are emerging as deterritorialized sites for identity production. While diaspora is a popular concept in literary studies, it has not been studied sufficiently empirically.

In my dissertation, I study an Arab-American cultural organization and the ways in which its members negotiate having multiple national attachments. Some members identify themselves as immigrants, while others see their location as more diasporic. Members come from all corners of the Arab world, yet they endeavor to create collective Arab-American identities. Given their multiple attachments, identity is ambiguous and liminal.

My study is ethnographic, proceeding through participant observation, textual analysis, and extended interviews, interviews that are informed by Sense-Making. My method involves: observing monthly board meetings; participation in many of the organization's retreats, subcommittee meetings, and social activities; and completing many interviews with the organization's founding and outlying members.
I found that while many people meet the theoretical criteria that exist in the literature on diaspora they do not necessarily identify with the concept, and the concept itself turned out to be much more complex and nuanced. Those who do identify with the concept stretch it so as to include immigrants and citizens in its purview. My study also makes visible the ways in which the identities of second, third, and fourth generation Arab-Americans have been affected by assimilation such that they now are busy reclaiming multiple forms of Arab identity: speaking Arabic, making indigenous food, music, dance, and political advocacy. Among all the Arab-Americans I studied, however, dance emerged as a crucially important practice for performing and affirming a group ethnic identity. Finally, while the members of this community certainly negotiate identities that are fluid, syncretic, and mediated through the vicissitudes of culture, power, and history, it also became clear that there are historically contingent forces that encourage their speaking as if in one voice.
Dedicated to the Arab-American community that made this work possible,

to my dear parents, Henry V. Hay and Ruth Hay,

and to Beastie
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CHAPTER 1

ENACTING IDENTITIES IN DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and emigres and refugees, gathering on the edge of "foreign" cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memoirs of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status—the genealogy of that lonely figure that John Berger named the seventh man. The gathering of clouds from which the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish asks "where should the birds fly after the last sky?" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 291)

One cannot open a text dedicated to Arab-American studies that does not include the struggles, the multiple gathering spaces, and the liminality that is embedded in Homi Bhabha’s reflections. For those Arab-Americans who have lived many moments of scattering, their relocation in the United States has been tumultuous. While Arabs in this country are ostensibly labeled as Caucasian, many scholars argue that Arab-Americans are not quite white and they are not quite colored (Joseph, 1999; Majaj, 1999; Saliba, 1999; Samhan, 1999). Unlike Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and African-Americans, Arab-Americans have not yet as of the year 2000 achieved a legally
recognized minority status. Yet racism against Arab-Americans in this country abounds.
One can rarely find a news source about Arabs, Palestinians in particular, that does not altercast them as terrorists. When Arab woman find their way into the media they are often part of an imagined harem, perhaps belly dancers, or they are veiled, subservient, and powerless. Concomitant with the proliferating media stereotypes that Arab-Americans endure they are also subject to legal policy that threatens their citizenship.

That is, since President Clinton signed into effect the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act in April of 1996 Arab-Americans have been targeted as ideal candidates for scrutiny (Moore, 1999). Airport profiling is yet another policy that has been a constant source of harassment.

Given the daily pressures that Arab-Americans confront, issues of identity are paramount in Arab-American studies. Kadi’s (1994) narrative brings the issues that frustrate identities into sharp focus.

I can’t remember the last time I saw a newspaper headline that did not link Palestinians and terrorism, Islam and fanaticism. Some people are surprised that I rarely read newspapers. I desperately needed a map during the massacre known as the Gulf War. All Arab-Canadian and Arab-American activists—and even those who tried to stay hidden—did. Avoid the street; Arab bashers are lurking. Don’t go to the demo; too many FBI cameras. Accept this speaking engagement, but not that one. Leave your khaffiya at home tonight. Wear that button. Don’t display your grief too openly—it’s not the time or the place. Lock the grief inside those brown eyes and hold it there for however long it takes. Don’t talk about what you know. (pp. xvi-xvii)

Given this narrative Kadi (1994) argues further that “that’s why, after one particularly bad day, I coined this phrase for our community: the Most Invisible of the invisibles” (p. xix). The issue of visibility for Arabs is at stake not only within white communities but also within minority communities because they too do not recognize Arabs as such.
Arab-Americans often experience seemingly insurmountable tensions with respect to identity. The most recent national census is a case in point. There is no space that includes Arab-Americans on the forms. They either check the box for Caucasian or they must write in Arab-American in the “other” category. Neither category is very appealing, which echoes Kadi’s point that either way, as Caucasians or as others, Arabs are invisible.

In the absence of a protective legal apparatus, the above mentioned scholars and activists inside and outside Arab-American communities have begun raising questions about the ways in which ethnic and national identity negotiations shape the daily lives of this community. But before I scrutinize further what is at stake for Arab-Americans with respect to the discursive and material registers of identities I will trace some of the competing theories of identity taking shape across the humanities and social sciences so as to interrogate and make sense of the concept.

Identity is a hotly contested issue at virtually every level of our social lives. Whether we look in academia, in the international political arena, in national politics, or in cultural forms such as novels, music, or film, identities are being claimed, named, contested, and self-fashioned. While identities may be made and unmade, the stakes in the production process are always high and always political. We can look to virtually any corner of the globe and bear witness to the fact that identities are worth fighting for. People are willing to give their lives in order to secure a place on a map that they can call their own.
What counts as a map and who decides figure prominently in questions of identity. At the end of WWI, Britain, France, and the United States carved up a chunk of the globe so as to serve their strategic interests. Thus it is small wonder that the arbitrary boundaries that eventually effected nations like Yugoslavia could not maintain and negotiate the differences at stake between Bosnians, Albanians, Serbians, and Croatians. Across the Atlantic in another direction much of Africa and Asia attained independence after WWII, which put an end to some two hundred years of colonialism. Yet before any postcolonial nations were effected they had to be imagined. Of course, who is doing the imagining, under what conditions, and serving whose interests figure all into the problem. These issues of nation-ness and national belonging in all of their ambiguities thus lead to the question: can the nation accommodate differences?

On a more general level, the question of difference looms large with respect to identity formation. Difference is indeed a distinguishing marker of identity. The tension between similarity and marked differences is where I enter into the larger academic debates about identity. I also enter debates about identity on a personal level. As one who grew up believing that I was Irish, only to find out at the age of thirty that I was adopted and that my ethnicity is actually Native American and Portuguese, my own experience has certainly taught me that identities are indeed tentative and constructed. As such, this dissertation is about the making and unmaking of identities in the global and interconnected world of the early twenty-first century.

Conceptions of identity range all the way from the notion of an autochthonous human born with attributes that attach permanently to self—a rooted theory of identity
(Asante, 1990)—to the idea that the very concept of identity is a mythic invention of the modernist movement (Adorno, cited in Bronner & Kellner, 1987) to the notion that identities are routed through experiences of travel, contact, displacement, and relocation (Clifford, 1998; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996; Pratt, 1992). While there exist multiple approaches to the study of identity across the social sciences and the humanities (Ben-Amos & Weissberg, 1999; Craig & Tracy, 1993; Gumperz, 1982; Moghaddam, 1994; Scott, 1996; Tracy, 1994; Woodward, 1997), most of the debates emerge out of two competing theories of identity. For analytic purposes I will refer to these two perspectives as rooted and routed theories of identity. On the one hand, proponents of rooted theories of identity have imagined it as a bounded collective held together by common cultural traits and practices, i.e., language, food, religion, ritual, expressive forms, and economic practices, as well as an attachment to land. Both identity and culture are conceptualized as discrete and fixed. Hall pinpoints this conundrum of identity production in the Afro-Caribbean colonial experience. Identity in a rooted sense reflects common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This ‘oneness’, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of ‘Caribbeanness’, of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express .... (Hall, 1996, p. 111)

The ethnic absolutism implicit in such rooted theory assumes that identity, culture, and history are “already accomplished facts” (Hall, 1996, 110). Rooted theories of identity have pull in postcolonial national imaginations because a return to one’s roots helps ease the pain of being “othered” and erased by dominant modes of western knowledge
production. Moreover, the colonial encounter begins with a loss of identity, attracting those who mourn a lost past, cultural forms, and indigenous sensibilities. To a large degree this theory of identity assumes autochthonous claims by tribal people. Rooted theory assumes further that in most traditional cultures natives rarely travel outside of their communities, leaving little room for contact with other peoples.

This theoretical approach is problematic on several levels. The essentialism that drives it can not account for difference, nor can it contend with contemporary global conditions of diaspora, dispersion, and cross-cultural contact. What is more, there is not necessarily the polarity between tradition and modernity which rooted theory assumes. Rooted theories are also essentialist at the level of national identity. Roots imply that identity is tied to territory, that there is a natural relationship between land and language, blood and soil, and that there exists an immutable link between cultures, identities and fixed places (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996). While I recognize that there are historically contingent reasons why people associate territory with identity and that not all claims that link identities to particular places are essentialist, my point here is simply that we ought to be guarded and critical when arguments emerge suggesting that such links are indeed immutable or unmediated.

On the other hand, routed theories of identity assume that identities are made and unmade through cultural contact and discursive formations. Routes imply that identities are constructed in and through travel and contact, calling into question the multiple layers of mediation that bear on identity, movement, contact, and social space. Routes assume further that identities are constructed, that identity formation is at base a process of
production. Identities, from this perspective, are contingent, fluid, and syncretic. Routed theories of identity also problematize the arbitrariness of territorial boundaries, a move which, in some ways, deterritorializes the production of identity. Hall reminds us further that

[far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they [identities] are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, 1997, p. 112)

The key points here are that identities do not exist outside of representation, since identities are expressed in claims, whether in statements such as “I am native American,” or “There is no such thing as a Palestinian.” Identities gain their legitimacy in discourse.

While Hall locates himself in routed theories of identity, he plays off the productive tensions that exist between the two competing theories. Given the context in which Hall is working, the postcolonial Caribbean Diaspora, he is not willing to dismiss entirely rooted theories of identity. He historicizes their emergence and traces their response to colonialism. Hall turns to Fanon, as many postcolonial critics do, to revisit the trauma that colonialism imposed on its subjects. According to Fanon,

[Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (Fannon, cited in Hall, 1996, p. 111)

Given that colonial institutions were so successful at dismantling indigenous notions of peoplehood, Hall is sensitive to the desires of recovering a lost past and the idea of “one people,” but he clearly sees the pitfalls of such an approach. A seemingly natural
response to this erasure is a collective reimagining of identity, yet the irony embedded within rooted theories is that the process of imagination is not recognized as one of invention. Instead rooted theories assume that indigenous identity is already finished, despite the fact that such identities have to be claimed, renamed, and articulated in new cultural forms.

**Diasporas and the Production of Identity**

Many forces have prompted scholars to rethink identity, and particularly national identities: global scattering and migration (Bartkowski, 1995; Glick-Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Pries, 1999); transnational economic structures and cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996); the fissures of our global political economy (Harvey, 1985); and the breakdown of nation-states (Morely & Robbins, 1994). These conditions and others such as ethnic wars, fundamentalist coups, and desperate economies have led to the emergence of diasporas. Given that diasporic peoples, who come predominantly from former colonies and postcolonial nation-states, are located within the heart of many western metropolises, diasporic identities stand at the intersection of multiple national attachments. As diasporic peoples straddle the boundaries between their former homelands and the nations in which they have relocated, they put pressure on the mechanisms through which nations try to cement national identity. Moreover, as Gilroy has documented so brilliantly, diasporas reveal the ways in which people navigate and negotiate a way of living double-consciousness, a mode of subjectivity that renders identities liminal, while challenging the ideologies driving the melting pot of cultures.
While the concept of diaspora is gaining currency across the humanities and social sciences (Bongie, 1998; Chow, 1993; Helmreich, 1992; Hsu, 1996; Koshy, 1994; Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996; Makki, 1994; Tololyan, 1996), it is a slippery term that is not easily conceptualized. Because of its historical primacy, the Jewish diaspora tends to be seen as the paradigm for all subsequent diasporas, and there is an ever-burgeoning literature on various aspects of this particular diaspora. But as studies of the Jewish diaspora multiply, the multi-valenced nature of the phenomenon becomes even more obvious. It is still possible to find scholars such as Dinur, who argue that Israel in diaspora has been a “nation” (his term) that has persisted through the millenia, an organic entity that finds its fulfillment in “the resettlement of Israel in its own land” (1976, p. 268). On this view diaspora is a negative condition of estrangement, lack, and yearning to return. More recent revisionist history has called the historical accuracy of these descriptions into question, pointing out that the majority of Jewish people already lived outside Israel at the time of the Second Exile, in 70 A.D. (Cohen 1995) and exploring instead the highly settled and even contented life of, for instance, the Geniza communities (Goitein, 1967-1993). Others, such as Boyarin & Boyarin, “propose a privileging of the diaspora” (1993, p. 723) as a unique synthesis of cultural identity coupled with renunciation of sovereignty, arguing that it is in diaspora, and only in diaspora, that Jews can maintain the best of these two worlds. Safran’s model bears on the Jewish case but also extends it. He contends that diasporas are inhabited by expatriate communities (1) that are dispersed from an original center to at least two peripheral places; (2) that maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their
original homeland; (3) that believe they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country; (4) that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return when the time is right; (5) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and (6) whose consciousness and solidarity as a group are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland. (Safran, 1991, pp.83-84)

This analytic is a useful beginning point, yet when one applies pressure to some of its features it may not hold up as an ideal model. The center/periphery binary that it assumes is problematic. Clifford also questions the degree to which dispersed groups plan on an eventual return. One can easily read the Jewish ritual of saying "Next Year in Jerusalem" as an allegorical move rather than a literal one. Clifford also complicates the particular ways in which diasporic people negotiate their relationship to the "former homeland," a point I will develop later in this section.

While there exists some overlap, diaspora is not the same phenomenon as exile, since exile indicates a forced departure. Some scholars insist that choice is what distinguishes diaspora from exile (Barkan & Shelton, 1998). I am unsatisfied with choice as a distinguishing marker; even if diasporas are constructed through choice, more often than not the choice is an unhappy one, fueled by political pressure or economic despotism. In addition, when economic collapse prompts people to relocate, diasporic existence does not equal immigrant experience. While immigrants may look forward to becoming North American, European, or Canadian, diasporic individuals tend to be more guarded about and conscious of the stakes that are tied to adopting hyphenated identities and much less interested in fast and furious assimilation. Clifford pushes this point further, insisting that "whether the national narrative is one of common origins or gathered populations, it cannot assimilate groups that maintain important allegiances and
practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere” (1998, p. 250). While diasporic peoples resist assimilation in their host countries, they also have ambiguous attachments to those nations from which they come. Their identities are neither tied to a lost origin, nor are they eager to submit to a new national imagination. Instead they negotiate hybrid identities, identities that are “structured around a tension between return and deferral” (Clifford, 1998, p. 251).

While I accept the idea of hybridity, I do not use it uncritically, nor do I use the term merely in order to celebrate differences. While hybridity demonstrates the ways in which identities are fluid and constantly shifting, this is not to say that identities are not anchored in specific historical locations, political contests, and material conditions. Inasmuch as hybridity, syncretism, or creolizing are at work in diasporic identity production we should not lose sight of the fact that diasporas are at base dispersed groups whose commonality is articulated through violent loss, detachment and alienation. What is more, diasporic cultures are subject to an array of unequal relations of power that are played out in the host countries in which they relocate. That is, the disparity that characterizes the first world as opposed to the third world is often reproduced when third world diasporas are constituted within the belly of the western beast (Behdad, 1994; Kaplan, 1994; Naficy, 1994).

While I have been contrasting rooted and rooted theories of identity, these two approaches are not always dichotomous or mutually exclusive, especially when one applies them to the concept of diaspora. Hall turns to the Palestinian situation in order to think through one of the more ambivalent dimensions of the concept. He contends that
[d]iaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of ethnicity. We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hand of this backward-looking conception of diaspora. .. (Hall, 1996, p.119)

Hall’s argument may seem ironic in the light of the claims of Jews, particularly Israeli Jews, who have accused Arabs of making the statement that “we will push the Jews into the sea as a means by which to reclaim Palestine.” The irony deepens with the discovery that no document exists that validates this claim. The Israeli Foreign Ministry claims that this statement was made on both Syrian and Egyptian radio in the aftermath of the Six Day War, but the contemporary Israeli historian Morris (1999) denies that the claim was ever made. And when examining the state of Palestinians, Hall leads me to question who is throwing who to the sea? Who is creating whose diaspora? These questions are more complicated than they may initially seem.

Inasmuch as Hall’s passage can be read ironically it is also cuts both ways. Both Palestinians and Jews claim roots to the same “sacred land,” and no other space will do. When the Jewish question was debated internationally in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Uganda and parts of Brazil were offered to Jews as a possible homeland, they did not see this as a palatable alternative, just as Palestinians are equally unsatisfied when Jews ask why, when there are twenty-two Arab nations, Palestinians won’t resettle in one or more of them. Both groups have advanced arguments that depicts themselves as scattered tribes; and both groups have propagated nationalisms whose existence rests on the negation of the other (Abu-Lughod, 1988).
I do not want to belabor this issue at the risk of missing Hall’s larger point, which is to get us to a more nuanced conception of diaspora, one that questions the ideology of scattered tribes displaced from their sacred homelands. Clifford contributes much to this end. He produces a routed theory of diasporic identity that is much more nuanced, and following his lead I think that addressing what diasporic people define themselves against is a productive way to flesh out the term. According to Clifford (1998), “diasporas define themselves against the norms of the nation-state and indigenous, especially autochthonous claims by tribal peoples... that is to say, the nation-state is traversed by diasporic attachments” (p. 249). Whereas nations are locked into specified territories, diasporas are deterritorial. Their attachments and modes of communication cross national boundaries without being policed from the inside-out.

Diasporic peoples have a precarious relationship to the nations from which they come. On the one hand, I agree with Clifford that diasporas can never be exclusively nationalist. Their existence is inherently transnational. Thus, it is important to recognize that “diaspora is oriented not so much to roots in a specific place and a desire for return as around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations” (Ghosh, cited in Clifford, 1998, p. 249). While I think it is important to take stock of the ways in which diasporas are deployed in transnational networks and cultural forms and connect dispersed groups in remote locales, the degree to which diasporas are removed or connected to their former homelands depends on the conditions which prompted the departure. The desire to return with a difference, and the ability to recreate cultural practices in diverse locations, are not mutually exclusive. Both of these phenomena can happen at once.
In many ways diasporas presuppose nations; they would not exist if not for the breakdown of nations, whether that breakdown comes in the form of collapsed economies or the nation’s inability to accommodate difference. And when nations disappear or their existence is delayed indefinitely, as in the case of Palestine, diasporic identity is indeed Janus-faced. My point is that however transnational diasporic peoples might be, they are not completely removed from the nations they fled or the host nations in which they relocate. This point may seem obvious, but I think it is worth emphasizing, given that scholars such as Clifford, Appadurai, and Ghosh are so mired in notions of transnational capital, travel, and cultural flows that for them the concepts of the nation and national identity are almost afterthoughts.

Travel and relocation are indeed forces that shape identities. As people are on the move so too are their identities, their cultural practices, national affiliations, and religious beliefs. Relocating in new host countries becomes a continuing process of social and cultural negotiation, a process of being interpolated into new sets of power struggles, and a process of intercultural contact that is at once friendly and dangerous. National identities are particularly important when people are either forced into displacement or chose to relocate; their identities are subject to reflection and they become more contested, more multi-layered, and more complex. Travel destabilizes and restabilizes national identifications and peoplehood, creating transnational sets of identities--this much I will grant Clifford and the other transnational scholars. However, because of the ambiguities that crosscut diasporic and national identities, I think it is worth looking at
the ways in which diasporas point us to the limits of the nation-state. This trajectory can
also open up new ways of looking at national identities.

Invoking Gilroy, Clifford contends that diasporas “are able, in part, to traverse
nation-states because they are deployed in ‘alternative public spheres,’ forms of
community, consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national
time-space in order to live inside, with a difference” (Clifford, 1998, p. 251). This
ambiguous locale, outside the national time-space, is what Lavie & Swedenburg identify
as “third space.” In a move similar to that of Clifford they argue that a productive way
to think through diaspora and diasporic identity is to move away from notions of identity
as essence toward a conception of identity as conjuncture. The possibilities of
conjuncture are located in third time-spaces. For Lavie & Swedenburg (1996), third
space

[i]Involves a guerrilla warfare of the interstices, where minorities rupture
categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, and empire in the center as
well as on the margins. The third time-space goes beyond the old model of
culture without establishing another fixity. Yet while the third time-space
designates phenomena too heterogeneous, mobile, and discontinuous for fixity, it
remains anchored in the politics of history/location. (p. 14)

Diasporic peoples occupy third time-spaces as they live a doubled life, an “out-of-
country, out of language” mode of experience (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996, p. 14).

Third time-spaces are at once discursive, material, and political. Yet diasporic
phenomena have not been studied sufficiently at the level of everyday experience. Lavie
& Swedenburg argue that third spaces, by and large, have been studied in literary and
cinematic texts. I would argue that diasporas and diasporic identities have also been
scrutinized predominantly through texts. While this mode of inquiry is important and
illuminating it is limited, especially with respect to materiality. Literary and cinematic
texts are partial, refracted representations that come from a specialized set of authors.
These texts are assumed to be representative of everyday experiences, yet are they? This
is an empirical question that needs to be teased out through more ethnographic and
anthropologically-oriented studies. I believe it will be revealing to study how these
modes of identity are made, communicated, maintained, repaired, and struggled over.
Furthermore, I am interested in learning how multiple national attachments are indeed
negotiated in diasporas. And given my disciplinary location I want to tap into the ways
in which communication bears on this process of negotiation. While I am interested in
studying communication practices it is obvious to me that one cannot answer this
question without straddling the boundaries between multiple disciplines. I think a
communication-oriented approach to diasporas as third-spaces is long overdue. This
approach will help determine the extent to which diasporic experience in the flesh
matches up with the ways in which it has been conceptualized in the literature.

Third space is also a discursive phenomenon, one that takes stock of the
unconscious, performative and strategic ways in which language works on us. In
communication studies, particularly discourse analytic approaches (Carbaugh, 1987,
1988, 1989; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Philipsen, 1992; Tracy, 1994), the unconscious
component of discourse is not unacknowledged. What is more, in mainstream discourse
theory, discourse itself is conceptualized in an unnuanced way. It is not tied to
institutional power, nor is it seen as a disciplinary force. Instead discourse is reduced to
its most rudimentary form: speech in action.
I think it is not only problematic but also untenable that discourse and conversation analysis in the discipline of communication does not include Foucault. While my dissertation is not driven by Foucauldian analysis per se, my understanding of discourse and communication practice owes much to Foucault. To study discourse is to study power. Who is allowed to speak, under what conditions, for whom, and to what effect are questions that go unaddressed in non-critical approaches to discourse. Pushing these questions also demands attention to the relationship between discourse and embodiment, since the body is another level at which issues of power and materiality bear on communication practice.

The usefulness of the communication literature for the questions I am posing here is also limited in other ways. Two clear patterns of conceptualizing identity cut across the literatures in communication. Either identity is seen as a combination of traits, such as age, sex, and socio-economic status, or it is studied in mediacentric ways. The ethnography of communication project is where this first approach to identity takes shape. Gerry Philipsen, in particular, is the most guilty of advancing reductionist approaches to identity (see especially Philipsen 1992). The moment that Philipsen treats identity as the combination of attributes he freezes the concept and removes it from social process; identity becomes the culmination of variables. While he sees culture as socially constructed and historically situated, identity falls out of the process of construction and becomes a set of inherent characteristics that are seemingly removed from politics. (Admittedly, there are some few exceptions; see, for example, Katriel, 1997).
The mediacentric approach to identity characterizes much of the work that is designated as international communication. In this paradigm identities are conceptualized in ways that are consistent with routed theories of identity. My only concern with this literature is that it is so focused on global media systems, nationalized radio, and the privatization of telecommunications that, once again, the daily lives of people are not considered (see, for instance, Featherstone, 1990; Ferguson 1993; Sahin & Aksoy, 1993; Schlesinger, 1993).

Because of gaps in the literature, the study that I am advancing, which brings to bear both the ways in which identities are mediated through cultural forms and the ways that social interaction and lived experience shape identities, is a necessary project that will contribute to our understanding of these processes.

Arab-American Diasporas

Arab-Americans living in urban centers in the United States travel in and through several worlds, through at least two sets of cultural practices, economic realities, and historical possibilities. Some have traveled first from their home country to Europe, eventually arriving and relocating in the United States. The cultural collisions that shape the daily lives of many Arab-Americans produce worldly yet unsettled identities, identities that are shifting betwixt and between a myriad of national spaces. That is, the political boundaries that shape national identity for Arab-Americans are not fixed; they shift as people absorb new cultural practices and registers of knowledge while they resituate themselves in locations that are not yet home.
I have had the privilege of working with one such Arab-American community for the last five years. AAMA—Arab-Americans of Mid-America— is a small grass roots organization that endeavors to educate the larger community which surrounds it about Arab-American cultures and histories. While the Arab-Americans of Mid-America are the focus of my study as well as many of their organizational practices, I am not theorizing the concepts of community or organization as a part of my primary focus. Rather, my focus is grounded in issues of identity and diasporic experience.

Members of AAMA struggle against stereotypes, particularly those that altercast Arabs as terrorists, and they fight for better educational materials in public libraries and schools. I gained an understanding about how painful the stigma is for members who have experienced such discrimination through biased educational materials. Eddie, a prominent member of the organization, told me a story about three of his many vexing experiences with ethnic Arab stereotypes.

When I was twelve I read an article in a magazine. I still remember the title. It was called "The black hole of Calcutta. I don’t remember everything in it; I just remember that it said bad things about Muslims. So I wrote a letter to the editor of the magazine. I got no reply. Then at the age of fourteen I had this history textbook that referenced Arabs under Mohammedism, which is a misnomer to begin with. Under Mohammedism the entry read: “see pirates”! It was very disturbing. I bought the book. Some 30 years later the local school board was having an open meeting about school materials so I went and brought my old history book. When I raised the issue that Arabs were listed first as Mohammedans, second as pirates, a member of the board said, “what is the problem?” After these events I began committing myself to Arab-American affairs and I’ve been doing it every day for forty years now. (personal communication, September 19, 1996)
Through this narrative and many others, I have come to understand that identity production and maintenance is at once the organization's paramount ambition and, in the form of imposed stereotypes, its most powerful nemesis.

Members of AAMA come from all corners of the Arab world, yet the majority of them are Lebanese, Palestinian, and Jordanian. The organization is open to any one who supports its mission statement and to all Arab-Americans whether they are new immigrants, exiles, or students. And while most members are either born here or are new immigrants some outlying and former members situate themselves closer to an exiled/diasporic community; nonetheless, what each pocket of the community—immigrants, exiles, students, and migrants—shares is the discursive process of negotiating hyphenated cultural identities.

The extensive time I have spent working and socializing with members of this community provides me with a particular entry into questions of identity. It is with this community at large that I have learned to navigate my way through the markers of identity that lead some people to identify themselves as immigrants and some as exiles, all of whom live in an Arab Diaspora. The organization's identity work, both as formation and resistance, has lead me to ask: What is at stake for Arab-Americans—and for ethnic groups in general—in their commitment to collective identities? And how and through what cultural practices and expressive forms are identities shaped?
Chapter Previews

In Chapter Two, I lay out my methodological assumptions and the ethnographic methods that guide my research. I present the former through a comparison of Dervin and Clifford’s methodological advances. Then I provide a fuller description of the organization that I am studying, highlighting the particular cultural practices and expressive forms through which I will examine national and diasporic identities.

Chapter Three serves as a historical account of Arab-American immigration, practices of settlement, and political organizing. I pay particular attention to the networks through which Arab-Americans built institutions in this country, the conditions that frustrated their organizational development, and their political allegiances. This history also provides the necessary background that sets up the historical, cultural, and political emergence of Arab-Americans of Mid-America.

In Chapter Four, I provide my analysis of the multiple ethnographic encounters that I have had over the last five years with AAMA members so as to address the questions that I have posed with respect to diasporic identity negotiations. I begin with questions of diaspora and the ways in which members of AAMA understand and negotiate diasporas, and then I move into the ways in which demonizing discourses and material practices have triggered problems and questions of identity for AAMA’s members.

During the last section of Chapter four I turn to the hall, the annual dance party that the organization has produced, as a way in which to tap into some of the cultural practices and reflective processes through which diasporic communities maintain,
celebrate, and negotiate identity. While I have conducted interviews and collected video footage of dancing, speeches, and other performances, most of my analysis comes from the longer Sense-Making interviews that I also conducted.

I have singled out the hafli for many reasons. After attending my first AAMA hafli I was struck by the ways in which the forum provided so many modes of space for Arab-Americans; a space to dance, sing, and let loose, a space to politic, to celebrate their accomplishments, a space where Arabic is the most dominant code, and a space where multiple forms of difference danced together. I have to admit that the practice of dance itself was at the time the most exciting part of the function for me. So many obstacles seemed to be traversed--age, gender, politics, business disputes--and the elation that came with this made a lasting impression on me. And while many of the people whom I interviewed communicated this same sentiment, this consequence in and of itself was not the more useful or interesting insight that my analysis yielded. Studying dance also helped me address issues of embodiment that are at stake not only with respect to identity but also for communication practice. What is more, dance itself is a useful practice through which communication can be studied and it provides a more interesting way to approach the question of nonverbal communication than what currently exists in the literature.

Thus my analysis of the hafli proceeds at two levels. I have 10 hours of video footage that catalogues the indigenous dances that are a part of Arab-American expressive forms. While this data is important, I draw more of my analysis from the two sets of interviews that I did with AAMA members; the first set of interviews was
videotaped at the haflis, the second set came much later. In the first set of interviews I asked members to talk about the importance of the haflī in Arab-American communities and the role it plays in identity production. In the second set of interviews I moved beyond dance, tapping into the ways in which this function operates at the organizational level, and here I addressed the features that have contributed to both the haflī’s successes and its failures institutionally.

Given some of the events that took place in the Arab world that had a direct effect on the haflis I studied, I also analyzed the array of contradictions that emerged with respect to the negotiation of identities in this context. This chapter yields an important set of insights that contributes to communication studies, Arab-American studies, and postcolonial theories of diasporic identity production.

In Chapter Five I summarize my insights and return to discussion of the theoretical questions that I posed earlier in this chapter.
Footnotes

1 See Anderson (1983); See also Hobsbawn (1990) and Hobsbawn & Ranger (1983) for similar treatments of nationalism. Anderson is particularly relevant for communication scholars since he argues that it was through print capitalism and cultural forms such as the newspaper and the novel that national imaginations were born, and thus there is a direct relationship between communication technologies and the spread of nationalism. Anderson’s work led me to push the relationship between communication and national identity further so as to include other modes of communication such as spoken discourse, dance, and public protests.

Though I think Anderson’s work is extremely useful, I do not mean to suggest that national imaginations supecede all other modes of identity formation. Often regional, religious, and gendered identities compete with the national imagination and the assertion of one form of identity at the expense of the other. Thus the other is always historically contingent. Both Palestine and India provide telling examples of competing identities. Bengali, Punjabi, and Tamil identities certainly call into question the limits of South Asian nationalisms. In the case of Palestine, one of my interviewees made the argument that “we only need nationalism when there is a larger problem that threatens our identity; when people from Gaza are not getting along with those in the West Bank, then they are Gazias. Yet when Palestine is under attack by larger forces we are Palestinians. When we are not having any conflicts with our neighbors we are just Arabs” (Jamil, personal communication, June 24, 2000).

2 David Horn asked me this question in my general exam and at that time I did not have a very sophisticated answer. The nation’s ability to accommodate difference is on one level a structural problem that is determined institutionally. Nations that propagate narratives of common origins are less likely to accommodate difference than those nations that are constituted by gathered populations. Yet there hardly exist any nations that are populated exclusively by peoples of common origins (Japan perhaps comes closest). Migrant workers, students, refugees, exiles, and intermarriage disturb the idea of one people. Germany is a key example of a nation with a narrative of common origin which has been invaded by foreign guest workers. In the case of Israel, the national narrative is complicated further by the fact that even if Jewishness is the imagined common origin, its population is one of gathered peoples. For those nations whose ideology favors a gathered population myth, diasporas complicate their narrative, since their multiple attachments keep them both inside and outside the nation’s grip.

So where does this leave me with respect to the question? At best the nation’s ability to accommodate difference is ambiguous. There are clear examples where I would say absolutely no, particularly given the regimes that are currently in control in Afghanistan, Iran, or North Korea. Even in countries that purport to be progressive, such as the U.S., the UK, or Canada, the nation falters with respect to issues of gender and
race. This question is bigger than the nation, since forces like transnational capitalism limit the nation's ability to contend with difference. As my arguments unfold here, I will continue to press this question, since I think it is the key question that bedevils the possibilities of national identities.

3 See Lavie & Swedenburg (1996). I am indebted to Lavie and Swedenburg for their critique of postmodern perspectives that are so seduced by the discursive play of differences that they elide important political conditions and contests. Lavie and Swedenburg advance a theory of diaspora that calls into question the politics of identity and points to the material conditions in which such political debates are located.

4 I use the concepts first world and third world cautiously. I am certainly not trying to reify binary oppositions, as if center/periphery metaphors that emerge out of world systems theory are still viable. There are multiple centers and margins that exist across, within, and between western and postcolonial nation-states. The terms are not merely descriptive either. I use them to indicate a postcolonial condition. For a discussion of the ways in which the concept postcolonial has replaced the term third world, see Shohat (1992). For a more heated debate about the Western use of the term third world and third world nationalism see Jameson (1986) and Ahmad (1986).

5 There are many scholars working on theories of diasporas. I rely heavily on James Clifford and Stuart Hall because they both are able to advance poststructuralist, discourse-centered theories of diasporas without ignoring political struggles and materiality. Paul Gilroy is another scholar whose work shapes mine to a large degree. I am less satisfied with their treatment of gender, however. For a gender-based critique of transnational theories of travel and hybridity see Grewal & Kaplan (1994). See also Kaplan (1996).

6 Homi Bhabha conceptualizes third space as a way in which to intervene into cultural production and cultural analysis. For him the splitting of the subject is a major moment in third space. See his chapter on "The commitment to theory" (1994, pp. 19-39). The concept of third space has important implications for cultural analysis; it is also relevant for the study of discourse, and communication scholars, particularly those scholars who advance the ethnography of communication project, can benefit from incorporating it.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES AND CONSIDERATIONS

In the previous chapter, I provided a theoretical argument for a conception of identities based on theories of diaspora, displacement, and cultural contact. In this chapter, I will connect my theoretical questions to the methodological procedures that I invoked as a means of contacting, dialoging, and engaging the Arab-American community whose lives, cultural practices, and political strategies provide a basis for my project. I will explicate the methods that I employed and locate myself within the larger paradigmatic issues that drive critical/interpretive methodologies, while also keeping an eye toward the politics that they call into question. I move from Dervin’s metatheory, to Clifford’s rethinking of ethnographic authority/fieldwork and its limits, to method, leaving readers with a sense of what an ethnographic Sense-Making study of identity looks like.

Metatheory, Methodology, Method

The moment that one takes on the task of doing empirical work, she collides with science. What counts as science is at stake, as well as one’s ability to situate herself
within or between the paradigms that map not only the "what" of science but also the "hows" of doing scientific work. Historically, science has named itself the most authoritative discourse, whose workers are the legitimizers of knowledge and its production. Science is big business, with a hand in much of our social and cultural life; it classifies and determines the boundaries and value assigned to physical conditions and human existence. It craves theory and has an appetite for first principles, origins, and essences, while it splits minds from bodies and subjects from objects. As a cultural practice (and industry) that is always naming entities and relationships between them, science is imbued with the ultimate power of discovery.

My vision of what postpositivist science might look like situates science as a subversive project, one that assumes that complexities and contradictions exist in human experience and the frames of reference that construct experiences. As a political project this science questions its own assumptions. Instead of pretending that we live in an objective, knowable world, one that can be uncovered parsimoniously, this science insists that physical relationships of human experience cannot be understood through the same practices or seen from the same lenses. Human experience is complex; it cannot be reduced to simple-minded taxonomies and charts. Models should be treated as illustrations that make what is strange visible, nothing more. Multiple methods are necessary for this science, as well as different types of human contributors and different discourses. Rather than reproducing the methods and practices used in the physical and natural sciences, rather than asking whether our science is rigorous enough, this science asks, is our science human enough?
In many disciplines, gone are the days of an unreflexive social science. Over the past twenty years a plethora of scholars across the sciences and the humanities have committed themselves to mapping new ways of understanding human existence, the political pressures that have frustrated it, and the discursive dimensions of that existence, thereby calling into question the political and ethical stakes of imagining, doing, and writing research (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Clifford, 1988, 1998; Crapazano, 1990, 1997; Dervin, 1999; Lather, 1991, 1996; Marcus, 1998; Marcus & Fischer 1986; Pilotta & Mickunas, 1990; Rabinow, 1977). The notions that science ought to be value free and that the researcher is a distanced spectator are now rejected in favor of epistemologies that insist that the production of knowledge is always partial (Clifford, 1988), that information is no longer a static absolute ontological category (Dervin, 1999), and that data are produced relationally (Lather, 1991), with and against the backdrop of social structures and discursive formations that privilege and legitimize certain interpretations of the world while subjugating and erasing the knowledge claims of others (Foucault, 1972).

Taking stock of the “multiple fault lines facing those who purport to study human beings,” Dervin (1999) turns to what she deems a postmodern force to explain the contemporary crisis in metaphysics. This force precludes the possibility of “neutral, objective knowing and insists that all knowing is implicated in the time, place, tools and histories of its making” (4). Clifford also locates himself within an epistemological crisis, although he straddles the conjunctural lines between anthropology, literature, and cultural criticism. As a historian of anthropology he is particularly invested in tracing the
trajectories of ethnographic research and writing. Thus he engages debates about the
status of ethnography, the poetics of writing, and the politics of knowing and being
known. Rethinking ethnography has included critiques of what counts as the
ethnographic field, of the political role of the researcher, of the status of knowledge, and
of the power relations at stake in doing ethnographies of radical difference. Clifford
problematises such topics as the relationship negotiated between ethnographer and
native, colonialism's mark on ethnographic research, and fieldwork as a rite of passage—
living with other cultures in faraway places, having a minimal grasp of the language,
immersing oneself into the heart of another's culture and then speaking for it with
authority. Arguing against a de-rhetoricated mode of writing, Clifford advocates a
poetics of writing culture, a poetics that supercedes a paradigm of observing with one of
inventing, self-fashioning dialogue, and discourse. As such, he places under erasure the
reigning metaphors of classical anthropology, those being vision and the ethnographic
authority that was once afforded to the professional ethnographer, so as to map a
discursive mode of writing ethnography. He sees his project as a struggle against
received definitions of art, literature, science, and history, insisting that the research
experience should "tear open the textualized fabric of the other, and thus also of the
interpreting self" (43).

Both Dervin and Clifford are unsatisfied with the current toolkit of terms and
practices that guide critical/interpretive projects. Both Dervin and Clifford go beyond
critique; Clifford offers a critical method for studying cultural contact and translation,
while Dervin provides a methodological repertoire that includes a revisionist sense of
methodology and methods. When put in conversation, Clifford and Dervin present some interesting challenges, tools, and tales of research. In this section I will map the key sets of tensions that they write with and against and their reasons for troubling particular discourse communities.

I begin with Dervin’s treatment of metatheory, methodology, and method; next I map out her key strategies and metaphors so as to make explicit how Sense-Making shapes my sense of an ethnography. Then I compare Dervin’s methodology to that of Clifford and to his critical method for writing ethnography. Dervin’s (1999) methodology is anchored in several concepts and metaphors. I will begin with her assumptions about methodology, metatheory and method, and I explain one of Sense-Making’s central metaphors as a way in which to bridge issues of methodology with that of method.

Metatheory: presuppositions which provide general perspectives or ways of looking based on assumptions about the nature of reality and human beings (ontology), the nature of knowing (epistemology; the politics of being known); the purposes of theory and research (teleology); values and ethics (axiology); and the nature of power (ideological).
Methodology: reflexive analysis and development of the “hows” of theorizing, observing, analyzing, and interpreting.
Method: the specific “hows” or techniques, guided implicitly or explicitly by methodological considerations.
Substantive theory: inductively and/or deductively derived concepts (which define phenomena) and propositions (which suggest how and under what conditions concepts are thought to be connected); sometimes called unit theory. Metatheory necessarily becomes substantive theory, though the substantive becomes background once located in terms of methodological procedure. (Dervin, 1999, p. 6)

The first step of Dervin’s intervention begins with her conceptions of methodology and method. Calling into question the hows of theorizing and the role of
reflexivity, she insists on verbing strategies, keeping the prospects of method unfrozen. Methodologically, Dervin argues that the social sciences are strong on method and weak on metatheory and methodology, while the humanistically-driven disciplines are strong on metatheory and weak on method. Thus in the sciences substantive theory and method are privileged, while metatheoretical critique thrives in the humanities. “Journeys are defined within the discourses from which they arise so not unexpectedly we find warnings among the scientists that they ought not become too philosophical; and warnings among the humanists that they ought not be taken in by the instrumentality of science” (Dervin, 1999, p. 5). The result of this polarization is the lack of a vocabulary for methodology, procedure, and practice across the science and humanities. Writing against the idea of transparent personalities, Dervin advocates situated meaning-making in which the human subject is an active interlocutor, a theorizing subject. At once Sense-Making brackets and traverses the shackles of substantive theory, focusing instead on the verbing strategies that subjects use to make sense of their worlds. This is not to say that the human subject is privileged or conceptualized without nuance. Rather, Dervin (1999) contends that “the subject, the sentient human being, is no longer given absolute ontological status, nor are the institutions human subjects create and maintain given absolute status” (p. 11). Instead subjects are put in motion and what become important are the verbing strategies through which they navigate their worlds.
Verbing as a Way of Knowing:

Verbing is predicated on the notion that in communication studies too much emphasis is placed on “states or entity analytics rather than dynamic or process analytics” (Dervin, 1991, p. 61). Interested in hows rather than whats, processes rather than traits, and practices rather than inputs and outputs, Dervin calls for more verbs as a means to reconceptualize the communicating human.

Instead of focusing on elusive, ever-changing and constantly challenged nouns, Sense-Making mandates a focus on the hows of human individual and collective Sense-Making and unmaking, on the varieties of internal and external cognizings, emotings, feelings, and communicatings, that make maintain, reinforce, challenge, resist, alter, and reinvent human worlds. (Dervin, 1999, p. 12)

Verbing shows up most explicitly in Dervin’s work in the three interventions that she makes when translating metatheory into method.

The Gap Metaphor and its Trajectory in Time-Space

The notion of the gap is one of Dervin’s primary metaphors. As she explicates this concept, “[i]ts essence is the assumption that there are persistent gap conditions in all existence—between times, and between spaces. Accompanying this assumption is the idea that communicating is best isolated, studied, and generalized by focusing on the gap conditions” (Dervin, 1991, p. 62). Given this condition, Dervin accepts the mandate of making sense of the communicative bridging strategies that confront us in our daily lives. The concept of a gap assumes an understanding of two other central metaphors, those being bridging and journeyings. Each presupposes the other, with all three working in tandem. What articulates gaps, bridges, and journeys is the presupposition that humans
are constantly in motion, traversing time-space at various moments of consciousness.

While time and space may be separated statistically, Sense-Making assumes that they are experienced concomitantly. Unpacking the relationship between gaps, bridgings, and time-space, Dervin asks us to imagine the following situation:

Assume a human being taking steps through situations; for each moment, new step. Assume a moment of discontinuity in which step taking turns from a free-flowing journey to a stop in the road. Focus individuals on those moments of discontinuity. Determine how they define the gaps and act to bridge them. How do they see the situations that interrupt their journeys? How do they conceptualize the discontinuities as gaps? How do they bring to bear past experiences? How do they construct bridges over the gaps? How do they start journeys again? How do they proceed after the crossing? To what use or help do they put the bridge they built? (Dervin, 1991, p. 66)

Given these sets of questions, the metaphors of gaps, bridges, and journeys render human Sense-Making as a process always in motion, vexed by fractures and contradictions.

What holds together the human subject together, albeit in fragments, is also at stake in Sense-Making. Borrowing from Gramsci and Bourdieu, Dervin explicates six shifting constructs that situate human existence, those being; head, heart, hand, habit, habitus, and hegemony. Taken together these terms articulate the intellectual, emotional, and embodied nature of being against the backdrop of power structures not of our making. Habit points to the routines of daily life, the repertoire of practices through which humans stumble up against gaps, how they make sense of them, and how they create bridging strategies. None of these concepts is necessarily new; rather, what makes them productive is this specific articulation. Dervin argues that in order to understand human existence, one cannot ignore any of these forces of subjectivity.
While I have only scratched the surface of Sense-Making’s history and repertoire of tools, I have mapped some of the central concepts and interventions. Dervin is writing against the grain of much of the communication discipline, particularly against transmission/banking models of research. She defies research protocols that simply name the world, erasing the role of the subject in the interpreting process of research.

Partial Truths and Ethnography

While Dervin’s primary foci are methodology, translating metatheory into method, and constructing communication procedures that guide human Sense-Making, James Clifford’s project is to rethink the limits and possibilities of culture and the politics and poetics of writing culture. He traces the epistemic shifts that have effected a crisis in anthropology over the last century, highlighting both the practices that have guided fieldwork and the forms of writing that have gained authority. He argues that “ethnographic truths are always partial—committed, and incomplete” (Clifford, 1986, p. 7); this partiality is always ”… shot through with power relations, and personal cross-purposes” (Clifford, 1988, p. 25). Pushing at the political stakes that make certain truths possible, Clifford (1986) claims “all constructed truths are made possible by powerful lies of exclusion and rhetoric” (1986, p. 7). For example, while working with Arab-Americans, I have seen this mode of exclusion brought to bear in early Israeli pioneering rhetorics. Golda Meir’s famous chiasmus is a case in point. Speaking of the historical land of Israel she proclaimed, “A land without a people for a people without a land.” This land happened to be populated by more than a million indigenous Palestinians at the
time of her proclamation, yet it made no matter in her discourse. This is not to say that Palestinian discourse is somehow innocent. Abu-Lughod (1988) has examined the “politics of negation” that is at work in both Palestinian and Israeli discourse strategies and nationalisms, driving home Clifford’s argument.

Textual authority is complicated by and articulated to other modalities of knowing and being known. Clifford concludes that “participant observation obliges its practitioners to experience, at a bodily as well as intellectual level, the vicissitudes of translation” (1988, p. 24).1 Whereas the body is indeed a way of knowing, Clifford would insist that it is enveloped in discourse. This is to say that our experience is not necessarily a ground of knowledge, in and of itself; rather it is, in many ways, an effect of discourse.2 Thus, the vicissitudes of translation have at least three layers that flesh out “the intersubjective web of relations” between ethnographers and their interlocutors: (1) the stuff of culture; (2) the relational experience of getting at the stuff; and (3) the writing practices through which those experiences becomes an unfinished text.

The status of culture is also very much at stake in his discursive mode of writing ethnography. For Clifford, culture is

contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence. The specification of discourses that I have been tracing is thus more than a matter of making carefully limited claims. It is thoroughly historicist and self-reflexive. (1986, p. 19)

While this conception may seem like common knowledge as we turn the corner to the twenty-first century, it marks an intervention in the discipline of anthropology. For the last fifty years anthropology, as a discipline, has cherished a particular concept of culture. Once imagined as bounded and discrete, as the sum total of beliefs and behaviors, culture
has been put under erasure; neither fixed nor autochthonous, cultures are on the move, syncretic, and cacophonous.

The Rhetorical Dimension of Ethnography

Clifford argues passionately that ethnography is inherently rhetorical, which is another intervention he makes in anthropology. Science has always policed its disciplinary boundaries, separating the rhetorical from the apodeictic. “Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire: rhetoric (in the name of ‘plain,’ transparent signification), fiction (in the name of fact), and subjectivity (in the name of objectivity)” (Clifford, 1986, p. 5). And given that ethnography for so long counted as the science of social description, authoritative anthropologists have always been suspicious of those practitioners who write a little too well, particularly those scholars who bring literary forms such as narrative, tropes, and figures to bear on ethnography, thereby blurring the boundaries between art and science. Ethnography is self-fashioned and invented, according to Clifford. What is more, Clifford insists that rhetoric is alive at every level of writing cultural science. That ethnography is self-fashioned, invented, and partial leads Clifford to his most controversial assumption, that is, that ethnographic writing is much like fiction. This is not to say that ethnography is not informed by engaged, cultural interaction, or that fieldwork does not shape the translation process from experience to textuality. Rather, Clifford puts pressure on the notion that the observing, almighty eye of the ethnographer guarantees a factual,
untethered cultural description. Thus he makes the tension between observation and invention productive.

From Clifford’s Caveats about Ethnographic Writing to Dervin’s Sense-Making

Clifford’s idea that ethnographic truths are partial is consistent with Dervin’s concept of the gap. They also have similar understandings of dialogue and discourse. What is more, they both are invested in rethinking the reigning methodologies in each of their respective disciplines. While Clifford does not offer a method in the traditional sense for writing culture, he does give us hints. He argues that

[ethnographic writing is determined in at least six ways: (1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieu); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institutionally (one writes within, and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or a travel account); (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested); (6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are changing). The determinations govern the inscription of coherent ethnographic fictions. (Clifford, 1986, p. 6)

If one turned to methods books as a means of understanding how to do ethnography, she would find material similar to Clifford’s (for a key exception in communication studies, see Conquergood, 1991, who brings the rhetorical and the performative into ethnographic practice; see also Rose, 1988). However, there is a striking absence in many qualitative methods texts with respect to the rhetorical inventions at stake in ethnography. If nothing else, Clifford’s inclusion keeps us honest and aware of the role that self-fashioning plays in writing cultural science.
Clifford’s caveats offer insight into the conditions that shape and constrain the possibilities of ethnography. In order to translate them into meaningful methods, I turn to Dervin’s strategies for translating metatheory into method. Given the criteria that Clifford posits, rhetoric—those expressive yet creative conventions—is the only dimension of ethnography that Dervin does not treat explicitly, which is to say that the poetic is not yet an issue for Dervin. At base she offers three ways that Sense-Making translates metatheory into method. The first is related to the “framing of research questions,” the second takes place in the “designing of interviewing protocols,” and the third moment of translation is tied to the “analyzing and concluding of research—reading practices—locating gaps, identifying bridging strategies, reconnection/articulation“ (Dervin, 1999, p. 20).

I turn now to my research protocol so as to put Dervin’s translation processes into action. Thus far, I have compared Dervin’s (1991, 1993, 1999) and Clifford’s (1986, 1988) methodological agendas so as to flesh out my own assumptions. In this section, I introduce my research community, AAMA (Arab Americans of Mid-America), the data sites within which I worked, and the methods that I used, bringing into focus Sense-Making procedures.

The Arab-Americans of Mid-America

AAMA is a local, non-profit, grass-roots organization that emerged in 1990. The organization is cultural and educational at base, though the political is never far from AAMA’s events and activities. AAMA was founded because a number of Arab-
Americans were unsatisfied with the organizations that existed in the early 90’s in their community. They set out to start up either a local division of ADC or AAI or else an organization that served as a bridge between national organizations and local interests. They settled on the latter. The organizing members began their work in the later part of 1990. The initial members were primarily university students, though they gained the support of members in the private sector, in part because the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War mobilized the larger community.

Members of AAMA come from all corners of the Arab world—the Gulf States, the Fertile Crescent, and North Africa. However, the majority of members come from Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon. Many members identify themselves as first, second, or third generation immigrants, while others see themselves more as diasporic than as immigrants. The vocational backgrounds of members are quite heterogeneous. Of the active members, a fair number come from university communities, some are attorneys and doctors, some work for the state, some are financial brokers and occupational therapists, and many are merchants, owing and operating local grocery or convenience stores. Because of the differences between members and because they do considerable work with non-Arab-Americans, they hold all of their meetings in English, though code switching into Arabic during the meetings is common.

Organizational Structures and Procedures

From its initial stages of development to the present, AAMA endeavors to advocate Arab-American interests and it does so through its involvement with the larger
Midwestern metropolitan area in which it is located. Thus their agenda is twofold; they work with issues that affect them locally and they address external issues in the Arab world that also affect them. Their organizational structure includes five standing committees, these being Government Affairs, Community Relations, Social/Cultural Events, Membership, and Newsletter. There are seven elected officers who serve on the Board of AAMA including the President, the Vice President, the Secretary, and the Vice Presidents of each of the respective standing committees. In addition to the elected officers, two at-large members also serve on the board; the President appoints them. The President serves a two-year term, while all other officers serve only one year. Elections occur every January.

The board of AAMA meets monthly. Historically they met in public places, most often in public libraries; of late, two of the founding members, one of whom is a former President, host the board meetings in their homes. The organization follows Robert’s Rules of Parliamentary Procedure with varying degrees of strictness. The President runs the meetings and opens with her or his report, which always includes important announcements. Then each of the Vice Presidents gives their reports. While Robert’s Rules tends to keep discussion to a minimum, given the complexity of the issues and members’ concerns and passions about them, often discussion takes place at the expense of Robert’s Rules. It is the President who has the responsibility for policing the parliamentary procedure.

The Vice President of Government Affairs has the responsibility for being a liaison between the organization and city, state, and national governments with respect to
Arab-American issues, while the Vice President of Community Relations works with local community-based agencies and organizations.5

The Vice President of Social/Cultural Affairs is responsible for organizing three events; the International Festival, the annual picnic, and the haflī. Co-sponsored by the local chapter of the United Nations and local organizations, the International Festival is held annually in early November and it brings together more than fifty different ethnic communities. The picnic is specific to AAMA. The biggest, most encompassing event is the haflī, which is basically a huge dance party that includes a formal dinner. It requires much organizing, such as getting a band from Arab Detroit, arranging food, finding a hotel, and selling tickets to more than a hundred people. People travel from all over the state to attend the haflī. The haflī is also a political event; the mayor and governor are always invited as well as any political candidates who wish to use the haflī as an opportunity to address Arab-Americans. Much like an American-style banquet, AAMA’s haflī serves also as a forum for Arab-Americans to celebrate their accomplishments and to award those members in the community who have provided service to Arab-Americans.

The Membership and Newsletter Committees are straightforward; the Vice President of Membership is in charge of recruiting new members and maintaining the current population of members. The Newsletter Committee has the responsibility for organizing authors to write articles for The Gazette, AAMA’s newsletter, and the Vice President of the newsletter also edits, publishes, and distributes it.
While anyone can attend board meetings, those present are most often either on the board, are newcomers to the community, or are individuals working on particular projects with AAMA. Occasionally members from other organizations attend to elicit the help of AAMA on joint ventures. One of the recurring problems that AAMA faces, as a small grass-roots organization, is that a small group of people end up doing all of the work; as a result, burnout is an unfortunate consequence. Thus, one of the biggest challenges is recruiting and maintaining active membership.

Entrée and Data Sites

Five years ago a professor and mentor gave me the business card of one of her students. She told me that he was interested in my work on feminism and nationalism in Palestine, since he was in her feminist theory seminar. He happened to be the President of AAMA at the time. I called him and we met for the first time in his home just before he went back to Palestine for a long visit. During our interaction, Passion (his pseudonym here) told me about the organization and invited me to attend their next meeting. When I attended the first AAMA meeting, I was introduced as a friend and scholar of the Arab-American community, which was not completely accurate, given that I had never studied Arab-American communities per se, only nationalism in Palestine and the Arab world. This introduction was at once a gift and one of my biggest challenges, since many members in the community were suspicious of anyone who studies Arab-Americans. At times we had to negotiate my interests, sometimes on a daily basis. Understandably, many members assumed that my investment in them was tied
completely to getting data that advanced my research agenda. They wanted to know what my commitment was to their community outside of the research context. Over the last five years I have straddled the line between being an active member and a researcher, a political advocate and one who can maintain critical distance. This process of negotiation is always alive in my research strategies and at times is an uphill battle.

Board Meetings

During 1995 and 1996 I attended all ten of AAMA’s monthly board meetings, logging one hundred and ten pages of field notes and twenty-five hours of audiotape. Each meeting lasted roughly two hours and all meetings were public. During 1995, I acted exclusively as a participant observer, though I did have the opportunity to ask questions. During that year I also volunteered to open and run AAMA’s cultural center, which afforded me the opportunity to meet many at-large members.7 After one year of engaged observation, I was struck by how much energy went into planning the annual hafli, and after I attended my first hafli, I decided to focus my work on it as my primary exemplar for studying embodiment and the ways in which identities are shaped. Once I made the decision to focus on the hafli, I paid close attention to how it was negotiated during board meetings. As a result, I gave much attention to the Social/Cultural Committee’s work on the hafli. Prior to the hafli of 1996, one of the members suggested that the organization hire a belly dancer for the event. This idea raised several issues about piety, modesty, sexism, and the cultural role of the hafli. We spent more than
twenty minutes going back and forth on this issue; ultimately the board decided against a belly dancer, though the discussion provided me ten pages of explosive field notes.

In 1996, Eddie, the President of AAMA, asked me if I would be the Secretary of the organization. This invitation put me in an awkward situation, since I would be in many ways the producer of my own data. The Secretary of AAMA has the responsibility for taking notes during meetings, writing minutes, and doing the bulk mailings of newsletters and other information that the organization sends out to its members. Minutes are expected to go out in a timely matter, no later than one week prior to board meetings. The President expects to get the minutes even earlier since the agenda depends on the past minutes. I agreed reluctantly, and I should have followed my intuition because my work as Secretary was a disaster. I could not distance myself from the practice of taking exhaustive field notes; thus, I ended up giving the organization four or five pages of detailed notes, when they expected one page of bare bones. They wanted who, what, where, when, and why notes; instead, they got every argument that was made on every issue. What is more, I was often late getting them out, since transcribing the whole meeting took a great deal of time.

After seven months of being tardy and disappointing the board, I resigned from the position of secretary, which caused some tension between the President and me. Understandably, he could not fathom why it was so difficult for me to provide abbreviated notes, nor did he understand why I felt conflicted about doing the job in the first place. I was so eager to show members that I was willing to give something back to the organization that I took on a job that was a mistake from the beginning. I took a
break from AAMA for two months after my resignation. When I returned, the tension was still there, yet it diffused as more time passed. This mistake ended up being an invaluable lesson about critical distance.

The Haflis

I attended two haflis that AAMA organized, one in 1996 and one in 1997. The first hafl was held in a large party room that accommodated more than two hundred people. The second was held in the banquet room of a large hotel. The attire was extremely formal. Nearly all of the men who attended wore suits, while the clothing of the women ranged from sexy short black dresses, to more formal evening gowns, to traditional Arab garments. The mood was light and festive, and by the end of both evenings the band was exhausted, since people danced until around 2:00 a.m.

I set up an interview station in a small room that was used mainly for people’s coats and personal belongings. One of my colleagues videotaped the interviews, while two others helped videotape the activities inside the hafl. I also took part in the hafl itself, including the dinner and the announcements, and for one hour I was out on the dance floor.

Prior to the second hafl, an event took place in Palestine that caused members to reimagine the hafl. In September of 1997, the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netenyahu, ordered military troops to enter a tunnel that runs below the El Aqsa Mosque. This mosque sits near the Dome of the Rock, which is the third most holy site in the Islamic World. This site also rests on the remains of the Second Temple of Israel. The
Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, is the holiest site for Jewish worshipers and is all that remains of the Second Temple; that the two sites are adjacent to one another causes much tension. Palestinians responded to Netenyahu’s actions with riots and protests, since they feared that an Israeli presence in the tunnel threatened the mosque. As a result of the riots, several Palestinian men were shot and killed; one of those who died happened to be the brother of one of AAMA’s members at-large, and he died two days before the hafi was to be held.

AAMA had a regular board meeting the night before the hafi, and during the meeting several members-at-large showed up to make their case that the hafi ought to be cancelled so as to honor those who had died. This suggestion elicited a passionate response from several board members. One member argued that “we cannot bring the Intifada here,” while most others argued that it was too late to cancel given that tickets had been sold, food was ordered, and a band was coming from Detroit. The outcome of this situation called for a different type of hafi. The President made the case that we should use this crisis as an opportunity to console one another; dance was the practice that was intended to be edited out of the hafi, since dance, for many of the members, is a practice appropriate only for celebration. In its place, members imagined that we would listen to folk music, pray, and politic.

This situation provided me with a basis for an extensive analysis, which I present in detail in my chapter devoted to the hafi, though it is not my only means of examination. I also look at dancing itself and I argue that it is in dance that identities are shaped and that age, gender, and class barriers are traversed. I argue further that dance is
a communication practice that demands that one address issues of embodiment, thereby stretching speech-centered models of communication.

Other Rendezvous

While board meetings and the two haflis are my primary data sites, I also met with AAMA members in several informal contexts, and in these meetings I gained tremendous insight into their production, maintenance, and negotiation of identities. I have met members at planning sessions and subcommittee meetings that took place in my home and their homes; we also had a goal-setting retreat in late 1996 where I recorded twelve different contexts in which political jokes were told as either ice-breakers or tension easers. We protested together in front of the State House when hundreds of civilians were killed when Israel, ostensibly trying to dismantle Hezbollah targets, destroyed a Red Cross building in Beirut. We have also spent time together during small dinner parties that either I or other members hosted. And even when the context was purportedly social, I found myself reaching for my journal immediately after my guests left to record identity issues that turned up in our conversations.

Ethnographic Methods

While I borrow heavily from Dervin's Sense-Making methodology, my project is at base an urban ethnography, albeit an untraditional one. Historically, for anthropologists fieldwork has been a right of passage. Traditional fieldwork required extended travel; it demanded that the ethnographer live in "out of the way places"; the
ethnographer had to have a reasonable familiarity with the native languages of her informants; and her time in the field usually lasted for roughly one year. This traditional mode of doing ethnography has been tied to the colonialisit project by several leading scholars (Clifford, 1998; d'Amico-Samuel, 1991; Scott, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994).

I believe that Kamala Visweswaran's concept of doing homework instead of fieldwork is a necessary intervention into the practice of ethnography. Doing homework is in a sense anthropology in reverse. Traveling and dwelling are problematized as well as the assumption that one has to study exotic cultures in order to advance the West's understanding of radical otherness. I see my project as one very much grounded in homework, particularly given that I am studying diasporic communities, who live inside North America with a difference. Diasporic communities are dispersed, usually in metropolitan locales. While I would be closer to the interpretive communities of Arab-Americans if I were fluent in Arabic, I was able to engage them in English, particularly since all of AAMA's meetings are held in English.

As an ethnographer, I relied on three primary methods; participant observation, extended interviews, and videography. Sense-Making informs the ways in which I framed research questions and my interview protocol more generally, and it also shaped my analysis of textual and other research materials. I mentioned earlier that I acted as a participant observer exclusively for one year during 1995. Actually, my work in this role has continued, though now I have much less contact with the organization. I do not have delusions that I ever was anything other than a participant observer; however, when the
organization was in need of working participants, they, more than I, suspended my research practices.

During the course of my work I used video as a method. I collected ten hours of material during the two haflis that I attended; some of the footage captures dancing activities, while the remainder of it is devoted to interviews. This mode of data collection was collaborative. Three of my colleagues helped me shoot and edit the footage. We made no pretense of gathering objective material. Each one of us was in control of the camera angles and subject positions that we produced, and there were no cameras set up to cover the room on autopilot.

The last round of interviews that I conduct is framed by a Sense-Making protocol. I conduct twelve adapted micro-time-line interviews; my participants are the long-standing and most active AAMA members, each of whom serves on the board now or has been active on the board over the past nine years.
Footnotes

1 For examples of this bodily engagement see Lingus, 1983; Taussig, 1987, 1993; Young, 1993.

2 Scott (1992) has made this argument in fuller detail. She contends “experience is always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political. . . . This will happen when historians take as their project not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself” (p. 37). Clifford also turns to Emile Benveniste (1971). Borrowing from Benveniste, he argues that “discourse is a mode of communication in which the presence of the speaking subject and of the immediate situation of communication are intrinsic. Discourse is marked by pronouns (pronounced or implied) I and you, and by deictic indicators” (1988 p. 39).

3 Pilotta & Mickunas (1990) conceptualize methodology as “a systematic justification as to how you come to understand what you are looking at,” while method, for Pilotta & Mickunas, is simply “a strategy for access into a particular community.” Like Dervin, they insist that we focus on the “hows” of theorizing and engaging the communities which make the process of research possible, rather than focusing on “what” questions, since “what” questions lead us into issues of substantive theory.

Informed by the dialogic mandate undergirding phenomenology and hermeneutics, Pilotta & Mickunas provide eleven concepts that guide critical interpretive inquiry. While their work is much more exhaustive than the concepts that I will treat, they are the most useful for me given the orientation of my project. Many of these concepts owe something to Alfred Schutz’s and Husserl’s notions of internal time consciousness. While I do not use Pilotta & Mickunas’ language explicitly, each of their concepts has informed my practices of social description, particularly the understanding of temporality. Much of the phenomenological work on spatial and temporal relations is also reflected in Dervin’s notion of time-space movement, the difference being that she translates the theory of time-space movement into particular lines of questioning that make visible how the subject apprehends and negotiates such movements. What follows are the concepts that I take from Pilotta & Mickunas:

Situation – a location, a set of immediate concerns which other concerns may integrate into. It is a “here” point, always already oriented beyond itself, criss-crossed by a temporal orientation in which one opens up a past and a future.

Relevance—taps into the history of sense that is built into one’s selection of what counts as significant/choice.

Environment—that which stands around you. A set of spatial/temporal typologies of signification.
Significations— that which is meaningful and has a way of pointing you toward what is important/unimportant. Such meanings have both value and direction. Time/temporality—a trajectory moving us from the chronological to the experiential, making distinctions of near past, far past, near future, and far future. Husserl’s internal time conscious Ideas. Space—also a location that opens up a particular experiential domain. Here to there coordination.

History— changes in time that resignify futures and pasts. Context—a field of meaning and acts; they are constituted and they do not end. Social Validity—an issue of recognition orientation toward the truth of social experience based on recognition; in fact, it is ratified by experience. Orientation—movement toward a particular field of experience, a turning toward. Horizon—the limits of what can be done.

4 ADC (the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee) is a national Arab-American organization. Fighting racism is at the top of their agenda. AAI (the Arab-American Institute) also is a national organization, though they have a broader agenda than ADC. AAI does a tremendous amount of work educating Arab-Americans about voting issues and about candidates and their commitments to Arab-Americans. Most recently they have organized an annual Arab-American Leadership Conference, and at the first conference in 1998, for the first time in American history, the President of the United States addressed an organized Arab-American community. This address helped heal the wounds that were opened in 1984 when Mondale and Ferraro returned the check that Arab-Americans donated because they didn’t want money from “terrorists.”

5 Several tensions exist between African-American communities and Arab-Americans, and part of the Community Relations Vice President’s job is to help ease such tensions. For example, many Arab-American merchants have stores in predominantly lower-income African-American neighborhoods, and many African-Americans have communicated hostility toward Arab-American immigrants who start up businesses soon after arriving in town. They don’t understand how it is possible to get businesses going so quickly and therefore accuse Arab-Americans of getting special privileges, when actually what exists are family networks that help family members get on their feet. There have also been cases in which African-Americans have accused Arab-American merchants of selling alcohol to minors. In cases when those merchants have been members of AAMA, the Vice President of Community Relations has become involved in negotiations.

6 I nearly went native preparing for this first meeting. Hospitality is an important feature in Palestinian culture and I sweated over what would be appropriate to bring. I didn’t know if Passion was Muslim so I didn’t bring wine. I settled on chocolate and some hazelnuts, which were very popular. When I look back at the clothing that I chose, I think he must have thought that I was a white girl trying really hard to look Arab, since I wore an outfit from India consisting of baggy pants and a long cotton blouse. This attire
is similar to that of traditional women’s clothing in Palestine. I tried entirely too hard to fit in. Some of Passion’s Palestinian friends were at his house when I arrived and they didn’t hesitate to ask me if I “just got off the boat.”

After attending board meetings for several months, I volunteered to open AAMA’s cultural center and it was here that I made the initial contacts that led me to my current project. The cultural center was a house that one of the prominent members donated temporarily for AAMA’s use. The house had a huge living room that was filled with chairs, and three bedrooms that were turned into two meeting rooms and a library. The basement was set up for entertainment; it was full of games and a large ping-pong table. Not too many people frequented the cultural center, but when they did, their kids usually flocked to the basement while adults chatted with me. AAMA used the cultural center to hold their board meetings, and occasionally when dignitaries or artists were in town, they used it to entertain. During the summer of 1995, I spent four hours a day, everyday, at the cultural center, mostly waiting for people to come by while I studied for my general exams. After I had been there a month, a group of women started visiting me every Friday afternoon for a few hours. Two of the women were students from Jordan; their brothers lived in the States and were members of AAMA. Another was a member of AAMA who came with a friend who is Arab-American, though not active in AAMA. This group was the only exclusively women’s group that I engaged during my membership with AAMA.
CHAPTER 3

MOVING “ORIENTS”:
ARAB-AMERICAN IMMIGRATION AND POLITICAL ORGANIZING

In this chapter, I provide a brief history of Arab-American immigration and political organizing so as to explicate the conditions that gave rise to the emergence of the Arab-Americans of Mid-America—AAMA. In addition to providing historical context I also tie Said’s Orientalism to the experiences of racism and stereotypes that have frustrated and stigmatized Arab-American communities from the time that they began immigrating to this country to the present. Most scholars who analyze Orientalism focus on literary, historical, linguistic, and scientific texts and the various Oriental schools that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That is, most of the work that demonstrates the effects of Orientalism reflects academics talking about other academics. A plethora of scholars have used Said to this end (see, for example, Abu-Laban & Zeady, 1985; Ahmad, 1992; Behdad, 1994; Lewis, 1996; Terry, 1985). I intend to demonstrate how Orientalism takes shape in everyday struggles in which Arab-Americans experience racism and otherness.
First Generation Immigration—1860-1945

Arab-American immigrants began arriving in this country in the mid-nineteenth century, though they didn’t begin coming in noticeable numbers until the later part of the century (Abraham, 1981). Most early immigrants came from Ottoman Syria, which today constitutes Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. However, the vast majority of early immigrants came from the rural villages in the Mount Lebanon area. Most immigrants were Christian, about 95%; the remaining 5% were Druze and Muslim. They were classified by the U.S. Government as Syrians, that is, when they were counted at all.¹

New York city was the debarkation point for most immigrants who crossed the Atlantic in the early years, and because of the expense of travel most Arabic communities were located in the East and Midwest, particularly Massachusetts, New York, Maine, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Michigan, and Ohio. The majority of the early immigrants were single men who left their villages because of lack of economic opportunity. The Syrian silk industry began failing when the Suez Canal was opened in 1869. The opening of the canal meant that Chinese silk became available to the West, and because of the underdeveloped equipment in Syria, Chinese silk was far better in terms of quality (Khalaf, 1987). In addition to the collapse of the Syrian silk industry, overpopulation was a growing problem in the Mt. Lebanon area, a rocky mountainous region with poor soil. Early immigrants imagined that they would come to the United States just long enough to acquire wealth and then return to their villages. Suleiman (1999) uses the term sojourners to explain this phenomenon. While overpopulation was a problem in the late nineteenth century in Ottoman Syria, the mass exodus that eventually emerged led to a

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serious labor drain in what would later become Lebanon and Syria (Abraham, 1981; Hitti, 1924; Naff, 1985).

Besides the push factor of desperate economies, early immigrants were seduced in part by letters that Syrians who visited the United States sent back home to their villages.² Despite the fact that travel loges often exaggerated the beauty and sophistication of cities like New York, they did spark the desire for wanderlust, a definite pull factor. Immigrants left for America under the delusion that they would experience instant success. Instead they experienced miserable, often traumatic travelling conditions across the Atlantic. Sometimes they didn’t even arrive in New York; many early immigrants found themselves in South America, Mexico, and Africa. Since they only spoke Arabic travelers relied exclusively on steamboat agents to guide them to their final destinations. What is more, most of the studies on Arab-American immigration only report the success stories; many families returned after the trauma of overseas travel and the difficulty of the working conditions.

Those who remained in the States and persevered usually found networks of Syrian businessmen who were anxious to acquire new workers. The peddling industry put many early immigrants to work. They peddled dried foods, garments, fine clothes, and household goods. In the early period, single men constituted about 70% of the total number of immigrants. However, women began immigrating in the late 1890’s, partly because the peddling industry was appropriate work for women and also because the men who immigrated sent home for wives. By 1917 women constituted almost 45% of the Syrian immigrants who entered this country.
While peddling provided a good means of support for the early immigrants, in most cases it was temporary work. Once families and or single men saved ample amounts of money most started their own businesses. Grocery and dried goods stores, cleaners, and restaurants were the most common types of early Arab-American business.

Some Arab-Americans found work in the steel mills in the eastern United States, most predominantly in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, while others took advantage of the auto industry in Michigan and Ohio. Those who were able to secure semi-skilled jobs in industry moved up the social ladder with most ease. They were able to support themselves, send home remittances to their families in Mt. Lebanon, and acquire enough savings to eventually move out of the over-crowded urban areas in which most early Arabs settled.

Several studies have documented the assimilation and acculturation practices of early immigrants (see, for example, Othman, 1970, and Tanous' 1943 dissertation on Arab-Americans in the deep South). In these studies and others like them, a number of patterns emerge. First generation immigrants initially did not try to assimilate. They learned only enough English to survive in the peddling business. They married within their ethnic groups and stayed within their religious communities. Most immigrants settled in urban centers and built communities in low-income neighborhoods. Thus it was not uncommon for Arabs and the community-at-large to refer to Arab neighborhoods as “little Syrias.” Many men crammed together in small rooms in Arab-run boarding houses in order to maximize their savings. They lived meager lives, saving the majority of their money and sending what they could back home. In fact, the remittances that
immigrants sent back to their villages allowed their families to build new homes and to acquire more parcels of land (Khalaf, 1987). This enterprise in many ways disrupted the feudal system that was in place in rural villages.

In terms of outreach to the larger North American population, early immigrants tended to work and socialize within their own tight-knit communities. Few cases of intermarriage occurred in the early years. And although most early immigrants were Christian, they preferred to build their own religious institutions rather than attending the existing churches. Until the 1950’s the majority of Arab-Americans who immigrated to this country were Maronites, Melkites, or members of the Greek Orthodox Church, sects which are all versions of Eastern Catholicism. Of the three Arab sects, the Maronites are closest to the Roman Catholic Church; they did, however, maintain their own liturgy and they also held mass in the ancient Syriac language rather than Latin. The Melchites are associated with the international Greek Orthodox Church, but they worked under the auspices of Tsarist Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church prior to World War One.

The Greek Orthodox followed the high priest of Antioch. It was a common practice for all three sects to send home for native priests (Othman, 1970; Naff, 1983)

Building churches accounted for most of the early institutional development in Arab communities. Prior to World War Two, very few political organizations existed within Arab immigrant communities. The early organizations served primarily as social clubs within the churches. They were sexually segregated. Men used these organizations to socialize, play cards, and discuss Church business. The women’s clubs were likewise
social. Youth groups were also organized, with the idea that they would encourage marriages within the Church.

By the First World War there were nearly 125,000.00 Arabs living in the United States (Auerbach, 1955). The Arab waves of immigration are consistent with those of other ethnic groups from Southern and Eastern Europe toward the end of nineteenth century. Prior to then, most immigrants to this country came from Northern and Western Europe; they were visibly white and Christian. Arabs, Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and Eastern Jews disrupted the ethnic composition of this country, and it did not take long for the United States Immigration Office to act on what they saw as a growing threat (Daniels, 1974). In 1921 the United States passed one of the first immigration acts in the history of the country that limited immigration based on nationality. (The first act was imposed on Asians in 1882; see Hatab-Samhan, 1999). The act was tightened further in 1924, limiting immigration to 2% of the number of Syrians who were accounted for in the 1890 census. Between the years of 1924 and 1965 some exceptions were made and the percentages were loosened considerably, yet the act itself was not repealed until 1965 (see Auerbach, 1955; Daniels, 1974).

By the beginning of World War Two, it was becoming clear that those early immigrants who imagined that they would make fast money here only to return to their native lands now planned to live permanently in the United States. More and more interethnic marriages were taking place, though cross-religious marriages were less common, particularly for Muslim communities. While the early churches held mass in Syric and Arabic, by the early fifties many churches held mass in English. Likewise, the
early practice of sending home for native priests came to an end by the 1950’s when American-born priests were employed in Melkite, Maronite, and Eastern Orthodox churches.

Many second-generation Arab-Americans lost touch with their Arab heritage. In fact, compared to other ethnic groups Arab-Americans have been the quickest to assimilate into the mainstream of American culture (Zogby, 1990). Few second-generation Arab-Americans learned how to read and write in Arabic, since their parents deemed it necessary for their children to blend into the larger American society. The majority of second, third and fourth generation Arab-Americans speak only English in the home.

The Second Wave: 1946-1966

Despite the constraints put on immigration Arabs continued arriving in this country. Unlike the early immigrants who were predominately poor, uneducated, Christian, and rural, the second wave of Arabs was mainly students and professionals. A number of unskilled laborers, many of who came from urban centers in Iraq, Palestine, and Yemen, also came at this time in order to take advantage of factory work in the steel mills and the auto industry. The vast majority of this group were Muslim. Second wave immigrants were also different in terms of their political practices and consciousness. By the mid 1950’s Gamal Abdul Nassar, Egypt’s prime minister, had been quite successful in awaking a pan-Arab consciousness across North Africa and the Levant. That is to say, immigrants who came to this country after World War Two were much more nationalist
than those of the first wave. They brought with them a new sense of political urgency, having been active in anti-colonial struggles in Egypt, Iraq, North Africa, Palestine and Transjordan (Suleiman, 1994; Terry, 1981). This sentiment translated into political activity that effected much Arab-American political organizing in the late 60’s and early 70’s.

Israel was inaugurated as a state on May 14, 1948 (a shifting anniversary, since Israelis work from the Jewish calendar and their Independence Day thus rotates from year to year). The establishment of Israel displaced more than one million Palestinians, and Palestinian refugees began immigrating in considerable numbers after the 48 war. Once Israel emerged as a state it had the effect of catalyzing Arab nationalism in both the Arab world and in the lives of Arab-Americans. While early immigrants shied away from politics, even Christian Arabs joined Muslim Arabs, Palestinians, and Lebanese in their struggle for independence once Palestine was lost. Zionism mobilized even those Arabs who had little commitment to Arab nationalism prior to 1948.

The Third Wave and the Six Day War

Much like the ‘48 War, the Six Day War displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Prior to 1967 Israel did not occupy the West Bank, which was a part of Jordan, nor did they occupy the Golan Heights, formerly controlled by Syria, or the Gaza strip and Taba, land that belonged to Egypt. While the ‘48 War ignited the Arab world, after the Six Day War, both contiguous and remote Arab countries had much more at stake than the loss of Palestine. East Jerusalem was also taken into Israeli control during
the Six Day War, which mobilized even the most conservative Arab states, namely the
Gulf States. The conservative regimes in the Gulf States were inflamed after the Six Day
War because the Dome of the Rock, which sits on the remains of the Second Temple in
East Jerusalem, was occupied by Israel. The Dome of the Rock is considered the third
most holy site for Islam. To date the only the strip of land that has been returned to its
former owners is Taba, located off the coast of the Red Sea where Jordan, Israel, Egypt,
and Saudi Arab meet. The Gaza strip, occupied predominately by Palestinians, many
living in camps, is now under the municipality of the Palestinian Authority.

Despite the Israeli victory, Arab immigration did not increase as a result of the
Six Day War; rather, Palestinians, along with Egyptians, Iraqis, Yemenites, and North
African refugees, continued immigrating to the United States at the same rate as before.
The Immigration Act of 1924 was lifted in 1965, which opened the doors for more Arab
immigration. The effects of this lifting of the burden were not realized, however, until
the 1980's. Lebanese and Palestinian immigration increased dramatically after the civil
war in Lebanon broke out in 1975 and again after 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon.

The vast majority of immigrants who came to this country after 1967 were highly
educated professionals and intellectuals. More than any other group, the post 1967
immigrants caused a brain drain in Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon (Naff, 1983). They
were involved in national struggles in the Arab world and many felt betrayed by the
West's pro-Israeli interventionist role in the Arab world. In particular, Arabs pointed to
Britain's betrayal, when Britain simultaneously promised Arabs and Jews the right to the
same piece of the map as their homeland. They also blamed France for the religious
tensions in Lebanon between Muslims and Christians, since France set up a mandate for Christian Arabs to rule in Lebanon; Lebanon’s political system was set up around issues of religious affiliation, and because of their majority Christians controlled the body politic. Harry Truman’s decision to support the state of Israel after the 48 War is also greatly resented in the Arab world.

**Arab-American Political Organizing**

These acts of betrayal, as well as the Western press’s pro-Israeli biases (Said, 1975; Terry, 1985), led Arab-Americans to get involved in the American political process (Suleiman, 1994). The first national Arab-American organization was established in 1967, that being AAUG—The Association of Arab-American University Graduates. This organization serves primarily as a “network of scholars and activists and to this day produces many fine monographs about Arab-Americans and Arab people” (Zogby, 1990, p. ix). AAUG focuses on educating the larger American public about the pro-Israeli biases in this country as well as the ways in which anti-Arab sentiment is unfounded and mythic. They hold annual conferences, the first of which began in 1968, and their publications are regarded highly by Arab-Americans and the larger academic community.

While AAUG focused their priorities on education and anti-racism campaigns, NAAA, the National Association of Arab-Americans was the first organization to tackle the American foreign policy arena. Effected in 1972, NAAA set out to change the political structures that denied Arab nations proper support and Arab-Americans their rights. Most of NAAA’s early members were business owners and professionals, and
they were active in both the Democratic and Republican parties. When NAAA emerged it was the only national Arab-American organization that primarily served the interests of professionals and small business owners.

Responding in part to ABSCAM, ADC, the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, was organized in 1980. Much like AAUG, ADC set out to fight against racism. They take seriously the task of fighting against negative stereotypes and they serve as advocates for those Arab-Americans who have been harassed by government policies as well as by individual assaults. For example, when Hollywood films are released that typecast Arabs are terrorists, fanatics, or villains, ADC campaigns against them. Of late films like The Siege, Father of the Bride Two, and Three Kings have been at the top of their lists.

Since 1996, when Bill Clinton signed the Anti-Terrorist Act, Arab-Americans have become subject to additional undue interrogation (see Moore, 1999, for further legal implications of this Act). Airport profiling is one such measure that has targeted Arab-Americans in particular. Airport profiling allows agents in airports to single out those individuals who look suspicious, and what counts as suspicious looking plays into the prevailing anti-Middle Eastern sentiment. Of those who have been harassed the vast majority are of Arab descent. I myself have seen this mode of harassment take place, once in Washington D.C. and once in the Midwest. ADC and other Arab-American organizations have lobbied, and continue to lobby, against such racist acts as profiling.

In 1985 The Arab-American Institute was founded "to serve as a clearinghouse and leadership training organization for Arab-Americans interested in working within the
electoral process" (Zogby, 1990, ix). As the fourth most prominent national Arab-American organization, AAI provides Arab-Americans with voter registration campaigns, lists of upcoming candidates at the national and local levels, and reporting on candidates’ commitment, or the lack thereof, to Arab-Americans. Most recently AAI began holding national leadership conventions. I attended their first annual meeting in Washington D.C. in May of 1998. At this forum panels were held on topics that ranged from “when stereotypes become policy,” to building alliances with other ethnic minorities, to sessions with the chairs of both the Republican and Democratic parties, to updates on issues in the Arab world. Hanan Ashrawi and Faisal Husseini attended the conference, reported on the ethnic cleansing taking place in Palestine, and gave updates on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

The National Arab-American Business Association (NABA) is the most recently established of the national Arab-American organizations. In addition to aligning and advocating the interests of business owners NABA also makes visible and rallies for the rights of Arab-Americans whose businesses have been vandalized or attacked based on racism.

There also exist other national organizations that have much more specific mandates. For example, the Arab-American Medical Association and the Arab-American Business and Professional Association “have played a key role in building an ethnic identity where for previous generations there was either a national or religious identity” (Zogby, 1990, p. ix). The Palestinian National Council is another organization that has the specific charter of advocating Palestinian rights and guiding the peace process.
The Emergence of the Arab-Americans of Mid America—AAMA

By the end of the 1980’s the Arab-American organizations that once existed in the Midwestern city where my study took place were more or less defunct. The American Syrian and Lebanese Association is one such organization that came to an end by the late 80’s. What is more, none of the aforementioned national offices had branches in the area either. The lack of organizational and cultural outlets led several members of this community to begin organizing on behalf of Arab-Americans. Several university students and others in the community at large started meeting so as to think through the possibilities. The initial members began their work in the summer of 1990. At that time they were not motivated exclusively by external conditions in the Arab world; that is to say, AAMA’s founding members imagined that their organization would serve Arab-Americans in the community while also reaching out to and educating the larger non-Arab American community.

However, activity in the Arab world quickly affected their potential pool of membership. In July of 1990 Iraq began deploying forces very close to its border with Kuwait. At this time the CIA monitored Iraqi movement closely, and Iraqi activities were reported almost daily in the press. Arab-Americans became concerned about the implications of Iraqi actions, particularly in light of how the United States might respond.

On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and U.N. Resolution 660, which condemned Iraq’s actions, was passed immediately. At this time the U.S. was quite vocal about its disapproval of Iraq’s move. Ostensibly, we communicated our concern about Kuwait’s freedom and liberation, yet no one was unclear about our larger oil interest in
the region. Days after the Iraqi invasion General Schwartzkof went to Saudi Arabia to get closer to the intelligence reports.

Much as they did in Vietnam, the media, and CNN in particular, brought the public day-by-day footage of Iraq’s every move and the United States’ response. Thus the Arab-American community was hungry for a public forum when AAMA organizers began to put their organizational plans together. The founding organizers sent out invitations in late July to those Arab-Americans whose identities were available to the organization’s founders.

The first meeting of AAMA took place on August 12, 1990, and was held on the campus of a local university. The turnout was good for the first meeting, primarily because of the timing of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. During the meeting one of its key organizers placed a diagram on the board which listed all of the existing national Arab-American organizations, while placing the initials of AAMA in the center, indicating that AAMA might serve as a liaison between all of them rather than a branch of any one organization. Those attending the meeting had a productive dialogue about the possibilities of starting a bridging, local organization and by the end of the meeting AAMA was named and activated.

Not long after AAMA was organized, its founding members drafted formal by-laws. In this document the organization’s mission statement as well as its organizational structure was articulated. The Gazette, which is AAMA’s newsletter, was one of the first pieces of discourse that AAMA contributed to its members. The early issues of The Gazette provided a forum in which Arab-Americans could voice their sentiments and
concerns about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. However, the activity in Iraq was not the only source of news. Articles in the newsletter also updated the community about the priorities of the national Arab-American organizations. And of course local news was reported that was more specific to the AAMA community.

More urgency confronted the AAMA’s members when the United States launched Operation Desert Storm on January 16, 1991. Once AAMA was in place, radio stations and local news organizations began looking to its members for Arab-American responses to the Gulf War. The Gazette reported on this activity and also served as a vehicle by which the organization solicited new membership. In fact, a former president of the organization told me that much of the organization’s success comes from the membership that The Gazette draws. The Gazette has pulled in members from around the country for AAMA.

From its inception to date the members of AAMA see education as their most important priority. They recognize that anti-Arab racism and harassment comes from ignorance, from pro-Israeli bias, and from long-standing stereotypes about what it means to be Arab. They take it as their responsibility as Arab-Americans and as individuals committed to Arab-American advocacy to educate the larger community in which they are located. They also endeavor to provide better communication between Arab-Americans and the larger local and national political arenas that could potentially serve them better.

AAMA has existed now for ten years and during this tenure they have accomplished much. Before AAMA was organized Arab-Americans were not considered
important, and to some extent their existence was not even acknowledged by local politicians and even the governor of the state. Much has changed since the early 1990’s. Recently the former Governor of Ohio issued a certificate of appreciation to one of AAMA’s former presidents for his commitment to multicultural education and his work in the Arab-American community.

Many politicians also take advantage of the opportunity to lobby Arab-Americans when the organization holds its hafla. Prior to 1990, the Arab-American community, as a group, was not contacted at all by political candidates. More importantly, one of AAMA’s founding members has become so successful at media education that now the editorial board of his city’s most prominent newspaper consults him and invites him to talk to their editorial board about the ways in which Muslims and Arabs have been misrepresented in the press.

As one who has been both a member and a participant observer of this particular organization, I have noticed two enduring problems that the organization faces in terms of its ability to draw and keep members and with respect to its ability to serve the larger Arab-American community. As I have noted earlier in Chapter Two, AAMA is much like many other small, grass-roots organizations; that is, a small, yet steadfast, group of people ends up doing the majority of the work. This causes some tension and burnout, particularly when newer members suggest that the organization take on big projects such as a public speaking campaign in local schools and organizations. While this project and others like it are important to the organization’s members, they have a hard enough time getting people to staff their annual, ongoing projects such as volunteering to work a shift

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at the local public television's membership drive, drop by the annual picnic, join in the international festival, and or plan and staff haflis.

Part of this predicament is connected to the second recurring problem that I mentioned above—the organization's ability to serve the larger Arab-American community. Since the majority of the larger Arab-American community is constituted by first generation immigrants, what often exists is competing motivations for AAMA, and it is important to take stock of the different commitments this group has to becoming politically active in the public sphere.

First generation Arab-Americans, the majority of whom came to this country after World War Two, have a different cultural background than second and third generation Arab-Americans who were born in this country and thus were raised in a context where political activism is not only expected if one wishes to make a political difference, but is also taken for granted. True, immigrants who come from Palestine and Lebanon are more familiar with activism as a way of being, given that their homelands have been more or less continuous hot spots in the Arab world. But immigrants who come from states where the western version of democracy and civic duty is not practiced have less experience and therefore less willingness to becomes advocates for Arab-Americans in this country. Fear of retribution also figures into their decision making.

I had an insightful conversation with one of AAMA's founding members in which he elaborated on his sense of what frustrates some of AAMA's members with respect to reaching the Arab-American community. He used a systems theory model to illustrate what he sees as mistargeted anxiety. Some of those AAMA members who were born in
this country assume that because AAMA exists, Arab-American membership and interest should come as an a priori input into the larger social system in which AAMA operates. However, because of some of the cultural differences that I just reviewed, many first generation immigrants don’t share the assumption that their support should come as an a priori input into AAMA. Just as AAMA has to earn the respect and interest of the non-Arab-Americans, so too it must for the larger Arab-American community. Like early immigrants who came to this country, many contemporary first generation immigrants are guarded about joining organizations, particularly organizations that take on political issues. Moreover, those immigrants who are small business owners spend up to 80 hours a week working. They have little time to spend with their families, much less organizing on behalf of Arab-Americans.

In addition, what the larger Arab community wants to see is more social/cultural activities, like haflis, picnics, poetry readings, lectures, and films. While AAMA does provide some of these events, they do not see them as their main priority. Many members of AAMA argue that events like the hafti do not benefit the organization in terms of new membership, financially, or gaining the appreciation of the Arab community. I understand AAMA members’ frustrations because planning and holding a hafti takes a tremendous amount of work.

AAMA uses the hafti as an opportunity to tell the community what the organization has accomplished. Usually the organization gives an award to a member in the community who has provided tremendous service to Arab-Americans. And as I mentioned earlier, politicians often make short speeches during the opening remarks of
the haflis. But during the interviews that I have done at two of AAMA’s haflis, and in some moments of small talk with non-members, I learned that non-AAMA members do not want to hear political speeches, nor are they interested in hearing long speeches by the organization’s presidents, past and present. They want to eat, mingle, and dance. The more time that is taken away from dancing, the more unhappy they are. So it stands to reason that if most people do not come to learn about AAMA’s endeavors and accomplishments, the more they hear the less they are going to appreciate the function as a whole. This is but one small example of the competing motivations for membership and cultural contact between AAMA and the Arab-American community that it is trying so desperately to both serve and reach. I will return to this issue in more detail in the upcoming chapter where I analyze more closely AAMA’s organizational practices.

Conclusion: Orientalism in AAMA’s Front Yard.

I turn now to the issues in the Arab-American community that frustrates the community as a whole. It is a painful commonplace in Arab-American communities that Arabs are too often stereotyped as being violent, fundamentalist terrorists, willing to launch a jihad at the drop of a hat. A fair amount of scholarship documents stereotypes of this nature (Al-Qazzaz, 1975; Douglass & Malit-Douglas, 1994; Said, 1975, 1981; Shaheen, 1981, 1997; Stockton, 1994). Much of this work is descriptive. With the exception of a few sources (see, for example, J. Terry, 1985), Said’s Orientalism is not used historically or theoretically to explain the ways in which today’s myths about Arabs came to life in the colonial periods of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth
centuries. I think that taking stock of Said’s work can contribute much to the discussion in Arab-American discourse communities about otherness. Thus in my concluding remarks in this chapter I will put to work some of Said’s brilliant insights in order to trace some of the unusual ways in which Orientalism shows up in AAMA’s front yard.

Said defines Orientalism in at least three different ways; as an idea, as a mode of academic discourse, and as a colonial enterprise that was supported by a plethora of institutions. Said (1978) explains that, as an idea, Orientalism is a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between Orient and Occident” (p. 2). Of course the troubling part of such a distinction lies in the otherness that is assumed between Occident and Orient; the later is assumed to be less human, less sophisticated, and unable to represent itself. As an academic discourse Orientalism represents the collective works of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, philologists, literary critics, and novelists who took the Orient as their object of study. And in its third conception Orientalism refers to

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said, 1978, p. 3).

Said is clear that the West has constructed its views of the Orient by selectively appropriating elements of its material culture and its perceived exoticism. As such, Orientalism is more a myth about the West’s imagination of itself than it is a discourse that represents anything real or authentic in the Orient.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to catalogue the collection of texts that Said analyzed in order to trace images and enactments of Orientalism, and given my focus in
this chapter, I will not spend time critiquing his disturbing polemic. Much of Said’s project documents the ideas that British and French intellectuals and colonial administrators held about Arabs and the limits of the Arab mind. Laziness, weakness, cowardice, and the inability to work across sectarian divisions are the recurring themes that Said uncovers. At the same time that these slurs are articulated, images of sexual exoticism abound. While British and French intellectuals and administrators chastise the Arab infidel, they simultaneously valorize the myths of The Arabian Nights and the beauty of Arabic dancers.

Given that the West has used Orientalism as a way in which to romanticize and freeze Arab literary works, The Arabian Nights in particular, I find it striking that in AAMA’s own community one can find a number of businesses with names that come from the Arabian Nights. One does not find restaurants with names like The Palestinian Palace, or The Iraqi Oven, whereas if we look to other ethnic restaurants there exist ethnically obvious names. Instead most Arabic restaurants in this area, with the exception of one, describe their food as Mediterranean, which is by far a safer name.

So if merchants want to subdue their Arabness, why do they choose names out of The Arabian Nights? My hunch is that most Americans don’t put the names together with the text. They recognize the exotic name, but they don’t associate the name with a geographic region, and when they do, Mediterranean works. In fact, some people who I have asked told me The Arabian Nights isn’t really about Arabs. One regular patron of an Arabic restaurant told me that the book “was written during the Crusades.”
If merchants are willing to go so far as to name themselves in and through stereotypes that have been exoticized by the West, then Orientalism is indeed alive and well in AAMA’s front yard. It is troubling to me that this group of people has to defer its ethnicity in order to serve the mainstream of the white Midwest. And yet, on the other hand, until I asked merchants about the names of their businesses, they seemed totally unaware of the implications of their choices.

The question of what is in a name is not the only site in which residues of Orientalism show up in AAMA’s greater community. I have also noted other occasions in which traces of Orientalism have crept into AAMA’s board meetings. During one board meeting, I passed around a cartoon that I had clipped from a local newspaper. The cartoon featured images of Arabs roaming around, inside a corral. They appear to be captured Bedouins and are dressed in traditional Islamic clothing; for the men, long shirts, loose pants, and khaffiyah (traditional headwear), and for the women, veils and long baggy dresses. The caption underneath the cartoon read, “Arabian Ranch.” I, and other members of the board, found this set of images offensive and degrading, while at the time the president said, “this is a joke.” The opening ceremonies of the Olympics happened to air on national television the night before the board meeting, during which time, just as the handful of Palestinian athletes entered the arena, one of the announcers had the audacity to say, “I can’t believe they are letting terrorists in the games.” This statement inflamed AAMA’s President. Given the context that we faced, that of interpreting both of these messages, he felt that the debasement that was communicated in the announcer’s statement was more damaging than the cartoon. Granted, the announcer’s statement was
indeed arrogant, rude, and unacceptable, and I see exactly how it would hurt Arab-Americans.

Yet I would argue, and AAMA’s president does agree, that jokes have the potential to do equal harm. In this case, the “Arabian ranch” cartoon is insidiously persuasive on many levels. First of all, it taps into a significant misrepresentation about Arabs, that the majority of them are desert-dwelling Bedouins, while actually only about 4% of the entire Arab world is constituted by Bedouins. Second, the implications that they are easily rounded up and herded plays into the stereotype that Arabs are lazy followers, and arguably reduces them to the level of animals. Finally, all of the women in the ranch scene are heavily covered, from head to toe. This feeds into the myth that all Arab women are veiled, and thus that sexism is more apparent and more virulent in the Arab world.

These two examples that I have mentioned are certainly not exhaustive. My point in including Said is two-fold: first off, he is barely cited in Arab-American literatures, which I find striking, especially since Arab-Americans often find themselves in situations where they feel pressure to define themselves in stereotypical ways in order to survive in their businesses. Second, when Orientalism shows up in political jokes and has the potential to feed and perpetuate stereotypes, there is the potential for it to pass as innocent, since it comes cloaked in the guise of humor.
Footnotes

1 The U.S. census labeled Arabs as Ottoman Turks, Greeks, or Armenians. Arab immigrants did not identify with being Turkish or Ottoman, particularly since they felt pressured and ostracized by the Ottoman Empire. In addition, prior to 1908 Christians were not required to serve in the Ottoman military, but once the Sultan required military service many Christian Arabs fled. For those who emigrated, Syrian was a more acceptable label. At this time, an Arab-identified consciousness did not exist; the Arab awakening came much later for Arab immigrants, with the rise of Arab nationalism in the early 1950's. For further historical background, see Suleiman (1987), Hitti (1924), and Dawn (1991).

2 Othman (1970) provides a nice repertoire of letters that document the Syrian imagination of American cities as the land of opportunity.

3 Before the 1948 Arab-Israeli war Christian Arabs did not identify much with issues in the Arab world. They were minorities during the Ottoman Empire and often associated Islam with their own persecution, whether the Muslims were Arab or Turks. Thus the tension between Christianity and Islam, for early immigrants, determined the degree to which Arab-Americans identified with issues in the Arab world. The 48 war helped ease this tension, particularly when Lebanese Christians saw Israeli bombs reaching their own villages.

4 Not long after the 48 War an Arab consciousness began germinating in the United States, partly because second wave immigrant brought with them an urgent sense of nationalism, and partly because the loss of Palestine created a huge flux of refugees that made their way into Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. Many Christian Arabs sympathized with Palestinians and took a more active interest in political issues in the Arab world.

5 For a detailed account of the causes, effects, and conditions of the Six Day War see Lenczowski, 1962; Sachar, 1979; Quandt, Jabber, & I.esch, 1973.

6 ABSCAM took place in the late 1970’s when the FBI created a front (Abdul Enterprises Ltd.) for its agents who, posing as associates of an Arab sheik, offered selected public officials money and other considerations in exchange for favors. The video taped meetings resulted in indictments in 1980 and the initial convictions of one senator and four congressmen on charges including bribery and conspiracy. Of course the FBI activities raised serious questions about entrapment, the results of which exonerated Florida Representative Richard Kelly, who was one of those initially convicted.

7 Perhaps the most troubling consequence of the Anti-Terrorist Act is the ways in which our government has been able to use classified information against individuals who “appear to be a threat.” These tactics are a throwback to the McCarthy years. And
as in airport profiling, those who have had classified information used against them are predominately Muslim Arabs who find themselves nearly defenseless against accusations that they cannot see.

8 When I wrote the first draft of this chapter I claimed that AAMA’s president laughed the political cartoon off as a joke. I argued further that ignoring these types of messages is dangerous given their persuasive power. Since that time AAMA’s former president read this chapter and qualified his response. He explained that on balance he can take a joke, even ethnic jokes. The issue for him is one of balance. Given the context of our discussion he prioritized the two statements, which lead him to argue that the TV statement was much more hurtful.
CHAPTER 4

IDENTITIES ON THE MOVE:
DIASPORAS, DEMONIZING DISCOURSES, AND DANCING THE HAFLI

Having set up some of the historical context that effected Arab-American immigration and the political conditions that gave rise to AAMA, I turn now to my analysis. In this chapter I analyze three dimensions of Arab-American identity negotiations. Using the interviews that I conducted with AAMA’s founding and enduring members, interviews that attend to issues of diaspora, migration and immigrant identities, I examine the ways in which members of AAMA negotiate what diaspora means to them. Then I treat some of the demonizing discourses and material practices that affect Arab-American identities. At the end of this chapter I examine the ways in which the haflı is a key event in which Arab-American identities are at once enacted, celebrated, and negotiated.

Before I begin my analysis I want to clarify how Sense-Making shapes my work. While I do not provide an orthodox Sense-Making analysis, it bears on almost every aspect of my project, particularly given that all of the long interviews that I did were constructed from Sense-Making questions. Here I think it is important to remind readers
of the primary Sense-Making metaphors of situation, gap, and bridge. In the first section of my analysis the utility of Sense-Making is most visible in the questions that I used to elicit the processes through which people negotiate diasporas. I rely on the Sense-Making metaphor much more closely in the next section, where I discuss the many ways that stereotypes and demonizing practices affect the production and maintenance of Arab-American identities. And in the final section I apply the metaphor in general terms at the end of my analysis, rather than invoking it passage by passage, for two reasons. First, given the amount of material that I gathered and the range of passages that I invoke, a one-by-one application would be too painstakingly tedious. Second, during the course of the interviews there were times when I was so struck by the substantive level of what people were saying that my follow-up questions also addressed that substantive level, rather than the extracting and triangulating elements. As a result of these detours, I could not always demonstrate how people processed situations, gaps, and bridging strategies in every single instance.

**Negotiating Diasporas**

I began this project with an interest in the ways in which everyday people negotiate diasporic identities. By everyday people I mean those individuals whose lives might be affected by diasporic cultural and political practices yet who are not scholars working on the concept. Since the majority of the work that has been done on diaspora shows up in literary criticism and other modes of textual analysis, most notably analysis of film and of travel writing, my hunch was that people living in diasporic conditions
would negotiate whatever diaspora might mean to them differently than what analyses of
texts have thus far suggested. What I found is that most people either don’t think about
the concept, they don’t know what it is, or it is not something they want to talk about.
Yet for those who did think through the concept their negotiations of it were striking to
me on a number of levels.

Before I begin tapping into these experiences of and reflections on diaspora, I
first want to profile the people whom I interviewed, noting the occasions on which we
met, the level of formality, and degrees of comfort. I did nineteen total interviews, nine of
which I recorded on videotape during two of the haflis that AAMA produced. These
particular interviews were relatively short, ranging from five to twenty minutes in length.
In them I asked questions about what role the haflī plays for Arab Americans and how the
event is significant for the organization. The last nine interviews that I conducted were
much longer Sense-Making interviews.¹ It was during these interviews, as well as
through casual conversations that I had with members over the last five years, that I
gained a deeper understanding of what diasporic experience means for some individuals.
Each of the nine longer interviews that I conducted took place either in the homes of
members, usually over a meal, or else in coffee shops or restaurants. One of the
interviews went on for nearly three hours, so we broke that one down into two sessions.

I think it is important to mention that by the time I did the longer Sense-Making
interviews I had developed a close relationship with each of my interviewees. They have
known me for the last five years; they have seen me active in many of the organization’s
activities, such protests, picnics, haflis, dinner parties, public lectures, retreats, weddings,
and subcommittee meetings. I think that this enduring interaction made them more willing to open up and share significant and often painful life experiences with me. If I tried to do these interviews five or even four years ago, I doubt I would have been able to tap into their stories of joy, personal tragedy, life struggles, and political commitments.

Several other background features are also worth noting. All of the nine people whom I interviewed extensively are highly educated. All of them have at least a bachelor's degree. One has a law degree, one a master's degree, another has a Ph.D., and another is getting a Ph.D. Four individuals are Palestinian, three are Lebanese, one is Jordanian, and one is Saudi Arabian. Six are men and three are women. Their ages ranged from 32 to 58, with the majority in their mid-forties. Only three of them were born and raised in this country and all three of them are Lebanese. Of these three Lebanese individuals, two are Christian and one is Muslim. The other six people with whom I did long interviews are all Muslims, and all six of them are first generation Arab-Americans who have attained citizenship in this country. All of the first generation Arab-Americans came to this country in the late seventies, with the exception of one who came in 1990. Four of the men in my study had been business partners with each other; now each of them has his own convenience or grocery store.

One other observation is necessary here. While the number of people with whom I conducted long interviews is relatively small, the amount of data that emerged from the interviews is quite extensive. These nine long interviews alone yielded one hundred twenty single-spaced pages of transcripts. When I add to that the videotaped interviews, I have over one hundred sixty single spaced pages of interview data. But the interviews
are not the sole basis of my analysis, as I mentioned in Chapter Two. I have been involved with AAMA since 1995, and I consider all of our interactions, regardless of the level of formality, as ethnographic encounters. In fact, some of the most interesting stories that I collected came in the most informal of settings, when we were driving home after interviews, during casual phone conversations, or at more or less social get-togethers. The diversity of experiences that we have had together has been quite valuable. Some of the more formal interactions, such as board meetings, yielded the least interesting data, while the stories that crept into the formal discourse and the joking performances, in particular, were most revealing with respect to identity.

As for the interview data that is presented below, the direct quotations are left in their original form (the form in which they appear on the transcript). The "um’s" and "ah’s," pauses, ungrammatical expressions, and repetitions appear, mine as well as theirs, because I chose to leave the natural thought processes of people in place rather than altering the data.

I open with Yasmine, a Palestinian woman from the West Bank. I begin with Yasmine because she is the only person who explicitly identified herself as being diasporic, and her negotiations of diasporic experience provide one of the most revealing cases of this form of identity negotiation. The first question that I asked people is: given that you are one of many people who are living in a place that is not the homeland of your ancestors, how do you think about it, particularly given that academics have so many concepts for this experience, like immigrant, exile, diaspora, migrant laborer, student, etc.? Yasmine stated that she sees herself as having a diasporic life, one that has
forced her “to live between two cultures.” Yet how that has unfolded is tied to her upbringing and to the conditions that prompted her family to leave Palestine. Yasmine’s father was an Imam, a graduate of Al Azhar University in Cairo, and in her words, “he was a very powerful man.” Yasmine’s family came to this country because her father was engaged to be the Imam in a medium-sized Midwestern city when she was eleven. The repercussions of their departure left an indelible mark on Yasmine. She explained that

when I came it was because of my dad. It was because of, you know, his position that um he came. Um, he stayed partly because he couldn’t go back. Um after ‘67, you know, the West Bank was repossessed so, um you know, by the Israelis took over and a lot of his land was repossessed by them. Um, and also because he had left um completely, you know, with his whole family; he could not return to live there. So that’s why we stayed, because he was going to be here only for a few years. (Yasmine transcript, lines 36-41).

While Yasmine’s family was not forced to leave Palestine, they had no choice about whether or not they could return.

It was very difficult for Yasmine in her youth because she was not allowed to interact with American children, except for her schooling. She summarized her father’s position as follows:

his feelings was that um if I would interact with the American children, that I would become Americanized. And to him, you know, the so-called American was somebody with loose morals and you know somebody that um does not adhere to what he believes, you know, would be our Islamic beliefs. (Yasmine transcript lines 48-51).

I asked Yasmine what was difficult or hurtful about her upbringing and she explained that

I felt isolated. I felt very isolated. Yeah. I felt very separate. I felt um how can I say it, it made me feel angry; it made feel um what can I say? Angry, I think would have been the best word for it. There would be other things, you know, in my life that actually affected that too and brought out a lot of anger. But, um, the
overwhelming one is, is that he did not want me to interact with American kids. So as far as he was concerned, the only way to do that is by keeping me home. (Yasmine transcript lines 62-66).

On the other hand when I asked her to reflect on what positive impacts might have emerged from this sort of isolation she concluded that

um it helped me keep my iden--, identity longer. Um being a Palestinian, I was mad at it, and yet um the books I read, the most that I talked to with the people around us was about Palestine. Um, so it kept my culture, I guess, more relevant in my life. And, uh, and that’s, so those are the two good things that came of that, um. (Yasmine transcript lines 93-96)

When I pushed her and said, “you’ve only mentioned one thing, what was the second?” she continued,

um well let me just… currently, I’ve gone back to it in terms of my current life. Yeah, it’s really funny, in that I’ve come back and partly because I now see the reason why. Before, you know, I didn’t see the reason why. I wasn’t clear on it, because I was young and when you’re young, you know, all you see is what’s going on around you and you’re not a part of it, that you’re isolated from it. You don’t see the bad things going on and how you’d fall into that. Um, and so, now that I see why and the reason behind it, you know, I have more respect for it. And, it has made me work harder at being a Palestinian and working with the Arab community and uh, it, it brought back my faith, so I’m more in working with the Muslim community now. (Yasmine transcript, lines 101-106).

These questions led Yasmine to reflect on the ways in which she saw the spiraling effects of her life. She saw the isolation that came with her upbringing leading her to rebel and go wild when she went to college; yet once she had her son she saw herself coming back almost full circle to her Palestinian Muslim identity. And for that she thanks the values that her family instilled in her.

It was only when we began talking about Yasmine’s relationship to her son that the effects of living two lives, between two cultures, became visible. That Yasmine’s son is not fully Palestinian sparked several identity issues for her. Her son’s father is North
American and has an Anglo-Saxon background. So when she mused over her son’s Palestinian identity it raised many questions for her.

Um, and that’s why it’s hard you know, cuz, I, I don’t want to oppress him. I don’t want him um to be something that he’s not. Um, I mean, OK, for instance, for me there are times when I think, you know, someday I would like to go to the Middle East to live, you know what I mean, but that’s something he would never think of. You know, that’s not in his mind. You know, to him being Arab is a cultural thing; it’s not a livable thing. I don’t know how to explain that. It’s um far away. When I take him to the Middle East, you know, he has a really hard time speaking the language, so he really doesn’t feel like it’s his country; he doesn’t feel like he’s a part of the people. You know, he feels like he’s a visitor. While, I on the other hand, you know, that’s when it becomes the most apparent to me. When I go back there, I feel like I’m part of something, you know, part of my people. Even though I still feel a little bit removed from it. I don’t feel like I belong anymore, actually. I feel like I’m between two, two cultures. (Yasmine transcript, lines 254-263).

At this point, I merely repeated what she had just said, “you feel like you belong between two cultures?” And Yasmine qualified, “that I belong in between.”

Yasmine’s experiences are striking because in some ways they speak to many of the dimensions that the literature on diasporas reveals, particularly the feelings of alienation, of not being able to go back home, and feeling liminal. She communicated several registers of what Gilroy articulates as double consciousness. Yasmine’s life experience also adds another layer of identity negotiation, that being the pressures on your sense of identity when your child is not only culturally hybrid, but also ethnically mixed. In many ways this is a source of pain for Yasmine, that her son, in her mind, is only Palestinian culturally. His Americanness makes her aware of the ways in which she too is Americanized. This negotiation comes to life between lines 260 and 263. At first when Yasmine distinguishes herself from her son she says he is just a visitor while she feels a part of something, part of her people. Then she realizes that she does indeed feel
removed to the point that she really lives in between two cultures. As in the literature that I reviewed in Chapter One, the question becomes how you live with a difference inside a host nation-state. For Yasmine, one part of living inside with a difference is her many activities with the Arab and Muslim communities, finding people with whom she can speak the language, cook the food, and pick grape leaves.

Yasmine’s experience also attends to another condition of diaspora that Clifford theorizes: the tension between returning to one’s homeland and deferral of this return. Many scholars wrangle over whether or not diasporas are effected out of choice or from force. Yasmine’s family did choose to leave Palestine; however, when they left they did not foresee the impossibility of returning later. So in this case, at least, the possibility of return is much more salient than the conditions under which they left.

While Yasmine was the only person who self-identified as being diasporic, others did reflect on what diaspora means. Passion, a Palestinian man, also contributed to the complexity of the conversation. Passion is from a city that is now considered a part of Israel. He has both Israeli and American citizenship, privileges that Palestinians in the West Bank do not enjoy. In fact Jamil, whom I also interviewed, said in Passion’s presence, “you carry two of the world’s most powerful passports.” Coming from the West Bank Jamil does not have the option of either Palestinian or Israeli citizenship. Thus when Passion travels he is not harassed to the extent to which West Bank residents like Jamil are. Passion identified himself, in terms of his early migration to the United States, as a student. Now, however, he identifies himself as an immigrant. Yet unlike the others whom I interviewed who consider themselves immigrants, Passion has always
intended to return to Palestine to live permanently once he completes his Ph.D. He said he doesn’t see diaspora as reflecting his experience because he has always chosen to come to this country. He was not pushed out or even exclusively pulled in. So it is striking that for some people choice is what characterizes diaspora, while for others like Passion force, or at least pressure, is a defining characteristic.

Passion did qualify in more detail what he sees as an Arab diaspora in the United States and he articulated his sense of it through his reflections on Arab-American immigration to this country. He mentioned that in the early days many Arabs were compelled either to hide or to ignore their ethnic heritage because there was not an appreciation for diversity in this country until recently--the melting pot of culture and assimilation kept people from expressing themselves. Whereas for Passion I always flaunted it. I flaunted being an Arab because it was so important to me that even when, if there were negative consequences I was willing to take it. I wasn’t willing to hide my identity for any favorable gain. And eh but I understand why some others would do that. One thing specifically that was surprising to me is an Arab professor of Arabic language who was developing an Arabic language program at a university did not teach his daughter Arabic in order to, because he thought she would fit in better if she did not have an accent. His own daughter does not speak Arabic! (Passion transcript, lines 304-311)

He then attributed the loss of Arab identity to the second generation, and for him it was the second generation that conforms to what he imagines as diaspora, that is, people who don’t know the Arab world, have never been there, and don’t speak the language. He continued but it’s ah interesting too that a lot of the Arabs who, like that daughter who grew up in an Arab home but not speaking Arabic and you know making everything in life mainstream average American ah American cultural whatever it is, all of those when they grow up realize that they have lost on their identity and they are reclaiming it. So all of those you see are involved in organizing Arab
communities and activists in ah various ways in the Arab community in the United States. (Passion transcript, lines 346-352)

Passion’s reflections on how diaspora affects the second and third generations of Arab-Americans stretched my sense of the concept. It stands to reason that when ethnic groups realize that they have lost their sense of identity and decide that reclaiming it is important they will then reconnect, organize, advocate, and negotiate their ways of living inside the United States with a difference. And for them building collective identities and a sense of solidarity is as important as recovering an individual sense of identity. Yet the literature on diaspora does not take stock of this sort of phenomena very explicitly. Much of the literature focuses on new arrivals, particularly new arrivals from the postcolonial world.

Other interviews added even more nuances and complexities to the phenomenon of diaspora. BB, a woman of Lebanese decent, spoke to the experience of losing touch with the material culture that is disappearing from generation to generation. Born and raised in this country, “fully American yet with pride in her Arab heritage,” BB sees diaspora in two ways. Initially she thought of it as relating most specifically to the Palestinian condition. Yet as she began thinking about the concept in terms of her own family she concluded that there are two ways in which the term is relevant for her. First she told me that

I think it’s one of the reasons I’m sad that my American-Syrian family, for the most part, not, not all of them, but you know, I don’t know, like, say, sixty people about five seem to care? Um so I’d hate to see connections severed. We’ve got family of the same family in Syria in um Sao Paola, Brazil, and in American, spread, and in America they’re spread out all over creation, I mean West Coast to East Coast, most on the East Coast. And it would be really cool if plane tickets
were cheap enough that we could all have a reunion in Syria sometime. (BB transcript, lines 1312-1318)

Then I asked BB, “so if you were—if someone said, if you had to define diaspora, what, what would it look like to you, what does it mean?” (BB transcript, lines 1319-1320).

She replied, “it means that my granddaughter’s granddaughters would go to haflis some day” (BB transcript, line 1321). In one breath BB touches on the scattered dimension of diaspora and the implications of having severed relations, only imagining how “cool” a return to Syria would be, if only for a temporary visit, while in the next breath diaspora for BB means that her children’s children will keep in step with their Arab heritage and the haflis is a key space for that identity work.

Earlier in our conversation BB reflected on the fact that so many indigenous Arab practices are disappearing, a disappearance which ended up for her being associated with diasporic life. She told me about the life of her grandmother, who raised nine children and took care of her mother-in-law in a two room house about twenty-five feet in width, forty feet in length.

My grandma was living like this, ok? And they worked; they knew how to work the land. The relationship the average person has with the land, I’ve seen go; people don’t know how to make their own sausage, butcher their own lambs, um out in Garden City we had what we called “little hellhole” where the um multi families and the Latifs and I remember when some PLO delegates came, they killed a goat and butchered it, and we were up til four in the morning, because you have to boil the goat a long time and all they had was an old goat. If they had a younger one, they’d go home at two in the morning? And this contact with the blood of the animal, the dirt and the soil and all this stuff, it goes more and more and more. It’s so much easier to go to the import store and buy a four dollar package of shanklesh, or to some of the newer markets, you know, springing up all over the place here now, and just buy a pound of ground halal lamb, you know? (BB transcript, lines 1148-1160)
BB also bemoaned the disappearance of other practices like making cheese balls out of cottage cheese, shanklesh, and special breads, such as mara‘aq. She told me that even though she was not able to take her daughter to haflis while she was growing up BB did take her out to local parks and taught her how to pick grape leaves. That her daughter knows how to pick and make grape leaves is very important to BB.

Of all of the people whom I interviewed it was only BB who brought up the issue of vanishing practices. I think that this is tied to Passion’s point about the second and third generations of Arab-Americans. BB is a third generation Arab-American whose father is not of Arab descent. He is from Western Europe and he disciplined BB’s identity when she was growing up. Her father did not allow her to express her Arab identity, not even through food, dance, or language. Thus assimilation is relevant in terms of the disappearance of indigenous practices in BB’s case. Yet she puts her finger on another dimension of diaspora, that being what happens when the host culture is not conducive to indigenous practices of slaughtering animals, religious expression, or the modesty of one’s dress. These are issues that temper the conditions of diasporic life.

Only Yasmine, Passion, and BB talked explicitly about diasporas, yet others, particularly Rami and Jamil, expressed struggles in their lives that in many ways reflect diasporic experience. Rami is also a Palestinian man. He came to this country in the late seventies as a student, though now that he has American citizenship he identifies himself as an immigrant. He comes from the West Bank of Palestine and has a lot of extended family from his home town living around him in nearby cities.
While I never asked Rami any question that specifically addressed the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank, when I asked him how his life was different back home than it is here several disturbing issues emerged about what life under the Occupation back home is like. Contrasting that life to his American immigrant experience Rami explained that

You have a real good life here, the freedom people enjoy. And uh everything is available, what you want to do, where you want to go. It’s no uh no borders. You can travel from east to west without anyone asking you questions. And that’s um a lot different than what we have there. (Rami transcript, lines 36-39)

Inevitably our conversation turned to the conditions in which he lived back home. He told me of the several occasions when he was detained and put in jail by Israeli police.

When I asked “for what,” he told me

for being active as a Palestinian, so they came picked me up, about three different times they throw me in jail. And that was one of the reasons why I had to come to America, just to travel, to get away from there. (Rami transcripts, lines 63-66)

When I asked him to unpack the negative impacts of these experiences he told me several accounts of mistreatment. I include the one that struck me the most.

The negative impact, that uh their accusation, their torture in jail. I mean one time they took about eh forty people of us. They put us in a very small room. It’s hard. You couldn’t even stand up. They pick us in a truck and it’s completely covered from the back—all standing up just like a bunch of animals. They put us there and we didn’t know where we were going. They covered our eyes and we just, we didn’t know where we were going until we got there in a dark room. (Rami transcript, lines 111-116)

Given that Rami had to leave just to be able to travel and to enjoy a good life it seemed important to him to maintain an immigrant identity. I can only speculate why diaspora did not enter his thoughts or why he would not talk about it. His experience seems to fit with many of the classic conditions of diaspora such as feeling pressure to leave one’s
home just to enjoy freedom and a decent quality of life. When he returns to the West Bank he is constantly harassed at Ben Gurion Airport, and the city in which his family lives is so divided that Palestinians cannot even enter the city proper; it is restricted exclusively to Israelis. However Rami did give me some clues as to why defining himself as an immigrant is so important to him. When we reached the point in the interview where issues of visibility emerged with respect to Arab-Americans I asked Rami, "So how does that visibility connect to your current life?" He replied, with much emotion, "It's very good to me. It's always been good, you know, and we want to be eh modern people who want to be educated, who want to be part of the system" (Rami transcript, lines 155-157).

Earlier in Chapter One I argued that the experience of being an immigrant does not equal diasporic experience and I invoked Clifford to make this point. But now I'm not so sure that there are discrete boundaries between these two experiences. Rami is not interested in a fast and furious assimilation. It is very important for him that his children know about Palestine, speak Arabic, and grow up in an Arab-identified home. Most of his friends and confidants are Arab-Americans of all generations, and he maintains many political allegiances and cultural practices that keep him connected to his homeland. Yet the marker of immigrant is vitally important to him and to many other first generation Arab-Americans whose lives could also be read as diasporic. I think that for Rami and others like him the idea of diaspora is tied to victim status, and for them that is both painful and restrictive. In any case, both of these registers of identity are much more slippery than the literature indicates. Immigrant status invites recognition from the
greater non-Arab population in ways that diaspora may not. Yet diasporas offer other outlets for solidarity that include Arab populations while also crossecuting ethnic and cultural alliances. His experience illuminates how negotiating multiple national attachments complicates one’s identity.

Diasporas and Shifting Time-Spaces

One other feature of diaspora merits some discussion here. More often than not diaspora is conceptualized in spatial terms as a site that somehow connects dispersed groups in remote locales. The consequence of this emphasis on spatiality is that the temporal dimension of diaspora almost disappears. Yasmine’s interview made me keenly aware of the time dimension that is at work in diasporas. As she talked about Arab time as opposed to American time she spoke of two different experiences in the world. Arab time is often an internal joke within the Arab-American community; usually someone makes fun of somebody else when they are running late and says, “oh well, so and so is running on Arab time.” Yet when outsiders start making assumptions that Arabs are slow or lazy because they have a different sense of time such implications are painful for Arab-Americans. Yasmine told me a story that she recalled that exemplifies this point. The story was triggered by my question, “um does it confuse you that they [non Arab-Americans] could have that sort of understanding of Arabs [referring to the aforementioned stereotypes]?”

Yes. It makes me angry, because it’s a misconception. Um I’ll tell you an example. I, I read in, it was an occupational therapy journal, this woman that was living in the Caribbean to work for about six months and um the woman that was in charge of the program asked her to dinner. (She was Arab). Uh, oh, she asked,
"what time should I come?" and she said, "oh around five," you know. Well she arrived at five. Well the woman hasn't even cooked, wasn't even dressed, was just. She was shocked that she came. She's like "what are you doing here?" She said, "Well you said five." She said "Well, uh yeah." But to her five meant like seven. (Yasmine transcript, lines 566-573).

This example for Yasmine explains how Arabs think about time. It is more relaxed and delayed, and if one is late it is not the end of the world. Yet as she continued reflecting on her own life the contradictions between the part of her that runs on American time and her desire to be more in tune with Arab time surfaced. When she separated herself from being Arab she told me that:

To this day I don't know how they get things done. But they do. You know, they do, and I don't know how. You know it just boggles my mind, how do they have jobs, how do they do with their kids, how do they, you know, I have to organize myself, I have lists to do. You know, and if I don't have it, I sit around and do nothing. You know, I don't work off, oh should I do this, and start working toward it. I have to be a little bit more focused, whereas they seem to be doing a lot of things at once. And it gets done. Somehow it gets done! (Yasmine transcript, lines 648-655)

In a strange way she had to objectify herself and Arabs to think through the differences in time/space; in this sense one can see a me/they mentality emerging. Yet there was always a desire to be more relaxed about her pace of life. Yasmine went so far as to say that she wished that she could get over an RSVP mentality. She told me that when you invite Arabs to a function everybody just comes, while the American way is to over-organize. However the contradiction between time patterns surfaced again when Yasmine told me that once she was invited to a wedding, and she waited so long to respond to the RSVP that the hostess had to call her, and for that she felt guilt. The experience of two overlapping senses of time is schizophrenic for her. When she is running on Arab time her American sensibilities make her feel guilty; they tell her to do,
do, do, yet when she works on American time the result is often stress and the feeling of running around like a harried rat.

Yasmine told me one more story that demonstrates her negotiation of and frustrations over time differences. I quote it at length because it is quite revealing. I asked Yasmine, “Did you have past experiences where you had a similar kind of experience between Arab time and American time colliding?”

She said:

um well uh partly when I went to the Middle East. Um on our trips to the Middle East if I took the Arab airline, you never knew when you were leaving, you know. It could be that day; it could be two days later, you know? You never knew! Um, and, you know, you never knew if the plane was working or not. You know, I mean, people are a little more fatalistic than I was. I mean, I had, I, I don’t know if I told you, but I had to fly through the Middle East and I was sticking out of the airline and they were trying to fix the plane and it wasn’t working. They had to find a part, and we ended up spending the night, and we didn’t leave until a day and a half later, and, so you know? Here I was stressing out about it, and they’re like, “what’s the big deal? They’ll get there eventually. Enjoy it while, you know, while it lasts. It might be fine, you never know.” And you know what, to this day, that was more fun for me. I still remember it, and I actually even though I mean, I sit and complain about it, it has fond memories with it. You know I met wonderful people, um my son and I, you know, we had an adventure together. You know? We really had an adventure together. We had no clothes, no nothing, and we’re trying to get food, to get, you know at two o’clock in the, it was an adventure. And I still remember it. And it’s really with a pleasant feeling. . . .

(Yasmine transcript, lines 731-749)

Knowing Yasmine and her commitment to organization it became clear to me that these experiences of time difference are yet another effect of negotiating diaspora. It reflects another dimension of feeling separated whether she is here or there, wanting to adjust to the rhythm of life in both places, yet having to negotiate how to live somewhere in between two worlds both spatially and temporally.
Section Summary

Thus far I have made several points about diaspora that shape the argument that I am developing. The question is, what do these narratives and life experiences tell us about diaspora and identity? Much as in the literature discussed earlier, there is a tension between those who assume that diasporas are formed by force as opposed to those who emphasize the elements of choice. Two of my interlocutors who are indeed affected by diasporic conditions, one directly, the other more indirectly, assume that diasporas are the result of force. However, if one pushes the question of choice it is necessary to ask, who is making the choices and under what conditions? Second, in some cases the question of choice is moot. Groups may choose to leave their homelands with the intention of going back, yet for Palestinians the possibility of returning no longer exists. Returning for many groups goes beyond deferral, a continuing process of delay that is negotiated against the benefits that exist in the host country. In many cases returning is foreclosed by multiple modes of state power. And the impossibility of returning is just as important with respect to diasporas as is the issue of force or choice when leaving.

The experiences of my interviewees also tie into other patterns of diasporic yearning. Many people who have immigrated here, who came as students, or who were forced to leave with their families for other reasons would rather be in their native countries. That is, in an ideal world they would rather be back home. In reality people in diaspora negotiate a tension between two poles of dissatisfaction: when you are here you long to be there, but when you are back “home” you wish you were here because you just can’t take the conditions of daily life back there. This experience brings to life the
liminality that arises when groups are scattered across the globe, having one foot in their host country, the other back home.

I certainly do not intend to valorize or essentialize what “back home” or the idea of homeland means to the people with whom I have worked. I use this language because it is important for many of them just to say the words “back home.” I think this is another effect of diaspora; the longer one is away from home the more romantic one becomes about it. On the other hand, when it comes to those who are less romantic and even openly angry about the state of the Arab world, their sentiments shift away from home as an actual space to home as the enactment of cultural practices. This echoes Ghosh’s point, which I invoked in Chapter One. He argues that “diaspora is oriented not so much to roots in a specific place and a desire to return as around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations” (Ghosh, cited in Clifford, 1998, p. 249). I argued earlier, perhaps naively, that both phenomena can happen at once, yet my research is leading me to see that people are divided on this issue, or at least they communicate their sense of attachment in either a rooted, romantic fashion, or through the need to make a definite break from their former homes.

Another point that surfaced in my analysis concerns the second, third, and fourth generations of Arab-Americans who are struggling to reclaim an identity that has been washed away after years of assimilation. These generations of Arab-Americans experience modes of alienation similar to those of the first generation. Actually what they have communicated is more akin to a deep desire or longing to know the Arab world, the Arabic language, and other indigenous cultural practices. Not knowing how to
do things like making Shanklesh or mara’aq can be its own form of small yet violent loss. Whereas the first generation knows the Arab world and experiences many registers of estrangement from it, the successive generations of Arab-Americans born outside the Arab world feel alienated because some have never known it. Anderson (1983) contends that “nationalism and nation-ness is a cultural artifact of a particular kind” (p. 4). Unpacking his definition, he argues further that “the nation is an imagined political community—and imagined as both as inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 6). Extending this point, he concludes that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). I think Anderson’s idea that nations are indeed imagined communities bears on those generations of Arab-Americans who are trying to reclaim their Arab identities. They too want to have multiple national attachments. Thus they immerse themselves into Arabic, the political arena, and events like the hafti which give them a sense of the community that they so passionately desire. Even when people identify as immigrants or as American citizens many of their life experiences reflect diasporic cultural and political practices.

And finally, the experience of time difference points to yet another dimension of diasporic life. In many ways, the experience of time opens up another layer of double consciousness, the sensation of living between two worlds. While I do not have sufficient data to theorize the time dimension of diaspora fully, I think that the experience of time, the ways in which it is embodied and shifts across space, is a distinguishing marker of diaspora. It is yet another marker of difference, one that forces people to live
betwixt and between multiple words depending on how much traveling they have done. I suspect that the literature on travel, travel writing, and travelling cultures can shed light on this phenomenon if the question is raised.

Embodying Difference: Terrorists or Terrorized Identities?

While negative stereotypes about Arabs abound in this country, I did not originally plan to focus on them in much detail. A fair amount of literature treats this issue and I did not think that I would have to further explore this phenomenon in order to study identity, but this turned out to be a truly erroneous assumption. Since so many of my interviewees could not separate practices of demonization from their sense of what it means to be Arab-American, stereotypes emerged as an unavoidable identity issue, and one that may well bear on diasporic life.

Four cases were particularly interesting with respect to stigma and identity negotiation. I begin with Jafar who is a Saudi Arabian man who came to this country in the late seventies as a student. When I asked him the same question as everyone else ("how do you think about not living in the homeland of your ancestors given the categories of diaspora, exile, immigrant, etc.?"), he went immediately to the issue of demonization of Arabs and Muslims, completely skipping what I actually asked him. In direct response to the question he said,

I think uh for me personally um and perhaps this is the case for other Arabs or Muslims in general, the um sort of demonization of the Arabs and Muslims in this society in general and in Hollywood through films, through the newspapers and so forth compels us to be conscious about our identity almost on a sort of constant basis. (Jafar transcript, lines 9-12)
Yet popular culture is not the only site where stigma bears on identity. Stigma also arises with issues related to politics.

Well it’s not so much pop culture; it’s I think there is a love/hate relationship that’s present at least in my mind and I believe in many others. You love everything about America: freedom of expression, the opportunities, um the ah overall structure of the system internally, ah but you hate a lot of things in terms of its foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis the Arab world. So there is that sense of alienation there um for you to feel completely part of it, you have to, to some extent, ascribe to a certain degree of the foreign policy vis-à-vis the traditional homeland and that’s not something I like to do. (Jafar transcripts lines 19-25)

While Jafar did not go into particular stories about demonization as many others did, he moved through two different situations; the first attends to media-driven forms of denigration and the second is tied to United States foreign policy. These situations created two tiers of gaps for Jafar, the first of which is expressed in his sense of alienation. The foreign policy level of hatred is perhaps more alienating for Jafar than discourse-driven stereotypes. The Gulf War is particularly painful for him as one who comes from the region where the war took place, and this issue surfaced a number of times during the course of our interview.

When I pushed further and asked Jafar what he saw as the negative impact of this demonization, he concluded

not feeling an integral, complete part, or as a citizen in this country because there is still that connection and there is still that alienation brought by the combination of the demonization generally of the Arab or Muslims in the media and the foreign policy. (Jafar transcript, lines 35-38)

And when I asked what this has lead to for Arab-Americans he explained that

“to some extent, this has brought us together because there is a sort of we are in a sense compelled to be conscious of our identity because of the culture surrounding it” (Jafar
transcript, lines 40-41). The positive outcome of this compulsion, in his words, is that "it gets communities organized" (Jafar transcript 44). So organizing becomes a bridge between the situations in which stereotypes and anti-Arab foreign policy are manifested, situations which cause the gap of feeling alienated and not fully integrated as a citizen. For Jafar the layering of these situations has led to another gap in terms of his negotiation of identity, that being the extreme sense of moral dilemma that comes with his U.S. citizenship. Because the Gulf War was always in the back of his mind, he explained this citizenship dilemma in the context of military service. And here again he mused that if he were called to serve in a war against Arab countries, his only sense of a bridge is to exercise his right to be a conscientious objector.

Two other people told me stories that touched on the material levels at which difference is embodied for Arab-Americans. Eddie is one of the founding members of AAMA. He is a third-generation Arab-American of Lebanese descent. His grandfather immigrated to the United States shortly after the turn of the century, and at the age of sixteen Eddie’s father joined his grandfather here in this country. As was the case for many early immigrant families both Eddie’s father and grandfather came from a small village in the south of Lebanon, and like many of his local villagers his father was a shepherd back in Lebanon. However, unlike ninety-five percent of early immigrants from this region, Eddie’s family is Muslim. After we finished our interview and as we drove back to his house Eddie told me a story about his father and grandfather that still astounds me. He told me that about four years before his death his father said to Eddie, “Come on, let’s go to the city.” When he asked why his dad told him that he had some business
there. So they went. They drove to the cemetery where Eddie’s grandfather is buried. Eddie’s father had brought a hammer and chisel with him, which struck Eddie as odd. When they arrived at his grandfather’s grave Eddie’s father told him to stand guard. There was a Star of David on Eddie’s grandfather’s headstone, and his dad was soon hard at work hammering it off. As Eddie explained it, “people knew so little about Islam at the time that they assumed when you died that if you were not Christian that you must be Jewish!” He told me that his dad talked to his Imam about and his dad must have been thinking about this situation for some time. The Imam told him in no uncertain terms, “You’ve got to get that off of there.” And so he did (personal communication, June 12, 2000).

While this incident does not reveal any type of insidious stereotype, it does demonstrate the level of ignorance that was operating in this country just thirty years ago. And though it may have been an honest mistake, it left its mark on Eddie’s family symbolically, materially, and certainly religiously.

Francis also encountered the marking of difference on multiple levels. Francis is also a third generation Arab-American of Lebanese descent whose grandparents immigrated to this country in the late nineteenth century. She grew up Catholic and considers her Catholic upbringing and schooling as an integral part of her Arab-American identity. During our interview Francis made a point of telling me that she grew up with a sense of difference. When I asked her if she had any questions or confusions about growing up with a sense of difference she explained that “certainly because sometimes people would call us names, anything from darkie, to foreigner, to um mackerel snapper,
to camel jockey” (Francis transcript, lines 25-26). She did qualify that this form of name-calling only happened about five percent of the time and when it did there were many family members around who would provide comfort and instilled pride in her heritage. Yet when I asked her to think about other ways in which she experienced barriers or constraints with respect to growing up with a sense of difference, she revealed more painful experiences of hatred.

There was osterization uh in housing. [I asked, “your whole family? You mean when your family would move somewhere?”] My family moved to a very exclusive part of the city and it wound up that my father lost the business and the house. Uh the Ku Klux Klan had come and burned a cross in front of our home. (Francis transcript, lines 37-40)

While this situation was certainly a hurtful event in Francis’ life, she bridged the many gaps that came out of it—feeling different, ostracized, and bereft—through her decision to become a lawyer. When I asked her, “is there anything at all that maybe came out of that experience as positive?” she explained that

Yaa. I decided to become a lawyer. I saw my father cry. And I decided you know, maybe law is something that I should study to help save this from happening to other people as well as my own family. (Francis transcripts, lines 44-47)

In and through her work as an attorney and political activist Francis has created bridging strategies for herself and her community that not only give her peace of mind but also a productive venue to assert her identity.

BB, much like Jafar, immediately associated the experience of being Arab-American with insidious stereotypes. BB and I entered our discussion about stigma after she remembered what she considers one of her first Arab-American experiences. This was the first situation that she addressed.
um that I can remember is the 1967 War, I was probably in the seventh grade, and I, we, my mom and I were watching the Merv Griffin Show after she came home from work. She was a school secretary. And uh they basically sat there and told dumb Arab jokes. (BB transcript, lines 23-26)

When I asked her to reflect on how that makes her feel now she explained that “it ended up, for me being, becoming the first of a long line of what I call ‘blood-boiling’ days.”

So the gap that this denigration led to is clearly anger. “Um you just have days sometimes where you get so angry you could kick your foot through a door” (BB transcript, lines 32-34). When I asked her if she had confusions or questions about that, she asked me what I meant by confusion. So I reframed the question and asked if the “dumb Arab jokes” surprised her in any way. This lead us to her next reflection

No. Um I know when we began the Arab-American internet list, a lot of people on there talked about the uh Jewish-owned media in America, and I said, no, no, that’s a racist statement. Okay. But I have no problem talking about the pro-Israeli media in America, cuz that is so true. (BB transcript lines, 41-46)

Thinking about the dumb Arab jokes propelled BB back and forth into her history, a constant movement through time-space that lead us to the next series of situations, the trajectories of which uncovered more layers of demonization. The impact of the pro-Israeli media for BB is that

um people look at the Arabs as slobbering animals who are out to rape white women, kill Jews, you know, wipe their ass with oil, just, you go on and on. And the stereotypes are so negative, so insidious, so cruel, and it’s hard for me because I know many real live Arabs, I’ve only met them here in America, and they’re some of the kindest, gentlest people you’ll ever meet. (BB transcript, lines 79-83)

Like those of Jafar, Eddie, and Francis, BB’s strategies for bridging gaps are advocacy and education. Yet I also think it is important to note some of the assumptions that she is making in her last statement, particularly lines 79-80. As one who was born and raised in
this country with a mixed ethnicity, she assumes that the only real Arabs are those who
are born in the Arab world who have come here. Getting to know them and finding that
they are some of the kindest and gentlest people serves as a bridge for her, one that may
well have kept her from internalizing racism, and yet perhaps unconsciously her
assumption also points to an “us and them” difference. I will return to this particular
point in my conclusion.

BB unpacked several more implications of what she thinks a pro-Israeli media
means for Arab-Americans. One in particular illustrates how her identity negotiations are
tangled up in media coverage.

I remember during the Israeli invasion, this was a blood-boiling day, I listened to
NPR and uh the invasion finally happened in 1982. [I asked, “of Lebanon?”] Yes, of Lebanon, and somewhere along the line they said the Rashadia refugee camp
has been leveled, our blank and blank correspondent now goes to Israel for the
Israeli reaction. Now they just leveled a refugee camp and they go to Israel for the
Israeli response. Now how does that make you feel? (BB transcript lines 189-196)

The situation here is two-fold: the invasion itself is the first source of shock and pain,
while NPR’s coverage of it and their move to elicit the Israeli response is the second
layer. Clearly the gap is feeling erased, horrified, and in the dark in terms of the actual
details of what took place. Before she explained her bridging strategies, I simply
repeated the last thing that she had just said, and that was, how did that make you feel?
She started answering my question at the speed of an auctioneer.

“How does that make you feel, Israelis?” And that’s again where we were seeing
cartoons, editorial cartoons, where you would have a can of Raid bent over at the
waist squirting these bugs with khaffiyahs on their heads. Okay, I called NPR. I
called them and I screamed into the phone, this is where I had to go to
Toastmaster years, but I just screamed. I said I don’t give a f--k about the Israeli
reaction. How many people are dead? What happened? What really happened?
And they said, you know, a lot of people feel the same way you do. Well, you'll never hear that on the radio. But I gave them the name and phone of Jim Zogby which I had in my handy little Rolodex, or whatever I had back in those days. And then I hung up and I immediately called Jim and said “get ready, they’re going to call you.” And he was on National Public Radio that night. Okay!

Embedded in this rich story is yet another effect of the first two situations—the Raid scenario—which caused another blood-boiling moment for BB—another gap. Yet the bridging strategies that she enacted are equally powerful. The catharsis that came from calling NPR is the first bridge; then she referred back in time to Toastmasters. BB told me that in her past she went to Toastmasters to help her cope with anger and to articulate her sensibilities about politics and other issues better. So we have a reference to a past bridge. Then she called Zogby and prepared him for his NPR debut, which one can read as both another situation and as a bridge for BB and other Arab-Americans who experienced some relief just hearing an Arab-American perspective on the radio.

All of these stories reflect the ways in which Arab-Americans negotiate having terrorized identities. In almost every interview there is some reference to being typecast as terrorists which, I think, is the most painful and insidious of all of the stereotypes with which Arab Americans have to live. My analysis certainly does not exhaust the issue of stereotyping and demonization but it does reflect one of the ways in which identity, when put under pressure, is at once a catalyst for expression and advocacy while it is also an ever-lurking nemesis. I turn now to my analysis of the hafli to reconnect with the more productive and performative enactments of Arab-American identities, a move that will also bring into focus the organizational practices of AAMA.
What is the Hafli?

In Arabic the word hafli means party, and when haflis take place in the Arab world most often they are wedding or engagement haflis. Sometimes haflis are held to celebrate a birth but they are more commonly associated with marriage. In the United States, Arab-Americans have haflis as a forum to get people together to enjoy Arabic cultural practices, particularly given that traditional Arab weddings may occur only occasionally. I have attended four haflis in the United States in the last five years; two that were produced by AAMA, one at a national AAI conference, and one that was sponsored by an Eastern Orthodox Church. In each context the hafli had very similar features. In each context the hafli is a very formal event. No one wears casual clothes. Women's clothing ranged from semi-formal evening gowns and dresses to indigenous dresses. Virtually all of the men wore suits. Children of all ages attend haflis. It is not uncommon for an entire family to attend a hafli, including infants up to great grandparents and somehow they all last until early in the morning when the band finally can play no more.

Haflis usually include a dinner, though in the American context the food is not necessarily Arabic. AAMA has used several different locations for its haflis; of the two that I attended one took place in a major hotel and the other in a large party park. In both places getting Arabic food was impossible, so the menu was bland American fare: appetizers and a meal that included chicken, rice, a hint of a vegetable, salad, coffee, and desert. The price of the tickets also included unlimited soft drinks, coffee, or tea.
For AAMA, the *haflī* has an added dimension, that is, it also serves as a platform for the organization to reach the larger Arab-American community to inform them about AAMA’s accomplishments and upcoming agenda. Various members of AAMA usually make short presentations about issues relevant to the community, and when the timing is right local candidates take the opportunity to address this large forum of Arab-Americans. These activities are followed by an award ceremony in which AAMA commends members of the community at large for their work serving Arab-Americans. At some point in the evening, usually following the awards or at the beginning of the program, the President of AAMA gives an address that ranges from 10 to 20 minutes. After the organization completes this portion of the program the band plays and people dance until the facility closes down.

While Arabic food is not a necessary ingredient for a *haflī*, live Arabic music is mandatory. Thus AAMA spends a lot of time arranging, far in advance, a band that comes from a nearby metro area that has a very large Arab community. The particular band that AAMA uses is quite popular, and there have been times when it is booked seven or eight months in advance.

Organizing the *haflī* is a huge endeavor that takes months of planning. AAMA’s Vice President of Social and Cultural activities usually has the responsibility for organizing the event and constructs a special subcommittee just to produce the *haflī*. Getting the word out and selling tickets also takes a lot of time and energy. The organization has two advertising practices; they announce the event in their newsletter and they call people who are either on their membership lists or have come to *haflīs* in
the past. Word of mouth is also at work. Though the organization often hires
individuals to work the door, usually AAMA members also help out since many people
reserve their tickets in advance or buy them directly at the door. One of AAMA’s
members also serves as an MC and facilitates the evening’s presentations, and someone
or a group of people produces a program that has to be copied and distributed. Planning
overnight accommodations for the band is yet another task.

The Haflî as a Gathering Space

As I mentioned in Chapter One, after I attended my first AAMA haflî I was struck
by how many levels of space that it seemed to provide, spaces where people feel free to
let loose, have fun, and simply enjoy indigenous cultural practices. In the context of
AAMA it functions also in some sense as a political space, and for others it is a refuge
where it is safe to be an Arab. While I was surprised by some of the trajectories that my
interviews made visible, for the most part my interlocutors not only validated my
assumptions but they also gave them some flesh. So in the first section of my analysis I
will attend to the ways in which the haflî opens up multiple registers of identity, paying
close attention to the contextual dynamics at work in this process. Then I will address
how and through what practices the haflî succeeds and fails in terms of AAMA’s larger
organizational goals.

When I reached the section in my interview protocol that addressed the haflî I
asked three general questions: tell me about a significant experience at a haflî, about your
best experience at a haflî, and about your worst experience at a haflî. All of my
interviewees except two talked about AAMA haflis. BB had never been to an AAMA haflis so she spoke of her experience going to other haflis when she was in college. Jamil discussed AAMA haflis but he also included stories about other haflis that he attended in this country.

Sami is a Jordanian man who came here as a student in the late seventies; like all the others whom I spoke to who came to this country under similar circumstances he has also acquired U.S. citizenship. When I asked, “does anything stand out in your mind [about the haflis]?” he said

the first for you, I mean, the people gathered together in the hafl, in a certain way you feel that you are at one of those haflis like back home. You know, that uh start with uh the gathering, the food, the friends you see, you might get a chance to see some friends, you didn’t see the for, you know, almost a year or more than that or less. And the dance, the music, you know. (Sami transcript lines 113-118)

Later, when I tried to probe further about the haflis, I asked Sami “so what thought, you kind of told me, what thoughts do you have about the haflis?” He continued his earlier point that “well, here you are in uh far away from home, and you find eh haflis, it’s uh the same one as back home and it’s remind you uh with everything” (Sami transcript, lines 127-130). Sami comes from a community in Jordan where he was exposed to haflis during his entire life, most often in the form of wedding haflis. So it is significant to note that haflis here bring him back home because the hafl experience was something that happened so often that he didn’t think about it much when he was in Jordan. Now that they happen so infrequently here in the States they take on more meaning and they open up many layers of reflection.
For those people like Jafar who were not exposed to haflis where men and women celebrated together they take on different meanings and open up identity issues that were not possible back home. Some further context is necessary here. Jafar was one of the first members of AAMA; he was also one of the first editors of AAMA’s newsletter. He told me during the course of our interview that the organization served as a refuge for many people, particularly since it emerged in the middle of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Given his experience and involvement with AAMA the hafla for Jafar was already imbricated into the political practices of the organization. He went so far as to say that at that time in his life he was so deeply committed to AAMA that an event like the hafla for him was a way to reel in more members. So when I asked him, “other than the political that you have mentioned what does the hafla do for the community in terms of maintaining a sense of identity or does it bear on that?” he responded, after a pause

I think the hafla among other things serves to build bonds between the people present in the community. Newcomers get introduced to the oldtimers; the oldtimers get to connect with other oldtimers and newcomers um so it’s sort of the one annual event where you can go to one place and find all the sort of acquaintances you’ve connected with in the past and refresh those connections. (Jafar transcript, lines 322-328)

I followed this question with the following: “What about the cultural practices, the dancing, and the music, do you think they are important contributions to the hafla?”

To some extent but not as much from my perspective. I think it’s just the event the gathering that’s more significant than the actual festivities or the nature of the activities that happen with the event. (Jafar transcript, lines 329-333).

I think these reflections are indicative of Jafar’s experience with haflis and the fact that when he experienced one in this country it was already framed in the context of a political as well as a social event. His perspective may also reflect that he did not have
the same exposure to music and dancing that the Lebanese, Jordanians, Egyptians, and Palestinians did in AAMA’s larger community.

When I contrast Jafar’s experience with that of Yasmine’s the contextual difference come through more fully. When I asked Yasmine to tell me about her best hafli experience, she could not really put her finger on one event in particular so she thought about it more generally and explained that

the coming together is really what is the best thing about the hafli, is when all of us come together. There just seems to be it’s like we’re caught up in a passionate experience, you know the music and the dancing. (Yasmine transcript, lines 781-783)

Then I asked if she had any questions or confusions about that and she turned another reflective corner.

um religiously, I mean, it’s not something I should be doing first of all because Islam, you know men and women dancing and all that is very suggestive and very…. That just poses a little bit of, it’s like a dichotomy to me, you know, it’s like I view the two things as being good. You know what I mean. Um and it, it also, it depends on what it is. I mean when I see the Arabic dancing and I see people dancing together, I don’t see it as a sexual thing. I see it as a rhythmic thing if that makes sense. The bodies moving in rhythm um, not to attract each other, but to be together. Um at least I’ve never done it for that. (Yasmine transcript lines, 787-794)

Clearly the practices of dancing and music have more texture for Yasmine because of her past experience with haflis, yet her religious background also shapes her moral reservations about whether or not she should do it. This can be read as a gap in Sense-Making terms; how she negotiates and rationalizes the dancing as not sexual is part of her bridging strategy. Yet she also speaks to one of the ways in which dancing is a bodily experience, that it is rhythmic and performative. And for Yasmine the hafli helps the community because “it makes you relax. And as an Arab, it makes you identify um that
you’re part of the group, that you are a part of something, you know” (Yasmine transcript, lines 805-806).

Others like Francis and BB made visible other contingencies that explain some of the ways in which people understand the form and function of haflis differently. When I asked Francis “what does it do for the community to have the opportunity to have a hafl?” she explained that

It brings us together, you know. Now the haflis are attended not just by the Lebanese Syrians but the Jordanians and the Palestinians because they’re here now. The Kuwaitis because they’re here now. You know everybody is here. So it’s more shall I say, a pan-Arab function because everyone is here now. (Francis transcript, lines 251-257)

Earlier in our discussion when I asked Francis to tell me about a significant hafl experience she made a point of providing me with a qualifier before she began her story.

Before I tell you this I just want you to know that ah the hafli experience is an experience in and of itself. It is an expression of one’s culture. It is an expression of one’s emotions, an inclination to how shall we say to couple. Traditionally it has been a place, for the Lebanese Syrians in any event, as the first immigrants, to get together and share family experiences and to look to see who is available for marriage. You know. [We laugh] That was the number one, the number one reason for going, in addition to the dancing I mean that was always so wonderful. (Francis transcript lines, 171-178)

Francis’ stories raises two important issues. The first is that she sees haflis as pan-Arab events that bring together Arabs from all over the world. Second, we can see contextual dynamics at work which shape her sense of the function of haflis. Earlier in Chapter Three I noted that the institutions that early immigrants built, immigrants who were predominantly Christian and Syrian-Lebanese, were churches and social clubs. They wanted to provide their children with many opportunities to meet one another and also to
marry within their ethnic groups. Francis’ experience speaks to that history and so it is no surprise that for her the haflī was a place where one could seek a marriage partner.

BB’s history as a Syrian-Lebanese woman also affects her experiences with haflīs. Given that her father disciplined her identity and did not want to see any form of Arab expression in their household, she had to go down the street to the local university to meet the Arabs from “over there.” And so it was in college that she experienced haflīs in conjunction with Arabs from student organizations and others involved in the university community. When I asked her “what are the positive impacts that the haflī provides for the community?” her responses were much more revealing that I ever expected.

You can go to a haflī and you might as well be here or in Beirut or Buenos Aires anywhere it’s like you never left home whereever home is. To me it’s the haflīs are one of the most important things the Arab-American community. They really, really are. I was reading about the St. Jude hospital people. They have haflīs there still. I didn’t know that. They have an annual celebration or fundraiser or something like that and every Friday night there is a haflī and Marlo Thomas is at it and all this stuff, you know. I’m so proud of that, you know, that a lot of things about Arabs, you know kibbi and tabouli will disappear before the haflī disappear, I think. It’s what we keep. And a lot of things have disappeared when people came to America. I’ve seen that. (BB transcript lines 1004-1014).

BB, like many others, communicates how important the haflīs are for dispersed communities; however, it was surprising to me to learn she thinks that haflīs will be around longer than food like tabouli and kibbi. While all of the people that I interviewed thought that haflīs were indeed important, only BB went so far as to say this is the practice that will be preserved. I think that this event takes on so much importance for her because for so many years she could not participate in any practices that are Arabic.
Rami’s experience addresses the last point that I want to make in this section and that is the issue of safety. When I asked him “did you have hafli’s back home?” he told me that we do, but it’s not like to be free and uh safe. It’s always when you have hafli’s back there, at that time, the life wasn’t that much safe. It’s always you worry about something that could go wrong in it. (Rami transcript, lines 226-229).

In the West Bank it is not uncommon for hafli’s and weddings to be cancelled or postponed due to the daily violence and pressures. So for him the hafli’s in the American context serve many desires, and chief among them is safety.

The Hafi under Pressure

In September of 1995 part of the Israeli army entered the tunnel that runs under the El Asqa Mosque in East Jerusalem. This activity, even though it did not result in any harm to the Mosque itself or the Dome of the Rock, panicked Palestinians. As a result, many protests, marches, and eventually riots occurred. During the course of the riots, several Palestinians were killed and a number of Israeli soldiers were wounded. These activities took place shortly before AAMA was set to host a hafi, the last hafi that the organization has produced for nearly five years. AAMA had a board meeting just prior to the hafi (actually it was the night before), and at the end of it four Palestinian men, who were members of an Arab student organization, came to make a request. Given the killings, they requested that AAMA cancel the hafi. They felt it was not appropriate to be dancing at a time when so many people were mourning. In this incident a number of identity issues came into contest with one another. I will address not only my interview
data but also my own experiences since I was present at the meeting, taking minutes no
less, and I have now interviewed several board members who were also present.

I mentioned earlier that I would return to the case of Jamil so as to address a range
of contradictions that take shape when identities are put under pressure. Jamil is also a
Palestinian from the West Bank. Of the people that I interviewed and have known over
the years, he is the newest arrival to this country. He came as a student and having
acquired citizenship in this country he is now a successful owner of a business. Jamil is
one of the four men who came to AAMA’s board meeting requesting that they cancel the
hafli. Rami is another. When I spoke with Jamil about it, his memories were not only
passionate but also insightful and replete with chords of intensity. First he explained that
he came as a member of another organization, an Arab student organization. He also
made it clear that it was his understanding that AAMA represented all Arabs--Syrians,
Egyptians, Saudis, or whoever--and that as an umbrella organization it also represented
the student organization of which he is a member. Then he filled in more background.

I mean, it was a big thing, that kind of thing [what took place in Jerusalem]. It
was not an easy thing, it was like a really big thing. And the next day there’s
going to be a hafli, we’re gonna be dancing, you know. And, it was just like, look
at it, you know. It’s, it doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t make sense at all. So we
talked to them before we came to the meeting. And they said, well, we’re going to
be at the meeting and we gonna discuss it, you know if we’re gonna make the
hafli or we can’t make a hafli. Because of being an Arab, Arab-American of Mid-
America, being an Arab, the best, the worst thing, I mean, the biggest thing of
being an Arab, and we all know this, we’re so dramatic about when we mourn
somebody. When we like, when it comes to uh how would I say it, sadness, man,
we make a big deal out of it, you know. It’s just like, oh my God, it’s just like
somebody died. It’s just you’re mourning. That’s one thing about being an Arab,
you know. (Jamil transcript, lines 474-485)
As he thought about this mourning phenomenon he contrasted it to the American context where some people celebrate to commemorate a death, as in the case of a wake. Yet for Jamil

Being an Arab, not, that’s totally different. It’s not like that, it’s just like, you cry. You’re sad. You have to show you’re sad. If you’re not sad, then people will start laughing at you. You know, it was, oh my god, his son, his dad, somebody in his family died and he’s not sad, you know. You have to. Actually we don’t even, we turn the TV off for forty days…. (Jamil transcript lines 491-495)

This is the same man who said earlier during our interview that he wishes people didn’t concern themselves so much about identities, that it used to be extremely important for him to insist that he is a Palestinian—not even an Arab, but a Palestinian—, while now he is delighted that he is over that need to fix an identity. Yet when members of AAMA acted in a manner that seemed inappropriate to him given the gravity of the situation, he was upset because he felt they were not acting like Arabs.

The board voted to continue with the hafli. I was there and this situation was quite intense. Five of the people who participated in my long interviews were also at this meeting and two of them had done much of the planning of the hafli. They had a number of responses. On the one hand they recognized how tragic the events in Jerusalem were. On the other hand they could not see canceling the hafli given that the band was coming, tickets were sold, and so much work had been done. Some members particularly did not like the idea of responding exclusively to a crisis. Eddie was frustrated because he sees his activism as a practice that takes place every day, not just in crisis situations. Francis also argued that we cannot bring the conditions there here, a response which calls into
question the kind of space the group are in, an American space, a Palestinian space, or a
diasporic space? Others communicated similar concerns.

I was completely torn about how I should respond. One member of the board
asked me directly what I thought we should do, and I wavered, which was not a satisfying
response for anyone. Eventually we voted to go ahead with the haflī, which was very
upsetting to those individuals who came and made the request. Now, after learning the
fuller context of the situation, I’m even more uncertain about what we should have done
as an organization.

This situation triggered several levels of contest. Issues of representation were at
stake; that is, the question for some became whether AAMA really represented them—
other organizations and Arab-Americans at large. As a result of AAMA’s decision the
student organization of which Jamil was a part concluded that it did not. Second, it
reveals the tension between an organization’s being proactive or reactive. Some AAMA
members saw the request to cancel as a reaction to crisis, while the student organization
saw it as a statement of solidarity and mourning.

Finally, this conflict also highlighted some of the differences between second and
third generation Arab-Americans as opposed to those of the first generation. When I
asked Francis, “so what do you think it led to, that they came the night before the haflī
and said please cancel this?” she said

I think it was a request. It was a respectable request by members of the AAMA; it
was a respectable request and it was considered and it was denied. And the haflī
did take place and it was well attended and that was that. I tell you, if I died, you
better, you better do that haflī and you better dance on my grave. (Francis
transcript lines 316-322)
For Jamil the idea of dancing or holding a haflī right after someone dies is unthinkable. In contrast, Francis wants the spirit of the haflī to celebrate her death. More than anything, I think this situation demonstrates how identities shift, in seemingly contradictory ways, when they are put under pressure, or when conditions emerge that raise the question: what does it mean to be an Arab, or an Arab-American? Jamil and Francis imply different questions of identity. Jamil asks, what does it mean to be an Arab? Yet when we consider Francis’ statement, “you better have that haflī and dance on my grave,” we can see culturally determined elements coming into play that are reflected in her particular Arab-American identity. Being an Arab for Jamil means something different than it does for Francis; likewise, so does the practice of dance.

It is also significant that Jamil had a friend who was killed in Jerusalem, so for him this issue was not just there, it was here as well. Jamil lives in two worlds that affect him whether he is here in this country or “back home” in Palestine. Yet Jamil said quite passionately during our conversation that “it might surprise you but I consider [the American city in which he lives] to be home.” It doesn’t surprise me; rather, what makes his story so interesting is how his identity shifts given the context he faces. I find it interesting that Jamil also told me that when there are no problems identity does not really matter. He extended this point to the issue of nationalism and explained that people only need it when they encounter a problem. And sure enough, as soon as he experienced a gap—the haflī at the same time as a death—it became important to assert his identity as an Arab—as a bridge.
There is one other feature that came out of this meeting that I think is noteworthy. When we sat in the board meeting and discussed alternative ways to satisfy the different needs of the community, someone suggested that instead of dancing we have the band play folk music, so as to encourage a fellowship. However, this idea was dropped. When the band started playing most people danced enthusiastically, but not those members of AAMA who came to the hafli to show their support for the community despite what had happened in Jerusalem. Their mood was heavy and their spirits tired. I could feel it down to my bones even though I am not an Arab-American.

The Fate of the Hafli for AAMA

Despite the fact that the hafli provides some forms of social space for Arab-Americans, the hard facts are that producing an event of this caliber takes a tremendous amount of labor power. Most of the enduring members of AAMA are facing institutional exhaustion, especially when one sets the hafli against their larger organizational priorities, those being media education and fighting racism. The events that I covered in the preceding sections affected AAMA’s members, but that conflict is not the reason that the organization has not hosted a hafli since 1995. The organization has decided against having the hafli so that they can do what they deem to be more important work.

Early in the organization’s life the hafli may have brought them new members and a few important contacts. Jafar’s experience reflects this phenomenon in the early days of AAMA. He did see the event as being relatively successful, though he agrees that the event is more successful as a social event than as a political event. By and large
all of the members whom I interviewed who actually did the work of producing the hafli communicated that their vision of what the hafli ought to be has not been realized. They did not acquire new members; they did not make much profit from the event; and most of all, they did not feel like much appreciation for hosting such a community-based event.

Eddie and Passion provided me with important insights about the fate of the hafli. Eddie made the argument quite cogently that the hafli gets in the way of more important work.

Well, I’ll give you an example. Um it was two years ago. We had some of our friends were saying we should have a hafli. And after some discussion we said, we just didn’t have the resources to do it, and people who were wanting it, wanted it done, but they wouldn’t take a part to do anything about it. We offered to support them, if they wanted to do it, but wanted them to do it and they wanted us to do it—three or four of our people to do it. We said “we’re not going to do it.” Well, come around September, which is around the time we would have been having, doing the hafli, and we would have been most busy, you know, getting people registering, whatever, having arrangements and all that, and right around that same time, um, we get word that X was trying to get a movie [about Palestinians] shown on the local university television station and the station said they wouldn’t show it….with some of our efforts we were able to direct our energies, working with the television station, you know, and ah I wouldn’t say pressure or whatever, but working with them, ah, with the phone calls and contacts and so forth to get them to change their mind. And they showed it; we were one of the few places in the country that showed that film. Well, had we been involved with the hafli, that probably would not have happened. Um that’s what I mean we can’t do both. We just don’t have the energy; we don’t have the time and the human resources to do both. (Eddie transcript lines 221-238)

Yet when I juxtapose to this Passion’s understanding of why the hafli failed, questions of both identity and diaspora resurface. Like Eddie, Yasmine, and others, Passion recognized that as a platform for reaching the larger Arab-American community, drawing in new members, and making money, the hafli has failed. Yet he thinks that as a social event it was always successful. When I asked him what his worst experience with a hafli
was, he started immediately thinking about how the hafli functions at the organizational level.

What I’m going to talk about is, is ah that because as I said, you know, we wanted the hafli to be not just an event but also a landmark event in a long-term process ah we’re always planning some kind of, in the beginning of the hafli some kind of presentations and speeches about certain issues and productions of issues in the community and so forth ah and realized that people who come to haflis are not very much interested in that context; they wanted to have dinner, to have fun, dance, and sing. (Passion transcript, lines 495-500)

When I probed further and asked him, “what are your questions or confusions about that?” he surprised me by his response.

It’s that um I think in retrospect I would think about that in terms of ah that for Arabs hafli is a hafli when you go dance have food, have fun, talk to your friends have a blast and that’s it. But we were trying to Americanize the Arab hafli by making it more like a banquet. Where you start with some speeches for the next year and so forth and as a staging platform and then at the end some dancing and some kind of combination of that and celebration. But for the many years that we worked on that I’m coming to realize that a hafli is a hafli is a hafli. It’s not a banquet; it’s an Arab hafli. (Passion transcript lines 502-511)

Later when I asked him to articulate his feelings about that he concluded

and that’s it. The hafli, for and I think even though there I don’t remember, you know, struggles with that issue on an individual level but the struggle was clear on the collective level. The hafli itself, as a manifestation of Arab culture, was telling us something. Do not Americanize me! I mean that’s what the hafli was telling us. (Passion transcript lines 512-516)

Both Eddie and Passion offer insightful rationales for why the hafli is not successful at the organizational level, yet their different readings at the cultural levels again speak to their differences. Eddie was born and raised in this country and has been an activist for much of his life. He agrees that the community needs social events like the hafli, but his heart and energies are dedicated to media education and making a difference in education and politics. Passion is also an activist and he made it clear that as much as
he loves haflis and thinks that the organization should continue doing them, he has not been doing the organizing and he didn’t give much of an indication that he would be in the future either. Like Eddie, Passion is a past president of the organization and has spent his time helping Arab-Americans become recognized politically. His work is very similar to that of Eddie, yet his background as a Palestinian from the Arab world, one who plans to go back home as soon as he finishes his degree, led him to a very different understanding. When I asked Passion what kind of barriers and constraints he experienced that led him to the conclusion about the Americanizing of the Arab haflis—his insight is “that every year we ended up shortening and shortening the program and shortening the program until the program became almost non-existent. And eh the haflis prevailed; the Arab haflis prevailed” (Passion transcript, lines 520-523).

Conclusion

I made three moves in this chapter. First I demonstrated how and through what practices and reflective processes people negotiate the concept of diaspora, paying attention to the contextual dynamics at work in those reflections. Second, I worked through some of the material and symbolic forms of demonization that Arab-Americans face on a daily basis and I articulated those practices to their sense of identity. And in the final section of this chapter I brought to bear two different interpretations of why the haflis has not met AAMA’s organizational goals. This juxtaposition made visible not only the labor shortage within the organization but also the different identity claims that were also at stake.
Sense-Making allowed me to get at those reflective processes through which identities are often articulated. At this point I would like to note that when I went off track from my Sense-Making protocol I elicited interesting data; however, I was not able to attend to process to the extent that I could when I did adhere more strictly to the protocol. This is quite visible when one looks at the responses to the questions that I asked Rami, Francis, and Jafar, when I myself labelled the hafi as a “gathering space,” in comparison to the responses Yasmine gave. Reflecting without the burden of my labels and preconceptions, Yasmine processed what the hafi experience means to her in her own terms, naming phenomena as she saw them, not as I saw them, which took us back and forth through time-space, opening up her past and projecting us into her future.
Footnotes

1 See my complete interview protocol in Appendix A.

2 Al Azhar University is the oldest and most prestigious of the Islamic institutions in the Arab world. Graduates from this university usually command much respect, and Yasmine said of her father, who was an Imam, that “he was so powerful that men would shake in his presence.”

3 I think it is telling that all of the Arab-Americans whom I interviewed, with the exception of Passion, understand diaspora as a phenomena that applies exclusively to Palestinians, since they are the only group in the community that is stateless. Yet when they thought about it further, for those who were willing to talk about it, the concept became more of a blanket term that applied to all Arab-Americans who organize, seek each other out, and share in the cultural and political practices. And for some, their relationship to the Arab world figured into their willingness to advance an Arab identity. Jamil in particular forced me to think through this point during his interview. He told me that when he first came to this country it was very important for him to identify himself as a Palestinian, not even as an Arab, but a Palestinian. Now he sees himself just as a human being and believes that being hung up over a fixed identity is something that we should all get over. When I asked if it was important to identify himself as a Palestinian because he could not do so in the West Bank he said, “Probably. I really do not think of it that much but I think it has a lot to do with a Palestinian who is angry at the Arab world” (Jamil transcript, lines 66-67). So for Jamil his organizing and particularly his involvement with Arab student organizations provided him a means with which to improve the situation back home while avoiding any Arab governments. This reflects Clifford’s argument that diasporas define themselves against nation-states and autochthonous theories of identity. Yet during the course of my interviews I saw many contradictions with respect to these two points, especially for rooted theories of identity. I will return to this issue later when I scrutinize Jamil’s case more closely.

4 It is significant that Rami mentioned the impact of borders, reflecting that borders are indeed subversive crossings that signify open wounds. Clifford, Anzaldua, and a host of other scholars connect border crossings to diasporic experience. Rami’s wounds were indeed open as he told me many stories about mistreatment at Ben Gurion Airport. After we had finished the interview he told me a long story about his most recent travel to Palestine. I taped it without interrupting him with any questions. In brief, people who either travel to or live in the West are required to get a special permit just to enter Ben Gurion Airport. Rami did not get such a permit because he is an American citizen. The Israelis ignored his citizenship, insisting that it did matter that he was from the West Bank. They harassed and detained him so long that he missed his flight, and then the next
one as well. Ultimately he had to buy another ticket that cost him two thousand dollars more than his original ticket. And before they finally let him go, the manager of the airport police came to him and asked him if he had just admitted to an agent that he was a member of Hezbollah. He denied it, but not without completely losing his composure and screaming at them. He said that this encounter is not so unusual, that it happens frequently.

Space does not permit an extensive critique of Anderson’s work. He certainly has plenty of critics (for postcolonial critiques of Anderson see Ahmad, 1992; Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Chatterjee, 1993; for transnational feminist critiques see Grewal & Caplan, 1994; and McClintock, Mufti, & Shohat, 1997). However, there is one point I wish to make. When Anderson defines nations and nation-ness as a cultural artifact he freezes it in a noun-space, which ultimately limits his latter point about the particular styles in which nations are imagined. The processes and practices through which nations are imagined and enacted politically are much more at stake than entities. And by extension when one stretches his point to national identities it seems to me that we can learn more from studying the practices that temper the imaginations of people than we can from conceptualizing this phenomenon as a state or artifact. Despite this concern, I think Anderson’s work is extremely valuable, particularly with respect to understanding second, third, and fourth generation immigrant experiences.

It is important to note that the question I ask here is not a Sense-Making question. This is one of those places where I was caught up in the substantive level of identity, which precluded the possibility of getting at process that I was able to tap into in other sections of the interview. A few other questions like this show up in my analysis. I include the data because it is useful; however, these questions did take me off-track with respect to my Sense-Making protocol. The other problem that occurred with respect to these types of questions is that I named the phenomena (identity in this case) for my interviewee instead of letting him name it himself. That is, even when he says “no, I think the hafli is more about having a space of gathering, for building bonds,” he is still talking about things that certainly bear on identity, but because I put the word out there sometimes it didn’t make sense to him. For example, I asked Rami “now do you think that the hafli um is an important sort of event that helps Arab-Americans maintain their identity?” He said “No, not really, it’s not in that form. I think the important thing that we get united and just a gather place for us. You know, some people, they will not show up the whole year [he means to the organization’s meetings], we don’t see them, except we see them at the hafli; so it just, it bring us together, really a little bit closer” (Rami transcript lines 259-264). His remark is much like that of others. Having a gathering space does bear on identity, but since I named it for him it distracted us away from the concept, even though his answer is relevant to it.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When I began this project I did not include a research question that asked the definitional question: what counts as a diaspora? Instead, like Clifford, who asks “what is at stake politically and intellectually in contemporary invocations of diaspora” (Clifford, 1998, p. 244), I also moved to questions that I found more compelling and provocative, those of diaspora and identity. Along the way I wanted to understand not only the historical conditions that lead to the phenomenon of diaspora but also the theoretical contests that surround the term. What I have found is that the concept of diaspora is much more complex than I ever imagined. Even Clifford, whose work I find brilliant, does not help me put my finger on all of its sprawling contours.¹

While asking the definitional question is a useful entry point into the literature I did not find it the most productive way to study the phenomenon. Scholars who begin with this question tend to answer it by positing lists of criteria that must be satisfied, or ideal types that must be matched (Safran’s model, which I invoked in Chapter One, is a case in point). Having not raised the definitional question, my project cannot pretend to answer it, or even to hazard a guess as to how close waves of the Arab diaspora might
draw near to an ideal type. However, my research does reveal dimensions of diasporic life, that is, dimensions of cultural practices, yearnings, and imaginations that people who think of themselves as away from their “homeland” enact and negotiate.

Going out and finding a diaspora is harder than one might think, particularly given their transnational character, and this point is relevant to one of the first comparative moves that Clifford makes. That is, when he compares borders and border crossings to diasporas he contends that the former assumes a boundary between two discrete territories while the latter “is not necessarily defined by a specific geopolitical boundary” (Clifford, 1998, p. 244). The Arab-American community that I studied certainly lives within discrete boundaries in one sense; however, the practices through which they maintain multiple attachments traverse national boundaries. Arabs and people who consider themselves Arab-Americans keep themselves connected to one another and their sense of home though practices like emailing, reading, and talking on the phone, and of course many of them travel back and forth as much as they can. These practices open one possible space for communication scholars to intervene into the discourses on diaspora. I could have taken this route and I have much data that would support such a study.  

I chose to study other practices because I wanted the in-the-flesh experience of understanding how people negotiate multiple national attachments, as well as access to the everyday practices and understandings of those who are in some sort of diaspora, rather than the fictionalized representations of such phenomena produced by intellectuals, artists, and academics. At this point it I think it is necessary to remind readers of the
research questions I set out to answer. I argued that it is important to study how multiple
national attachments are negotiated in diasporic experience, and I also argued that
uncovering these types of negotiations would be especially revealing of the ways in
which identities are made, communicated, maintained, repaired and struggled over. I did
identify a number of diasporic aspects of Arab-American life, aspects that bear on the
lives of Arab-Americans even when they did not identify themselves as being in a
diaspora.

First, my research reveals how heterogeneous the situations, experiences, and
reflections on diasporic existence can be, as opposed to the rather homogeneous notions
of diaspora that much theorizing on the subject tends to slip into. Among the people I
studied were: immigrants who, nonetheless, resisted assimilation; immigrants who plan to
return to the homeland; families that never meant to leave permanently but found their
return blocked; individuals forced out by political harassment; and, second and third
generation Arab-Americans who could go back, but are committed to remaining here, no
longer speak the language of their homeland, or feel uncomfortable with the cultural
conditions there. In this mix of self-labeling, legal classification, and imagined
belonging, the terms immigrant, citizen, and diaspora often leak into one another, that is,
each concept is much more fluid than I originally thought. People who identify
themselves as immigrants, and may even be legally classified as residents or citizens,
often exhibit diasporic practices or sentiments in their daily lives. In defiance of the
melting pot metaphor, they are not interested in a quick rate of assimilation and persist in
staying connected to “back home” through such practices as frequent return, travelling, making native food, speaking Arabic, and hosting haflis.

Another very striking finding that emerged from my research, but has not attracted much attention in the literature that theorizes diaspora, is the differences between the experiences of the first generation as opposed to those of the second and third generations, as well as the crucial influence of the historical periods during which each generation came here. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Arab-American immigrants at the turn of the century intended to be sojourners and maintained closely-knit communities; however, after the first World War it became clear that most of them were here to stay and thus they began assimilating. The demographic work that organizations like ADC and AAI have provided demonstrates that Arab-Americans are one of the fastest groups to assimilate in this country. They are also one of the newest ethnic immigrant communities to arrive here. The first generation of Arab-Americans longed for a cultural milieu that they actually had lived in, and tried to recreate here. The second, third and fourth generations of Arab-Americans not only lacked this direct experience, they inevitably assimilated somewhat more into American culture, and their parents often ensured that they would assimilate by not teaching them Arabic language or Arab cultural practices. Thus they often express a yearning for an imagined homeland and community, rather than memories of the conditions that led to leaving it. Also, they must engage in recovery operations, often arduous and painful, of language, cuisine, religion, and so on that were already inculcated in earlier generations. However, I found diversity here, also, since not all parents made the same set of choices.
Turning to my specific research questions, these being how multiple national attachments are negotiated, and how and through what cultural practices and expressive forms identities are enacted, my research highlighted the underlying tension that shapes Arab-American identity. On the one hand Arab-Americans, because of media stereotypes, prejudice, and hurtful personal interactions, are forced to consider themselves as Arabs, to reflect on their identities as such, and to seek to combat the stigma they feel. This requires claiming a group identity, and speaking in one voice. On the other hand, when one looks beyond the stigma that unites them multiple forms of difference show up in striking detail. Unlike, say, members of the Irish diaspora, Arab-Americans may split along many dimensions, such as nationality (there are twenty-three nations in the Arab world), religious affiliation (and degree of religious observance), ethnicity, cultural practices, language, political beliefs, gender politics, and extent of assimilation.

Given these tensions, Arab-American identities are enacted and affirmed in very particular ways. Identity claims tend to be highly contextual, often shifting within a single conversation, or even a single sentence. The shape of the asserted identity is very responsive to outside pressures, including the historical events both “at home” and here. Identity often functions strategically, to advance a political or cultural agenda. And not surprisingly, identity is often contested—what is the proper Arab or Arab-American response to a political killing in Jerusalem, or to a proposal that a belly-dancer be hired to entertain at a hafla?
Perhaps it is not surprising that the cultural practices constitutive of identity that
came up again and again as the most important, enjoyable, and worth preserving were
communal and non-verbal. I am referring here to the forms of dancing and the foods
associated with being Arab, and to the hafli itself. It is at the hafli that differences of
(almost) all kinds can be most easily overlooked and that an assumed cultural similarity
can be celebrated. It should be noted, though, that the tensions between assimilation and
traditionalism surface here also, since some Arab-Americans will not attend the hafli
because the dancing is sexually mixed, or because alcohol is available (the haflis that
AAMA has hosted in the past did not include alcohol but given their locations—hotels
and party parks—it was available for those people who went looking for it). But for the
people I interviewed, the hafli provides a safe space and at least the feeling of a shared
and valuable cultural identity that they perform for and to each other.

The hafli is also a third space, in Lavie & Swedenberg’s sense of the term. As I
discussed in Chapter One, third spaces are alternative public spheres where dispersed
groups live inside the nation-state, but with a difference. The hafli brings together Arabs
who are immigrants, citizens, refugees, exiles, students, and visitors. Of course non-
Arabs also attend. In this space of cultural performance, politicking, and discoursing,
identities are mobile, heterogeneous, and conjunctural, yet they are never outside of a
politics of location.

In Chapter One I also teased out the theoretical differences between rooted and
routed theories of identity. The former assumes that identities are pregiven, essentialist,
and that there is an unmediated link between identity and fixed spaces, blood and soil.
The latter, however, insists that identities are constructed, that they are tempered by travel, relocation, and displacement. Hall (1996) argues cogently that, from a routed perspective, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (112).

While I locate myself within a routed theoretical framework, I tried to pinpoint how it is that these two theories can exist in productive tension with one another. I set out to scrutinize the ways in which Arab-Americans think through how issues of identity affect their daily lives; this orientation assumes that the experience of and reflection on identities adds important dimensions to the theorizing of identity that do not necessarily show up in textually-driven studies of identity. I would like to emphasize that I did not take this approach to privilege experience uncritically or to treat it as a foundationalist ground of knowledge. Foucauldian discourse theory, which shapes routed theories of identity to a large degree, refuses to grant experience primacy as an unmediated ground of knowledge. As a consequence, scholars who advance routed theories of identities do not typically ask questions about how people think about and reflect upon their experiences with issues of identity. While I accept the notion that experience is already an interpretation, not an unmediated foundation, I do not think that it is theoretically incommensurable to advance a routed theory of identities that takes on the task of tapping into and accessing the ways in which people process and make sense of issues of identity.

This is not to say that one does not run the risk of finding that people do indeed have romantic, rooted, and even valorized ideas about what it means to be an Arab-American. I think when one asks any group of people who has been stigmatized and
forced into statelessness to think about identity, romantic yearnings and imaginations will surface. Yet my findings complicate even the romantic conceptions of identity that emerged in my research. For example, the one person who I interviewed who was most critical of maintaining identity labels and the most vocal about the fact that identities are constructed was also the same person who was the most adamant about canceling the haflj when political killings occurred in Jerusalem. For him there is one way to be an Arab when mourning the deaths of loved ones. His identity claims shifted in a single conversation. Likewise, even those people who emphasized the liminality at work when one lives hyphenated identities privileged either the former or the latter parts of the hyphen given the contextual dynamics at work. While I did focus on how the experience of identities bears on the phenomenon itself, the ways in which identities shift, are performed, and are articulated to discourses never fell out of focus.

One of the ways in which I was able to maintain a hand in both realms, discourse and experience, is through the verbing strategies of Sense-Making. Not only did Sense-Making allow me to get at the ways in which people process issues of identity, it also made visible how it is that identities are processes rather than fixed states. Second, Sense-Making mandates that interviewees articulate what their gaps are with respect to identity. This means that they themselves are theorizing subjects; although I, as the researcher, am also involved in this process, I am not the sole or privileged source of this theorizing.
Future Directions

When I first imagined this project I singled out AAMA’s haflī because I thought that I could focus much of my analysis on the practice of dancing and the many cultural roles that it plays in Arab-American communities. I thought this emphasis would allow me to intervene into the speech-centric models that have hegemony in much of the discipline of communication. At the same time I was making arguments that cultural practices like dance and identity negotiations need to be studied more empirically. After collecting many hours of video footage of people dancing, making speeches, chatting, and enjoying themselves during haflīs it became clear to me that I did not have the training to take on such a project. Had I pursued this sort of study I would have ended up doing an analysis much like that of a rhetorical critic; my gaze and vision would be the primary vehicle of analysis. Perhaps I would have had insightful ideas about dance; maybe I would have produced reasoned speculations about how dance is a communicating practice that opens up questions of embodiment. Yet my analysis would not have allowed me attend to the reflective processes that I was able to tap into in the study I did take on.

However, I do think that studying dance is a productive and necessary project. When I began researching dance I did a subject search that uncovered two hundred and twenty-five sources for Arab-American studies and the Arab world. Of those citations only three provided me with any detail about dancing in Arab-American communities. (This marks yet another limit of my study. If I were fluent in Arabic I might have found more materials.). In the future I may explore the literature in the ethnography of dance
project to see whether it will provide helpful resources and comparative strategies. After a five-year hiatus AAMA is hosting another haflī, and I will be there.

Reflecting Identities

I have argued that Arab-American identities are enacted through cultural practices and expressive forms such as dancing, protesting, making food, speaking Arabic and so on. Yet the methodological journey that I traveled also opened up the ways in which individuals’ and groups’ reflection and reflecting shapes the embodiment and expression of identity. The Sense-Making questions that I invoked led my interviewees to a practice of conscientizing their identities. In the absence of a dialogic space of reflection identities are often taken for granted or they are expressed unconsciously. Until they are put under pressure or risk becoming invisible, issues of identity may go unnoticed.

Sense-Making, both its methodological assumptions and the method itself, helped me learn how Arab-Americans understand, process, and enact their identities. It also helped me experience the many ways that diasporic cultural practices are negotiated in the daily lives of Arab-Americans. And more than anything, Sense-Making helped me expose the practices and processes through which identities are named, asserted, struggled over and repaired, rather than prematurely freezing identities in states or traits.
Footnotes

1. I do not mean to suggest that Clifford thinks that he has indeed figured out the term. He is quite clear about the limits of his theorizing and reminds readers that when one attempts work at the survey level what we often see are the “tips of many icebergs” (p. 244). I am grateful that Clifford, Hall, Safran and Toloyan have done the work of theorizing the concept since so much of the literature that I have read simply assumes that we all know what diaspora means.

2. During the course of my interview with BB, when I asked her what was confusing or surprising about the ways in which Arab-Americans are stigmatized she began talking about the email list that she and another woman started for Arab-Americans. She gave me every message posted to the list over a two year period. I find the information fascinating and illuminating and at some point I may begin to study these messages in more detail. Communication scholars often make the argument that our field is about the study of messages and their production. I think it is equally important to study the ways that people process messages, among other things, and I was able in part to tap into that dynamic through my interview with BB.
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APPENDIX

RESEARCH PROTOCOL

Initial questions

A. Meaning For Being Away From the Homeland:

1. You are one of many people around the world who do not live in the homelands of your ancestors. There are a lot of names applied to this experience—diaspora, exile, immigration, migration, dispersion, and so on. How do you think about it?

2. When talking to friends, how do you describe yourself and your living here now?

3. Do you have friends who talk about themselves differently? How do they describe themselves? How do you see them as differing from you?

B. The Hafli

1. First, think of a significant experience in your life with the hafli, either in person or on film or talking to others. What happened?

2. Thinking back over your experiences with the hafli, describe for me your best experience with the hafli. What happened?

3. Thinking back over your experiences with the hafli, describe for me your worst experience with the hafli. What happened?
4. Now thinking about the larger Arab community, when have you seen the haflī having positive outcomes on the community? What happened?

5. When have you seen the haflī having negative outcomes on the Arab community? What happened?

6. Now thinking about AAMA, when have you seen the haflī having positive outcomes for the organization? What happened?

7. When have you seen the haflī having negative outcomes for the organization? What happened?

Given the initial response of the participant, each question is followed by extracting elements questions and by triangulation questions.

**Extracting elements questions**

1. What ideas, thoughts, or conclusions did this experience lead to?

2. What questions or confusions?

3. What emotions or feelings?

4. Did you see barriers or constraints

5. Anything hindering or hurting?

6. Did you see anything in particular as helping you?

7. What positive impacts came out of it?

8. What negative impacts emerged?
Triangulation questions

1. What do you see this as leading to?

2. How did it connect with your current life?

3. How does it connect with your past experiences?

4. Did it help? How?

5. Did it hurt? How?

6. Thinking about this, how did it connect with power issues in the Arab-American community?

7. How did it connect with power issues in the non-Arab-American community?