Performance and Visibility: Arab American Women’s Influence on Post-9/11 Plays, Solo Performance, and Stand-Up Comedy

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

The events of September 11, 2001 compelled playwrights of Arab or Arab American background to adjust their narratives and to include discourses which interpreted as well as challenged misconceptions surrounding their own culture. Political incidents such as 9/11 produced a shared response from Arab American playwrights wherein women playwrights recognized a need and a responsibility to adequately represent their own personal stories, bodies, and histories through performance. I address the visibility, responsibilities, and historical contributions of Arab American women playwrights and performers post-2001.

I explore how the theatrical works of playwright and performer Betty Shamieh, playwright and solo performer Heather Raffo, and stand-up comedian Maysoon Zayid reclaim and reconstruct the cultural and historical interpretations of Arab American women. Shamieh writes plays that contain historical and political themes in order to expose assumptions about Palestinian women. Raffo uses solo performance to relay social, political, and cultural issues representative of Iraqi women. Zayid explores stand-up comedy to address her Palestinian identity as well as her experiences living with cerebral palsy. All of these forms of performance essentially create and serve as pivotal foundations of the Arab American theatre movement. I argue that Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid dramatize, renegotiate, and
challenge reductive historical narratives of the Arab American woman and the representation of her body in post-9/11 politics.
Dedication

I dedicate this document to Betty Shamieh.
Thank you for the inspiration.
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Vita

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Chapter 1
The Effect of 9/11 on Arab American Performance: Visibility vs. Responsibility

Prior to Sept. 11, I felt the Arab community was a lot like the Mideast itself, made up of insular communities . . . But since that time it's become an immediate, all-inclusive [community], wanting to create together (Heather Raffo qtd. in Smith New York Times 2006).

Arab American women playwrights and performers are currently building the foundations of an ongoing Arab American women’s theatre movement. Playwright Betty Shamieh states in the introduction to her post-9/11 play The Black Eyed: “September 11 would change how I as an Arab American was seen.” Following 9/11, plays about Arab American identity became of greater interest at theatre festivals, universities, and Off-Broadway sites. This public intrigue created opportunities for Arab American playwrights to share stories not frequently revealed in mass media forms. Women playwrights and performers achieved significant visibility and claimed ownership over their representation. However, this visibility also generated a sense of responsibility to adequately represent their own history and culture onstage. After 9/11, these playwrights discovered distinct methods of performance to share their stories and to dispute false histories informed about their culture. How do Arab American women playwrights construct onstage socio-political experiences relevant to Arab American women after 9/11? I examine Arab American women's relationship to their own culture, history, and
body and the theatrical ways they restructure post-9/11 narratives through live performance. A study such as this is essential because it analyzes Arab American women playwrights’ and performers’ contributions to the American theatre while simultaneously exploring the various methods that they employ to address cultural and historical issues relevant to the daily lives of Arab American woman in a post-9/11 world.

The events of 9/11 influenced the course of the Arab American theatre movement in the United States. Playwrights and performers of Middle Eastern background disputed the Arab archetypes circulating the mass media; they claimed their own accounts of their culture and history. However, reductive representations still continued to blur historical myth and fact, distorting perception of the Arab American post-9/11. Images of “good Arabs” and “bad Arabs” as well as “threatened damsels protected by heroic males” pervaded news outlets (Taylor 245). This hyper-visibility and simplistic categorization of the Arab American community created a contradictory representation of the Middle East and its people. Evelyn Alsultany discusses the varying representations of Islam post-9/11. She argues that despite common representations of the Arab as “enemy” and the Arab woman as “subservient,” there were also sympathetic images constructed about the Arab world. Alsultany refers to these as simplified complex representations (14). For example, she states: “If the storyline of a TV drama or film represents an Arab or Muslim as a terrorist, then the storyline also includes a ‘positive’ representation of an Arab, Muslim, Arab American, or Muslim American to offset the potential stereotype” (15). According to Alsutany, this appeared in television series such as
24. She references a 2004 case issued by the Council on American-Islamic relations against the writers of 24. CAIR took issue with the repeated storylines of terrorism involving Muslim characters. The writers of 24 decided to rotate the ethnicity of the antagonist each episode to demonstrate complexity and to offset stereotypes. Another strategy television series writers and creators used involved depicting kindhearted Muslim characters in order to serve as a foil to the Muslim terrorist stereotype. In response to these “simplified complex representations,” Arab American women playwrights sought opportunities to perform their own works onstage in order to construct their own interpretations and to challenge these strategic ways of offsetting stereotypes in television. However, theatre artists were faced with sets of problems when presenting their creative work. First, how would they relay political topics in a post-9/11 world without being accused of promoting anti-American discourses? Additionally, Arab American culture does not readily embrace the arts and performance, especially as a career path for a young woman. An Arab American woman declaring explicit opinions or disagreements about U.S. and Middle Eastern politics through a published play or a live performance often elicit controversy. However, these women continued to write as well as perform in their own plays; they refused to be told that theatre was an unsuitable profession for them. In fact, Michael Najjar notes: “The second and more ironic shift [of 9/11] was that Arab American dramas were being produced and published in greater numbers” (3).
Chicago’s Silk Road Theatre Project\(^1\) and San Francisco’s Golden Thread Productions led initiatives to produce works for and about the Arab American community. Chicago’s SRTP was founded by Syrian American playwright Jamil Khoury immediately following 9/11. Michael Najjar notes: “The attacks of September 11, 2001, were the impetus that gave birth to SRTP” (5). At its inception, it was considered the only theatre of its kind in the United States. SRTP produced works promoting social diversity and political change. Khoury co-founded the company with his partner Malik Gillani. Together, they led a creative mission to provide a platform for Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and Asian voices. In 2004, American Theatre Magazine referred to SRTP as one of the “young American companies you need to know.” Khoury’s play \textit{Precious Stones} (2003) served as the company’s inaugural production. \textit{Precious Stones} involves a lesbian couple, one Palestinian and one Jewish American, who form an Arab Israeli peace group together; however, their work together soon develops into a romantic relationship. The play deals with the opposition and resistance they meet from family and friends as well as from their own inherent prejudices. As an exploration of identity and sexuality, \textit{Precious Stones} reverses traditional expectations of Arab American performance. Khoury gravitated to theatre as a forum of civic engagement because he believes in the transformative power of performance. His goal is to “impact change” through live performance (11). Khoury notes: “I am interested in how gender and sexuality fit into the larger identity picture for people and for

\footnote{1 Silk Road Theatre Project is now called Silk Road Rising; however, since I focus on its dramatic work at the time of 9/11, I will be referring to the company as Silk Road Theatre Project (SRTP).}
communities” (qtd. in Najjar 11). SRTP, now known as Silk Road Rising, is still an active, important company in Chicago.

San Francisco’s Golden Thread Productions was formed by Iranian Armenian producer, director, actress, and author Torange Yeghiazarian. From 1997 to 2000, Yeghiazarian led Golden Thread, and with the help of family and friends, she ensured that her company maintained access to rented theatre spaces. In 1999, Golden Thread held staged readings of new works and one-act plays. The staged readings became so popular that the company eventually named the event the ReOrient Festival. The development of the ReOrient Festival played a significant role in the visibility of Arab American dramatic work post-9/11. Golden Thread’s mission statement emphasizes dedication to “exploring Middle Eastern cultures and identities as expressed around the globe [and presenting] alternative perspectives of the Middle East by developing and producing theatrical work that is aesthetically varied and politically and viscerally engaging” (qtd. in Bakalian).

Although concerns arose over whether audiences would receive or reject these themes, Arab American artists were pleasantly surprised with the public’s newfound interest in their work. Yeghiazarian notes: “At least half of [Golden Thread Production’s] audiences are white and younger. We get a lot of students. We do outreach to campuses, we provide students with big discounts, we hire them as interns” (qtd. in Hill 2009). New York Theatre Correspondent Holly Hill also observed the American public’s desire to learn more about the Middle East after 9/11. Hill notes: “Before the 2001 terrorist attacks made the American public acutely aware of Middle Eastern people and subjects, few were interested. In
September 2001, [while she was working part-time at a Borders bookstore in Dallas, Texas] suddenly there was a huge demand for books about the Middle East, about Islam.” This unexpected interest in Arab history and culture encouraged Arab American theatre companies and playwrights to continue with their work. After 9/11, Yeghiazarian decided she would no longer pursue a career in the medical field but would dedicate all her time toward Golden Thread Productions as well as promoting the ReOrient Festival.

9/11 occurred two weeks following the opening of Golden Thread’s second ReOrient Festival of Short Plays. The company avowed: “Now more than ever it is crucial to go forward with a cultural event that we hope will foster a deeper understanding of our shared humanity” (Hill 2009). The events of 9/11 triggered an uncertainty in many Arab American theatre artists. Mainstream theatres were not producing much Middle Eastern work prior to 9/11. In fact, the only play by an Arab American many were familiar with before 9/11 was Betty Shamieh’s *Chocolate in Heat*. After a successful run in August 2001 at the New York Fringe Festival, *Chocolate in Heat* was scheduled for an extended Off Off Broadway run at Theater for the New City. Following 9/11, Shamieh questioned whether performances should be discontinued; however, the *Chocolate in Heat* production team, along with Shamieh, addressed the importance of continuing to perform a show “that emphasized the humanity of its characters” in the wake of 9/11 (Shamieh Official).

The ReOrient Festival provided opportunities for writers such as Betty Shamieh to share their work with an audience. Shamieh’s work has consistently been included in the Golden Thread Festival. In fact, Yeghiazarian says: “The
ReOrient Festival helped launch the careers of such award-winning playwrights as Yussef El Guindi and Betty Shamieh at a time when very few theatres would even consider them. Golden Thread championed these playwrights’ work with “pride and commitment” (qtd. in Bakalian). Yussef El Guindi’s play *Back of the Throat* is considered one of the most popular plays written by an Arab American. Najjar notes that El Guindi is “arguably the most published and produced of all the Arab American playwrights” (12). In this dissertation, I examine how Arab American women dramatists’ visibility and recognition post-9/11 operates differently from that of male playwrights such as El Guindi and the ways they influenced the Arab American theatre movement. The ReOrient Festival still takes place on an annual basis, providing a forum for new work from the Arab American theatre community, as well as post-show discussions and workshops led by playwrights and performers. Additionally, each year the festival organizers include a forum titled “What do the Women Say?” which serves as a platform to celebrate international Women’s Day as well as the voices of Arab American women theatre artists.

**History, Theory, Literature on Arab American Women and Performance**

Arab American scholar Michael Najjar’s anthology *Four Arab American Plays* (2014) addresses the development of the Arab American theatre movement. Najjar includes plays by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef El Guindi, and Lameece & Jacob Kader. In his introduction, Najjar argues that more realistic dramatizations of the Arab American community by Arab American writers and performers began after 9/11. He believes the foundations of the Arab American theatre movement developed in the late 1960s and further expanded post-9/11. Najjar observes post-
9/11 theatre not only as a response to the World Trade Center attacks or the War on Terror but also to the increase of governmental persecution and surveillance as well as the media misrepresentations of the Arab American community. For example, Yussef El Guindi’s play *Back of the Throat* is about an Arab American writer who is interrogated by government officials. El Guindi wrote his play shortly after 9/11 when Bush and his administration enforced the Patriot Act which permitted government surveillance and secret searches. El Guindi says: “I began to look at my apartment . . . What do I have in my apartment if an F.B.I. agent came in? I have books on assassins, guns, Islam, research materials, the Koran, that would identify me as interested in the Middle East. In my paranoia, I started to imagine what could happen” (Smith 2006). The need for Arab Americans to identify themselves and explore issues of identity politics began during the 1960s when civil rights groups advocated for a distinct Arab identity.

Even before 9/11, issues such as the third wave of Arab immigration and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War generated a need for creative work of some kind to represent and respond to the Arab cause. With the war, came the effect of U.S. governmental surveillance that specifically targeted Arabs in America. Simultaneously, according to Najjar, negative portrayals of Arabs in film and television obscured the history of the Arab American culture (10). The proliferation of Arab American playwrights and performers adjusting historical narratives post-9/11 is significant. During the 1960s, literary forms were frequently employed to express identity whereas live performance was not as popular until after 9/11. Najjar notes, it is not until after 9/11 that realistic, artistic expressions and responses to political events occurred.
Yussef El Guindi states: “For the longest time Arab issues or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar . . . They were regarded as too complex” (8). Palestinian American and post-colonial theorist Edward W. Said describes the effects of these conflicts and tensions in *Orientalism*. “The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West is . . . disheartening . . . the web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim very strong indeed, and it is in this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny” (27).

Arab American sociologist Nadine Naber suggests that the label of “Third-World” writer, particularly when it applies to women writers and performers, is problematic. She argues that this labeling shapes itself into a “diasporic anti-nationalism.” Nader argues that this process relies on anti-colonial and anti-capitalist sentiments and that it became widely disseminated by Arab immigrant students of the 1960s and the 1970s. These ideals eventually created a need for Arab Americans to challenge accepted ideologies through performance. Arab American plays post-9/11 confront Naber’s definition of the “politics of cultural authenticity” (Najjar 14). Naber defines such politics as: “A process by which middle-class Arab diasporas come to herald particular ideas as markers of an authentic, essential, true, or real Arab culture. These ideas surround the myth of ‘the good Arab family, good Arab girls, and compulsory heterosexuality, all in opposition to an imagined America and its apparent sexual promiscuity, broken families, and bad women’” (12). Post-9/11, Arab American women performers and playwrights defied these traditional narratives surrounding an Arab American woman’s role in
culture. Instead, they presented Arab American women with complex desires and active pursuits, which ultimately did not always include a family or behaving as a “good Arab girl.” Therefore, Naber’s concept of politics of cultural authenticity acquires new meaning in a post-9/11 world as Arab American women playwrights and performers continually disrupt expected characteristics and expected conduct of the Arab woman in their plays, solo performance, and stand-up comedy.

The myth of the “good Arab girl” is further addressed in Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Ahmed describes a Muslim Arab feminism and explores political markers, such as the veil, that she argues can function as a “symbol of resistance.” Inevitably, a considerable portion of her work developed out of 9/11. Ahmed observed more political discussions surrounding the veil and its “oppression of Muslim women.” For example, politicians used simplistic narratives that placed the Arab woman as the face of the oppressed and functioned as a means of justification for war and conflict. Post-9/11, it became of profound political importance to “save” the Muslim woman. Playwrights and performers such as Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid also challenge this concept of “saving the Arab woman” in their work. They each reference stereotypes regarding Muslim women as subservient and, through explicit language, careful ritual, and witty satire, they disrupt assumptions surrounding the Arab female body. Scholarly texts such as Ahmed’s work contextualize the live performances occurring within the Arab American theatre movement post-9/11. Arab American women playwrights and performers represented themselves instead of allowing themselves to be represented exclusively by male politicians and writers.
Several theorists have provided critical tools for better understanding the Arab American female experience through a post-9/11 lens. Lila Abu-Lughod poses the question: “Do Muslim women really need saving?” In her essay, she considers the problematic American intervention to reform the Muslim woman during the War on Terror. Particularly, Abu-Lughod addresses the politics of the veil and how it functions as a contentious political marker. For example, Laura Bush claimed that Afghan women felt free after American policy removed Taliban control, and yet many Afghan women still chose to not remove their burqa. Abu-Lughod analyzes the operative signs of the veil and how it does indeed indicate a separation of gender spheres and powers but how many women suggest it also offers “portable seclusion” for them to move around living spaces freely and promote community while still feeling safe. Post-9/11, many American politicians, feminists, and citizens were concerned and very much immersed in conversations about the bodies and assumed behaviors of Arab and Arab American women. Another example includes Eve Ensler’s addition of “Under the Burqa” monologue which is sometimes, but not often, included in her play *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler wrote this piece in 2000 after a visit to Afghanistan and refers to women under the Taliban control as “walking corpses.” Ensler felt the need to write about her interpretation of Muslim women’s experiences living underneath the burqa as well as Taliban control. As a result, more Arab and Arab American women playwrights and performers felt the need to challenge misconceptions and create performances to reclaim their own identities.
Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked: Politics and Performance* assesses the assumptions within cultural theory regarding representational visibility and political power. Phelan notes: “I am concerned with marking the limit of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other” (2). She also focuses on framing the under-represented and making them visible for contemporary culture to reassess the image. How are issues of representation and authenticity operating in post-9/11 plays written by Arab American women creators? What hegemonic forces operate within and outside these plays? Elaine Aston identifies in “Feeling the Loss of Feminism” the effect of the feminist movements of the 1970s -1990s and how this informed and complicated the representations of gender on-stage. This process also relates to the development of women’s issues within the Arab American theatre movement. Feminist movements and ideologies shaped female identities and provided opportunity for women playwrights to engage with relevant social and political issues. However, working in the context of feminism presented its own challenges as women’s artistic work became misinterpreted as well as reinterpreted, ultimately altering feminist ideology.

In *Affective Economies*, Sarah Ahmed explores affect and the significance between the interplay of emotion and signs attached to specific bodies. These exchanges can produce false impressions which are grounded in myth and assumption. Ahmed states: “In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (118). Ahmed’s concept of “affect” elevates the degree of hate attached to plays depicting Arab American causes
thereby making it additionally challenging when presenting their stories onstage. Ahmed’s concept relating to the ways hate “sticks” to the “other,” and how an emotional hardening toward an enemy, “other,” impedes the possibility of being able to feel a way out of an “us” versus “them” binary (589). This concept plays a complex role within the Arab American community post-9/11, especially in plays dealing with terrorism and political acts of war. However, many writers incorporate this kind of immersive, experiential style of performance to relay issues related to women in moments of political crisis. Aston identifies the ways women playwrights were labeled as “angry young women” whenever engaging with topics related to gender and violence. Dealing with representations of Arab American women post-2001 creates contradictory opinions and political stances. For example, Charles Isherwood reviewed a 2007 production of Betty Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed*. He compared it to the ABC television talk-show *The View* but remarked that Shamieh’s construction of Arab women illustrated: “embittered, suffering [and] enraged Arab women” (2007). Nonetheless, writers such as Shamieh continued with their work and offered perspectives not offered prior to 9/11. They believed there was a need to continue representing issues of gender and ethnicity onstage, particularly for the Arab American community.

Feminist elements shape the critique of Arab American dramatic work post-9/11. Do Arab American women performers and writers work within a homogenous feminist framework, or are they [re]shaping their own forum of feminist thought? Since the representations of the Third World Woman tend to be monolithic and simplified, particularly via news outlets, live theatre can distort
assumptions and form new interpretations. Scholars often debate whether a “feminism” exists for the Arab woman. This is due to assumptions related to the hijab and Islamic traditional practices. Some Islamic scholars argue that “feminism” is deeply grounded in Western constructions and attitudes and therefore there is a tendency to “save” the Muslim woman from her oppression and invisibility, and to question whether an Arab feminism could even exist.

Although many Arab American theatre productions present gender topics, there is also a tendency for artistic directors from the Middle East to not use the term “feminist” theatre. For example, Artistic Director Madeeha Gauhar of Lahore’s Ajoka Theatre Troupe rejects the term “feminist” to identify her works (Afzal-Khan 1997). Other artists embrace the term “Islamic feminism” and strive to illustrate work responding to women’s rights. However, it is a complicated issue since Arab and Arab American women’s feminist concerns often differ from those of American feminists. For example, topics such as bombings, buildings of Israeli settlements in Palestine, access to clean water, and the wearing of the hijab position feminist concerns differently for the Arab or Muslim woman. Some women call for an alternative form of feminism for the Arab woman. Debates such as these make it even more significant for women such as Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid to produce their work. Although they do not explicitly identify themselves as feminist playwrights, they are writing about women’s issues specific and relevant to the Arab/Arab American woman. These theatrical strategies shape and develop an Arab American theatre movement for women. Playwright Lucy Prebble argues: “There is nowhere a
writer, particularly a woman writer, should not go” (qtd. in Aston 591). 2 Prebble’s statement is essential to consider when addressing the Arab American theatre movement and its influence on American audiences.

Arab American women are operating within traditional masculine discourses to explore history, theory, and politics through performance. Aston further emphasizes: “[Prebble’s] generation, like generations of women playwrights before her, remains constrained by the gender inequalities that mean that there are places/spaces where it is not possible, as a woman playwright, to go—or to go in numbers sufficient to challenge the predominantly ‘one-eyed [maledominated] view of the world’” (591). The same idea operates in Arab American live performance: It is challenging for Arab American playwrights to break-out of the assumptions which surround “Arab” or “Middle Eastern;” their works are expected to focus solely on topics such as Islam and Arab culture.

Although post-9/11 theatrical experiences tend to be immersive, they are also prone to criticism because they are associated with “Islam” during moments of political tension. For example, Golden Thread’s 2001 ReOrient Festival performance of post-9/11 play Stoning was criticized by some Iranian audience members due to its violent portrayal of an Iranian man stoning an adulterous woman. Also Palestinian-American playwright Betty Shamieh’s play Tamam was assailed “as stereotyping Middle Eastern men as violent” (Hill 35). Golden Thread productions were criticized for “promoting negative images” of Middle Eastern families in their productions.

2 Prebble’s play Enron dealt theatrically with the corporate scandal and received mixed criticism because she was dealing with masculine themes.
performances. This was particularly aggravated and complicated post-9/11. Terms such as “terrorist” attach to bodies that appear to represent these social constructions.

A categorization of works by Arab Americans developed out of 9/11. For example, *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* (2004) is divided into six sections focusing on non-fiction, poetry, journalism, religious discourses, fiction and plays. The majority of this anthology, however, is divided into poetry and journalism entries in which plays are delegated to the final section. In 2009, *Salaam.Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama* introduced more plays by writers of Middle Eastern background. Editors Holly Hill and Dina Amin include Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* and Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed. Salaam. Peace* also includes an introduction which outlines the evolution of theatre companies such as Silk Road and Golden Thread prior and post-2001. Najjar addresses this anthology and argues that even though this anthology was published a few years ago, and is indeed a significant resource, it now needs to be updated as there are even more playwright voices to include. The editors select a limited amount of influential writers, and their text versions need to be updated frequently as more voices enter the Arab American theatre movement. I analyze the affect Arab American drama and performance might have on a contemporary audience post-2001. Therefore, my dissertation will examine how history and theory work their ways implicitly and explicitly in these plays written and performed by Arab American women.

There is not a great deal of research specifically surrounding Shamieh, Raffo or Zayid; however, research is continuing to build. Despite this growth, there are no
studies or biographies that outline the careers of these women. Their work is frequently presented in the context of other Middle Eastern playwrights and performers and is limited to anthologies instead of individual biographies. However, these are not just plays and performances for entertainment purposes. These playwrights and performers make meaning and values through their theatrical performances and strive for political transformation. This work contains substantial theoretical and historical implications. Several dissertations explore the significance of Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid. For example, Dalia Basiouny’s 2009 *The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American Theatre Movement* and Maysoun Freij’s 2008 *The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York* provide an overview of the emergence of Arab American female writers and performers pre and post-9/11. Basiouny introduces fifteen Arab American playwrights/writers and the stylistic choices they each incorporate into their works. She analyzes Betty Shamieh’s characters in *Chocolate in Heat* and *The Black Eyed*. Basiouny describes the stylistic choices Shamieh incorporates in these two plays to convey character, thought, and action. Basiouny also mentions Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* and addresses themes about the individual and the community. It is important to note that Basiouny is also an integral part of the Arab American theatre movement. In addition to being a scholar, she is also a solo performer and playwright. Her play *Solitaire* is a multi-media performance that synthesizes the events of September 11th and the Egyptian Revolution. In *Solitaire*, Basiouny examines how both of these events influenced social and political changes within the Arab American community.
Al-Masry Al- Youm states that prior to 9/11, Arab Americans were: “the most invisible of the invisible” (qtd. in Elwakill Mai 2011).

Figure 1: Dahlia Basiouny performs her solo performance *Solitaire* at Rawabet Theatre, Cairo. Photo by M. Abdelfattah. 2011.

In *The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York*, Freij outlines the career of Arab American female writers, performers, filmmakers, comedians, and musicians living in New York City from 2003-2006. Freij searches for similar patterns revealed within these female artists’ work. For her research, Freij attended two staged readings of Betty Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed* at Alwan for the Arts in New York in 2004 and at New York Theatre Workshop in 2007. Freij incorporates discussions of these staged readings to address the creative initiatives of Arab American playwrights and the audience reception of these plays.
There are several articles exploring Raffo’s influence in Arab American theatre. In *Trauma and Testimony: Heather Raffo’s 9 Parts of Desire*, Magda Romanska analyzes the series of traumatic events that influenced and shaped Iraqi women, and she uses *9 Parts of Desire* to support her claim that Raffo “softens” her female characters to make them more accessible to an American audience (25). She explores how this softening relates to the way Raffo uses trauma as a device in *9 Parts of Desire*. Although I agree with Romanska that vulnerability is an integral part of Raffo’s play, I focus more on the hardening of the female characters’ bodies. They skillfully traverse political spaces and ultimately function as survivors of war and conflict. In turn, this might transform a spectator in a way that “softens” their interpretations and allows for them to better understand the life and culture of an Iraqi woman.

In Sharon Friedman’s *The Gendered Terrain in Contemporary Theatre of War by Women*, she addresses theatre by women that reveals themes of war, conflict, and gender power dynamics. In addition to Raffo’s work, she considers Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*, Danai Gurira’s *Eclipsed*, and Judith Thompson’s *Palace of the End*. These resources will guide my exploration of Raffo’s influence on Arab American theatre. However, I examine how Raffo uses the solo performance form to metaphorically shape Arab and Arab American bodies and political spaces into a live, interactive experience on-stage.3

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In regards to Zayid, Hala Baki’s thesis *Female Voices of Comic Resistance in Arab-American Stand-up Comedy* examines the subversive ways in which female stand-up comedians tackle issues of identity through their art and explores how this might differ in comparison to male stand-up comedians. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* by Jack Limon is considered the first study to define stand-up comedy as an artistic expression and serves as an important resource to reference when discussing stand-up comedy. For instance, Yasser Fouad Selim mentions Limon’s influence in *Who Defines Me: Negotiating Identity in Language* (2004) and references the lack of Arab Americans in Limon’s text. Selim affirms this is due to the fact the stand-up form was not predominant within the Arab American community before 2001. The plays written by Shamieh and the performances created by Raffo further shaped the Arab American theatre movement and paved the way for Arab American comedy to become a predominant form within Arab American theatre. Explicit language and uninhibited sexuality are essential components in Shamieh and Raffo’s work. Before 9/11, Arab American women did not perform this type of controversial material. Shamieh and Raffo’s work made it more acceptable for Arab American women to perform explicit post-9/11 material on-stage.

While there are many influential writers and performers within the Arab American community, no one has yet tried to fit all of these narratives in one anthology. There are some limited selections but rarely any theory or history to
contextualize the dramatic works. It is important to deconstruct any underlying social, political and cultural power structures at work that define Arab American culture when researching, directing a performance or teaching plays that represent Arab American concerns. I observe themes of the body, cultural artifact, and language/ritual as key components within all of these works. They serve as the foundation for the representation of gender on-stage post-9/11. Playwrights and performers such as Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo and Maysoon Zayid engage audience members with complex representations of political, post-colonial, and feminist ideas. Simultaneously, they capture the realistic, daily lives of Arab American women. Each performer goes about this in a particular way and utilizes a different form but all contain connective, historical threads that unite them. These types of performances are significant in a post-9/11 world; they function as perspectives that were not readily offered prior to 2001.

Key Terms

Arab American: Playwright Jamil Khoury argues for both an Arab and Middle Eastern theatre movement (Najjar 191). He emphasizes: “We are specifically Arab and particularly Middle Eastern . . . We are bound by our commonalities and our conflicts and we need our theatre movements to reflect just that.” I will primarily be using the term “Arab American” while also keeping in mind the thread that connects any and all Middle/Near East backgrounds. Shamieh sees the Palestinian American community as a subset of the Arab American community. She states: “I think the Palestinian-American experience is definitely a subset of the Arab-American community. I see myself as both representing Palestinians who live in the diaspora
(and my generation of Palestinians were the first generation in which more of our community was born in the diaspora than in Israel and the Palestinian territories combined) as well as an Arab-American who, like all Americans, see themselves as part of the mosaic that makes up American society” (Shamieh Email 2012). Lisa Schillinger reminds us in “The New ‘Arab’ Playwright” that although religious foundation and national ancestry vary within the Arab American community, they are all artists committed to making visible, and removing, their hyphenated identities on-stage. They are all sharing stories essential to discuss during moments of tense political change (1).

Hyphenated Identities: In this dissertation, I choose not to use the hyphen when referring to the Palestinian American or the Arab American community as I find the hyphen to be reductive and unnecessary. Using the hyphen highlights a particular division that I want to avoid when examining identity politics surrounding the Arab American woman playwright and performer. I do use the hyphen when it is used within a direct quote. As Columbia University professor Berel Lang suggests: “The hyphenated identity dramatizes the condition through the divided self it represents” (4).

Methodology

I use a historiographical approach when analyzing the works. I also look at performance reviews of the plays to gain insight into the ways these productions were staged as well as received. Using historiography, dramaturgical analysis, and critical synthesis, I explore these playwrights’ careers and the influences that guided them to the points in their careers to date. Unlike anthologies, which introduce a
brief biography of the playwright, I incorporate historical and theoretical
implications when analyzing these plays in order to explore the significance of 9/11
as an event that shaped and transformed Arab American drama. Although it was a
time of transition for all communities, it was also a transformative time for Arab
American women writers. Instead of silencing their voices, they used theatrical
performance to speak out on issues of political and social concern. In conclusion, I
address the influence of Arab American women playwrights within the post-2001
Arab American theatre movement. I reflect on the significance of criticism and
analysis when discussing these works, and the ways these women playwrights and
performers shaped a collective Arab American women’s theatre movement.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2, “Betty Shamieh and the Intersection of Gender, Body, and History
in Post-9/11 Performance,” focuses on Shamieh’s writing and the methods she uses
to assess modern day issues dramatized through a historical lens. Shamieh, a
graduate of Harvard College and the Yale School of Drama, has written over fifteen
plays. In 2001, she began developing The Black Eyed which eventually premiered off-
Broadway in 2007 at New York Theatre Workshop. In this chapter, I emphasize the
significance of her work in the context of post-2001 politics and analyze the effects
that her strategies had on fellow Arab American women playwrights in their
exploration of post-9/11 politics and the female body. Shamieh rarely has her female
characters wear the veil on-stage and their language is explicit and uncensored. She
creates her own history that re-inserts women into historical narrative and
reassesses their place in historical context. Shamieh’s plays The Black Eyed,
*Territories*, and *Again and Against* are her most politically saturated plays, and I use them to analyze how the body, artifact, and language/ritual are deployed to challenge masculine ideological spaces.

In Chapter 3, “Heather Raffo and the Woman Solo Performer’s Presentation of the Body in Moments of Political Crisis,” I contextualize Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire*. Raffo’s solo performance of *9 Parts* premiered in 2003 at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and had its Off-Broadway premiere at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre. Raffo utilizes techniques from documentary theatre, yet still manages to frame her play in a way which is flexible, adaptable, and unique. I analyze how Raffo conveys historical events in a similar way to Shamieh to tell a story in a non-conventional way. Raffo’s solo performance in *9 Parts* consists of the portrayal of nine women and their shifts in thought regarding war, gender and the female body. I analyze the theatrical ways Raffo adjusts history and introduces theoretical implications to question the active desires and collective pursuits of the Iraqi woman.

Chapter 4, “Maysoon Zayid and the Politics of Humor, Hijab, and Heartbreak in Post-9/11 Stand-Up Comedy,” provides an analysis of the ways Maysoon Zayid utilizes humor in her stand-up comedy routines to address political, cultural and social concerns. Zayid states: “The Arab comedy thing is actually the ultimate American story because when you look at any immigrant group that tried to make it in America...they all started out using comedy” (Najjar 13). She is a co-founder and co-executive producer of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. At TEDWomen 2013 she delivered a talk about being identified as a Palestinian woman.
living with cerebral palsy. Zayid exclaims: I’ve got 99 problems and palsy is just one.” In this chapter, I explore how comedy can relay history, identity, and culture by satirizing a culture and satirizing one’s self.

In Chapter 5, “The Arab American Women’s Theatre Movement Post-9/11,” I analyze the theatre of Shamieh, Raffo and Zayid to identify how they control and maintain their visibility in a post-9/11 world. Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid are all dramatizing the daily lives of Arab American women. Although politics are inherently attached to their work as well as an area they frequently explore/challenge, they also emphasize realistic and non-realistic dramaturgy to explore the daily issues Arab American/Muslim women experience. It is important to note that this type of dramaturgy did not exist pre-9/11 in the form that it does now in a post-9/11 world. Arab American women playwrights and performers are creating a cultural product not visible before 9/11. The post-9/11 lens has guided women playwrights addressing concerns of the social construction of Arab American gender and ethnicity. Playwright Shamieh discusses issues of visibility and performance:

Invisibility, on the other hand, invites despair. A stereotype on-stage shouts out, YOUR PEOPLE ARE NOT FULLY HUMAN! You know in every fiber of your being that is not true. Never having any representation of your people in mainstream theatre at all whispers, Whatever you may or may not be, you simply do not matter. Or, at least, not to the people who have theatres, audience bases, resources, power. (Shamieh 2)

In this research project, I explore the plays and performances by Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo, and Maysoon Zayid. I analyze the theatrical as well as political influence these women have had on the Arab American theatre movement from
2001-present day. I selected these respective theatre artists because they are each utilizing a different method of performance, and yet they each share similar historical, cultural, and political fragments within their work. As Shamieh noted, September 11th, 2001 changed how she as an Arab American was seen. In this dissertation, I make visible Arab American women playwrights’ and performer’s influential theatrical works post-9/11 and the performative ways in which they deconstruct gender and identity on-stage.
Chapter 2
Betty Shamieh and the Intersection of Gender, Body, and History in Post-9/11 Performance

I realized that to write political theatre with any sort of sense of humor, or humanity, you have to put it in a cultural historic context (Betty Shamieh Time Out New York 2007).

Playwright Betty Shamieh realized that her play The Black Eyed (2008) would assume a different, more sociopolitical meaning following the events of 9/11. During her time as a teacher at Marymount Manhattan College, she recalls: “It was a devastating time for me personally. I was living in New York and trying to teach a traumatized class of college freshmen. Not only did I fear for my safety in the event of more terrorist attacks, I was also afraid of hate crimes against Arab-Americans like myself” (Shamieh Email 2012). Shamieh’s concerns were valid. Shortly following September 11, 2001, reports multiplied about Arab Americans—especially women wearing the hijab—being spat at and labeled as “rag-heads” (Ahmed 204). In Georgia, three men assaulted an Arab woman. One of them removed her hijab, another put his foot on her neck, and a third kicked her back, all the while “cursing Arabs” (205). The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) revealed that on September 16, 2001 a Muslim woman was attacked while grocery shopping. In this case, a white woman struck the victim
while yelling “America is only for white people.” 4 Many Arab Americans questioned their place post-9/11 and recognized hyphenated identities now took on new meaning. For example, Anika Rahman wrote “Fear in the Open City” for the New York Times shortly following 9/11. She wrote: “I am so used to thinking about myself as a New Yorker that it took me a few days to begin to see myself as a stranger might: A Muslim woman, an outsider, perhaps an enemy of the city. Before last week, I had thought of myself as a lawyer, a feminist, a wife, a sister, a friend, a woman on the street. Now I begin to see myself as a brown woman who bears a vague resemblance to the images of terrorists we see on television and in the newspapers.”

During such a tumultuous, unpredictable moment in history, Shamieh questioned if she should continue working on her plays. She notes: “Because of my background, people tend to assume that my plays have an underbelly of propaganda or agitprop which I find extremely frustrating” (qtd. in Reilly, 2012). Following the events of 9/11, Arab American playwrights faced the risk of being labeled as anti-American, culturally insensitive, or resistant for moving forward with their creative initiatives. With this risk, however, also came a responsibility to adequately represent Arab Americans. In fact, after 9/11 more playwrights willingly “outed” themselves as Arab American playwrights and performers (Najjar 7). Instead of viewing “Arab American” as a pejorative label, Arab American theatre practitioners

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4 Important to note: Amaney Jamal & Nadine Naber’s Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects (Syracuse University Press, 2007), discuss the contradictory ways Arab Americans are labeled as “white” yet have also have come to be viewed as “non-white.”
reclaimed their identity on their own terms and embraced their visibility through performance.

In this chapter, I am analyzing three of Shamieh's plays: The Black Eyed (2005), Territories (2008), and Again and Against (2008). These three plays all involve politically active female characters challenging masculine ideological spaces during moments of historical urgency. Shamieh's three plays adjust historical, biblical, and political narratives to insert the visibility of the Palestinian woman in a post-9/11 world. The Black Eyed creates its own history that reinserts women into historical narrative/challenges masculine ideological spaces. Shamieh represents the women's body so as to claim space, exposing the societal norm that women minimize themselves. She also confronts the myth that the women were virginal or asexual and that they preferred to be that way. Shamieh explores the ways history and ideology can be used to tell, as well as complicate, a well-known story. I will address the ways Shamieh incorporates the body, artifact, and language/ritual. In her plays to make visible historical concerns about the Palestinian woman to post-9/11 audiences.

Shamieh also realized the significance of restoring the term Arab American in her plays. She initially did not want to be seen as “the Palestinian American playwright.” However, she discovered that forming stories about her own identity post-9/11 was not expected but essential. Shamieh focused on producing humanistic stories with realistic characters. Playwrights such as Shamieh viewed their role as an Arab American playwright in a post-9/11 world as a responsibility. During a time in which media stories assigned labels to Arab Americans such as
“terrorist” and “villain,” it was imperative for Arab American playwrights and performers to self-identify and represent their culture in order to achieve a recognition through live performance.

Shamieh recognized that her most compelling stories involved her own Palestinian American identity. Although she is Palestinian, Shamieh does not practice Islam but instead identifies herself as a Christian. While Shamieh is not Muslim, Arab American theorists still acknowledge her significant influence in the Arab American theatre movement. The movement consists of a multiplicity of voices and identities. Shamieh’s scope of dramatic work represents a multiplicity of issues regarding the Arab American woman. In fact, Shamieh is the only non-Muslim woman represented in the anthology *Shattering the Stereotypes* (2004). Editor Fawzia Afzal-Khan writes in her introduction, “Playing with Images, or Will the RE(A)EL Muslim Woman Please Stand Up, Please Stand Up?”5 about her inclusion of Shamieh: “Betty is a Christian Palestinian-American woman, and I decided to include her play *Chocolate in Heat* because it shows that the issues which are so important in the work of the Muslim women included here are not ‘Muslim’ issues alone” (16).

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5 The chapter’s full title is included because of its emphasis on the “real Muslim woman.” Shamieh proves that Arab American female identity is fluid and complex.
Shamieh resolved to revise her plays and re-shape public opinion about Arab American women living in a post-9/11 world. Shamieh notes: “I wanted to capture the complexity of being a Palestinian-American woman living in New York in the wake of September 11” (The Black Eyed 6). Indeed, this relationship is a complex one. For instance, Arab American women playwrights often contest traditional Arab culture and ideology in their dramatic work. Instead of upholding domestic values and tradition, these women define what it means to be a contemporary Arab American woman living in the United States. Their work focuses on failed
relationships, indefinite career paths, and complicated explorations of sexuality and identity. Shamieh employs sardonic humor and explicit language in her plays. Most of her female characters speak in sharp, candid tones that negate traditional Arab gender expectations. In Shamieh’s *Again and Against*, Arab American graduate student, Dahlia, is interrogated by an Arab American FBI agent about her potential involvement in a terrorist act on campus. She frequently interrupts him and demands that Omar to listen to her perspectives. She challenges him: “Fuck you, Omar. If you had the evidence you need to convict any of us for something more than a prank, you already would have . . . Get out!” (26). Shamieh often incorporates gender power reversals in her play. Indeed, the female characters possess agency. Simultaneously, Shamieh’s female characters overturn gender roles and disrupt traditional masculine roles. The choice to have Dahlia not only speak up to Omar, her interrogator, but to also order Omar to “get out” shifts the power dynamics in the room. At first, it seems as if Dahlia is in the submissive role; however, it is exactly the opposite. She controls the action of the play.

The political climate post-2001 shaped and revised Shamieh as well as other Arab American theatrical narratives written and performed by women. Particularly, the expectations and assumptions regarding Arab American women became skillfully distorted through performance. Arab American women playwrights and performers functioned as leaders and principal creators of their own identity. After 2001, playwrights frequently constructed and implemented experiential theatre\(^6\) to

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\(^6\)The term “experiential theatre” is used to emphasize that these theatre artists are taking personal moments from their own life and inserting them into their plays and performances. This is significant
impart stories not frequently revealed in the mass media. For example, the theatre space opened up the possibility to make unknown stories of unidentified Arab women directly and/or indirectly affected by war and conflict publicly visible. The Arab American theatre movement also included narratives of the “every day” Arab American woman.

Shamieh started out writing about her own identity and her every day experiences growing up Arab American with her family. *Chocolate in Heat* (2001) and *Roar* (2004) were Shamieh’s first pair of dramatic works. Both plays were produced in New York. *Roar* became the first play by a Palestinian American playwright to premiere Off-Broadway while *Chocolate in Heat* and *Roar* both focus on the Arab American immigrant experience and how this affects young women. *Chocolate in Heat* provides an account of Aiesha, a young Arab American college student, desperately wanting to fit in with her peers. Shamieh’s *Roar* depicts a Palestinian American family struggling to manage a small business in Detroit, Michigan, as well as to establish themselves as successful musicians. *Roar* is set during the First Gulf War and illustrates the pressures to assimilate as well as manage familial relationships during an unpredictable moment in history. Political events play a key role in Shamieh’s plays; she illustrates illustrate how politics impact a woman’s identity. *The Black Eyed* is her first play that tackles these issues. 

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7 post-9/11 because these women’s personal stories were now being made visible and accessible to the public. Additionally, these women had ownership and autonomy over their plays and performances.

7 This is significant because all three of the playwrights/performers analyzed in this dissertation were all the first to contribute to a vital part of the Arab American Theatre Movement.
Shamieh continued to revise her play *The Black Eyed* in order to provide a theatrical space to relay political issues and questions affecting Arab American women in a post-9/11 world.

Women playwrights and performers, like Shamieh, wrote plays about local and national concerns, considering both to be vital for post-9/11 audiences. The effect of performance on the work of Arab American women is significant. According to media scholar Jack Shaheen, film presents recyclable characterizations of the Arab American community such as “half naked belly dancers” and “silent black covered creatures” (55). Shaheen closely studied 900 movies and found only 5 percent of these films to adequately represent Arab culture. He noticed an increase in these representations in post-9/11 films. In order to combat reductive representations, Arab American women playwrights and performers gravitated to live performance to convey issues of identity formation and cultural interpretation.

Although she questioned whether or not her plays would resonate well with a post-9/11 American audience, Shamieh recognized the importance of addressing Palestinian identity through live performance. Her family is from Ramallah and immigrated to San Francisco during the 1960s. Shamieh’s parents were supportive of the arts, and encouraged her to attend local theatre productions. After seeing a high school production of *Godspell*, Shamieh knew she wanted to pursue a career in theatre. She became involved on-stage as an actor at Mercy High School; her skills as a writer also developed during this time. Her first play, *One Arabian Night* received recognition at the San Francisco’s Young Playwrights Festival.
As a result, she applied for various theatre and English university programs. Shamieh studied three years at the University of California, Berkeley, and then transferred, as a junior, to Harvard University. Shamieh notes: “I applied to transfer to Harvard on a whim; partially because I was interested in moving [someday] to New York and felt it would be easier to transition to the East Coast if I attended college there” (Shamieh Email 2012). As an undergraduate student at Harvard, Shamieh began to explore her identity as a playwright. In 1995, Harvard University produced Shamieh’s first play *One Arabian Night*. An anonymous student critic for *The Harvard Crimson* wrote: “*One Arabian Night*, by Betty Shamieh ’96, is both bold and honorable in trying to address the ways in which Arab American women must negotiate their sexuality within American and Arab-American society” (Gideonse 1995).

After graduating, Shamieh entered the playwriting program at the Yale School of Drama. ⁸ She recalls: “To me, getting into Yale Drama was a very important step in my career as a playwright. I knew that I wanted to study playwriting at Yale when I was in high school.” As a graduate student, Shamieh shared her plays about Arab American identity with a select few. Shamieh remarks in the introduction to her 2008 play *The Black Eyed*:

I wanted to be smart about my career choices . . . until I felt safe, which is hard to feel when you’re in your early twenties anyway, particularly if you are a minority trying to break into a field where few or no members of your own are working. (7)

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⁸ Shamieh attended Yale School of Drama from 1997-2000.
As a result, she began to experiment with dramatic structures and narratives with an emphasis on her own experiences and identity. For example, one of Shamieh’s first works was a one-act written in blank verse in which Shakespeare’s tragic characters come to life in order to harass him into changing the endings of their stories. Some of her plays deal with her ethnicity. I am particularly looking at her plays that deal with ethnicity at significant moments in history.

**Introduction to The Black Eyed**

Shamiehs’ poetic drama, *The Black Eyed*, depicts four Palestinian women from different time periods anticipating their outcomes in the afterlife. The Black Eyed refers to the myth that Muslim men will be greeted with “black eyed” virgins in the afterlife. Shamieh challenges this myth throughout her play and reverses traditional power dynamics. The characters in Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed* are unapologetic and openly claim their sexuality and “ethical flaws.” Shamieh recognized that the *The Black Eyed* challenged dominant ideologies. She notes: “Because it is an extremely political and nonlinear play written in free verse with a chorus, I half believed I would never find a major producer willing to take it on, and that freed me to write in a way I had not attempted to write before” (*Black Eyed* 9). *The Black Eyed* premiered at Magic Theater in New York City on May 14, 2005 under the direction of Jessica Heidt. Subsequently, the play opened in 2007 at Fournos Theatre in Athens. Shamieh traveled to Greece to meet with the director and performers prior to their performance. Shamieh asked *The Black Eyed* producer why the Fournos Theatre was interested in producing a play about four Palestinian women and presenting it in Greece. Shamieh recalls the producer’s response: “She
looked slightly surprised at my question. Then she said that she never really thought about the play as being about four Palestinians. She said she thought the story was about four strong people” (*Black Eyed* 10). Although this play is very much about the Palestinian experience, it is significant that the producer categorized the women in this way. From these depictions, a play like *The Black Eyed* is a significant resource for post-9/11 audiences to realize the impact live performance can produce. Women playwrights such as Shamieh created characters and plots to question the representation of Arab American women in post-9/11 entertainment.

Following the 2007 Fournos Theatre premiere of *The Black Eyed*, Sam Gold directed a notable production of the play in New York. This production relied on minimal scenery and lighting. Bacalzo notes: “Scenic designer Paul Steinberg’s vision of the afterlife is a vast pink emptiness, which is given a bit more shape by Jane Cox’s lighting” (2007). The color pink was used to represent femininity, indicating that the world was about women. This choice is significant as the themes in *The Black Eyed* involve women’s sexuality and identity. Gold’s production focused on the urgency of each woman’s story. Playing with the idea of labels, Gold made visible that each female characters’ actions could be seen as “terrorist” or “resistant” depending on the audience perspective. *The Black Eyed* addresses the oppressive acts that inspired each woman’s desperate action and their will to seek answers in the afterlife about their own identity. The “vast pink emptiness” constructed by Steinberg casts dark shadows of each woman as they reveal their deepest truths and regrets while living. Their stories redirect modern day conversations about the
Palestinian Israeli conflict and post-9/11 politics and their effect on Arab American female identity.

The four female characters in *The Black Eyed* are relentless in their pursuit of their unanswered questions while they wait for their outcomes in the afterlife. They recite their desires and fears in poetic passages, chorus sections, and monologues. Although each character possesses a distinct opinion, they frequently function as one voice and speak collectively and cohesively as a chorus. The characters are all Palestinian women yet they come from very different historical moments and geographical locations: A woman from the Crusades [Tamam], a biblical figure [Delilah], a modern day suicide bomber [Aiesha], and another modern day victim of an aircraft hijacking in the United States [The Architect]. In her stage directions, Shamieh indicates that “the stage is very sparse” in order to place more emphasis on the words of each individual character (*Black Eyed* 5). A ladder was the only set piece during the 2005 production of *The Black Eyed*. In productions, Aiesha lies down on the stage, next to the ladder, as the audience members arrive. She stays in this position until the show begins. Aiesha is the first character to greet the audience members and serve as their main point of contact. This choice is significant because Aiesha is waiting in the afterlife, and she is no longer alive. Audience members are encouraged to observe her body on-stage and perhaps question issues of gender, objectification, and religion before the performance even begins. Shamieh uses a seemingly flawed female character to function as leader of *The Black Eyed*. As Bacalzo notes: “At the same time, by including a suicide bomber amongst the cast of characters, Shamieh allows for dramatic differences of opinion and impassioned
debate” (2007). Aiesha functions as a political reference to remind audiences that their expectations of Palestinian women have been influenced by news stories and that a performance of *The Black Eyed* will offer new insights and meanings.

![Figure 3: Actors from the 2007 production of *The Black Eyed*: Emily Swallow, Jeanine Serralles and Lameece Issaq and Aysan Celik. *The New York Times*. 1 August 2007. Photo by Rahav Segev.](image)

Aiesha, an outspoken, former suicide bomber, has been waiting in the afterlife for some time when she is suddenly greeted by three other Palestinian women. Aiesha asks herself: “What is the point of revolution that begins with the little hand? Any little hand? This little hand? (13) She states: “I am a martyr. There are female martyrs too, you know” (33). Shamieh utilizes repetition throughout *The
Black Eyed to emphasize significant themes of resistance as well as to unify all four women. Aiesha makes it known that she will serve as their guide and that she will be the one who asks questions about their life experiences. She suggests to the women that the door to the afterlife is unlocked and, if they are inclined, they may enter at any given moment. Instead of entering right away, they initiate a conversation with one another.

In the afterlife, Delilah is searching for Samson. In contrast to the traditional biblical story, Delilah reveals the story from her own point of view. She explains how the Philistine elders forced her to seduce Samson, eventually causing her to think it was actually her own idea. The elders refer to her as “whore” and do not want her to function as leader, although she demonstrates these capabilities. However, the elders demand she merely operate as a subservient woman. They silence her whenever she provides them with insight or suggestions. Delilah explains: “I told them my ideas about how to prevent the cattle from dying and why our well always ran dry . . . [the head elder] said the only weakness that man has is for women. And then in perfect time, they all turned and looked at me. It was then that I offered to try” (16-17).

Tamam, searches for her brother, Muhammed. He was killed during the Crusades, and she desperately wants answers. Tamam reveals her story: “I am the last of seven sisters, good luck for the family. Because, after me, a brother was born. The only one” (Black Eyed 38). As a chorus, the women question: “Why do our people rejoice when a boy child is born?” (38). Tamam shares how she decided to pay ransom for her imprisoned brother’s release and confront the Crusaders herself.
Tamam is aware of her femininity and its effects on the Crusaders: “I am a pretty woman. It’s not a boast,” and the chorus recite with her: “It’s a fact. Looks are a commodity, an asset, a possession I happen to possess” (39). Tamam hopes to persuade them to release her brother. Instead of accepting her offer, they rape her in front of her brother to demonstrate their power over her and her people (40). She recalls: “The crusaders believed rape would enrage our men” (40). The chorus considers her statement and replies: “Enraging a man is the first step on the stairway that gets him to a place where he becomes impotent, helpless” (40). In the afterlife, Tamam is granted authority over these particular men as she is the first person to “greet” them upon their arrival. She is permitted to cut off each man’s genitals, but refuses this option saying: “But I chose not to and said I’ll be back to do it later, because I didn’t want to hurt them once and be done with it. I wanted them to fear me forever” (48). In Shamieh’s world, the rules are reversed; the Palestinian women possess agency, choice, and dissent in the afterlife.

Although she serves as the primary guide, Aiesha also does not reveal much about her own story. She is very dominant and forthright throughout the play. She constantly reminds the women: “I ask the questions” (24). When asked about her own story, Aiesha responds: “It’s a long story . . . and it ends with a real bang” (24). Shamieh inserts sardonic humor to foreshadow Aiesha’s role as a suicide bomber. When Aiesha finally reveals her story, it is actually quite a short narrative. She emphasizes that there are “female martyrs” even though people don’t often expect it (33). Aiesha reverses the traditional role of the suicide bomber as well as the expectations of the Black Eyed myth itself. For example, Aiesha says: “Women like
me take matters into our own hands, and we get our rewards” (34). Aiesha believed she would get any choice of man once she reached the afterlife. In traditional Muslim belief, it is the male martyrs who will figuratively receive the promise of one hundred women of any hue for their own pleasure. Although Aiesha confirms her interpretation of the religious text is a “loose one,” this moment is a significant reversal of traditional Palestinian women religious expectations. Aiesha’s suicide bombing mission did not go as planned. She became frightened as she approached the large crowd, and ended up killing one of her own people. In fact, it was a young girl, and it is an unsettling experience Aiesha rarely discusses. She reveals: “They left her for dead when they saw me coming. I don’t think they meant to, but that’s what they did. It was too late to stop everything, the one step I took back was my last. The little girl didn’t understand she was going to die. She smiled at me” (80). The Architect, also a modern day woman, recalls seeing news headlines about this incident. She finally realizes that Aiesha is the female suicide bomber she read about in the news. The Architect recalls: “Underneath it were the words: Finally, they are killing one another” (80). Both Aiesha and the Architect have a similar frame of reference because they were both either directly or indirectly involved with acts of terrorism.

Although Tamam, Delilah, and Aiesha speak openly about their stories, the Architect recites very little until she suddenly decides to command attention. At first, she comes across as inarticulate and has very little to add to the conversation: “I may be inarticulate. Have always been. It’s not that I’m not thinking clear thoughts, I’m thinking too many of them” (48). Gradually, she inserts her opinions
and advances into a detailed monologue filled with impressions of Arab American
women and sexuality and politics of 9/11. She discusses her work as an aspiring
architect during her life on earth: “You see I do little projects. I take the
requirements and dimensions that clients give to far too many overrated white men
like Gehry to make a museum and make my own drawings of how I would do it if
someone gave me . . . [The chorus states in unison with the Architect] a chance”(50).

The Architect envisions a life in which her supervisor is now her husband.
She says: “Occasionally a female architect like Zaha Hadid\(^9\) succeeds, but it’s mostly
men like Gehry and you, husband, who get to design museums . . . I content myself
with helping you with your work, showing you where you falter, and you falter often
enough.” The Architect reveals what she would really like to say: “Was your head up
your ass when you designed this?! But I can’t say that. I’ll have to be vague and
suggest a reinforcement or two. I have to be careful not to bruise your ego” (56-57).

The female chorus recite as the Architect speaks: “Take up less space! Take up less
space!” (59). Shamieh’s characters repeat this phrase consistently throughout the
play gives more attention to the work of female architects in male-dominated
spaces.

The Architect recalls an incident that occurred while traveling to visit her
supervisor: “Upon boarding the plane, she notices a group of Arab men on the same
flight as her. When she senses they are about to hijack the plane, she emphasizes to
the chorus: “It’s not about blame. What’s the point of being articulate when no one

\(^9\) Shamieh credits Iraqi born British architect Zaha Hadid’s work for inspiring the Architect character in \textit{The Black Eyed}. 
can hear anything they aren’t ready to hear? I died a virgin, but that was just bad luck. While I was alive, I did the hardest things imaginable, more wonderful than a million buildings that will one day crumble. I am a woman who was born with a good heart and I designed and executed my life in a way that made sure that’s how I would stay” (73-74). The Architect comes to terms with her death and is the first woman to head toward the door to exit. As she walks away from the women, the Chorus declares:

Here I only have unanswered questions. Because there, I only had unquestioned answers. Unanswered questions, unquestioned answers. I do someone good dead. I do someone dead good. What is the point of the revolution that begins with the little hand? Any little hand? (85)

Shamieh’s characters in The Black Eyed are each from a different historical time period and geographical location, but they are all Palestinian woman searching for answers to their questions. Shamieh historicizes the ways these Palestinian women were underestimated and unrealized during their respective lives. Before Shamieh attended Yale, she was hesitant to share her plays that dealt explicitly with her Palestinian identity. In her academic studies, she noticed that writers who were labeled as “truly” American and universally recognized were frequently white, male playwrights. After 9/11, Shamieh’s work fostered the ever-growing Arab American Theatre Movement and created an opening for work by Arab American women playwrights to be more accessible to the American public. However, Shamieh engaged with issues as polarizing and controversial as the Palestinian American conflicts she presents in her plays. She acknowledges these artistic concerns in her introduction to The Black Eyed. Humor is an element Shamieh incorporates
frequently in her plays, and she sarcastically asks the reader to consider how a
Palestinian American women playwright might go about undertaking a topic so
contentious, “especially if you enjoy being well-liked” (8). Shamieh, however, also
emphasizes a significant point: “The answer, of course, is that you absolutely should
not. Unless you have to” (8).

Shamieh even adjusted her own views on the future development of the
American theatre canon after rereading Tennessee Williams’ essay *The Catastrophe
of Success* (1947) post-9/11. She discovered the possibility that she could find a
place in American theatre if she kept pursuing her work. In *The Black Eyed*, Shamieh
reinforces the concept of women “taking up less space” in history and decides to
challenge this position in the world of the play as well as her own life. She created
her own space in American theatre. She acknowledges the influence Williams’ essay
had on her decision to continue her work. In her opinion, it was vital for her to
continue writing her plays post-9/11. In his essay, Williams discusses the
problematic aspect of producing theatre for success or profit. He defines this success
as temporary, fleeting, and ultimately unsatisfying. He believes validation comes
from the process of creation. This is a significant guiding point for the Arab
American theatre movement. Post-9/11, the purpose of dramatic work was to
emphasize the creative process and the artistic product to instruct and to initiate
conversation. Shamieh decided to concentrate on this notion of creation and
ownership over a story and subsequently wrote *The Black Eyed*. Shamieh identifies
this play as her most complex, vivid work. Additionally, it was her first play to have
multiple productions and to be translated into different languages. She views this as a significant accomplishment in her career.

Critics recognized the importance of her work in a post-9/11 world. *The New Yorker* defined *The Black Eyed* as: “A gorgeously conceived and realized drama . . . Shamieh’s theatrical imagination, in its agility and its urgency, brings to mind Tony Kushner, whose faith in eloquence as an instrument of change is echoed here.” *The Oakland Tribune* notes: “From its first words, Shamieh’s play grabs you and won’t let go.” Reviews also paid attention to the explicit sexual references throughout the play. Robert Hurwitt notes: “Sex plays a key role in their narratives—from seduction, rape and virginity to repressive sex roles and ironic fantasies” (2005).

Shamieh deals with contradictory elements in her play which is significant because this reinforces how Arab Americans were being represented in post-9/11 media. In *The Black Eyed*, the female, Palestinian body is always at the forefront when discussing identity issues and politics. However, it is always revealed in the characters’ own terms. By exploring Shamieh’s emphasis on the body, artifact, and language/ritual in *The Black Eyed*, I explore the way Palestinian women expose historical and religious myth to reveal and challenge male-dominated spaces.

As the reviewers noted, explicit sexuality plays an integral role in Shamieh’s plays. Delilah functions as the Palestinian seductress figure. Shamieh illustrates the unknown parts connected to Delilah’s story that do not get realized in the biblical texts. Indeed, the relationship between biblical Delilah and Samson is a complex one. Shamieh addresses the long standing debate as to whether or not Delilah actually felt love for Samson. The Old Testament versions focus on Samson’s love and desire
for Delilah. Shamieh, however, captures Delilah’s perspective and experiences. Delilah shares: “Just because I love someone else does not mean I become someone else” (32). Delilah recognizes the religious, political differences between her, a Philistine, and Samson a Hebrew, but still feels love for him in her own way. As art historian Madlyn Kahr suggests, the reader is given sparse details regarding the voice of Delilah in the Bible. Kahn reveals this limited perspective: “Samson loved Delilah, she betrayed him, and what is worse, she did it for money” (taken from Judges 13:16). Due to this longstanding interpretation of the Delilah figure, she embodies “deadly female allure” and her body and persona is continually depicted this way in both art and literature. Shamieh’s choice to include Delilah in her play is a significant one as Delilah tends to be represented in a stereotypical, seductive manner. Delilah remarks: “I am a pretty woman. It’s not a boast,” and the chorus recites along with her: “It’s a fact. Looks are a commodity, an asset, a possession I happen to possess” (32). This statement does not only correspond to Delilah. Instead, Shamieh has all of the Palestinian female characters utilize this phrase when discussing the role body and sexual power have on their own life experiences. This statement is applicable to each woman’s life experiences.

Delilah no longer plays the “bad woman” of the Bible but a more complicated, humanistic persona with stories connected to all of the other Palestinian women. Each of these female characters possesses flaws to some degree but they are self-aware and accountable for their choices. Delilah reminds the other women that the Philistine elders used her sexual prowess to their advantage. They wanted Samson dead, and they believed she would be the one to manipulate him. They told her: “The
whore did her job and she did it well” (15). She reveals to the women the elders did not recognize she was also the daughter of an honorable man and a “good woman who loved her people.”

In this version of the Delilah story, we discover she had a brother who recently died in battle at the hands of Samson. She feels alone and the elders use this to their advantage. They act interested in her ideas about improving their community with the intention of manipulating her into seducing Samson. The elders say to Delilah: “Don’t want to lose more men like your brother . . . [Samson] needs to be stopped” (16). Delilah and Samson eventually develop a relationship. She goes to live with him at his camp; however, she discovers that he has many other Philistine ladies at his camp as well. She reveals her pride felt “wounded” and she behaved indifferently toward Samson. As a result, Samson preferred her the most out of all of the Philistine women. Shamieh depicts Samson as the “charmer” figure whereas Delilah functions as the “hero” in this narrative. Despite this, Delilah still holds complex feelings toward Samson. Delilah exclaims to the audience: “Samson! I begged my people not to hurt you. When they blinded you, I could not see, how to show you though I loved my people more, I still loved you . . . outside, looking in, I saw you framed in the doorway of that great hall that stood so tall . . . your arms stretched out. The pillars exploded . . . I wished your God could have kept you safe, [Chorus] from she who loved you, but still wished you dead” (23). Shamieh employs a biblical story and addresses power dynamics within sexuality and Palestinian history.
Tamam’s story reveals unbalanced gender power dynamics during the Crusades. Tamam went to see her brother in jail and pay his ransom. She remarks: “Most of my people looked at the Crusaders with every ounce of hatred a human heart can hold...I was smarter than that. I knew I must navigate through the maze of might, and did my best to be kindly...hoping perhaps that I would remind them of a woman they knew, [Chorus] or would have liked to know” (39). The chorus repeats: “I am a pretty woman. It’s not a boast. It’s a fact. Looks are a commodity, an asset, a possession I happen to possess.” The guards thanked her for the baskets of food she brought them as a gesture. Then, they raped her in front of her own brother.

Tamam’s brother withheld information from the Crusaders, and they raped Tamam to force him to reveal information. Tamam exclaims: “They skewered the support for their argument into my flesh... They thought making us face one another in our misery would break us. But we were used to misery. It’s like anything else” (41). After Tamam’s brother was released from jail, he joined a rebel group. He met a disastrous end in a spontaneous killing spree. Tamam reveals: “They hung my brother’s head and hand with them on pikes above the city walls. The head I barely recognized, but I wanted to bury his hand to show who it belonged to.” Tamam’s stories emphasize “broken bodies” of the Palestinian people throughout history. Also, her story reveals the ritual of rape and its function of power over Palestinian women. In The Black Eyed, each woman now possesses ownership over her stories and has a chance in the afterlife to reclaim her own identities through narrative.

The Architect’s story focuses on sexuality in the work place. She reveals she applied for an assistantship from an advertisement she observed in Architectural
Digest. During her job interview, she notices her supervisor is an attractive “Half Breed,” and she begins to formulate thoughts about a potential future with him. The Architect shares with the women that she is constantly thinking, and that is the reason why she doesn't often speak. However, she decides to share her story after all of the other women have finished speaking. The Architect is self-conscious about being a virgin at age thirty. She states: “I promised myself if I’m not married by thirty-five I would stop being precious and just have sex with a man I wanted to love me, whether or not he did” (63). When the chorus asks her why this is the case, she replies: “Because it’s no longer cute that you’re a virgin at thirty-five.”

Shamieh addresses the pressure of Palestinian women to find a reputable man to marry but also to remain a virgin until she is married. The Architect envisions what a future with this “reputable” male architect might consist of, and it is not how she had hoped. She says: “Twenty years from now, I will be sitting on the toilet in a hotel ballroom on a night you get some award for a project I did at least half the work on. Two girls will enter [and brag] I did it again with him again on Sunday. In his office!” (58). The Architect shares when she asks her husband why he works so late, he contests her and declares his work pays the bills. The Architect remarks: “I don’t cost too much to feed nowadays. You’re a big fat motherfucker now. I weigh much less than the day you married me because I have to stay thin,

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10 A term Shamieh uses in her plays to discuss someone who is partially Arab, partially another culture. In her plays, it is always male personas that she refers to as “Half Breed.” This term is also used in her play Roar. In that play, Hala remembers an attractive man from her past who she refers to as the “Half Breed.”

11 Chapter Four. Maysoon Zayid discusses virginity and Muslim religious custom in her stand-up comedy routines. She also remained a virgin until her thirties.
gaunt, hollow.” The Chorus recites: “Take up less space. Take up less space” (59).

Shamieh reintroduces this phrase throughout *The Black Eyed*.

Following the events of 9/11, contradictory political attitudes were directed toward the Arab/Arab woman. Arab women functioning as their own political agents challenged the orientalist idea that Arab and Muslim women’s bodies should be represented as “passive” and “demure.” In “Palestinian Women’s Disappearing Act,” Amal Amireh refers to this as the “death by culture” paradigm and argues that this paradigm diminishes political leanings and replaces them with cultural assumptions to justify the motivations behind women’s violent acts. Instead of being seen as victims of war and occupation, suicide female bombers are rather depicted as victims of a “killer culture” that abuses and victimizes these women’s bodies. Amireh explores these cultural assumptions and identifies the reductive representations of Arab women, particularly the suicide bomber, post-9/11.

Amireh’s concepts relate to the themes in Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed*. Shamieh depicts the story of a female suicide bomber, Aiesha. Palestinian female suicide bombers are immersed in a sexual political narrative instead of represented as active political national agents. Indeed, post-9/11 narratives developed a specific profile for the male suicide bomber post-9/11. This narrative of violent, Arab men and their submissive, docile women permeated news outlets. There was never a clear, specific political narrative toward the Arab female suicide bomber. Western media often trivialized their role and referred to them as “lipstick martyrs.” In *The Black Eyed*, the news article about Aiesha states: “Finally, they are killing their own people.” They no longer function as passive and demure bodies but as active,
complicated figures. Amirah argues these women are “purposeful, lethal, and literally explosive.” Shamieh’s text of *The Black Eyed* plays around with the misconception of Palestinian women’s bodies as “weak.” In Shamieh’s play, these women acknowledge they are expected to “take up less space,” but they purposefully refuse and claim their own position in history. Also, sexual politics plays an integral role in *The Black Eyed*. The Palestinian women in Shamieh’s play disrupt the political narrative of the suicide bomber as well as the politically active Palestinian woman. Shamieh’s Palestinian, female characters realize that they are more than victims of a killer culture, even in the afterlife. Each of these women were told in some way to “take up less space” during their lives. As the Architect reminds us: “I’m the architect of the unseen, underlying structures, of buildings that have never been built” (14). In the afterlife, these rules are reversed, and they not only “take up the space” but they each reclaim it, including the playwright Shamieh.

In *The Black Eyed*, Shamieh emphasizes that the “stage is sparse.” As previously mentioned, the only prop typically used in productions is a small-sized ladder which the characters’ refer to as “heaven’s gate.” They state: “Here we wait at heaven’s gate, at the gate of the martyrs’ door” (30). The ladder also embodies the power dynamics revealed in the play. Tamam recalls: “The crusaders believed rape would enrage our men” (40). The chorus considers her statement and replies: “Enraging a man is the first step on the stairway that gets him to a place where he becomes impotent, helpless.” The ladder serves as a dominant power position on-stage. The actors sometimes use the ladder to tell their story. Although the ladder is the main set piece, artifact also plays a key role figuratively.
In *The Black Eyed*, the emphasis on the labor of the body and its visibility is essential. There is an exhaustive quality to the monologues in *The Black Eyed*. The pieces require a great deal of effort on the part of the performer as well as active listening on the part of the spectator. The audience is transported locally and globally toward many places in a limited amount of time. Shamieh incorporates dialogic interruptions and balanced rhythm and song in her writing. In *The Black Eyed*, these women reinterpret history in their own ways and on their own terms. Shamieh’s inclusion of visibility issues form new meanings about the Arab American female body in post-9/11 performance. Shamieh uses this visibility to emphasize the importance for these women to tell their stories in their own voice.

Newspapers and religious texts make their way into the dialogue and function as key plot points and reveals. Delilah references historical sources and their authenticity. She notes: “Check your sources, remember who wrote them” (33). Tamam argues with her and says: “You’re certainly not a religious figure . . . I didn’t read about you when I scoured the Holy Books of every religion that ever existed. Looking for a trace of what all the world religions say happens to martyrs, so I can figure out where my brother might be” (28). Delilah reminds her: “I’ve looked at all those books too. I did just as much work as you did to get here . . . everyone picks and chooses what’s convenient about their own religions.” The women question which stories are considered historically valuable to share. Tamam asks: “Why do people mention the length of a story as a reason not to tell it?” (24). Shamieh includes debates such as these to place attention on the unheard stories of Palestinian women.
Shamieh employs a combination of ritual, poetic language, and explicit language. For example, language and ritual blend together during the chorus parts:

**CHORUS.** *(lift hand and look at it)* “What is the point of the revolution that begins with the little hand? Any little hand? *(lifts her right hand and looks at it)* this little hand?” *(13)*

In *The Black Eyed*, Chorus moments are used to emphasize visibility and to reiterate integral themes of the play. These moments also place attention to the female body and its perceived lack of power. Shamieh includes moments of overlapping, repetition, and prayer-like chants. The women speak together, as if chanting a prayer, as they take a step toward the room in the afterlife. In a long passage, they each point to different areas of the stage to indicate various groups of women also experiencing oppressive acts:

**DELILAH.** There must be the Japanese women, whose men kamikazied their way here and haven’t been seen since . . .

**TAMAM.** Over there are the Iranian mothers, who helped convince their children it was their duty to run through land riddled with land mines . . .

**ARCHITECT.** The Irish girls are over there, whose fathers starved themselves in the hope of tasting freedom.

**TAMAM.** There are the Jewish ladies, the relatives of the Unsung heroes of the Holocaust, unnamed, because anyone who might have seen or been told about their brave acts died almost immediately after them. *(30-31)*

Shamieh incorporates several of these poetic segments in the beginning of *The Black Eyed*. She employs this to set up each woman’s story and to indicate unity as well as dissonance with all four women:
DELILAH. (overlapping) Women were his only weakness, and I was his only woman . . .
TAMAM. started out smaller than me and got bigger. I want to see my brother . . .
ARCHITECT. he passed me and knew I was an Arab . . .
AIESHA. (interrupts) Hold on! Women and weakness? You’ll speak first. (14-15)

Although the women often speak in poetic unison and rhythm, Shamieh also employs explicit language to ignite tension and crudeness. Aiesha states: “Crudeness is necessary for clarity.” Aiesha reinforces stereotypes associated with Delilah. She declares: “So you refused to put out till he told you, right? All I know is that you like kosher dick, bitch” (32). During this moment, it is made clear what is known about Delilah is the limited material presented in the biblical archives. Shamieh also includes jarring interruptions to keep the audience alert and always thinking. After Aiesha speaks these words to Delilah, The Architect exclaims. “Ugly! No hands! Change!” After this moment, the women do not participate in their chorus rituals. Instead, Delilah replies. “Don’t worry, I can handle her.” Delilah then goes on to reveal her entire story. Despite their differences, they frequently move together, speak together, and complete each other’s sentences. Eventually, they discover that all of their stories share connecting points with one another.

Although The Black Eyed is written in English, Shamieh introduces Arabic terms. She includes the term “houris” to describe the figurative pleasure men will receive in the Muslim afterlife. The chorus declares: “Hanging out with a bunch of houris, who were hot virgins whose virginity is continually renewed, also known as the Black Eyed” (35). Shamieh also emphasizes that these women are not very
articulate in Arabic. It is interesting that she includes this, because so much of *The Black Eyed* consists of Muslim religious themes. The Architect says: “I can hardly speak any Arabic” (53). She reveals her mother never taught her and she did not grow up hearing it in her household. In Shamieh’s play *Roar*, A Palestinian mother desperately wants her daughter to learn the Arabic language and tradition. In this case, the daughter has no interest in learning about her culture and wants to emphasize her “American-ness.” This is an issue that frequently appears in Shamieh’s plays. She implements multiple perspectives about hyphenated identities and the tensions which can arise when trying to navigate two cultures. For example, the Architect envisions a different scenario for the airplane hijacking incident. In her fantasy, she will speak in “perfect Arabic” and talk the men out of their plans:

**ARCHITECT.** Being able to listen and understand is a different kind of articulacy and one I possess. Like how I can’t speak Arabic, but I can comprehend

**CHORUS.** and know what’s going on before everyone else does . . .

**ARCHITECT.** They’ve lived lives that would break the hardest of men. They only want to be heard”

**ARCHITECT.** I knew if I was not proud to be a Palestinian, I could not live a life with dignity. I knew if I did not love my people, no one would. I would no longer resent being a bridge between two cultures, or as myself . . .

**CHORUS.** What does a bridge ever do except get stepped on?

(64-65)

Although she does not justify the violent act, she considers their perspective and questions if she could have stopped the incident through common language and understanding. Throughout *The Black Eyed*, all of the women have moments where they move together, reciting: “Welcome to heaven, where everything you believe to
be true is true . . . but we can't control what we believe . . . that's what makes our heaven such hell" (26).

**Territories**

Territories gives us the name, face and bold deeds of one woman, and we leave the theater reminded that history rarely tells the whole story. It’s up to art to help fill in the blanks (Jones 2012).

In Shamieh’s play, Territories,12 a Muslim woman’s unrecorded contributions in the Third Crusades are laid out and explored in a historical conjecture narrative. Although Alia persuaded two powerful leaders to go to war with one another, her contributions have been completely left out and not included in historical artifacts. Territories had its world premiere at the Magic Theatre on January 19, 2008. A German translation of the play premiered at the Landes Theatre on January 31, 2009. It was co-produced by the European Union’s Capital of Culture Festival and the Landes Theatre.

In Shamieh’s director’s note, she states: “In 1187, a caravan was captured by Reginald of Chatillon, a middle-ranking French nobleman and ruler of the Crusader city of Kerak. A high-born Muslim woman was among the captives and was held as a prisoner by Reginald. She was believed to be the sister of the Islamic ruler Saladin” (3). Temporally, Territories shifts back and forth to reveal Alia’s life prior to and

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12 Betty Shamieh emailed an updated draft of Territories on April 28, 2015. Territories is only published in German translation. Shamieh gave permission to use the draft for scholarly purposes.
shortly after her kidnapping. The stage space is divided to represent Saladin’s royal room in Damascus and the underground prison located in Reginald’s Kerak castle. Alia wears a traditional Muslim headscarf which covers most of her face. Instead of a burka, she wears a robe. Alia moves back and forth between these two spaces; she controls the dramatic action. Throughout, she begins to remove her headscarf to demonstrate her independence from male authority.

Figure: 4 Nora el Samahy and Rod Gnapp in Betty Shamieh’s *Territories*. Directed by Jessica Heidt. Photo by David Allen. 2008.

*Territories* involves Alia’s interactions with the male political figures around her. Her brother, the well-known Islamic ruler Saladin, is extremely proud. He
exclaims: “I will be praised for my chivalry in poems and epics for hundreds of years. It won’t only be my people who speak of my valor as a soldier and a king” (4).

Alia realizes she will never receive this type of notable recognition. She remarks: “No one will think it worthwhile to write down my name” (4).

Alia desires to go to Mecca to pray, but her brother does not find it suitable behavior for a woman to make this visit alone. He warns her that Reginald has been ransacking caravans on the road to Mecca. Alia reminds her brother that Reginald attacked the holy city and that it is important to take immediate action. She provides her brother with suggestions, but he refuses to listen. He questions: “Do you want me to be forever known as the ruler who lost Mecca?” (18). Reginald instills fear of the Muslim civilization, and the men are fearful to act. In fact, Reginald is known for his collection of severed ears. Saladin does not want to face him or lose to him in battle. Alia attempts to persuade him to develop a better strategy; she reminds him the Crusaders possess more sophisticated weapons than their people. Shamieh also reveals gender power dynamics and the role the body plays in the spectrum of historical power. Alia refuses to let her disability prevent her from asserting her political causes. Alia attempts to persuade her brother Saladin to develop a more effective strategy since the Crusaders possess more sophisticated weapons than the Muslims. He interrupts her suggestions: “You should have gotten married” (32). She replies: “Why? A husband to keep me down? To feed me my medicine . . . I sneak out dressed like a man and I hear men talk. They laugh about me and about what it would be like to have sex with me” (36). Alia dresses like a man and performs masculinity to obtain political information. While pretending to be male, she also
hears gossip surrounding her condition. The men make jokes and gestures about her perceived sexual performance. They make fun of her condition and pretend to shake and convulse. Alia even identifies herself as a “crippled virgin.” Whenever Alia discusses politics with her brother, he undermines her suggestion by switching the subject to her lack of prospects for marriage. Alia refuses to marry and instead focuses on defeating the Crusaders in battle, a task her brother is fearful of completing himself.

Alia undergoes spontaneous seizures that affect her movement and speech. Alia frequently experiences convulsions but refuses to let this inhibit her objectives. She says: “When the seizures come, I think this time it won’t end. I won’t stop shaking till I stop breathing. When I realize it won’t matter that I will be gone, even to me, everything shifts. It is not me shaking. It is the world that is moving and I’m the only one standing still” (29). Saladin informs her about the importance of marriage in their culture: “Look who I married! My predecessor’s widow. She’s fifteen years older than I am. I married her to secure my throne, I married her for power. Everyone does it” (937). Again, Alia requests to travel to Mecca, and her brother again refuses to grant his approval: “Men are never at as much risk as women are. Look, Sister, I didn’t make the world this way . . . [also] I’m going to look like a fool if I let my own sister be captured” (27).

Alia decides to ignore her brother’s commands and travels to Mecca alone; however, she is indeed kidnapped by Reginald’s army. While she is his prisoner, she uses this time to her advantage. She reminds Reginald: “There’s a funny thing about power. You don’t have to declare it if you possess it” (10). Also, Alia knows she is an
“expensive hostage” and uses this as a tool to assert her power. Alia refuses to submit to Reginald’s societal power: “Let me tell you one thing, Sir. I do what I want. Do you understand me? You don’t fool or trap me into anything. In good time, you will see. I do what I want” (21).

Reginald acknowledges Alia’s intelligence, and he recognizes her family shield. He realizes she is pretending to be of lower class than she truly is. Reginald says: “I thought to myself— the only reason someone would pretend to be in his family is if they were from a greater one” (13). As times goes on, the two develop a relationship. Alia reveals to Reginald that her brother is humiliated by her condition: “My brother despises me because I am not whole. He hates it that I shake and show everyone in our family I’m not perfect, blessed by God. Many of our people think my condition is a sign that I am possessed. I can’t help but feel that he thinks I am too. He is humiliated by me” (29).

It is soon revealed that Alia plotted her own kidnapping. She knew very well Reginald's army would capture her on her way to Mecca. She did not care; she was determined to fulfill her mission. She uses her time as prisoner as an opportunity to skillfully maneuver between both the Crusaders and the Muslims. In Territories, Alia is not a victim in the Third Crusade but functions as a willing compliant in political strategic maneuvers. Alia says to Reginald: “How weak are you if you can’t keep a woman you want? Convince the knights not to be afraid of my brother. I’m telling you, Reginald. My brother is afraid of you. Don’t you think if he had the power to throw you out he would have a long time ago?” (60). Alia suggests: “I know he can’t
do it. We don’t have the weapons, we don’t have the strength. The Crusaders will eventually rule over us forever” (61).

Eventually, Reginald allows Alia to leave his castle. She tells her brother, Saladin: “There is a weak spot in the fortress guarding his castle near the southern gate. We could attack” (67). Alia says to herself: “Being captured by this Reginald is the only way I can make my brother go mad as every military leader must be mad” (78). During the battle scene, Alia initiates the action by declaring, “Go!” (71). Reginald and Saladin fight one another to the death, however, Alia is at the forefront of their minds. Reginald declares: “She lied to you and me both . . . she hated that you respected Crusaders and made truces with [traitorous] men” (78). Saladin replies: “You know nothing about my sister. Do not speak about her with your filthy tongue.” Alia initiates the two men to take action and she also serves as the primary force which complicates the men’s choices in battle.

Later, Saladin reveals that, after his death, his men opened his treasury to find not even enough money to bury him. During his life, Saladin spent all of his money and died with barely anything left. He emphasizes: “But, my people built me a glorious tomb in Damascus anyway” (5). Eight hundred years later, Saladin’s tomb would be opened and the French would declare victory “of the Cross over the Crescent” (6). Alia notes: “And I will know that I was right to do what I did. I, who was just a nameless, faceless woman” (6). Alia declares: “I am a nameless, faceless woman. I don’t matter, but the men that I will force to fight one another do. They will decide the fate—the destiny—of both their civilizations. I will make them decide it” (80).
Shamieh’s depiction of Alia further explores the complexity of the historical Palestinian female voice and its omission from archival sources. Although Alia possesses effective strategies for furthering the success of her people, everyone, including her own brother, refuses to listen to her suggestions. She places herself at risk by willingly allowing herself to be kidnapped by Reginald’s forces. She recognizes the necessity to take action and gain information about the Crusaders. Initially, her brother refuses to take this much needed action. Alia recognize this urgency to take action and decides to act independently. She is able to cleverly persuade both sides to fight one another in hopes for a decisive battle. Alia propels her brother to take action, and she simultaneously incites Reginald to engage in battle. This tactic causes the men to rethink their own strategies. Reginald is known for violently punishing his enemies. In spite of this, Alia risks her own life to assert her cause and to remain as his prisoner until her brother takes action.

Territories illustrates the role women contribute to political events and the lack of recognition they historically receive. Shamieh also reveals gender power dynamics and the role the body plays in the spectrum of historical power. Alia refuses to let her disability prevent her from asserting her political causes. Alia attempts to persuade her brother Saladin to develop a more effective strategy since the Crusaders possess more sophisticated weapons than the Muslims. He interrupts her suggestions: “You should have gotten married” (32). Alia then requests to travel to Mecca, and her brother again refuses to give his approval: “Men are never at as much risk as women are. Look, Sister, I didn’t make the world this way . . . [also] I’m going to look like a fool if I let my own sister be captured” (27). Saladin reinforces
the subservient role of women and does not acknowledge Alia’s skills or intelligence when it comes to political matters. She is aware her brother is humiliated by her disability. He believes it is a sign of favor from God to be able-bodied, and the fact she is not “perfect” hinders her from spiritual growth and prosperity.

Shamieh explores the convoluted relationship between the Palestinian female body and history. Also, it is an interesting choice that Shamieh has the male characters in *Territories* “shake” in unison with Alia when she experiences her seizures. Shamieh defines it as a “rhythmic dance.” She does not explicitly explain this choice; however, it is essential because it is not just Alia’s body convulsing on stage. The male actors are also required to participate. As an anonymous critic for *Der Standard* writes: “*Territories* records an entire catalog of power technique accessed on the relatively unprotected body of a woman.” Shamieh uses the Crusades to emphasize the presence of women in historical narratives and how these issues translate to modern-day sexual politics. Reginald tells Alia: “That’s unfortunate. To not be able to control how you move . . .” (14). She responds: “It’s better than not being able to control how you think.” In *Territories*, Shamieh represents a female body on-stage that undergoes seizures and that occupies a prison space.

Alia is in a prison metaphorically at home as her own brother literally tries to keep her from taking up space and delegate her to the private realm. Concepts of torture, power, and visibility are analyzed in Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1985). Torture, a repeated act typically communicated in private, is now “contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body” (27). Pain functions as “world-
destroying,” and torture forces the person to record and objectify this fact. How does the meaning change when this is placed upon a female, Palestinian body on-stage? Shamieh dramatizes Alia’s challenge to stay alive and maintain her own voice and body in the process. Territories challenges the idea that historical record is shaped by men and that significant events are led by men. Alia functions as the torturer in this scenario. She complicates both Reginald and her own brother’s tactics of war. Even in their final battle, they hear Alia’s voice in their minds and ultimately cannot focus.

Alia removes her headscarf as a symbol of her refusal to be a “nameless, faceless” woman. However, she also recognizes she is indeed a “nameless, faceless woman.” For example, she removes her headscarf and declares: “I will be known only as one man’s sister and another man’s captive” (4). Throughout Territories, she begins to remove her headscarf to demonstrate her independence from authority. She places it at the foot of the stage, so it is always visible. Alia wears traditional Muslim woman’s clothing to emphasize her identity. However, although she wears traditional clothing, she does not follow traditional expectations. She is assertive, dominant, and questions her religion. For example, Saladin criticizes her lack of reverence for their religion and therefore denies her trip to Mecca. He tells her she has never behaved very devoutly. Alia agrees with him. She does not identify as a devout Muslim; she is angered by the effects and devastation of war on her people. She is also angered by her own disability. She knows she is capable and competent, but it can be challenging with her disability to be visible in her community. Shamieh emphasizes that Alia does not wear a burka but a headscarf to cover her face. Her
eyes, however, are visible. Shamieh addresses issues of visibility and the male gaze. Reginald remarks to Alia: "You know, I believe that is the first time I have ever seen you angry. Even more angry than you were last night when you caught me peeking at you" (21). He repeats this behavior throughout the play. Alia continues to distance herself from the traditional Muslim clothing and removes her headscarf. At the end of the final battle, Alia puts her traditional Muslim clothing back on and acknowledges the audience. She smiles. This act illustrates the unknown, uncredited political actions on the part of Alia as well as other Arab women throughout history. Alia removes her Muslim clothing and becomes visible to the audience; however, once her task is completed, she returns to the traditional clothing. She is now unrecognizable and her contributions unrecognized. Alia knows her historical contributions, and Shamieh allows for these to be made visible through live performance.

Shamieh’s play shifts back and forth in time to illustrate Alia’s life before and after her kidnapping. Shamieh emphasizes that the stage should be divided to represent Saladin’s royal room in Damascus and the underground prison located in Reginald’s Kerak castle. However, the focus is always placed on Alia. Alia moves back and forth between the two spaces, dancing with each man as a medley of Eastern and Western music plays. The men remain in their respective spaces on-stage. Alia is the only one permitted to move back and forth between the different spaces.

Shamieh also focuses on religion and tradition and the role this plays in historical gender dynamics. Alia has never considered herself devout. She does not
readily embrace the Arabic tradition, yet she cares tremendously about her own people. Reginald learned Arabic during his fifteen years in a Turkish prison. He adopted the language and uses it to try and intimidate Alia. However, he does not succeed. Alia informs him: “My name is 5000 dinars in your treasury if you turn me over. That’s all you need to know about me and my name” (14). She refuses to eat, and this worries Reginald. He wants her alive because he knows she is an expensive hostage. Alia also knows this and uses it to her advantage. She talks with him and contests his social theories. Reginald enjoys her company. In the end, he does not want her to leave because he is so used to having her around his castle. She informs her brother that his men defiled her. She does this to propel him to act. She exclaims: “Being captured by this Reginald is the only way I can make my brother go mad as every military leader must be mad” (78). Therefore, Alia functions as a willing prisoner and uses the prison space as a political one. However, Reginald's feelings also shift. He develops feelings toward Alia and wants to ensure she is safe. Alia states: “I don’t matter, but the men that I will force to fight one another do. They will decide the fate, the destiny, of both their civilizations. I will make them decide it” (80). The play concludes with Alia remembering conversations with both Saladin and Reginald. It is revealed Reginald loved Alia and deeply cared for her despite their political differences. Despite these feelings, Alia persuades Reginald to encounter her brother and meet a decisive outcome once and for all. Alia says: “at the point where my people can win! As her brother stabs Reginald, Alia says: “. . . At the point where my people can win!” (81). However during this statement, Saladin succeeds and stabs Reginald in the chest.
Shamieh’s stage directions reveal: “Reginald dies. Alia moves to the middle of the stage and Reginald stands up and returns to the prison side of the stage. Alia begins to dress in the traditional Muslim outfit we see her undress out of and leave onstage at the beginning of the play” (81). Reginald’s body is now permanently located in the prison space onstage whereas Alia’s body is covered yet still mobile. Alia’s feelings towards both men are quite complicated; however, her incentive to act takes precedence. Despite this, she is not beholden to her brother. In fact, the final lines of the play come from Saladin. He tells Alia: “I will not be your jailer, Sister . . . I will let you go” (82). Shamieh’s Territories makes visible through historical conjecture a woman’s productive contributions in the Crusades.
Again and Against

There’s constantly a sense of tension in the play, forcing the story forward and keeping the audience on the edge of their seats - teaterstockholm.

In 2008, Shamieh’s Again and Against had its world premiere at Playhouse Teater in Stockholm, Sweden. In this play, a Palestinian American graduate student is accused of managing and initiating a terrorist plot on campus. Dahlia is accused of this attack by a fellow Arab American. In 2011, Again and Against was selected for Russian translation and presented at the Ljubimovka Festival with support from the US Russia Bi-Lateral Presidential Commission and the Lark Play Development Center. As in The Black Eyed and Territories, Shamieh incorporates varying degrees of humor and drama to reveal historical injustices regarding Palestinian women. Shamieh states: “I’m always trying to create work that you don’t know whether it’s comedy or tragedy . . . Are you going to laugh or have your gut pulled out? It’s my sensibility as a person. Life is so great—but people are dying in Somalia . . .” (Alliance).

In Again and Against, Shamieh relays the story of graduate student, Dahlia, and her encounter with FBI agent Omar. Dahlia is in her mid-twenties and is a very politically active graduate student in the sciences at Columbia. Omar, on the other hand, is a determined FBI agent in his forties who desires to end terrorism at all costs and refuses to be associated with pro-Islamic causes. Omar interrogates her

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13 Again and Against was developed by London’s Royal Court Theatre and presented in the 2006 Public Theater’s New Work Now series.
about a crime she supposedly committed. They are both Arab American and reference this mutual connecting point throughout the play. However, their discussions on identity often create more conflict than resolution or solidarity. Shamieh reveals more context about both of their lives through a power reversal game in which they take turns manipulating one another and commanding attention. Dahlia questions the “authenticity” of Omar’s Arabness. Omar responds: “Yes. I am an Iraqi-American. I don’t normally work in this department. But, I’ve been asked to come here to explain what you’ll get if you cooperate” (3). Dahlia is focused on protecting her boyfriend Amir who is also under investigation. However, Omar reveals that her boyfriend Amir is currently viewed as a national security threat. If she does not turn him in, she will also be viewed as a national threat. Dahlia has already received local and national attention about this perceived terrorist ploy. She declares: “Outlandish stories about how Osama Bin Laden and I met over cappuccino and decided to bomb the Golden Gate Bridge next and then the Sears Tower” (10).

Omar pretends to be Dahlia’s confidant, but he is not being sincere. He suggests: “They’re not acting in accordance with FBI policy. And they’re racists. I know that. I also know that you didn’t intend to kill anyone. That will weigh heavily with the judges if your case goes to trial and we’re hoping it won’t. Were you informed that you’re being accused of trying to set bombs on the Columbia campus?” (9). He also adds: “What I am doing – or actually what I’m trying to do - is get you a fair deal. I know it seems like I am on the other side, but I’m not. There are a lot of people who don’t want me in the Bureau, who want to see every Arab-
American deported or caged, but I’m not going to allow that to happen” (6). In reality, Omar is attempting to use their common ground in order to obtain much needed information from Dahlia. He is also trying to convince her that her boyfriend is using her as a pawn in a terrorist act. Dahlia emphasizes: “I don’t want help for me. I want help for Amir. I’m an American citizen. But Amir and I are the same. We are Arabs. Just like you. Or your father or his father. I’m banking on the hope that whoever it was in your family who gave you your Arab name and your Arab eyes also gave you an Arab heart. Help me help Amir. He’s just a kid” (24).

As the power reversal game continues, Omar indicates Dahlia and her friends made paint bombs along with a letter with a political message attached to them. However, somebody accidentally filled the bombs with actual explosives. A janitor discovered the paint bombs and was instantly injured. Dahlia insists she did not intend for that to happen. She was simply trying to make a political statement. Omar reminds “Well, you did send a statement with the word ‘bomb’ to the New York Times and the office of the president of Columbia University.” Omar asks her if it was all supposed to be a “joke.” Dahlia replies: “No, a good joke is an Arab-American FBI agent. I thought it would make a good statement, which I unfortunately did not get to finish drafting before I was picked up. I knew that pussy guard you set up in Lerner Hall was FBI. Don’t play dumb. The dude that your people hired right after 9/11 to supposedly check people’s bags, but really just to spy on the political activity of the kids there.” (10). Impressions of 9/11 and post-
9/11 politics guide the narrative of *Again and Against* and are used to relay the discourses on terrorism.

There are only two characters in *Again and Against*; the gender power dynamics constantly shift back and forth in a political manipulation game. Omar asks Dahlia: “I don’t know how our men have gotten our women twisted to the point that they defend what goes on in the Middle East.” Dahlia emphasizes to him: “And here!” Omar responds: “In America, no one kills their daughter for having sex.” Dahlia adds: “Just their wives, right? And get only six months in jail? But, no, that’s not called an honor killing.” Omar replies: “We? What ‘we’ are you talking about? You’re not an Arab woman and you know it. You can fuck all the boys from the old country you want and change your name to *Arabia El’Arabia*, but you never will be one of them. Be an American, Dahlia, tell the fucking truth. Are there other paint bombs really being planted on other campuses?” (38). In a similar manner to *Territories*, the male figure interrupts the conversation to introduce sexuality, and, in doing belittles the Palestinian female body. In *Again and Against*, Shamieh also uses the character of Omar to introduce topics of cultural authenticity, hyphenated identities and the concept of “passing” as white/American.

It is also discovered that Dahlia experienced a sexual harassment incident on campus. However, her academic committee manipulated the situation to their advantage, especially when the committee members discovered that Dahlia was a Palestinian woman. Omar states: “Yes. Dr. Manning told us when we questioned him that you began proceedings to sue him for sexual harassment. Dahlia says: “That was a dumb thing to do. If I were closer to death than birth, maybe I wouldn’t be
able to help myself from slapping an ass or two if the owner of it was a spry twenty-
something bent over a lab table” (19). She further adds that she was molded into
the “poster child for the feminist movement in the sciences.” She felt forced to
exaggerate the situation because other people on her committee had conflicts with
the professor accused of sexual harassment. In fact, Dahlia reveals: “Two of my
female profs had prepared a statement that made it sound like I was just about
finger fucked every time I looked into a microscope. So, either I had to confront
these amazing women scientists who were lying or drop the suit” (21). Dahlia felt
hopeless in the situation. She says: “You have to scream to be heard and I didn’t
want to scream.” Even Omar has to admit: “He clearly harassed you, though. Why
didn’t you want to make him responsible for his actions?” Dahlia responds: “Hello?!
I’ve got the blood of an Arab woman in me.” When Omar questions what she means
by that statement, she responds: “That means I’m more likely to bust into his office
and fling a rock at his head than file a ‘sexual harassment’ suit.” Again, Shamieh uses
humor to challenge many historical assumptions about Palestinian women.

As in Shamieh’s other plays, the stage directions emphasize that the stage is
very sparse. Again and Against is set in an enclosed room at Brooklyn’s Metropolitan
Detention Center (MDC.) The time is set “one year from now,” making its themes
continually relevant. Dahlia, like most of Shamieh’s female characters, decides not
to wear traditional Muslim hijab. She does, however, hold a great deal of opinion
about the matter. She reveals to Omar her discussion with her adviser:
In America, we don’t have to dress in a burka to be treated with respect . . . I told her . . . In America, one in four women are raped and there is no word for that other than epidemic. In America, there has never been a woman president and there have been women presidents in three Muslim countries. In places like Texas in America, if you shoot your wife in bed with another man, you could until recently plead temporary insanity and get six months. Lady, the definition of ignorance is to be such a joke that you don’t get that you’re a joke. Your position as a world-class scientist doesn’t help you. You’re still old. You’re still a woman. That makes you the lowest of the low on the totem pole in your precious fascist America. (19)

The choice for Dahlia to not wear a headscarf, yet still hold opinion about the custom, as well as other Islamic traditions is significant. Although the hijab or burka is not made literally visible, it becomes discussed through narrative and discussion. Dahlia addresses crucial points about Palestinian women and their choice of whether to wear the hijab. Shamieh’s female characters rarely wear the hijab, but it is still a visible political artifact in their lives simply because they are Palestinian women. The hijab signifies a contentious point of identity politics and shapes the lives of Arab American women, even those that choose not to wear it. Dahlia discusses how her ex-Jewish boyfriend’s family viewed her. She states: “Little Palestinian girlfriend seems like a symbol, a personal statue of their liberty. I could never just be a girl to them. They loved me because I was a Palestinian and that struck me as more racist than if they had hated me for it” (46). Dahlia’s decision to not wear the headscarf shapes her identity and causes her to consider her authenticity as a Palestinian woman in a post-9/11 world.

In Again and Against, Dahlia’s ritual of counting down on her fingers appears in various moments of dramatic conflict. In Territories, it serves as a similar conceit.
Alia removes her headscarf at particular moments in the play. She also returns back to her initial stage position at the conclusion of the play. In *Again and Against*, Shamieh emphasizes in the stage directions: “One of [Dahlia’s] hands is handcuffed to her chair. The index finger and thumb of her free hand is crossed (as if she is indicating three fingers or making an ‘okay’ sign)” (2). The only required set piece is a table and this serves as a barrier between the two characters. Throughout the play, Dahlia bangs her hands on the table and demands justice. She sticks out four fingers of one hand, and hides this from Omar. When he questions her behavior she simply says: “Nervous tic” (10). She continues to count down the time throughout the dramatic action. When Omar tells her someone here is lying she says: “Yeah. You *(she slams her hand down and changes her fingers to show seven)*” (41).

She continues this repetitive behavior to demonstrate that she is in control of the situation. She declares: “Fuck you, Omar. If you had the evidence you need to convict any of us for something more than a prank, you already would have. Get out! *(She bangs on the table with her hands, then she places her hands on her lap with four fingers of her right hand tucked in – as if she is indicating the number six with both hands)*” (25). She even addresses him as “habibi.” This means “baby” or “love” in Arabic. She places him in the role of subservient and refuses to relent.

Arabic language is used sparingly in Shamieh’s plays, and it occurs during moments when it matters. For example, Omar reveals to Dahlia what occurred when her boyfriend tried to step in and prevent her from being interrogated. Omar states: “I heard he knocked out the first man who tried to cuff you and kept screaming, ‘Itseybeyhash! Itseybeyhash!’ Over and over like a maniac. That wasn’t too smart. I
mean, for god’s sake, if it’s so important to tell them not to touch you, at least remember to do it in English so they can understand” (12).

In the end, Dahlia triggers Omar to act. He slaps her. She thanks him. She says: “Your name is obviously not really Omar. From the few Arabic words you said, it’s clear you speak Arabic with an American accent, but then again so do I. And, since everything you told me was a lie, I was starting to doubt you are even an Arab. But, I thought if I can get under this man’s skin enough to make him hit me, not as a tactic but out of anger, he’s definitely one of my kind. Now please, if you wouldn’t mind, be on your way. There’s music I’d like to hear.” Protestors are congregating outside the detention center. Some are there to support Dahlia while others are there to contest her political views. Shamieh states in her stage directions: The chanting of ’no justice, no peace’ gets louder and clearer. It sounds like more voices have joined in” (70). Dahlia says: “They will start a revolution.” As he exits, Omar says: “Not in time for you . . . Bring the boys in here!” Dahlia sits alone on-stage, still handcuffed to the chair and resumes the same position as at the beginning of the play. Dahlia exclaims: “In time for someone.” While she states this, the chanting of “no justice, no peace, gets more audible. Then, the play ends. Again and Against operates similarly to Territories as well as The Black Eyed. Similar to the female characters in these plays by Shamieh, Dahlia reminds us: “I dared to articulate a dream. To have it be heard without killing people” (13). Dahlia’s body is confined, handcuffed yet it is visible, vocal, and powerful.

Betty Shamieh’s plays are vital in post-9/11 politics and performance. Her work has continued to influence the Arab American Theatre Movement as well as
university education. Shamieh is a recipient of the April 2016 John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Shamieh was awarded this honor in April 2016. Shamieh’s contributions to Arab American theatre have earned her considerable recognition. In May, 2011, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized Shamieh as a recipient of the “Young Artist for Intercultural Dialogue and Western Worlds” (United). Twenty artists under the age of thirty-five received this award. These individuals were acknowledged for their skill in addressing cross-cultural, “widely appreciated” topics. In addition, Shamieh received a 2004 National Endowment for the Arts grant and was selected as a 2004 Clifton Visiting Artist at Harvard University. Shamieh was also declared a Playwriting Fellow at Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies in 2006. Her extensive recognition illustrates the significance of her work.

Shamieh wrote The Black Eyed directly following 9/11. The four Palestinian female characters in The Black Eyed debate political, religious, and social issues through fragments of body, artifact, and language/ritual. In Territories, Shamieh presents a courageous Muslim woman whose strategies dictate the outcome of a significant battle fought between two influential male leaders. Although Alia is never recognized for her role in the battle, her contribution cannot be denied by the male leaders. She risks her life to fight for her beliefs and is not concerned about behaving in a manner her brother deems appropriate. Instead, she controls the entire battle from beginning to end. In Again and Against, Dahlia refuses to be labeled as a “terrorist,” although, she recognizes the importance of political action. In all three of Shamieh’s plays, Palestinian women make visible historical
inadequacies and adjust narratives to explore how the body, artifact, and language/ritual can complicate male-dominated communities.

Shamieh explains: “Arab Americans have always been part of the fabric of the cultural scene in America, but we’re for the first time talking about issues, about our identity, more than just trying to assimilate” (qtd. in Baron). In Shamieh’s plays, she emphasizes the complexity of the Arab American female identity as well as the guiding historical thread that connects each and every woman throughout history.
Chapter 3
Heather Raffo and the Woman Solo Performer’s Presentation of the Body in Moments of Political Crisis

I listened deeply to what each woman said, what she wanted to say but couldn’t, and what she never knew how to say. Then I wrote her song (Heather Raffo, Author’s Statement, 2009).

Heather Raffo, creator and solo performer of 9 Parts of Desire (2003), felt a “tremendous responsibility” as an Iraqi American to adequately represent the women in her play (Horowitz 2005). Like, Shamieh, Raffo considered challenges and potential resistance when presenting this type of thematic work to post-9/11 American audiences. In what ways would they theatrically, and perhaps ethically, produce critical conversation and also maintain spectators’ interest? Women performers and playwrights such as Shamieh and Raffo discovered solo performance as an effective medium to create emotional dialogues with spectators. Raffo serves as both creator and performer of 9 Parts as she foregrounds the Iraqi woman’s collective experience. Raffo was born into a Christian family in Mosul, Iraq. At a young age, her family came to the United States where she was raised in Okemos, Michigan. Raffo received her Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Michigan and her Masters of Fine Arts in Acting from the University of San Diego. She also studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Raffo says: “As an American with a father who was born in Iraq, I naturally live on both sides of the issues. The first Gulf War was the most defining moment of my life. I was
in school at the University of Michigan. I remember watching many of my fellow students at the bar cheering the war as it played out on TV, while I was worried if my family in Baghdad was even going to survive. Over a decade later, I think Americans are deeply questioning their place in Iraq, and wondering about its history” (Raffo Official). Raffo questioned her own situation in both American and Iraqi culture and decided to pay a visit to her family in Baghdad. This visit inspired her to write *9 Parts of Desire*. She returned to Iraq in 1993, shortly following the Gulf War. However, her experience differed greatly from her childhood in Baghdad. She remembers as a child sleeping on the roof of her grandmother’s home and gazing at the stars. Returning to Baghdad as an adult, she witnessed the effects war and conflict had imposed upon the Iraqi people. Raffo's time in Baghdad made a significant impression on her. She was greeted with: “Welcome to your father’s country;” however, it was the Iraqi women's stories Raffo wanted to learn more about and to understand (qtd. in Hill 111).

When Raffo visited the Amiriya bomb shelter and explored the Saddam Art Center in 1993, a painting titled “Savagery” captured her attention. It was of a naked woman clinging to a barren tree with a golden sun illuminated behind her. Raffo researched “Savagery” and discovered that the artist of the painting, an Iraqi woman, died in an American air raid during the war. Raffo decided she wanted to learn more about the life experiences of unknown women like this particular Iraqi female artist. Who was this woman? Why did she create this particular painting? After her visit to the Saddam Art Center, Raffo introduced herself to various women in Iraq and forged relationships with them. It is interesting to note that a majority of
the art work exhibited at the Saddam Art Center depicted and portrayed Saddam Hussein. Many Iraqi artists, frequently male, would honor and pay tribute to Hussein through their art pieces. In fact, these works were considered the most favorable by the regime officials. As Layal in 9 Parts suggests: “These jobs are hard to come by and it takes a lot to get them” (120). However, Raffo made a deliberate choice to focus on the Iraqi women and their untold stories. The stories presented in 9 Parts are not told verbatim but function as composites of Raffo’s experience of discovering more about the daily lives of Iraqi women. Raffo acknowledges that her stories are composites within the text of the play. The Mullaya says: “My feet hurt. I have holes in my shoes. I have holes now even in my feet. There are holes everywhere even in this story” (117). Although these stories are not told verbatim, Raffo manages to capture the essence of each of the nine women that she depicts. In Raffo’s play “the reality of the people and the events described can [not] be denied” (qtd. in Saal, 150).

Raffo embodies stories of women who are very much attached to Iraq and feel they cannot leave, women who have been exiled, and women who desperately long to leave and form a new identity. Raffo also tells the story of a woman who lives in the United States and grapples with her Iraqi American identity. Raffo inserts her own identity into this particular role. As an Iraqi American woman living in New York, she wanted to address these issues along with Iraqi women and introduce local and national concerns of Arab/Arab American women. She emphasizes that she is bringing women not often visible to the forefront of the conversation. She dramatizes issues of motherhood, domesticity, and identity. The artist Layal
exclaims: “I’m a good artist. I’m an okay mother. I’m a miserable wife” (125). Charles Isherwood refers to Raffo’s work as “humanistic journalism.”

Raffo credits foreign correspondent Geraldine Brooks’ book *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* as an additional source of inspiration when writing her play. In *Nine Parts of Desire*, Brooks shares her experiences as a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*. She spent six years (1987-1993) covering the Middle East conflict. After reading many headlines about car bombings and political conflicts, Brooks wanted to learn more about the daily life experiences of Muslim women and the contradictory socio-political elements that shape their culture. *Nine Parts of Desire* chronicles Brooks’ experience in Saudi Arabia as a foreign correspondent and the time she spent learning more about the lives of Muslim women. Raffo’s play is based on actual interviews, but it is quite freeform and creative in its theatrical style because Raffo does not use the women’s words verbatim but instead emphasizes the emotion and feeling behind each woman’s story. Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* is a theatrical journey that tells the story of nine different women all with experiences surrounding Iraq and identity politics. *9 Parts of Desire* also takes its title from an ancient Shiite proverb: "God created sexual desire in 10 parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men."
9 Parts of Desire premiered in 2003 at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and had its Off-Broadway premiere at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre. It won numerous awards including a Lucille Lortel Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn and Marian Seldes-Garson Kanin playwriting awards, and the Helen Hayes, Outer Critics Circle and Drama League nominations for outstanding performance. In 2009, Raffo devised a concert version of 9 Parts which incorporated additional moments of music and dance. Despite its emphasis on politics, Raffo intends for audiences to have a personal, “heartfelt” approach to the material as opposed to a particular political point of view. Instead of politically charged conversations, she seeks viscerally charged dialogues. She wants her audience to “feel the performance in their flesh.” As a performer Raffo says: “I have to emotionally go to Iraq to give these
women justice but also adequately relay these stories to an American audience” (Horowitz 2005).

Solo performances such as Raffo’s 9 Parts disrupt audience members’ theatrical expectations. Instead of avoiding conversations about urgent cultural and political matters, women theatre artists purposefully use solo performance to actively engage audience members through heightened narrative, with less emphasis on action. In this chapter, I examine how solo performance challenge traditional gender roles and nationalistic politics, and I will use Raffo’s 9 Parts as a case study to analyze the play’s contributions within the Arab American theatre movement. How does an Arab American woman writer convey a multiplicity of historical and biographical narratives in a limited time frame and simultaneously circulate newfound representations relevant to post-9/11 socio-political concerns?

9 Parts of Desire contributes to the Arab American theatre movement in a number of ways: It is the first Arab American play to utilize real life interviews as source material. Raffo actually went to Iraq to talk to the women there to write their stories. She spent a considerable amount of time there developing relationships with them and immersing herself in their culture. Finally, 9 Parts of Desire demonstrated that solo performance could also serve as an effective way to explore a multiplicity of cultural issues for and about Arab and Arab American women.

Solo performance is an effective form to relay social, political, and cultural issues in a live performance setting, and has been adapted and used by a number of influential women from a many backgrounds. For example, Holly Hughes was predominant in the 1980s with her work with WOW Café in the East Village of New
York City. Hughes describes WOW Cafe as a “zeitgeist that made people like Shonda Rhimes and Tina Fey possible.” WOW Café developed in a small theatre space with the purpose of creating an accessible platform for women and gay rights movements. The ensemble at WOW Café emphasized experimental work created and performed by women, for women. The space consisted of twenty seats and no backstage area. Performances included work with titles such as “Paradykes Lost” as well as “Fear of Laughing on the Lower East Side.” The goal of the WOW ensemble was to complicate the term “taboo” and to address “controversial” issues surrounding a woman’s body. These women willingly identified as the “uncooperative cooperative.” Although these women artists felt it “freeing” to share issues of identity, their mission met resistance (Clements 2013).

For example, Hughes' work was considered too "homo-erotic" and was denied funding from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). It did not meet the general requirements of “decency” presented in the funding guidelines, and Hughes, with three other notable yet “controversial” performance artists, spent three years of her life fighting for the NEA to reconsider their standards of merit and to address inherent prejudice in Congress. As a result of their commitment to take action, they were unfavorably known as the “NEA 4.” Despite the political and career risks, performers such as Hughes recognized the responsibility to share work and also to address unfairness toward women in art and politics.

Another performer who worked with Hughes to combat injustice within the NEA organization was Karen Finley. During the 1990s, Finley also took major risks on-stage and wanted the audience to feel many emotions throughout her
In her piece, *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, sexuality plays a vital role. Finley often performed completely naked and incorporated food in her performance and smeared food over her body to signify the violation of women. She performed with emotional intensity. Her work included themes of incest, rape, violence, masturbation, and bodily functions. Finley’s goal was to create distress on stage so the audience could feel suffering and experience emotion. Finley said: “I was dismissed as a hysterical female by most of the press. Which proves my point about what I’m trying to fight: the female is only looked at as a sexual object and then she becomes the harlot, the whore, the evil witch. And I was given that position with my work. And that’s the reason why I have to continue doing the type of work I do” (Clements 2013). The NEA also considered Finley’s work too provocative and denied her funding. Finley decided to take legal action alongside Holly Hughes. Because of their activism, they paved the way for other women performers to take action and receive recognition and support for their work. She explored the explicit and the controversial through text and raw emotion. Finley explained: "I can't paint fields and flowers. My landscape is Grand Central Station and children dying of AIDS in the hospital." She describes performing her pieces as painful, at times, for her: "It's like going to a funeral."

Finley emphasized making her audience uncomfortable through performance. She reminded them: "I am more than a hole!" Hughes and Finley were both associated with controversial work. Solo performance became associated with "women behaving badly." Performers like Hughes and Finley refused to satisfy audience expectations but used solo performance to present significant issues and
to make the audience emotionally engaged. Hughes noted: “Other than being called ‘The NEA Four,’ we were often called, ‘Karen Finley and the Three Homosexuals’ — like this really bad band.” These women were reduced to “the homosexuals” and their artistry was not supported due to its perceived explicit themes (Clements 2013).

Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) is another groundbreaking solo performance about women's bodies that generated controversy as well as interest. Like Raffo’s *9 Parts*, Ensler developed the idea for a play after casual conversations with women about their bodies and their identity. Ensler also served as creator and solo performer in the original production of *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler’s fascination with developing a singular piece of theatre about vaginas began when she questioned the effect on women of "growing up in a violent society." Ensler wrote the work to "celebrate the vagina," and it is considered one of the most important political pieces of theatre for women during the 1990s. However, the piece has met with criticism. Feminist groups, universities, and critics found it to present a reductive view of women and, at times, favor a particular type of woman and leave others out of the conversation. Critics questioned its lack of voice from the transgendered/transsexual community. Ensler responded to this critique: “I think it’s important to know that I never intended to write a play about what it means to be a woman, that was not what the *Vagina Monologues* ever intended to be.” She added: “It was a play about what it means to have a vagina. It never said, for example, the definition of a woman is someone who has a vagina . . . I think that’s a really important distinction.” Ensler wanted to create a space for dialogue and
assumptions about the vagina. However, when creating work about the body, particularly a woman’s body, resistance may occur. What consequences can a woman solo performer potentially meet when presenting her work as both creator and performer? What assumptions are attached to her work and how does she relay her material to connect with diverse audiences? Ensler continues to revise *The Vagina Monologues* every year and introduce new material. In 2005, Ensler created a new piece, entitled “They Beat the Girl out of My Boy,” written entirely from the perspective of a Trans person. Additionally, she spurred the V-Day movement in which participants annually stage *The Vagina Monologues* in local community venues and universities in order to benefit rape resource centers and shelters for women. Women solo performers wrote out of a need to express feminist thought and address political issues surrounding assumptions about women’s bodies.

Solo performance in moments of historical, political crisis extends to Arab American women in theatre, particularly post-9/11. These performers and creators were writing out of a need to explore issues related to Arab American women. Michael Najjar argues that Arab American drama functions as a tool of resistance to refute assumptions and to create ideological space for the Arab community (4). Although resistance is essential in the development of Arab American theatre, solo performance operates not so much as a tool of resistance but more as a visceral model to reposition conversation and cultural understanding. These performers do not want audience members to feel alienated from the conversation. Rather, their objective is to open up the solo performance space and engage spectators with the conversation at a critical yet theatrical level. As Raffo suggests: “The audience plays..."
a vital role in the show with each Iraqi character speaking directly to them in English as if they were a trusted western friend. I wanted the audience to see these women not as the ‘other’ but much more like themselves than they would have initially thought. I felt it was important to create a safe environment to experience both horror and humor, but ultimately to see the play as a celebration of life” (qtd. in Hill).

The form of the solo show is significant in transmitting post-9/11 Arab American themes. Following 9/11, mediated constructions of men “performing” as government heroes and advocating on behalf of “oppressed Islamic women” circulated as a means to demonstrate sympathetic examples of the Muslim world. Male dominated discourses perpetuated every day “solo performances” of politics and citizenship, especially following 9/11. As performance studies scholar Diana Taylor writes: “A few newly heroic protagonists, like Giuliani, emerged from the rubble to cordon off the catastrophe, trying to limit it to ground zero” (241).

Through solo performance, women found ways to examine and address underlying social, political and cultural power structures at work that attempt to define Arab American and Muslim culture. Additionally, solo performance is an effective tool to employ as a writer and performer because narratives depicting the Arab, Muslim woman as silent and subservient dominated 9/11 discourses. The fact these women chose to perform live and write a solo show deconstructs this narrative and rejects societal expectations before the performance even begins. As Umm Ghada states in *9 Parts*: “[it makes a difference] to go to Amiriyya [bomb] shelter to look what really
happens here not what they read in papers or see in the CNN” (135). Solo performances written and performed by Arab American and Muslim American women post-9/11 contextualize experiences of war by challenging historical impressions and introducing theoretical implications. During the mid-2000’s, an increase in solo performances created by Arab American women occurred. These women each created their own responses to 9/11.

Pakistani American playwright Bina Sharif’s *Afghan Woman* addresses Muslim women and visibility post-9/11. *Afghan Woman* premiered in 2002 at the Theater for the New City in New York. Sharif directed, wrote and performed in this solo show. *Afghan Woman* contains descriptive dialogue with emphasis on the Afghan burqa and the ideological effect it has on the Western spectator. She wears her burqa throughout the entire performance which serves as a visual reminder to the spectator about the universal struggles of Afghan women. The Afghan mother declares: “I have been in a burqa, beaten up, stoned, shot at in public in the roadside spectacle, a street fair arranged by the Taliban to celebrate the special effects of my brain being blown up in a cloud of blood” (247).

Sharif refuses for the Afghan mother’s story to go untold or to be suppressed by the media. Instead, she places the focus on the Afghan woman so spectators can hear her perspective regarding the war in Afghanistan. Also, the woman unfolds the

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16 Although Sharif is not Arab, there are many parallels with Afghan woman and Arab women and her work is also important to share in a post-9/11 context.
concept of visibility, or invisibility, of Afghan women in burqas. The Afghan mother reminds: “An Afghan Woman in a burqa also has a fantasy” (247). Sharif incorporates cultural artifact into her performance of *Afghan Woman*. The burqa represents the nameless, faceless Afghan women who struggle every day but do not have the opportunity to express these challenges. The Afghan woman says: "My destiny is of silence. My silence is silent...me in a burqa" (246). She also addresses Western curiosity to know what is behind the veil. For example, the Afghan woman states: “Maybe this is the safest place to be. Maybe when I take my burqa off, you won't recognize me...you will be too scared of my face. Maybe there won't be any more eyes of mine on my face. Maybe there will be two hollow sockets of a skeleton. There won't be a mouth or teeth or a nose” (248). Therefore, the meaning of the burqa transforms theatrically and Sharif demonstrates its literal uses as well as its negative connotations.

Najla Said, daughter of Islamic theorist Edward Said, premiered her Off-Broadway play *Palestine* in 2010. Her play, which developed from her own journal entries, eventually evolved and adapted into her 2013 memoir *Looking for Palestine*. Said’s book focuses on her identity as a Palestinian American woman as well as daughter to influential theorist Edward Said. Her coming-of-age story balances the complications of being both American and Palestinian. Moustafa Bayoumi states: “*Looking for Palestine* is a survivor's guide for all of us who live with that feeling of being out of place wherever we are.” Following 9/11, Said felt the need to reflect on her identity growing up in an immigrant family while still living in Manhattan’s Upper West Side. She remarks: “I am a Palestinian-Lebanese-American Christian
woman . . . I began my life, however, as a WASP” (1). She describes her childhood: “I was a dark-haired rat in a sea of blond perfection” (2). It is interesting Said pursued a career in the arts as her father notes in his renowned text *Orientalism* that the Arab community should focus on political matters and downplay artistic pursuits. Najla Said, however, saw art as a valid expression to explore identity. She found it a more accessible and instant form of taking political action. As she states: “The only way we can get through the political stalemate we are in is to tell our individual stories and invite people to listen” (as qtd in Najjar 9).

Leila Buck’s solo performance of *ISite* explores the tensions of growing up as an Arab American woman. Buck’s mother is Lebanese, her father is American, and her husband is Jewish American. She discovered performance to be a productive form in transmitting dialogues with audience members. Buck states: “Art has the power to raise deep questions and create dialogue on how we experience the world” (Najjar 9). She performed and revised *ISite* for eight years. In *ISite*, Buck explores the cross-cultural connections of the women in her family. She traces patterns and cultural connections between her grandmother and mother, particularly making visible her experiences visiting her family in Saudi Arabia. Utilizing narratives of experience in a solo performance format became a popular form post-9/11 as it was accessible, emotional, and engaging.

Finally, Betty Shamieh’s *Chocolate in Heat* is important to address in the context of Arab American women, solo performance, and post-9/11 politics. In the wake of 9/11, Shamieh’s play proved vital in shaping the formation of the solo performance form in the Arab American theatre movement. Although it is not a
“true” solo performance – *Chocolate in Heat* contains one female as well as one male character – it contains similar elements of the solo performance. *Chocolate* had its world premiere in August 2001 at the New York International Fringe Festival. A chair functioned as the primary set piece. Despite concerns about potential hate crimes toward Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11, the *Chocolate in Heat* production team decided it was important to continue to support a show that addressed pertinent social and cultural issues. One year later, Sam Gold directed the Off Off Broadway run of *Chocolate in Heat* with Shamieh and Piter Maret. This production proved successful, and it had a sold-out, extended run. It eventually toured to universities. The tour included New York University, University of Pennsylvania, The New School, University of Illinois, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, University of Michigan at Flint, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Georgetown. The Georgetown production was co-sponsored by the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. When *Chocolate in Heat* opened at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it was co-sponsored by the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural Relations, The Harvard Society of Arab Students and Hillel. This marked the first time ever an event at Harvard was cosponsored by these two student groups.

This is significant because it fostered collaboration between Arab and Jewish students. To date, over ten thousand students have had the opportunity to see and learn about Shamieh’s *Chocolate in Heat*. Shamieh’s performance as Aiesha earned distinguished reviews from theatre critics. Shamieh performed in three of the five monologues as “vivacious” and “volatile” Aisha. As mentioned in Chikako Sassa’s
review in *The Tech*: “Shamieh alternately dances, acts, belts out her anger with a spoken word-like cadence and flits about the stage as if consumed by a flame from within” (1). Although *Chocolate in Heat* may not be readily categorized as a solo performance, it emphasizes minimalism, contains one woman performing multiple monologues, and includes dance and movement. Prior to 9/11, solo performers such as Hughes, Finley, and Ensler created work about women's issues in order to challenge patriarchal norms. Post-9/11, Arab American women playwrights such as Raffo create work to challenge cultural norms about the Arab American culture and the Arab American body in performance. Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid all use their playwriting and performance skills to reshape the Arab American female identity, thereby giving them a voice and a presence. All of these elements can be found in post-9/11 solo performance narratives written and performed by Arab American women.

Women theatre artists particularly responded to solo performances and repositioned its conventions to promote theatrical possibility within powerful dialogues between performer and spectator. Does Raffo’s work, along with fellow Arab American women solo performers, help shape an Arab American feminism in a post-9/11 world? What are the risks and responsibilities of producing and performing in this type of live performance? Raffo appreciated how the structure of solo performance can dramatize suffering in a way in which audience members can observe all sides of an issue and witness one performer desperately trying to adopt different personalities and characteristics in a particular given amount of time (Najjar 9). Raffo selected this mode of performance because of its ability to connect
with an audience and its emphasis on storytelling and personal testimony. In solo performance, the personal and the political merge together to create a dynamic transmission of autobiographical material. Post-9/11 performances such as 9 Parts of Desire produce active, visceral exchanges and encourage audiences to feel emotion and generate regrowth of community after political conflicts and tragedy.

**Raffo’s 9 Parts of Desire and the Body in Political Spaces**

The nine different women in 9 Parts of Desire are Mullaya, Layal, Amal, Huda, The Doctor, Iraqi Girl, Umm Ghada, The American, and Nanna. Raffo first portrays the character of Mullaya. This name is traditionally used for women assigned at funerals to make mourners feel sadness and suffering for the recently deceased. The women enact a call and response technique to achieve the desired emotion. Layal is a free-spirited painter who admits to being favored by the regime due to her physical appearance. At Saddam’s Art Center, she was granted the position of curator. In one of her watercolor paintings, she depicts a real life incident. An acquaintance of hers was killed after revealing to a mutual friend that one of Hussein's sons abused her. Layla states: “They stripped her, covered her in honey and watched his Dobermans eat her.” Amal is a thirty-eight-year-old Bedouin who has roamed to various places with her children, trying to find herself as well as forge a successful marriage. Married three times, she reveals she caught her second husband cheating on her with a friend. Huda, an exiled academic, watches the London protests against the war in Iraq and is torn about what to think. While drinking a Scotch, Huda says: “I have my doubts about American policy . . . still, I prefer this chaos to permanent repression and cruelty.” Huda fled Iraq in 1963 and
traveled to different places since then and continues to protest oppression.

However, her thoughts are now mixed: “This war is against all my beliefs . . . and yet I wanted it.” She reveals this to express her disdain for Saddam’s regime. The Doctor works closely in the Iraq hospitals and notices a change in the people’s well-being and health post-Gulf War. She also treats a lot of men, some from her own family, who are injured and deformed from the war. The Iraqi girl sings along to ’N Sync but is interrupted by a sudden blackout. She then discusses her family life and the news headlines about Iraq she observes on the television. She reveals how her grandparents were killed when an American tank entered their apartment. She expresses sadness, confusion, and uncertainty about her future. Umm Ghada dedicates her life to tending the bomb shelter that killed many people during an American bombing during the first Gulf War in 1991. Ghada lost her entire family during the bombing. She asks: “I am hard to understand why I survive and my children dead. I asked to Allah, ‘Why? Why you make me alive?’” (135). The American shares her story while sitting by the TV in her New York City studio apartment. She remarks how her father remembers his life in Iraq and how incredibly painful it is for him to watch CNN and witness the effects of war on the people. The American struggles with her own identity as an Iraqi American and questions how she can assist the Iraqi people when she is also an American, safe within her studio apartment. She can do nothing but say a prayer for the women affected by the war. Nanna is an older woman who “has seen it all” and has lived through twenty-three revolutions (144). Each woman has a different story, but they are all connected to a sense of place and imagined community.
Nine Parts of Desire incorporates themes of the Iraqi woman’s body in the context of war, domesticity, and power. I argue that the nine female characters are representative of desire in their own unique ways. They all embody the quest for liberation; their objectives, however, vary. Raffo refuses to label or mark these women as victims. Instead, she defines them as “survivors of suffering” (Khan 2007). In Iraq, she observed these women’s inner “fighting spirit” and wanted to capture this powerful essence in 9 Parts of Desire. Although she was hesitant at first to use solo performance as a medium to relay these issues, Raffo realized that solo performance served as the most effective means of transmission of this material post-9/11.

As Jill Dolan argues in Utopia in Performance, live performance, particularly solo performance, functions as a productive place in which participatory audiences come together for a significant moment in time to find community and hopeful possibilities and solutions through performance. Dolan values the various narratives of experience solo performance offers to audience members. She stresses the potential live performance possesses to present affective possibilities of “doings” that can produce the prospects of a better, more effective outcome. In Raffo’s play, the audience is not only presented with multiple narratives but also a mixture of emotions. The themes in Raffo’s play might encourage them to take the emotion with them when they leave the theatre space and let it further manifest. In Regarding the Pain of Others (2003), Susan Sontag questions making audience members feel pain or suffering during live events. Sontag focuses on war photography and the transmission of suffering through photograph and exhibit.
Although she considers using emotions such as pain and suffering as a tool for change, she also recognizes live experiences as a source to ignite empathy and position dialogues of hope and change. Dolan values the meaning making that live performance can generate and observes the audience as active participants in this exchange. Although *9 Parts of Desire* is a solo performance, Raffo’s play is not just a singular person performing labor on-stage but rather a collective effort and exchange on the part of performer and audience as they engage with real and imagined histories. Similarly, to how the art work is presented within *9 Parts of Desire*, it is important to take into account the entirety of the frame Raffo makes use of in her play. For example, Michael Fried suggests in *Art and Objecthood* (2009) that everything in a frame is essential to take into consideration. The object itself is only a part of the entire situation, context, and history which should also be taken into consideration. In Fried’s scenario, the beholder possesses agency of the situation; however, I argue that in live, theatrical performance, there is a mutual effort on both the part of the performer and the observer. Particularly, Raffo frames Iraqi women’s bodies and histories as part of the overall narrative of her entire solo performance. As Sontag questions the possibilities and ultimate functions of art, I also want to question the possibilities of live performance, particularly post-9/11 solo performance. In a mediated culture that has the tendency be less prone to empathetic reactions, solo performances like Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* are essential and significant. Raffo’s chooses to not entirely erase sensitivity and vulnerability, inherently feminine characteristics, from her piece. Post-9/11 performers such as Raffo and Leila Buck realized that their identity as female solo performers possessed
agency and made politically controversial material more accessible to relay to American audiences (Najjar 10). Additionally, these performers framed their theatrical pieces in a way, that Sontag suggests, that repositions conversations between spectator and performer. Solo performances by Arab American women present the reality of truth in order to make meaning, as Dolan suggests, and to reconstruct a new, considerable truth.

In *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo explores themes of the Iraqi women’s body and sexuality as well as the body’s ability to instill empathy. The archetype of the Arab woman as seductress, belly-dancer, and harem girl is a common theme in art and literature; however, this stereotype is often challenged by Arab American women in performance. In Raffo’s *9 Parts*, the artist Layal embodies a complex sexuality and strength. Layal acknowledges Scheherazade, the virgin storyteller who tells a story each night to save her life in *One Thousand and One Nights*, as her model of strength. Layal quotes Scheherazade with delight: “Either I shall die or I shall live a ransom for all the virgin daughters of Muslims and the cause of their deliverance from his hands to life!” (121). Raffo describes Layal as “sexy and elegant . . . a resilient and fragile woman . . . a daredevil with a killer smile” (117). As an artist, Layal questions her role if she leaves Iraq. She believes her work is vital to disseminate within Iraq. She states: “Here my work is well known. Hardly anyone will paint nudes anyway but this is us . . . our bodies –isn’t it?” (118). As Rebecca Schneider explores in *The Explicit Body in Performance* femininity is often associated with secrecy and bodies are commodified to “historically show the female body as emblem of desire and property in general” (40). However, in Raffo’s play, the paintings by Iraqi women
function as a mechanism for survival by using their images to reflect strength and not sexuality. Each of the women in 9 Parts of Desire discloses private thoughts and personal memories. Raffo decides to make visible their stories in order for other women to live on through cultural memory.

Although Layal is aware of her own femininity and uses it to her advantage, her story also involves another Iraqi woman’s disembodied body. The contrast between the playful nature of Layal and her revelations about the somber stories behind her art work are salient and unsettling. Layal describes her painting of a woman killed by Saddam’s son. She was a beautiful, young woman studying at the University of Bagdad. Saddam’s son asked her out and eventually brutally beat and bruised her. The young student told her friends about what happened to her friends, which ultimately led to her death. Saddam’s son took her back with his friends where they stripped her, covered her in honey, and watched his Dobermans eat her. Layal says: “See in my painting she is the branch’s blossom leaning over the barking dogs. They cannot reach no matter how hungry they are not unless they learn to climb her but they are dogs, they never will . . . you see, nobody knows the painting is her but I believe somewhere she sees” (119). Through her art work, Layal continues to preserve this woman’s story and keep her memory alive. Layal emphasizes her attachment to all of the women she meets or hears about in Iraq. She feels connected by spirit, body, and place. Layal also recognizes their objectives of survival. Layal reveals that some Iraqi people accuse her of obtaining her job at the Saddam Art Center because she had an affair with Saddam’s cousin. She says: “If I’d had an affair with him how would that have made my life any easier? Isn’t
everything in this country a matter of survival . . . so if I am now in a position of
grace, favor, rumor so be it . . . I am still trying to be revealing something in my trees,
my nudes, my portraits of Saddam—“(121). Raffo employs the Iraq War in her play
as a historical foundation to express the history and the voices of the Iraqi women
and to challenge gender misconceptions. Layal keeps these women alive like
Scheherazade keeps women alive through her stories. Like Raffo uses solo
performance to relay issues about the Arab American body in performance, Layal
uses her art work to recall the lives about the Iraqi women.

Umm Ghada embodies the women survivors and sufferers of war. Raffo
describes Ghada as a woman of “great stillness and pride, peaceful and
dispassionate.” Since 1991, she now lives in a trailer outside Amiriya bomb shelter.
Ghada remembers: “I was inside with nine from my family talking, laughing then
such a pounding, shaking everything is fire . . . In the whole day later I am searching,
searching charred bodies . . . bodies they were fused together. The only body I did
recognize is my daughter Ghada so I did take her name” (135). Ghada questions
why she survived the attacks and her family did not. Raffo suggest that as her story
is further revealed, the audience will notice a visible “subtle limp.” Ghada is a
survivor and a fighter. She walks through the bomb shelter and describes her
despair. She remarks: “The walls are stuck with hairs and skin” (136). Umm Ghada’s
story is visceral and realistically representative of human suffering. Indeed, the
bombing incident at the Amiriya bomb shelter caused devastating loss. Prior to the
attack, Iraqi citizens were taking shelter from potential U.S. raids at the Amiriya
shelter. Two powerful laser guided US bombs struck the shelter. Alan Little of the
British Broadcasting Corporation recalls: “I saw one man, incoherent with grief, fall to the ground and bury his face in the earth. Eleven members of his family had been in the shelter” (Boustany 1991). To this day, the United States government states that it believed the shelter was being used as an Iraq military command center, and that was the reason for the bombing. However, others question the implicit propaganda tactics of war, and the Iraqi civilians cannot deny the suffering this incident inflicted upon their people. As Jordan's Information Minister Ibrahim Ezzdine said: "If you want a visual image of the sadness of war, this is it." Most of the footage was considered too grim and controversial to broadcast. Rescue workers described the bodies: “Most of them mangled, many of them charred beyond recognition, some still smoldering." Raffo’s 9 Parts depicts these same scenes of loss and suffering through the historical narrative of an Iraqi mother who lost her entire family. Raffo shares a woman's voice on the terror of war and the emptiness a mother feels.

In 9 Parts of Desire, the themes of want and desire emerge as a connective thread in the monologues of the nine characters. Raffo voices Iraqi women’s desires for justice, peace, and freedom. She presents their artistic, political, and familial aspirations as well as the conflicts and barriers which prevent them from their desires. The emphasis on the singular women embodying universal woman is a common theme. For example, Layal states: "I paint other women as me . . . I do not ever want to expose exactly another woman’s body so I paint my body but her body, herself inside me. So it is not me alone it is all of us" (119). Raffo’s 9 Parts of Desire creates an affective exchange to produce dynamic action in a solo performance. In
particular, Raffo emphasizes how the materiality of women’s bodies can subvert patriarchal norms. As Layal says: “It’s the worst feeling this occupation to inhabit your body but not be able to live in it” (138).

Raffo’s role as performer, writer, and creator adds another dimension to the work. She transitions into each character through music, movement and minimal props. In fact, the only props she makes use of are a pair of old shoes, a whiskey bottle, and a paintbrush. Most importantly, she also uses an abaya to portray each character. The abaya is a traditional robe-like garment worn by women in Muslim communities. It covers the entire body. In 9 Parts, the abaya is not used to empathize with “oppressed women” but it rather functions as a source of agency and active use for the women to reveal their personal pursuits. Raffo emphasizes these active pursuits of each woman in the play. For example, the artist Layal “wears the abaya loosely hanging off her shoulders like a dressing gown or painting stock” (117). According to the stage directions, the mother Umma Ghadda “lets the abaya fall to the stage floor; the abaya becomes a black hole at the center of a bomb shelter” (134). The Iraqi Girl plays with the abaya, “wrapping it around her head like long luxurious hair and other times bundling it up to be her baby doll” all the while dancing to ‘N Sync” (130). The abaya is used to represent their respective identity as well as to share their own stories yet still remain connected to one another regardless of place or space. Amal “wears the abaya fastened behind her head and flowing voluptuously about her body” (121). Huda remarks: “I said let the young ones living there have a chance with the policies but they are all shell-shocked, all these girls they’re going backwards they abandon their education and now, since the
occupation, now they are wearing veils. Their grandmothers are more liberated than them” (143). Nanna is an older woman and wears the abaya in a traditional manner; only her face and hands remaining showing. She is on the streets of Iraq, selling anything she can to make a profit. The fact that she wears the abaya is significant because Nanna feels it makes her appear more accessible to approach and to traverse the streets.

Nanna shares her childhood memories and the audience discovers art work also plays an integral role in her life. Nanna recalls a memory in which she drew her family tree while at school and illustrated her mother’s dress with ruffles and flowers, a dress she loved. Nanna says: “So I draw my mother like a big flower with ruffles. My teacher say no it is wrong before Allah drawing her hair and her body showing . . . I am disrespecting . . . so I just erased her, my mother, it was only pencil” (147). In this case, Nanna becomes aware that her abaya also can erase her identity to some extent. She considers this as a possibility. However, Nanna has lived through repeated acts of war and conflict and therefore recognizes this is a part of her life and hardens herself to this fact. In fact, she fails to make a sale during her monologue and resumes the same task after she is finished sharing her story.

Although it is a one-person show, Raffo creates a collective essence throughout her piece that embodies Iraqi women’s shared experiences. Also, there is a mutual effort on the part of Raffo as performer to embody all nine women’s active pursuits as well as an effort on the part of the spectators to engage with active listening and observation. 9 Parts is poetic, lyrical, and stylized; in fact, Raffo likened its creation to the writing of a song. Raffo notes in her introduction to the play that a
double em dash indicates a moment when “the ideas driving the language come so close to the surface that the character finds herself in a moment of powerful lucidity.” She also contains a comprehensive glossary for Arabic terminology. If there is an Arabic word readers or directors are unfamiliar with, they can consult the glossary. Each woman's story is introduced, and then, the stories overlap one another. This causes the performer, Raffo, to swiftly adopt each role. Also, each piece contains questions as well as Arabic language. The Doctor asks: “Look at us. Look at us. Wayn Allah, Wayn, Allah?”

Raffo also includes various rituals throughout the play. For example, the Muslim call to prayer signifies the beginning of the play. Raffo even notes that the call to prayer is heard five times a day in Muslim tradition, and that it is also heard five times throughout the course of the play. The Mullaya is a woman in Muslim culture hired to lead the call and response with women mourning at funerals; her goal is to lead the women into a crying frenzy. As Raffo notes: “Mythic, celebratory and inviting, this Mullaya’s mourning is part of her ritual ablutions” (115). The Mullaya chants: “Early in the morning, early in the morning, I come to throw dead shoes into the river.” After the women are introduced, they then overlap their stories in a very similar style to the characters in Shamieh’s The Black Eyed. Also, the Mullaya responds to the traditional Muslim call to prayer whereas the American uses a rosary to call up prayers to her family in Iraq. The American's ritual does not have words to describe the events she sees on the television, but instead she says a

17 Arabic translation: “Where is God?”
prayer by reciting each woman’s name out loud. She serves as the stand-in for the spectator because she is most likely the figure most American audiences will relate to and understand. The American, very much based on Raffo, shares her experiences of the war through a selected lens from New York. She deeply identifies with her Iraq heritage yet experience challenges while also living in New York and expected to behave in a certain manner. This relates to Raffo’s experience growing up in Michigan. Also, this monologue intersects with Raffo’s own experiences. Like Raffo, the American depends on the television to notify her about her family and their situation in Iraq; however, the American also recognizes that she continues to go on with her life getting “fucking pedicures” while her family is still at great risk. The American struggles with her hyphenated identity on many levels; however, she decides all that she can do is pray for her family and for the women in Iraq. During the women’s last call to prayer initiated by the Mullaya, they reinforce their own respective stories, they repeat similar phrases such as the women’s names as well as “I love you.” Although their stories differ, they are connected through similar emotions, ideas, and questions.

Dolan recognizes the intersection of performance and politics and hopes that after a live performance she feels “charged, challenged and reassured. She emphasizes the importance of “meaning making” through live performance. In particular, she believes solo performance is a useful way of exploring feelings and serves as a foundation for transformative experience. It is significant that Arab American playwrights, creators, and performers employ this form as a mode of expression and self-evaluation as well as a foundation for community building. What
can a performance do politically as well as personally? Geraldine Brooks notes in her book *9 Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* that during her time in Saudi Arabia the hotel receptionist questioned why she was checking into her room by herself. He informed her that as a woman, she needed a male to accompany her in public or she would be viewed as a prostitute. Live solo performances such as Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* are essential for women because they remove reductive labels and create multi-dimensional work. Arab American use solo performance to navigate hyphenated identities and use cultural markers such as the abaya to frame conversations. Raffo uses methods that are similar to those of Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, and Eve Ensler (what are they) in her solo performances but Raffo does this: but she positions conversations directly about Iraqi women and their experiences. *9 Parts of Desires* specifically shapes the Iraqi women's experiences. In *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo opens a dialogue between east and west and shares stories about Iraqi women that were not readily available before 9/11. As Raffo suggests about live performance. “It's a window they will never have on television.”
So I walk in and they see an Arab trying to board a plane. But as I mentioned before I have cerebral palsy, which means I shake all the time. So they don't see just an Arab, they see a shaky Arab, and they're like, that bitch is nervous! And I'm usually crying also, because I'm terrified of flying. And the reason I'm terrified of flying is because I know that if God forbid, the plane I’m on crashes . . . they will blame me (Michael 2011).

Stand-up comedian Maysoon Zayid utilizes humor, story-telling, and self-deprecation in her stand-up comedy routines to address Palestinian American identity and women’s political issues. Following the events of 9/11, Arab American women playwrights and performers recognized a need and a responsibility to restructure their own interpretations of their identity through various modes of performance. These forms of post-9/11 performance position Arab American women as essential contributors in this collective effort to create work that implicitly and explicitly reflects the Arab American community. Although Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid create different types of performances, they each examine a woman’s expected conduct in post-9/11 America. By exposing this expected conduct, which is very much informed by historical myth and conjecture, they make visible the realistic values and desires of modern day Arab American women which complicate ideological constructs. Following 9/11, performers and writers such as Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid developed a voice within the Arab American theatre movement and continued to impact its growth in the United States. Currently, stand-
up comedy serves as a significant, ever-growing form in navigating post-9/11 politics for the Arab American community.

Zayid addresses sociopolitical concerns in her comedy. She also uses humor to relay misconceptions about her own body and identity as a Palestinian-American woman living with cerebral palsy. For instance, she delivered a TEDWomen 2013 talk in which she announced: “I’ve got 99 problems and palsy is just one.” Zayid’s statement in her TEDWomen talk is significant to her work, and in all of her performances, she dramatizes multiple layers of Palestinian identity, sexuality, and disability. She discovered stand-up comedy to be an essential platform in representing cultural issues and exploring what defines a “real” Muslim woman. However, it took Zayid time to develop and to uncover her position as a stand-up comedian.
In this chapter, I explore how Zayid incorporates varying degrees of humor in her work to expose assumptions about identity, ethnicity, and disability in post-9/11 America. She uses spaces such as the New York Arab American Comedy Festival and the TEDWomen Talks as a platform to navigate and reconsider 9/11 politics and assumptions surrounding the Palestinian, female, disabled body. Zayid’s stand-up comedy routines create an ideological space for other Arab American women artists to perform their work about the Arab female body and examine its cultural validity. Stand-up comedians such as Zayid use explicit humor and language to adjust the ways Arab American women are seen, heard, and understood in a post-9/11 world.
When Zayid started her career as a stand-up comedian in the 1990’s, she emulated comedians such as Eddie Murphy. She felt, especially being a woman, that she needed to fit in with the controversial material male stand-up comedians were performing. She noticed many comedians using derogatory slurs and explicit language in their performances, and she considered also incorporating this style into her routines. Eventually, Zayid realized their stand-up comedy could be used as much more than a platform to recite explicit jokes. She began to use stand-up as an expressive platform to relay identity politics and women’s issues. She notes: “I found my voice in comedy sadly after 9/11 (Comedian Maysoon 2015). Living in New Jersey, Zayid was in close proximity to the events of 9/11 and instantly experienced undesirable attitudes directed toward the Islamic community. The hyper-visible construction of the Arab person as dangerous and undesirable played a significant role in the reductive representations and assumptions about the Arab American community post-9/11. On the other hand, Zayid promotes conversation and dialogues within her comedy to expose assumptions about the Arab American community.

Zayid returned to the stage to perform her comedy ten days after 9/11 because she thought it was important to make her work visible. Producers advised her it was in her best interest not to share her Palestinian comedic material as it would be too dangerous in the aftermath of 9/11. Zayid recognized that all of her material implicitly dealt with her Palestinian culture which made it essential to her identity and to her performances. She states: “This is what I do.” She realized she had choices to make as a stand-up comedy performer in a post-9/11 world. She
decided not only could she but she should engage with dialogues about the Palestinian identity and the Palestinian woman’s body. Zayid emphasizes that women performers are targeted differently by theatre critics and audience members. They are left out of certain parts of performance as their voices are often considered not as dominant or valued. For example, Zayid noticed that male Arab American comedians were stereotyped as “scary” and “unpredictable” which led to the assumption that audience members might respond to them with more respect. Arab American women performers, on the other hand, were seen as vulnerable and susceptible to criticism (Comedian Maysoon 2015). Their performances appeared to lack value compared to the popular male comedians. Zayid, however, reinforces in her comedy that no topic is off limits and, as a Palestinian woman, she refuses to be censored. However, she also does not want her audience to feel alienated. She focuses on using humor to create dynamic exchanges with the audience and make them feel included while using satire and story-telling to dramatize her opinions.

Zayid formed the Arab American Comedy Festival as a response to 9/11. She co-founded the New York Arab American Festival with friend and fellow performer Dean Obeidallah. The AACF is currently celebrating twelve years of performances. Founded by Zayid and Obeidallah in 2003, the festival functions as a space for Arab American actors, comedians, and writers to present their work to a live, diverse audience. It is also a site that brings the works of many Arab American women to the forefront. Obeidallah remarks: “In the beginning . . . joke after joke was making fun of racial profiling. Now . . . It’s saying, really unapologetically, “This is who we are, this is our culture,”” (James 2009). As the festival received more attention, Zayid
and Obeidallah noticed an increase in audience attendance and gave performances to standing room only crowds. The AACF attracts approximately 50 Arab American participants each year. Their purpose: “Each year, we have been able to successfully achieve our main goal of increasing the visibility of talented Arab-American artists as well as attracting positive attention for the Arab-American community” (New York). The festival space serves as an essential site for contesting post-9/11 ideologies about the Arab American identity as well as a home for Arab American women to claim their space in Arab and American culture.

**Background on the Form of Stand-up Comedy**

The form of stand-up: encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle. Yet standup comedy’s roots are [...] entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than this simple definition can embrace (Mintz 1985).

Comedy serves as a foundational piece in the development of Arab American theatre. The first play to be produced professionally was actually a comedy, a form that has remained at the core of the Arab American theatre movement ever since (Najjar 10). It was written by a playwright of Lebanese background named S.K. Hershewe. In 1965, he wrote *An Oasis in Manhattan*, and his play was produced at Stage Society Theater in Los Angeles. *An Oasis in Manhattan* adopts the style and thematic elements of *You Can’t Take It With You*. In this adaptation, the story focuses on a Lebanese patriarch who discovers that his daughter, a Christian Lebanese
woman, is recently engaged to a Jewish man. When both families meet one another, hilarity ensues and the play relies on situational comedy and humorous family conflict. Hershewe says: “In 1966, no one had ever heard of Lebanon. They sure have now” (McDonnel). The play was later revived in 1990 at the Venture Theater in Burbank, California and starred Arab American television actor Vic Tayback.

Despite *An Oasis in Manhattan’s* popularity, there is a considerable lack of published plays to analyze pre-9/11. 18 A great deal of this is due to cultural factors affecting Arab Americans, especially the assumption that theatre is not considered a valued career path in their own community. During the time of influential Islamic scholar Edward Said, many Arab Americans felt learning more about politics instead of engaging with creative work served as a more effective mechanism in revealing political injustices. However, an event such as 9/11 made it necessary for the Arab American community to reassess their position in society. During such a time of political instability, it was necessary for Arab American women writers and performers to refute reductive stereotypes and to reclaim their space in American culture. Many theatre artists found theatre, in its varied forms, to be an effective means of expressing their cultural concerns and to explore their own identity.

The form of stand-up has been used by many comedians to reclaim space in American culture and to transmit the way race and the body affect identity politics. Moms Mabley, a twentieth century African American stand-up comedian and musician, blended together a light-hearted and raunchy style of comedy. Her work

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18 For more on the origins and development of drama in the Arab American Theatre community see *Four Arab American Plays* by Michael Najjar (2015).
was featured frequently at the Apollo Theatre. Mabley was known for her robust personality and her over-the-top characters. Mabley portrayed an older, toothless, African American homemaker stereotype. Her character revealed to the audience racial tensions in the United States directed toward the African American community. She based this character on her own grandmother, a former slave. Mabley spoke of her grandmother in an interview: "You know who hipped me? My grandmother. This is the truth! She lived to be 118 years old... One day she’s sitting out on the porch and I said, 'Granny, how old does a woman get before she don’t want no more boyfriend?' She was around 106 then. She said, 'I don’t know honey, you’ll have to ask somebody older than me" (Bennetts 1987). Her offstage persona differed greatly from her on-stage performances. Off-stage, she adopted a more glamorous look to contrast with her on-stage persona.

During the 1970s and the 1980s, Richard Pryor used his stand-up comedy to voice a social critique and point out discrepancies within the American culture. Pryor created myth, fabrications, and realities of race in America in his stand-up performances. As an African American man, he paved the way for many others to find their voice and reassess racial relations within the United States through stand-up comedy. Comedians such as Moms Mabley and Pryor made it acceptable for comedians to satirize not only themselves but their own ethnicity. By appearing on television, they reached a broader audience and, despite their controversial material, began to make their comedy more accessible and visible. Sadly, in 1986, Pryor was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He continued to perform despite his diagnosis. He incorporated his disease into his stand-up comedy acts. Pryor’s
comedy sets also included satiric moments addressing his diagnosis. In the early 1990s, he performed at the Comedy Store in West Hollywood and satirized his condition as well as his confinement to a wheelchair. Zayid’s performances resemble Pryor’s comedy that he performed later in life. Both comedians include self-deprecation and self-realization about their own bodies in performance.

Tig Notaro is a stand-up comedian who also revealed identity and issues of the body in her stand-up comedy performances. In her critically acclaimed set, she did not memorize her material but simply spoke to the audience about the challenges in her life, particularly a recent diagnosis with breast cancer. It was her diagnosis with breast cancer that made her decide to take to the stage and discuss her personal issues. She changed her original act and confronted her own life issues head-on while the audience listened to her talk out her feelings and fears about cancer. She began her set by asking: “Is everybody having a good time? I have cancer” (Notaro 2016). In this set, Notaro discussed her mother’s accidental, tragic death, a difficult breakup with her girlfriend, and her recent diagnosis with breast cancer. Notaro’s style of comedy often requires patience on the part of the audience because she relies on story-telling and active listening. Her focus is not on receiving immediate laughter. Instead, she paces the set and intentionally speaks in a dead-pan style to convey humor. Notaro’s emphasis is on the dynamic, live exchange between performer and the audience while she reveals insecurities as a performer. Notaro’s close friend and well known comedian Amy Schumer says: “Looking masculine and being gay, the challenges of the road are 20 times harder for Tig than other female comedians. People fear what they don’t understand” (qtd. in
Grigoriadis 2013). Notaro’s particular comedy set in 2012 repositioned her as a reputable stand-up comedian and her fearless examination surrounding public scrutiny of the physical, cancer-ridden body, fears of being gay, and fears of dying were all conveyed through a self-reflective, humorous lens. During her 2012 set at the Largo she revealed about an encounter with a man on the street. He referred to Notaro as “sir.” Notaro says: “Usually I have a sense of humor about that but I just got diagnosed with breast cancer in both breasts; that’s how much I’m not a man . . . not today, not a man” (Notaro 2016). Notaro’s act deals with the body and she uses the stand-up comedy stage as a home to reposition conversations. She took an awkward encounter on the street and produced new meaning, response, and reaction through live performance. In 2014, Notaro presented a set at Town Hall at the New York Comedy Festival. She further examined her life post-cancer and appeared topless during the set to display her recovery scars to the audience. The New York Times reported: "She showed the audience her scars and then, through the force of her showmanship, made you forget that they were there. It was a powerful, even inspiring, statement about survival and recovery” (Zinoman 2014).

Like Mabley, Pryor, and Notaro, Zayid took to the stage to express issues with identity, sexuality, and the body. In stand-up comedy, there is also a cerebral palsy genre of comedy. This collective group incorporates their own bodies in performance and uses self-deprecation, satire, and story-telling to confront stereotypes about cerebral palsy and to claim ownership over their identity. Geri Jewell from Facts of Life is considered the first person with a disability to have a regular role on a prime time series. In 1978, she began her career as a stand-up
comedian at the Comedy Store. Later, she wrote the book *I'm Walking as Straight As I Can* which refers to her sexuality, her struggles with cerebral palsy, and the challenges she had to face trying to make it as an actor on television. Like Zayid, Jewell had difficulty achieving visibility on television because of her cerebral palsy; however, she fought to stay visible. Jewell is currently a motivational speaker and serves as a consultant for disability and diversity topics for several Fortune 500 companies.

Josh Blue is another stand-up comedian with cerebral palsy. His comedic skills earned him recognition on NBC'S *Last Comic Standing*, and he won the competition in 2006. Most recently, Blue developed a television special called *Comedy Central Presents: Josh Blue*. He reveals: “My humor is very self-deprecating . . . I’m very happy to throw myself under the bus for your amusement.” Blue strives for the audience to feel a mixture of emotions during his comedy set and to develop a better understanding of the disabled community and what it means to be disabled. He believes humor is the best tool for education. As the other CP comics, he explores what it means to have an “ab/normal” body (cite).

Francesca Martinez gained recognition in the comedy industry after she won *The Daily Telegraph* Open Mic award for her stand-up comedy set at the Edinburgh Festival. Martinez says: “Normal is what you’re used to, that’s what normal is. I don’t think I’ve got ‘cerebral palsy.’ To me, I’m normal, and I would wager that most people with disabilities feel like that.” In her book, *What the **** is Normal?!* Martinez discusses the definition of normalcy and critiques Western society’s tendency to label the disabled community as “inspirations.” She believes just
because a person with cerebral palsy achieves recognition or success in mainstream America does not give other people the right to label them as inspirational. Maysoon Zayid also explores this misuse of the inspiration label. For example, Zayid says: She says: “If there was an Oppression Olympics I would win the gold medal!” Martinez recognizes implicit and explicit labels about CP. She says: “People when they see me don’t go ‘oh my god, she’s a woman!’ They go ‘she’s wobbly’ . . . The fact that I’m wobbly and a woman does terrify TV commissioners.” In turn, Martinez willingly accepts that she possesses control to select her own label as a stand-up comedian; therefore, she chose “wobbly” as a term to identify herself because it does not make her feel like a medical abomination.

Since so many news headlines have labels attached, Arab American comedians felt the need to self-identify and label themselves. For example, pre-9/11 Arab American comedians considered it appropriate to wear Western attire and explore non-Muslim themes when on-stage. After 9/11, Arab American comedians collectively decided they should embrace their Muslim names and incorporated Muslim themes as the majority of their comedy set. Some even decided to wear Muslim clothing during their comedy routine (Najjar 2014). It signified something else to be Arab American in a post-9/11 society. This need to self-identify and willingly “out” oneself in performance developed into a collective effort on the part of Arab American comedians to promote cultural unity. Many Arab Americans, including Zayid, incorporated these ideas into their comedy sets.

One of the comedians who represents post-9/11 issues within the Muslim American community is Tissa Hami. She is an Iranian American woman who grew
up in a traditional Iranian family in a suburb of Boston. In March 2010, the *San Francisco Chronicle* named Tissa one of the Top eleven female comedians in the country. Hami critiques Islamic fundamentalism and American politics while exploring issues with her own physical appearance, including self-deprecating remarks about her weight and her identity as an Arab American woman. Hami often begins her stand-up performances covered in a headscarf and purposefully decides to reveal little to no skin. As her performance goes on, she removes her coat, headscarf, and jacket. When asked if this is to make a political statement, she sarcastically says she does this to: “show off my awesome bod” (Najjar 2014). She incorporates western and eastern themes and deconstructs the body in performance. For example, in some sets, she describes her male relative’s wedding planning process and asks the audience what would he do for a bachelor party in Iran? Hami asks: “Would they hire a Muslim stripper? What would she do . . . would she show ankle?”

Another example, Atheer Yacoub, is a Palestinian American woman raised in both Alabama and Palestine. Her goal through stand-up comedy is to redefine what American audiences think when they hear the words “Arab” and “bomb” in the same sentence (New York 2016). This emphasis was also explored in pre-9/11 dramatic forms. Arab American theatre group Nibras devised a piece, called *Sajjil*, which was developed in June 2001 and performed at the New York Fringe Festival in 2002. The production centered on the word “Arab” and the common associations and misconceptions which come to mind when hearing that particular word. Nibras used a tape recorder to interview the public and to ask them their opinions on the
term “Arab.” The group would use these responses to recreate public responses on-stage. According to member Najla Said: "The point we were trying to make was that Arab culture is linked to Islamic culture, but not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab; and not all people from the Middle East are Arab; that we’re a varied culture" (qtd. in Hill xxii). This is significant to note because now this same technique is being used on stand-up comedy. These individual efforts turned into collective efforts and spawned comedic troupes such as Axis of Evil and Allah Made Me Funny and festival sites to celebrate this work at the Arab American Comedy Festival.

Zayid creates a safe space in order to address issues of cultural nationalism and resistance. The Arab American Comedy Festival is essential in the development of the Arab American theatre movement. Before Zayid’s contributions to stand-up comedy, masculine voices dominated this form. For instance, Allah Made Me Funny, Bryant “Preacher” Moss, Azhar Usman, and Azeen Muhammad, are considered the longest-running comedy troupe. In 2003, they formed Allah Made Me Funny to teach others about Muslim culture and to seek out gathering places for fellow Arab Americans to hear work about their culture. Allah Made Me Funny produces work expressive of Muslim culture and makes it a point to promote culturally sensitive material. For example, they choose to not use profanity in their sets, and ask the comedy clubs where they perform to not serve alcohol or pork out of respect for

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19 Their work has appeared on Spike Lee’s The Original Kings of Comedy (2008). Also, they released the film Allah Made Me Funny: Live in Concert (2008) the film is a close glimpse into their lives as well as their reactions to post/11 American and how they use comedy to grapple with these issues.
Muslim audience members. Zayid’s style of comedy differs drastically from Allah Made Me Funny; however, they both deal with revealing Muslim stereotypes and fearmongering tactics in post-9/11 America. Zayid chooses to use explicit language about her own body, sexuality, and culture in her stand-up comedy routines. Because of Zayid’s contributions, there is now a functional performance space for the women to express their thoughts through comedy.

Zayid explored different forms of performance before deciding to create her own standup comedy routines. She grew up in Cliffside Park, New Jersey during the 1980s. After graduating from Arizona State University in 1996 with a BFA in Performance, she moved to New York and found brief success on television; however, casting directors projected assumptions about her physical limitations as a performer. She reiterates in her standup performances that the entertainment industry idealizes “perfect people” and the fact that she has cerebral palsy prevents her from ever fitting this media construction. Zayid, a Palestinian American, Muslim woman with cerebral palsy, realized the film and television industry did not advocate for actors with a visible disability. As a theatre student at ASU, Zayid did not receive many acting roles. In fact, one production included a character with cerebral palsy. Zayid comments: “I was literally born to play this role!” However, it went to an able-bodied actor because the director did not think Zayid was capable of performing the stunts. She notes: “If I can’t do the stunts . . . neither can the character” (Zayid 2013).

When disability is written into an episode, the character typically functions as curiosity or an extension of tokenism. Even these roles are frequently given to
able-bodied actors. A recent example involves wheel-chair bound Artie Abrams on Glee. The actor, Kevin McHale, is able-bodied as well as a trained dancer, yet his character is confined to a wheelchair. The exception is when he performs ability in dancing, dream sequences. The use of able-bodied actors to portray disability has become a common occurrence in film and television. These actors receive nominations for “convincingly” imitating disability. Additionally, they evoke empathy for an unseen, generalized disabled community however actors who actually have a visible disability are rarely cast in these specialized roles. Casting an able bodied actor as a disabled character becomes a convenient way to deal with disability in a movie or television episode. This is why stand-up comedy is a unique and vigorous platform for marginalized communities to share their work.

Frustrated she could not even be considered for a “quirky best friend” role on a television sitcom, Zayid confronted issues of disability and ethnicity on her own terms. As a stand-up comedian recognized that several female performers who did not fit the “perfect people” model pursued their own created opportunities, particularly in comedy (Maysoon Comedian). For example, Margaret Cho reveals that television producers criticized her face for being too round and her features too Asian to be considered as a “serious” leading female role on a sitcom. Ultimately, her television sitcom All American Girl was canceled. Cho turned to stand-up in order to find a platform to express issues related to the Asian American community, particularly women and their sexuality. Her stand-up comedy routines involve themes of migration, immigration, and stereotypes. In Cho’s comedy sets, she relies on hyper-visibility. She uses stereotypical themes of the Asian female body, what
Pelle refers to as the “excessively raced and sexed body” to playfully juxtapose cultural and political norms while simultaneously challenging them (2010). In her comedy, Cho literally takes up space on-stage and challenges herself to be as loud and vocal in her opinions as she possibly can. Pelle refers to this as “counter-identification” (23). I acknowledge there are parallels with Cho’s work to Zayid’s comedy routines. Both of them rely on counter-identification. These women performers acknowledge and play up to stereotypes, yet they also challenge simplistic representations of their identity and the dominant voices which keep them oppressed. Cho reminds: “I deal with something racial everyday” (Cho 2000).

Najjar also introduces the concept of humorous accounting within the Arab American stand-up comedy circuit. Arab American comedians such as Zayid often account for all of their perceived flaws and use humor to address these assumptions. For example, Zayid reflects on her childhood and young adult experiences as a Palestinian, Muslim woman with cerebral palsy. She says: “If there was an Oppression Olympics I would win the gold medal!” In her standup routines, she also satirically adds “being from New Jersey” to her Oppression Olympics resume. Zayid incorporates varying degrees of humor in her work to expose assumptions about ethnicity as well as disability whereas Cho incorporates a similar style and challenges assumptions about ethnicity and her sexuality. Cho and Zayid both discovered the stand-up comedy stage as a “home” in which they could freely speak their opinions about gender, culture, and politics and employ tactics of counter-identification and humorous accounting. However, with this home came particular
obstacles in which they had to challenge, refute, and reinforce cultural and identity backlash, particularly when their work on stage was made visible on television.

Zayid appeared as a television correspondent on “Countdown with Keith Olbermann” in 2010. Regrettably, she did not realize that the stage manager gave her a revolving chair. Once she sat down and discovered this, it was too late to find a more suitable option since the countdown to live broadcast had already begun. She tightly clutched Olbermann’s desk during the entire performance so that she would not roll off the set. Following the broadcast, internet users posted public comments questioning whether Zayid was drunk or perhaps just had too much Botox recently injected. One said: “Poor Gumby-mouth terrorist. We should pray for her” (Maysoon 2015). Public online assumptions such as these are loaded with assumptions attached to Arabs, Muslims, and the disabled. Zayid refused to allow these comments to be lost and unidentifiable within internet forum threads. Instead, she exchanged conversation with antagonistic internet users and provided them with follow-up questions, advice, and concerns about online harassment.

Zayid chose to incorporate the Olbermann incident into her routines. In the role of stand-up comedian, Zayid restructures the exchange, and she uses criticism to her advantage in her comedy routines by sharing personal anecdote such as these with her audience. She recalls:
So here I am, I’m finally on television. It’s everything I ever dreamed of... I thought, ‘Wow, this is so fantastic -- and then I got home and I Googled the clip... everybody was making fun of me. They were saying things like I had Botox gone wrong. And there were these people that were saying I was disgusting...distracting. That they couldn’t even watch me. (Maysoon 2015)

It is important to note that the internet age allows for contemporary stand-up comedians to share their work with a multiplicity of voices; the consumption of performance can now occur in a live setting as well as digital dialogic form. Also, many stand-up comedians employ the internet to publicize their work on social media sites. It is interesting that Zayid took a realistic approach when engaging with online users. She did not adopt her satirical, humorous persona but instead seriously questioned the performance of hate these internet users were displaying. Instead of focusing on promoting her material, she focused on the human exchange and used it as a platform to express concerns about the way we respond to the disabled community in the United States. She also reminds her audience at the start of her comedy set: “My name is Maysoon Zayid . . . and, no . . . I am NOT drunk.” She incorporates her disability in her standup routines and literally stands up for the audience to see her visibly “shake” on-stage. Zayid declares on-stage: “I’m like Shakira meets Muhammad Ali. I shake a lot.” Zayid reflects on her first appearance on “Countdown with Keith Olbermann” in 2010. Although she considers this initial experience “disastrous,” Olbermann included her as a regular guest on the show.
Zayid favorite comedy shows were in Jerusalem and Beirut. Zayid chooses to not wear the hijab in her life as well as in her performances, and this is an essential component to her routines. She also addresses the hijab in performance. Zayid chooses not to wear a headscarf because she believes it is not explicitly stated as a law in the Quran. She recognizes it is a choice for women and she respects that choice. However, she emphasizes her lack of support for wearing the burqa. She says: “Who knows, someday I may wear hijab, but I promise you I will never see me in a Burkini. There are also women who are forced to wear it, (yeah, I'm looking at you Saudi) that is sacrilege.” Zayid does not hesitate to point out sociopolitical issues in both the Arab and Western world, and she uses stand-up comedy as a platform to explore these issues.

Similar to Shamieh, Zayid does not adopt the headscarf in performance and yet this still informs their dialogue. She sees the value in performing in a place like Palestine, Jordan, or Jerusalem where they're not used to seeing “functional disabled people” (Raya). Zayid states: “I don't feel like I need to make people like Muslims through my comedy . . . [instead I show] how ridiculous the hate is” (Martin). Zayid endured harsh criticism from American internet users during her appearance on Olbermann; she also encountered backlash from Middle Eastern audience members. Zayid reflects on censorship issues in the Middle East and the ever-changing power structures and laws reflective of the time. She notices a difference when performing in Palestine as opposed to Egypt. To date, she has yet to experience issues with censorship from a Palestinian audience; however, this was not the case during a
2009 performance in Egypt. She reveals the risk she encountered performing her material while in Egypt:

Unbeknownst to me Fayza the Minister of Tourism was perched front-row. I knew Egypt had strict censorship laws. I couldn't make fun of Mubarak, Islam or talk about sex, but nobody said anything about Egypt Air. I did a joke about how I was happy for the first time ever that I have Cerebral Palsy because if I wasn't flapping my arms the plane would have crashed...then I mentioned in passing that the plane was so filthy my lice had gotten fleas. Fayza didn’t find this funny and she charged up on stage screaming, 'You're not funny!' in English (Rejected Writings by Maysoon Zayid 2015)

Zayid's experience brings up a significant issue regarding women in comedy. In what ways does a Palestinian, woman performer “effectively” deliver a stand-up comedy routine and also be viewed as “funny.” Indeed, comedic satire possesses the potential to be met with resistance. Arab American scholar Michael Najjar views some resistance as essential. For example, he identifies the Arab American theatre movement as both a form of cultural nationalism and resistance for these artists to proclaim their “Arab-ness” in the face of the dominant culture.

Many Arab American stand-up comedians use plane and airport jokes as a formula to discuss political happenings post-9/11. Tissa Hammi shares that when she is accused of faking her passport, she tells the airport staff: “Do you really think I would pick Iran as my birthplace if I made a fake passport?” (Najjar 2014). Dean Obeidallah emphasizes in his stand-up routines: “Dress white, make your flight.” The plane model is an example of counter identification and humor accounting. In Zayid’s plane joke, she retells a scenario in which she is at a home in New Jersey, and her girlfriends ask her if she is afraid to travel to Palestine. Zayid (2009) shares with
the audience what it is that really frightens her: “I am not afraid to go to Palestine! I am afraid to go to Newark Airport! And this is why. Because when I walk into an airport, security sees an Arab trying to board a plane, and we don’t have a good record.” She emphasizes the fact that she is also disabled further augments her already suspicious profile. Zayid uses jokes such as these and her Oppression Olympics joke to make her body and cerebral palsy hyper visible. She addresses the labels of Arab, cerebral palsy, and terrorist in her stand-up comedy performances.

Zayid’s integration of disability and ethnicity issues in her standup has received recognition. She is considered one of the first Muslim female stand-up comedians. Also, she is regarded as the first Palestinian comedian to ever perform in Palestine and Jordan. She intersects English and Arabic into her routines. Most Arab American standup performers introduce cultural topics, but they perform their routines entirely in English. Zayid emphasizes the importance of constantly reinforcing her Palestinian roots: “I spent my summers in a war zone because my parents were afraid that if we didn’t go back to Palestine every single summer, we’d grow up to be Madonna” (Zayid 2013). All of her routines incorporate Arabic language to some degree. During a performance at The Gotham Comedy Club in New York she completed her performance with a joke she learned from her father: “For those of you who don’t speak Arabic — find a friend.” She delivered a lengthy, crude comedic joke entirely in Arabic filled with obscene gestures and loud dialogue to foster cross-cultural audience collaboration.

This use of language has the potential to meet various audience responses when Zayid performs in different settings. She finds the Arabic language a fun tool
for comedic purposes. American audiences find the use of it in stand-up comedy engaging, especially because the language has an angry quality to it which makes it an effective contrast in stand-up comedy and humor. When Zayid performs in the Middle East, she rewrites her sets and recites them entirely in Arabic. She finds the people are not used to seeing a female, yet alone a disabled female comedian, and she defies their expectations. They also do not expect her to be telling her jokes in Arabic. Zayid shares: “I use a heavy Palestinian farmer’s dialect that they don’t expect to come out of the mouth of someone born and raised in New Jersey” (Raya 2016). Before Zayid founded the Arab American Comedy Festival, she would perform her work at open mic nights in New York City. She waited for hours and performed during the late night sets with few audiences. She said that although being a woman and disabled presented her with challenges, “being brown” was the issue primary issue (Martin). Prior to 2001, these spaces did not exist. Now, Arab Americans had a place to explore these issues. Zayid wanted to explore how ridiculous this imagined hate was and use live stand-up comedy performance as a space to complicate how these issues of the body and politics are marked and assessed.

The comedy festival space functions as an ideological site for Arab American performers to reveal general misconceptions about their community but it also allows for them to collectively reflect on their culture and history as Arab people living in a post-9/11 world. Additionally, Zayid addresses the misconception that Arab culture is not grounded in any humor. Particularly following 9/11, sober media images of war and terrorism circulated and reflected assumptions about the
Muslim world. Audiences were not exposed to story lines or images in which an 
Arab or Muslim simply shared a laugh or a daily occurrence with another member of 
his or her community. What implicit and explicit labels or assumptions are attached 
to an Arab American female performer? Zayid shares that even her Palestinian 
parents were concerned at first by her career choice. They questioned if she had 
entered into a “dishonorable profession.” In fact, her own father questioned her 
frequent appearances at comedy bars. Zayid states: “All he knew was that I was 
working in bars at night...he thought I was a stripper.” She further addresses her 
sexuality: “So I’m a virgin and people are like, really? You’re a virgin? And they feel 
sad for me and I just want you guys to know I’m a virgin by choice and that is my 
father’s choice!” (Maysoon Comedian).

Zayid introduces the misconceptions surrounding cerebral palsy in her 
comedy routines. She views the cerebral palsy as well as the disability community 
greatly underrepresented in film and television. She reinforces that people with a 
disability are more than their disability. This is interesting in terms of Palestinian 
identity. In her routines she emphasizes that CP is not genetic or a birth defect. Also, 
she assures her audience a curse was not placed on her mother’s 
uterus. Palestinian culture and disability. Rather, she emphasizes that CP occurs 
from an accident, typically occurring during child birth.

Zayid deliberately addresses gender issues for Muslim women in her 
performances. Zayid states: “Arabs are not funny? The sold out crowds at the 
eleventh annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival and at my shows in
Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem would strongly disagree.” She also told Al Arabiya News: “A lot of people swear women aren’t funny and they’re wrong about that too . . . Stand-up comedy is still relatively new in the Arab World but Arabs joking is as old as Jericho.” The event and transmission of live performance is significant, particularly the standup comedy model. It does not have to be attached to a script or controlled by other voices. The performer can be in charge of the material. Women have autonomy over their material. The standup comedy model is significant for female performers. Her influence in Arab American stand-up comedy created a new space for women to be included within comedic practices and to challenge dominant discourses.

Zayid uses her Ted talk Zayid’s TEDWomen2013 set to signify issues about the body in performance. She begins the set seated, and shares with the audience she is not drunk but that the doctor who delivered her was. He cut her mother six different times in six different ways, suffocating Zayid in the process. As a result, Zayid now has CP. She then stands up to show her body to the audience and to visibly shake for them. She says: “It’s exhausting I’m like Shakira Shakira meets Muhammad Ali. She reminds the audience that CP is not genetic or a birth defect. Also, she assures her audience a curse was not placed on her mother’s uterus. Rather, she emphasizes that CP occurs from an accident, typically occurring during

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20 Maysoon also serves as Co-executive producer of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. Other Zayid accomplishments: Performing in 40 cities in 3 nations in 3 months. Appearing in the 2008 Adam Sandler film You Don’t Mess with the Zohan. Also Zayid has been a headliner for: Arabs Gone Wild Comedy Tour and The Muslims Are Coming Tour, and the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour.
child birth. From the start of her set, she reminds the audience: “I’m not inspirational! Don’t feel bad for me!”

Zayid then informs her audience that they all have “dreamt of being disabled.” She goes on to describe a scenario in which it is Christmas Eve, and there are limited parking spaces at the store. She inserts the audience members into the performance: “You are circling around and around . . . and then you see 16 empty handicapped parking spaces . . . and you think, ‘god, can’t I just be a little disabled?’ (pause). I gotta tell you I got 99 problems and palsy is just one.” She acknowledges that she could win the Oppression Olympics and lists off her ethnicity, disability, and gender as the primary reasons for this. Also, she adds “being from New Jersey” to her Oppression Olympics resume. She provides information about cerebral palsy and reminds the audience that there are many different characteristics of the chronic disorder. With intensive yoga therapy and training she is now able to walk to some degree. Also, she sometimes incorporates literally standing up and walking in her comedy routines. The majority of her routines consist of her sitting and conversing with the audience from a chair. She emphasizes that her parents did not believe in the word “can’t.” Zayid uses an Arabic accent to mimic her father. She says: “You can do it. Yes, you can can!” She says that when her older sisters were mopping the floor, she would participate in the same activity. She then jokes how her family would dangle a dollar bill in front of her so she would come after it and chase it. She jokes: “My inner stripper was very strong. She also acknowledges that

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21 Zayid is currently married; however, she used to also add “virgin” to her Oppression Olympics list
with these improvements still came challenges. She says: “I was walking like a champ who had been punched too many times."

Zayid then discusses her childhood in Cliffside Park, New Jersey. She transitions from the topic of body and addresses ethnicity. She mentions there were only six Arabs in her town and they were all her family. Zayid jokes: “Now, there are twenty Arabs in my town . . . and they are all still my family . . . I don’t think anyone noticed we weren’t Italian.” However, she mentions that it was not until she became visible on television that she experienced criticism. She recalls a time before 9/11 before politicians thought it was acceptable to use “I hate Muslims” in their campaign slogans. She said her friends at school were much more concerned she might starve during Ramadan.

In her TEDWomen Talk, Zayid describes her experiences as a theatre student at Arizona State University. She fit every category of diversity at the university level, identifying herself as the “pet lemur” of the Theatre Department. Although she fit scholarship criteria, Zayid never got received an acting role in a university play. She sarcastically recalls performing a scene from The Glass Menagerie and making her professor break down into tears. Despite this, she was never cast in a theatre production. When ASU Theatre scheduled performances of They Dance Real Slow in Jackson, Zayid really thought this would be her chance to get a part since the main character had cerebral palsy. In performance, she exclaims: “I was a girl with CP! I’m finally going to get a part!!” Instead, the director cast a non-palsy actor as the lead role. As a result of this experience, Zayid reiterates in her performances: “If a wheelchair user can’t play Beyoncé, Beyoncé can’t play a wheel chair user.”
The TEDWomen 2013 talk signified a turning point for Zayid, and her comedy and satirical conversations are now visible in the media and considered significant in understanding hyphenated identities and disability issues. She used the Olbermann incident to strengthen her own material as a standup comedian and initiate conversation about online harassment as well as misunderstanding surrounding Arab Americans and the disabled. Zayid controls and creates her own comedic material. She does not use a set list and prefers freestyle and improvisation. She reuses jokes that work well especially if her respective audience is not being receptive. However, because of her condition, it is physically challenging for her to write down her own material. She prefers to let her humor and story-telling occur naturally on stage. She recognizes her approach is not one many would find effective but it works for her. Her advice to young comics: “write jokes every day, but don’t memorize your set. Leave something to chance, it’s more natural and funny” (Maysoon Comedian).

To conclude her TEDWomen talk, Zayid recounts performing for Muhammad Ali which she considers her most memorable experience as a standup comedian. She says: “He flies like a butterfly and stings like a bee and has Parkinson’s and shakes just like me!” The TEDWomen talk signified a turning point for Zayid. Her comedy and satirical conversations are now visible in the media and considered significant in understanding hyphenated identities and disability issues. She used the Olbermann incident to strengthen her own material as a standup comedian and to initiate conversation about online harassment as well as misunderstanding surrounding Arab Americans and the disabled.
The form of comedic, solo performance allows Zayid to be visible in a more distinctive way than if she were on television or film. The stand-up form is also significant because it claims ownership over material. Post-9/11, American voices attempted to assert ownership and construct interpretations of the Muslim identity, particularly using comedic forms. Zayid and comedians at the New York Arab American Festival effectively relay Muslim political topics and collectively address what it is like being Arab American or Muslim. The form of comedic, solo performance allows Zayid to be visible in a more distinctive way than if she were on television or film. The standup form is also significant because it claims ownership over material. Post-9/11, American voices attempted to assert ownership and construct interpretations of the Muslim identity, particularly using comedic forms. For example, the 2005 Albert Brook’s film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* seeks to “find laughter in the funniest places.” Brooks plays himself in the film, and he receives a letter from commission chairman of the US government to go on an assignment to better understand the Muslim world. He is involved and active in the process. He is required to write a 500 page document on the effect of his comedy and return it to the US Senate. His mission involves going to India and Pakistan to “make the people like Uncle Sam.” His goal is to utilize laughter to “better understand” the Muslim religion and culture. However, his performance of Muslim topics is not effective because he is not familiar enough with their culture. It poses the question: did audience members laugh at his routine or at him? Zayid and fellow
comedians at the New York Arab American Festival reassess assumptions regarding
the Muslim community and collectively address what is like being Arab American or
Muslim. The standup comedy form provides variability for them to speak on
political and concerns of the time. They create space to (re)construct their own
interpretations in a post-9/11 world. The standup comedy form provides variability
for them to speak on political issues and concerns of the time. They create space to
(re)construct their own interpretations. Zayid emphasizes the need for variety in
her routines. She says: “I don’t focus on one thing. I don’t focus on being a woman
and dating, or focus on being married, or focus on being ethnic or being disabled. It’s
like I am who I am and the comedy I do is very personal, it’s very political and I don’t
apologize to anyone” (Martin 2012).

In addition to her achievements as a standup comedian, Zayid is also the
founder of Maysoon’s Kids, a scholarship and wellness program for Palestinian
disabled and wounded refugee children. She frequently returns to Palestine where
she leads art programs for disabled and orphaned Palestinian refugees. She also
earned the 2013 United Cerebral Palsy NYC's Women Who Care Awards. Zayid
navigates post-9/11 politics through a variety of standup comedy routines and
creates an open space for other Arab-American female performers to also relay their
work. Standup comedy serves as an effective tool for Zayid to make visible her own
struggles and to claim ownership over her stories.

Zayid and comedians at the New York Arab American Festival effectively
relay Muslim political topics and collectively address what it is like being Arab
American or Muslim. Standup comedy serves as an effective tool for Zayid to make

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visible her own struggles and to claim ownership over her stories. The event of live performance is significant, particularly the stand-up comedy model. It does not have to be attached to a script or controlled by other voices. Women stand-up comedy performers have autonomy over their material and can revise, explore, and edit it the way they feel is necessary. To conclude, I think this moment shared by solo performer Najla Said is significant in understanding the future direction of Arab American live performance. Before her father, Edward Said, died he expressed to her his thoughts on Arab American stand-up comedy. Najla Said states: "One of the last things he said to me, a few days before he died, I had seen these Arab-American comedians, and I told him about it, and he kept like sort of shaking his fist and going, 'That's it, that's it. That's the future. You guys, you got it.' And sort of this idea that art was somehow going to be the way out" (200).
All of these post-9/11 theatrical works written and performed by Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid disrupt the expected cultural conduct of Arab American women and reposition their bodies in historical conversations. Betty Shamieh subverts traditionally historical masculine spaces; Heather Raffo utilizes a specific political location to effectively analyze Iraqi women's bodies on-stage; and Maysoon Zayid employs comedy to satirize the assumptions about her own body and ethnicity. Each of these playwrights and performers contribute to a collective, ever-expanding Arab American Theatre movement. They develop an Arab American women’s theatre movement and develop a space in which women’s issues can effectively be relayed. Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid challenge what it means to be labeled a “good Arab girl.” Rather, they remove/erase such labels and reveal new representations in their multi-dimensional work. These women are continuing to make vital work and relay contemporary issues about the Arab American woman. As Zayid notes:

There was, like, five things I could do, one of which was teach, which is what I did until my stand-up comedy took off. I taught seventh and eighth grade reading and English at a Catholic school, like all good Muslim comics do. (Martin)

There is indeed a certain conduct expected of Arab American female performers. Arab American women performers confront stereotypical misconceptions of Arab American women and emphasize these in their plays and performances in order to
gradually break them down and dispel them. These perspectives are further obscured by conflict from both Arab and American values and this complicates the traditional expectations Arab American women are frequently required to uphold.

Through storytelling, Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid contradict popular cultural myths by including the Arab American woman’s perspective. Indeed, the theatre can also be seen as a masculine dominated space; however, these women create their own space within it. Risk and responsibility are shared themes in all of these works. There is a precise construction to maintain this type of visibility presence in a post-9/11 world, and these women playwrights and performers take risks and assess responsibilities when addressing their work.

During her visit at The Ohio State University in 2012, Shamieh addressed the extensive amount of work yet to be done on Arab American theatre and Palestinian American history. Shamieh chooses to concentrate on creating humorous yet emotionally unsettling stories with complex characters. In her plays, she strives to create compelling and strong female characters to address complicated gender issues. Jamil Khoury says: “I want an Arab American theatre movement that is vibrant and visible and daring and unafraid of its own power (as qtd in Najjar 187). I argue women have their own movement and shape feminist issues. In fact, Shamieh shared with me on the first day of her Ohio State visit that she believed she will eventually be more known as a feminist playwright than as an Arab American playwright. This is because her work deals with gender inequalities and emphasizes the universal female voice, very much in a similar style to Heather Raffo.”
Raffo is currently engaging with a new theatrical form: opera. *Fallujah: The First Opera about the Iraq War* is inspired by interviews conducted by Raffo with American soldiers and the Iraqi people. Similar to the American character in *9 Part of Desire*, Raffo intends to build a metaphorical bridge between the two cultures and explore similarities and differences. She states: “This is not just a story of pain and struggle but of hope and redemption” (Raffo Official). *Fallujah* further employs the battles of the Iraq War as a historical foreground to explore identity, family, and the body on-stage. In this opera, Raffo also explores relationships between mothers and their sons.

Zayid continues to promote the Arab American Comedy Festival and each year invites new voices, particularly women stand-up comedians, each year. The Arab American stand-up comedians continue to sell out comedy clubs throughout the United States. They are creating a new interpretation of what it means to be Arab, Muslim, and/or Arab American. The growth of the community and comedy has created a new path. For example, Palestinian hip hop has now become a popular artistic form although there are religious concerns regarding the artistic form. Some of the visible Muslim hip-hop artist include: Ramallah Underground, Checkpoint 304, PR (Palestine Rapperz), and DJ Lethal Skillz in Lebanon. The predominant women hip-hop artists include Mir and Deeyah. In Norway, Deeyah is known as “the Muslim Madonna” (Najjar 2014).

Shamieh, Raffo, and Zayid strive to teach aspiring Arab American women writers and performers the importance of perseverance. With violent news coverage about the Muslim world still widely prevalent on the news, it is now more
important than ever to have these works of humor continue post-9/11. Zayid uses humor as a tool to survive and make sense and meaning about the political happenings which surround her. Particularly, in a world in which the hashtag #StopIslam instantly appeared on Twitter moments after the Brussels attacks, live performances are now even more essential to explore, capture, and complicate issues of identity and culture on-stage.

A recent example to necessitate this need for live performance during times of war involves thirteen-year-old refugee Helen. She revealed to The Guardian her future goals for herself and for her family. Helen’s family fled from Turkey to Germany and are currently the subjects of the recent documentary Children on the Frontline: The Escape. Helen’s mission is to one day become an architect so she can go back home and rebuild the area. She says: “I want to go back to Syria and build everything. Aleppo is broken – all of Syria is broken . . . I’ve seen pictures and it’s hard to look at them. There are so many people who’ve died. My best friend died – that’s hard for me. I saw so many people my age dying and you cannot forget their faces . . . I would build everything . . . the mosque, the church, the buildings . . . I’d build it so it was better – with work. I’ll have to see when the war is finished” (Nianias 2016). This real life example is reminiscent of Shamieh’s Architect in The Black Eyed as well as Raffo’s experience conducting interviews and rebuilding dialogues with women of all ages in Iraq, and Zayid making visible post-9/11 political and social concerns. These plays, solo performances, and stand-up comedy routines serve as vital reminders to recall and to reconstruct the past in order to create a more meaningful future.
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Appendix A: Comprehensive List of Betty Shamieh’s Plays

2001: *Chocolate in Heat*

2002: *Tamam*
Betty Shamieh performed the role of Tamam at the Imagine: Iraq event in November 2002. This event was curated by Naomi Wallace and the Artists Network of Refuse and Resist.

2002: *Architecture*
One-act play. Based on the same character portrayed in *The Black Eyed*. Shamieh collaborated with Sam Gold on a workshop production at the Hangar Theater Lab in 2002.

2004: *Roar*

2005: *The Black Eyed*

2007: *The Machine*
One-act poetic drama produced by Naked Angels at Duke Theatre. Directed by Marisa Tomei.

2008: *Territories*
Commissioned by Trinity Rep and developed with Al-Harah Theatre where it was presented at the Bethlehem Peace Center (with support from the Doris Duke Foundation). World premiere at the Magic Theatre in 2008. Directed by Jessica
Heidt. European premiere in German translation as a co-production of the Landes-Theatre and the 2009 European Union Capital of Culture Festival.

2008: *Again and Against*:

2008: *As Soon as Impossible*
Commissioned as part of the Time Warner Commissioning Program.

2009: *The Alter-Ego of an Arab-American Assimilationist*
Developed by the 2009 Hip Hop Theatre Festival and Voice & Vision. As of 2012, this is Shamieh's latest solo work.

2010: *Fit For the Queen*
Developed at a workshop production at Yale School of Drama. Directed by Lisa Peterson.

2010: *The Strangest*
Developed at HERE Arts Center and New Dramatists with support from the Creativity fund. Directed by May Adrales. Workshop production took place February 4 and 5, 2012, as a part of Culturemart 2012 in New York.

2012: *Free Radicals*
Slated for production in Dutch translation. Commissioned by Het Zuidelijk Toneel in The Netherlands.

2014: *The Malvolio Project*
Devised at Denison University, Spring 2014. Shamieh served as the Jonathan R. Reynolds Playwright-in-Residence.
Appendix B: Interview Transcript with Betty Shamieh

Interview with the author via email
11 May 2015

Allison Brogan (AB): What year did your parents come to America? What were their professions? Describe your early childhood and family life growing up in America. What year were you born? Did you attend private or public schools?

Betty Shamieh (BS): My parents immigrated to America in the mid 1960s. My father came to San Francisco State University as a student to study engineering and my mother studied Health Science at San Francisco State. I was always attracted to the arts and trained with several local theatre companies as an actress since middle school. I began writing plays in high school. I attended Catholic schools (Our Lady of Mercy for grammar school and then I graduated from Mercy High School). My parents were incredibly supportive of my interest in the arts, even when I was very young. I think it made an enormous impact upon me that they were and still are so supportive of my work in the theatre. My play, One Arabian Night, was a finalist in the Young Playwrights Festival in 1992. I prefer not to share the date of my birth.

AB: Can you please share the reasons you selected Harvard and Yale?

BS: I started out as a freshman at UC Berkeley and transferred as a junior to Harvard. I applied to transfer to Harvard on a whim, partially because I was interested in moving to New York and felt it would be easier to transition to the East Coast if I attended college there. To me, getting into Yale Drama was a very important step in my career as a playwright. I knew that I wanted to study playwriting at Yale when I was in high school.

AB: When I am writing, how should I use the term Palestinian-American and Arab-American when referring to your work? My adviser said I am jumping back and forth and need to be sure to differentiate between the two. Would you consider these two to share the same cultural voice?

BS: I think the Palestinian-American experience is definitely a subset of the Arab-American community. I see myself as both representing Palestinians who live in the diaspora (and my generation of Palestinians were the first generation in which more of our community was born in the diaspora than in Israel and the Palestinian territories combined) as well as an Arab-American who - like all Americans - see themselves as part of the mosaic that makes up American society.
AB: When did you write the one-act blank verse play in which all of Shakespeare’s characters came to life? Was that during high school?

BS: First year of college in my first formal playwriting class taught by Marvin Rosenberg.

AB: Could you please describe the reasoning for the switch from *Chocolate in Heat: Growing Up Arab in America* to *Chocolate in Heat*?

BS: I wanted to bill a show as an "ethnic" show in which I don’t deal with race at all as a means to force the audiences to confront their own preconceived notions of what "ethnic" shows entailed. It was intended as a tongue-in-cheek gesture I did for its premiere at the NYC Fringe Festival in August 2001. I felt the subtitle made less sense after September 11, particularly outside of the circle of theatre artists who would have an understanding of the genre of ethnic drama I was trying to subvert.

AB: Are there any similarities between Aiesha in *Chocolate* and Aiesha in *The Black Eyed*?

BS: None.

AB: Was *Roar* the first play by a Palestinian-American to premiere Off-Broadway and/or the first play about a Palestinian-American family to premiere Off-Broadway? I have read differing facts in my sources and wanted to confirm that with you.

BS: To my knowledge, *Roar* is the first play by a Palestinian-American playwright to premiere off-Broadway and it is the only one in which all the characters are Palestinian-Americans or Palestinians.

AB: How did 9/11 affect you personally? Did you find it more difficult to have your work produced after 9/11? Also, did you notice that fellow Arab-American writers were being treated differently after 9/11? In particular, how were the women being treated?

BS: 9/11 happened on my second day of teaching at Marymount Manhattan College. One of my student’s father died in the Towers. So, it was a devastating time for me personally. I was living in New York and trying to teach a traumatized class of college freshman. Not only did I fear for my safety in the event of more terrorist attacks, I was also afraid of hate crimes against Arab-Americans like myself. Because I graduated from Yale Drama in 2000 and began to work professionally at that time, it is difficult for me to assess how my career as an Arab-American theatre artist was affected by 9/11. I cannot speak for the experiences of other Arab-American playwrights. But, I know that Arab-American issues were always
considered controversial subject matter at American theaters, even before 9/11. So, I would have to say that I did not notice a big shift in the theatre world regarding to being more open to such subjects as a result of 9/11. In many ways, that is disappointing because there was a great deal of support for finding Arab-American voices in other medium, including film. But, theatre tends to be a very conservative art form, at least at the professional level.

AB: In regards to Chocolate in Heat, I noticed Piter Fattouche and Piter Marek are both credited. Could you please tell me which production each of these men were involved with, respectively?

BS: They are the same guy. Piter changed his last name in 2005. So, I think you should call him Piter Marek.

AB: Could you please send me the specific months/time frames of the awards/recognition you received. I have the dates for most of these, but if you could provide additional info, that would be great!

BS:
--Recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts grant/Clifton Visiting Artist at Harvard (month? 2004) yearlong position

--Selected as the NEA/TCG playwright-in-residence at Magic (month? 2007) yearlong award

--Playwriting Fellow at Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute (Month? 2006) yearlong position

--Artist-in-residence at Het Zuidelijk Toneel of Holland (Month? 2009) yearlong position

--UNESCO Young Artists for Intercultural Dialogue (Month? 2011) April 2011

--Playwriting board for New York Foundation for the Arts (Month? 2012) yearlong position

--Artist-in-residence at HERE (Month? 2012) Sept 2010 - Feb 12
--New York Theatre Workshop Usual Suspect (Month? 2012) began 2007 to the present

-Professor of screenwriting at Marymount (dates?) Fall ’01 - Spring ’04
--Resident at Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study. Conference Center (dates?)

June 2005

--A New Dramatists Van Lier Fellowship (dates?) 2000 yearlong

--New York Foundation Award (dates?) 2005 yearlong position
Appendix C: Flyer from Betty Shamieh’s Visit to The Ohio State University

Women of Color Conversations Series

Female Representations in Popular Culture: An Arab American Perspective

As part of our 2011-12 Women of Color Series, The Women’s Place presents a conversation with Betty Shamieh, Palestinian-American playwright, author, screenwriter, actor, and professor at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City.

The author of fifteen plays and a novel, Shamieh is known for addressing women's issues and "the struggle with being good Arab girls" in her work. She stresses the importance of raising the profile of Arab Americans with more positive representations in pop culture, which she believes can have an impact on everything from foreign policy to the rise of hate crimes.

RSVP to womensplace@osu.edu by Feb. 24. Space is limited.

Feb 28, 2012

The Women’s Place presents:

Female Representations in Popular Culture: An Arab American Perspective

Tuesday, noon
Stillman Hall
Rm 115
1947 College Rd