# Art in the Lives of Immigrant Communities in the United States

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CHAPTER 4

# Inside and Outside the Box

## THE POLITICS OF ARAB AMERICAN
## IDENTITY AND ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS

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Arab American identity is strongly rooted in the political realities and social identity constructions of the homeland. For decades homeland attachments have shaped Arab American identity; thus, it is not surprising that Arab American arts have traditionally relied on the cultural and folkloric elements of social ties and other relationships to the homeland. As with other ethnic groups, however, an additional dimension also shapes Arab—and Arab American—identity. The long history of political conflicts in the Arab world has played an equally significant role in structuring Arab American identity and its artistic expressions. The politically contentious realities of the Middle East—from multiple U.S. involvements in the region, to the Arab Israeli conflict, to the newly constructed War on Terror—are all at the heart of Arab and Arab American identity.

Yet when we examine predominant representations of Arab identity in Arab American arts, an overarching theme becomes all too clear. The transmission of an Arab identity into mainstream American discourses is contingent not only on what Arabs think of themselves but also on the ways the mainstream has historically defined Arabs. This dialectic relationship between identity representations that emerge from within an ethnic group and the complementary identifications that preexist in the mainstream define the nature of Arab American arts today. The politics surrounding representation very much dictate not only the content but also the medium through which Arab American arts are disseminated. This ongoing, sometimes fluid, sometimes static relationship between competing articulations of identity has resulted in what we can today broadly categorize as the Arab American arts. The debates over representation are influenced by important facets of art dissemination like resources (money) and audiences (mainstream vs. Arab). This

interaction between ethnic and mainstream identity representations has also led to new forms of artistic expression like Arab hip-hop music, which is a direct result of the ongoing tensions involved in defining an Arab identity in the West.

Since 9/11 two forms of responses have emerged from the Arab American community. Mainstream Arab American organizations like the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) in Dearborn, Michigan, have now institutionalized the Arab American National Museum as a key source of Arab American representation. Such forums seek to define and exhibit the Americanness of Arabs in America. There are also new forms of artistic expression adopted by the second generation that highlight the Arabness of their identities while simultaneously exposing mainstream intolerance. These two forms of artistic expression address the stereotyping within mainstream society and appeal differently to each generation. The first generation is far more likely to want to showcase its positive attributes to mainstream society. The second generation, however, is more adamant about asserting its own identity and pointing out the discrimination and intolerance of the surrounding culture.

### OVERVIEW OF THE ARAB AMERICAN COMMUNITY

About 1.2 million of the total 281.4 million U.S. population reported Arab ancestry, according to the 2000 census (de la Cruz and Brittingham 2003).[1] This population grew by 41 percent in the 1980s and 38 percent in the 1990s. About half of the Arab population is concentrated in five states: California, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York. Michigan has the highest concentration of any state (1.2 percent of the total state population), growing by 51 percent in the 1990s.

Before World War II Arab immigrants (first and second waves) were predominantly Christian, coming from the Mount Lebanon part of Greater Syria; most were men who took jobs as unskilled laborers, peddlers, and factory or mine workers. Many in this cohort saw themselves as sojourners. Yet this group of immigrants was almost completely cut off from the homeland as a result of World War I and the imposition of strict immigration quota laws in the 1920s. While the Arab American community felt increasingly separated, two alternative patterns emerged simultaneously within the community: strong ethnic solidarity and a more assimilationist worldview. Arabs realized they were in the United States for the long haul.

After World War II, Arab immigration continued with a much more diverse population coming to the United States than before. This third wave of Arab immigrants included those escaping political turmoil, like Palestinians and Iraqis; those escaping civil war, like Lebanese and Yemenis; and those looking for better economic opportunities and constituting the brain drain of the Arab world, like Egyptians and Syrians. These new arrivals were better educated and more affluent than those in the earlier flows. Furthermore, many in this new wave were also Muslim. While earlier immigrants did not necessarily see themselves as part of the American fabric—their children, rather than they, assimilated—post–World War II

immigrants tended to appreciate the democratic process; they were politically gal-
vanized, especially around issues pertaining to the homeland (Suleiman 1999).

Both previous immigrant waves came to the United States with strong nation-
alistic sentiments, although they were not as strong as the sentiments of the third
wave. The first and second wave of Arab immigration in the early 1900s coincided
with the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in the Arab world, as the Ottomans
began to be seen by Arabs (especially Christian Arabs) more as foreign occupiers
than as indigenous Muslim rulers. The third wave of immigrants, however, is most
inspired by a growing national Arab consciousness because of its direct relation-
ship to political unrest linked to the colonial period. With the creation of the state
of Israel and numerous Arab Israeli wars, this new wave was the most devoutly
nationalistic in sentiment and identity. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, as
political conflict after political conflict erupted across the Arab world, third-wave
Arab immigrants continued to trickle into the U.S. Arab national identity—an
identity that would come with Arabs to America—is rooted in the political
upheavals of the Arab world.

## ARAB AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE ARTS

Arab American identity is normally bound up with the social, cultural, and politi-
cal realities of the homeland. The Detroit Arab American Study (DAAS) found that
key identity indicators include attachment to the homeland, speaking the Arabic
language, supporting Palestine, and participating in Arab arts and cultural activi-
ties.[2] Through various institutions, social networks, and the arts, Arab Americans
continue to reproduce these identity characteristics and attachments in the United
States.[3] Religious institutions, social service organizations, antidiscrimination
groups, and Arab and Islamic schools have all become key sites where Arab Ameri-
can identity is promoted and preserved. Family networks are no less important.
Marrying within the community and socializing with other Arabs are also impor-
tant features of identity sustenance. Further, political allegiances and discourses
remain paramount in describing and linking one's self to a broader Arab nation
abroad. Since most Arab immigration patterns to the United States have resulted
directly from political upheavals in the Arab world, the world of politics is an
underlying denominator of Arab American identity today (see Howell 2000; Naff
1993; Suleiman 1999).

Historically, then, Arab American arts have promoted intertwined symbols of
cultural traditions, class and religious experiences, and homeland identities. It is
curiously difficult to separate the cultural or social elements of Arab identity from
the political. Arab arts tend to encompass these multiple self-definitions. Since
Arab American identity is in fact a conglomeration of the political and the cultural,
Arab American arts have simultaneously featured these dual expressions. Arab art
exhibits, for example, have historically showcased traditional Middle Eastern garb.
Long robes with detailed embroidery, headscarves, and jewelry signify a cultural
heritage that underscores both the religious traditions of the region and their

peasant origins. One might assume that dress on its own is apolitically cultural in
nature; however, for Arab Americans, the traditional dress is not only culturally
but also politically salient. The *fellah* (peasant) looms large in the mind-set of Arab
Americans. Before colonization, Arabs enjoyed an intimate relationship with their
lands, which symbolized not only nationalist pride but also the means of subsis-
tence before the onset of globalization. Various agricultural tools and hand-woven
items used to collect wheat and vegetables, items like trays and bowls, are often on
display, projecting a deep sense of attachment to Arab lands. Furthermore, the tra-
ditional dress also demonstrates what many will consider a rejection of Western-
ization altogether.

On the musical scene, belly dancing, the traditional Arab *debke* (troop dance),
and other instrumental performances—which include music performed on the
drum, *shababe* (short flute), and windpipes—all epitomize expressions of Arab
identity. These forms of music are often considered nationalist in origin, and they
dominate Arab American cultural festivals, weddings, social gatherings, and the
like. To rally an Arab American crowd, one needs only to begin a *debke*; it assures
full and animated audience involvement. In a typical *debke*, dancers hold hands in
large circles and move counterclockwise, coordinating the movement with foot
tapping and stomping. These *debkes* are normally accompanied with lyrics that
either explicate social and cultural norms and ties (like kinship, attachments to
family and friends, patriarchal relations, and so on) or focus on political national
phenomena. The *debke* is a folkloric mode of identity expression passed on from
generation to generation. The themes of displacement, living in the diaspora, occu-
pation, and foreign intervention are topics that *debke* songs capture in eloquent,
poetic fashion. These various cultural forms are so integral to and expressive of
Arab identity that any Arab arts display must include them.

Performances across the United States capture the connection between the arts
and the political aspects of Arab identity. When the famous Lebanese artist Fairooz
visited the United States, her fans—mostly Arabic—crowded the aisles and seats of
New York's Carnegie Hall, their distinct dialects clearly audible. At the end of her
concert, the audience asked for an encore of the song "Jerusalem" and began
chanting in one voice: "*Al Quds, Al Quds*" (Jerusalem). The year was 1971, and the
1967 war was very much on the Arab mind (Bushnaq 2002). As Inea Bushnaq
reminds the United States, "The [arts] are a means for Arabs to convey to an audi-
ence beyond their own community their view of events in the Arab world" (2002).
In Carnegie Hall, the Arab audience was communicating their deep attachment to
Jerusalem.

## REPRESENTATIONS AND COUNTERREPRESENTATIONS

In the United States the package of Arab American arts has been segmented into
two dichotomous categories. For decades, the American mainstream has been fas-
cinated by Orientalist representations of Arab culture (Lockman 2004; McAlister
2005; Said 1979; Shaheen 2002). Dating back from the early days of Hollywood,

portrayals of Arabs in predominant media circles have often emphasized the "backward" elements of the heritage. Susan Akram discovers this process in the "deliberate mythmaking" tactics of film and media, in the polemical stereotyping strategies of "experts" on the Middle East, "in the selling of foreign policy agendas, and in a public susceptible to images identifying the unwelcome 'other' in its midst" (Akram 2002, 61). A long history of misrepresentation and the promotion of violent stereotypes mark the popular American media; Arab and Muslim Americans were portrayed as terrorists long before 9/11 (see Gerges 2003; Mandel 2001; Shaheen 2003; Suleiman 2002; Tessler and Corstange 2002). Muslims and Arabs are consistently absent from that desirable group of "ordinary people, families with social interactions, or outstanding members of communities such as scholars or writers or scientists." "This process of demonization," Akram goes on to say, "has been so complete and so successful that film critics, most Americans and social commentators have barely noticed" (Akram 2002, 66). Not only do popular images do little justice to Arab representations, they often shape policies vis-à-vis the Arab American community. Says Jack Shaheen, a leading expert on Arab American popular representations:

> Hateful words and images have their impact on public opinion and policies. There is a dangerous and cumulative effect when repulsive screen images remain unchallenged as *real* portrayals of Muslim culture, which come back to afflict Americans of Arab heritage as well as non-Arab Muslims in their dealing with law enforcement or judicial officials. For example, in January 1997 a judge in Dearborn, Michigan, was asked to rule whether an attorney could show *Not Without My Daughter* to a jury deciding on a child-custody case between an Arab-American father and a European American mother. Incredibly, the judge allowed this defamatory film portraying an Iranian man as a child abuser and child kidnapper to be introduced in court, influencing the judicial proceeding.
> (Shaheen 2002, 207)

Not only is Arab culture portrayed as "backward," but it is also depicted as violent, savage, and inhumane. The traditional Arab dress, which for many Arabs signifies cultural and political pride, has become in the United States the lens through which Arab men oppress and their women become victims. Female forms of Arab dance, which include belly dancing, are seen in the mainstream as purely exotic and erotic. More often than not, women in mainstream depictions, especially on television, are portrayed either as exotic sexual beings and/or submissive and abused objects. Because of geopolitical strategic reasons, the relationship between the United States and the Arab world is one that erects, highlights, and reinforces difference between "us" and "them." Thus, it is difficult for average Americans to understand what Arab American cultural expressions are all about. The audience is quite tainted.

Not only has the ongoing conflict-based relationship between the United States and the Arab world hampered efforts to create better cultural understanding, but

in many cases there are deliberate attempts to downplay or ignore important elements of the Arab identity altogether. To be more precise, much resistance meets Arab Americans who desire to display artistic expressions that have political undertones—and, as documented above, Arab identity in general is highly political (Howell 2000). Arab nationalist consciousness was born of the political upheavals in the region, and the modern nation-state system in the region is a result of World War II. In the United States, however, Arab artists and exhibitors are often told to "tone down" their political identities. Artistic expressions about foreign intervention, Palestine, the Occupation, and war are vetoed out of Arab art exhibits. Lyrics, songs, and images that document political Arab experiences are excised from display lists, brochures, and handouts. Arab American art forms are censored by non-Arab exhibit owners, and often the non-Arab funders, too, show similar intolerance toward Arab political identity. Funding organizations are much more comfortable providing grants to promote "social" rather than "political" expressions of the culture, often asking grant writers to remove any mention of politics. This intolerance is most visible when any art forms thematically relate to Palestine or the Occupation, resulting in a segmented representation of Arab American identity within the arts. The mainstream American public is more privy to the image of an Arab woman as a belly dancer or abused wife than as a woman wearing a traditional embroidered dress that carries a potent political message of homeland attachments. Why? Because layers of censorship have reduced Arab American identity to just that. Thus, the existing social image of the "Arab" is one that the U.S. mainstream is comfortable with. It is exotic, mysterious, and represents mystical, Orientalist fascinations with the Arab world.

Micromanaging this apparent disconnect between the reality and representation of Arabs in the arts is mind-boggling for any organizer of an Arab American arts exhibit. Sally Howell, a former arts director at the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services in Dearborn Michigan (ACCESS), captures this dilemma when she describes her attempt to organize an arts display in the 1990s that would showcase Arab American arts to the mainstream. According to Howell:

> The only artists the American art establishment would fund were those who specialized in the folkloric, home-oriented art forms. . . . ACCESS was compelled to present the most traditional forms of Arab expressive culture to a larger society that already considered Arabs backward or worse. We were trapped between an identity politics that demands public representation of "ethnic heritage" and a political discourse that stigmatizes all things Arab in America. (Howell 2000, 62)

At numerous junctures Howell felt her efforts to promote Arab American arts to a larger mainstream constituency was stifled because of political considerations. "Some program officers from national granting agencies asked me to remove the

word 'Arab' from my grant applications because they thought it 'too pejorative.'"
She added:

> They preferred that I refer to immigrants by their national affiliations. I was
> advised to substitute the word "Israel" for "Palestine" and to describe Palestin-
> ian needlework traditions by village name rather than by national or ethnic
> titles such as "Palestinian" or "Arab." This was the advice of staffers who were
> friendly to ACCESS; they were trying to soften the negative connotations of
> Arabness our applications would carry for some members of folk arts and
> humanities panels in Washington and elsewhere.          (Howell 2000, 69)

When we look at the ways in which various artistic expressions about Arab
Americans emanate from the mainstream, we are in reality only witnessing
glimpses of the actual dynamics of Arab American identity behind these images. For
mainstream society, acceptable images of Arabs are those that depict a backward
culture, fascinating in its very backwardness. For Arab American artists this has
posed a serious dilemma as they find themselves in the troubling situation of repro-
ducing a distorted identity of themselves. While the political aspects of their identi-
ties are being defined by the mainstream as irrational and inhumane, their social
identity has been reduced to stereotypical representations that capture neither Arab
identity abroad nor Arab American identity in the United States (Howell 2000).

   This phenomenon has created much unease among Arab American artists and
community members. In fact, it creates a paradox. On the one hand, Arab Ameri-
can artists feel that the only way they can obtain a mainstream audience is to con-
form to the existing understandings of Arab identity. On the other hand, artists may
choose only to perform for and/or display their work to more understanding Arab
American audiences, thus keeping their works of marginal significance in terms of
the larger issues surrounding the mainstream. Either mechanism reproduces Arab
American marginalization. Only being able to perform or display artistic qualities
to one's own group normalizes an inward-looking rather than outward-looking
endeavor. Furthermore, if one can only exhibit arts to an audience that has already
predetermined the subordinate qualities of the ethnic group, then conforming to
those expectations reinforces one's own subordinate status as well. Arab American
identity has been subordinated and marginalized in artistic expressions.

   In an era where outreach is needed to improve cultural understanding and
incorporation of Arab Americans into the larger society, these conundrums infuri-
ate many Arab Americans who want mainstream society to see Arabs outside this
tainted box. Arab Americans who are more wealthy and better off often register
disgust with the ways Arabs are portrayed in these folkloric types of artistic
exhibits. They are sick and tired of "traditional" images of Arabs showcased as
the only images. Sally Howell captures these critiques of existing art displays by the
Arab Dearborn elite:

> When we [ACCESS] represented Yemeni musicians we were accused by the
> Lebanese of making Arabs look primitive and backward, dark-skinned, even
> black. . . . Traditional art projects in general were frowned on by urban

> professionals, who thought they made Arabs look like peasants. . . . Bourgeois
> Arabs resented being represented by art forms associated so obviously with
> the past and the foreign (needlework, calligraphy, weaving) at the expense
> of more modern and elite art forms (painting, sculpture, classical music)
>                                                          (Howell 2000, 71).[4]

Yet, these modern and elite "high" art forms are heavily influenced by class loca-
tion and social hierarchy. Embracing one form of art over others that are more
pan-nationalistic, encompassing identities across classes would not lessen the mar-
ginalization of Arab identities. Furthermore, the transition to forms of artistic
expression that are already part of the mainstream and do not necessarily emanate
from the homeland means that the identity of the artist gives the music its ethnic
quality and not the music itself. A handful of Arabs, including Simon Shaheen,
perform using modern instruments and attract a wide audience. But if one listens
to Shaheen's music on its own, it is hard to notice a distinctive Arab quality. His
music has African, Asian, and European elements as well (Bushnaq 2002; Howell
2000). There is little about it that is distinctly Arabic.

## The Importance of Art to Arab Americans in Detroit

Artistic expression remains a key mode for the expression of Arab American iden-
tity. In the DAAS, Arab Americans were asked whether participating in Arab arts
and cultural events was important to "being" Arab; 54 percent of the Detroit Arab
population agreed that it was. Often, it is assumed that Muslims are less open to the
arts because Islam is much stricter about music, and the depiction of humans in
paintings and portraits is shunned as part of theological interpretations (Denny
1984). Nevertheless, we found that Muslim and Christian Arabs are almost equally
likely to believe that arts and cultural events are important to their Arab identity—
55 percent of Christian Arabs believe in the importance of the arts, compared to 51
percent of Muslim Arabs. Fifty-seven percent of Arab women and 49 percent of
Arab men hold this view as well. We also found that among the various nationalities
significant variations emerge. Palestinians are far more likely than other nationali-
ties to embrace the arts as part of their identity. Sixty-three percent of Palestinians
believe the arts are important, compared to 56 percent of the Lebanese and Syrians,
51 percent of Iraqis—who are predominantly Chaldean—and 42 percent of Yemenis.
It appears that proximity to the central issue of Palestine is directly related to posi-
tive appreciation of the arts as a means to assert identity. In fact, of those Arabs who
believe the arts are important for their identity, 77 percent also said that supporting
Palestine was important for their Arab identity—compared to 39 percent of those
who do not believe the arts are important.

   Identifications with Arabness extend beyond Palestine. Arab Americans in the
DAAS were asked about the importance of the following three questions for their
overall identity: Is it important for others to know you are Arab? Is socializing with
other Arabs important for your sense of Arab identity? Do you identify with other

Arabs? Eighty-seven percent of those Arabs who believe that Arab arts and cultural events are important for their identity more strongly identified as Arab.

Not only are the arts a means for Arabs to assert their identity; it also appears those who embrace the arts are more likely to fear discrimination and perceive unfair treatment. Sixty percent of those who value arts for their identity are likely to worry about their futures in the United States, compared to 43 percent who are not that attached to the arts. Only 44 percent of those who value the arts believe Arabs and Muslims can get a fair trial in the United States, compared to 58 percent of those who do not believe the arts are important for their identity. Further, those who embrace the arts are also significantly more likely to believe the media is biased against Muslims and Arabs. And while only 10 percent of the entire Arab American population has participated in protests, of those who believe the arts are important to their identity 16 percent have protested compared to 6 percent who do not believe the arts are important to sustain their identities. All in all, it appears that those who embrace the arts are more likely to assert their identity while simultaneously responding to mainstream forms of discrimination.[5]

## Within and Outside the Box

Two different aesthetic modes have captured the ways Arab Americans have embraced their identities, especially in the post-9/11 period. On the one hand, there has been an overwhelming commitment from community members to assert the "Americanness" of the community and to illustrate the many and multifaceted contributions of the Arab American community. On the other hand, and especially among the second generation, there also emerges a tendency to highlight Arab American identity as distinct from the mainstream population. The dominant tone here is also about discrimination and unfair treatment.

### The Arab American Museum in Dearborn, Michigan

In May of 2005 the $16 million Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, opened its doors as a hallmark of the Arab American community. For decades Arab Americans have had to rely on other spaces both to provide them forums and to represent their communities. The museum is the first institutionalized American venue representing the Arab community. It received ample funding from both Arabs and non-Arab donors, but large mainstream corporations played a significant role in funding too. It appears that post-9/11 many non-Arab organizations attempted to embrace Arabs as American partners. For example, corporations like Chrysler, Ford, and GM donated over $4 million toward the museum. Today it operates on a $2.5 million annual budget, with the bulk of that funding coming from non-Arab donations.

Anan Ameri, director of the Arab American National Museum, highlights its significance for the Arab American community. As a longtime member and respected leader of the Arab community in Dearborn, Ameri felt that Arab Americans had been excluded from mainstream representations of themselves. In order

to ameliorate the image of Arabs, the community needed its own space to "document the presence [of] and be able to present Arab Americans to the mainstream public" (pers. comm. 2006). According to Ameri, the museum is an enormous asset, providing not only a forum for the mainstream to learn about Arab Americans—local public schools and members of the community visit—but also a space for aspiring Arab American artists. Many of the debates that Howell documents above about the ability to find space and funding for Arab artists can be directly addressed with the newly created museum. In the spring of 2007, the museum hosted a Diwan conference, which brought together various Arab American artists to discuss their work. A central theme of the conference focused on identity. These artists, however, were addressing issues on their own turf; hence, candid discussion of identity was possible. These themes included youth identity, hyphenated identities, misrepresentations of identity, and female identifications.

The museum has also organized an Arab American artist exhibit and is already in the process of sponsoring two edited volumes on Arab American arts. In many ways, the Arab American National Museum provides a space for Arab artists to showcase their work while simultaneously packaging these artistic expressions to a larger mainstream audience, without the interference of mainstream biases. Ameri, hoping that similar museums will emerge in other key American cities, believes that the museum in Dearborn can serve as a model for other Arab American community organizations.

The themes of the museum highlight the ordinary Americanness of the Arab American experience. This strategy is seen as vital in terms of countering decades-old and mounting stereotypes against the community. The museum has three permanent exhibits: "Coming to America," "Living in America," and "Making an Impact." While the first two exhibits highlight the specifics of the Arab American immigrant experience, they also draw strong parallels to the immigrant experience more generally. Thus, although one is able to appreciate the uniqueness of Arab Americans, one is also able to see Arabs as part of a larger immigrant category, one that at its very essence is an American experience.

The exhibit "Making an Impact" showcases the many contributions of Arabs to the mainstream and reveals the Arab identities of several icons—including presidential candidate Ralph Nader, White House journalist Helen Thomas, auto racing legend Bobby Rahal, and opera singer Rosalind Elias—demonstrating that not all Arabs are potential threats. In fact, one Arab American featured in the exhibit has worked with every presidential administration for fifty years—as the White House Santa. Statements such as "Numerous Arab-Americans have made it their lives' work in improving the lives of all Americans" and "All areas of government and politics have been well-served by the hard work and commitment of Arab-Americans" are found across the exhibits. Such statements demonstrate ACCESS's goal: to package Arab Americans as pertinent, constructive, law-abiding citizens who have given back to the United States.

The strategy of showcasing similarities and American commitments, however, is one that the mainstream still has problems fathoming. Even in its effort to

create understanding, the museum still encounters resistance from the mainstream. Take, for example, the coverage of the museum by *New York Times* reporter Edward Rothstein. In his review he states, "One exhibit . . . shows a collage of images of Arab terrorists on television, and asks why a more accurate image of Arabs is not broadcast—one more closely resembling another collage, of smiling children and families." But the reason is not necessarily a reflection of prejudice, he says: "Islamic-motivated terror has compelled a rethinking of everything from airport design to foreign policy; smiling families have not" (Rothstein 2005, 51). It is these types of responses that the second generation, like its artists, seems less likely to tolerate. Rather than package their Americanness to a mainstream audience that is more or less suspicious and weary of Arab Americans, these activists directly address the bigotry associated with statements like Rothstein's through their various artistic expressions.

### The Hip-Hop Genre

An oppositional mode of artistic expression can be juxtaposed with the aesthetic mode described above, the goal of which is to create understanding of Arabs through the arts. Hip-hop artists in various media seek less to create understanding and more to point out that American society is bigoted toward Arabs and Muslims.[6] In the last decade, young Arab American artists have begun to reject the predominantly folkloric ways in which Arabs are represented in the arts. To an extent, they also reject Arab American artists complicit in this process. A new, mostly second-generation group of performers attempting to break into submainstream forms of artistic media have emerged. Abandoning everything "Arab"—all the traditionally defined signifiers of Arab identity—these Arab American artists are becoming visible with a vengeance.

For these second-generation artists, the "political" becomes an overtly visible and structuring component of their art. Rather than using "traditional or folkloric" expressions, they use mainstream forms that include poetry, hip-hop, and comedy to step outside the essentialized box of Arab identity. Adopting the discourse of the oppressed and marginalized in the United States, especially that of African Americans, these new artists see themselves and their identities as a minority subjected to racial discrimination. Their plight, they claim, is due to an inherent prejudice against Arabs. These artists do not see Arabs as white, nor do they support U.S. policies in the Arab world. As American citizens, this class of Arabs is an oppressed minority.

Take Suheir Hammad, the widely celebrated Palestinian American poet, for example. Her first book of poems, published in 1996, is entitled *Born Palestinian, Born Black*. Not only does she boldly use the word "Palestinian," but she also links it directly to the U.S. black experience. Her collection has gained widespread recognition among similar second-generation Arab Americans and other groups dedicated to human rights, gender equality, gay rights, and other coalitions of color—groups that Arab Americans do not generally support. New artists, seeking a larger audience, tend to form alliances with segments of the population not

traditionally Arab. This strategy seeks to tackle the issue of Arab misrepresentation through the establishment of alliances with other minority groups rather than from within the dominant mainstream audience. Instead of trying to change the mainstream perception of Arabs from within, by showing Arab American sympathy with the status quo, these new artists also critique that mode of Arab artistic expression as complicit. By forming alliances with nontraditional segments of the mainstream population, second-generation Arab hip-hop artists are attempting both to expand their audience base and to emphasize continuities of oppression. The vast majority of the first-generation Arab immigrant community would neither recognize Hammad's contributions nor understand her poetry. Hammad's audience, like that of her second-generation cohort, is a broader coalition of individuals that includes other minority groups. Her poetry resonates well with those who have been affected by injustice in the context of American racial clashes and social conservatism. Her poetry is both overtly political and what many would consider radical (Shalal-Esa 2003).

In "Exotic," Hammad distances herself from mainstream portrayals of "Arabness" and takes on the essentializing, exoticizing portrayal of women. She speaks generally about women of color, but her primary focus is on Arab women. Nor is Hammad timid or lukewarm about her support for the Palestinian cause. Palestine looms large as a theme in many of her poems, and she often ties the Palestinian issue to other pertinent daily events that ordinary Americans can identify with. "Of Refuge and Language," her poem about Hurricane Katrina, directly draws on the Palestinian discourse and has found support within Arab and non-Arab circles alike:

> I do not wish
> To place words in living mouths
> Or bury the dead dishonorably
> I am not deaf to cries escaping shelters
> That citizens are not refugees
> Refugees are not Americans
> I will not use language
> One way or another
> To accommodate my comfort
> I will not look away
> All I know is this
> No peoples ever choose to claim status of dispossessed
> No peoples want pity above compassion
> No enslaved peoples ever called themselves slaves

While Hammad never explicitly refers to Hurricane Katrina, her language of "shelters," "refugees," "dispossess[ion]," and the "dead" clearly evokes the traumatic event. Similarly, while she never explicitly refers to the Palestinian experience, such language equally signifies occupation, diaspora, and camp life. By tying the devastated New Orleans to Palestine, Hammad links the identities of

Arab and "dispossessed" American. Yet Hammad goes even further, rejecting an uncritical association or an association denuded of action, "pity" without "compassion." Adopting the lyrical, yet stark qualities of hip hop, she vocally takes up the work that poetry can do. "Language" should not "accommodate . . . comfort." Rather, it should help us "not look away" from the truth, the truth that "No peoples ever choose to claim status of dispossessed / No peoples want pity above compassion / No enslaved peoples ever called themselves slaves." Hammad's poetry is clearly political in form as well as content. Unlike an attempt to win over mainstream society, Hammad, like other second-generation artists, is committed to illustrate the reckless insensitivities commonly understood as mainstream consensus.

### The Iron Sheikh

These newly emergent artistic images, like Hammad's poetry above, resonate powerfully within Arab American youth culture. Hammad has many fans within Arab hip-hop forums. Since 2000, Arab American hip-hop has really become more of a trend than a fad. This second generation hip-hop phenomenon is represented in the experiences of other minority groups, like Cuban Americans and Asian Americans (see chapters 2 and 7 in this volume). Like the poetry that Hammad constructs, Arab hip-hop addresses similar issues, directly linking Arab hip-hop artists to the politics of the homeland. Their lyrics prioritize antiwar and anti-occupation themes. In the words of "Narcy of the Euphrates," an Iraqi Canadian hip-hop crew, hip-hop is "the voice that felt oppressed speaking out." In many ways these young hip-hop artists want to reclaim their identity, an identity that has been distorted in popular media and the arts. Their songs also address salient issues of race relations and discrimination in the United States. These hip-hop artists are critical of "assimilationists" in the Arab American community. The Iron Sheikh, one of the most well known of new Arab hip-hop artists, sings about the injustices inflicted on the Arab world, his disgust with U.S. policies vis-à-vis the region, and growing up Arab in America. He also raps about surveillance, monitoring, suspicion, and discrimination. In "Growing Up," the Iron Sheikh asserts that Arab Americans are here to stay, and it is not up to the U.S. government to "take away our rights without a fight." In the "Tale of the Three Mohammads," the theme of Arab American persecution is repeated: "But we are all Arab at the Heart. / Please Don't Hate Us from the Start. / We'll keep living and never depart. / It's the Tale of the Three Mohammads." In my summer 2006 interview with the Iron Sheikh, he was adamantly critical of those in the Arab American community who believe that in order to assimilate Arab Americans should refrain from criticizing government. The point of hip-hop, he argues, "is to empower people who already feel alienated." Empowerment for the Iron Sheikh should be part of any assimilation script. While the audiences for artists like Narcy of the Euphrates and the Sheikh are predominantly Arab, the themes in their work draw from and extend to the oppression of other minority groups—especially African Americans.

Figure 4.1. The Iron Sheikh in concert at the Arab Cultural and Community Center in San Francisco. Photo by Amaney Jamal.

Discussing the creation of his crew and the formation of his aesthetic, the Iron Sheikh describes the origin of his name:

> The Iron Sheikh was a professional wrestling character who served as the stereotypical Middle Eastern villain. He wore a headdress, flowing robes, and the curly *Arabian Nights* shoes. Growing up, he was a powerful icon that taught me that Middle Easterners are the bad guys, and to be Arab is to be evil. . . . Now I want to reclaim that moniker and redefine it in an empowering way. In short, my name is in itself political commentary on the misrepresentation of Arabs in the popular media, and what Arab-Americans can do about it through performance arts. (Saada 2005)

Although the Iron Sheikh has been a huge hit among Arab American youth, his overtly political lyrics have drawn criticism from larger segments of mainstream society. In 2003 three of his shows were canceled because of the political content of his raps as they pertain to the Arab world.

The new hip-hop generation attempts to forge new ties and illuminate existent links to other youth cultures that understand the history of racial conflicts in this country. They are drawn to the hip-hop world because they also find the music appealing in ways that allow them to identify with other American youth, forging new aesthetic and political alliances. In the older generation of Arab Americans, some find these trends disturbing. Not only is hip-hop considered a form of cultural expression that stands against all things Arab and that is too "American," but it also forges ties with other "colored" communities. For Arabs, this poses a direct challenge to their own "white" identity in the United States. The DAAS found that close to 65 percent of Arabs see themselves as "white" and not "Other," with the older generation more likely to identify as white. Further, Arab Americans are one of the most affluent ethnic communities in the United States. The land of opportunity, at least on the economic side of the story, has been kind to them. Identifying as black, even if it is at the expense of romanticizing the black experience, many will say, would be a further subordination of their status. Older generation Arabs simply do not identify as a colored minority. Hence the generational struggle between first and second generation Arabs is not about recognizing misrepresentation, but about how Arabs should be represented.

## The Axis of Evil

Taking Muslim and Arab American (especially second-generation) audiences by storm are comedy groups, including the famous Axis of Evil, which critique the ways in which Arabs and Muslims are essentialized as terrorists in the media and news organizations. In reference to the anthrax scare right after 9/11, the Axis of Evil ironically proclaimed that Arabs and Muslims do not take the time to put a stamp on an envelope and mail anthrax. "No, no, no, no," Maz Jobrani, a comedian of the group says, Muslims would strap the anthrax to their bodies and charge into a group of people. By using the imagery of Arab suicide bombers, the Axis of Evil draws sharp attention to common mainstream stereotypes.

The comedy group features Middle Eastern comedians Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, and Maz Jobrani, with a special guest Dean Obeidallah. The tour, named after President Bush's State of the Union reference to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil," began in November 2005. In March of 2007, they were given their own Comedy Central special. The group's goal is to point out the hysteria surrounding the war on terror and illustrate its impact on the Arab American community. They do this through laughter, as a means of striking back, asserting their identity, and also drawing an audience of support around their cause. The group sees its tour as a means of defining the Arab American community rather than having terrorists define them. "We don't want to be defined any longer by the worst examples in our community, and it's a very small amount of people. There are a few terrorists and they define all of us" (Dougherty 2007). Not only does the Axis of Evil break down stereotypes and win the laughter of Arabs and non-Arabs, but like the Iron Sheikh and Hammad, the comedy troupe sees itself as part of this new identity marker that is nonwhite. On stage Dean Obeidallah says, "Before 9/11 I was white . . . Arabs are now the new blacks . . . Oh, my God. We're cool!" (Poniewozik 2007).

Yet the identification with the black experience is one that galvanizes an identity that stands against bigotry toward Muslims and Middle Easterners. Even our political elite are not immune from such bigotry, as recently highlighted with the mainstream attack on Barrack Obama for his alleged Muslim connections. Insinuations about Obama's Muslim father, rumors that he attended a *madrasah*, jokes about his middle name (Hussein), and the confusion of his surname with "Osama" are but a few of the instances that showcase the reach of hostility toward Islam. It is these types of portrayals that the Axis of Evil, Hammad, the Iron Sheikh, and many others hope to counter.

## CONCLUSION

The existing artistic articulations of Arab American identity are neither complete nor all-encompassing. Historically, exhibits and performances by Arab American artists have bolstered the social and cultural elements of the heritage. Because these artistic depictions are often packaged for a mainstream audience, they also tend to

reinforce stereotypical representations of Arabs as backward and traditional. Arab portrayals of themselves through such media as the Arab American museum are a step toward addressing the ways in which the mainstream has defined the Arab, empowering Arab artists to represent themselves on their own terms. Time will tell if the mainstream is receptive to these types of portrayals, and whether Arab portrayals of themselves will be consistently structured to appease a skeptical mainstream audience. The embrace of alternate forms of artistic expression like hip-hop and poetry with a target audience that is neither mainstream nor white may reify Arab American marginalization in the mainstream. Not only do these forms enter the aesthetic realm from the perspective of the oppressed, but the alliances they forge with other colored communities create a cleavage within the Arab community itself.

The politics of representation of Arab Americans in the arts is multifaceted and nuanced. This chapter offers a glimpse of the multiple layers that structure negotiations among Arab Americans and the mainstream, and among Arab Americans themselves, about their representation in the realm of the arts. These representations are influenced by debates that have emerged between immigrants and their children, among various sectors of the mainstream—whether to embrace or not to embrace Arab Americans, and among those with varying political loyalties in the United States, and they are directly influenced by war and tragedy in the Middle East. To understand Arab American arts it is vital to fully comprehend the politics surrounding their representation.

### NOTES

1. Any mention of an Arab country constituted Arab ancestry.

2. The DAAS was produced through an intensive collaboration between the University of Michigan, the University of Michigan–Dearborn, and an advisory panel of community representatives from over twenty secular, religious, and social service organizations. Research team members are Wayne Baker, Sally Howell, Amaney Jamal, Ann Chih Lin, Ron Stockton, and Mark Tessler. The DAAS is a representative survey of all adults of Arab or Chaldean descent eighteen years and older who resided in households in Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties from July to December of 2003. Between July and November of 2003, 1,016 face-to-face interviews were conducted. Seventy-three percent of those asked to participate in the survey did so. In addition, 508 members of the general population, age eighteen and over, in these three counties were interviewed during roughly the same period through the Detroit Area Study. About 85 percent of the questionnaire items are common to both surveys, permitting extensive comparison of the two populations.

3. These included organizations like the Michigan Council for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts (see Howell 2000).

4. Yemenis in Dearborn are more recent arrivals. The Lebanese in Dearborn have now been there for over four generations.

5. These findings substantiate what other scholars have learned while studying the tendencies among the second generation. Portes and Rumbaut argue that "segmented assimilation" represents many of the trajectories shaping the incorporation of the second generation in the United States. "Unequal modes of incorporation," they maintain, shape the extent to which immigrants may enrich society or find that their aspirations are blocked, becoming therefore more poised to experience downward mobility. In a subsequent study, Portes and Rumbaut further examine the sources of downward mobility among second-generation immigrants. They find that there are elements of dissonant acculturation linked to these experiences. They

label this process, drawing on Irving Child's "Reactive Ethnic Formation." Groups that experience "extreme discrimination and derogation of their national origins are likely to embrace them ever more fiercely; those received more favorably shift to American identities with greater speed and less pain" (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 187). Thus, how the second generation is received determines the extent to which the second generation adopts oppositional attitudes toward the mainstream. This has consequences for social mobility more generally. Portes and Rumbaut find that Mexican Americans in California (while intense debates about immigration reform ensued in the 1990s) developed many of the reactive ethnic formation attributes. Fernández-Kelly and Schauffler (1994) also find this pattern applicable to the Nicaraguan American experience as well.

   6. For a more elaborate discussion of hip-hop culture and ethnic identity, see Stolick (2000), Smith (1997), and Szwed (2005).

# Desis in and out of the House

## SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES BEFORE AND AFTER 9/11

*Sunaina Maira*

South Asian immigrants in the United States are generally associated with popular culture and artistic expressions that are considered exotic, colorful, and traditional. There has long been a particular market in the United States for elite forms of South Asian culture, such as classical music and dance, performed by maestros at "high culture" venues and favored by world music aficionados as well as upper-middle-class South Asian Americans. But there has also been a growing interest in more popular forms of South Asian cultural production, such as folk dance and Bollywood film and music, culminating in the fashionability of all things Indian since the mid-1990s (Maira 2000). The emergence of "trendy" South Asian popular culture, echoing the fascination with Indian aesthetics and spirituality in the 1960s and 1970s, draws attention to the ways that certain cultural productions of immigrant communities are labeled "art" and others "popular culture," highlighting distinctions of cultural capital that rest on class hierarchies within these communities and the society at large (Bourdieu 1984), as well as American policies in South Asia at a particular historical moment.

   The surge in commodified "Indo-chic" in the 1990s coincided with an increasing diversification of South Asian immigrant communities in the United States. The Immigration Act of 1965 opened the door to the second major wave of immigration from South Asia since the early twentieth-century migration of agricultural laborers and railroad workers from the subcontinent. The revised immigration laws gave preference to highly qualified, technically skilled immigrants, so the South Asians who migrated in the 1960s and 1970s were largely affluent, highly educated professionals. The "model minority" image of South Asians, particularly Indian Americans, shifted after a third wave of less affluent and