STAGING BELONGING: PERFORMANCE, MIGRATION, AND THE MIDDLE EASTERN DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

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What does it mean to be a Middle Eastern immigrant in the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant context of the early twenty-first century US? How can performance help to construct and make sense of Middle Eastern immigrant identities and their belonging to US society? In "Staging Belonging: Performance, Migration, and the Middle Eastern Diaspora in the United States," I take on these questions to interrogate facets of "belonging" for Middle Eastern immigrants in a post-9/11 US. I use ethnographic, archival, and performance analysis research methods to examine a range of performances, from the explicitly theatrical to the everyday, to argue that Middle Eastern immigrants use performance tools in aesthetic and quotidian settings to challenge xenophobic and Orientalist meanings of the Middle East while constructing nuanced understandings of Middle Eastern identity in US diaspora.

In my attempt to learn about the diasporic formations of Middle Eastern identity through performance, I pay attention to a variety of performance types. In the first chapter, I engage with cultural citizenship theory to study the performance practices of Middle Eastern American theatre companies in producing civic participation opportunities for their target audiences. I focus on the notion of "home" in the second chapter to examine the complicated relationship of Middle Eastern immigrants with their host countries in Saba Zavarei's travel performance *Looking for Tehran* (2013) and Mohamad Hafez and Ahmed Badr's installation *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage* (2017). In the last chapter, I examine how post-9/11 US surveillance strategies shape Middle Eastern identity in everyday performances of border crossing at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, Vermont. I conclude by offering a brief analysis of Wafaa Bilal's

Domestic Tension (2007) to explore how the digitization of the War on Terror leads to more violence against Middle Eastern bodies.

In a time when immigrants from the Middle East encounter xenophobic policies and hostile attitudes in the US, demystifying Middle Eastern immigrant identities and highlighting their contributions to society are crucial to creating a society based in equality. This study contributes new perspectives to theatre and performance scholarship that seeks to trouble the xenophobic views of many Americans toward immigrants and the ways they do and do not belong to US society.

To the loving memory of Ziba Fatemi,

my *maman bozorg*,

who taught me to laugh.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Middle Eastern identity has primarily become associated with Islamophobic sentiments and perceptions of victimization in the United States. The global War on Terror and coinciding domestic conflicts in the Middle East region have brought forth an era in which Middle Eastern identities are increasingly judged by their ethnic and religious similarities with perpetrators of a few terrorist acts, or by a desperate need to escape violence and socioeconomic hardship. The prevalence of such views in the US signals a limited understanding of Middle Eastern people as homogeneous individuals and communities. In this context, what it means to be a Middle Eastern immigrant in the US diaspora is a question that requires careful attention to the politics of identity formation and various migration discourses.

"Staging Belonging: Performance, Migration, and the Middle Eastern Diaspora in the United States" uses performance studies frameworks to interrogate facets of "belonging" for Middle Eastern immigrants in post-9/11 US. I use ethnographic, archival, and performance analysis research methods to argue that Middle Eastern immigrants use performance tools in aesthetic and quotidian settings to challenge xenophobic and Orientalist meanings of the Middle East while constructing nuanced understandings of Middle Eastern identity in diaspora. In the anti-immigrant and Islamophobic context of the US in the early twenty-first century, paying attention to the formation of diasporic identities and their contributions to society is crucial to contesting the validity of vilifying claims about Middle Eastern immigrants. As such, this study contributes new perspectives to theatre and performance scholarship that seeks to trouble the xenophobic views of immigrants and the ways they do and do not belong to US society.

While a comprehensive study of Middle Eastern diaspora performance is not the goal of this work, my case studies nonetheless open up crucial questions that are at the intersection of Middle Eastern identity, migration, and performance. In this dissertation, I ask, how does performance illuminate the sociopolitical and cultural processes through which Middle Eastern immigrants come to "belong" in the US, and how do Middle Eastern people in the US articulate and challenge those processes? Pursuing these two overarching questions throughout, I also pose more specific questions in the following chapters: How do immigrants use theater to perform particular meanings of citizenship in order to establish their belonging to society? How might "home" become a concept that is contested through performance, informing how immigrants are perceived in diaspora? How can immigrants use the liminal space of borderlands via everyday performances of self to challenge discriminatory immigration policies? I address these questions by examining a range of performances, from mainstream plays to installation art to authoethnographic performance. In addition to conducting original interviews and doing ethnographic fieldwork, I consult a variety of archival materials (newspapers, posters, program notes, letters, corporate and personal websites) to pursue my different inquiries. Furthermore, I engage more deeply with a specific framework in each chapter to produce nuanced discussions of diaspora. For instance, while I use critical dance and movement studies in the second chapter to study immigrants' bodies in motion, I rely on critical surveillance studies in the last chapter to highlight the security performances of the nation-state.

Using performance to study the construction of Middle Eastern identities in the US diaspora could reveal pertinent social processes and structures otherwise tacit or hidden. I am here inspired by Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young to incorporate a performance studies lens to examine the formation of immigrant identities at and across borders. In their introduction

to *Performance in the Borderlands* (2011), Rivera-Servera and Young contend that performance is an "optic that prioritizes the multi-sensorial experience of embodiment" and is specially equipped to examine ways "in which border spatialities and temporalities are formed in/as movement."[1] As this dissertation takes on the goal of investigating how engaging with geopolitical and social demarcations within migration discourses produces various meanings of Middle Eastern immigrants, studying performances of/by/about Middle Eastern people in the US is crucial to understanding the embodiments of Middle Eastern identity in diaspora.

Furthermore, since an increasing number of Middle Eastern artists use performance to address their social and political concerns in the US, a performance turn in the study of Middle Eastern diaspora is necessary for examining different practices associated with Middle Eastern identities. As Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson note about Arab American performance, such practices are usually motivated by an urge for expressing minoritarian identities and portraying a more accurate picture of the Middle East.[2] As a marginalized group, artists of Middle Eastern heritage strive to raise their voices from the periphery of the society and call attention to their significant contributions to society. Therefore, studying the performances of Middle Eastern artists in the US can offer a detailed look into the sociopolitical challenges facing Middle Eastern immigrants.

Additionally, the cultural endeavors of artists of Middle Eastern descent coincide today with continuing waves of immigrants who move from the Middle East region toward the west to

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[1] Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, "Introduction: Border Moves," ed. Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, *Performance in the Borderlands* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 3.

[2] Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson, "Current Trends in Arab-American Performance," in *Performance, Exile and 'America,'* ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 209.

find a new place to live. Met with anti-immigrant and Islamophobic policies of the current US government, the treatment of these immigrants also plays an important role in the diasporic construction of Middle Eastern identities in the early twenty-first-century US. Each legislative or executive order that bars Southwest Asian immigrants from entering the US constitutes the Middle Eastern race as unwelcome communities of people who do not belong to the US national image. In such a context, studying diasporic Middle Eastern performances as informed by US immigration politics is imperative to better understand important concepts such as citizenship, home, and belonging.

Who gets to perform Middle Eastern identity in the US is an ostensibly simple question that soon reveals complex motivations and patterns upon investigation. In the minoritarian histories of the US, nonwhite demographics struggling to secure the right to represent themselves is not a new phenomenon. From people of African descent resisting the condition of their enslavement in the early decades of the nation to Asian and other waves of immigrants arriving in the New World to find themselves treated as unacknowledged and unequal members of society, the modern history of the US is fraught with examples of systematic racial oppression in varying degrees. Cognizant of such histories, my study of Middle Eastern identities and their belongings to/in the US is informed by the racial and cultural politics of diaspora as instantiated in a variety of performance contexts. Moreover, not only do I scrutinize who represents the Middle East and how, but, inspired by Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany's insights in "The Cultural Politics of 'the Middle East' in the Americas: An Introduction," I also give specific attention to "conceptual paradigms" within which diasporic representations of the Middle East

occur.[3] A cultural study of the Middle Eastern diaspora vis-à-vis social and political patterns, Shohat and Alsultany argue, complicates the notions of the Middle East in the US as both a feared topic in the eyes of the xenophobic government and public and a fetishized region in Orientalist contexts.[4] Therefore, my study of diasporic Middle Eastern performances attends to the politics of identity formation within migration discourses while remaining conscious of anti-immigrant patterns and objectifying tendencies.

Middle Eastern diaspora studies is a burgeoning area in the field of theatre and performance studies. An increasing number of scholars tackle the complexities of living in the US as it intersects with performance and Middle Eastern identity, but book-length projects that approach the topic remain scarce. Therefore, there is a specific need in theatre and performance scholarship for focused projects on the Middle Eastern diaspora. Additionally, although theatre and performance scholars have produced significant works about the politics of diaspora and migration, a limited number of those studies specifically deal with Middle Eastern people. Thus, this project seeks to fill the tangible gap in theatre and performance scholarship about Middle Eastern identity and migration.

Performance, Migration, and the Middle East

I bring together three interdisciplinary fields of study in this dissertation to argue that performance plays a significant role in the construction of Middle Eastern immigrant identities in the US. While various studies about the Middle Eastern diaspora frame the entirety of my

[3] Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany, "The Cultural Politics of 'the Middle East' in the Americas: An Introduction," in *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, ed. Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 22.

[4] Shohat and Alsultany, "The Cultural Politics of 'the Middle East," 10.

analyses throughout, I pay equal attention to migration discourses to contextualize my performance studies project within discussions of belonging and border crossing. As such, a review of pertinent performance literature about the Middle Eastern diaspora and migration should precede my discussions in the following chapters.

As much as this volume is driven by performance inquiries into Middle Eastern diaspora studies, equal importance is given to Middle East studies as an interdisciplinary field that could help clarify the politics of belonging for Middle Eastern communities in diaspora. As Zachary Lockman states, in addition to helping scholars achieve a fair and detailed understanding of the region, Middle East studies can also help US mass populations "to make better sense of what is going on in the Middle East and to more effectively assess the policies advocated by government officials, politicians, pundits and 'talking heads' on television"[5] Given the continuing interventions of the US in the domestic affairs of many Middle Eastern countries, Lockman continues, knowing about the Middle East is imperative to knowing about the US on a transnational scale.[6] Moreover, the ever-increasing levels of Islamophobia and the recent enforcement of harsher immigration laws against the people of Southwest Asia necessitates more attention to related studies about the Middle East.

The politics of the Middle East informs every step of my study, but I am cautious in my engagement with the term "Middle East." As I discuss in the following section, the Middle East is a contested category rooted in colonialist and Orientalist histories. Moreover, the Middle East is often considered a homogeneously Arab and Muslim region in public contexts. As such,

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[5] Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

[6] Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 2.

relying on the "Middle East" terminology to discuss people of Southwest Asia could perpetuate colonial scenarios and leave the diversity of the region unexamined. To address these issues, I join other Middle East studies scholars who reclaim the "Middle East" as a contested term while acknowledging the multiplicity of religions, languages, ethnicities, and cultures in the region. To that end, whenever a topic is specific to a Middle Eastern ethnicity or nation (and not the whole Middle East), I discuss it using specific terms. For instance, the last chapter of this dissertation deals with President Trump's "Muslim ban" and the border crossing of Iranian travelers at the Haskell Free Library in Vermont. While other Middle Eastern nationalities are also impacted by the ban and might exercise a similar act of border crossing at the library, I am clear in my discussion that my research is focused on Iranian immigrants, and not all Middle Easterners.

An example of a Middle Eastern diaspora studies project that consciously dismisses the term "Middle East" in favor of incorporating an ethnicity-specific language is Michael Malek Najjar's book, *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* (2015). In his introduction, Najjar contends that Arab American art requires specific scholarly attention as Arab Americans face increased prejudice in the US due to their Muslim heritage. Moreover, some Arab countries, Najjar continues, suffer from US aggressive foreign policies, and therefore, their citizens are in a different position than some other Middle Eastern ethnicities such as Armenians and Israelis. Therefore, choosing "Arab American" instead of "Middle Eastern American" will result in a study informed by how various Middle Eastern ethnicities experience the US diaspora in different ways.[7]

[7] Michael Malek Najjar, *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 14.

Najjar's ethnicity-specific approach makes sense, as "Arab American" terminology also invokes particular (but not complete) cultural, social, religious, and lingual similarities among diverse descents of Arab nationalities. Therefore, opting for the "Middle Eastern" term in Najjar's study would have obfuscated the accuracy of his claims, particularly those about shared themes and concerns among Arab American artists. Najjar recognizes "ethnicization, cultural exclusion, deassimilation, and pan-identities" as some common motifs in Arab American drama and contends such frequent patterns shows Arab American artists' urge for being reckoned with and resisting the scenarios of their oppression:

> These Arab American writers' and performers' works signify from the periphery of an authorized hegemonic power, which does not depend on the persistence of a previous Arab or American tradition. Instead, these artists estrange the access to their originary identity and received traditions by creating works that complicate notions of ethnicity, culture, hybridity, and homogeneity.[8]

Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson state a similar scope for the Arab American theatre in their study, "Current Trends in Arab-American Performance" (2009). Moreover, Basiouny and Carlson point to the challenges Arab American identities have to endure in the post-9/11 US. Being targeted with hostile government and public attitudes, contemporary Arab American performance artists, Basiouny and Carlson assert, strive to explore and express their hybrid identities in an aggressive environment and provide the non-Arabic audiences with a more accurate picture of their lives in diaspora.[9] Knowing that Arab American theatre and performance is predominately populated with women artists, for instance, is a powerful example

[8] Najjar, *Arab American Drama*, 16.

[9] Basiouny and Carlson, 209.

of how performance can demystify the heteropatriarchal stereotype of Arab Americans for the US public.[10]

While it is vital to clarify how the Middle East is comprised of various ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures, it is also useful to think about the coalitional benefits of using "Middle Eastern." For instance, many people of other Middle Eastern ethnicities use theatre for goals similar to those pursued by Arab American artists. Not much different from other minoritarian theatres of the US, Middle Eastern American artists are united in their work against their systematic racial subjugation in society.[11] Combined with a long history of Orientalism, the prejudiced climate of the US leads artists of Middle Eastern lineage to resist their oppression and produce works that demystify their identities. As Erith Jaffe-Berg notes, in the xenophobic context of the post-9/11, artists can use the power of performance to create a "fleeting, but tangible sense of community" and collectively engage the audience with the pressing question of who is Middle Eastern?[12] Performance could be a subversive tool and can create change in society. As the range of examples in this dissertation shows, Middle Eastern artists use the insurgent power of performance to facilitate sociopolitical transformations. The recently published "Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights," which I discuss further in Chapter 1, demonstrates the shared concerns and ideals among the diversity of artists involved with the Middle Eastern diaspora. There are certain differences in how Israeli American and

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[10] Basiouny and Carlson, 219.

[11] How Middle Eastern American theatre socio-politically functions similar to other minoritarian theatres in the US is a topic that I address in Chapter 1.

[12] Erith Jaffe-Berg, "Deterritorializing Voices: Staging the Middle East in American Theatre," in *Performance, Exile and 'America,'* ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 181.

Iraqi American citizens negotiate their identities in the US, yet their collective work for producing a more layered understanding of Middle Eastern identity in diaspora should not be completely ignored in the name of cultural specificities.

While my dissertation builds upon studies such as those done by Najjar as well as Basiouny and Carlson, it departs from the extant scholarship by bringing migration discourses to the fore. Instead of letting the politics of diaspora passively inform my performance inquiries, I actively engage with the topic of migration as the leading question in my chapters. I work from a definition of migration as "patterns of individual and mass human movements across the world's stage, the policies governing human im/mobility, and the social experiences that such movements engender."[13] When understood as embodied and choreographed movements in and across lands within specific sociopolitical contexts, migration can be examined through a performance studies lens to produce important details about the embodiment of Middle Eastern personhood in diaspora.

Unlike the scarcity of performance scholarship on the Middle Eastern diaspora, abundant are works that address migration through a performance perspective. *Theatre & Migration* (2014) by Emma Cox, for instance, is a concise volume that explores theatre and migration through a myth-making perspective. According to Cox, theatre and performance practices that respond to migration discourses work within a series of myth-making processes, or "mythopoetics."[14] According to Cox, such processes create a mythical notion of immigrants as "foreigners" who are both of and out of their time. In other words, contemporary stories of

[13] Paul Scolieri, "Global/Mobile: Re-Orienting Dance and Migration Studies," *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 2 (2008): v.

[14] Emma Cox, *Theatre and Migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9.

migration can be "flattened by a telescopic view of history" that adds "the mythic views of ancient stories" to the present.[15] Studying the contemporary theatre of migration in relation to ancient ideas of exile, citizenship, and belonging, Cox continues, can bring forth details about the immigrants' attachments to a nation as well as clarify how migrant and native identities interact with each other in urban sites of personhood.[16]

Cox's method for studying migration is a fruitful approach for demystifying who could be a Middle Eastern person. In a time when the government and conservative media portray certain immigrants as foreign agents who threaten the security and labor market of the state, paying attention to how such misguided understandings of immigrants are constructed and disseminated is necessary for challenging them. Therefore, my discussions of recent performances of Middle Eastern identity in diaspora are contextualized not only within post-9/11 immigration politics, but also in terms of how a longer history of anti-immigrant policies, particularly seen throughout the mid-twentieth century, informs them.

As Cox mentions in her study, a performance study of migration could reveal the belonging of immigrants to their hosting countries and clarify their relationship with nationhood. Many performance studies projects focus on the topic of citizenship to understand the formation of national belonging in migration discourses. A well-known contribution in this regard is May Joseph's classic study in *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (1999). By offering a performative understanding of citizenship, Joseph asks how citizenship can be performed under conditions of migrancy. According to Joseph, citizenship can be acquired by a form of social participation to which immigrants have little to no access. Therefore, nomadic

[15] Cox, 10.

[16] Cox, 35, 54.

communities participate in a kind of "cultural citizenship" to establish themselves as authentic citizens.[17] This notion is amplified in a more recent study by Emine Fişek. In *Aesthetic Citizenship: Immigration and Theater in Twenty-First-Century Paris* (2017), Fişek directs her attention to the heterogeneous context of Paris to investigate the role of theatre in establishing citizenship for immigrants. Fişek studies the practice of immigrant rights companies and associations to conclude that citizenship is much more than a legal status and requires a social, cultural, and moral agency for being embodied. Although immigrants constantly work toward claiming more agency, Fişek continues, the government also uses its law-making power to limit the range of their practice.[18] Combined with Joseph's ideas, insights put forward by Fişek shows that in the global anti-immigrant context of the twenty-first century, citizenship is a highly contested notion that plays a significant role in determining immigrants' belonging to the nation-state.

Immigrants use cultural tools to perform a demystified understanding of their identities. Governments, however, also use performance tools to formulate their desired structures for maintaining a hierarchy of identities in society. This is a topic that Joshua Chambers-Letson further explores in his book, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (2013). Chambers-Letson contends that since law comprises "linguistic utterances and acts (statutes, policies, executive memos, judicial opinions) [that] do more than describe the world," it can be understood performatively.[19] The significance of law as performative is that the state

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[17] May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship*, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

[18] Emine Fisek, *Aesthetic Citizenship: Immigration and Theater in Twenty-First-Century Paris* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 25.

[19] Jashua Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 14.

can use performance tools to construct policies that govern the bodies and render them legally meaningful. Therefore, approaching citizenship as a performative topic in migration discourses requires special attention to how individuals culturally practice their ideas of personhood vis-à-vis constative policies issued by the state.[20]

Theatre and performance studies projects about citizenship and migration directly influence my discussions in the following chapters. More specifically, I use the available literature to explore the construction of Middle Eastern identity in the US diaspora through cultural practices of citizenship performed by Middle Eastern American theatre companies. Moreover, I examine the state performances of the US government, ones in which an inaccurate notion of Middle Easternness comes to spread within post-9/11 contexts, to point at different ways Middle Eastern immigrants challenge the condition of their vilification in the US diaspora.

While a rich performance scholarship about migration already exists, no book-length volume tackles the topic of Middle Eastern diaspora. There are certain similarities in how marginalized immigrant communities negotiate their diasporic identities in the US. By drawing from the politics of diaspora as experienced by a diversity of communities, I offer this dissertation as a project that is especially committed to examining the idiosyncrasies of Middle Eastern diaspora in the US. Moreover, in my study of the Middle Eastern identity vis-à-vis migration discourses, I rely on interdisciplinary fields such as dance and surveillance studies to produce a unique contribution to theatre and performance studies scholarship.

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[20] Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different*, 15.

Middle Eastern Diaspora: History and Definition

For a project so invested in the Middle Eastern diaspora, I have already delayed my attempt to clarify what the "Middle East" means and who represents it. My tardiness in this regard was intentional so that I could first highlight some complex discussions that inform my engagement with the Middle Eastern diaspora. Superficial understandings of the Middle East are a consequence of Orientalist approaches that persist in today's US society. Much like what Edward Said discussed decades ago, the tight "grip of generalization" combined with "simplistic contempt of dissenters and 'others'" continue to render people of the Middle East as communities who either need the colonizer's democracy or deserve his wrath.[21] With the theoretical groundwork of migration established, I now turn to a brief history of Middle Eastern migration to the US, as well as performance patterns associated with this history, to further complicate the meanings of the "Middle Eastern diaspora" and "Middle Eastern theatre" in the US. Similar to what Cox posits regarding the importance of history in making migration myths, knowing about the history of Middle Eastern immigration challenges superficial ideas and adds important nuances to the contemporary understandings of Middle Eastern identities.

Generally, scholars divide the history of immigration from the Middle East to the US into three periods. The first wave of travelers was mainly Christian minorities from the Ottoman province of Syria (contemporary Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria) who mostly arrived in the New York area in the late 1880s. The new immigrants, typically known as "Syrians," left their homeland to improve their access to economic opportunities as well as escape political turmoil in the region. The first wave of Middle Eastern immigrants was fairly uneducated and found an

[21] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), xii.

occupation in low-skill businesses, including the garment industry.[22] The categorization of Middle Eastern immigrants in the racial structures of the US in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century was not easy. The underlying reason behind such a challenge was the self-identification of the Middle Eastern immigrants with their native regions and families instead of their nationalities.[23] While not officially recognized as white, most Middle Eastern immigrants in the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed similar discriminations to which some white ethnicities (such as Italian, Poles, Jews, and Greeks) were subject.[24] State and mainstream prejudices against early Middle Eastern immigrants, however, did not stop them from lobbying for their categorization as white and the right to vote.

The passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act in 1924 ended the first wave of immigrants traveling from the Middle East. The discriminatory act barred Asian citizens from immigrating to the US and set quotas on the number of immigrants from other Eastern countries. Therefore, the number of immigrants in the Great Depression years significantly decreased. The trend continued through World War II until the war between Israel and the Arab League[25] broke in 1947. The majority of the immigrants who arrived in the US after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war were Palestinians who were forced by the Israeli government to leave their homeland. Other

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[22] Hisham S. Foad, "Waves of Immigration from the Middle East to the United States," *SSRN Electric Journal* (2013): 5.

[23] Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 12.

[24] Louise Cainkar, "Race and Racialization: Demographic Trends and the Process of Reckoning Social Place.," in *Handbook of Arab American Psychology.* (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 22.

[25] The Arab League now includes dozens of nations, but at the time of the war it was comprised of Egypt, Transjordan (contemporary Jordan), Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

comprising demographics of the second wave of Middle Eastern immigrants were elite individuals and families who had to flee the revolutions in their Arab countries including Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.[26] The second wave of Middle Eastern immigration to the US occurred after the Immigration and Naturalization Service officially considered the Arabs (and other Middle Eastern countries) as white.[27]

The 89th Congress of the United States passed the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965. The new law nullified the Immigration Act of 1924. Coinciding with the Civil rights movement in the US, the act opened immigration to all individuals, including the citizens in Southern and Eastern Europe as well as the continent of Asia. As such, a new group of Middle Eastern travelers arrived in the US. The third wave of Middle Eastern immigrants, similar to the second wave, had high levels of education. The new immigrants also were more diverse than the preceding waves.[28] The third wave of immigration from the Middle East to the US continues to this date, yet different events have created different immigration patterns in recent decades. The first Gulf War, for example, significantly increased the number of refugees from Iraq and Kuwait.[29]

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[26] Foad, "Waves of Immigration from the Middle East to the United States," 5.

[27] Cainkar, *Race and Racialization*, 22.

[28] Mattea Cumoletti and Jeanne Batalova, "Middle Eastern and North African Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, January 10, 2018, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants-united-states.

[29] Judith Miller, "The World; Displaced in the Gulf War: 5 Million Refugees," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1991, sec. Week in Review, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/16/weekinreview/the-world-displaced-in-the-gulf-war-5-million-refugees.html.

By 1920, approximately 50,000 Middle Eastern immigrants lived in the US.[30] Right from the outset, immigrants of Middle Eastern descent used theatre to create a strong sense of community in diaspora and establish connections to their Arab homelands.[31] Similar to other immigrant groups of the time, Middle Eastern communities performed shows in their native languages and relied on comedy as a popular genre. Such patterns could also be seen in the theatre during the second wave. The plays by Middle Eastern immigrants in the 1940s were typically community productions and written in both English and Arabic. The shows continued the same objective of community-building rehearsed during the preceding wave of Middle Eastern immigration.[32]

The first immigrants who arrived in the US during the third wave of Middle Eastern immigration brought with them a new sense of activism to Middle Eastern communities who were tired of discriminatory treatment by the state and the mainstream public. Although considered racially white, Middle Eastern immigrants witnessed an increasingly hostile attitude well before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001. Particularly in the 1970s, Middle Eastern immigrants were treated as inferior groups of people who were innately violent and incompatible with the western way of life.[33] Such a dehumanizing understanding of Middle Eastern identity was met with resistance and led to the formation of a diasporic theatre that was designed to challenge mainstream views about immigrant families from the Middle East. In other words, the

[30] Cumoletti and Batalova, "Middle Eastern and North African Immigrants."

[31] Basiouny and Carlson, 208.

[32] Najjar, 58.

[33] Cainkar, *Race and Racialization*, 21.

amateur theatre of the first and second wave was gradually replaced by a professional theatre of resistance among diverse Middle Eastern communities.[34]

I focus on the post-9/11 era in this dissertation to interrogate the construction of Middle Eastern identity through performance vis-à-vis contemporary discourses of migration. My decision in this regard, however, should not be taken as if the "Middle Eastern immigrant" is a category formulated during the post-9/11 context of the War on Terror, nor should it be gleaned that the "Middle Eastern theatre" is a phenomenon newly appeared in the contemporary cultural scenes of US society. As this brief history shows, Middle Eastern immigrants are diverse communities, whose belonging to the US society dates more than a century ago. Therefore, though it is not the focus of this study, more research can be done about the performances of Middle Eastern people at different historical points.

An important aspect of the construction of Middle Eastern identity in the US diaspora is related to how the "Middle East" entered the English lexicon. The history of the term contains colonial narratives that add to the complexity of the "Middle East" as a word readily used by many scholars, including me. After World War I, the Allies declared Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan (later renamed Jordan), and Palestine as the new states that combined with Arab provinces of the dismantled Ottoman Empire formed a geographical region important to the British Empire.[35] Since these states connected Europe and North Africa to the British colony of India in South Asia, Britain wanted the region under its rule to maintain trade privileges and safe shipping lanes. British imperial endeavors got more aggressive after the Great War upon the discovery of oil in the region. Soon after, Britain declared "Kuwait an independent British

[34] Najjar, 33.

[35] Lockman, 100.

protectorate."[36] From that point on, the region spanning from contemporary Israel and Turkey in the west to Iran and Afghanistan in the east, as well as the Arabian Peninsula in south and Egypt in Northern Africa became known as the "Middle East" and is, therefore, a relic of British Empire.[37]

Nowadays, the Middle East can refer to sixteen countries located in West Asia (Bahrain, Cyprus, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) in addition to Egypt and Libya in North Africa as well as Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco in the Maghreb (African countries west of Egypt). Ethnic and cultural commonalities and proximities combined with shared languages and the overwhelming popularity of Islam can justify such a broad categorization. But that is not to say that Middle Easterners are only Muslim or with Arab roots. The diverse geography encapsulated in the term should be evidence for the heterogeneity of the Middle East as a region with numerous languages and religions.

Since the demarcation of the Middle East was a work of the British Empire (who believed England to be the "Middle" of the world), the Eurocentric categorization of the region, then, calls for a counternarrative that considers the mentioned countries as a part of their geographical location in West Asia and North Africa.[38] Given the problems associated with such

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[36] Michael Gasper, "The Making of the Modern Middle East," in *The Middle East*, ed. Ellen Lust, 14th ed., Kindle edition (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2017), 97.

[37] Mehran Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East: A Political History Since the First World War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3. While the coinage of the "Middle East" term precedes the twentieth century, it was only made more popular after the events of WWI. For a pre-WWI genealogy of the "Middle East" neologism see Clayton R. Koppes, "Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term 'Middle East,'" *Middle Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (1976): 95–98.

[38] For a historical study of the relationship between Britain and the Middle East see C. M. Woodhouse, "Britain and the Middle East," *Pakistan Horizon* 12, no. 1 (1959), 24.

a category, I reserve the "Middle East" in my dissertation as a geographical marker for countries mainly located in West Asia and North Africa. Similarly, "Middle Eastern" is a term that I use to describe the racial identity associated with people of the region. In my usage of the term, I also include those who self-identify as Middle Eastern but live in South and Southeast Asia (e.g. Afghanistan and Pakistan), the Caucasus (e.g. Armenia), or the Balkan Peninsula (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina). Therefore, I join other Middle East studies scholars to engage with "Middle Eastern" as a flexible term that is informed by colonial discourses but defined by a diversity of demographics who represent the mentioned disperse geographies.

Similarly, I understand "Middle Eastern diaspora" as an encompassing term for communities of different ethnicities and nationalities in the US who closely associate with the Middle East region. The Middle Eastern diaspora does not entail a homogenous group of immigrants. Instead, the term covers various communities who identify with certain Middle Eastern ethnicities (e.g., Arab diaspora) and/or specific nationalities (e.g., Syrian diaspora).

Some important legal terminologies must also be clarified when discussing the members of diaspora communities. "Immigrants" refer to people of foreign nations ("aliens") who lawfully reside in the country (e.g. Green Card holders). "Nonimmigrant" individuals are non-resident aliens who are temporarily inside the US. Such individuals are also referred to as "travelers" (e.g. international students and tourists). "Naturalized citizens" denotes former immigrants who have acquired US citizenship through legal procedures. "Asylum seeker" is a person who had to flee her country in fear of persecution or other possible harms. When the residency request of an asylum seeker is acknowledged by her destination country, she becomes a "refugee."

Whenever the legal aspect of such terms is crucial to my discussions, I highlight them as such to maintain the accuracy of my arguments. Otherwise, I reserve "immigrant" as an inclusive term in this dissertation to include individual as well as the US-born descendants of naturalized citizens, non- and resident aliens, asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented immigrants. I do acknowledge the privileges and limitations that come with legal designations. I, however, also believe that the politics of diaspora and the inherent inequality embedded in the sociopolitical structures of the US have similar impacts on non-white demographics with roots in the Global South. The fact that many non-white US citizens identify as immigrants regardless of having an American passport supports my decision in this regard.

Performance, Belonging, and Belongings

My study of the performances of Middle Eastern identities in diaspora aims to complicate a key term that appears in the title of this dissertation. "Belonging" means both possession and affinity, and it is a particularly appropriate word to frame discussions of the Middle Eastern diaspora as they relate to identity formation and national membership. While the possessive meaning of "belonging" indicates owning certain im/material items ("those are my belongings!"), the affinitive meaning of the word can denote membership in a specific identity group ("I belong to the Iranian community in L.A."). Within the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries immigration contexts of the US, such identity belongings have played an important role in determining who is welcome in US society.

"Belonging" is connected to identity when it is read as "be-longing," a term that "allows an affective dimension, not just *being*, but *longing*."[39] By longing to be associated with a group,

[39] Vikki Bell, "Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction," in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell, Theory, Culture & Society (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1999), 2, emphasis added.

place, or values, individuals and communities express their self-identification desires. Similarly, when individuals and communities are hailed as people who belong to a specific group, they are interpellated as people who share an identity with the said group. Belonging, then, has an effect on who we are or who we want to be; it is a "process of capturing the desire for some sort of attachment" that defines our place in the world at a specific time in a particular geography.[40]

One's belonging to a specific identity is not merely assigned to that person. Rather, there is a performative element in identity belongings. Ann-Marie Fortier discusses the performativity of identity by focusing on flexible notions of ethnicity in her book, *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity* (2000). By relying on Judith Butler's performative theory of gender, which details gender as a "*stylized repetition of acts*"[41] that is constituted as it is performed, Fortier argues ethnicity can be "'incorporated' through repeated performative acts."[42] Through Fortier's perspective, identity is an unstable concept, perhaps best understood as "threshold, that is, a location that by definition frames the passage from one space to another; identity as transition, always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming."[43] Therefore, who one is or who one wants to be is influenced through performative acts that express and constitute one's identity.

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[40] Amina Alrasheed Nayel, *Alternative Performativity of Muslimness: The Intersection of Race, Gender, Religion, and Migration* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 142.

[41] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519, emphasis in original.

[42] Anne-Marie Fortier, *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 6.

[43] Anne-Marie Fortier, *Migrant Belongings,* 2.

Identity, however, is not always and merely performative. This statement is perhaps best understood when one takes into consideration the racial belongings of an identity. Race is a social reality constructed by both physical and performative elements. Here, I am inspired by Michael Omi and Howard Winant's foundational study of racial formation in the US. Omi and Winant define race as "a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies."[44] "Race is a concept," Omi and Winant continue, "a representation or signification of identity that refers to different types of human bodies, to the perceived corporeal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to these differences."[45] It is important to note that while Omi and Winant emphasize biophysical differences as the foundation for categorization of people based on ever-changing social stimulations in the US, they also state that with corporeal stratification, a series of practices get attributed to different races. In other words, while race has an undeniable "visual dimension," it also entails certain embodied acts, all framed under specific socio-historical structures.

Since performance is important in knowing into which group one fits, belonging can be understood as a performative act that reveals information about one's gender, sex, sexuality, class, age, nationality, and ability. For instance, my physical similarities to a group of brown-skinned individuals with Iranian nationality determine my belonging to the Middle Eastern race. My racial belonging could create expectations for my behavior. There is obvious room for stereotyping in this consideration of race. However, I can also trouble the assumptions of Middle

[44] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 110.

[45] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 111.

Eastern racial belonging by my behavior. As Omi and Winant note, racial identity is both forced and self-described. While it is "imposed from above by dominant social groups and/or state institutions," race is also "constituted from below by these groups themselves as expressions of self- identification and resistance to dominant forms of categorization."[46] Therefore, my acts of belonging could perpetuate assumptions about my racial identity or challenge them in different ways.

Belonging encapsulates group characteristics and longing desires. Therefore, performing belonging reveals various aspects of identity. Within immigration discourses, belonging is currency. If an immigrant can prove her belonging to her hosting country, she is afforded privileges of residency or citizenship. On the other hand, belonging can be used to cast the immigrant as someone who has an attachment to somewhere else, and therefore, is less qualified for certain privileges. In the xenophobic context of post-9/11, belonging to the Middle Eastern race can render the immigrants as security suspects or the Middle Eastern American citizens as less American. In such a milieu, "belonging to 'America' becomes a site of intensified contradiction" for Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants in the US diaspora.[47] Interestingly, when the belonging of immigrants to discourses of citizenship and national identity is questioned, traces of material belongings soon become the signs of exclusion and dislocation. In the contemporary history of mass exile and migration, two events, both situated during the years of World War II, illustrate the connection between national nonbelonging and material belongings. First, the systematic persecution of Jewish people throughout Europe, and second,

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[46] Omi and Winant, 106.

[47] Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, "Arab and Arab American Feminisms: An Introduction," in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, ed. Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), xxvi.

the incarceration of Japanese American citizens in the US. During the years of war, Nazi officers were instructed to force Jewish people around Europe to pack their belongings inside a suitcase and get ready for relocation to other areas. As the Nazi regime deprived Jewish people of belonging to the Aryan ideal of a pure homeland, the Jewish people were left only with their suitcases to maintain their belongings. Similarly, the incarceration of Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 led to another display of suitcases in WWII. Following the attack, the US. Department of War proposed mass detention of thousands of people with Japanese heritage to allegedly prevent any act of sabotage and espionage against the US. Upon the gradual approval by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Japanese American citizens had to leave their homes with only a suitcase containing their basic essentials. In both historical cases, belongings of specific minority groups and their belonging to society were reduced to suitcases and deported to incarceration or death camps.

The persecution of Jewish people in Europe and the incarceration of Japanese American citizens in the US are two examples that show the connection between the material belongings of minoritarian groups and their belonging to citizenship, national identity, and civil society. Therefore, in my discussions throughout this dissertation, I take advantage of any opportunities to investigate the traces that Middle Eastern immigrants leave behind in their journeys toward equality and unbiased civic participation. Performance, in the words of Rebecca Schneider, is an "*act* of remaining and a means of reappearance" that, according to Diana Taylor, becomes visible and meaningful through "embodied acts."[48] Thus, performance can be effectively used to examine and reimagine the remaining traces of immigration acts.

[48] Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (January 1, 2001): 103. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Schneider and Taylor mainly posits their

Belonging is a word with various denotations and connotations. I embrace the complexity of the word in this dissertation and highlight a specific aspect of belonging to US society in each chapter. The first chapter deals with "citizenship" as a series of criteria for the categorization of people inside society. Citizenship is a complicated topic not only for immigrants who seek the rights and privileges of membership in society but also for various groups of US-born minoritarian individuals who do not conform to the white and heteronormative ideal of the US citizen. The oppressive structures of society consistently discriminate against such minoritarian groups and limit their participation in society. In such a restrictive context, theatre-makers of Middle Eastern descent join other marginalized groups to practice a cultural notion of citizenship that, while still connected to legal procedures and policies, is welcoming of diverse points of view. Cultural citizenship allows Middle Eastern immigrants to rehearse their identities in accurate ways and consolidate their belonging to US society.

In the second chapter, I complicate what it means to belong to a home, and how such belonging can be used to discriminate against Middle Eastern immigrants. In a time when xenophobic policy-makers and individuals repeatedly ask immigrants to go back to their countries and homes, one should stop and think about what "home" means in this context. Is home one single place fixed in a specific geography, or is it a flexible concept, always-changing and relocatable in other areas? I study both possibilities in my discussions of Saba Zavarei's *Looking for Tehran* and Mohamad Hafez and Ahmed Badr's *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*.

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statements to challenge Peggy Phelan's theory of performance as something that "becomes itself through disappearance." See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Book, Whole (London and New York: Psychology Press, 1993), 146. I also discuss this topic further in Chapter 2.

Putting the two performances in conversation with each other shows how being always on the move leads immigrants to develop ambivalent feelings about belonging to a specific home.

Lastly, I pay particular attention to how geopolitical borders determine who belongs to society. Borders specify the edges of the nation-state and give meaning to the encircled society. They are constructed obstacles used for defining who belongs inside the society and who is an outsider. Such a formulation of borders, however, leaves out those who reside on the borders. They are neither inside nor outside, located in a liminal place where belonging to either side of the border is unclear. In my last chapter, I study an example of such a non-place on the US-Canadian border in Vermont to discuss how some Middle Eastern immigrants use the liminality of the borderland to challenge threatening assumptions about their identities.

Methodology

"Staging Belonging: Performance, Migration, and the Middle Eastern Diaspora in the United States" is a dissertation that seeks to understand how Middle Eastern immigrants negotiate their belongings to and in the US. Some overarching questions that guide my study in this regard include: Why and how is performance crucial to different understandings of Middle Easternness? Who uses performance to formulate such understandings? How do such formulations take place within US society? While Middle East and Middle East diaspora studies, as well as interdisciplinary discussions of migration, inform how I conduct my inquiries throughout the dissertation, I also rely on specific frameworks such as critical dance studies and surveillance theories in future chapters to further nuance my arguments.

Since I understand performance as social, embodied experiences (Rivera-Servera and Young) that leave material and embodied traces behind (Schneider and Taylor), I deploy three interdisciplinary research methods to excavate and analyze the diasporic construction of Middle

Eastern identities in bodies and archives. First, I use ethnography to glean embodied information and details about the performances I discuss. I am specifically inspired by Norman Denzin in designing my ethnographic approach. By challenging the authority of textual materials in traditional ethnography, Denzin invites the researchers to performance ethnography as it "simultaneously creates and enacts moral texts that move from the personal to the political, from the local to the historical and the cultural."[49] In this context, performance is more than a research artifact, it is an "act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, a way of revealing agency."[50] D. Soyini Madison amplifies Denzin's ideas by contending that ethnography "is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other's world."[51] Inspired by Denzin's and Madison's ideas, I engage with ethnography as a collaborative methodology that, according to Dwight Conquergood, involves "Dialogue, conversation, and participation."[52]

Ethnography is a highly nuanced method with various meanings. While I borrow from Denzin, Madison, and Conquergood in formulating and conducting my research, ethnography is more central to some chapters than others. In Chapter 1, I use qualitative interviews to discuss

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[49] Norman Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), x.

[50] Denzin, *Performance Ethnography*, 9.

[51] D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2011), 9.

[52] Dwight Conquergood, "Performing Cultures: Ethnography, Epistemology, and Ethics," in *Cultural Struggles*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson, Performance, Ethnography, Praxis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 20.

the cultural and political functions of two Middle Eastern American theatre companies, Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising, with their artistic founders. The two companies are relatively young, and archival materials about them are scarce. Therefore, a direct conversation with their founders was a more effective way to learn about their cultural work. I also interviewed Saba Zavarei, an Iranian artist based in London, to discuss her transnational travel performance, studied in Chapter 2. Zavarei has made significant records of her travel in an Iranian newspaper, but since press censorship is a common practice in Iran, I could not rely on the accuracy of those records. Thus, I interviewed Zavarei to get a more nuanced picture of her travel performance. For my last chapter, I use participant-observation and rely heavily on an authoethnographic approach. I understand autoethnography as a form of inquiry that deals with "the personal and its relationship to culture," a method that asks the researcher to "take an inward look to highlight the outward social and cultural dimensions" of self.[53] Interested in studying the everyday acts of border crossing by Iranian immigrants at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House in Vermont, I visited the library to examine the performances of my Iranian identity through a self-reflexive process. During my fieldwork, I also conducted interviews with a library staff as well as my Airbnb host to reach a more accurate picture of Middle Eastern border crossing.

Second, I use archival research methods to examine historical evidence recorded in performance and cultural collections. I approach the archive with a definition that Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone provide: "as concept, as resource, as location, as site of power relations, as signifier of the historical and cultural division and ownership of information and

[53] Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Rowman Altamira, 2004), 37.

knowledge."[54] Such a definition is useful for investigation of the politics regarding the ownership, the creation process, and the target reader of the archive. Moreover, in approaching the archive, I am cognizant of my work as a researcher, someone who "archives the *already archived*" and uses such a privilege to bring the past to the present and contribute to the process of cultural meaning-making."[55] Since the theatres, artists, and events that I study in this dissertation are relatively new phenomena, they are not included in national repositories. Instead, the majority of my archival information comes from examining a range of evidence (articles, reviews, newspaper columns, travel monographs, program notes, playbills, posters, and photographs) available on news, organization, and personal websites. Additionally, in my archival research, I am also indebted to many scholars who already explored various archives to produce studies related to the Middle Eastern diaspora. In each section that I borrow from these archival studies (e.g. the section about Middle Eastern immigration to the US, discussed earlier in this chapter), I confer several studies to confirm various narratives and look for historical discrepancies.

Lastly, I use performance analysis to analyze the political, cultural, and personal information that I co-produce through archival and ethnographic inquiries. My usage of performance analysis includes two complementary approaches that Erika Fischer-Lichte, et al. delineate: phenomenological and semiotic.[56] The former involves the experiences that

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[54] Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone, "The Imperative of the Archive: Creative Archive Research," in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 17.

[55] Gale and Featherstone, 20, emphasis in original.

[56] Erika. Fischer-Lichte, M. Arjomand, and R. Mosse, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies* (London and New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 56.

performance creates for the audience and the latter deals with the creation of meaning through the language of signs. By incorporating performance studies, migration theories, and Middle East studies frameworks, I analyze my selected performances of Middle Eastern identities in diaspora both on phenomenological and semiotic levels.

My goal for bringing the trio of ethnographic, archival, and performance analysis methods together is for finding intricate ways performance helps construct the Middle Eastern identity in the US. In this process, I am also aware of how my Iranian immigrant identity influences my study. The questions I address in this study are not merely theoretical inquiries to satisfy my intellectual curiosity, or to simply fulfill the requirements of an academic degree. Rather, they are also deeply personal issues to me. I am inspired by Kamala Visweswaran here, who believes research ("fieldwork") is not mutually exclusive from feeling at home ("homework"); "*field* and *home* are dependent…and the lines between fieldwork and homework are not always distinct."[57] Every thought that I pursue in these chapters is somehow related to my daily encounters in life. My personal experiences inform my research and my research has an impact on my experiences. In the meantime, I am cognizant of the paradoxical situation in which my positionality puts me. On the one hand, I have certain privileges for studying the Middle East. I am more akin to the history of the region, and my ethnicity very likely made some of my interlocutors to be more candid in their discussions than they might have been with non-Middle Eastern scholars. On the other hand, my personal and emotional attachment to migration and the Middle East could weaken my impartiality when investigating the materials. Although I acknowledge that objectivity is impossible in any research, I remain aware of the privileges and

[57] Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 114, emphasis in original.

challenges my ethnicity affords me throughout this project. Moreover, given the historical balance of Middle East studies projects toward Orientalist values, I believe that my positionality adds an important voice to the field.

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation addresses how the belonging of Middle Eastern immigrants to US society is established and challenged through performance. In each chapter, I engage with a different performance type. I begin with a discussion of Middle Eastern theatre performances and a mainstream play, then move to performance art and installations, and end with a focus on quotidian performances. By studying a variety of performance types, I highlight the consistency of factors and issues involved with the construction of Middle Eastern identities within various contexts. For instance, a desire for increased participation in civic discourses drives Middle Eastern American theatre companies to practice a cultural sense of citizenship that is not exclusive to white and heteronormative demographics. Similarly, the citizenship criteria is an issue that bars Middle Eastern immigrants of certain nationalities from freely crossing the US borders. In both cases, citizenship is a topic pertinent to Middle Eastern identities and their claims over belonging to US society. When studied near each other, these aesthetic and everyday examples help to bring specific details about the politics of diaspora to surface.

Chapter 1, "The Profane Problem: Cultural Citizenship and Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights," explores how citizenship criteria determine immigrants' belonging to the US. By looking at the cultural functions of Middle Eastern American theatre companies within society, I ask: How can theatre produce a specific meaning of citizenship for ethnic groups? After establishing that there is a cultural dimension to citizenship, I argue that Middle Eastern American theatre joins other minoritarian theatre groups of society to create

social forums for rehearsing more complex ideas of identity. I provide examples for argument by discussing key strategies that two prominent Middle Eastern American theatre companies, Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising, incorporate into their programming. After elaborating on the various ways these companies promote a more equitable form of citizenship in society, I explain how mainstream theatres undermine these cultural attempts by excluding artists of Middle Eastern descent from their productions. An event key to my discussion in this regard is the off-Broadway staging of Zayd Dohrn's *The Profane*, produced by the Playwrights Horizons in 2017. Written by a white playwright, *The Profane* tells the story of two Middle Eastern families in New York with opposite attitudes toward Islam and their Muslim heritage. The production drew protests from Middle Eastern theatre-makers in the US who believed Dohrn's script lacked a subtle understanding of Muslim and Middle Eastern identity. Moreover, Playwrights Horizons' selection of *The Profane*, Middle Eastern American theatre-makers argued, further perpetuates the exclusion of the scripts written by Middle Eastern playwrights from US mainstream theatres. Studying the controversies around the Playwrights Horizon's production of *The Profane* clarifies the significance of Middle Eastern American theatre for maintaining liberated ideas of citizenship in society. I conclude the chapter by investigating the "Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights" as an important document written by the founders of Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising and published after the events of the Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane*. Modeled after the US Bill of Rights that legally guarantees certain privileges of US citizenship, the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights enumerates rights that artists of Middle Eastern descent hold as an unnegotiable part of their belonging to US society.

While the first chapter takes into consideration the specificities of producing theatrical productions, I focus on performance art and installation art in Chapter 2 to expand my inquiries into the performance construction of Middle Eastern identity. "In Search of Home: Border Choreography and Middle Eastern Immigrant Identity" is dedicated to understanding how belonging to home defines immigrant identities in diaspora. I incorporate Dutch sociologist Jan Duyvendak's "universalist/particularist" model of studying home to trouble home as a fixed concept and highlight how people conceive of home in different ways. I first use the "universalist" view to examine Iranian artist Saba Zavarei's transnational travel performance, *Looking for Tehran*. A resident of London, Zavarei traveled from England to Iran using only ground and sea transportation in 2013 to embody the space between her two homes. It is through her gendered border crossing, I argue, that Zavarei comes to understand "home" as a non-place, repeatedly eluding immigrants. I follow my discussion of Zavarei's performance with an analysis of *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage* (2017), a multimedia installation by Mohamad Hafez and Ahmed Badr. For this project, Badr has collected the stories of ten families resettled in the United States. Hafez uses the stories to create miniature dioramas that resemble the refugees' last memories of home. Unlike *Looking for Tehran*, I argue, this installation exemplifies a "particularist" approach that introduces home as a specific place, relocatable through performance. By juxtaposing Zavarei's performance travel with *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, I trouble assumptions about the fixity of home and nuance the construction of Middle Eastern immigrant identity within performance art and installation contexts.

Studying Middle Eastern identities in theatre, performance art, and installation generates useful information for understanding notions of Middle Easternness as produced in artistic performances. In my last chapter, however, I turn my focus to everyday life to examine Middle

Eastern identity as performed in quotidian acts of border crossing. Chapter 3, "Securing Iranian Identity: Performance, Muslim Ban, and Covert Border Crossing," addresses the ways in which the government uses performance tools to prevent Middle Eastern immigrants from claiming their belonging to the US national image. Similarly, I look at some strategies that Middle Eastern immigrants use in their quotidian lives to counter their systematic vilification in diaspora. My case study in this regard is the everyday performances of border crossing by Iranian immigrants at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House. Deliberately constructed on the US-Canada border in Vermont, the library is a liminal borderland that facilitates international crossing between the two countries without requiring immigration documents. Therefore, those Iranian immigrants who lack the proper documents to leave the US without a change in their residence status can use the space of the Haskell Library to temporarily reunite with their families in Canada. How diaspora politics coerce Iranian immigrants to take such measures to exercise international mobility is key to my discussion in this chapter. I first elaborate on the securitization of diasporic Iranian identity during two recent events: the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and President Trump's Muslim ban. I argue that the US government uses the spectral ability of performance for remembering the past to construct a threatening notion of Iranianness in the post-9/11 era. Afterward, I recount my personal experience of visiting the Haskell Free Library to discuss how Iranian immigrants use performance tools to challenge their sanctioned immobility and vilified identities in the US.

I conclude the dissertation with a brief analysis of Wafaa Bilal's online performance, *Domestic Tension* (2007). For this project, Bilal installed a camera and a paintball gun in his made-up room in FlatFile Gallery in Chicago. Audiences could go online and chat with the artist. They also could use the website, manipulate the gun and shoot at the artist nonstop. Throughout

the month-long performance, numerous participants surveilled Bilal in a private room while targeting his brown body with thousands of paint bullets. I rely on my previous discussions of citizenship, home, and security to analyze *Domestic Tension* as a performance that seeks to trouble the stereotype of the violent Middle Eastern man in the ever-expanding digital context of the post-9/11 US.

As I examine Middle Eastern identity formation through a performance studies lens, I add to different meanings of being Middle Eastern in diaspora. Who a Middle Eastern person is and what that identity entails are complex questions that "Belonging: Performance, Migration, and the United States Diaspora" addresses in different settings. As I hope the following chapters clarify, performance plays an important role in understanding Middle Eastern identity in diaspora. At a time when the US government continues to reify the idea of Middle Eastern immigrants as potential threats through legal and public discourses, knowing about the diversity and human complexities of Middle Eastern identity is vital to resisting the oppression of the state. This dissertation is an addition to theatre and performance studies discussions about migration and diaspora, but perhaps more than that, it is a scholarly act that takes on the activist mission of consolidating the undeniable belonging of Middle Eastern immigrants to the ideal of the US.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PROFANE PROBLEM: CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AND MIDDLE EASTERN AMERICAN THEATRE ARTISTS BILL OF RIGHTS

On March 17th, 2017, the off-Broadway company Playwrights Horizons opened *The Profane*, by Zayd Dohrn. Written by a white playwright, *The Profane* details the story of two Middle Eastern families who need to confront their ideological differences in diaspora. The production quickly garnered criticism by Middle Eastern theatre artists for its representational issues as well as for the theatre's failure to hire any cultural representatives to serve on the creative team. More than a month after the opening, Middle Eastern American theatre company Noor Theatre published an open letter, publicly criticizing Playwrights Horizons for staging a text about Muslim and Middle Eastern cultures by someone who lacks the appropriate cultural competency. Co-signed by several prominent Middle Eastern American theatre artists, the open letter led the artistic directors of Playwrights Horizons to issue a formal response and defend their season selection as well as detail a few ways to incorporate scripts written by playwrights of Middle Eastern descent into their future programming.

Several months later, on September 29th, 2017, *American Theatre* magazine published the "Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights," co-created by the artistic founders of two prominent Middle Eastern American theatre companies, Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising. Modeled after the US Bill of Rights, the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights details nine rights of Middle Eastern theatre artists for representing their stories freely without any censorship, coercion, and assumption. The bill came to be after decades of Middle Eastern misrepresentations in US mainstream theatres and the continuing struggles of Middle Eastern artists for better cultural visibility. Although not explicitly connected to the controversy of the Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane*, the bill was

published at a time of recent tension between Middle Eastern American theatre and mainstream theatres.

Spread out throughout a few months in 2017, the described events—Playwrights Horizon's production of *The Profane*, Noor Theatre's open letter, and the publication of the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights—are interconnected phenomena, raising questions about the role and significance of Middle Eastern American companies in contemporary US theatre. Additionally, the events signal a broader discourse on the importance of minoritarian theatre communities and their functions within the US theatre writ large. Given the investment of Middle Eastern American theatre companies in creating a society in which Middle Eastern people are members with equal access to socio-economic opportunities, I suggest studying the Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane*, and subsequent events, in tandem with the notion of "cultural citizenship" produces important insights about the belonging of Middle Eastern identities to US society. Citizenship, as I will discuss in the next section, is an area for authoritarian states to enforce specific policies for constructing a national identity that is differentiated from other countries. Therefore, nation-states hold much power in controlling who can be affiliated with that national image and who has the right to exercise it. Inevitably, controlling citizenship criteria for producing a coherent national identity will result in the marginalization of some groups who states believe are incompatible with their sovereign structures. Such groups do not meet citizenship requirements and/or are shunned from participating in civic discourses. In this context, Middle Eastern American theatre companies, I argue, incorporate carefully designed strategies for enforcing a liberated idea of citizenship that relies on equality and equity. Juxtaposed with the merely legal understanding of citizenship,

Middle Eastern American theatre companies enforce a cultural notion of citizenship that is welcoming of racial diversity.

Moreover, I contend that Middle Eastern American theatre companies follow a similar pattern to other minoritarian US theatres in their strategies for practicing cultural citizenship. Closely knitted to the history of various civil rights movements of the twentieth century, the advent of professional minoritarian theatres in the US coincides with the ever-expanding urge for inclusivity among marginalized communities. From the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, different minoritarian groups relied on the insurgent power of theatre for advancing their activist agendas. Middle Eastern American theatre-makers are inspired by such success stories in their endeavors for creating a fair society. Their work, however specific in content and innovative in design, is informed by a rich history of fight for equality as instantiated by African American, Asian American, and Chicano theatres.

A close analysis of the controversy around the Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane* helps to illustrate the significance of Middle Eastern American theatre in the contemporary xenophobic society. I begin my study in this chapter by offering a theoretical review of cultural citizenship as a deliberate enactment of personhood by immigrant communities who feel a specific need to define their identities with attention to the condition of their exclusion from dominant forms of civic engagement. It is my argument that the cultural mission pursued by Middle Eastern American theatre companies is related to the long history of racial exclusion in the US, and subsequently, connected to the cultural functions of other US minoritarian theatres. Upon connecting the rise of Middle Eastern American theatre to the sociopolitical necessities for the formation of previous US minoritarian theatres, I rely on online archives and personal interviews to discuss how Middle Eastern theatre companies such as

Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising use theatre to practice cultural agency and promote civic equity.

I then turn my attention to the controversy around Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane* to argue how the staging of Dohrn's script at the company undermines efforts made by Middle Eastern artists for creating a more equitable society. I first present a brief analysis of *The Profane* to point to some issues around the creation of the text as well as representational problems embedded in Dohrn's script. I follow my reading of *The Profane* by a study into the open letter published by Noor Theatre in response to the aforementioned production of the script. Noor Theatre's open letter facilitated an official response from the creative directors of Playwrights Horizons, and furthermore, it motivated *American Theatre* magazine to cover the story in detail. By examining the Playwrights Horizons' response to the Noor Theatre's open letter as well as the in-depth article published in *American Theatre,* I demonstrate how the production of *The Profane* is only one example in the long history of US mainstream theatres ignoring the cultural mission pursued by Middle Eastern American theatre companies. Finally, I discuss the contents of the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights as a crucial step for safeguarding the accuracy of Middle Eastern theatrical representations and maintaining the cultural agency of Middle Eastern artists in diaspora. I believe that unpacking the controversies of Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane* in connection to the Bill of Rights further clarifies the concerns of Middle Eastern American theatre companies about the belonging of Middle Eastern identities to US society.

Cultural Citizenship and Middle Eastern American Theatre Companies

The concept of citizenship as a cultural practice rests upon the performative premise that citizenship is not simply assigned but is also practiced within society. Such performative

consideration of citizenship, as May Joseph posits, takes away from the state the exclusive right to formulate personhood, and in turn, opens opportunities for communities to enact their ideas of citizenship.[1] The state, without a doubt, enforces a specific pattern of citizenship that is usually aligned with white heteronormative ideologies in western nations. Minoritarian groups, however, can rely on the performative understanding of citizenship to enact civic ideals that may expand the membership criteria for equal citizenship in society.

Cultural performances of personhood are particularly important as they expose the public to diverse ideas about national belonging. Referred to as "cultural citizenship," these performances encapsulate a series of social practices by various communities for establishing the right to "be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense."[2] Such cultural practices, as Aihwa Ong and others argue, cannot lead to the complete disregard of legal policies pertinent to citizenship.[3] Rather, cultural citizenship creates ambivalence about the exclusivity of ideas regarding personhood, nationality, and belonging. Moreover, the legal understanding of citizenship is not mutually exclusive from the cultural performances of citizenship. As Joshua Chambers-Letson argues, instead of separating the lawful procedures of personhood (i.e. legal citizenship) from its aesthetic practices (i.e. cultural citizenship), performance studies understands citizenship as a series of acts performatively uttered by states and embodied by

[1] May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship*, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

[2] Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 402.

[3] Aihwa Ong et al., "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States [and Comments and Reply]," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996): 738.

citizens in political and cultural contexts.[4] Therefore, cultural practices of personhood are as crucial to maintaining a specific understanding of citizenship as legal policies that define national belonging and citizenship.

For scholars who study culture and citizenship, theatre is of particular importance as it is a "space of subject constitution," a site "where personhood could be embodied through repeated practice and rehearsal."[5] Theatre could offer artists a site for rehearsing and enacting civic desires, including the right to be equal citizens of the society. No wonder, then, that the evolution of US minoritarian theatres is closely connected to the history of civil rights movements in society. In the 1920s, during the Harlem Renaissance movement and decades before the civil rights movement of the 1960s, W. E. B. Du Bois formed the first African American theatre company in the US (the Krigwa Players) so he, along with his fellow collaborative artists, could produce plays about the equality of African American individuals with their white counterparts. The company pursued a mission statement that insisted on a theatre "about us…by us…for us…and near us."[6] Such a commitment to portraying African American people without pandering to the mainstream stereotypical tenets of the US theatre arts in the Jim Crow era marked an important turn in the evolution of cultural performances of citizenship by marginalized communities. While African American identity suffered from caricaturization in popular performing forms of the time (e.g. minstrelsy and vaudeville), the Krigwa Players artists

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[4] Jashua Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 14.

[5] Emine Fisek, *Aesthetic Citizenship: Immigration and Theater in Twenty-First-Century Paris* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 5.

[6] Ethel Pitts Walker, "Krigwa, a Theatre by, for, and about Black People," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 3 (1988): 348.

treated African American legacy with respect and advocated for a society based on equity and racial diversity.[7] Through theatre, in other words, African American people were enacted as equal citizens and an inseparable component of US national identity.

Even though the Krigwa Players company did not last more than three years, their cultural work inspired future artists during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. From the Negro Ensemble Company to Kuumba Theatre, African American theatres of the time owed much to the cultural work instantiated by Du Bois and his collaborators.[8] Equally so, the civil rights movement of the 1960s inspired many artists who later became prominent figures in African American drama. August Wilson, for example, acknowledged his debt to the Black Power Movement as a collective of African American individuals who were "seeking ways to alter our relationship to the society in which we live—and, perhaps more important, searching for ways to alter the shared expectations of ourselves as a community of people."[9] African American theatre, according to Wilson, grapples with similar desires and concerns. While the mainstream representations of African American identity remain scarce and/or inaccurate, African American artists use the space of theatre to produce nuanced thoughts and sentiments about how they are represented.

Vital to Wilson's discussion of African American theatre is the visibility it lacks. Given the importance of theatre in facilitating cultural practices of citizenship, Wilson's concern is nothing short of a call for attention to US social inequalities. Diverse representations on stage do

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[7] Walker, "Krigwa," 356.

[8] Walker, 356.

[9] August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand," American Theatre, June 20, 2016, https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/.

not only lead to inclusive entertainment. For minoritarian groups, the stakes are much higher. It is through an active presence on stage that marginalized communities can rehearse their fully realized identities and engage with a form of cultural citizenship that advocates for civic equity.

While exclusion and invisibility are common concerns among marginalized communities, not all groups are subjected to the same oppressive conditions. Asian American exclusion, for instance, has a slightly different narrative and relationship to cultural citizenship than African American exclusion. Karen Shimakawa points at the unpopularity of Asian American representations in US mainstream theatres to argue for a consideration of Asian American identity as "national abject," a contradictory and relational position in which Asian Americanness is repeatedly excluded from and assimilated into the idea of Americanness.[10] The abject is neither subject not object. Rather, Shimakawa contends, the Asian American as abject means being the defining boundary between inside and outside, "visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation." Shimakawa continues that Asian American theatre should be studied vis-à-vis such abjection as it reveals the "boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship."[11] Concurrent with the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and struggling against a biased job market and misleading representations, Asian American artists founded the first Asian American theatre companies to combat their condition of abjection. Instigated by companies such as East West Players, Asian American Theatre Company, and the Northwest Asian American Theatre (NWAAT), Asian American artists began telling stories that were excluded from the white, "American" definition of US

[10] Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.

[11] Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 3.

theatre.[12] Resisting their abjection, these companies inspired future generations of Asian American artists who believed in the important role that theatre plays in garnering social equities for immigrant communities.

As exemplified in both African American and Asian American theatres, to practice cultural citizenship is to forge a collective identity as an inseparable component of US national identity. This statement can be used to summarize the cultural function of minoritarian theatre groups in the contested history of national belonging and citizenship in the US. Similarly, the statement could be extended to include other immigrant and minority communities. The Chicano Theatre Movement that followed the foundation of El Teatro Campesino by Luis Valdez in 1965 is an example of another minoritarian theatre in search of ways to express "the hopes, dreams, frustrations, and demands of the Chicano in all parts of the United States and beyond."[13] Participating in a theatre of this kind—a theatre concerned by the "sociopolitical conditions of the Mexican-American community"—means engaging with a cultural understanding of citizenship (as opposed to mere legal one) and "interrogating the modes of identity construction key to liberalism, contemporary liberal democracy, and neoliberalism."[14] What is shared among the theatres made by, about, and for African American, Asian American, and Mexican American communities is the urgency in claiming "the right to represent their own communities, tell their

[12] Shimakawa, 58.

[13] Jorge A. Huerta, *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* (Ypsilanti: Bilingual Press, 1982), 1.

[14] Huerta, *Chicano Theater*, 1; Patricia A. Ybarra, *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 15.

own stories, and combat the racial marginalization they [experience]."[15] In other words, US minoritarian theatre companies seek to use their stages to practice civic equality and belonging to a US national image that is not exclusively white.

I argue that Middle Eastern American theatre companies are also driven by the social mission to create an equal society. Similar to artists behind other minoritarian theatre companies, artists of Middle Eastern heritage use theatre to practice cultural citizenship and create a strong sense of individual and collective identity, historicized by various discourses on civic exclusion and racial oppression. Joining the rich history of culturally specific theatres in the US, Middle Eastern and Muslim American theatres have also been active players in the fight for civil rights particularly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 but also decades prior to the incident. For instance, a group of Iranian artists founded Darvag Theatre Group in 1985 at Berkeley, California to produce Farsi-spoken plays for the Iranian diasporic population in the area. As the first organized group of Middle Eastern theatre-makers who dedicated their stage to creating plays written by Iranian artists for Iranian audiences, Darvag was a cultural enterprise invested in connecting their audience with their Iranian heritage and, therefore, facilitating civic participation through cultural practices.[16] Likewise, Najee Mondalek founded the first Arab American theatre group AJYAL in 1988 Dearborn, Michigan to provide the large Arab diaspora of the region with productions in their native language. AJYAL's productions mostly addressed the challenges

[15] Stephanie Lein Walseth, "Staging Race in a 'Post-Racial' Age: Contemporary Collaborations Between Mainstream and Culturally Specific Theatres in the United States" (Ph.D., United States - Minnesota, University of Minnesota, 2014), 10.

[16] "Darvag Arts Foundation," GuideStar, accessed March 13, 2020, https://www.guidestar.org/profile/94-3202809.

Arab immigrants had to face, particularly in the years leading to and after the first Gulf War.[17] Similar to the work that Du Bois started in the context of US theatre in the Jim Crow era, or much like efforts made by Asian American and Chicanx theatre artists amid the civil rights movements of the 1960s and beyond, artists involved with Darvag and AJYAL were seeking ways to enact Middle Eastern identities on cultural stages, and as such, increase their participation in national discourses on citizenship and belonging.

Today, numerous theatre companies and groups are active in the US to promote accurate images of diverse Middle Eastern and Muslim people. While their number goes beyond dozens, a few examples include New Arab American Theater Works (Minneapolis, MN); Art2Action (Tampa, FL); New York Arab American Comedy Festival; Maia Directors (a national board of four directors); and the Middle Eastern American Writers Lab as well as the Middle East/United States Playwright Exchange at Larks Theatre (NYC). Among the wealth of Middle Eastern American theatre companies and groups, two are more renowned for their long history, cultural reach, and their role in the publication of the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights: Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising. Paying attention to the strategies incorporated by these two companies, I believe, is helpful to better understand cultural citizenship as practiced by Middle Eastern American theatre companies.

Golden Thread Productions is the first professional Middle Eastern American company in the US. Founded by Iranian-Armenian-American Torange Yeghiazarian in October 1996 in San Francisco, the company was focused on staging Middle Eastern stories from the beginning.

[17] Holly Hill, "Middle Eastern American Theatre: History, Playwrights and Plays," Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, accessed March 13, 2020, http://inclusionin thearts.org/projects/middle-eastern-american-theatre-history-playwrights-and-plays/.

Frustrated by how little US Americans knew about the region, Yeghiazarian formed her theatre company to produce works by and related to Middle Eastern people. Golden Thread Productions aims to change the prevailing narratives about the Middle East and expose their audience to alternative, more authentic perspectives. It is through theatre, Yeghiazarian contends, that one can deconstruct stereotypes and facilitate dialogue around them.[18]

To present layered meanings of Middle Eastern identity as understood in a variety of contexts, Golden Thread Productions engages with multifaceted programming. Ranging from full-scale productions to tours of elementary schools in the Bay Area and hosting various festivals, different programs offered by the Golden Thread Productions aim to demystify what it means to be Middle Eastern in diaspora. This mission can be seen in the company's 2019 season, which includes *On Behalf of All Muslims* by Iranian American comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh, and *Scenes From 71* Years* by Palestinian Irish playwright Hannah Khalil. *On Behalf of All Muslims* is a standup special in which Noorbakhsh tries to (sarcastically) speak on behalf of all Muslims in the world. *Scenes From 71* Years* is a play about decades of illegitimate occupation of Palestine by Israeli forces. Both productions counter Islamophobic discourses that Muslim citizens and communities face nationwide as well as colonial discussions of Israeli settlements and their sociopolitical significance for Palestinian diaspora in the US. The current US government has shown repeatedly that people from Muslim and Middle Eastern countries not only have no place in the white national image of the US at home but they are also often at odds with US interests abroad. From enforcing a ban on travelers from mostly Muslim countries (i.e. President Trump's "Muslim Ban") to relocating the US. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, the US government is clear in its disregard of Middle Eastern and Muslim lives in its formulation of

[18] Torange Yeghiazarian, personal interview with author, June 27th, 2019

national US identity. In such a context, producing challenging scripts at a national theatre company about facile assumptions regarding heterogeneous Muslim communities and the life under occupation has profound representational repercussions.

Golden Thread Productions chooses to stage plays like *On Behalf of Muslims* and *Scenes From 71** to assert Muslim and Palestinian lives as crucial components of the US society. Threatening anti-immigrant and Islamophobic policies certainly limit civic participation for Middle Eastern and Muslim identities. Therefore, when stories of the Middle East are performed by Middle Eastern artists on a professional stage, the Middle Eastern identity is given a cultural forum to enact their democratic ideal of the US.

Figure 1. *Scenes from 71* Years*, Golden Thread Productions, April 2019. Photo courtesy of Torange Yeghiazarian and Golden Thread Productions.

The long history of Golden Thread Productions in US theatre showcases the ongoing concerns of Middle Eastern and Muslim communities as well as their investment in the medium of theatre for addressing those concerns. Since the racial structures of the US society continue to ostracize marginalized identities, having access to a professional stage with national visibility is

significant for practicing an insurgent idea of US citizenship that is unbound from discriminatory notions of personhood. As Yeghiazarian repeatedly posits, the community-making feature of theatre serves Middle Eastern American groups as it creates an opportunity for fruitful discussions outside dominant contexts like terrorism, Islamophobia, patriarchy, and backwardness.[19] Therefore, partaking in the cultural programs of Golden Thread Productions is a way to consolidate Middle Eastern identity as an unequivocal member of the society with the right to rehearse civic equality.

Silk Road Rising is another Middle Eastern American theatre company driven by the activist agenda to create an equal society. Founded by Jamil Khoury and Malik Gillani in response to fearmongering and racial profiling that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Silk Road Rising has been an active Middle Eastern American cultural enterprise in Chicago since May 2002. The company is focused on producing scripts about the Middle East and South Asia to fill the representational gap in authentic storytelling in the US. Khoury and Gillani named their company Silk Road Rising to unite people of East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa against the imperial policies of the US.[20]

In terms of programming, Silk Road Rising shares a similar pattern with Golden Thread Productions. The company usually produces two full-scale performances per year and offers various programs, including one tailored for young audiences. The program, titled Empathic Playwriting Intensive Course (EPIC), is a seasonal, in-school residency that helps to develop empathetic imagination among middle and high school students through playwrighting.

[19] Yeghiazarian, personal interview.

[20] Khoury, personal interview with the author, August 17, 2019.

Additionally, Silk Road Rising regularly produces various "video plays," a format of digital theatre-making championed by Khoury since 2011.

What separates Silk Road Rising from Golden Thread Productions in terms of cultural production is their particular focus on the playwright's positionality in telling Middle Eastern stories. Silk Road Rising enforces the "playwright/protagonist rule," which only allows playwrights to submit scripts in which their identity matches their protagonist's identity. Khoury explains the enforcement of the rule as a strategy for increasing authorial voices in the contemporary context of Middle Eastern appropriation, vilification, and misrepresentation.[21] Regarding the Middle Eastern stories, Khoury posits, "they are often written by European or white American playwrights. While there are some very sincere efforts out there and some that succeed on any number of levels, the orientalist and colonial impulse, or what I call 'tourism literature,' haunt those stories."[22] Therefore, Khoury came up with the playwright/protagonist rule to safeguard the aesthetic history of the Middle East on a national theatre stage from incomplete and orientalist understandings.

At first glance, the protagonist/playwright rule might seem to some overtly exclusive and creatively limiting. One, however, should bear in mind numerous former and contemporary instances of racial mimicry and cultural appropriation in US popular culture to realize the importance of the playwright/protagonist rule. From the ubiquity of black minstrelsy shows since the turn of the nineteenth century to the appropriation of Native American attires in the 2012

[21] Khoury, personal interview.

[22] Khoury, personal interview.

Victoria Secret Fashion Show,[23] stories and ethnic tenets of marginalized cultures have been used by majority groups for commercial benefits. Aside from important economic and civil repercussions of such activities, depriving the minoritarian groups of their cultural expressions leads to limited civic participation for those groups. Therefore, while racial structures of society impose legal restrictions on communities of color for engaging with discourses of belonging and national identity, racial mimicry and appropriation further perpetuate the scarcity of opportunities for performing cultural citizenship. Given this reality, it is understandable that Silk Road Rising relies on an organizational rule to mitigate the possibilities of civic oppression for people of Middle Eastern descent. Moreover, since Silk Road Rising also welcomes scripts by playwrights with connections to other parts of Asia, a higher number of artists can get involved with the company to represent their cultures and corresponding concerns.

Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising are only two examples of numerous theatre companies and groups in the US driven by an urgent desire to increase civic participation of Middle Eastern communities in diaspora. Their efforts are connected to the long history of civil rights movements and the rise of minoritarian theatre companies in the US. The African American artist-activists of the Harlem Renaissance began a cultural revolution that directly influenced artists involved with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Inspired by the fight for equality for all, Asian American and Latinx communities also embraced the insurgent capacity of theatre for advancing their claims over notions of collective belonging and national identity. Modeled after such groups, Middle Eastern American theatre companies use theatre to increase

[23] Jessica Derschowitz, "Victoria's Secret Apologizes for Native American-Inspired Look at Fashion Show," CBS News, November 12, 2012, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/victorias-secret-apologizes-for-native-american-inspired-look-at-fashion-show/.

their visibility on social and cultural stages of the US, and as such, perform a more equitable idea of citizenship.

Some artists with connections to Western Asia have access to a professional theatre stage to produce accurate understandings of Middle Eastern identities. While their cultural endeavors are strong and abundant, they remain limited to specific theatres constructed for telling Middle Eastern stories. Therefore, many playwrights with Middle Eastern lineage struggle to find a stage for their scripts. Moreover, as significant as the works of Middle Eastern American theatre companies are, they lack the visibility mainstream theatres enjoy nationwide. In their continuing effort for getting access to more and bigger forums for producing cultural understandings of Middle Eastern identities, playwrights of Middle Eastern heritage seek support from mainstream theatres for producing their plays. US mainstream theatres, however, remain hesitant. As Khoury contends regarding the rarity of seeing Arab American scripts produced by mainstream theatres, one might find the roots of mainstream US theatres' hesitance in larger anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia.[24] Therefore, despite the victories achieved in Middle Eastern American stages, the fight for equality in US theatre is still afoot.

The Profane Problem

One might ask what the fight for civic equity by Middle Eastern American theatre artists might look like. To fully explore this question, and to further corroborate my claims regarding the cultural functions of Middle Eastern American theatre companies, I turn my attention to a specific example of the ways in which US mainstream theatres shun artists of Middle Eastern descent in favor of telling stories by white playwrights. For this purpose, I focus on the

[24] Jamil Khoury, "Beyond First Responders: Politics, Racism, and the Aesthetics of Arab American Theatre," in *Arab American Aesthetics: Literature, Material Culture, Film, and Theatre*, ed. Therí A. Pickens (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2018), 90.

controversies around the 2017 Playwrights Horizons' production of Zayd Dohrn's *The Profane*. At a time when Middle Eastern American artists struggle for more visibility, Playwrights Horizons decided to offer its mainstream, off-Broadway stage to a text about Middle Eastern cultures, however, written by a white playwright who lacks the appropriate cultural competency. Moreover, Playwright Horizons did not seek the help of any Middle Eastern artist in directing and designing their creative production. The steps Middle Eastern American artists took to protest against Playwrights Horizons is worthy of attention as they illuminate the cultural functions of Middle Eastern American theatre vis-à-vis discourses on civic equity and civil rights. In this section, I fully examine the controversies around the Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane* to argue that staging scripts about Middle Eastern lives written by white playwrights impede the cultural and political change that Middle Eastern American theatre companies pursue. Moreover, it is exactly such issues that necessitated the publication of the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights, a foundational document for sustaining the unequivocal membership of Middle Eastern artists in the national image of US theatre.

The Profane is a two-act play by Zayd Dohrn that explores the contradictions and limits of self-proclaimed secularism and the assumed inclusivity in liberal discourses. When it opened at Playwrights Horizons, the show turned into an off-Broadway hit; it ran successfully through May 2017, and Laura Collins-Hughes of *The New York Times* hailed it as "An eloquent, frequently comic new drama…It simply does one of the things theater does best: It gets us thinking about how to be human together."[25] The script also got Dohrn the 2017 Horton Foote Prize for excellence in playwrighting.

[25] Laura Collins-Hughes, "Review: Zayd Dohrn Plumbs Muslim-American Rifts in 'The Profane,'" *The New York Times*, April 10, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/theater/the-profane-zayd-dohrn.html.

The Profane tells the story of two immigrant families in contemporary New York. Raif is an atheist novelist with a Muslim background. With his dancer wife Naja and two daughters, Aisa and Emina, he lives in a liberal neighborhood in New York City. The play starts with Emina bringing her fiancé, Sam, to her parents' home and introducing him to the family. Right from the beginning, Raif is reluctant about accepting Sam into his family. After an awkward introduction, Emina confronts Raif and asks him to keep his "prejudice in keep."[26] Raif admits to no prejudice but expresses his contempt for Sam's family and their profession of "selling restaurant equipment." Later, Raif clarifies his position. As an academic immigrant, Raif is skeptical of religious people who, like Sam's family, live a traditional life and do not overtly renounce their ties with their "fundamentalist" homelands. In a heated argument with Emina, Raif cops out to be an "elitist" and declares: "There's a difference. Between liberal and conservative. Atheist and fundamentalist. Good and evil. And I'm not going to sit here and pretend I think all points of view are equal, because I don't. That's not balance. It's stupidity."[27] By citing some examples associated with Muslim extremists (including "[stoning]…their pregnant daughters"), Raif tries to convince Emina that Sam and his family follow the same extreme ideologies and practices. "I know these people," Raif says, "They are not our people."[28]

Later that night, Sam and Emina are alone with each other. Emina tells Sam how much she likes to be a part of his family, to "go to all the get-togethers" and "sleep in a big bed with all [Sam's] sisters and nieces and cousins." Taken by her words, Sam kisses Emina's neck, but she

[26] Zayd Dohrn, *The Profane* (Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2017), 8.

[27] Dohrn, *The Profane*, 21

[28] Dohrn, 22.

stops him. Emina tells Sam that she prefers to wait "until after the wedding."[29] Sam objects that they used to be physically intimate before and it does not make sense to stop now. Emina, however, responds that she needs to be respectful of Sam's family.

The next act starts with Sam's family preparing to welcome Emina's parents to their home. Sam's father, Peter, is a businessman, married to his stay-at-home wife, Carmen. As everyone is busy with a chore, Sam approaches Carmen and asks her to "keep everything…as normal as possible." Sam also adds: "No prayers today…You know they're not/ like us."[30] After a brief argument, Carmen and Peter seem to accept Sam's request. Emina arrives with her parents and lets Raif and Naja socialize with Peter and Carmen. During a brief moment when Raif and Naja are alone in the living room, Raif expresses his discomfort and says: "I feel like I've come to [Sam's father] tent, to haggle over a bridal price. And now I'm supposed to offer him so many goats."[31] Raif stops his rant when Peter and Carmen join them in the living room. Following a friendly conversation, the families go to the patio to have dinner.

After dinner, Naja comes to the living room and finds a young woman, Dania (double-cast with Raif's oldest daughter, Aisa), sitting on the stairs. Surprised to see someone else living in the house, Naja approaches Dania, but she quickly apologizes and leaves the room. After everyone comes back to the living room, Naja pushes Sam's parents to learn if they live with someone else. Peter and Carmen say that they are alone in the house. Confused by their lie, Naja insists that Sam's parents tell them who lives upstairs. Carmen, then, introduces Dania to Raif and Naja. "This is my daughter, Dania…[She] has lived with us for several years. And she is—

[29] Dohrn, 33.

[30] Dohrn, 46.

[31] Dohrn, 51.

will always be, a member of our family. As much as my own children."[32] Not satisfied by Carmen's answer and agitated by her secrecy, Raif and Naja conclude that Sam is married to Dania, and that is why Dania was hiding upstairs. Emina explains to her parents that she knew about Dania. Sam was married to Dania, Emina adds, but they divorced a long time ago. After Sam separated from Dania, Peter and Carmen kept treating Dania as a member of their family. "They took her in," Emina adds in defense of Sam and his family, "when no one else would."[33] No matter all the explanations, Raif remains angry. In a dramatic move, he tears out a page from the Quran put on display in the living room. Afterward, Peter firmly asks Raif and his wife to leave his house. Emina, however, stays behind.

In the following scene, Carmen tries to understand Emina's decision for marrying someone with a religious family. Emina explains when she was in college, she was awfully depressed. Then, a friend of hers took Emina to a group, so that they can read together.[34] Being a part of that group gave Emina hope. The final scene portrays Raif as heartbroken, having a conversation with Aisa. Disappointed with Emina's life choices, and perhaps with his aggressive reactions to Sam's family, Raif lets Aisa read to him a paragraph from a book that he had thrown into the trash in previous scenes. The paragraph is about a man in diaspora, facing the realities of living in exile. "He was homesick. Most of the time," Aisa reads to Raif to conclude the play, "Still, he had his own room…He could sit all day, thinking, without anyone telling him what to do…If he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure he ever wanted to go home…"[35]

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[32] Dohrn, 63.

[33] Dohrn, 64.

[34] Although not explicit, the dialogues in this scene suggests that this was a Quran club.

[35] Dohrn, 71.

The story of *The Profane* relies rather heavily on the topic of life in diaspora and Muslim cultures as practiced in the US. To his credit, Dohrn is not apologetic in his depiction of Islamic views and insists on the employment of actors of color in his note on casting. Furthermore, Dohrn depicts a layered conflict of two immigrant families negotiating their lives in diaspora. The play is an intriguing exploration of tolerance, particularly in relation to liberal hypocrisy. Most importantly, the play-world is detached from terrorist tropes that haunt the mainstream Middle Eastern representations in the US. As Evelyn Alsultany notes regarding US mass media, the depictions of Middle Eastern people in US culture often fall between the dichotomy of terrorists and victims of terrorism, a representational mode that she calls "simplified complex representations."[36] By specifically focusing on Arab Americans, Alsultany debunks the liberal agendas that seek to produce a good cultural image of Arabness in response to anti-Arab sentiments but only in relation to terrorism. Writing Middle Eastern characters who suffer from terrorist attacks as well as Middle Eastern characters with a deep patriotic passion for the US is a step toward highlighting the heterogeneity of Middle Eastern communities and Islamic practices. Yet, Alsultany contends, such efforts remain attached to the context of terrorism, and as such, fail to challenge the stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern and Muslim people.[37] Given this, Dohrn's play is a conscientious script that does not conform to terrorist contextualization. Or at least, that is the case inside the world of the play. The outside world is a different story.

During an interview, when asked to elaborate on his inspiration for writing the play, Dohrn mentions a myriad of events, including the 2015 Charlie Hebdo terrorist shooting in Paris.

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[36] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 14.

[37] Alsultany, 27.

Discussing the literary conversations regarding the freedom of speech that surrounded those attacks, Dohrn states:

> Is it okay to defend a newspaper that had been publishing these very provocative, and in some cases sacrilegious, cartoons about Islam? Nobody was defending the violence, but there was this question of can liberal artistic humanism coexist with devout religious Islam? And meanwhile, in America, there was this pastor in Florida who was burning the Qur'an, and there was the debate in New York over the 9/11 mosque. All this stuff was happening that had to do with how western liberal cosmopolitanism can integrate with religious Islam.[38]

In other words, it was a terrorist attack done by self-proclaimed Islamic extremists that partly inspired Dohrn to write a play about Muslim characters. Of course, this input shows how *The Profane*, if not in representation, is still connected to the context of terrorism in terms of the play's creation. It is certainly laudable that Dohrn is concerned with the limits of secular tolerance and inclusivity, a topic constantly challenged by Middle Eastern artists and scholars in relation to white liberalism in the US and beyond. It is, however, equally discouraging to learn that Dohrn decided to write his play after discussions around terrorism. Social, political, and cultural events inspire artists at all times. In fact, one might argue that it is a necessary component for effective artmaking. The problem with Dohrn's play, however, is that the intolerable liberals of the story are also Middle Eastern and with Muslim heritage. By opposing Middle Eastern characters against each other around the topic of prejudice and tolerance, Dohrn makes these issues exclusive to the interaction between Middle Eastern families and pays no attention to the shortcomings of white liberalism. As such, the problem of tolerance and Islamophobia becomes a problem innate to Middle Eastern lives, conservative or liberal, rather than a problem for everyone. In *The Profane*, it is the Middle Eastern person who shows no

[38] Auriane Desombre, "Review: Zayd Dohrn Plumbs Muslim-American Rifts in 'The Profane,'" Stage Buddy, April 10, 2017, https://stagebuddy.com/theater/theater-feature/interview-zayd-dohrn-the-profane.

flexibility for other points of view. It is also a Middle Eastern family that is subjected to such prejudice. In the meantime, while the Middle Eastern families are fighting with each other, those who wield the most power in the white structures of US society remain uncalled, unquestioned, and unaccountable. Put differently, I read this play as if the "liberal" family is actually a white family in disguise, but the playwright displaces white liberal intolerance onto a Middle Eastern family. It would indeed be a more accurate and timely decision if Dohrn had decided to tap into the limits of liberalist tolerance if the intolerable character in *The Profane* represented the white realities of racist assumptions about Middle Eastern and Muslim identities.

Finally, *The Profane* suffers from an Orientalist understanding of Islam and the Middle East. In his portrayal of Emina's fascination with Islam, Dohrn is cartoonishly simplistic. Emina resorts to an abstinent pre-marriage life in her relationship with Sam as if that orthodox teaching is mandatory for being Muslim. Moreover, when Emina is describing her faith to Naja at the ending scenes, she tells a cliché story about how by turning faithful, she found peace and happiness in life. Such superficial details not only do not add character complexity but they also present a shallow understanding of a highly nuanced religion like Islam. Additionally, when Raif and Naja wrongly accuse Sam and his family of practicing polygamy, a stereotypical trope regarding diverse Middle Eastern and Muslim people is incorporated into the text. The audience quickly learns Raif is wrong, but the stereotype is nevertheless used by, again, not a character of different ethnicity, but by someone with Middle Eastern heritage. Such content-related problems make Dohrn's play a dramatic piece fraught with representational issues. Despite the shortcomings of the text itself, it was the production that attracted more criticism from Middle Eastern artists.

While *The Profane* at the Playwrights Horizons enjoyed both box-office and critical success, the production quickly became a subject of controversy. On April 26th, 2017, Noor Theatre, a New York City-based company committed to developing and producing works by artists of Middle Eastern descent, published an open letter, raising concerns about the content of *The Profane* and the demographic representation in Playwrights Horizons' producing team. Penned by Noor Theatre's founding artistic director Lameece Issaq, the letter was titled "A Call for Equity and Inclusion: An Open Letter to US Theaters from Members of the Middle Eastern American Theater Community." Issaq begins the letter by acknowledging her prior conversations with Playwrights Horizons about the play. Then, she draws attention to an interview with the cast of Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane*, published in *The New York Times* on March 30th, 2017. Among a series of questions asked by the interviewer, Issaq quotes one: "Was it a problem for you,' the interviewer asks the cast, "that *The Profane* was written by a white playwright and has a white director?"[39] According to Issaq, the interviewer should have asked the creative and producing team that question, not only the actors. Issaq argues that actors have a certain creative agency in different productions and that should not be questioned or undermined. At the same time, those in charge of hiring and producing a play should reflect more on the social and cultural effect of signing a contract with a white playwright who has written a script about Middle Eastern families and Islam. The actors, the letter states, are employees, and might not

[39] Alexis Soloski, "Faith and Identity Clash in 'The Profane': An Actors' Round Table - The New York Times," *New York Times*, March 30, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/theater/the-profane-zayd-dohrn-playwrights-horizons.html.

have a high agency to object to production choices. Furthermore, they should not be put in a position to defend the work. Those who make the decisions should answer for their choices.[40]

Issaq's critique regarding the importance of positionality in storytelling is not a new one, yet it remains as urgent as before. While actors could significantly contribute to the accurate representations of their identities, one who creates the story wields the most power and has the responsibility of respectful representation. As Erith Jaffe-Berg writes, "How one 'stages' the Middle East is a question that literally begins with how one represents the bodies and voices of its people as much as how one's own stance influences the process."[41] A casting practice that is conscious of color, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality is certainly a practice fully embraced by Playwrights Horizons during their staging of *The Profane*. Yet one should also explore how the playwright, the director, and the producers' positionalities could improve and limit the representational values. The off-Broadway scale of the show could afford the Middle Eastern identity national visibility not seen often in US mainstream theatres. Instead of culturally competent artists use that visibility to practice an accurate idea of Middle Easternness, a group of mostly white artists benefited from that opportunity. In other words, the employment of no Middle Eastern artist on the creative team behind the Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane* is an example of civic inequity that theatremakers of Middle Eastern descent face nationwide.

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[40] Lameece Issaq, "Call for Equity and Inclusion: An Open Letter to US Theaters from Members of the Middle Eastern American Theater Community," Noor Theatre, April 26, 2017, http://www.noortheatre.org/letterforinclusion/.

[41] Erith Jaffe-Berg, "Deterritorializing Voices: Staging the Middle East in American Theatre," in *Performance, Exile and 'America,'* ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 182.

Issaq takes issue with non-Middle Eastern demographics on the producing and creative team of *The Profane* while many Middle Eastern American playwrights and artists (directors, dramaturgs, designers, and so on) are frequently shunned in mainstream theatres. "Why, when there are so many gifted Middle Eastern and/or Muslim playwrights and directors," the letter includes, "there still no decision makers of Middle Eastern descent or Muslim faith involved in a production *about Muslims*?"[42] When stories about Muslims are told by white artists, Issaq continues, the idea of "voiceless" minorities is perpetuated. It is particularly a dangerous initiative to take away from Middle Eastern and Muslim artists the opportunity of representing themselves in a time of heightened Islamophobia and white privilege. According to the contents of the letter, disenfranchising Middle Eastern and Muslim artists also further reifies the Orientalist idea that the stories and experiences of minorities should be expressed for them, rather than by them. In such a milieu, Issaq contends, Middle Eastern and Muslim individuals and communities are rendered passive and in need of interpretation.[43]

Additionally, Issaq urges Playwrights Horizons, the larger New York City theatre community, and regional theatre across the US to, first, include Middle Eastern and Muslim artists and individuals in their decision-making processes; second, choose more scripts by Middle Eastern playwrights in their seasons; and third, welcome scripts that refrain from using Orientalist and Islamophobic tropes and explore different angles of history and politics. Issaq concludes the letter by highlighting the significance of her three requests vis-à-vis current US immigration policies and foreign affairs, and how storytelling could play a challenging cultural role in this regard.

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[42] Issaq, "Call for Equity and Inclusion," emphasis in original.

[43] Issaq.

The Noor Theatre open letter is endorsed by three prolific Middle Eastern American playwrights: Leila Buck, Ismail Khalidi, and Mona Mansour; three Middle Eastern American directors: Kareem Fahmy, Noelle Ghoussaini, and Pirronne Yousefzadeh; founder of Pass the Mic Media and co-founder of Noor Theatre Maha Chehlaoui; founding artistic director of Silk Road Rising Jamil Khoury; and Thomas Simsarian Dolan, a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies from George Washington University. Furthermore, at the time of this writing (March 2020), the letter has acquired signatures from the Lark Middle East-US Playwright Exchange director Catherine Coray, playwright Sarah Schulman, costume designer Dina El-Aziz, and three-hundred-and-seventy-three additional companies, artists, and individuals. While artists and individuals can add their electronic signatures to the letter, they can also include a comment and communicate their thoughts. The common denominator among all comments, aside from expressing gratitude for the letter, is a clear frustration with US mainstream theatres and the common tendency for prioritizing white writers and artists over people of color. Such a collective frustration shows the ever-growing need for expanding venues for staging non-white cultural representations and participation in an equitable job market. When the artistic directors of Playwrights Horizons decided to choose a script about two diasporic Middle Eastern families written by a white playwright, they inevitably ignored years of cultural efforts made by artists of Middle Eastern heritage for better visibility in US theatre, and consequently, the demystification of Middle Eastern identity. Moreover, Playwrights Horizon's production of *The Profane* sends a dangerous message that Middle Eastern artists are not needed to create a story about the Middle East; white playwrights can easily just do that. Aside from the cultural inaccuracy that such appropriations create, the sociopolitical result of excluding artists of Middle Eastern descent

from mainstream artistic production could be the perpetuation of "voiceless minority" subjectivity, marginalized within and outside discourses of civil rights and civic equity.

Middle Eastern American communities have actively resisted their civil and civic oppression, and the Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane* is only one example in their long fight against injustice. For instance, Carol Fadda-Conrey addresses such efforts in the Arab American literature collective as a communal strategy for initiating "a transformative project of communal and individual self-representation, one that captures the complexity and heterogeneity of their [Arab American] communities."[44] Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson identify a similar pattern in the post-9/11 Arab American theatre. By emphasizing the changing role of theatre for Arab American communities after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Basiouny and Carlson highlight the increasing need of these communities for being exposed to broader audiences.[45] While different trends preside within Arab American theatre, Basiouny and Carlson continue, the negotiation of being Arab in the US in a milieu of underrepresentation remains a common concern for Arab American theatre-makers.[46] Yet the mainstream US theatres still refuse to give Arab Americans enough opportunities to represent themselves. Michael Malek Najjar believes the unpopularity of Arab American writers in the US mainstream theatres is directly connected to the marginalization of Arab American identity in the social and political context of the US. On the one hand, Najjar contends, Arab American playwrights and performers have gained more

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[44] Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 3.

[45] Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson, "Current Trends in Arab-American Performance," in *Performance, Exile and 'America,'* ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 209.

[46] Basiouny and Carlson, "Current Trends," 216.

creative license for facilitating complex understandings of ethnicity, culture, hybridity, and heterogeneity in the US. On the other hand, their marginalization "can render them obscure to the larger discourses that surround them. Because of this, their works are not fully embraced by either the American theatre mainstream or [even] by Arabs living in America."[47] Given this, the Noor Theatre open letter and the accompanying comments join a broader discourse regarding limited forums appropriate for cultural practices of citizenship for Middle Eastern American identities and the inequality inherent to accessing the job market within US mainstream theatres.

Playwrights Horizons was quick to respond to the open letter directed at their production of *The Profane.* One day after Noor Theatre published their letter, the artistic directors of Playwrights Horizons, Tim Sanford and Adam Greenfield, issued a response on April 27th, 2017. The response starts with the directors' expression of gratitude for Issaq's continuous support of their production throughout the past few months. Then, the directors write about their long investment in Dohrn's play as a text that troubles the prevalent close-mindedness in religious communities in the US, and the division between the secular and the devout. "Challenging narrative expectations," Sanford and Greenfield write, "Dohrn's play is a heartfelt and personal appeal for empathy and greater understanding."[48] The directors express their full commitment to resolving the debate about Middle Eastern American representations while refraining from admitting to any wrongdoing in their staging of *The Profane*. Sanford and Greenfield continue that they have already begun taking steps into more diverse representations on their main stage,

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[47] Michael Malek Najjar, *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 17.

[48] Tim Sanford and Adam Greenfield, "Response to Open Letter from Middle Eastern American Theater Community," Playwrights Horizons, April 27, 2017, https://www.playwrightshorizons.org/about/news/response-middle-eastern-american-theater-community/.

including launching a commissioning program for Middle Eastern and Arab American playwrights as well as expanding their efforts for equity. The response ends with the directors offering their staff and physical resources for the public discussion of the issue.

While the public interchange between Noor Theatre and Playwrights Horizons concludes with the latter issuing a response, *American Theatre* magazine picked up the story on May 5th, 2017, and shed more light on the topic. In an article titled "Middle Eastern-American Artists Ask: Who Gets to Speak for 'The Profane'?," the readers learn that Playwrights Horizons director Adam Greenfield had reached out to the Council on American-Islamic Relations as well as the program director of the Lark Play Development Center's Middle East/United States Playwright Exchange for feedback and suggestions regarding their production.[49] Similarly, Greenfield began his conversations with Noor Theatre's director Issaq in February, almost two months before the premiere of the show. It was exactly the timing of the conversation that led Issaq to open up the issue to the public. By the time Playwright Horizons sought suggestions regarding their production of *The Profane*, the play had already been selected and a creative team was formed. Issaq also mentions that when Greenfield approached her about the issue, she recommended several scripts by Middle Eastern playwrights.[50] Additionally, Maha Chehlaoui, co-founder of Noor Theatre, notes that private conversations, like the one between Issaq and Greenfield, is only limited to a few people. Opening up the issue to the public, therefore, could be a more efficient way to discuss such sensitive matters. "We," Chehlaoui adds, "do not have

[49] Allison Considine, "Middle Eastern-American Artists Ask: Who Gets to Speak for 'The Profane'?," American Theatre, May 5, 2017, https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/05/05/middle-eastern-american-artists-ask-who-gets-to-speak-for-the-profane/.

[50] Considine, "Middle Eastern-American Artists Ask."

the resources to keep doing this [having private conversations] again and again."[51] What seems noteworthy in this process is the insistence of the directors of Playwrights Horizons on continuing their work on Dohrn's play. As consulted experts, Issaq and Chehlaoui suggested from the beginning that Playwrights Horizons should invest in plays about Middle Eastern identities that are also written by artists of Middle Eastern descent. Playwrights Horizons, however, prioritized telling a story by a white playwright.

To some, Middle Eastern American artists protesting the production of *The Profane* seemed an attack on freedom of speech. Heather Raffo, the Iraqi-American actor who portrays Naja in the production, addresses this issue in particular. Citing the open letter published by Noor Theatre, Raffo states, "the letter confuses the pressing notion of equity and inclusion with a censorship-like critique of a single play…In asking for platforms to make our own art, the letter implies a need to exclude others making art."[52] Greenfield shares his actor's opinion in this regard and asserts a need for encouraging writers to tackle issues outside of their lived experiences. In response to the topic of censorship, Silk Road Rising artistic director Jamil Khoury rejects the objection, as he believes the open letter never questions the freedom of speech for writers of any background. For Khoury, Middle Eastern American artists not having enough access to opportunities in US mainstream theatres is at stake. "It's not about censoring Dohrn," Khoury argues, "I think that theatres often overlook critical and compelling work created by artists of Middle Eastern background in favor of white artists. We've seen that over and over."[53]

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[51] Considine.

[52] Considine.

[53] Considine.

One comment that deals with not the production but the content of Dohrn's play comes from Noor Theatre's co-founder, Chehlaoui. Similar to what I argued in my brief analysis of the plot of *The Profane*, Chehlaoui also believes assigning Islamophobic attitudes to the secular Middle Eastern character is a decision less informed by the realities of living in the US:

> If you talk to the Muslim community in America and ask them what their deepest concerns about Islamophobia are, I guarantee you that nighty-nine percent would not say that it is [coming from] other Muslims, secular or not…I'm not saying Playwrights Horizons framed the play this way, but it is very interesting to me that a play about two families who make up the Muslim community is being counted as a play about Islamophobia. Is that the entry point that an American non-Muslim audience needs, examining Islamophobia?[54]

Chehlaoui's critique of the text is also key to the larger issue of the freedom of speech as noted in the previous paragraph. The theatre-makers of Middle Eastern descent protested *The Profane* because it took away their opportunity for telling stories of the Middle Eastern diaspora. Aside from contributing to job inequalities, allowing white playwrights to tell Middle Eastern stories also risks the dissemination of inaccurate information about Middle Eastern identities. Thus, the protests against the staging of Dohrn's text is less about what he can freely express in his plays, and more about the accuracy of his representations. Middle Eastern theatre artists in the US are simply frustrated by racist structures of society that allows white playwrights to step in and misrepresent Middle Eastern people.

Read immediately after each other, Playwrights Horizons' staging of *The Profane* might seem an issue turned ugly quickly. It is important, however, to note the productive results of the debate surrounding the production. Playwrights Horizons received a donation for launching the Amal Commission for supporting playwrights with Middle Eastern and Muslim heritage. [55] Their

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[54] Considine.

[55] *Amal* is Arabic for "hope," perhaps deliberately used for the hope of a better collaboration between Middle Eastern American and US mainstream theatres.

first commissioned writer is Mona Mansour, one of the signatories of Noor Theatre's open letter.[56] On the other hand, Middle Eastern and Muslim artists found an opportunity to suggest different ways mainstream theatres can enjoy more non-white plays, and consequently, increase their visibility within national discourses. Theatre, as I have suggested throughout this chapter, is a venue for practicing a cultural notion of citizenship. Encountered by limited opportunities for participation in national discourses, theatre-makers of Middle Eastern descent use theatre to reify their belonging to US society through cultural citizenship strategies. In such a context, when white theatre-makers use their abundant resources to tell stories about the Middle East, they, in fact, deprive Middle Eastern immigrants of the opportunity to rehearse their ideal of citizenship. The post-9/11 theatre, more than before, has become a primary cultural tool that different Middle Eastern artists and communities use to subvert the condition of their systematic oppression and exercise an ideal notion of citizenship. "Persistent themes of racism, Orientalism, powerlessness, voicelessness, ostracization, and invisibility frame much of our discourse," writes Khoury about Arab American theatre. "[Those themes] in turn feed our aesthetics . . . If Arab American political and identitarian orthodoxies, on both the right and the left, are to be questioned, challenged, and subverted (as they should be), theatre is a space for that to happen."[57] The power theatre and performance relegate to artists and scholars for creating change in society is without a doubt an enticing feature that attracts different demographics with different goals. For Middle

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[56] Considine.

[57] Jamil Khoury, "Beyond First Responders: Politics, Racism, and the Aesthetics of Arab American Theatre," in *Arab American Aesthetics: Literature, Material Culture, Film, and Theatre*, ed. Therí A. Pickens (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2018), 89.

Eastern American theatre artists and companies, theatre is a powerful site for engaging their audiences with sociopolitical issues and question the politics of belonging in society.

Similar to other minoritarian theatre communities in the US, theatremakers of Middle Eastern descent use the power of theatre to raise their voice against the condition of their oppression, make their contribution to US culture more visible, and declare their belonging to society loudly. The Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane* highlighted how easy it is for mainstream theatres to default to white authorship of others' stories. They do not this in a vacuum. Rather, there is a long history of appropriating non-white stories and cultures that make choosing scripts like *The Profane* easy. Theatre artists of Middle Eastern descent responded to Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane* quickly and fiercely. While the Noor Theatre open letter encapsulated the concerns regarding the production of *The Profane* at Playwrights Horizons, another response was brewing among Middle Eastern artists. Encountered by numerous examples similar to the staging of *The Profane* at a mainstream theatre, a group of theatremakers of Middle Eastern heritage was working to publish a bill to more formally vocalize their rights to self-representation.

Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights

On September 29th, 2017, *American Theatre* magazine published an article titled "Middle Eastern American Theatre, on Our Terms." Written by the artistic founders of Golden Thread Productions and Silk Road Rising, Torange Yeghiazarian and Jamil Khoury, the article includes two separate but related documents called "Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights" and "Dear Producers and Artistic Directors of the American Theatre." The developmental history of the two documents precedes the Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane*. That production, however, further necessitated the publication of the bill. I am not suggesting

that the Bill of Rights and the "Dear Producers" letter were published directly in response to the Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane*. Instead, I believe the production marks only one incident among the continuing struggles of Middle Eastern and Muslim American theatres with issues of representation and job market.

As stated on top of the documents, the bill and the letter were results of an ongoing discussion among Middle Eastern American artists at different communal gatherings. The initial meeting was held in the Lark Play Development Center at New York City, under the title of "Middle East America: A National New Plays Initiative." The next two meetings happened during the 2016 and 2017 convenings of Middle Eastern and Muslim American Affinity Group sessions at the annual Theatre Communications Group's conference, respectively in Washington, D.C., and Portland, Oregon. Regarding the 2016 meeting, Yeghiazarian states:

> In the gathering at the Lark in 2016—the largest ever [with] a hundred people—what I observed was, over the years artists been struggling with the burden of representing their communities and having the rights to tell the stories. In 2016, all those questions were gone and the community was claiming the rights and a place in American theatre but not knowing how to negotiate that in the room. That was the inspiration behind creating the bill.[58]

Similarly, Khoury believes the purpose of creating the documents was to elaborate on the rights of Middle Eastern and North African American theatre artists and helping mainstream theatres in adapting more accurate and authentic representations of the communities. In other words, Khoury adds, the documents were collectively produced to clarify who can be at the table, what voices are being heard, and who has the power in the process.[59]

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[58] Yeghiazarian, personal interview.

[59] Jamil Khoury, personal interview.

The bill, modeled after the US Bill of Rights, is a collection of nine rights for Middle Eastern American theatre artists and includes:

1. We have the right to tell our own stories in our own words without bearing the burden of representing an entire community's experiences.
2. We have the right to define our own cultural identities, free of coercion, policing, and stereotypes, and to embrace our myriad identities simultaneously.
3. We have the right not to conform to preconceived notions of our cultural identity and to resist political and social judgments in favor of stories that reflect our own truths and understandings.
4. We have the right to bring complicated, nuanced, and layered interpretations to the characters we play.
5. We should not be expected to perform preconceived notions of our identities, nor acquiesce to hypersexualized or systemically violent representations of our bodies.
6. We have the right to examine "negative" and/or "silly" aspects of our communities, religious traditions, and identity politics without being censured or held up as a model.
7. We have the right to tell stories that criticize certain policies of the US government or specific Middle Eastern governments without being accused of being anti-American, racist, or self-loathing.
8. We have the right to tell all stories, including those that are not necessarily about Middle Eastern identity.
9. We have the right to remind artistic decision makers of the following:
    a. Do not single us out to validate or authenticate all content as it relates to our cultural heritage.
    b. Hear our concerns as they relate to our identities with the understanding that we are all here to serve the play.
    c. Do not assume that one Middle Eastern artist's participation in a project automatically lends approval to all culturally specific choices that are made.[60]

Following the nine rights is a paragraph about the definition of "Middle Eastern" with which the authors engage. Similar to my engagement with the term as explained in Introduction, the bill contests the colonial history of the "Middle East" and reclaims the word as a term that encompasses a diversity of demographics throughout a vast region in South Asia, North Africa, Central Asia, the Caucuses, parts of Mediterranean Europe, and their corresponding diasporas.

[60] Khoury and Yeghiazarian.

The paragraph also defines "America" not merely as the US but the continents of North and South America. The bill ends with a note on the necessity of including all American Muslims as members of Middle Eastern communities.[61]

Going back to the Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane*, one major concern regarding Dohrn's play was the representation of Islamophobia and Muslim families. A call for welcoming non-white scripts also followed the critique of the production. Contextualized vis-à-vis the Bill of Rights, the protests against Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane* shows that while Middle Eastern and Muslim American theatre communities ask for more opportunities in mainstream theatres, they are not willing to compromise their commitment to the truthful portrayal of the groups they represent in favor of having access to more exposure. The Bill of Rights, in other words, is a safety net for reminding producers and directors of US theatre that Middle Eastern and Muslim American artists want their fair share of engagement with the public but that that want neither undermines their rights nor means that Middle Eastern American theatre artists are willing to modify their works to serve the common expectations of mainstream theatregoers. As Khoury argues, mainstream US theatre and media are in the habit of portraying Middle Eastern and Muslim experiences through the three lenses of national security, patriarchy, and liberalism.[62] Middle Eastern and Muslim characters, Khoury contends, often are the enemy of the state, the usual suspects who threaten the safety of the US. Similarly, the Middle Eastern and Muslim experiences are inherently in contrast to gender equality discourses and neatly engrained in the systems of patriarchy. Furthermore, Islam is the antithesis of liberalism and liberal values.

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[61] Khoury and Yeghiazarian.

[62] Jamil Khoury, "Mass Media Muslims: A Three Lens Theory of Representation," *Arab Stages* 2, no. 1 (2015). Khoury argues that these three lenses are reminder of mainly historical LGBTQ representations that portrayed queer lives through the three lenses of psychology, religion, and law.

Subverting such tropes in mass theatre and media has become a crucial task for Middle Eastern and Muslim American artists of all backgrounds. In a context when inaccurate representations are prevalent, and in a time when minoritarian artists demand more exposure to the public, publishing the Bill of Rights figures as an obvious yet continuously undermined call for justice within society writ large. Similar to the US Bill of Rights that protects US citizens from violation of their rights, the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights should be treated as a document that symbolically safeguards the rights of theatre-makers of Middle Eastern heritage to enacting their identities.

Bundled with the Bill of Rights is a letter written by Yeghiazarian and Khoury, titled "Dear Producers and Artistic Directors of the American Theatre." The letter calls attention to what Middle Eastern American communities consider their priority: "More plays written by Middle Eastern American playwrights to be produced across the US."[63] Doing so, the letter states, not only serves the collective society as a whole but also means welcoming the variety of experiences and perspectives of diverse American writers. Fully acknowledging that inclusivity requires substantial effort, the authors of the letter (and the bigger communities they represent) offer their help in four specific areas crucial to producing any play: play selection, casting, cultural competency, and facilitating the conversation.

On play selection, the letter introduces the New Play Exchange[64] as an extensive portal for finding various scripts written by Middle Eastern and Muslim playwrights. Including a range of genres—from comedy to family drama, from tragedy to political commentaries—the New Play Exchange includes a significant variety of texts with fully-fledged characters developed by

[63] Khoury and Yeghiazarian, "Middle Eastern American Theatre, on Our Terms."

[64] https://newplayexchange.org/

Middle Eastern playwrights. Likewise, different scripts are available for different available production resources. Producers and directors may select from "low-budget two-hander" texts or epic adventures with a big cast suitable for students.[65]

Regarding the second topic, casting, the letter describes the significant Middle Eastern talent easily found particularly in metropolitan areas: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Minneapolis. Of course, many Middle Eastern actors are active in other areas throughout the country. The letter urges producers and directors to look for them. "Bottom line," Yeghiazarian and Khoury write, "You all should be working with more Middle Eastern American actors, directors, dramaturgs, and designers."[66] If the attempts for finding local actors are not successful, depending on the budget, the writers of the letter offer their help for referrals and hiring out-of-town artists. If that option is also impossible due to unresolvable restrictions, Yeghiazarian and Khoury encourage coalitional casting, i.e., casting more widely in the interest of the story.[67] What immediately follows is a reminder about the diversity of Middle Eastern people with deep historical and cultural roots in South Asia, Africa, Mediterranean Europe, and Latin America. The letter asks producers and directors to look into those communities as their next option. "Don't let casting challenges deter you from producing Middle Eastern American

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[65] Khoury and Yeghiazarian, "Middle Eastern American Theatre."

[66] Khoury and Yeghiazarian.

[67] Patricia Ybarra coins the term "coalitional casting" to argue that performing characters of color on stage "is not only an act of becoming a culturally different person, but an act of committing to the cause of telling a marginalized story." For more see Patricia Ybarra, "A Message from TAPS Chair, Dr. Patricia Ybarra | Theatre Arts and Performance Studies," Brown University, accessed March 13, 2020, https://www.brown.edu/academics/theatre-arts-performance-studies/news/2015-12/message-taps-chair-dr-patricia-ybarra; Also, for a discussion of coalitional casting in university productions see Brian Eugenio Herrera, "'But Do We Have the Actors for That?': Some Principles of Practice for Staging Latinx Plays in a University Theatre Context," *Theatre Topics* 27, no. 1 (2017): 23–35.

plays altogether," Khoury and Yeghiazarian assert, "Telling more Middle Eastern American stories has to be the first priority."[68] The letter encourages that flexible casting at specific occasions when changes are negotiated with the playwright to honor her or his intentions.

Cultural competency is the next topic the letter addresses. According to the writers, cultural competency is "the ability to fully dive into the cultural context of a particular story."[69] In producing Middle Eastern and Muslim scripts, the letter recommends hiring a cultural consultant who has the lived experience and knowledge about the contents of the text. The consultant, Yeghiazarian and Khoury submit, should be familiar with the creative process to offer creative options derived from the cultural context. The cultural consultant is not there to police the creative process; it is that person's job to facilitate an honest and accurate representation of Middle Eastern stories. The cultural consultant needs to have the agency for making decisions. Otherwise, recruiting that person is meaningless. It is also vital to remember, the letter warns, marginalized artists should not be placed only to represent their communities' experiences or validate their representations.[70]

Facilitating the conversation is the last topic the letter covers. The artists behind the letter fully acknowledge that producing stories about Middle Eastern and Muslim lives are politically charged. In such a context, they ask producers and directors to stay focused on the play and the story they are telling. They also should do the same while facilitating conversations about their productions. "The conversations will often begin from our differences," Yeghiazarian and

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[68] Khoury and Yeghiazarian, "Middle Eastern American Theatre, on Our Terms."

[69] Khoury and Yeghiazarian.

[70] Khoury and Yeghiazarian.

Khoury write, "but invariably end with our commonalities."[71] The letter is concluded with a reminder that the communities the letter represents should be a resource for US theatre producers and directors. The communities are ready to continue their role in increasing the visibility of Middle Eastern scripts. In the meantime, other artists and producers should feel free to ask for any recommendations and suggestions for such culturally important work.[72]

Among various topics "Dear Producers" addresses, play selection and cultural competency are more related to the Playwrights Horizons' *The Profane*. As discussed before, one common concern with Playwrights Horizons' production of *The Profane* was offering a mainstream stage to a story written by a white playwright about two families with Middle Eastern and Muslim heritage. Playwrights Horizons made this decision while Middle Eastern and Muslim playwrights still struggle to have a fair share in the job market of mainstream theatres. Then, one could surmise, the addressees of the "Dear Producers" letter could include the artistic directors of Playwrights Horizons. The letter was in development two years prior to the staging of Dohrn's script at Playwrights Horizons, but that only shows, unsurprisingly, that the Middle Eastern and Muslim American theatre suffers from old problems in relation to US mainstream theatres. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that no person of Middle Eastern and Muslim descent was recruited for the producing and creative processes. Despite doing multiple interviews about the creation of his script, Dohrn has especially been quiet about any cultural consulting he might have done with representing cultural experts. Moreover, by the time the artistic director of Playwrights Horizons' reached out to Middle Eastern and Muslim communities and artists, the play was already written, selected, cast, and in production. As Noor Theatre's artistic director

[71] Khoury and Yeghiazarian.

[72] A postscript credits Justin Simien and Ralph B. Peña for influencing the language of the letter with their respective writings in "Dear White People" and "Diversity for Dummies."

Issaq explicitly stated, the overdue attempt from Playwrights Horizons seems more like damage control than a conscientious effort for an accurate representation of the Middle East and its diaspora.

Perhaps the sheer number and diversity of Middle Eastern and Muslim theatre companies and groups in addition to freelance artists could put the significance of producing *The Profane* at Playwrights Horizons into a deeper perspective. Why is it that a story written by a white playwright about Muslim families gets selected for a mainstream production while numerous Middle Eastern and Muslim playwrights exist to offer a more accurate story? As I discussed before, the systematic oppression of minoritarian groups in the US plays an important role in this regard. Since Middle Eastern identity remains an ostracized subjectivity within US society, it is not surprising to see few Middle Eastern scripts in mainstream theatres. In theatre, artists can enact specific ideals of citizenship and national belonging. As such, theatre as a cultural enterprise holds much significance. While minoritarian groups seek to use theatre to perform civil equality and civic equity, majority groups can control their theatrical productions to maintain a white and heteronormative idea of Americanness. Theatre, in other words, serves both purposes. On the one hand, it affords the minoritarian groups a cultural way to perform democratic and inclusive citizenship, and on the other hand, theatre remains a strong tool for producing white supremacy.

Conclusion

Sylvia Khoury is an American playwright with French and Lebanese heritage. Her newest play, *Selling Kabul*, entails the story of Taroon, an Afghan citizen who helped the US military with his translation skills after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Taroon was promised to be relocated to the US for his safety, but when US forces partially withdrew from

Afghanistan, he was left behind. Now, Taroon needs to hide away from the malicious power of the Taliban and become a refugee. How could he do that, though, when he so dearly wants to be with his son on his birthday?

Sylvia Khoury's *Selling Kabul* premiered in March 2020 at Playwrights Horizons. In addition to their immediate action for commissioning Mona Mansour to write new plays, Playwrights Horizons has continued their effort for including more plays by writers of Middle Eastern descent in their season programming. The company's diligence in this regard is commendable. Therefore, I refrain from crediting their effort only to the following consequences of producing Zayd Dohrn's *The Profane* and the involvement of Middle Eastern American theatre communities with the matter. Playwrights Horizons had a choice, and they decided to work toward a more equitable representation on US mainstream theatres.

Moreover, one should pay attention to how dialogue and collaboration between minoritarian theatre companies and mainstream theatres could prevent important cultural tensions. While the staging of *The Profane* at Playwrights Horizons soon led to protests, the long-term impact of those events is a welcoming of more Middle Eastern and Muslim playwrights to different national venues. Middle Eastern American companies could also quickly get involved with the controversy and, through the publication of open letters and the Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights, they further delineated the significance of their cultural work within US culture.

People of Middle Eastern descent continue to deal with various acts of discrimination. The white structures of society marginalize Middle Eastern and other non-white groups and restrict their legal performances of citizenship. In return, Middle Eastern immigrants find any cultural opportunity to practice their ideal of citizenship. Enactment of citizenship through

theatre is an important aspect of the construction of Middle Eastern identity in diaspora. Through theatre, Middle Eastern immigrants perform their desires for being equal members of society, and challenge ideologies and sentiments that question their belonging in the post-9/11 context. Through these performance practices, Middle Eastern identity is constructed accurately and without reference to vilifying notions. Middle Eastern American theatre companies are aware of the change they can make in understandings of Middle Eastern identity. Thus, they keep their doors open to anyone interested in witnessing a diverse picture of US society.

CHAPTER TWO: IN SEARCH OF HOME: BORDER CHOREOGRAPHY AND MIDDLE EASTERN IMMIGRANT IDENTITY

In the last chapter, I discussed how Middle Eastern diasporic communities negotiate their belonging to US society through practices of cultural citizenship as instantiated on theatrical stages. Theatre helps immigrants to enact their identities in more informed ways and challenge stereotypical representations. Demystifying who Middle Eastern identities are is an important task particularly in the xenophobic and anti-immigrant context of the early twenty-first century. Middle Eastern American theatre companies are aware of the stakes and dedicate their resources to various performances of Middle Eastern identity. While cultural citizenship helps to understand how Middle Eastern communities negotiate their marginalization in US society, I focus on the concept of home in this chapter to discuss another way in which diasporic discourses of national belonging is formulated. Belonging to a home has a determining effect on how immigrants are publicly perceived. Are immigrants groups of people whose homes are always located outside the peripheries of the nation-state, or are they people with a home and place inside society? Depending on the view, immigrants are understood as foreign travelers, unaccounted in the markup of national identity, or an undeniable significant portion of society. Perhaps more important than how they are perceived by others, though, is how immigrants define their relationship with "home." It should not be assumed that immigrants are desperate for recognition of their rights to only having a home inside their hosting country. Rather, a further inquiry into the topic reveals the complex attitudes immigrants maintain toward where home might be.

Throughout this chapter, I argue for the instability of the concept of "home" and contend that Middle Eastern immigrants negotiate their belonging to society partly through how they

approach "home." While some immigrants commit to their nomadic conditions and accept the utopian idea of global society, one in which home is an arbitrary construct, other immigrants remain invested in the idea of home as a specific place directly influenced by the politics of diaspora. To illustrate these points, I focus on two performances. The first piece is *Looking for Tehran* (2013) by Iranian performance artist Saba Zavarei. Zavarei spent three weeks traveling the distance between London to Tehran to embody the space between her two homes. Starting from England and going through France, Italy, Greece, and Turkey to finally arrive in Iran, Zavarei recorded her daily experiences in the format of a column for a national Iranian newspaper *Shargh*.[1] For her travel, Zavarei used only ground and maritime transportation to better understand how the perception of her gender identity and body gradually changed as she crossed different borders. After reaching her destination in Tehran, Zavarei realized that she no longer felt at home. Believing that she belonged to an extremely mobile generation, Zavarei concluded her travel with a feeling that her body is forever stretched between Tehran and London, always and never at home.

The second performance that I analyze in this chapter is a multimedia installation by Mohamad Hafez and Ahmed Badr, titled *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage* (2017). For this project, Badr has interviewed ten immigrant families to learn about their last memories of home. Hafez uses the interview information to create dioramas (placed inside separate suitcases) that visually represent the immigrants' homes. The dioramas are so accurate in design that immigrants have noted they felt like they were back in their home upon seeing them. Thus, *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage* can be understood as a project that allows immigrants to revisit their homes through performance.

[1] Farsi for "East."

I study the two performances next to each other as they both share a thematic concern about home. Additionally, the juxtaposition of *Looking for Tehran* and *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage* allows me to ask, what kind of movement is necessary for establishing one's belonging to a home? As I describe in the following sections, Zavarei finds a specific meaning of home while being always on the move. Her physical act of crossing geographical borders gets her farther from one home in London and closer to another in Tehran. Zavarei constantly moves, and in her movement, she arrives at an elusive notion of home. In *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, however, home is brought to the immigrants. Reconstructed and packed inside the suitcases, the dioramas of the installation move the memories of immigrants to recall their homes. Similarly, the suitcases motivate audiences to imagine the homes of immigrants inside the diasporic space of the gallery. Therefore, while physical movement is more prominent in Zavarei's effort for finding home, Hafez and Badr's project requires cognitive and affective movement for arriving at the immigrants' homes.

Studying Zavarei's travel next to Hafez and Badr's installation exposes the notion of home as a complicated concept with different valences for diverse immigrant identities. Performance brings out such complexity through embodied acts. As I argue in the following section, the literal movement of Zavarei across borders changes the meaning of her body in specific ways while alienating her from understanding "home" as a place locatable in the past. On the contrary, the imaginative movements that the suitcases of *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage* require to be fully understood make "home" relocatable in the past and transportable to the present. Given the important role of movement in the development of such home-relations, I rely on dance and movement theories in this chapter to investigate how mobility functions in both

performances. The information in my analyses comes from examining the archival records of Zavarei's travel, my personal interview with her, and a personal visit of *Unpacked* exhibition.

To further deepen my discussion of *Looking for Tehran* and *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, I also rely on a sociological model of studying home as theorized by Dutch scholar Jan Duyvendak. In his book, *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*, Duyvendak summarizes the recent discussions of home in migration studies to two primary perspectives, which he labels "universalist" and "particularist." The universalist perspective is informed by the increasing flow of capital and labor worldwide, and involves a lack of interest in finding specific values in different places. "The consequence of *people's* increased mobility," Duyvendak contends, "is that they can no longer develop thick attachments to places. For 'detached' people who have lost their ability to value a specific place, places eventually become interchangeable." Moreover, Duyvendak continues that "the increased mobility of marketable *goods*" ascribe the immigrants with a "homelessness" characteristic and makes them more or less indifferent to concepts such as nostalgia.[2]

The second position, which Duyvendak calls "particularist," considers specific value in places in which people have lived, as those places provide a comforting sense of home for mobile identities. The particularist view, Duyvendak suggests, can be used both in support of and against globalization. Those opposed to global mobility believe that getting attached to a place is a "defensive" action against forced relocation. Conversely, those in favor of the free movement of labor and capital argue that living in a world of increased mobility affords the individuals to develop a nostalgic feeling about a particular place. This, however, is not to say that

[2] Jan Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9, emphasis in original.

particularists believe home to be a fixed geographical location. Rather, immigrants can engage with "mobile home strategies" to make a new place their home.[3]

The universalist and particularist positions, as introduced by Duyvendak, consider movement on a transnational level as a ubiquitous characteristic of the twenty-first century. Being always on the move, according to the universalists, disconnects "home" from a specific place, whereas it is the condition of constant mobility that further solidifies "home" for particularists as a specific place. While both arguments differ in their approach to global mobility and home as a valued place, they both show the idea of "home" to be a contested and nuanced notion in discussions about migration.

In my discussions of home, I use Duyvendak's "universalist/particularist" model to further frame my study within migration discourses. I am not interested, however, in proving which perspective is more useful for examining the concept of home, and as such, limit my inquiries to a binary model. Rather, I incorporate Duyvendak's theory to further nuance my analyses vis-à-vis two prevalent contemporary considerations of home.

I begin this chapter by studying *Looking for Tehran* in relation to the universalist perspective about home. After explaining the sociopolitical context in which Zavarei made her trip and published her writings in Iran, I use Zavarei's columns and my personal interview with the artist to explore her interaction with borders while getting far from one home and getting close to another. The performance elements of *Looking for Tehran* are varied. On the one hand, I take Zavarei's quotidian interactions as everyday performances of border crossing, and on the other hand, I treat Zavarei's writing as performance, or to quote Gloria Anzaldúa, as "acts

[3] Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home*, 12.

encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently."[4] In this section, I examine Zavarei's efforts for finding her home while paying attention to shifts made in the perception of her gender identity.

I continue my study with a particularist analysis of *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*. I first discuss how the suitcases of the installation function as "scriptive things" to move the audience toward an imagination of the immigrant's home. I then focus on the lack of any human figurines inside the dioramas to discuss the significance of invisibility in refugee representations of the installation. I conclude the section by examining how bringing the suitcases of *Unpacked* to the space of the gallery has a racial impact on understanding refugees and their homes in diaspora.

***Looking for Tehran:* Gender Mobility and Choreography of Borders**

Saba Zavarei is an Iranian artist, writer, and researcher based in London. Raised in Tehran, she finished her undergraduate studies in architecture at the Art University of Tehran. In 2010, Zavarei left Iran for London to continue her advanced education in arts. After spending three years as an international graduate student in London, Zavarei decided to take advantage of the excitement around the election of new Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, as an opportunity to visit her home in Tehran. This time, instead of purchasing an expensive airline ticket, Zavarei decided to use only ground and maritime transportations to get a better sense of how borders divide different communities. Compared to a few-hour flight, being on foot gave Zavarei enough time to test the reality of borders in creating sociopolitical differences and provided her with an opportunity to explore the "void" space between her two homes.

[4] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands - La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 67.

As Zavarei moved from the U.K. to France, and from there to Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Iran, she recorded her daily experience in the format of a travel column for the Iranian daily, *Shargh*. Zavarei's stories are about an "out of space" body "stretched out" between two homes.[5] Central to Zavarei's performance is her female, Iranian body and a constant march, simultaneously toward and away from home. Therefore, understanding how Zavarei's body produces multiple, shifting meanings during her travel is key to understanding her relationship with the concept of home.

Since the sociopolitical events of 2013 in Iran inspired Zavarei to revisit her home in Tehran, it is important to have a strong sense of the context in which *Looking for Tehran* happened. Such contextual attention is especially called for when the performance event includes movement of bodies across borders. As Susan Foster notes, the orchestration of bodies always happens in new ways at specific historical moments. Not only do such historical moments define movements of bodies, but the movements of bodies also define that history.[6] Therefore, understanding the historical context in which Zavarei's travel performance occurred deepens the meanings behind her choreography. As such, I turn my focus now to a description of the society in 2013 Iran.

Government of Prudence and Hope

In 2013, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was concluding his second term as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Campaigning first for the 2005 presidential election, Ahmadinejad quickly attracted the support of Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran who

[5] Saba Zavarei, "Stretching out; between Two Homes," Saba Zavarei, accessed September 24, 2019, https://www.sabazavarei.com/blog/stretching-out.

[6] Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 16.

was (and is) leading the nation after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's demise in June 1989. Ahmadinejad was successful in garnering Ayatollah Khamenei's support due to his conservative policies and close alliance with the Principalists, the right-wing majority party in Iran. Combined with effective populist strategies, Ahmadinejad won the election by acquiring the majority vote (62.6 percent) in August 2005.[7] During his first term, President Ahmadinejad proposed an overhaul to economic infrastructures mainly to decrease the unemployment rate in Iran. Despite spending a considerable amount of bank reserves on the initiative, President Ahmadinejad's economic proposal failed and added to the number of Iranian citizens with no job. According to an analysis published in BBC Farsi, Ahmadinejad's plan was supposed to create 3,100,000 jobs during a five-year period, but in reality, it only created nine-hundred-thousand occupation opportunities.[8]

At the same time, Ahmadinejad pushed for the significant expansion of Iran's nuclear power plants, a policy met with a hostile response mainly from the US and the European Union. The result was the global enforcement of crippling economic sanctions against Iran, which only worsened the quality of life for Iranian citizens. Combined with the less-precedented limitation of the civil rights and the freedom of speech for the press, Iran's unhealthy economy made Ahmadinejad look like an unlikely candidate for the next presidential election in 2009.

Against all odds, Ahmadinejad won the 2009 election. The voting results were tainted with strong fraud allegations. The supporters of the two competing progressive candidates, Mir-

[7] Flynn Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, "Ahmadinejad Won. Get over It," Politico, June 15, 2009, https://www.politico.com/story/2009/06/ahmadinejad-won-get-over-it-023745.

[8] Kaveh Omidvar, "Early Return Firms, Failing or Passing with Safety Net," BBC Farsi, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/persian/business/2011/01/110111_ka_employment_iran.shtml.

Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, expressed their anger by flooding the streets of the capital and other major cities. The insurgent movement, labeled as the Green Movement, became the biggest unrest since the 1979 revolution and led to frequent protests, including a mass rally of five-hundred-thousand protesters on June 14th, 2009.[9] The movement was met with a violent response from the police and the Quds Force (a militant unit in Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, an influential governing body directly controlled by the Supreme Leader). Ultimately, the protests faded away, leaving dozens of casualties, the domestic arrest of the two protesting candidates (which continues to this date), and a reign of national despair.

The catastrophic events that followed the presidential election of 2009, in contrast to speculations made by some political commentators on both Iranian and Western media, did not stop Iranian citizens from showing up again to select their next president in 2013. Perhaps having the memory of the last election in mind, Iranians were as determined as before to elect a president through a democratic process. Moreover, Iranian citizens needed a new president to help the country out of a grim financial crisis. During the final year of Ahmadinejad's second term, Iran's economy was collapsing. Iranian Rial, the official currency of the country, lost 40 percent of its value, the unemployment rate reached 12.63 percent (a steep increase from 2004's 10.3 percent rate), and US-led sanctions contributed to the shortage of basic materials, including food and medicine.[10] In such a depressing climate, Hassan Rouhani, a centrist cleric with a

[9] "Iran Election Live-Blogging (Wednesday June 17)," *HuffPost*, July 18, 2009, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/iran-election-live-bloggi_n_216925.

[10] Andrew Blomfield, "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Concedes Iran Sanctions Hurting Economy," *The Telegraph*, September 5, 2012, https://www.telegraph.co.U.K./news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9523230/Mahmoud-Ahmadinejad-concedes-Iran-sanctions-hurting-economy.html; "Iran: Unemployment Rate from 1998 to 2018," Statista, n.d., https://www.statista.com/statistics/294305/iran-unemployment-rate/.

substantial history of political service, announced his candidacy for the 2013 presidency under the slogan of "Government of Hope and Prudence." Rouhani faced challenges from the right-wing hardliners and their championed candidate, Mohamad Bagher Ghalibaf, the former mayor of Tehran. Yet his flexible ideologies softened some support from the opposing party. Moreover, Rouhani quickly learned that his centrist views were not enough to win reformist and secular votes. Therefore, he changed his centrist tone and incorporated a progressive language that excited millions of people.[11] Centering his governance plan around four steps of resuscitation of Planning and Budget Organization, controlling liquidity and inflation, improving economic growth and decreasing imports, and alleviating global concerns for lifting economic sanctions, Rouhani turned into a popular replacement for President Ahmadinejad.[12] On June 14th, 2013, 72.2 percent of eligible citizens cast ballots and elected Rouhani as the 7th President of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[13] Thousands of Iranian citizens poured into the streets in major cities, this time to celebrate the result of the election. Chanting "Long live reform, long live Rouhani," they all were hopeful for a different Iran that was globally revered and had better living conditions.

It was an effortless decision for younger generations to join the optimism that swept the nation upon Rouhani's victory. The Rial immediately gained more value and the initial changes

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[11] Vali Nasr, "How Hassan Rouhani Won in Iran," *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/iran-election-rouhani-shia/527577/.

[12] BK, "Economic Promises and Plans of Rouhani's Government," DW News, June 17, 2013, https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/وعدها-و-برنامههای-اقتصادی-دولت-حسن-روحانی/a-16887008

[13] "Hassan Rouhani Wins Iran Presidential Election," BBC News, June 15, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22916174.

in the government's foreign policy signaled a determined country seeking a better relationship with Global West. Almost a month after Rouhani's election, Zavarei decided to travel to Iran. As discussed earlier, she was inspired by the recent development in the country to visit her hometown. Zavarei was also homesick. Reflecting on the lost distance between her two homes in Tehran and London, she decided to embark on a journey that could offer her an opportunity to embody that distance. Thus, Zavarei made an arrangement with *Shargh* newspaper to publish a daily column on her experience of encountering borders, cultures, and people, an experience that was lost during her initial flight from Tehran to London.

Shargh is a daily newspaper distributed across Iran. Known as a private and pro-reform newspaper, it has a complicated publication history. The first issue of *Shargh* was published on August 24th, 2003. By incorporating an editorial board of mainly young journalists (average age of under 30), *Shargh* quickly turned into one of the most revered newspapers in Iran.[14] Such popularity among the public, combined with the critical approach for which the editors opted, made Shargh susceptible to extra scrutiny by authoritative forces. I use the term "authoritative forces" because the responsible legal section that oversees the press activities in Iran remains unclear and under the concurrent influence of the government, the judiciary, and the Revolutionary Guard. What is clear, though, is the frequent suspension of the press and detaining of journalists. As a prominent newspaper with a sharp tone, *Shargh* was suspended four times for different reasons, including covering sensitive political events, publishing critical cartoons, and interviewing a lesbian activist-writer.[15]

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[14] "Shargh Daily; The Sad Tale of a Hopeful Generation," BBC Farsi, September 15, 2009, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2009/09/090915_mg_shargh_newspaper_media_history.shtml

[15] "Shargh Daily; The Sad Tale of a Hopeful Generation."

Perhaps the popularity of *Shargh* newspaper, as well as its recorded history of protesting the status quo, were appealing qualities for Zavarei and her daily stories of a body on the move. Zavarei's first writing was published in *Shargh*'s Issue 1784 on July 17th, 2013, under the series title of "From London to Tehran."

I mentioned before that I treat Zavarei's daily columns as performance text and as something close to autobiography, a form that, as Ann Cooper Albright puts it, is "situated at the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation."[16] Zavarei's words are what remains of a body performing a notion of Iranian femininity in a transnational context. My work, in a sense, is similar to the job description Foster writes for a dance historian: "reconstructing in the imagination a version of that dancing body, then producing it on the stage of the written text."[17] Additionally, I consider *Looking for Tehran* as a travel performance that involves quotidian acts of border crossing within various contexts. Therefore, in my discussion of the performance, I examine Zavarei's written columns while remaining cognizant of the physical movement Zavarei experienced across borders.

Iranian Femininity, or How to Destroy Borders

"It has been a while," Zavarei begins the very first column, "that I do not fit in my home anymore." She continues, "…as if I make more sense while being on the move, as if I need to be somewhere else."[18] Then, Zavarei gives a brief discussion of her background as a tourist guide in

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[16] Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 216.

[17] Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography & Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 11.

[18] Saba Zavarei, "How London Turns into Tehran," Magiran, July 17, 2013, https://www.magiran.com/article/2777358. Translated to English by Mohamadreza Babaee.

Iran. Since she was eighteen years old, Zavarei made more than eighty tours around Iran. Her main concern during that time was to record her experiences in the format of photographs and diaries. After a while, by completing that many trips, Zavarei found a new understanding of her body: "When I left Tehran about three years ago, there was an external hard drive in my backpack full of photos and writings about every corner of Iran, a place over which my body had *stretched*."[19]

"Stretched" is an interesting word choice that requires more scrutiny. When I asked Zavarei why she chose that word, she told me about her extensive travel experience. Then she added, during those trips she never thought about herself as being completely away from home. Instead, Zavarei perceived herself as a being that simultaneously was and was not home.[20] Such a self-conscious image of the bodily presence eventually led Zavarei to choose the verb "to stretch" to describe her body. After relocating to London, the stretching found even more significance for Zavarei. Due to her VISA limitations, she could not travel home for three years, even when her grandmother passed away. Feeling trapped inside an isolated island, Zavarei kept thinking about the life that she could have in Iran, had she chosen to never leave home. Such an act of imagination—the constant remembrance of the life that could have been—in addition to her vulnerable living situation as an immigrant inside the U.K. led her to an understanding of "relocation" that was not limited to one place at a time. Rather, Zavarei understood her nomadic

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[19] Saba Zavarei, "How London Turns into Tehran," Magiran, July 17, 2013, https://www.magiran.com/article/2777358, emphasis added.

[20] Saba Zavarei, personal interview with the author. August 22, 2019.

life "as a living that left traces behind; traces of my body and identity, as if I live simultaneous lives."[21]

Zavarei's remarks are reminders of the universalist view of home as discussed by Duyvendak. According to that point of view, the increased mobility of immigrants discourages them from investing in one place as their home. Instead, immigrants get used to a mobile way of life in which one needs to "make many places he or she comes across as particular and personal as possible."[22] While some might interpret such a lifestyle as unstable and fragmented, Zavarei sees continuity in it. Instead of focusing on a body torn between different places, she imagines an elastic body, hovering over two particular places, one in Tehran and one in London. My usage of the term "elastic body" is informed by but different from what Anusha Kedhar describes as a "flexible body." Building her argument upon Aiwha Ong's work in *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (1999), Kedhar asserts that late capitalism forces South Asian dancers to the breaking levels of flexibility both in citizenship and the body. While immigrants choose to adhere to the governing policies of the nation-state to prove their qualifications for being eligible citizens, the ever-demanding job market also compels them to acquire new skills to remain relevant to the free movement of labor. In the case of South Asian dancers, Kedhar states, going through excruciating physical flexibility is among such demanding skills.[23]

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[21] Zavarei, personal interview.

[22] Duyvendak, 13.

[23] Anusha Kedhar, "Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits: Transnational South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism," *Dance Research Journal*, 46, no. 1 (2014): 24.

Without a doubt, Zavarei as an Iranian student in London is required to be legally flexible to meet the demands of residence in the U.K. Yet the state does not seem to explicitly require her to be physically flexible too. What states do usually require of immigrants, however, is an immobile body situated within the culture of surveillance. "While flexible bodies have been mobilized by global capital for cultural production in the global north," Kedhar argues, "their mobility has also been restricted within the nation-state through racial discrimination and strategic regulations on citizenship."[24] When discriminatory U.K. immigration policies forced Zavarei to remain in the country to protect her resident status, she was coerced to engage with a flexible strategy that liberated her mind from bureaucratic imprisonment. Zavarei remembered her elastic state of mind as a tour guide in Iran. In her imagination, she stretched out again, this time between her two homes in London and Tehran. After requiring the documents necessary for leaving the U.K. (which she admits as a privilege), Zavarei chose a way of life that nation-states frown upon: constant movement between borders as if one's body is nowhere but everywhere. Here, elasticity functions as a liberating component that frees Zavarei from total investment in the confines of the borders. Put differently, elasticity —the desire and ability to stretch and adapt—motivates Zavarei to be on the move and to expose the concrete nature of borders as obstacles designed for enforcing immobility.

One should be cautious about understanding Zavarei's commitment to exposing borders as a neoliberal action that is invested in homogeneity and globalization. I see Zavarei's mission for looking into the nature of borders as a conscious choice that seeks to render borders as constructed and not natural dividers. Zavarei does not dismiss the very real function of borders in dividing geographies, communities, cultures, and resources. Instead, she engages with what

[24] Kedhar, "Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits," 24.

dance professor and choreographer Yvonne Hardt calls "debordering," a practice that "does not signify simply the act of dissolving or challenging borders/margins (although it can), and it does not necessarily indicate the total disappearance of them. The term keeps borders implicit as a point of reference to show how they might decompose and how new ones can be erected."[25] As readers find in the description of Zavarei's interaction with diverse people of France, Italy, Greece, and Turkey, the author is adamant about portraying the tension that borders create at different places. Simultaneously, Zavarei is also careful to not treat the tension as a feud based on differences that are innate and irreconcilable.

Before jumping on the train toward her first stop in Paris, Zavarei had to make an appointment with the French Consulate in London. During her interview, Zavarei decided to withhold details about her full itinerary to make the process of issuing travel documents easier. Thus, she included Paris as her only stop outside of the U.K. Upon receiving the proper travel documentation, Zavarei had to prepare for her journey and pack her clothes and other necessary materials. Inside a big backpack, she placed clean sheets, towels, one pair of pants, underwear, one warm layer, camera, notebooks, different creams, and a shampoo bottle. The backpack was so heavy, Zavarei writes, that when she first put it on, she felt like a tortoise.[26] In addition to those material belongings, Zavarei also had to pack her substantial experience of traveling as well as the "joy of transgression and [the] madness of crossing lines."[27]

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[25] Yvonne Hardt, "Alwin Nikolais-Dancing across Borders," in *The Returns of Alwin Nikolais: Bodies, Boundaries and the Dance Canon*, ed. Claudia Gitelma and Randy Martin, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 65.

[26] Saba Zavarei, "Tortoise Was on Her Way," Magiran, July 20, 2013, https://www.magiran.com/article/2779237.

[27] Zavarei, personal interview.

In my interview with Zavarei, she seemed to have a keen interest in the word "trespassing," especially when commenting on border crossing. What were those borders that crossing them was madness for Zavarei? Was she writing about the politics of geographical borders that target immigrants based on their racial profiles? Or was she encountering forces that prohibited her female body from crossing the lines of femininity? Perhaps answering such questions needs inquiring after the dangers for which female bodies need to prepare while on the move. Here, I am less concerned with the frequent travel hazards with which people of all genders deal (getting lost, being robbed, losing luggage, etc.) and more with structural limitations that women face. As Valerie Briginshaw writes, travel is a gendered performance that has historically required women to be static and that confines them to domestic spaces close to home. Whenever a woman's role is acknowledged in travels, it is usually limited to marginalized and degrading spaces such as tourism and sex trafficking.[28] Within such a historical context, Zavarei's movement is in contrast with what historical prescriptions afford women. She chooses to break free from domestic travel politics, venture outside of her comfort zone, and be onward to an eastward journey. It is also important to make note of Zavarei's nationality. As a woman born in Iran, Zavarei's travel is a countermove against racist assumptions that take Middle Eastern women as complete victims of the so-called Islamic patriarchy. Fighting against such misinformed beliefs, Zavarei is a good example of feminist women in Iran who, contrary to the public western view, are determined to trespass the bounds of the domesticated womanhood. By moving across borders (both geographical and gendered), Zavarei becomes, to use Sara Ahmed's word, a "global agent" whose feminism achieves transnational levels.[29]

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[28] Valerie A Briginshaw, *Dance, Space, and Subjectivity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 29.

[29] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 164.

Similarly, Zavarei's movement is in contrast to the static notion of home, a fixed place to which women belong. In her search for embodying the distance between two homes, Zavarei engages with an understanding of home that is dynamic and in-between. Indeed, in-betweenness is emblematic of immigrant life. It is in the distance between two places (homeland and hostland) that immigrants, as Ahmed writes, find home:

> The movement between homes allows Home to become a fetish, to be separated from the particular worldly space of living here, through the possibility of some memories and the impossibility of others. In such a narrative journey, then, the space that is most like home, which is most comfortable and familiar, is not the space of inhabitance – I am here – but the very space in which one is almost, but not quite, at home. In such a space, the subject has a destination, an itinerary, indeed a future, but in having such a destination, has not yet arrived.[30]

It is in the walk toward home that immigrants find their place of residence. Always on the move, they look forward to a place that they could call Home, but as Ahmed contends, they never arrive at that place. Borderland, instead, welcomes immigrants and gives them a place of inhabitance, a place that is "in a constant state of transition" and houses "the prohibited and forbidden" ones, "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the *mulato*, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.'"[31] Once again, a universalist position about home is at work here. Home is not attached to a specific place. Rather, home, as E. Patrick Johnson calls it, is a "temporal space," a vantage point from which "I can see most clearly and perhaps perform my transgressions, my border crossing, with a sense of purpose and ethics."[32]

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[30] Ahmed, *Strange* Encounters, 78.

[31] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.

[32] E. Patrick Johnson, "Border Intellectual: Performing Identity at the Crossroads," in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 159.

When Zavarei arrived in Paris, a border officer inside the train station asked for her documents and fingerprints. Zavarei obliged and then left the station to take her first step inside the Schengen Area.[33] She was immediately attracted to various dining chairs and tables scattered in front of multiple restaurants and cafés. Along with an old friend, she walked through the streets of Paris, paying special attention to what the touristic atmosphere of Paris might conceal. Unlike the areas popular among tourists, Zavarei writes, many parts of Paris are imbued by a tension between French nationals and mainly Algerian immigrants. It seemed interesting to Zavarei how immigrants had changed the looks of those areas to make them more familiar and exercise a sense of ownership over them. Numerous hair salons with Arabic signs on their fronts, stores that offered cheap phone service plans that could reach North African countries, and pro-diversity graffiti on the walls, they all had created a Paris that belonged to the immigrants.[34]

Immigrants' claiming of a space is a topic that I fully discuss subsequently in this chapter in my analysis of *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*. For now, it is important to pay attention to the politics of diaspora and how they influence the architecture of the city and the identity of its denizens. Intrigued by this notion, I was curious to know how such politics influenced Zavarei's identity as an Iranian woman. In her response, Zavarei first made sure to communicate her thoughts regarding the constructed nature of gender and how she felt hybrid at all times. Then, she added:

> It's normally social and political situations that make me a woman…In London, there are days that I'm genderless. I'm not conscious of my genitalia or what I'm wearing. In

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[33] An area comprising most European states and with no internal border control.

[34] Saba Zavarei, "From Immigrants' Paris to Alps Mountains," Magiran, July 23, 2013, https://www.magiran.com/article/2781835.

> France, it was quite similar, although people were more comfortable making eye contact, and making me think [that] I exist. Things were different in Italy.[35]

In Italy, Zavarei continued, it was easier for people to make eye contact with strangers. That by itself was not an issue, but when those stares were combined with being frequently catcalled, Zavarei became conscious of her gender. Such a feeling was further intensified when during her stay at a house in the city of Bari, Zavarei had to deal with her host's inappropriate behavior, including consuming drugs and alcohol and inviting four other men to the house.[36] Although it is important to resist making any quick generalization about the entire cultures of different countries, Zavarei claimed that she was made more and more aware of her gender identity the closer she got to Iran.[37]

On a ferry toward Greece, for example, Zavarei was asked by some fellow travelers where she was originally from. After saying Iran, the travelers were surprised that an Iranian woman could be this far from home on her own. Zavarei's encounter with gendered stimuli also continued in Turkey. As Iran's neighboring country, Turkey has a long relationship with Iran. Separate from significant periods of conflict—ancient and recent—both countries have had a great impact on each other's cultures. From architecture to language, Iran and Turkey share many similarities less prevalent around the world. Turkey is also one of the main destinations for Iranian tourists. It was a gendered act, however, that made Zavarei most aware of being close to home: women wearing a hijab.[38] While exploring the streets of Istanbul, the ubiquitous image of

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[35] Zavarei, personal interview.

[36] The explicit details of the incident are missing from Zavarei's column published on August 7, 2013.

[37] Zavarei, personal interview.

[38] Saba Zavarei, "Istanbul the Middle East, A Labyrinth with No Dead-End," Magiran, September 12, 2013, https://www.magiran.com/article/2811608.

women covering their hair was a strong impetus for Zavarei to remember her native gendered identity. Zavarei told me that the overall atmosphere in Istanbul, although vibrant and fascinating, made her conscious of her short garments and subsequently led to an uncomfortable feeling.

During her travel, Zavarei's gender identity was influenced by different social, political, and cultural experiences. In Italy, she was catcalled. In Greece, she had to prove herself as not a stereotypical example of Iranian women. In Turkey, she was made aware of revealing her body. All those moments constituted Zavarei's body as female, and she had to maneuver around such a perceived representation as someone who believed in gendered hybridity.

But how could Zavarei resist her gender assignment by others? Can one constitute her body in a way different from her gendered hailings? Cooper Albright addresses this inquiry through her discussion of the "double moment" of representation, a moment during which bodies are "both objects of the representation and subjects of their own experience."[39] According to this point of view, "bodies are both producing and being produced by cultural discourses of gender, race, ability, sexuality, and age."[40] Unlike what Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2011), Albright contends that there could be "slippage between the lived body and its cultural representation, between a somatic identity (the experience of one's physicality) and a cultural one (how one's body—skin, gender, ability, age, etc.—renders meaning in society."[41] While marginalized bodies are historically restricted to the

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[39] Albright, 13.

[40] Albright, xxiii.

[41] Albright, 4.

"material conditions of their bodies," Albright continues, they can practice a different cultural understanding of their bodies in society.[42] Inspired by these remarks, I contend that despite numerous gendered hailings to which Zavarei responds, she also creates a sense of Iranian woman identity that is in contrast to the mainstream representation of female Middle Eastern bodies. I have already discussed one evidence for this argument when addressing the gender politics of travel. Indeed, by being away from home, Zavarei is already working against gendered assumptions about spaces in which women belong. Even more so, I argue that it is the direction of Zavarei's travel that resists both racial and gender stereotypes. As Zavarei repeatedly mentioned in our conversation, the eastward direction of her travel is the opposite route many Middle Eastern refugees and immigrants choose. While many individuals choose to move to the west to find better living conditions, Zavarei goes the other way. At first, it might seem that, as an immigrant, Zavarei has succumbed to the xenophobic sentiment that expects immigrants to go back to their native countries. However, a closer look at Zavarei's everyday interaction creates a strong sense of Iranian womanhood that breaks down the borders that define such a subjectivity. Zavarei's move is unpredicted and challenging to the obstacles that hamper any westward travel for immigrants. Similarly, her unapologetically Iranian and female body on the move questions facile assumptions about what Iranian and female bodies are capable of doing. Therefore, although she is repeatedly hailed as a woman and Iranian through stereotyped assumptions, it is Zavarei's control over the direction of her movement that constitutes her identity positively as a woman and Iranian.

Zavarei's last column, published on September 15th, 2013, is about her experience of crossing the Turkish border to Iran. Ironically, it is in this column that readers witness the most

[42] Albright, 6.

challenging experience of border crossing for Zavarei. It is important to note that Zavarei could freely move across the European countries of France, Italy, and Greece because of her Schengen VISA. Iranian passport holders are also immediately offered a tourist VISA upon arriving at Turkish borders. Iran, on the other hand, enforces stricter laws within its borders. Such enforcements are especially strong at commercial ports of entry. When the bus stopped at the border security check station, Zavarei writes, she had to join a long line. While waiting for her documents to be processed, she witnessed numerous people struggling to acquire a permit for importing a few materials for their small businesses. Border officers, Zavarei writes, seemed both easy-going and intimidating. She also mentions a moment when an officer had to resort to force and stop people who were trying to cross the border with more merchandise than the allowed limit. After waiting for three hours in the line, Zavarei received a stamp in her passport and was welcomed to Iran. As she took the first step inside Iran, she noticed Hassan Rouhani on the Iranian National Television, giving his first speech as the new President of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[43]

Zavarei told me that a part of her last column, which included the above-described events, was censored in *Shargh* newspaper. Curious about the content, I asked her to explain what was deleted from the published draft. In November 2012, Zavarei published a poetry book in Sweden for which she could not receive a publication permit in Iran. The book gained attention from some broadcast networks, which the Iranian state considered *mona'ed* (enemy of the state). After appearing on those programs as a guest speaker, Zavarei knew she could end up

[43] Saba Zavarei, "Allo Baba, I Iran...," Magiran, September 15, 2013, https://www.magiran.com/article/2813300.

on some sort of a security list.[44] After receiving the entry stamp on her passport at the Turkish border in northwest Iran, Zavarei got back on the bus only to be stopped a few miles later. A police officer got on the bus and called her name. Zavarei followed the officer into a small room with a desk and two chairs and framed pictures of the late and current Supreme Leaders hung on the wall. The officer asked, "What do you do? Where do you live?" Zavarei answered patiently, and the officer wrote everything on a piece of paper. Zavarei describes that moment to me as if she was dragging her fingernails on a cement wall. "That was my home," she said, "but it felt as if they built this wall around it…They patronized me, humiliated me to feel as if I'm a criminal."[45] In the meantime, Zavarei's family and friends were waiting for her to cross the border and get to Tehran. They were ready, Zavarei remembered, to run a campaign in protest to her possible detention. After more questions and answers, the officer finally let Zavarei go.

The rest of the last column deals with the moment when Zavarei arrived at the bus station in Tehran. She was immediately approached by numerous taxi drivers who offered her a ride. In the meantime, she also heard some men catcalling her. "More than ever," Zavarei writes as her final words, "I get aware of my gender. As if I am wrong. In that time and space, with a backpack with the size of a tortoise, I am still a woman, I am wrong."[46] Zavarei's parents picked her up, and they moved toward their home. When they arrived, Zavarei reached for a key she had not used in three years. She opened the door and thought: "When one leaves her home once, one

[44] Zavarei, personal interview.

[45] Zavarei, personal interview.

[46] Zavarei, "Allo."

is always homeless. She cannot settle down anymore. She needs to go and stretch; she needs to cross."[47]

Zavarei's travel from London to Tehran was a performance of embodying home. While she moved across borders, Zavarei sought to embody the space she lost during her initial flight to the U.K. In seeking home, Zavarei found many borders that separated people around the world. Some borders were geographical, and some were sociopolitical. The borders determined how Zavarei perceived self and as such, they required her to move in specific manners. While borders choreographed Zavarei's body, she was not simply an object being passively shaped by borders. With her eastward movement, Zavarei was committed to challenging the constructed nature of borders and questioning their authority. Anytime she was encountered with a choreographic move, Zavarei responded to it carefully and consciously. Her determination in overthrowing assumptions about what a woman from Iran could do was a strong countermove to the dictatorship of borders. The closer she got to one home, the more racial and gendered stereotypes Zavarei had to break. She was a conscious body who refused to give in to scenarios that ask immigrants to stay motionless. Similarly, Zavarei rejected the domestication of female bodies by being always on the move.

Home for Zavarei is nowhere. Or perhaps, home is where it is not. In between countries, on a bus, a train, or a ferry, on a dingy couch in Southern Italy, or a friend's house in Turkey. It is the liminality of the space, as Ahmed discusses, that makes the place homelike. Immigrants never arrive at Home, they are perpetually on their way to a place that one day might become home. In the meantime, Home remains in distance, in the field of memory, nationality, and identity. Such memories were what drove Zavarei to look for her home in Tehran. She hoped that

[47] Zavarei, Allo.

one day she could return to the place that she was born, nurtured, and matured. But Zavarei explains in her last column that even though she got to the place in which she was raised, she did not feel at home. Feeling lost, Zavarei then decided to wander in the streets of Tehran for a place that she could call home.[48]

The condition of homelessness that Zavarei realized after concluding her travel should not be taken as a sign of desperation. Rather, homelessness troubles the fixed understanding of home and facilitates an imagination of the world less concerned with the rigidity of the borders. As anthropologist Shahram Khosravi contends, only in the condition of homelessness "is humanity not territorialized and can the plagues inherent in the nation-state system vanish and the 'botanical' way of thinking about human beings, in terms of roots, and the uncritical link between individuals and territory fade away."[49] While it is impossible to ignore the neoliberalist premise of Khosravi's contention,[50] it is interesting to see how such a view of homelessness is brought forth during Zavarei's travel performance. Zavarei's constant challenging of borders is what motivates her to march forward toward home. In the end, it is in these border crossings, and not in her final destination, that she finds a place to invest.

Looking for Tehran shows the complexity of a relationship that some immigrants develop with the concept of home. Zavarei consistently moves toward her home in Tehran, but she never

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[48] For a full account of Zavarei's search of a home in Tehran, that was made immediately after she concluded her three-week travel performance, see Saba Zavarei, "Sleeping with Tehran," *Performance Research* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 79–82.

[49] Shahram Khosravi, *'Illegal' traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 95-6.

[50] For instance, Alan J. Spector argues that globalization and deterritorialization encourages colonial and imperial behaviors. See Alan J. Spector, "Globalization or Imperialism? Neoliberal Globalization in the Age of Capitalist Imperialism," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 33 (2007): 7–26.

arrives. To her, home becomes a non-place, always at distance and not locatable at specific geography. While a universalist view can be used to discuss such a perspective of home in *Looking for Tehran*, the particularist view offers a more grounded understanding of home, one with which home is a specific place that could be revisited upon leaving it. To explore the particularist perspective further, I focus on Mohamad Hafez and Ahmed Badr's multimedia installation, *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, in the next section.

Performing (In)visible Bodies in *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*

While Zavarei looked for her home during her travel performance, home is brought to the immigrants in *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage.* What could such a relocation do to the place-related politics of home is a question that I explore in the following pages. By looking at the dioramas of home contained inside different suitcases of the installation, I argue that the recreation of refugees' homes could be an empowering choice with liberating opportunities for both the immigrants and the audience.

Figure 2. The suitcases of *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*. Photo courtesy of Mohamad Hafez, www.unpackedrefugee.com.

A cluster of suitcases on the floor (Figure 2) welcomes the audience to the multimedia installation *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, on display late April–October 2019 at the Keller

Center at the University of Chicago. A note close to the suitcases reads: "2 Artists. 10 Suitcases. 10 Real Stories." Above the note, a small touchscreen plays an introductory video. It begins with the installation's two artists narrating the story of their travel to the US while showing a few behind-the-scenes clips. First, the audience can hear the voice of Mohamad Hafez, a Syrian-born architect and artist, who talks about his sister and brother-in-law and their efforts to seek refuge in Sweden in 2014. Then, Ahmed Badr, a writer and former refugee from Iraq, begins the story of a bomb that hit his house in Baghdad during the invasion of Iraq by US-led forces in 2006. Afterward, the stories lead to the introduction of the artists and their collaborative mission in collecting the stories of refugees resettled in the US. For this project, Badr spoke to several refugee families to learn about their struggles and triumphs. Hafez sculpturally re-created parts of those stories in different suitcases. The video concludes with the artists' artistic statement: "Changing the narratives about refugees is a personal goal for both of us," Hafez asserts. Badr continues, "We hope that through this exhibition, we can redefine and expand the meaning of the word *refugee*."[51]

The mass of suitcases on the floor is the first artwork of the installation. Unlike the other suitcases, these do not belong to one refugee family and no diorama accompanies them. The suitcases were donated mainly by second-generation Jewish Americans, whose grandparents immigrated to the US decades ago to escape genocide in Europe.[52] Behind the mass of suitcases

[51] "Unpacked: Refugee Baggage," Vimeo, 1:48, uploaded by Mohamad Hafez, September 7, 2017, https://vimeo.com/232924010.

[52] "Unpacked: Refugee Baggage," YouTube, 2:12, posted by "Harvard Divinity School," May 21, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkdoM2I4jeM.

is a long white wall, functioning as the mounting board for nine suitcases,[53] each dedicated to a refugee family resettled in New Haven, Connecticut. The refugees are diverse in race and ethnicity, coming from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Sudan, and Syria. These suitcases, with open mouths, reside under separate spotlights, filled with dioramas that represent the last images the refugees could remember about their homes. Next to each suitcase is a pair of headphones and an information label. The labels have a photo at the top, typically depicting the portrait of the refugee(s) whose story is communicated through the headphones. The ten suitcases, along with the headphones and labels, comprise the contents of *Unpacked*, an installation that started at New Haven's Art Space in 2017, and since then has been shown in different venues, including Yale University's Whitney Humanities Center (October 2017), UNICEF headquarters at NYC (December 2017), the World Bank in Washington, DC (June 2018), and the Julliard School in New York City (January 2019).

Through careful incorporation of interviews and detailed visual representations, *Unpacked* performs a series of stories about refugees and their homes. In this project, home is a specific place that immigrants value. Therefore, unlike my incorporation of the universalist view in the study of Zavarei's travel performance, I use the particularist perspective here to investigate home as places that "continue to matter as they provide a sense of 'home' in an increasingly turbulent world."[54] Home as a specific place is re-created throughout the installation and it is put on display to perform refugee narratives. Understanding the performances of home carried

[53] During my visit to the University of Chicago, I realized that one suitcase, "Azhaar & Fouad: A Father's Pride," was missing from the installation. After following up with the Keller Center staff, I was directed to another building, where the suitcase was displayed. Since I was told that the Azhaar suitcase is usually displayed next to the rest of the suitcases, I decided to design my report to conform to the usual order of the suitcases in the gallery.

[54] Duyvendak, 10.

through the exhibition is at the center of my focus in this section. What happens when refugees' homes are recreated in performance and are enacted for the audience in the current context of the heightened anti-immigration sentiment? I argue that by bringing the dioramas of different home(land)s to the place of their exhibition, Hafez and Badr disrupt the exclusive imagination of the galleries as places located only in the US. Believing that racial structures undergird construction and negotiation of any place, the place-related disruption that the suitcases of *Unpacked* perform regarding the concept of home is an empowering act for refugees and their claim over the hostland.

I begin by discussing Robin Bernstein's theorization of "scriptive things" to describe how the suitcases of *Unpacked* script (i.e., create movement) in the bodies and minds of the audience. Then, I use the ideas put forward by Peggy Phelan to draw attention to the absence of physical bodies in the installation. I juxtapose Phelan's remarks with a nonbiological discussion of the body, mainly offered by Diana Taylor. After expanding the definition of body as a collection of social practices, I use the concept of *imagined places*, put forward by Ernst van Alphen, to study *Unpacked* in relation to the place-making function of the suitcases and their racial significance.

While I discuss all the suitcases of the installation throughout this section, I emphasize five to fully illustrate my arguments. I use the "Maher: A Broken Camera" suitcase to argue that the scriptive function of the suitcases of *Unpacked* is not limited to physical movements and that it also creates imaginative acts among the audience. The "Ayman & Ghena: A Coffee Cup" suitcase serves as an example that illuminates how the suitcases effectively perform the underrepresented minoritarian subject of the refugee by including no human figurines. I extend this argument to also discuss the cultural meaning of "bodies," best exemplified in the "Fereshteh: A Secret School" suitcase. I then shift my focus to study the sociopolitical

significance of *Unpacked* in relation to the larger place of the exhibition, the US. I use the "Badr Family: A Bombed House" and "Um Shaham: War and a Burnt Car" suitcases to conclude that the suitcases of the installation perform a negotiation of place, which, in fact, is a negotiation of race.

Unpacked is a multimedia installation by two Middle Eastern artists who are active in the US diaspora. As such, the project fits the purview of my study in this dissertation. That said, the suitcases of the project are not only about refugees from the Middle East. Rather, the installation represents a diversity of immigrants with roots in various geographies. As such, I use an ethnicity-focused language in my analysis of the installation to prevent an appropriation of non-Middle Eastern stories.

The Suitcase as a Scriptive Thing

Exhibitions inscribe bodies with knowledge by encouraging specific movements from the audience. A small label next to a painting urges audience members to get closer and gain contextual knowledge about the painting. Similarly, a bench facing a projected waterfall invites audience members to bend their knees and sit on the bench to reflect upon the displayed object. Such a choreography of bodies is essential to the epistemological function of exhibitions and is vital to reading exhibitions as performance. Robin Bernstein calls the ability of displayed items to create movement among bodies the "scriptive" behavior of "things."[55] Bernstein uses Bill Brown's "thing theory" to distinguish between an object and a thing.[56] An object is always looked through and beyond itself. It is a situation wherein a chunk of materials holds less to no

[55] Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text 101* 27, no. 4 (2009): 69.

[56] See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 1–22.

value in comparison to the duty that humans expect of it. On the other hand, things are capable of influencing human behavior. In other words, things are objects that have moved beyond their intended function. The peculiar quality of their usefulness beckons the curious body to a dance, troubled and uncodified in the absence of subject-object relations. Through such a process, things doctor human behavior; they script bodies to do something.

The suitcases of *Unpacked*, hung on the wall, transcend their functionality. They are not to be picked up and carried to places both familiar and strange. Instead, they invite the audience for a closer encounter. With their peculiar design, the suitcases seduce audience members into walking toward them. For example, upon first arrival at the wall, audience members find themselves inside Azhaar and Fouad's home in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan. The small scale of the dioramas necessitates more scrutiny, and thus, more movement from the audience. One audience member might squint her eyes to find small holes on the wall, perhaps a reminder of the war from which Azhaar and Fouad fled, or maybe a sign of natural decay in abandoned buildings. A similar scriptive act could lead the audience to notice something eerie in another suitcase, called "Maher: A Broken Camera." Here, an old television, displaying a frozen frame of an animated cartoon, is placed next to a child's tricycle. Adjacent is a blanket with a pair of feet protruding beneath it (Figure 3). The scene speaks of horrors, all framed under the prominent element of the stage, the photograph of a boy's face, and a hand that is keeping his mouth shut.

It is only through listening to the attached audio recording that the audience can make sense of the home recreated in the Maher suitcase. Badr begins the narrative by stating that Maher is a photographer and filmmaker from Iraq. When asked about his favorite photograph, Amjad describes the framed photograph inside the suitcase and tells the audience about a boy who was kidnapped in his neighborhood. After the boy's family refused to pay the ransom

money, they found the dead body of their son in front of their house. Maher concludes the narrative by stating that he re-created the photograph to tell the story of that boy.

Figure 3. "Maher: A Broken Camera" suitcase, *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*. Photo courtesy of Mohamad Hafez, www.unpackedrefugee.com.

It is through the thoughtful arrangement of the suitcases and the headphones that one comes to understand *Unpacked* not merely as a display of material things; rather, the suitcases perform specific social and cultural settings related to the notion of home. The interpretive distance between the content of the audio recordings and the visual items of each suitcase is traversed in the minds of audience members. I argue that such an imaginative movement is also a component of the scriptive behavior of the suitcases. The dioramas, mainly free of any human figurines, propel the audience to rely on their imagination. Such a move, reinforced by the immediacy of prerecorded narratives, adds to the performative experience of attending *Unpacked*.

The covered body in the Maher suitcase is the closest the installation comes to showing human figurines inside the dioramas. The absence of human bodies is a prominent feature of the installation. Such an artistic choice could appear contradictory to what Hafez and Badr aim to achieve: making visible the lives of refugees and immigrants. How can one do so when no refugee is visible inside the suitcases? In the following section, I address this seeming contradiction by emphasizing the significance of invisibility and expanding the definition of the "body" as something not purely physical. I contend that, compared to a piece of live theatre, the suitcases of the installation more effectively perform the underrepresented subject of immigrants by refraining from representing them through physical presence on stage.

Invisible Bodies and Cultural Practices

Those who wield power in society enjoy more visibility. In other words, more societal power typically leads to more prevalence in representations of the powerful entity. In the US, for instance, it is easy to find examples of white, heteropatriarchal representatives in governing branches. The same holds true regarding theatre and media representations. As bell hooks states regarding African American identity, there is a clear connection between "the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy" and "the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people."[57] Similarly, Peggy Phelan argues that visibility has become an exclusive place for establishing and enforcing white and heterosexual policies that govern the structures of performance and representation.[58] According to this point of view,

[57] bell hooks, *black looks: race and representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 17.

[58] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2003), 6.

visibility does not garner the underrepresented more agency in social and political contexts. Instead, it leads to a process in which the binary of majority and minority, white and the Other, "us" and "them," is further consolidated. The minoritarian subject, Phelan continues, should incorporate an "active vanishing" strategy to rupture this monolithic politic of representation.[59] It is only through remaining unmarked that the disenfranchised subject could draw attention to the politics of loss and absence.[60]

I argue that the suitcases of *Unpacked* perform a political performance in which the literal invisibility of the minoritarian subjects facilitates a discussion of who does and does not get to be onstage. From this view, the dioramas of *Unpacked*, empty of (material) immigrant bodies, do not appear as ineffective representations of home. Rather, they perform an active absence and invite reflections on invisible subjects. For instance, the audio recording attached to the "Amjad: A White Car" suitcase reveals the oppressive practices performed by the Syrian secret police during the 2011 Syrian Civil War. Amjad explains the story of his neighbor's son while introducing the white Peugeot 405 as the preferred vehicle for the secret police. The audio file speaks of the police as well as the neighbor and Amjad himself, none of whom appear inside the diorama. The audience is left only with a miniature replica of the white car, parked before a rusted, blue building. In this way, the Amjad suitcase performs a narrative about the disappeared bodies of the protestors, apprehended by the secret police as well as the silencing force of the oppression practiced by the Syrian government.

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[59] Phelan, *Unmarked*, 19.

[60] Phelan does not suggest that invisibility should be the political agenda for the minority. Rather, the disenfranchised should embrace the real power of remaining unmarked. See Phelan, 6.

A similar reading of absent bodies can be applied to the "Ayman and Ghena: A Coffee Cup" suitcase (Figure 4). The diorama shows a living room with an aquamarine sofa at the center. One wooden chair sits at the (stage) right of the sofa, and another is about to fall from the open mouth of the suitcase at left. A wooden coffee table, with a white coffeepot and two brown ceramic cups, is placed right in front of the sofa. Next to the right chair is a sewing machine on a small cabinet. The furniture stands in front of two closets, painted in light blue and adorned with Islamic plant motifs. Between the two closets, one can see a decorative pot and a purple flower inside a silver vase. Below them lies a cooking pot with a lid. The whole diorama is covered in dust, yet the dominant color of blue in the diorama should not be taken lightly. According to Jamal-E-Din Mehdi Nejad, E. Zarghami, and Ali Sadeghi HabibAbad, blue is a holy color in

Figure 4. "Ayman and Ghena: A Coffee Cup" suitcase, *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*. Photo courtesy of Mohamad Hafez, www.unpackedrefugee.com.

some Islamic cultures. The sacred implications of blue, Mehdi Nejad and others argue, explain the usage of the color in the decoration and design of some mosques.[61] Given this, the grim

[61] Jamal-E-Din, Mehdi Nejad, E. Zarghami, and Ali Sadeghi HabibAbad, "A Study on the Concepts and Themes of Color and Light in the Exquisite Islamic Architecture," *Journal of Fundamental and Applied Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2016): 1084.

understanding of the dusty home in the Ayman suitcase is contradicted by the serenity of the color blue.

It is also important to pay attention to the dilapidated edges of the diorama. The rubble and exposed wires on the edges perform the forced relocation of a Syrian home to the site of the exhibition in the US. The house belongs to another part of the world, but it is carried to the site of the exhibition to remind one middle-class Syrian family and the exhibition attendees of home. Additionally, the rubble and exposed wires perform a narrative of the Syrian Civil War that has defaced the Syrian terrain and destroyed many homes. The poor conditions of the edges of the diorama enact the way that memories fade over time. What the audience sees inside the suitcase is a memory of home, decayed through the repetitive act of remembrance.

The coffeepot and cups are also significant components of the suitcase. As they sit on the table, they represent a domestic scene in everyday Syrian life, when family members sit around the table and drink coffee or tea. Yet no family member is seen inside the suitcase. The relatively clean condition of the teapot strikes me as if the inhabitants of the living room had to leave immediately. What happened that disturbed a family gathering and forced the suitcase into a ghostly condition? Who are these ghosts, haunting the suitcase?

The audio file attached to the suitcase answers some of these questions. Upon listening to the recording, one finds out about Ayman and Ghena, two teenage siblings from Homs, Syria. Badr begins the narrative by informing listeners about the geopolitical importance of Homs as one of the early cities impacted by the Syrian Civil War. Ayman then remembers the night he had to leave their home forever. In a thick accent, he says: "My grandpa, he wokes[62] us up and

[62] In an attempt to represent the narratives as accurately as possible, I deliberately forgo marking the recorded syntax errors.

he said, 'We have to leave right now! The army's coming!'"[63] Ayman says that he did not have time even to wash his face. Moreover, Ayman remembers his mother leaving the coffeepot and cups on the table. At this point, the audio file has given enough information to understand the suitcase and its absent bodies. The Syrian Civil War appears as the urgent reason behind the immediate evacuation of the living room. The immediacy of the horror of war propels the inhabitants of the suitcase to run for their lives. Had Hafez included human figurines of Ayman, Ghena, and their family inside the suitcase, the impetus for reading the suitcase as a visualization of the refugee experience might have been lost. The absent bodies of Ayman, Ghena, and their family perform violent displacement resulting from a dreadful war. It is through their absence that the bodies of Ayman, Ghena, and their family hold significance. Here, invisibility tells more about the minoritarian subject than visibility. Put differently, the invisible bodies of the immigrants perform the experience of living as a refugee, forced out of home.

The absence of bodies in the Ayman and Ghena suitcase helps to recognize the embodiment of forced migration. One might see a paradox in this function of the installation: if there is no body, how can one come to know the experience of the immigrant body? If *Unpacked* helps to recognize the dramatic experience of migration, are not those experiences made visible through the installation? How can an absence speak to the presence of experience? If absent, how are bodies, as Phelan argues, (un)marked?

Phelan's ideas of invisibility are connected to a physical understanding of bodies. Diana Taylor, however, considers bodies more than flesh and skin. In her discussion of Emilio Carballido's play *Yo, tambien hablo de la rosa* (*I, Too, Speak of the Rose*, Mexico, 1965), Taylor

[63] Ahmed Badr, "Ayman & Ghena: A Coffee Cup," *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, https://www.unpackedrefugee.com/ayman-ghena.

reads the still body of a character ("the Intermediary") as "the site of convergence binding the individual with the collective" and asks, "How does one come to inhabit and envision one's body as coextensive with one's environment and one's past, emphasizing the porous nature of skin rather than its boundedness?"[64] Emphasizing the function of bodies in creating cultural meanings in both personal and collective settings, Taylor introduces the readers to the concept of the "repertoire" as a collection of embodied memories that reveals and constitutes a culture.[65] Such an understanding of bodies facilitates their conception as both physical and cultural. As the individual and biological lifespans of bodies chronologically decay, the peripheries of bodies expand in the form of culture, carried over generations.

If one looks at the suitcases of *Unpacked* through the lens Taylor offers for the cultural understanding of bodies, one can realize the efficacy of bodies for making visible the experience of immigrants. The suitcases lack the visual representation of biophysical bodies. However, they contain bigger bodies: diverse repertoires of Afghan, Congolese, Iraqi, Sudanese, and Syrian lives. For instance, the "Fereshteh: A Secret School" suitcase contains no biophysical sign of Fereshteh—an Afghan teacher in Tehran—nor her undocumented Afghan students, who had to be educated in secret due to the Iranian government's xenophobic policies. What is shown, however, is the round, framed Islamic calligraphy on the wall, displaying the names of Allah and of the Prophet Muhammad. Similarly, one can see the small, white Qur'an on the bookshelf, below which lies a green doily with *Allah* written on it in yellow. Such details, reinforced by the direct mentioning of Fereshteh's strong Muslim faith in the suitcase note, perform a rich Islamic

[64] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 82.

[65] Taylor, 20.

Afghan repertoire in diaspora. Through this perspective, the Fereshteh suitcase is not a thing untouched by the embodied experience of refugees. The suitcase, in fact, is permeated with what a cultural body of an Afghan teacher and her students could look like in a secret school in Iran.

In sum, not having a representation of physical bodies does not mean that the suitcases of *Unpacked* are empty of any bodies. Each diorama contains many details about the cultural meanings of bodies. Invisibility is an effective performance element throughout the installation. The subject of *Unpacked* is refugees, an underrepresented body of immigrants who face many limitations in the US, including restricted access to social and cultural spaces. Accordingly, the refugees are shunned from having a physical presence on the various stages of *Unpacked*, the suitcases. Yet the intricate designs of the dioramas and their accompanying audio recordings perform a rich understanding of the refugees' extended bodies, their diverse cultures. Therefore, the suitcases of *Unpacked* are each a cultural performance about underrepresented immigrants who were forced to leave their homes.

My reading of the suitcases of the installation also resonates with the particularist view of home and the practices that Duyvendak describes as "mobile home strategies." Since we live in an ever-changing world, people need a particular place to feel attached. Therefore, the mobile person engages with a set of practices to "particularize one's material world."[66] The repertoire of activities communicated through the suitcases of *Unpacked* (e.g., Amjad's taking photos of his neighborhood and Ayman and Ghena drinking tea with their family around a table) represent instances of "mobile home strategies" as discussed by Duyvendak. In the next section, I examine more examples to ask what could be the sociopolitical significance of such practices as performed in a country that is historically hostile toward immigrants.

[66] Duyvendak, 13.

Imagined Homes

"Place" should not be considered a preconceived notion with stable characteristics. The renowned geographer Tim Cresswell troubles the fixed understanding of "place" and defines it as an "unstable stage for performance," wherein social practices occur to produce identity.[67] Performing social practices, Cresswell continues, constitutes new places.[68] Earlier I discussed that the suitcases of *Unpacked* perform various practices, and, as such, produce specific understandings of different cultures. What, then, happens to the place of the exhibition when the last images of refugees' homes are memorialized through the installation? It is my argument that the dioramas of *Unpacked*, representing the refugees' homes, disturb the consideration of the place of their exhibition as only American and contribute to a multicultural environment in which the refugees have equal claim over the land.

Look, for instance, at the "Badr Family: A Bombed House" suitcase, a diorama that represents the home of the installation's co-creator, Ahmed Badr. The diorama (Figure 5) displays a domestic scene, comprised of three different rooms. A small kitchen is on the stage right. A stove and charred refrigerator lean against the back wall. On top of the stove is a cabinet, with a metal cover, adorned in Islamic plant motifs. Another (white) cabinet sits to the left. Beneath that, at the kitchen front, three torn gas canisters can be seen. The bathroom is the room on the left side of the diorama. In symmetry with the kitchen, a cabinet with the same metal cover is on the back wall. Beneath it rests a rusted, white tub. At the front of the tub and leaned against the right wall, one can see the toilet and the vanity. A living room connects the bathroom

[67] Tim Cresswell, "Introduction," in *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*, ed. Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 25.

[68] Cresswell, "Introduction," 25.

to the kitchen at the center of the diorama. A Qur'anic verse, calligraphed in a golden-color font and framed in golden wood, covers a big area of the back wall. The verse reads, *Inna ma'a al'osre yosra* ("For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease").[69] The center foreground shows a

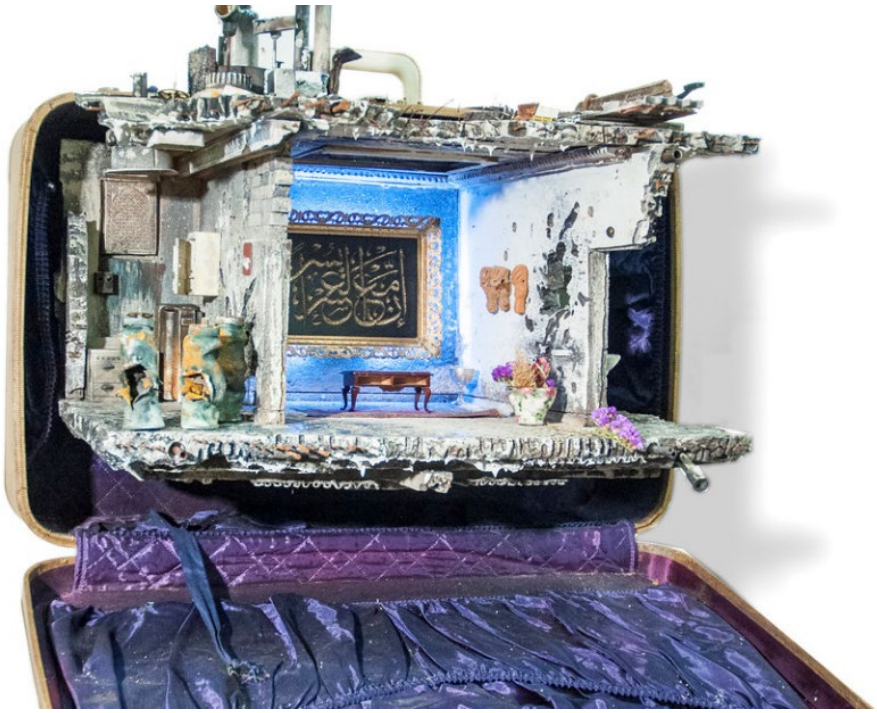

Figure 5. "Badr Family: A Bombed House" suitcase, *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*. Photo courtesy of Mohamad Hafez, www.unpackedrefugee.com.

purple flower, blooming out of a white vase. There are also two big holes, one on top of the flower vase, in the middle of the wall, and another in the kitchen wall, just next to the gas canisters.

The audio recording details the story of the day when Badr's house in Baghdad was hit by a dud missile in 2006. Staying the night at his grandparents', Ahmed remembers his dad, Maytham, picking him up late at night to break the news to him. Next, the audience hears from Hanna, Ahmed's mother, who retells the moment of the impact: "I was working in the

[69] "Ash-Sharh," Quran.com. Accessed October 02, 2019, https://quran.com/94.

garden…It was before sunset and the electricity was down. I don't know what's happen. It's dark and dust everywhere. I just hear my daughter crying. I don't see her, I just hear her crying."[70] Maytham first assumed that the natural gas canisters inside the kitchen had exploded, but then he remembers that they were emptied the night before. The incident becomes the force behind the Badr family feeling it necessary to leave their homeland. After staying with a relative in Aleppo, Syria, for a while, the Badr family applies for the refugee program through the United Nations. The narrative concludes with Ahmed saying, "We were going to America."[71]

The framed calligraphy, at the center of the suitcase, is a prominent feature of the suitcase, which could perform a specific understanding of a Muslim Iraqi identity. The calligraphy, however, might have more cultural and less ideological value to the Badr family. Whatever the case, the sheer size and prime mounting location of the frame are significant. But perhaps most notable are the torn gas canisters inside the kitchen. These might seem unfamiliar to some viewers, but to my Iranian eyes, they are reminders of a cooking method practiced in some neighborhoods around Iran and other countries of the region. For different reasons, some households use natural gas canisters as the fuel for their stove. If that is the case for the Badr family, then the gas canisters are not solely dramatic items, nodding to an explosion that never happened; they also perform a specific way of life in an Iraqi house. Therefore, what might seem to some viewers to be strange objects is a vital source of cooking and a significant part of everyday life in different cultures.

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[70] Ahmed Badr, "Badr Family: A Bombed Home," *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, https://www.unpackedrefugee.com/badrfamily.

[71] Badr, "Badr Family."

Taken together, the canisters and calligraphy perform the expanded body of the Badr family. This body is distilled through the cultural memory of home that the suitcase performs. During an interview with *NPR*, Badr describes his first experience of seeing the diorama as such: "[It] felt as if I entered my house for the first time in eleven years. I never thought I would see it again."[72] The representational power that Badr bestows on the diorama, combined with the narrative information communicated through the headphones, creates a strong case for the suitcase's ability to bring forth the memory of home. Such remembrance is distinctly cultural: it is the memory of an Iraqi home, and perhaps the remainder of the everyday performance of cooking. Moreover, the "Badr Family: A Bombed House" suitcase is a memorial to a lost home. As the verse reads, "For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease," the suitcase gives a visual voice to the dream of home, and the hopeful possibility of returning to it.

The Badr Family suitcase succeeds in such a representation because of the way the installation negotiates place. The suitcases of *Unpacked* are marked by their representative cultural repertoires and could be taken as what the Dutch literary studies scholar Ernst van Alphen calls "imagined places."[73] Given the imaginative movement required to understand the representation of each refugee family's home inside a suitcase, it is easy to count the suitcase as simply an imaginary placeholder for a real, geographical place elsewhere. Such a consideration could undermine the significance of the suitcases as mere made-up objects, with only virtual

[72] Diane Cole, "Artist Creates Tiny Houses from the Memories of Refugees," *NPR*, December 23, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/12/23/572564038/see-dioramas-of-refugee-homes-each-re-created-in-an-old-fashioned-suitcase.

[73] Ernst van Alphen, "Imagined Homelands: Re-mapping Cultural Identity," *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*, ed. Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 55.

lineage to diverse cultures. Yet Alphen argues that there is no longer a place completely real and geographical. He uses "imagined" as a given condition for every place. According to Alphen, imagination penetrated the meaning of the place as a by-product of the ongoing increase in the number of immigrants in the last decades. Migration, Alphen contends, has created a disconnection between place and culture, but this does not mean the place is no longer relevant. Rather, "place" has changed meaning from geographical coordinates to "imagined place." "Imagined places," Alphen continues, "are not imaginary, not fairytales, but they are connected to a place that exists geographically."[74] Every day, more people are detached from their homes and are left with imaginative connections to their homelands. Moreover, homeland is already an imagined place even for non-displaced individuals and communities. Homeland identity always hinges on the historical dimension of a place, repeatedly transformed in the format of memories.[75] Within such a context, place is only constructed when one performs an imaginary act in relation to a geographical place.[76] For example, the Holy Land is only Israel when (mainly) Jewish people imagine that geography as their homeland. On the other hand, the same geography is Palestine when (mainly) Arab people imagine it as their homeland.[77] Different geographies are constantly imagined as different places across the world. Such imaginary acts never end, as places are never complete, but are always transforming into a new place.[78]

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[74] Van Alphen, "Imagined Homelands," 56.

[75] Van Alphen, 57.

[76] Van Alphen, 55.

[77] Van Alphen, 55.

[78] Cresswell, "Introduction," 25.

As *Unpacked* is a multimedia exhibit for telling the stories of refugees, the suitcases of the project and their embedded narratives facilitate an active imagination of home, materialized through each diorama. The empowering agenda of *Unpacked* is further realized by examining the construct of place vis-à-vis imaginary acts. By negotiating the place of the exhibition, the suitcases bring forth a memory of home, loaded with cultural significance. The installation does this to bring back accurate subjectivity to a few displaced inhabitants of five countries. As Hafez and Badr explain in their mission statement, *Unpacked* "seeks to humanize the word 'refugee.'"[79] Bringing the human to the refugee is a timely initiative in the 2010s and 2020s intensified xenophobic culture of the US. Instead of making an exotic spectacle out of refugee cultures and repertoires, the artists of the installation evoke empathy through a careful design for their art. The suitcases of *Unpacked* and their accompanying audio recordings encourage critical reflection on the reasons behind the global displacement of millions of people. In doing so, Hafez and Badr are also cautious to not contribute to the notion of victimization that surrounds the word *refugee*. In the audio recording attached to the suitcase designed for *Unpacked* co-creator Hafez, and his memory of home in Syria, Badr responds to the common tendency for victimizing refugees and asks Hafez, "What can we do as artists to make sure that we're not romanticizing the refugee experience, but we're simply letting it live and telling it in [the] most honest, genuine way?"[80] Hafez responds, "Architects are the documenters of their time…[we] are not asking people to paint refugees with one wide brushstroke. Quite the opposite, you can't

[79] *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, https://www.unpackedrefugee.com/.

[80] Ahmed Badr, "Mohamad: A Regal Living Room," *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, https://www.unpackedrefugee.com/mohamad.

judge any of these people with one color."[81] Badr interjects, "Or with one suitcase."[82] These statements explain the commitment the artists have made to represent the diverse lives that the suitcases contain. Moreover, they are adamant in communicating the successful lives their interlocutors used to live in their countries. For instance, in the "Joseph: A Missing Son" suitcase, the audience learns about Joseph, a former refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and his son. They also learn that Joseph was a prominent lawyer in his country, and, more importantly, he has no interest in dwelling on the label of "refugee" anymore. Such an accurate retelling of a refugee's story, which sits in contrast to commonly circulated scenarios that portray refugees as helpless individuals with no significant life prior to relocation,[83] clarifies the claim immigrants could place on the land to which they migrate.

The immigrants' claims over the land are deemed dangerous by xenophobic governments. It is no surprise then that states use different strategies to segregate the land based on majority and minority status. The role race plays in such circumstances is clear. As SanSan Kwan notes, "The production of space contributes to the production of race…Race and geography work together such that race is in part created through place-making and place is largely created through racialization."[84] Thus, a place-related investigation of *Unpacked* requires additional attention to the racial negotiation the suitcases perform.

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[81] Badr, "Mohamad."

[82] Badr, "Mohamad."

[83] For a thorough report on how media coverage perpetuates such degrading consideration of refugees, see Al Jazeera English, "Between 'Swarms' and 'Security': How Media Report on Migration," YouTube, 26:25, April 6, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=I_47gufvoN0&feature=emb_title.

[84] SanSan Kwan, "Performing a Geography of Asian America: The Chop Suey Circuit," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (2011): 121.

The “Um Shaham: War and a Burnt Car” suitcase is a powerful case for demonstrating the intertwined relationship between place and race. As the title denotes, the diorama contains most significantly a miniature model of a burnt, yellow taxi, parked in front of a house (Figure 6). The taxi sits in poor condition at the forefront of the model and dominates the last memory of a refugee’s home. By listening to the audio recording, we learn that the taxi belongs to Um Shaham’s husband, who brought it back from the shop. The taxi is parked in the driveway of

Figure 6. “Um Shaham: War and Burnt Car” suitcase, *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage.* Photo courtesy of Mohamad Hafez, www.unpackedrefugee.com.

their home in Mosul, Iraq. Um Shaham and her husband, as well as two of their children, decide to clean a few grease stains off the car, using gasoline. Inside the house, next to Um Shaham’s infant child, a flame escapes the heater and spreads throughout the house to the driveway. It burns down the car and leaves Um Shaham and his son with burn injuries. The narrative then moves a few months ahead, into the Iraq War. It is then that the audience learns that Um

Shaham's husband was killed by a stray bullet. That tragedy forces Um Shaham to leave Iraq with her family to the final destination of the US.

While the visual representation of Um Shaham's story could be powerful enough to help her imagine she was once again at home (remember Badr's first impression of the diorama), one should ask: What does such an imaginary relocation do for the audience regarding the negotiation of place and race throughout the installation? More specifically, are the audience looking at the authentic representation of an Iraqi home, or are they bearing witness to an imagined Iraqi place in the imagined place of the exhibition?

If all places are imagined, as Alphen claims, then *Unpacked* is a performance of reciprocal imaginations. The Um Shaham suitcase is the diorama of a home as imagined in Iraq. The audience, in return, witnesses the suitcases while imagining the place of the gallery as American. While the place of the gallery needs imagination to be considered as a part of the US, the home contained inside the Um Shaham suitcase also requires imagination to be read as Iraqi. The performative experience of being an audience to the story of Um Shaham is then participating in a process in which place is imagined and negotiated.

If place and race are inextricably connected, then one can say that the installation is a performance of racial negotiation, especially because it highlights the experience of refugees who are racial minorities in the US. The suitcases facilitate a non-US consideration of the place of their exhibition in the US. Such a negotiation happens in a time when refugees are actively threatened by hostile government policies and public views. Within such a context, giving an opportunity to the refugee for claiming a place as their own is significant. The place-making function of the installation is a way of bestowing more agency to those with identities connected to the represented places of the suitcases. By disrupting the place-related structures of their

display, the suitcases of *Unpacked* figure as scriptive things, doctoring the imagination of the audience for separate Afghan, Congolese, Iraqi, Sudanese, and Syrian galleries.

The racial performance of the Um Shaham suitcase happens mainly through the taxi. The vehicle is a symbol of the middle-class Iraqi life as represented by the suitcase. A taxi is also stereotypically associated with the profession of Middle Eastern immigrants in the US. The taxi, then, offers a contradictory representation. On the one hand, the taxi mobilizes an active imagination of a domestic Iraqi repertoire. On the other hand, the vehicle hints at a racial assumption about its driver. The juxtaposition of two readings of the taxi puts the Iraqi place in comparison to the US place. The competing places of the Um Shaham suitcase, therefore, create a racial dilemma. The representation of the taxi projects a diasporic racial stereotype in the native locality of Iraq, in a story that is still in the past, where the taxi holds no such cliché.

The gasoline that ignites the taxi accelerates the structures of stereotype in the Um Shaham suitcase. The charred taxi warns against the real consequence of racial prejudice and the destruction of lives that it mobilizes. I believe the humanizing project of *Unpacked* is further fulfilled through such a cautionary implication. The suitcase marks the invisible bodies of the refugees as valuable. It also portrays the repertoire of diverse immigrant identities as real. Such a realization is vital to recognizing refugee experiences outside of racial contexts, where stereotypes maliciously function.

Looking at *Unpacked* as performance reveals complex layers through which the installation works. The suitcases of *Unpacked*, as scriptive things, move the bodies of the audience and help them to imagine absent bodies of the refugees inside their homes. Such an imagination frees bodies from a mere biophysical form and reveals much about the culture of their constitution. Moreover, when *Unpacked* is looked at as a collection of suitcases containing

distinct, native places, the display of dioramas in the US appears as a negotiation of place, effectively disrupting the oppressive structures of place-related segregation. Since place is an indicator of race, the suitcases of *Unpacked* perform a racial negotiation of home with empowering possibilities for refugees.

Conclusion

Mohamad Hafez and Ahmed Badr approach the concept of home differently than Saba Zavarei. In her search for embodying the distance between her two homes in Tehran and London, Zavarei reaches the conclusion that home is found in constant mobility, and one is always on her way to arrive. *Looking for Tehran* is not about how Zavarei's home in Iran compares to her home in diaspora. Rather, the performance is about the racial and gendered borders Zavarei finds during her travel and the transgression she carries out throughout. On the other hand, Hafez and Badr's *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage* reflects a particular understanding home. Home is a specific place to which one remains attached. Once on the move, the traveler does not become homeless. Rather, she engages with home-making practices to negotiate the place of her residence as home.

In both cases, performance clarifies to which society immigrants belong. Zavarei engages with a debordering mission to highlight the universality of the human condition across borders, cultures, religions, and languages. She does not commit to one nation as the only place of her belonging. Instead, Zavarei becomes a global agent for trespassing the boundaries of statehood, femininity, and Iranianness. Contrastingly, *Unpacked* performs an intimate memory of home, one which is connected to specific geographies. The suitcases of the installation disclose the roots of the refugees in other parts of the world. Their exhibition in US galleries, however, troubles considerations of immigrants as people with no claim to their hosting country.

Unpacked disrupts the place of the exhibition and makes the audience wonder about where refugee homes belong. Hafez and Badr give refugees a chance to enter their homes once again, but, more significantly, their project asks the audience to reconsider the place of refugees in society. The artists put the baggage of refugees on display, perhaps also with the hope that we too will claim our baggage.

CHAPTER THREE: SECURING IRANIAN IDENTITY: PERFORMANCE, MUSLIM BAN, AND COVERT BORDER CROSSING

Exploring how various meanings of Middle Eastern identity are constructed in the US diaspora is a topic that I explore in this dissertation. In previous chapters, I focused on cultural citizenship and the flexible notion of "home" to discuss different belonging practices as performed by theatre-makers and performance artists of Middle Eastern descent. While the last two chapters dealt more with aesthetic performances of Middle Eastern identity, this chapter is dedicated to studying how diasporic Middle Eastern identities are constructed through everyday performance. The politics of diaspora as enforced and experienced in daily life require immigrants of different backgrounds to remain conscious of their nomadic conditions and actively respond to them. Such politics might question the belonging of the immigrants to society through carefully-designed criteria for citizenship. Similarly, the politics of diaspora might render immigrants as people who belong to a home in a different part of the world. The issues of citizenship and home continue to be a part of my study in the following sections. I, however, highlight border crossing more than before in this chapter to discuss belonging in/to borderlands. Geopolitical borders divide the land and have an important role in determining to which nation-state the people of each side belong. But how about the people who are on neither side of the border, or at both sides at the same time? To which state and society do the people of borderlands belong? I address these questions in this chapter by examining the borderland space of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.

Derby Line is an incorporated village in the town of Derby in Northeast Vermont. With an approximate population of 765, the village is located in close proximity to the US-Canada border. Central to the tourist industry of the village is the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.

Founded in 1904, the library was deliberately built astride the national border that separates Derby Line from Stanstead, a small town in Quebec, Canada. As a historic site, officially recognized by the US and Canadian governments, as well as the Province of Quebec, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House attracts thousands of tourists every year. The center is also significant for the covert border crossing that it provides for the visitors on both sides.

While the library and opera house serve the border communities of the area with specific cultural and educational programs, it also invites many non-traditional visitors. Historically, patrons can access the entirety of the facility without any of the paperwork necessary for passing an international border. Similar to a somewhat unprotected gateway, the library facilitates border crossing without enforcing the usually tenacious immigration policies. Therefore, many immigrants who reside in the US or Canada and lack the appropriate documents to cross the joint border, use the liminal space of the library to reunite temporarily with their families in the other country. An immigrant who, for example, lives in Canada can visit her children in the US at the Haskell Library without acquiring any VISA.

The peculiar border crossing opportunity that the Haskell Free Library and Opera House offers presents a somewhat unique solution to those immigrants who are not allowed re-entry to their hosting country upon their departure.[1] Among such travelers, citizens of the countries impacted by President Trump's notorious Executive Order No. 13769 loom large. The US government expanded the E.O. in February 2020 to include six African countries (Myanmar, Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania), but the order initially barred the citizens of several majority-Muslim countries, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, from

[1] A similar situation can also be seen in Peace Arch Park at the border between Blaine, Washington, and Surrey, British Columbia.

entering the US. Since the order disproportionately targeted mostly Muslim travelers as people who do not belong to US society, the order came to be known as the "Muslim ban." Currently, the citizens of all the countries included in the E.O. face an aggressive restriction on their mobility across US borders. At such a time, some immigrants use the liminal border areas like the Haskell Free Library to reunite with their family in Canada, a country with less strict immigration policies. Thus, it is often the case that the immigrants who live in the US ask their relatives to apply for a temporary Canadian VISA to see each other at the library. While the immigrants who visit the library are diverse in heritage, Iranians comprise their majority.[2]

Investigating the ways in which the liminal space of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House influences the performances of Iranian identity in relation to US surveillance discourses is at the center of this chapter. Through an autoethnographic method, I use my personal experience of visiting the library to self-reflexively examine the performances of my Iranian identity within post-9/11 politics. Autoethnography is a form of inquiry particularly useful for investigating the lived experience of self vis-à-vis larger cultural and sociopolitical discourses. Therefore, I use autoethnography in this chapter to discuss how my embodiment of Iranian identity at an international border speaks to US immigration policies writ large. I draw attention to doubly-charged performance elements of the Haskell Library and Opera House to ask: How do US diaspora politics influence the performances of Iranian identity? How do US surveillance strategies perform a specific understanding of Iranianness? How do Iranian citizens use the liminality of the borderland to perform their identity and challenge state propaganda? I address

[2] Yeganeh Torbati, "Separated by Travel Ban, Iranian Families Reunite at Border Library," *Reuters*, November 28, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-ban-insight-idUSKCN1NX1P2. This fact was also corroborated by a library staff during my visit of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.

these questions throughout the chapter to argue that Iranian immigrants, encountered by systematic acts of exclusion and discrimination, use the liminal space of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House to perform their belonging to US society and challenge state policies that render them as a national security threat.

Understanding the performances of border crossing by Iranian immigrants vis-à-vis current surveillance discourses requires specific attention to two specific moments in the contemporary history of racialization in the US. First, the conflation of "Middle Eastern/Muslim identity" with "terrorists" after the events of 9/11, and second, the recent Muslim ban executed by President Trump. It is because of the Muslim ban that Iranian immigrants must resort to using the Haskell Free Library and Opera House to reunite with their families. The Muslim ban, as I discuss in this chapter, is also informed by the xenophobic rhetorics of 9/11. The fall of the Twin Towers brought forth a new wave of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments particularly in relation to those who were loosely connected to the ethnic identities of the perpetrators. Looking or sounding Middle Eastern and/or Muslim in the following weeks of the attacks was enough motivation for bigots to harass, threaten, and assault innocent people. More importantly, the US government quickly implemented "a series of initiatives and policies that targeted Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrant populations, especially men. Ostensibly, these decrees, administrative rule changes, executive orders, and laws aimed to stop terrorism; however, they legitimized the backlash in the eyes of the American public."[3] The aggressive public acts and discriminatory surveillance policies did not stop shortly after 9/11. Rather, they continued on an increasing level to establish a global "War on Terror" that continues the profiling and targeting

[3] Louis A. Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 2.

of Middle Eastern and Muslim people to this date. While I agree with Nadine Naber that 9/11 was only a "turning point" and not a "starting point" for institutionalized discrimination against Middle Eastern and Muslim individuals and communities, studying the events of 9/11 is key to understanding how the US government continues efforts to disassociate Iranian identities with US society at contemporary times.[4]

Similarly, the initiatives taken by the current government of the US resemble the xenophobic attitudes seen before, albeit more pronounced. As Donald Trump bolstered his 2016 campaign with blatant Islamophobic and anti-immigrant rhetorics, he communicated his desire for a presidential term centered on bigotry and xenophobia. After taking office, President Trump exercised his ideology by quickly signing an executive order that banned travelers from Muslim-majority countries. Done in the name of protecting the homeland from foreign terrorist attacks, the Muslim ban is yet another example of the marginalization and monitoring of non-white individuals and communities, including Iranians. Therefore, an examination of diasporic Iranian performances in the context of US immigration policies necessitates an investigation into the performative valence of the Muslim ban.

The Haskell Free Library and Opera House is a peculiar place for border crossing. While the security enforcement of the border performs a threatening notion of Iranianness, Iranian citizens use the liminal space of the library to perform their identity in a way that challenges stereotypical assumptions. As discussed above, such performances should be contextualized

[4] Nadine Naber, "Arab American and US Racial Formation," in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, Arab American Writing (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 4. Also see Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 140.

within the post-9/11 politics. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a personal narrative of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Unlike many discussions that rely on a domestic narrative of the attacks to consider 9/11, for example, as a tragedy made "through claims to universality,"[5] I use my personal account of the events as watched in Iran to illustrate the impact of 9/11 and the War on Terror on the construction of Iranian identity on a global level. Then, I expand my discussion to study President Trump's Muslim ban as another example of state performances of vilification that is connected to post-9/11 US discriminatory rhetorics. By relying on the two performance concepts of "twice-behaved behavior" and "effigy," I examine the Muslim ban as a state security performance designed to immobilize Iranian travelers based on the conflation of "Middle Eastern" and "terrorist." Afterward, I elaborate on my autoethnographic experience of visiting the Haskell Free Library and Opera House to argue that Iranian immigrants use the liminal place of the library to perform a more nuanced understanding of Iranian ethnicity and consolidate their belonging to US national identity.

How I Became Iranian after 9/11

The terrorist attacks of 2001 influenced how I came to understand myself in relation to the world. The events grounded my identity in a reality that deemed my ethnicity as dangerous, inferior, and unwelcome. I grew up learning to suppress my identity and it was not until my immigration to the US that I fully realized the role of US foreign affairs in my performances of self. Before then, the US was the standard with which I measured myself. Despite the Iranian

[5] In her description of the 9/11 attacks, Diana Taylor discusses how the US government and media covered the attacks as "'incommensurable,' the greatest, worst, most unimaginable and unspeakable crisis." Taylor contrasts such universalist claims with crises (including other terrorist attacks) happened outside the US and suggests 9/11 was not an exceptional event for non-US citizens who had witnessed other tragedies before. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 263.

government's tireless efforts to display the atrocities of the US government over the years, I dreamed of the American life as constructed in US cultural exports. I wanted to walk on the carpet with my shoes on, to eat bacon and eggs every morning, and to have girl classmates. I always dreamed of having an American friend who could show me her country. I wanted to have connections with the outside world, so that I too could, for example, become a Boy Scout one day. My parents did their best to give me a proper urban, middle-class upbringing, and it was not that I had no affection for my ethnicity. But I wanted to be more than that. In my mind, belonging to America was more. I wanted to shed myself of Iranian ethnicity and perform Americanness.

In retrospect, I understand how I was a target of US intellectual colonialism, an indirect imperialist process for "the domination of one people by another in their world of thinking."[6] As a child, however, I was incapable of discerning the world as a racial constellation in which the most powerful entity subjugates the less powerful ones. If anything, I blamed my country for not giving me access to a better place in the world. It was our fault, I grew up assuming, that I was deprived of an American way of life. In my mind, all Americans were friendly and generous, but Iranians betrayed that generosity with their Islamic Revolution. I had blind faith in America's goodwill and only contempt for the Islamic Republic. Americans were allies and we were our own enemies. I sincerely believed in that until the attacks of 9/11 happened.

It's Tuesday, *Shahrivar* 20th, 1380. A cool, late summer evening in Tehran. Blocks of tall buildings made of grey concrete surround scattered areas covered in greenish grass. Water sprinklers are on, making it impossible to play in the grass. So, my friends and I are playing in a

[6] Syed Hussein Alatas, "Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 1 (2000): 24.

paved football field with no lights. It's getting dark and harder to see the ball, so we call it for that night. With bodies soaked in sweat, we go to one of the sprinklers, detach the hose, and drink. Is the water safe? Who cares; bottled water is yet to become a thing. What should we do next? A round of hide-and-seek? Why not, it's dark enough to make things challenging. Plus, leaving the game without telling the last kid who is seeking never gets old. He keeps looking for us, not knowing we're gone and probably eating dinner with our families. Everyone will laugh. Well, probably not the last seeker.

Summer is almost over. We hate it, even those of us who are really good at being a student. "Let's stay out longer," we agree. It's pitch-black. Moms call their teenage children home. Most kids yell back, "we're still playing!" But I'm not among them. I'm not allowed to stay out after the dark. I know it by this point that when I hear the praying call echoed through the loudspeakers of the mosque, that's my cue to run upstairs, wash my hands and feet, and join the family around the *sofreh.*[7] I hate going home when other kids are still out. It's Shahrivar 20th, for god's sake! Almost ten more days until school starts. Screw it, I'm going to lie. "Mom, I'm not hungry. Can I go to the mosque for the evening praying?" "Sure, but clean yourself up first," my mom brushes me off. It's that easy. As long as they haven't figured out my lie, I can stay out longer every night. I don't feel completely happy about lying to my mom (what if she figures it out?), but I'm tired of only hearing about what other kids did the night before. I change my sweaty shirt and muddy pants into something clean, perform wudu,[8] comb my hair, grab some money, and head out.

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[7] Farsi for "tablecloth." Traditionally, sofreh is placed on the ground, covering a portion of the carpet with families sitting around it.

[8] Wudu is an Islamic cleansing ritual done prior to praying. It involves washing the face and hands, and rubbing a wet hand over the head and feet. The tradition varies in different branches of Islam.

We actually go to the mosque, but we don't join the group praying. That takes a long time and leaves us, or at least me, with no time to go outside and have fun. After a quick praying session (I feel like a hypocrite), we run straight to the *vidéo-klub*[9] in the neighborhood, right behind the mosque. To call it a "store" is an exaggeration. It's a tiny basement with a few rows of mostly Iranian films in VHS format. There are also four chubby televisions connected to four PlayStation systems, with four tall, white stools placed at their front. I begged my parents to buy me a new video game console but they never did. Not necessarily because they couldn't afford it, but because they thought it would stop me from doing my homework. The klub is new and the only store in our neighborhood. So we had to sign up first and wait for our turn. There were a few chairs in the back that people could use and wait. A tiny, black-and-white television was also in the top corner, right above the entrance door. It was on a news channel. Boring.

Isn't our turn yet? It's getting late and I'm sure the praying at the mosque is finished. I can't stay out longer than that. "Sorry," I ask the store clerk, "shouldn't it be our turn by now?" He hushes me and raises the volume of the black-and-white TV. I raise my head and look at it. There's smoke everywhere. Is it in Palestine? That's always the case when the state TV shows explosions and condemns the Israeli government for their crimes. I don't think it's in Palestine. Look at those buildings! They're really tall, taller than our concrete buildings! How's that possible?! The video loops back to the beginning, to a part that I missed before. Did I just see an airplane hitting that building? What a sad accident. The pilots probably lost control. I've seen it before in movies. Wait, the video just cut to a second airplane hitting the same building? No, it hit the building next to it! What is happening?! Kids stop playing, they put the video game controllers down and stare at the screen. It's getting late. I should go home. "Guys, let's go

[9] Video rental shop.

home." They don't say anything. It's dark. Really dark. I'm afraid to go back alone. I step outside of the store. It's quiet. A gentle breeze is slightly shaking the leaves on trees. That's the only sound I hear. I can't leave alone. I go back inside. The clerk, with a worried voice, says to me, "close the door behind you!" I stand there nervously. I want to go home. "There are two towers in Amrika," says the clerk. What's a tower? Is it a fancy word for a tall building? I want to go home. The loud volume of the TV is bothering me. It's just smoke! I can't see anything. I'm afraid. "Guys, let's go home. It's dangerous." They completely ignore me. I wish there was an electricity outage. The TV would go off and then we can leave. But look! The tower fell! It just fell! How could something that huge come down? I hear the clerk gasp, "*lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billā*."[10] I know that prayer. My mom taught me to say it whenever I was scared. I whisper it too, once, twice, five times, ten times. I stopped counting. I've lost track of time. I know it's late. I'm in so much trouble. I walk nervously around the store with an eye on the TV and another on the door. Then the second tower fell. The clerk turns pale. My stomach turns. I'm terrified, nauseous, and confused. I can't hear anything anymore. I open the store's door and run as fast as I could. I need my mom.

To see towers crumble on the ground violated my innocent presumption that the world could not be that scary. The fall of the World Trade Center introduced me to a degree of terror unimaginable before. Living in a fourteen-story building, I had associated tall buildings with the concept of home. Thus, when I witnessed the towers coming down, I felt my home was vulnerable too. I left the video klub in fear of another airplane hitting our house. In a way, then, I understood the 9/11 attacks as an attack on my home. I was outraged at and terrified of the perpetrators of the attacks. What monster could possibly bring down homes?

[10] There is no might nor power except in Allah.

As it turned out, I was the monster. Soon after the attacks, we heard rumors about the foreign news speculating about the role of Iran in the attacks. It did not take long before Iran was internationally established as an axis of evil. The American President said on TV that we were a nation that "aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror."[11] He said we sponsor terrorism, that we were complicit in bringing down the towers. Iranians were the enemy, not only of ourselves, but also of America. I did not deserve to be there, in America. I belonged to Iran, to the country that terrorizes the world. Unwelcome and despairing, I accepted my Iranian identity as a stigmatized label. I hated being Iranian. I hated making towers fall. I hated being evil. I hated having it with me, carrying that evil baggage wherever I went.

As long as I can remember, US imperialist ideals influenced my performances of self. I grew unimpressed with my native background and fascinated with a mediated culture that did not belong to me. Tricked into believing in my ethnicity's "native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent," I watched American films, listened to US music, and played with US-made toys to participate in the superior idea of the empire.[12] With all these acts and more, I performed a subjugated idea of Iranianness that was only defined vis-à-vis US culture. My participation in colonial discourses made me feel (falsely) included, as if I was part of the empire. The attacks of 9/11, however, changed that. I continued to measure myself against what the US government and society thought of my identity, but I did not believe in the common good as something that brings the world together. I was the enemy, an evildoer who had to be

[11] "President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address," The Washington Post, January 29, 2002, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm.

[12] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 74.

exterminated. As a result, I suppressed my Iranian identity further and accepted my performances of identity as forever stigmatized and inferior.

The attacks of 9/11 reverberated as a spectacle of terror for years to come. For US citizens, it remained a point of reference—repeatedly reenacted by the government—for remembering the vulnerability of the nation. For my Iranian identity, however, 9/11 became a daily struggle. While the attacks were (and still are) continuously used as a past example for legitimizing aggressive foreign policies and implementing security measures inside the US, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center were never relegated to the past for me. I consistently assessed my brown skin and Muslim heritage based on how the US framed my identity. I situated myself on the axis of evil and I lived in the fearsome shadow of US military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The terrorist events of 9/11 might be kept alive as a prominent event in the US collective memory, but for many countries in the Middle East region, the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001 remains an uncommitted sin for which they continue to pay.

The adaptation of the "Never Forget" adage—first used after the Second World War to remember the Holocaust victims—in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center signals the same function of the 9/11 event in the US collective memory. Here, I engage with a theory of collective memory as offered by Mary Susan Weldon and Krystal D. Bellinger. Collectively remembering an event, Weldon and Bellinger argue, is a social activity in a specific social context, which "(a) prescribes the style and contents of recall that are appropriate in the setting, (b) is characterized by social dynamics that govern who speaks when and whose recollections receive the most weight, and (c) varies in the purpose of the recollective activity."[13] Regarding

[13] Mary Susan Weldon and Krystal D. Bellinger, "Collective Memory: Collaborative and Individual Processes in Remembering," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 23, no. 5 (1997): 1160–75.

the 9/11 attacks, the events are usually remembered as an unforeseeable national tragedy that disturbed the assumption of a secure homeland. In the post-9/11 context, the Never Forget adage foresees a probable forgetting and obliges US citizens to minimize their distance with the past event. The people of Middle Eastern and Muslim descent, on the other hand, are relieved of the probability of forgetting 9/11 as their ethnicities are continuously under attack because of it. They are reminded every day through US illegitimate acts of war, aggressive foreign affairs, and most related to this volume, restrictive immigration policies, that they still need to pay for the act of a few individuals almost twenty years ago.

The US state incorporates biased strategies to portray individuals of Middle Eastern and Muslim heritage as possible actors of evil. Until such vilifying state performances end, the Middle Eastern identity remains politically connected to the discourse of terrorism. Actions such as the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, the PATRIOT Act, the No-Fly List, black sites such as the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, the denaturalization of individuals with dual citizenship, invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and imposing crippling financial sanctions on Iran, all are examples of how the US state rehearses a vilified idea of Middle Easternness and continues to conflate Muslims and terrorists.[14] The most recent addition to the US performances of Middle Eastern and Muslim inferiority is President Trump's Muslim

[14] The conflation of Muslims and terrorists is a topic addressed by many Middle East studies scholars. Evelyn Alsultany, for instance, understand the Muslim/terrorist conflation as a US government strategy informed by "centuries-old Orientalist narratives of patriarchal societies and oppressed women, of Muslim fundamentalism and anti-Semitism, of irrational violence and suicide bombings. With this conflation established, it is easy to conceptualize the United States as the inverse of everything that is 'Arab/Muslim: the United States is thus a land of equality and democracy, culturally diverse and civilized, a land of progressive men and liberated women." For more see Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

ban. While President Trump's order went into effect more recently, it is still connected to a series of anti-immigrant and Islamophobic policies that ensued after 9/11.

I used my personal account of watching the World Trade Center fall in this section to illustrate how my performances of Iranian identity were adversely influenced by US foreign policies. Before the attacks, I performed a colonial understanding of being Iranian, infatuated by American culture. After 9/11, I surrendered to the rhetorics that perceived me as a global actor of evil. I have since gained the skills to discern and resist the politics of my ethnicity's subjugation. For this reason, I cannot ignore the most recent attempt of the US government in performing a dangerous idea of Iranianness, particularly as it relates to my discussion of border crossing in a time of ubiquitous surveillance. Therefore, I spend the following pages discussing how President Trump's Muslim ban is a performative act that continues US post-9/11 foreign policies, an act that seeks to perpetuate Middle Eastern and Muslim identities as terrorists and establish a culture of surveillance to limit the border crossing ability of certain immigrants. I contend that the Muslim-majority countries impacted by the travel ban (Iran, Libya, Somalia, and Syria) are haunted by the image of the "Muslim terrorist," a ghostly effect conjured upon the attacks of 9/11. The spectral condition of Middle Eastern immigrants brings forth the memory of past terrorist attacks and justifies future acts of discrimination.

Muslim Ban and Muslim Ghosts

In the US public sphere, the US government continues its active strategy of reenacting the memory of the 9/11 attacks as recent occurrences with the immediate possibility of happening again. Such constructed immediacy of the danger gives rise to an "insecurity culture"

in which no one is safe from internal and external terrorist threats.[15] It is within this insecure culture that surveillance seems a necessary step for eliminating the minutest possibility of getting attacked again.

The US government uses surveillance on an (inter)national scale to allegedly establish security in the homeland. By relying on the logic that the perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attacks were all foreign nationals, the state controls and surveys the borders in the name of securing the nation. The monitoring practices of border crossing significantly increased after September 2001, namely after the passing of the Aviation and Transportation Security Act by the 107th Congress on November 19, 2001, and through the establishment of the Transportation Security Administration. The securitization of borders, along with the proliferation of other security and surveillance policies and technologies, continued during Barack Obama's presidency and reached a new peak under the presidency of President Trump. Tightening border security was by no means an unexpected initiative by Donald Trump. During his campaign leading up to the 2016 election, Trump focused on appealing to primarily white, working-class demographics in rural areas with his xenophobic ideology. Most notably, he promised a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims" seeking to enter the US.[16] The blatant Islamophobia in Trump's campaign promise turned into reality when he signed his fifth executive order (EO 13769) on January 27th, 2017 as the Commander-in-Chief. Titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign

[15] Torin Monahan, *Surveillance in the Time of Insecurity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 3.

[16] Jenna Johnson, "Trump Calls for 'Total and Complete Shutdown of Muslims Entering the United States,'" *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-the-united-states/.

Terrorist Entry into the United States," the order, in addition to indefinitely barring Syrian citizens from seeking refuge in the US, put a halt on the United States Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days. Moreover, the E.O. granted the US Citizenship and Immigration Services the right to deny VISA applications from the citizens of seven majority-Muslim countries, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Libya. The officers of Customs and Border Protection agency along with agents of Transportation Security Administration were also tasked to deny re-entry requests from travelers with those specific nationalities, even if they held valid US VISAs, Green Cards, and dual US citizenships. Given that the majority of the travelers were citizens of mostly Muslim countries, the Executive Order became also known as the "Muslim Ban."

Even though it was later superseded with the twice-revised Executive Order 13780 and expanded once more in February 2020 to include some African countries, the Muslim ban remained a highly contested policy in all iterations. President Trump and his cabinet insisted that the order was, in fact, no "Muslim" ban and having North Korea and Venezuela in the language of Executive Order 13780 was evidence for that claim. Yet, as researchers and political commentators argued, President Trump's travel ban primarily affected travelers from Muslim countries. [17] Moreover, the well-recorded history of President Trump blaming Muslims for terrorist attacks further supported the Islamophobic nature of his executive order.

I argue that the Muslim ban, as an example of the practices set for monitoring, profiling, prosecuting, and detaining Muslim individuals and communities in the post-9/11 US, is a security performance that works on the premise that all Muslims are capable of inflicting

[17] For a review of how President Trump's Executive Order impacted Muslim travelers see Vahid Niayesh, "Trump's 'Travel Ban' Really Was a Muslim Ban, Data Suggests," *The Washington Post*, September 26, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/26/trumps-muslim-ban-really-was-muslim-ban-thats-what-data-suggest/.

violence and each Muslim extremist represents all Muslims. Therefore, Muslim Middle Eastern identity cannot belong to US society. This premise is better understood through two performance studies concepts, "twice-behaved behavior" and "effigy."

According to Richard Schechner, "performance means never for the first time."[18] Nothing in performance is original. Performance is a site of remembering and restoring things that were formed and enacted before. If the 9/11 attacks were a macabre performance, as Schechner suggests,[19] the attacks were not unprecedented. Rather, they echoed, for instance, the archetypal conflict between Abrahamic religions, particularly the medieval Holy Wars. Moreover, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center ushered in a new age of Islamophobia in the US and across the world. Since the terrorists were ostensibly Muslim and acted upon their belief in battling evil (in this case, US imperialism), an automatic assumption was made that all Muslims (more than 1.8 billion people) follow the same ideology and seek to battle the US through armed means. Every remembrance of the attacks in the carefully designed US sociopolitical context could allude to this Islamophobic association. Therefore, whenever the US public remembers 9/11 without paying attention to the long history of the US interfering with global affairs, the conflation of "Muslims" and "terrorists" is possible. Furthermore, performance, according to Joseph Roach, brings forth the absent past to fulfill today's needs. Since the actions, behaviors, and bodies of the past are absent today, performance allows people to step in as "effigies" to remember the past.[20] When the victims of 9/11 are memorialized in

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[18] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Routledge Classics (New York and London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 35.

[19] Richard Schechner, "9/11 as Avant-Garde Art?," *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (2009): 1820–29.

[20] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Social Foundations of Aesthetic Forms Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 36.

everyday acts of US security, someone needs to step in to carry out the role of the terrorists. In the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant context of the post-9/11 US, all Muslims can perform Muslim terrorists who brought the World Trade Center down. In other words, Muslim identity is interpreted as an effigy for inflicting terror. In this light, any Muslim person is capable of restoring the terrorist behaviors after 2001. The US government uses the possibility of such a restoration to justify restrictive measures against Muslim individuals and communities. By enforcing and supporting discriminatory policies, the US state and the public enact the effigy of the Muslim terrorist only to stop him in future restorations, an action that failed in 2001 attacks. Creating effigies out of Muslim individuals creates a ghostly condition of the Muslim identity, facilitates a process of dehumanization of the Other, and justifies US maintenance of a never-ending war against the "spectral infinity of its enemy."[21]

Therefore, the Muslim ban as a security and surveillance strategy that targets Muslim individuals is designed to remind the public that Muslim individuals attacked the US. Any time when a Muslim traveler is separated from the check-in line in an airport, for example, it is a scene constructed to impose an impression upon spectators that, as Marvin Carlson puts it, "we are seeing what we saw before."[22] In this theatre of vilification, any Muslim individual, as well as any Muslim-looking person, could be an actor of terrorism, performing the role of terrorists.

When the first iteration of the Muslim ban went into effect on January 28, 2017, many travelers from a few mentioned countries got turned away from their itineraries toward the US. *The Daily Beast* estimated that number to be around 348 on the first day, but it reached 904 a few

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[21] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 34.

[22] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 1.

days later by February 1. Moreover, 735 travelers who were already at different ports of entry were detained and refused to be let in. [23] They all were deemed security risks, even though the fact that they were at borders meant they had passed many security checks. Upon their arrival at the US border, the travelers found themselves treated as threats to US national security, a threat not diagnosed upon their departure.

With a population of more than 80 million people, Iran seems to be the most affected country by the Muslim ban. Statistics show 7,727 VISAs were issued for Iranian nationals in 2016. A year after the enforcement of the Muslim ban, that number plummeted to only 537 VISAs in 2018.[24] While the executive order dramatically reduced the number of Iranian citizens traveling or relocating to the US, it also created serious problems for Iranian citizens currently residing in the US. Specifically, the families of Iranian individuals on non-immigrant VISAs were denied authorization to visit their relatives in the US. The executive order incorporates a case-by-case waiver program (a tacked-on feature added to the order to convince the Supreme Court that the ban is not discriminatory), yet the data shows that the US has issued waivers to only 2 percent of VISA applicants.[25] Furthermore, since the majority of non-immigrant VISAs are single-entry authorizations (i.e., the individual can cross the border to the US only once during the period of their VISA), Iranian citizens in the US. without permanent residence cannot

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[23] Betsy Swan, "White House Lowballs Impact of Trump Ban," *The Daily Beast*, April 11, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/01/30/white-house-lowballs-impact-of-trump-ban; Glenn Kessler, "The Number of People Affected by Trump's Travel Ban: About 90,000," Washington Post, January 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/01/30/the-number-of-people-affected-by-trumps-travel-ban-about-90000/.

[24] Niayesh, "Trump's 'Travel Ban' Really Was a Muslim Ban, Data Suggests."

[25] Yeganeh Torbati, "US Issued Waivers to Trump's Travel Ban at Rate of 2 Percent, Data Shows," *Reuters*, June 26, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-ban-idUSKBN1JN07T.

travel to Iran and reunite with their family, as there is no guarantee that they will be eligible again for another VISA. With these policies in place, Iranian citizens with non-immigrant VISAs are trapped inside the US and separated from their families.

The racial and ethnic identities of the 9/11 terrorists justify discriminatory and militarized actions against Iranians to this date. The global War on Terror has cemented the idea of Muslim Middle Eastern as terrorist in xenophobic contexts and has led to a culture of surveillance that associates acts of violence with few specific identities. I discussed earlier how such a milieu influenced my performances of identity. The US post-9/11 politics dictated to me that the only role I could have in international settings was the suspected terrorist. Every initiative that uses the Islamophobic context of the past terrorist events to argue for the implementation of new safety measures restores the conflated assumption that all Muslims could be terrorists. My Iranian body, ergo, is rendered in such discourses as an effigy of the perpetrators of violence. President Trump's Muslim ban uses this reasoning to dismiss any claim by Iranian travelers about their belonging to US society. Therefore, whenever the executive order is engaged to prevent movement of bodies across borders, a performative act is taken place. The utterance of the travel ban stops the travelers in their journeys and assign them a role of the suspected terrorist.

The security of the US homeland, as the defensive argument of the state goes, depends on a thorough investigation of movement particularly by those who are more likely to cause violence. In the context of state-sanctioned immobility, crossing the border is an insurgent move that defies the stasis-producing feature of border surveillance. While Iranian travelers encounter restrictive immigration policies that limit their movement, their commitment to incorporating a strategy for crossing the border in a time of global surveillance reveals an important aspect of

Iranian identity as rehearsed in the US diaspora. In their search for a way to increase their mobility, Iranian immigrants have found the Haskell Free Library and Opera House to be a somewhat reliable choice. The library stands on the US-Canada border in Vermont and Quebec and allows for the travelers of both countries to reunite with each other without acquiring any immigration document. In the next section, I explore how Iranian immigrants use the liminal space of the library to challenge US immigration policies and perform a demystified understanding of Iranian identity.

Walking on the Borderline

I have so far discussed how the US government discriminately targets Iranian citizens and limits their ability to cross the border. Despite these restrictions, Iranian travelers are the furthest thing from passive, as individuals and as communities. Since the Muslim ban went into effect in 2017, Iranians have organized numerous protests, filed lawsuits against the government for separating them from their families, and come up with ingenious ways to reunite with their dear ones. While Iranian travelers experience a liminal life in the US, they see possibilities in liminal places for circumventing state regulations. Motivated by understanding the liminal qualities of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House as well as studying how performances of identity change according to the politics of the borderland, I decided to visit the center and embody the border crossing facilitated through the library. Before discussing my visit to the library, some historical information is necessary for contextualizing the contemporary functions of the library and opera house.

The Haskell Library was built in 1904 on the order of Martha Stewart Haskell, a wealthy native of Derby Line. The building was deliberately constructed astride the border to foster international relations between the border communities at both sides, and provide them with

learning and cultural services. At that time, the project cost a hefty sum of USD 50,000, all courtesy of the Haskell family. Colonel Horace Stewart Haskell, Martha's son, continued his mother's work after her death and funded maintaining the library and opera house with generous offers.[26]

With a keen interest in arts, Martha Haskell also proposed building an opera house on top of the library, so all the revenue produced from selling show tickets could support maintaining the library. The house has a proscenium arch 26 feet wide and 20 feet high, and a stage that is 24 feet deep and 47 feet wide. The opera house also includes three hundred folding chairs, which patrons can "adopt" and support managing the maintenance costs. With white plaster walls surrounding the dark brown and red chairs, the house seems luxurious. The décor in the opera's interior is allegedly the only surviving work of Boston artist, Erwin LaMoss (1855 – 1910). It is also noteworthy that while the audience is in their seats, they are in the US, watching a show on a stage located inside Canada.[27] In other words, every production in the Haskell Opera House is literally borderland performance, a cultural representation inside a "lived space where liminal and hybrid identities and experiences abound."[28]

For the inaugural show of the Haskell Opera House, a local black-face minstrelsy troupe, called the Columbian Minstrels, was recruited to perform on June 7th, 1904. The show, varying in ticket value from $0.50 for general admission to $1 for orchestra seating and the first two rows

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[26] The information in this paragraph comes from the guided tour of the Haskell Library, offered by the staff.

[27] M.F. Farfan, Haskell Archives, and Haskell Free Library and Opera House, *The Making of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House: The Construction Years, 1901-1904 : Selected Letters from the Haskell Archives* (Quebec: Haskell Free Library, 1999), 2, 82.

[28] Patricia Ybarra, "Havana Isn't Waiting: Staging Travel During Cuba's Special Period," in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 58.

in the balcony, was comprised of two parts. Part one included the minstrelsy performance, advertised as a "grand revival of old-time black-face minstrelsy" with "new songs, new jokes, and beautiful electric effects" (Figure 7). Part two was a new musical comedy titled *The Isle of Rock*, directed by C. A. Freligh and composed by the George Lowell Tracy Company of Boston. Additionally, a music number, called "The Collective Goon Cadets' Grand Military Number," followed the show. The Clement Theatre Orchestra of Sherbrooke played the music for the entirety of the show.

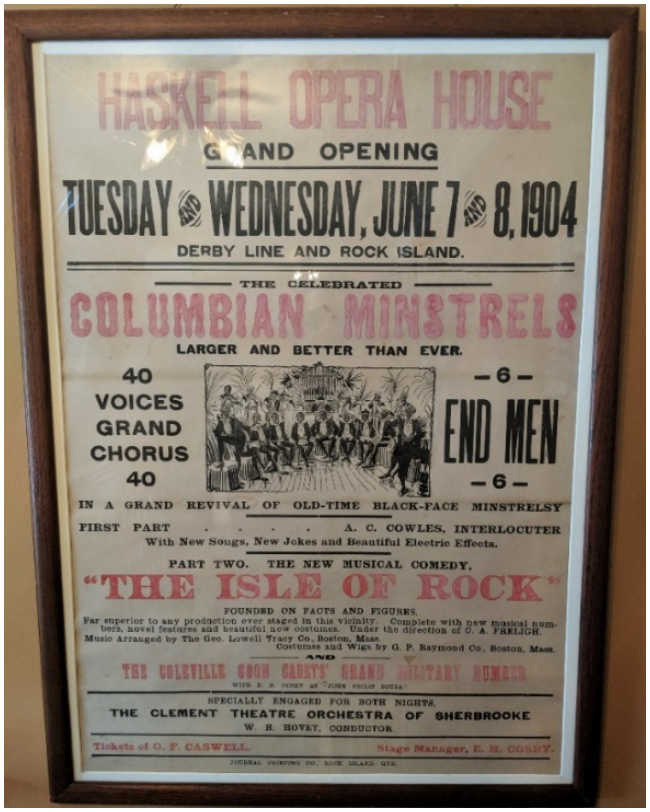

Figure 7. The advertisement for the opening show at the Haskell Opera House (1904). Photo by the author.

There are some differences and similarities between the blackface minstrelsy performance of the opera house and contemporary performances of border crossing by Iranian travelers at the Haskell Library. Both performances are informed by racial politics and involve a specific representation of the Other. But while the blackface minstrelsy show disfigures the

African American identity for entertainment, the walk of Iranian travelers on the border aims to challenge the immobilizing surveillance practices of the state.[29]

Today, the library and opera house belong to the US but it is operated by the Stanstead city government. Under the creative directorship of the local company Borderline Players, current shows differ in genre, from musical plays to original productions as well as courtroom dramas. The Haskell Opera House 2019 Season includes *All Together Now!* written and directed by Ross Murray, the musical show *Mama Mia!*, and *Let's Murder Marsha!* by Todd Cubit. It is interesting to know that *All Together Now!* is an adaptation of an urban legend in Derby Line that entails the possibility of a Beatles reunion at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.

The library is a well-known cultural center in Vermont, but it remains less-known to outsiders. That, however, is not the case for Iranian travelers. Among these travelers, the Haskell Library functions as what James C. Scott calls "hidden transcripts," a collection of covert discourses used by marginalized communities to combat the power imbalance between the condition of their oppression and the power of the state.[30] By word of mouth, Iranian travelers discovered the peculiar geography of the library and learned how to use it to their advantage. For instance, I came to know about the library through my Iranian partner. When discussing the hardship imposed on Iranian travelers by their non-immigrant VISAs, my partner told me about a library in Vermont where Iranian and other non-immigrants can visit their families in Canada without acquiring any immigration document. After some research, I soon realized that many

[29] How contemporary performances of border crossing at the Haskell Library and Opera House are racially haunted by black minstrelsy shows at the US-Canada border is a topic worthy of inquiry in future projects.

[30] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.

Iranian travelers knew about the library for a long time, even before President Trump took office. Travel restrictions for Iranian nationals significantly increased after the Muslim ban, but US discriminatory immigration policies against Iranian citizens well precede the current US government. Faced with numerous limiting laws over the decades, Iranian travelers had to find a way to somehow exercise the basic right of seeing their families without any foreign intervention. Using the Haskell Free Library was an effective, relatively cost-efficient solution especially for nearby travelers on the East Coast.

The Haskell Library provides a flexible site for Iranian travelers to reunite with their acquaintances. That flexibility, however, does not mean complete freedom. The US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers have the right to ask for documents within a 100-mile radius of any border, a right heavily contested by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) as well as other pro-migration entities and individuals.[31] Therefore, visiting the library needs careful planning and making sure that one has all pertinent documents for proving her legal residence in the US. Prior to my visit, I gathered my immigration documents as well as any evidence that could support my status as an international student. In addition to my passport and i-20 form,[32] I gathered a copy of my unofficial transcripts, an official certificate of enrollment, a letter from the Chair of my graduate program attesting to my current student status, and my teaching assistantship contracts for the past three years. In a sense, these documents were props for my performance as an international student. As long as I had them in hand, I could play a convincing role. Even though I was sure that I had the necessary documents with me, the fear of harassment

[31] See "The Constitution in the 100-Mile Border Zone," American Civil Liberties Union, accessed December 7, 2019, https://www.aclu.org/other/constitution-100-mile-border-zone.

[32] "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status," also known as the i-20 form.

by border control officers led me to also ask my partner and colleagues to contact my graduate school's International Students Services office if they did not hear from me every night during my trip.

The border between the US and Canada in Vermont is not always a clearly marked line. Border control stations appear at numerous points, but many areas are left unattended. When driving across those areas, I was particularly nervous about accidentally crossing the border. In April 2018, the two-year term of my student VISA expired and I could not return to the US upon leaving it. Even though I remained inside the country legally, driving a car near an invisible line that determined the legality of my movement was a mentally demanding task. As a result, I had to constantly check the map application on my phone to make sure that I was driving on a route that did not cross the border. I relied on the alleged accuracy of the geographical data transmitted through my phone until I was sure that I had arrived at my lodging destination in Newport, a small city southwest of Derby Line.

I did not encounter any border control officer when I reached Newport. I was, instead, confronted by citizens who enforced domestic border control around their properties. As I was getting close to my rented room, I had to pass many houses with large American flags hanging from them. The flags made me conscious of my immigration status and Iranian ethnicity. Additionally, there was a "PRIVATE PROPERTY – DO NOT ENTER" sign in front of almost every house. Combined with the flags, the signs made me more uncomfortable. I felt their presence unwelcoming and even threatening as if they knew about my non-residence status. The flags and signs hailed me as illegal, regardless of my legal residence in the US. They were surveillance tools, making me conscious of being watched not directly by the state but by citizen actors who the state deemed crucial to enforcing national security. Such an extension of state

security responsibilities to the public, as James Walsh argues, is a neoliberal plight that "deplaces" state functions and gives rise to vigilant citizens, watchful entities who "seek to recuperate traditional systems of belonging, morality and identity by regulating the presence of 'others' perceived as threatening."[33] At that moment when I encountered the fluttering flags and restrictive signs, I was illegal, a threat to the national security, and unwelcome to the border community. I felt as an effigy, self-conscious of my racial similarities to the 9/11 terrorists. The American flags and the warning signs restored a scenario of Islamophobia based on which I was a suspect terrorist. They "scripted" me to tread carefully and remember the ghosts my brown body could represent in the context of US national security.[34]

When I arrived at my lodging destination, I quickly learned Iranian travelers are frequent guests in that house. Lynn, the owner of the property, approached me and said: "You must be Mohamadreza." Her pronunciation of my name was impeccable and slightly surprising. I am used to people having some difficulty saying my name, but Lynn was confident. I told Lynn how impressed I was with her pronunciation of my name. She simply smiled and said: "I've got to host many Iranians!" After giving me a tour of the house (which she called the "retreat"), Lynn asked me, "Are you here to see your family at the library?" I said, "I'm here to write about families at the library." Lynn raised her eyebrows and I clarified my plans for her. The moment

[33] James P Walsh, "Watchful Citizens: Immigration Control, Surveillance and Societal Participation," *Social & Legal Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014), 250. Walsh borrows the "deplace" term from Michel-Rolph Trouillot and his study of anthropology in the light of globalization. See M. Trouillot, Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[34] Elise Morrison uses Robin Bernstien's theorization of "scriptive things" (see Chapter 2) to study the performative effects of surveillance technologies. For more, see Ellis Morrison, *Discipline and Desire: Surveillance Technologies in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 24.

she learned that I was a theatre scholar, she got excited and said she is an art educator. I actually learned later that Lynn used to be the Administrative Assistant for the renowned New York City-based experimental theatre company The Wooster Group. Sharing an interest in arts, we both tacitly acknowledge each other as colleagues.

After unpacking, I gathered my immigration and employment documents and headed toward the library. As I got closer to Derby Line, the nicer-looking neighborhoods gave way to more impoverished ones. The houses turned slightly dilapidated, the cemeteries seemed barren, and stores looked smaller and sparser. A few minutes later, I realized that I was on the main street that would lead to the library. I knew at the end of that street I had to turn right. I was actually told to be specifically careful there as the main street would eventually cross the border and a Border Patrol SUV always hides behind the next turn. I slowed down the car. Carefully watching the traffic signs, I got to the end of the street and turned right. Immediately after, I recognized the Haskell Free Library and Opera House in front of me (Figure 8). I passed the library to find a parking spot and right then a Border Patrol SUV pulled in next to the library.

Figure 8. The Haskell Free Library and Opera House. Photo by the author.

I wondered if I had crossed the border. I parked the car behind the library building and waited to see if the SUV was following me. Two minutes passed and no Border officer approached me to ask me to step out of the car. Taking a deep breath, I got out. I realized that I had received a text message a few minutes earlier. The text was an automated message from my cell phone carrier, welcoming me to Canada. I was instructed to purchase a travel package to avoid additional charges on my data plan. Was I in Canada? I looked to my right. There was a green lawn with no sign, no border station, and no wall. I went to the front side of the library. The Border Patrol SUV was parked there with an officer inside. A row of potted plants was at that side in addition to a concrete border marker that read "United States" (Figure 9). I leaned forward to see the writing on the other side of the marker: "Canada." I was, I learned, in the US.

Figure 9. The border marker in front of the library. Photo by the author.

The text message that incorrectly announced my location in Canada shows the unreliability of digital data, particularly as pertaining to bodies and their movements. In my drive

to Newport, I relied confidently on the accuracy of digital navigation tools to explore the border areas in Vermont. The text message I received at the Haskell Library, however, shows the discrepancy between my physical body and the digital data about it. My physical body was not the only traveling entity close to the border. Rather, my body produced non-material traces that could pass the border. As people interact with technological tools that are designed to monitor and record individuals' activities to offer services and/or capitalize on them, a digital collection of data is created about each individual. Such digital data exist in the air, in corporate and government servers, significantly influencing the "true" identity of individuals. In technological and security contexts, digital data determines who individuals are. The driving license contains information about one's sex, height, blood type, date of birth, and soon with the national enforcement of the Real ID Act of 2005, one's residence status. All that information is digitized, mediated, and prone to inaccuracy and misinterpretation. Yet much value is given to it. The digital data are not representations, they present individuals; they complete, confirm, and contradict who we are. These digital clones, or as David Lyon suggests, "data-doubles," travel more often than physical bodies; they fly from one server to another and constitute the identity of the physical body in their increased mobility.[35] Then, in a sense, I actually crossed the US-Canada border as I got closer to the library. The GPS data sent from my phone to satellites recorded my presence on the Canadian side and asked for a toll (in that case, an extra charge on my cell phone bill). In the meantime, my physical body remained in the US. I was, then, concurrently in the US and Canada.

[35] David Lyon, "Filtering Flows, Friends, and Foes : Global Surveillance," in *Politics at the Airport* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 30.

Or maybe I was in neither place, not in the US nor Canada. Maybe I was in a place in-between, a geographical gray-zone where rules were vague and distorted. Of course, such a description is a reminder of the foundational theorization of liminality by late anthropologist Victor Turner. "Liminal entities," writes Turner, "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." It is also interesting that in his study, Turner uses the word "passenger" to describe liminal personae, "threshold people" who pass "through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state."[36] With this in mind, the liminal place of the Haskell Library and Opera House fosters geographical, political, and cultural irregularities, a place in which the stubborn quality of borders lose their sharp edge. Demarcation, at least in terms of land, is flexible. This flexibility is significant, as it permits "for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed."[37] Travelers of certain ethnicities are not allowed to freely cross the US border. The liminal place of the library, however, allows those travelers to disregard that political norm. Put differently, the liminal place of the library provides Iranian travelers with the possibility of crossing the border without holding the appropriate immigration documents. It allows them to move somewhat freely and break away from the role of the suspected terrorist. Unbiased assessment replaces misinformed history in the Haskell Library. There, Iranian identity is not systematically judged by the idea of the Muslim terrorist, and therefore, is unimpacted by the immobilizing effects of the Muslim ban. The travelers use the liminality of the library to

[36] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94.

[37] Jon Mackenzie, "The Liminal-Norm," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 11.

liberate themselves from the state policies. In the library, as E. Patrick Johnson writes about liminal borderlands, the Other is not bound to the subjugator's will; she can overturn the surveillance culture of the border and conceal her body in its suspension.[38] Indeed, I felt less pressured to play the role of Muslim terrorists inside the library. With no officers and security cameras inside, no authoritative memory was restored to associate me with the past acts of violence. In my mobility, I was equal to every other guest inside the library. I never had that privilege at an international border, so for the first time in my life, I felt less Other on a global scale.

After walking inside the library, I noticed that the interior seemed less luxurious compared to the grandiose architecture of the building. The circulation desk stood a few dozen feet away from the entrance door. There were also two reading rooms on the left, one designed for children. With wooden floors and furniture, the rooms had a nostalgic quality to them. Somewhere between the entrance door and the circulation desk, a black line was drawn on the floor (Figure 10). The line reached a bookshelf on the left, on top of which two small flags were placed at two sides of the line. The flag closer to the entrance door belonged to the US and the further one was Canadian. Therefore, to reach the circulation desk, visitors had to cross the international border.

When I passed the line to talk to the librarian, for the first time in my life, I was not stopped for crossing a geographical border. It felt anticlimactic. My body is used to rigid customs of border crossing. The invasive practice is internalized in me, and without it, I felt disturbed at the library as if it all were a ruse to catch me passing the border illegally. After a

[38] E. Patrick Johnson, "Border Intellectual: Performing Identity at the Crossroads," in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 150.

brief conversation, the librarian asked me where I was from. I replied, "originally from Iran," and she smiled, "Aaah, Iranian!" I seemed to her a usual guest, perhaps with less interest in the library itself.

Figure 10. The black line on the Haskell Library's floor, marking the US-Canada border. Photo by the author.

At the library, I soon realized that I need to perform the role of a "trusted traveler," a constructed concept that Benjamin J. Muller introduces as a position in which the traveler is encouraged to remain inconspicuous to avoid the surveillance gaze.[39] While I felt more at ease inside the library than how I usually am at an international border, I had to occasionally perform the role of an enthusiastic tourist. When I signed up for a guided tour of the library, I found out that the visitors also explore the outside area of the building where the border patrol officers were present. I was genuinely interested in learning about the library, but I thought the more I pass as a friendly fan of cultural centers, the less likely border officers would notice me. I used every opportunity to take my phone out of my pocket and enthusiastically take photos. I had a

[39] Benjamin J. Muller, "Travelers, Borders, Dangers: Locating the Political at the Biometric Border," in *Politics at the Airport*, ed. Mark B. Salter (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 135.

fake smile on and read every information sign to blend in as an enthusiastic guest among the group of exclusively white library visitors.

I finished my first day of visiting the library with a thirty-minute tour of the library. Afterward, I went back to the retreat to talk with Lynn and learn about the oral history of the US-Canada border in Derby Line and surrounding areas. Six years ago, Lynn decided to come back to her hometown. She was an international art educator, teaching classes in different countries such as Trinidad (of Trinidad and Tobago nation), Germany, Portugal, and most recently, Myanmar. Growing up that close to Canada, Lynn could remember a time when there was no border control between the US and Canada. Along with her grandmother, Lynn could easily stop in Canada for grocery shopping, picnicking, or any other reasons. Things changed after 9/11. Border security got tightened and traffic to and from Canada got closely controlled. To this date, Lynn understands the border as an abstract notion, although she is sympathetic to how it separates families.

Newport has a population of 10,000 people in a 50-mile radius. The area, Lynn continued, is mostly economically deprived. Lynn decided to buy a house after returning to her hometown and earns additional income by hosting guests. Although Iranians comprise the majority of her usual guests (she calls herself the "Iranian connection of the Northeast Kingdom!"), people from around the country and the world frequent her retreat. Some come there to enjoy the nature, some to participate in sporting events throughout the year, and some to see their families both in town and at the library. I was her tenth Iranian guest in the past two years since the Muslim ban went into effect.

I asked Lynn about what she makes of the DO NOT ENTER signs in front of her neighbors' houses. She shook her head in disappointment and described the neighbors as

conservative people who relocated to Vermont from other areas with different belief systems. Generally, Lynn believes, local people are welcoming and compassionate toward strangers and neighbors. North Vermont has harsh winters, and mutual respect and tolerance are necessary for survival. If someone runs out of gas in the middle of winter, for instance, and no one helps that person, she could easily die. Her neighbors, on the other hand, Lynn continued, feel threatened by strangers driving past their houses. The neighbors were not a fan of Lynn and she actually had to fight for a permit from the City Council to host guests.

I wondered if the Border Control officers shared the same compassion for people that Lynn described. She believes many of them do. Lynn divided the officers into two categories: one, those who choose that job to protect the country, "the US freedom," and national security; and two, those who got hired by the Border and Customs simply because it pays decently. The former group, Lynn speculated, approach their job with a military mindset and are typically not familiar with the history of the area. The latter group has spent their whole lives in the border area. They understand that their job is fostering international relations and not shooting anyone who passes the border.[40]

When I went to the library the next morning, no Border Control SUV was parked on the street. I went inside and walked into a reading room to categorize my fieldwork notes. Then, I saw a couple—a young woman and a man—sitting nervously behind a desk. We looked at each other briefly and tacitly acknowledged our shared heritage. I said "*Salam*"[41] and approached them. They seemed happy to see an Iranian fellow there, so I asked them if they were there to visit their family. They nodded "yes" nervously. "How long have you been waiting," I asked.

[40] Lynn Rublee, personal interview with the author, July 31, 2019.

[41] Farsi for "Hi."

"Almost an hour," the woman replied. I briefly explained my research project for them and asked if they were willing to talk to me about their experience. The woman's answer was a definite "No." The man said, "We're waiting for our family. But I'll let you know if we had a chance." He was just being nice. In retrospect, I should not have asked them to participate in my research. They were clearly under pressure as if something was wrong.

Border politics complicate the cultural and social functions of the library. The center was originally designed to foster international relations, but that function could be an obstacle to fulfilling other services. In all the reports I read about the Haskell Library and Opera House none mentioned the crucial role it plays in educating young populations and helping the unemployed demographics with economic opportunities. Border crossing has become what the library is known for, and that, to a considerable degree, undermines other significant functions of the center.

One library staff, who wished to remain anonymous, explained that the function of the library should be considered in relation to the complex communities it serves. The area, my interlocuter delineated, is primarily populated by blue-collar families, working in places like tool-making factories and with low education levels. There is also a significant community of retirees who live a financially stable life, particularly in Stanstead, Quebec. Recently, there has also been an influx of young families moving from Montreal and other big cities to the border area to decrease their living expenses. Moreover, the fact that the communities on the Canadian side speak two languages (French and English) adds to the complexity of offering services by the library.[42] On both sides of the border, unemployment looms large. One study details the

[42] The anonymous interlocuter believed that living in a bilingual area in Canada was a main reason behind lower education levels on the Canadian side. According to them, approximately 45 percent of the Canadian population speak English, but they are forced to send

unemployment rate in Derby Line as 6.3 percent, almost two times bigger than the national average (3.3 percent).[43] The 2016 Canadian Census reports among 1,475 residents of Stanstead 527 individuals, i.e., more than a third of the population, are unemployed.[44] One major mission of the Haskell Library is to offer services to the large unemployed populations at both sides of the border. Among different services, the library provides easy and free access to print and online job advertisements for patrons.

Some patrons on the US side, my interviewee added, are deterred from visiting the library due to 24/7 surveillance. The Border Patrol has installed many CCTV cameras around the library (but not inside) and their SUVs constantly patrol the area. Such a security system is not pleasant, particularly to those residents with a criminal record. Additionally, the luxurious appearances of the library make the center less appealing to a mainly economically-deprived population. The Haskell Library staff are aware of these obstacles and are at work to resolve them.

The library also has a specific focus on training young people and getting them interested and ready for long-term education. Many programs include storytelling, but the library also offers various STEAM training programs for understanding science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics. Through these creative initiatives, young demographics are encouraged to

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their children to French-speaking schools. That leads to obvious learning obstacles, and in the long term, an increased drop-out rate.

[43] "Derby Line, VT Employment - Median Household Income, Unemployment Rate," areavibes, accessed December 9, 2019, https://www.areavibes.com/derby+line-vt/employment/.

[44] "Census Profile, 2016 Census - Stanstead [Population Centre], Quebec and Nunavut [Territory]," Statistics Canada, accessed December 9, 2019, https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=POPC&Code1=1493&Geo2=PR&Code2=62&Data=Count&SearchText=Stanstead&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=1493&TABID=1.

learn about technological problem-solving and get interested in finding jobs in the ever-growing tech industry. [45]

The Haskell Library exists to temporarily provide a relatively safe space to Iranian immigrants who wish for the disassociation with security performances that restores their racial identities to justify anti-immigration policies. At the same time, performing Iranian immigrant identity at the Haskell Library can interfere with the important roles the center plays for the border communities. I am not suggesting that Iranian immigrants undercut the value of the Haskell Library by covert border crossing. On the contrary, the library was built, among many things, to foster border crossing. Therefore, Iranian immigrants simply use a service that the library offers to everyone. That said, I am sympathetic with the library staff's struggle to continue their work at a time when state security enforcers impose unprecedented pressure on them. As long as the Haskell Free Library and Opera House facilitated border crossing for white travelers, US Customs and Border Protection did not find it necessary to interfere with the library. It is the mobility of brown bodies at the border that could not be left unchecked by a xenophobic state.

After my conversation with the library staff, I headed outside to pay closer attention to the village. I saw the nervous Iranian couple walking slowly away from the library, alone. I deduced their family could not make it to meet them. I also noticed a Border Control SUV parking in front of me. I was first tempted to approach the officers and ask about their thoughts regarding the border crossing at the Haskell. I changed my mind, though, partly because I thought doing so will further perpetuate the homogenous understanding of the library as only a "border portal" with no other significance. I was also afraid. Unlike inside the library, the outside

[45] Anonymous interlocutor, personal interview with author, July 31, 2019.

space resembled a border area that I am used to: border security officers everywhere with CCTC cameras recording my every move. I copped out from being insurgent, from performing my Iranian identity without remembering what my ethnicity means in the eyes of a racist security state.

Instead, I turned around and walked past the library toward downtown. I was walking along the borderline, watching houses split into two by it. I remembered the time, a year ago, when I was walking across the US-Mexico border in San Diego. Construction workers were working on implementing a prototype for President Trump's proposed wall. As disgusting as I found the wall, combined with overt security measures, the wall gave me a false sense of security. It kept my body where it was supposed to be, a land for which I had permits to traverse. On the contrary, the invisible wall at Derby was unsettling to me. What if my foot slipped and crossed the border? I feared the repercussions. I thought, rightly or wrongly so, the Border Control officers were hiding everywhere across the invisible border, waiting for me to go beyond the mobility limit set by my expired VISA and employment contracts. How much was I conditioned by the politics of visibility at borders that its invisibility was disturbing to my act of walking next to it?[46]

Harsh movement regulations make the border a threatening divider for immigrants. The border is also a spot for travelers to reunite with their families. Therefore, an ambivalent feeling about the border in Derby Line is common among Iranian travelers. Derby Line also hosts residents who mostly believe in the function of the border in bringing people together. When I

[46] Patrick Anderson calls such politics in the neoliberal context the "the ocular-technics of state power." See Patrick Anderson, "'Architecture Is Not Justice': Seeing Guantánamo Bay," in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 82–96.

arrived downtown, a group of protestors had congregated to express their contempt against strict border control and the treatment of immigrants at borders (Figure 11). Holding signs that read,

Figure 11. A group of local border residents protesting President Trump's immigration policies, August 1st, 2019, Derby Line, Vermont. Photo by the author.

for instance, "Cage Trump – Free the Children" and "Immigrants Make America Great," the protestors, all residents of the border area, did not believe in using the border to keep people out. Instead, they disclosed to me how they are followers of the belief that the border is designed to bring people together. In a sense, then, the border in Derby Line is a (re)uniting zone for people who deal with it the most, the residents and immigrants. The state, however, enacts the border to create tension and limit who can have access to society.

Perhaps no word captures my feeling while walking across the borderline than "disorienting." The invisible border made it hard to understand where I truly was, or to which side I belonged. I remember the same disorientation as I watched the Twin Towers fall. I was no more than fourteen years old when I found out my national identity was perpetually suspect in acts of terrorism. As the towers fell, more walls were raised around my Iranian identity to mark it as inherently violent and further undeserving of connection to the "Free World." Through

aggressive initiatives taken by Western governments during the War on Terror, I was reminded every day that I belonged to an "axis of evil." How could a typical teenage boy react to the systematic vilification of the Other on an international scale without feeling confused, scared, and disoriented? Sixteen years later and I was walking across a line that marked me as "illegal," a line that had me trapped inside a country that officially believed Iran to be a sponsor of terrorism. I was freely walking at the borderland while being aware of my transnational immobility outside the liminal space of the border. Disoriented, I freely crossed the invisible border at the Haskell Library, but my walk was not free of enduring a lifetime embodiment of terrorist ghosts.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by discussing how US post-9/11 politics influenced my performances of identity. Before the attacks, I judged my place in the world by colonial standards set by the US in Iran. I was infatuated by the American culture and did my best as a teenager to perform my identity according to imported American values. I unknowingly gave in to subjugation so that one day I could have access to what the empire could offer me. After the 9/11 attacks, I continued understanding the world based on how the US government framed my identity, but this time I was overtly hailed as the enemy of the state. As I watched the Twin Towers fall, I internalized the evil condition that the US imposed on my nationality. From that point on, the American way of life was no longer something I wished for. Instead, it became something to be afraid of. I had no place in the advertised immigrant image of the US. I was the enemy who had to be stopped from entering the homeland. The US government situated my ethnicity within an axis of evil and I had to find a way to deal with that baggage.

The 9/11 attacks ushered in a new age of vilification and securitization. In the name of keeping the nation safe, the US initiated illegitimate acts of war. It also enforced discriminatory anti-immigrant and Islamophobic policies that continue to this date. In the xenophobic context of the post-9/11 era, Iranian citizens are introduced as actors of evil who can conflict violence upon the nation. Therefore, the security of the US homeland partly rests upon subjecting Iranian travelers to harsh surveillance procedures. Any US act of security that targets Iranian nationals and is justified by the memory of the past terrorist attacks is a performance of vilification carefully designed to conflate Iranians and terrorists. Given this, President Trump's Muslim ban, which bars Iranian and citizens of some other majority-Muslim countries from entering the US, is a performative act that perpetuates the xenophobic idea of Muslim travelers being the same as the perpetrators of terror. In this scenario (i.e., the ban), Iranian nationals are effigies of the Middle Eastern terrorists who brought down the World Trade Center. They are cast in the role of the terrorists to restore the memory of a national tragedy. Stopping Iranian travelers in this context, thus, is stopping future acts of violence. Such reasoning undergirds the Muslim ban and immobilizes Iranian immigrants across the borders.

At a time when the Muslim ban reifies the "Iranian = terrorist" sentiment, and as such, limits the movement of Iranian citizens, Iranian travelers seek ways to increase their mobility and resist their condition of oppression. Using the Haskell Free Library and Opera House to cross the US border freely is an effective way in which Iranians challenge state policies and perform a more accurate understanding of their identity. In the library, Iranian travelers are liberated from the bonds of being a national security threat. They cross the international border with ease and constitute their bodies and identities as legal entities, sharing many common values with their domestic hosts. In that context, Iranian travelers are understood as people with

an affection for family, a desire for physical and emotional touch, and interested in having a social gathering. As absurd as it feels to state these obvious actions and desires, it is precisely the lack of such traits in state representations of Iranian identity that justifies its surveillance and detainment. In a way, then, being an Iranian traveler in the contemporary US is an ongoing endeavor to perform the sacrilegious idea that, we, too, are human.

CONCLUSION

On May 4th, 2007, Iraqi-born performance artist Wafaa Bilal entered the FlatFile Gallery in Chicago to begin his month-long project, *Domestic Tension.* Bilal chose a small space inside the gallery and decorated it with a bed, a computer, a lamp, an exercise bike, and a coffee table. During the entirety of his performance, audiences could go to a specified website and monitor Bilal at all times through a webcam. They also could use the website to chat with the artist. More importantly, audiences had a peculiar option too: they could use the website to shoot Bilal with a robotic paintball gun. The choice was entirely up to the audience. Bilal, except for brief breaks, never left the room. He responded to the online participants on the project's website, but he mostly tried to evade the paint bullets shot at him around the clock. At times, when Bilal was conscious, he could dodge the bullets. In most cases, however, unknown shooters successfully targeted the brown Arab artist, inflicting considerable pain to his lightly protected body.

There are many examples of performances in which the performer allows, or even invites, the audience to inflict pain onto the performing body. Perhaps the most notorious case is Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) in which the artist stood against a white wall in F Space Gallery and asked his friend to shoot at his arm with a rifle, while a select number of people watched. Burden's performance, as Frazer Ward describes it, was a work that sought violently to interfere with the "ethical real" and "limned the public as an arena of responsibility, of dilemma and decision."[1] Similar to Burden*,* Bilal gives the participants the option of shooting the artist or refusing to do so. Unlike *Shoot,* however, *Domestic Tension* poses an ethical dilemma that is informed with the racial history of treating brown bodies during the War on Terror.

[1] Frazer Ward, "Gray Zone: Watching 'Shoot,'" *October* 95 (2001): 117.

Bilal fled Iraq in 1991 to escape Saddam Hossein's dictatorship. After spending two years in refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he relocated to the US and earned a master's degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2005, Bilal received the tragic news of his brother getting killed by a remotely launched US bomb. Combined with the death of his father soon after, these events inspired Bilal to create a performance to comment on US post-9/11 military aggressions and wartime technologies.[2]

Chronicling his life and artistic productions in the book *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* (2008), Bilal states that he came up with the idea of *Domestic Tension* after hearing a story about a young soldier in a military camp in Colorado, who operated drone strikes in Iraq. "It struck me that," Bilal writes, "Haji's [my brother's] death had been orchestrated by someone just like this young woman, pressing buttons from thousands of miles away, sitting in a comfortable chair in front of a computer, completely oblivious to the terror and destruction they were causing to a family—a whole society—halfway across the world."[3] Personally and intellectually affected by the tangible gap between understanding US wars inside and outside the country, Bilal decided to create *Domestic Tension* to highlight the chasm between "comfort zone" and "conflict zone." While many US citizens live their lives in the comfort of experiencing no military war, their country initiates brutal conflicts in other parts of the world. Moreover, modern wartime facilitates the annihilation of people without producing any interpersonal consequences for the perpetrator. In such a context, war becomes a "video

[2] Kari Lydersen, "Shot More Than 40,000 Times, an Iraqi Artist Spreads a Message with a Paintball Gun," AlterNet, June 22, 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20070625044026/http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/54537/.

[3] Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2013) Kindle Edition, 326-329.

game" in which soldiers can kill their unknown enemy, who are thickly cloaked by racial and ethnic stereotypes.[4]

Bilal spent a month in FlatFile Gallery in front of a remote-controlled paintball gun to simulate modern warfare. The bullets shot at his body lacked lethality, but they anonymously brought him physical and psychological pain over and over. More than 60,000 people shot at him from approximately 136 countries. At times, when the server was overloaded with many users, participants struggled for their turn, practically fighting with each other over the gun. Some hackers manipulated the online interface to continuously shoot hundreds of bullets at Bilal. Other hackers came to Bilal's rescue and turned the gun away from the artist. By the end of the project, Bilal was bruised. He suffered from sleep-deprivation and struggled with post-traumatic stress, "as if he had been in an actual war zone."[5]

Domestic Tension brings forth the importance of bodies as images transmitted through digital platforms. Online participants perceive Bilal's body as a series of codes visualized within online interfaces. Such mediated perception is susceptible to indifference, as if digital bodies are merely virtual and unreal. Video games capitalize on this dissociation of bodies from their digital recreations and make the manipulation of bodies less consequential and more fictitious. In *Domestic Tension*, however, the body is not purely digital, coming to life only through graphical mastery. Instead, Bilal's digital image is an expression, synchronously connected to his corporeal being. In other words, manipulating Bilal's digitized picture through the project's website produces an effect directly embodied by the artist. As online participants aim and shoot at Bilal's virtual body, Bilal gets to experience the shot with his real body. *Domestic Tension* might seem

[4] Bilal and Kari Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi*, 383-387.

[5] Bilal and Kari Lydersen, 136-139.

like a video game in medium, but it produces real effects on the body that it represents. The virtual quality of the digital medium in this project does not mean the transmitted body is unreal too. Instead, as Steve Dixon contends regarding recorded digital performances, the digital body is "an index . . . another trace and representation of the always already *physical* body." The project's participants interact with a digital manifestation of Bilal's body, but that digital manifestation "constitute[s] fully embodied actions."[6] Therefore, by shooting at a digital image of an Iraqi artist in a made-up domestic space, the participants, in fact, take part in the real act of brutalizing Middle Eastern bodies.

At a time when mainstream media propagates an idea of the Middle East as a series of images captured by military drones during an endless War on Terror, most US citizens come to understand Middle Eastern bodies as unreal, virtualized through acts of digital transmission. What is left unseen in the digitization of war in some Middle Eastern countries is the shift bodies and terrain go through. The black-and-white pictures in media conceal the bloodshed and reduce bodies to abstract marks, ready to be wiped from screens. The ubiquity of such imagery in US mass media desensitizes audiences to acts of war as well as violence against racialized bodies.

Performances like *Domestic Tension* seek to trouble apathetic perspectives through which war in the Middle East is understood. Bilal centers the performance around his body and asks the audience to confront it digitally in their comfort zones. The Middle Eastern body is not concealed in the performance. Instead, the body figures prominently against the impersonal construction of Middle Eastern identity as publicized through propaganda war pictures and many video game projects. Performance participants get to see the face of their target and listen to his

[6] Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 215, emphasis in original.

moaning after the bullets hit his body. The bullets also create a colored effect on the body and the environment, making more visible the consequence of pulling a trigger. In these ways, Bilal troubles popular understandings of male, Muslim Arab bodies as monolithically violent. The Arab identity is a target of brutality in the performance. He is continuously punished for no reason and cannot take a relaxing breath even in his bedroom. As Carol Fadda-Conrey asserts, Bilal redeploys the digital images of a Middle Eastern identity in a "counterpublic" space to challenge the "imperialist" perception of the Other as positioned within "us and them" dichotomy.[7] In *Domestic Tension*, the racialized body endures pain for who he is, an unarmed Iraqi man who threatens no one and nothing but the troublesome idea that some lives matter less.

Bilal's incorporation of modern technologies in his art should be studied within the increasing reliance of Middle Eastern immigrants on digital tools for creating online communities. Encountered by an oppressive state and limited opportunities for civic participation, Middle Eastern immigrants use digital resources to build coalitions among themselves and other communities, and increase their involvement in public discourses such as national identity.

In a way, then, I understand *Domestic Tension* and other similar works as cultural productions designed for producing a digital sense of citizenship. As I discussed in my study of Middle Eastern American theatre companies in Chapter 1, citizenship is neither limited to legal discourses nor is it merely assigned by the state. Rather, Middle Eastern theatre companies use theatre to complement US citizenship with cultural understandings of the notion. The white heteronormative state has tight control over who gets to practice citizenship in legal fields. In the

[7] Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 174-5.

post-9/11 context of the US, Middle Eastern theatre companies contest such a civic exclusion and practice their ideals of citizenship through cultural productions. In that way, US citizenship is not only an identifier of the white majority. Rather, Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants can partake in national discourses of belonging and consolidate their identities as an inseparable part of society. Digital citizenship, as practiced by artists like Bilal, overlaps with the political scope of cultural citizenship. It is yet another way to increase social participation in an anti-immigrant and Islamophobic context. Therefore, Middle Eastern immigrants can use cyber technologies to create "digital diasporas," safe online spaces built for expressing citizenship rights.[8]

Domestic Tension can also be studied using my assertations regarding the notion of "home" in Chapter 2. Home can have different meanings for immigrants. Some might understand it through a universalist perspective, one in which increased global mobility and mass relocation deprive places of their meaning. For instance, after venturing on a journey to find her home again in Iran, Saba Zavarei came to realize her perpetual homelessness in the everyday act of immigration. After arriving at her home in Iran, Zavarei did not feel "in place," but as if she belonged "somewhere else." Thus, she soon left her birthplace to wander around the streets of Tehran. On the other hand, some might approach home with a "particularist" attitude. Similar to the refugees of *Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*, immigrants can remain attached to their native homes and embrace performance as a tool for recreating it in diaspora. *Domestic Tension* also incorporates a particularist notion of home. In his book, Bilal writes that he did this project to

[8] Karim Tartoussieh, "Muslim Digital Diasporas and the Gay Pornographic Cyber Imaginary," in *Between the Middle East and the Americas*, ed. Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, The Cultural Politics of Diaspora (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 214.

feel closer to his family at home.[9] While many Iraqi citizens have to deal with sudden shootings and explosions at their homes, Bilal could not sit comfortably at his house in the US. Thus, he decided to simulate an Iraqi home. He reconfigured the space of the gallery to create an Iraqi home and transmit it through the internet to people around the world. For those audiences who participated in the project, an Iraqi home was not a place "over there," far from their homes. Rather, an Iraqi home was at the tip of their fingers, much like the suitcases of *Unpacked*. The intimate notion of home digitally communicated through performance did not stop many participants from invading Bilal's bedroom. But unlike in mass media coverage of the Middle East, the performance participants had to bear witness to the immediate consequence of destroying Iraqi homes.

Lastly, surveillance discourses can add more nuances to Bilal's performance. Constantly in front of a camera, Bilal was never alone in his private space. Unknown viewers could monitor his every move around the clock and punish him with a paintball if desired. As I discussed in Chapter 3, a surveillance perspective reduces Middle Eastern identities to threatening agents who are incompatible with US society. The US state unfairly monitors Middle Eastern immigrants and situates their identities exclusively in terrorism-related and Islamophobic contexts. Limiting these travelers to security discourses establishes the Middle Eastern race as a homogeneous Muslim community haunted by the ghosts of specific terrorists. In this way, surveillance ideologies of the US perpetuate the conflation of "Muslims" and "terrorists," and give rise to an inferior construction of the Middle Eastern race. In *Domestic Tension*, Bilal confronts the condition of his security oppression and voluntarily gives away a continuous look into his private life. Bilal, however, contradicts the surveillance assumptions of the security state by exposing the

[9] Bilal and Kari Lydersen, 1974.

real perpetrators of violence. In his performance, it is not the Arab man who holds a gun in hand and shoots at innocent civilians. Instead, it is the always-viewing agents who callously pull the trigger to inflict pain on racialized bodies.

Throughout this dissertation, I have elaborated on how the Middle Eastern identity is constructed through performance within discourses on migration. While white, heteronormative ideologies and policies situate the Middle Eastern race in the post-9/11 context as essentially inferior and dangerous, Middle Eastern performers rehearse their ethnic and racial identities in insurgent ways. Inspired by the possibilities of the performance for creating change, Middle Eastern artists use the medium to cement their belongings to US society. Their activist acts are varied in form and format. From theatrical productions to multimedia installations to everyday acts, Middle Eastern diasporic performance shows how diverse artists and travelers take on the important task of demystifying immigrant identities in the contemporary milieu.

As I briefly discussed in this conclusion, studying digital projects can also add to the discussion of Middle Eastern immigrant identities in diaspora. Wafaa Bilal belongs to a significant body of artists with Middle Eastern heritage who use digital means to trouble and expand the meanings of their representing identities. Among many, I can name Lamia Joreige, Emily Jacir, Sama Alshaibi, and Lamia Joreige. These artists are only a few important figures in the cultural scene of the US and I hope their works attract more attention from theatre and performance studies scholars in future projects.

"Staging Belonging: Performance, Migration, and the Middle Eastern Diaspora in the United States" addresses different topics pertinent to the construction of Middle Eastern identity in diaspora. While the three chapters contain discussions of various performances as informed with nuanced theoretical frameworks, they also leave out important issues that should be studied

in the future. Namely, many Middle Eastern performance artists are invested in how their racial and ethnic identities intersect with their marginalized sexualities. Therefore, a study of queer Middle Eastern performances in the US could challenge the anti-LGBTQ assumptions of Middle Eastern immigrants and contribute to a deeper understanding of the Middle Eastern identity in diaspora.

Similarly, there is significant room in theatre and performance scholarship for research that addresses the history of diasporic Middle Eastern performance particularly in relation to the specific sociopolitical contexts of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How did the newly-arrived Middle Eastern immigrants negotiate their lives in the US through performance? In what specific ways the civil rights movement of the 1960s influenced the theatre-makers of Middle Eastern descent in the 1980s? What concerns did the performances of Middle Eastern artists aim to address during the first Gulf War? These are a few questions that require the attention of those theatre and performance scholars interested in studying the multicultural history of US theatre.

I dedicate these last lines to also express the specific need for more projects about the diasporic performances of various Middle Eastern ethnicities. An increasing number of scholars address the politics of diaspora in their studies of contemporary Middle East performances. While such efforts are significant and varied in scope, fewer projects deal with non-Arab Middle Eastern artists working in the US. The dearth of studies about different Middle Eastern ethnicities is a considerable challenge for achieving a detailed picture of the Middle Eastern diaspora. As such, I hope to see more projects in the future that address the valuable contributions of immigrants to US society as practiced by a diversity of Middle Eastern ethnicities.

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