Cracking Down on Diaspora: Arab Detroit and America’s “War on Terror”

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[Note to Readers: This essay was submitted to Anthropological Quarterly on March 14, 2003. Since then, the U.S. has invaded Iraq, deposed Saddam Hussein, and commenced its military occupation of that country. We have decided not to update our arguments, largely because recent events support our original conclusions in ways we had not entirely anticipated. In a brief postscript, we will try to explain how.]

Introduction

It is hard now to portray Arab Detroit outside the framework provided by the attacks of September 11, 2001. The idea, popular not so long ago, that the Arabs of metropolitan Detroit had finally entered the cultural mainstream, producing U.S. senators (Spencer Abraham) and union bosses (Steve Yokich, President of the UAW) and captains of industry (Jacques Nasser, CEO of Ford), is likely to be dismissed today as wishful thinking. Once hailed as “an immigrant success story,” as “the capital of Arab America,” the image of Arab Detroit changed within hours of the 9/11 attacks. Suddenly, it was a scene of threat, “divided loyalties,” and potential backlash. In the suburb of Dearborn, home to 30,000 Arab Americans, people began, after 9/11, to describe their neighbor-
hoods as “ghettos” and “enclaves,” a terminology of Otherness that was popular in 19th century newspaper accounts of Detroit’s newly arrived immigrants from Mt. Lebanon. Non-Arabs, for their part, began to use terms like “you people” when talking to Arab neighbors, relatives, and friends. In the language of polite society, “you people” is replaced by unctuous, incessant references to “the Muslim American community” or “the Arab American community,” a double-edged jargon that effectively subordinates individual citizens to a logic of collective responsibility even as it protects them from accusations of collective guilt. “The 9/11 attacks,” Arabs in Detroit tell us, “set us back a hundred years.”

The collapse of history is a powerful motif. It captures much of what is happening in Detroit. The Arab community has played a critical role in the development of Detroit’s economy and culture throughout the 20th century, and its influence on high politics and everyday life in the Arab homelands—which are linked to Detroit by an irregular flow of money, information, ideas, and people—is so pervasive, so taken-for-granted, that scholars of Arab immigration to the Americas are only now beginning to study it systematically (Khater 2000). As the Bush administration’s “War on Terror” expands, however, Arab Detroit’s rich history of domestic integration and transnational connection is being truncated, questioned, re-politicized, Americanized, and selectively erased. This radical transformation is rooted in anxiety about boundaries: Arabs and Muslims are clearly “in Detroit,” with “us,” but their hearts might still be “over there,” with “them.” The opposition is stark, and unrealistic, yet having it both ways, cultivating an identity that is both “here” and “there”—a sensible option that, in an era of multicultural tolerance, is still possible for many immigrant and ethnic Americans—is no longer a position Arabs in Detroit can easily embrace. The defense of boundaries, we will argue, only accentuates the centrality of the state in placing them; it also points to the moral dimension of boundary maintenance, to “being on the right side” of the line and the law. Rules, regulations, security protocols, and law enforcement technologies are never adequate to the task of moralizing national boundaries. Loyalty to the state (also known as “patriotism”) is the affective medium in which proper identity placement is made and measured.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Arab and Muslim Americans have been compelled, time and again, to apologize for acts they did not commit, to condemn acts they never condoned, and to openly profess loyalties that, for most U.S. citizens, are merely assumed. Moreover, Arabs in Detroit have been forced to distance themselves from Arab political movements, ideologies, causes, religious organizations, and points of view that are currently at odds with U.S. policy. This coercive
predicament, which thwarts scholarship as much as it curtails political activism, is the backdrop against which we write. To understand how this coercion works and what it is working on, we must re-engage with the dimensions of Arab Detroit that are now being removed from the public language in which Arabs, as Americans, are allowed to speak of (and for) themselves. We must also acknowledge that the nation-state, once a construct to which cultural theorists attached such dismissive modifiers as “withering,” “disintegrating,” “eclipsed,” and “vanishing,” is (in its American imperial form) central to any understanding of what is happening in Detroit, where state oversight and American identification are most intense, are most openly called for, in those parts of “the community” that still have strong ties to Arab and Muslim worlds. The privilege of transnational identification—that is, the ability to sustain political and economic ties to sites of belonging and social reproduction that are not American and are not fully subject to U.S. sovereignty—has been, for Arabs in Detroit, the first casualty of the War on Terror.

**Histories and Maps**¹

Detroit and its suburbs are home to a large, diverse population of Arab immigrants and their descendents. Population estimates, always controversial, are routinely inflated by Arab American activists—who claim numbers as high as 400,000 for the Detroit community—but even sober demographic calculations suggest a population of roughly 125,000 people. Arabs in Detroit tend to reside in the suburbs. The most visible concentration is in Dearborn, where Lebanese, Yemenis, Iraqis, and Palestinians, almost all of them Muslim, have built a vibrant terrain of mosques, ethnic business districts, social service agencies, political action committees, village clubs, and neighborhood associations. Another concentration, located along Seven Mile Road in Detroit, is home to Iraqi immigrants, almost all of them Chaldean Catholics, an Aramaic-speaking minority from northern Iraq. The Seven Mile area is much smaller than Dearborn, and more transitory. Its inhabitants, as soon as they are financially able, move into the northern suburbs, where Chaldeans and other Arabic-speaking immigrants are widely recognized as an influential business and professional community. Detroit’s grocery and liquor store trade is dominated by Iraqis. The Lebanese and other Dearborn-based Muslims, meanwhile, have specialized in gas stations and convenience stores. According to figures generated by the American Arab Chamber of Commerce, there are over 5,000 Arab and Chaldean-owned businesses in greater Detroit.
In addition to newly-arrived immigrant entrepreneurs, there are large numbers of assimilated, second, third, and fourth generation Arab Americans living throughout the metropolitan area. Immigrants from Ottoman Syria had established small enclaves in Detroit by the 1890s. Mostly Christians from what is today Lebanon, they worked as peddlers and shopkeepers. Detroit became a magnet for other Syrians in 1914, when Henry Ford began paying his factory workers five dollars a day. Political turmoil in Lebanon and economic opportunity in the U.S. have continued to draw new immigrants to Detroit. The most significant recent wave of immigration was precipitated by the Lebanese Civil War, which began in 1975. Between the years of 1983 and 1990, just after the war’s peak, over 30,000 immigrants came to Detroit directly from Lebanon. Another ten thousand Lebanese arrived from Africa, Canada, and Europe.

The relationship between political and economic instability in the Middle East and migration to Michigan holds for each of the nationalities that make up Arab Detroit. While the Lebanese are the largest and most visible of Detroit’s Arab communities, the city also includes America’s largest Yemeni and Iraqi communities, and sizable populations from Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and other Arab countries. Each of these national groups represents an odd inversion of the demographics of their home country, giving some indication of the forces that have made migration possible and necessary. For example, Christians make up less than 5% of the Arab world, but in Detroit they are half the community. Detroit’s Iraqi population is predominantly Catholic. Likewise, Detroit’s Lebanese, who were once overwhelmingly Christian, are now at least half Muslim, with Shi’a, a minority in Lebanon, outnumbering Sunnis three to one.

This broad range of lifestyles, national backgrounds, and levels of assimilation has made the Detroit Arab community hard to represent, both intellectually and politically. It is not simply an American ethnic community. Parts of it make sense only in relation to the Yemeni highlands, the Lebanese countryside, or the ravaged “no-fly zones” of Iraq. Nor is Arab Detroit an integral part of the Arab world. The city is home, for instance, to tens of thousands of Arabs who cannot speak Arabic and have never traveled to the Middle East. Likewise, the overrepresentation in Detroit of Arab minorities and politically disenfranchised populations (Palestinians, for instance, and thousands of Iraqi Shi’a, displaced when their U.S.-inspired uprising against Saddam Hussein failed in 1991) contributes greatly to its internal fragmentation. The inhabitants of Arab Detroit often find it difficult to imagine themselves as a unified “Arab American constituency,” and the divide between Muslim and Christian Arabs is a stable feature of community politics.
Still, the interface between the newest Arab immigrants, the old-line Arab Americans, and the larger, non-Arab society is administered by community organizations that represent, and have struggled since the 1970s to create, an Arab American ethnic identity compatible with American multiculturalism. This model of Arab American identity is secular, progressive, and pluralist. It treats religion (whether Christian or Muslim) as one aspect of an overarching Arab identity defined in national, cultural, ethnic, and historical terms. In the aftermath of 9/11, this model of community has been put to the test, along with the more localized and globalized identities available to Arabs in Detroit. The period of testing is far from over, but its effects on Arab Detroit are beginning to accumulate in trends that are ominous and contradictory.

Report from the War Zone

Nearly two years have passed since the 9/11 attacks. Today, the Arab and Muslim populations of Detroit have been transformed, by an elaborate array of legal and extralegal means, into a domestic front in the Bush administration’s War on Terror. The suburb of Dearborn was the first American city to have its own office of Homeland Security, an honor it owes exclusively to the number of its Arab/Muslim residents. No government official has said it explicitly, but Arab Detroit is now a zone of threat, and its inhabitants have good reason to feel threatened by the mixed messages they have received from officialdom and society at large. The first months after the 9/11 attacks were a time of hate crimes and intimidation, but a simultaneous desire to “understand” and “protect” Arabs and Muslims flourished in America. The federal government quickly released statements (six coming before September 15, 2001) designed to prevent a domestic backlash. “Any threats of violence or discrimination against Arab or Muslim Americans or Americans of South Asian descent,” warned the office of Attorney General John Ashcroft, “are not just wrong and un-American, but also are unlawful and will be treated as such” (U.S. Department of Justice Memorandum 01-468, September 13, 2001).

Initial attempts to “reach out” to anyone who might suffer from scapegoating suggested, for some, that a solid decade of pluralist conditioning had finally paid off. The “pay off” was, in some cases, quite literal. The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), the largest social service agency of its kind in the U.S., has received over $5 million dollars in gifts since 9/11, mostly from corporate sponsors and private charitable foundations, to fund its cultural and educational programs, which now include “sensitivity
training” for (among others) the very law enforcement agencies that monitor the Arab community. In the days following the 9/11 attacks, mosques throughout Detroit received a barrage of death threats, by mail and phone, but they also received visits from members of local Christian churches, who offered support and friendship. Several mosques held open houses to “introduce” themselves to curious neighbors, and these events were well attended and generally deemed to be successful. On the economic front, Middle Eastern restaurants and other small, Arab-owned businesses weathered months of reduced sales after 9/11, but Detroit’s mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, joined Arab American business leaders in welcoming a delegation of ambassadors and trade ministers from the Arab League who, in November 2001, toured the city and discussed plans for promoting investment and trade between Detroit and the Arab world.

Gestures of support for Arabs and Muslims met with open, often vociferous assertions of patriotism by those who felt most vulnerable to hate crimes. Denunciations of the 9/11 attacks appeared on the websites of every major Arab and Muslim organization, in Detroit and nationally. Community leaders asserted publicly that Bin Laden was not a good Muslim, or was not a Muslim at all, and that “there is absolutely nothing about Arab or Muslim culture that condones or encourages violence” (ACCESS 2002). In all of these exchanges, problems of identification and doubt (about being Arab, about being American) were never far from view. The exaggerated display of American flags by Arabs in Detroit—on clothes, skin, cars, homes, storefront windows, and places of worship (Shryock 2002)—was part of a heightened desire, familiar among immigrants of manifold sorts, to “belong” or (failing that) to be sheltered from the brute consequences of not belonging. The singing of “The Star Spangled Banner” and “God Bless America” became, for a time, a stage on which young Arab American vocalists could shine. They vied for spots on the podium at organizational events throughout Detroit. Photogenic young singers who wore the hi-jab attracted special media coverage, and one became the subject of a brief documentary video (Mandell 2002).

Though it now seems strange, it is nonetheless true that many Arab and Muslim American observers believed, in the first months of the post-9/11 era, that their community was “being inducted into a kind of collective citizenship ceremony” (Mattawa 2002:160). As a Muslim cleric from Dearborn told a delegation of visitors to his mosque in May of 2002: “I would say that we have seen, in this congregation, more positive developments after September 11 than negative ones. People have never been so eager to learn about Islam. We cannot meet the demand for lectures and workshops. This is a good thing that has come from a
very bad situation."² These words came in response to a question about harassment and profiling, which the cleric acknowledged were daunting problems. His upbeat conclusion, however, is a refrain we hear often among Arabs in Detroit. It is partly a refusal to cower, but it is also testament to the adaptability with which many mosques and secular community groups have responded to the crisis.³

This “positive” take on events has been related, from the very start, to parallel trends that undermine it and, as the U.S. prepares for war in Iraq, threaten to overwhelm it completely. The passage of the USA Patriot Act and policy decisions made by the Department of Justice, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the Department of the Treasury have created a climate in which Middle Easterners and South Asians in the U.S. can be treated as a special population to whom certain legal protections and civil rights no longer apply. This set of policies has led to the detention of over 1,200 people in the United States (who were never named or charged with crimes), the deportation of over half these detainees, the interrogation of thousands of resident aliens from Arab and Muslim countries, and the arbitrary declaration (usually based on secret evidence) that certain religious and political organizations—particularly those accused of having links to groups that oppose the illegal, but U.S.-backed, Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza—are providing “material support to terrorists,” a status that legitimizes the freezing of their financial assets and the criminalization of their leadership.⁴

The Patriot Act II, now being assembled by the Department of Justice, will increase the government’s power to revoke U.S. citizenship (again, based on secret evidence), after which an accused person can be removed from the realm of civilian courts and legal protections, detained indefinitely, tried by military tribunal, deported, or even executed. Against powers of this magnitude—Hobbes himself could not have imagined a mightier Leviathan—the 20th century threat of “internment camps” seems inefficient and old-fashioned. In an age of credit cards, cell phones, and computers, Arabs and Muslims in America do not need to be rounded up en masse and held in detention camps, as Japanese Americans were during World War II. Instead, they can be placed under a tactically flexible “house arrest,” monitored in the privacy of their homes or as they move about the country, their purchases, financial transactions, intellectual interests, and personal contacts tabulated, their bodies examined each time they board a plane or enter a federal building. When the need arises, targeted groups can be arrested and, without due legal process, be loaded onto chartered flights and discreetly shipped back to their homelands (or to third countries, where they can be subjected to “further questioning”).
Not everyone, of course, is traceable in this way. The U.S. Border Patrol in Michigan is now using “unannounced, rotating checkpoints” to search automobiles for illegal aliens, drugs, and terrorists. And, lest you doubt that Arabs are being singled out, the FBI will reassure you that their Detroit office has more than doubled in size during the past year and that their agents are receiving full cooperation from “wary community leaders acting as cultural guides into the local Arab world” (The Detroit Free Press, November 12, 2002). Mark Corallo, a U.S. Justice Department spokesman in Washington, D.C., said of the probe: “It’s the largest investigation in the history of the United States” (ibid.). The result, so far, has been dozens of arrests—mostly for graft, identity forgery, cigarette smuggling, and other black market crimes—and the purported discovery of an “operational combat sleeper cell” of four “al-Qaida terrorists” (who might just be hapless immigrants who fit the profile; the evidence against them has not been made public, although federal prosecutors have “characterized” the evidence in a manner favorable to their case).

Appeals to common citizenship with Arabs and Muslims have been substantially degraded by this wartime regime and its rhetoric of suspicion. Historical reversions and relapses are occurring now with alarming frequency. Howard Coble, Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, recently defended the internment of Japanese Americans. He also said he did not support the internment of Arabs, but his wording was hardly convincing: “We were at war. They (Japanese Americans) were an endangered species. For many of the Japanese Americans, it wasn’t safe for them to be on the street. Some probably were intent on doing harm to us, just as some of the Arab Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us” (Associated Press, February 5, 2003). The mass mediated structures of public opinion, especially those that materialize on cable news networks, in the wide circulation press, and on talk radio—Coble’s remarks were made on a call-in radio talk show—have performed well as a conduit for the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim views espoused by a complex network of conservative think tanks, pro-Israeli pundits, U.S. (and other) government spokespeople, and retired military and State Department officials. It is ironic, and more than a bit depressing, to learn (from national pollsters) that Arab and Muslim Americans have a higher “approval rating” today than they did before the 9/11 attacks. Apparently, they have never been regarded more fondly. Meanwhile, the Arabs of Detroit, despite the monetary gifts, the publicity, and the well-wishes that continue to be showered on their prominent community organizations and leaders, must find ways to interpret the growing evidence that their place in America is more vulnerable than ever.
Going Out of (the Diaspora) Business

Evidence of vulnerability is abundant wherever Arab Detroit is connected to the Arab world by ties of kinship, structures of shared religious and political sentiment, and commercial relations. These linkages facilitate the flow of money, the lifeblood of Arab Muslim (and most other) diasporas, and the U.S. government—which, before 9/11, was willing to “tolerate cultural pluralism, dual citizenship, and transnational activism as never before” (Werbner 2000:6)—is now determined to regulate these material and ideological flows and, when they cannot be regulated, to cut them off entirely. Giving to international Muslim charities has declined radically as a result, but equally pervasive effects are being felt in Arab Detroit’s commercial sector, a domain filled with conservative, pro-American businessmen, mostly Lebanese and Iraqi arrivistes who voted overwhelmingly for George Bush in the 2000 presidential elections.

Before 9/11, the success of Arab entrepreneurs in Detroit was a major selling point for the city. The booming Arab neighborhoods of Dearborn were expanding into Detroit and Dearborn Heights, reviving local economies that were essentially moribund. Immigrant entrepreneurs, who had spent the 1980s channeling surplus income into houses, cars, financial support for relatives in the U.S. and abroad, and donations to churches and mosques, were finally beginning to flex their political muscle, contributing to municipal campaigns throughout the metropolitan area, backing and opposing mayors, placing their allies on school boards and town councils, and building their own political machines. By the late 1990s, these economic and political advances were attracting the attention of Arab governments and their trade representatives, who saw Detroit as a unique point of entrée. As a commercial zone, it was part of the American economy, yet it was Arabized in ways that would make transnational commerce more attractive to Middle Eastern investors.

Detroit’s potential as a nexus for the flow of wealth between the Arab world and North America is now being used by federal authorities as a new managerial context in which to reward and punish Arab entrepreneurs and the diasporas they support. The American Arab Chamber of Commerce, a high profile, Dearborn-based business association, has been working in recent months to organize a major economic forum at which dignitaries from the Arab states and Detroit’s business and government officials will negotiate new trade relations and investment deals. The Chamber’s partners in the project include the U.S. Departments of State and Commerce as well as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. “Our goal,” says Ahmed Chebbani, president of the Chamber, “is to make Detroit a hub of trade be-
tween the U.S. and the Middle East, similar to (the relationship between) Miami and Latin America” (The Detroit News, May 7, 2002).

The American Arab Chamber of Commerce has vigorously promoted this event and has sought to keep it as apolitical as possible. Still, a glitzy “show summit” attended by Gulf royals closely aligned with the U.S.—worse, a forum scheduled to coincide with a U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq—is a prospect many Arab businessmen are now reluctant to endorse (and some are unable to stomach). The optimism that once marked planning for the summit has faded even among its key organizers, who have watched the Bush administration recast Arabs and Muslims as a threat to national security. Hamoud Rizk (pseudonym), a prominent Arab American business leader, who spoke with us recently about the progress of the economic summit, feared that the old rationale for the event, which was based on a real sense of Arab American success and economic possibility, has evaporated.

“People have put a freeze on all their plans,” Rizk observed. “Individuals are not investing right now. Not buying homes. Not starting new businesses. If anything, they are thinking more of buying or taking care of property overseas. People are scared. They are asking ‘are we safe?’”

This climate, Rizk continued, is disastrous for business, which depends on stability and trust. Fear of internment camps and confiscation of assets is rampant among his friends and colleagues; everyone assumes the IRS is pouring over their financial statements, looking for signs of tax evasion.

“People are beginning to think about a future in the Middle East,” Rizk told us. “They’re worried that Arabs won’t be treated like other Americans. They’ve lost their faith in the U.S. legal system. It used to be that America was thought of as a place for individual freedom. America prided itself on this. But now freedom is less certain. It depends on who you are. We’re no longer innocent until proven guilty. Now, in our community, you have to prove you’re innocent.”

Increasingly, local and national news stories feature Arab Americans who are caught up in criminal investigations—for instance, “Operation Green Quest,” conducted by the U.S. Customs Office—that are clearly designed, both as propaganda and as policy, to discourage people from sending money to the Arab world. In January 2003, sixty federal and local agents raided five Yemeni American businesses in Dearborn, arresting six men for engaging in what officials called “illegal money transfers.” Authorities told the media that up to $53 million is sent annually (and, it was strongly implied, illegally) from Detroit to Yemen, a claim that would seem ludicrous to anyone familiar with the small, working class community of Yemeni immigrants (consisting of perhaps as few as 5,000 people) that was said to generate this vast sum. The charges were
quickly dismissed by a local magistrate for “lack of evidence.” Similar arrests have been made among Iraqis in Detroit, a much larger and wealthier community, who were said by federal authorities to be sending over $20 million a year to relatives in Iraq—strangely, $30 million less than the amount sent by unskilled Yemeni factory workers—via indirect routes through Jordan. Since 1991, it has been illegal for Iraqis to send money home to their families, but authorities did not enforce the policy rigorously until after 9/11.

“Regardless of whether the money is going for food or clothing,” said James Dinkins, special agent in charge of U.S. Customs investigations in Detroit, “ultimately some of the money makes its way back into the hands of Saddam” (Detroit News, January 31, 2003). Given the fact that most Iraqis in Detroit are staunch opponents of Saddam Hussein’s regime, this claim seems disingenuous, but Dinkins reveals the larger agenda with his next statement: “Part of the embargo is to put pressure on people and the government to change their practices. The government only changes if the people put enough pressure on them” (ibid.) Transnational flows are acceptable only if they connect the U.S. to regimes it supports; otherwise, they must be blocked with the explicit goal of causing human suffering and useful political instability.

These news stories (and the disciplinary strategies behind them) are followed closely by Arabs in Detroit, who realize the numbers are grossly exaggerated; they also realize that claims that Arabs in America are providing “material support” for terrorism have become as routine as they are unsubstantiated. Increased scrutiny and suspicion, economic instability in the U.S. and the Arab world, and an underreported but significant boycott of American products in the Middle East have created, according to Hamoud Rizk, “a great reluctance to do business right now. Individuals are vulnerable. Where possible, they are keeping their assets liquid. Trade, commerce, shipping, these are all taking a tremendous hit. When sending $50 to a relative through Western Union provokes a federal inquiry, you question everything.” The fate of the U.S.-Arab Economic Forum is now on hold. “We are waiting to hear from the State Department,” Rizk told us, without a trace of eagerness in his voice. “We should know any day now. This depends on when the strikes [on Iraq] begin and on whether their projected outcomes will be as they imagine, or as we imagine.”

**American Carrot/American Stick**

The fate of the economic summit has structural parallels in every quarter of Arab Detroit. Tremendous pressures of delegitimization and criminalization
are paired with levels of public and private sector support that have never been higher. In exchange for organizing and hosting the U.S.-Arab Economic Forum, for instance, the American Arab Chamber of Commerce will receive generous funding from the U.S. government, state and local authorities, and American corporations. It will also solidify its role as intermediary between the Detroit business elite and big corporate and political interests in the Arab world, especially the Gulf states. The larger goal, says Nasser Beydoun, director of the chamber, is to increase Arab investment in the U.S. (which currently stand at $200 billion) and to bring more of that vast sum to Detroit, which, Beydoun claims, has so far attracted only $10 million in direct investment from the Arab world. Beydoun told reporters the summit would entice Arabs overseas to “funnel money into Detroit real estate, including the revitalization of the riverfront. Medical centers and universities could forge relationships with Arab counterparts, and General Motors Corp., Ford Motor Co. and DaimlerChrysler Corp. could increase their share of the Arab market” (The Detroit Free Press, September 20, 2002). Talk of reciprocal U.S. or Arab American investment in the Arab world is poorly developed in this discourse, and its lack is part of the tendency, exaggerated since 9/11, to locate Arab Muslim interests strictly within Americanizing frames of reference and control.

Attempts to regulate monetary flows between Arab Detroit and the Arab world have meant that resources once sent abroad are now flowing into U.S.-based and U.S.-focused ethnoreligious institutions. If contributions to global Islamic charities are falling, attendance and giving at local mosques is rising. “The only mosques that are suffering,” a Dearborn cleric assured us, “are the ones that receive support from the Middle East. Praise God, we do not receive support from outside this country.” New mosques (and Islamic schools) are being built, endowed, and enlarged in Detroit and across America, while Muslim advocacy groups in the U.S.—like CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) and AMC (the American Muslim Council)—are awash in contributions from people who see great value in their mainstreaming agenda. “We’re Americans,” said a recent full-page add in the New York Times, placed by CAIR, “and we’re Muslims. We’re American Muslims.” For Muslims who are self-described “modernists,” or “moderates,” the post-9/11 climate has opened up new possibilities for creating an Islam that is unapologetically American, and this creation, all too often, is legitimized by contrasting it to an implicitly “bad” Islam that is associated not only with fanaticism but, symbolically and spatially, with Arabs, the Middle East, and the “cultures” found there. Consider the representational window dressing in the following statement issued by CAIR: “Only about 18 percent
of Muslims live in the Arabic-speaking world. The largest Muslim community is in Indonesia. Substantial parts of Asia and most of Africa have large Muslim populations, while significant minorities are to be found in the countries of the former Soviet Union, China, North and South America and Europe” (2003).

At the household level, meanwhile, the movement of family members and “liquid” assets between (and around and beyond) national jurisdictions, once a highly fluid process, is being compulsively monitored and contained: the retired parents who might have come to the U.S. from Lebanon no longer want to; the extended family that moved regularly between Jordan and Detroit is now divided into “the ones who stay in Jordan” and “the ones who stay here”; the Yemeni whose visa is about to expire will not overstay but will return to Sanaa with his brother’s wife and children, who are all citizens, but whose relatives in Yemen are pleading with them to come home, “until it is safe again in America.” Buying property in Syria, sending a wedding gift of cash to a brother in Iraq, supplementing the budgets of family members living under house arrest in the West Bank, or discreetly funneling (undeclared) income into a business in Lebanon—all these quotidian transactions, which have their equivalents in other immigrant communities, are now more difficult, sometimes even endangering, for Arabs in Detroit.

Perhaps the greatest changes, however, are occurring in realms of political and personal identification, where Arab and Muslim Americans must re-imagine their communities in order to locate them securely in (national) space and represent them effectively to others. This political project is national in scope, and Arabs and Muslims are neither its principal targets nor its primary beneficiaries. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS), for instance, is now producing and promoting sympathetic, high-quality documentaries about Arabs and Islam in America; major initiatives are being devised and funded by elite U.S. research foundations, institutes, and universities, where scholars who once had no interest in Arab and Muslim communities in the U.S. are now dividing up the research spoils; dozens of new books and special issues about Islam in America are in print, in press, or already on shelves; and Arab American and Muslim organizations are partners in this flurry of cultural production, all of which is animated, colored, and (too often) distorted by the necessity of knowing Arabs and Muslims in relation to the events of 9/11.

It is not surprising, in this moment of redefinition, that Arabs in Detroit would be eager to assert a sense of national belonging that is demanded of them and, at the same time, is denied to them. What is unexpected, however, is the odd way in which every attempt to assert American identity must involve a si-
multaneous stigmatization of any sense of Arab identity that includes a strong identification with religious beliefs, political ideologies, or cultural practices that are genuinely alternative to those prevalent in America today. To reassert their status as “good” and “loyal” and worthy of respect, Arab Americans must distance themselves not only from negative stereotypes, but also from the people who are most likely to suffer from these images and their consequences. In an op-ed piece written by Jim Zogby (2001), head of the Arab American Institute, a Washington-based advocacy group, the scrutiny aimed at Arab Americans by journalists after the 9/11 attacks provides an opportunity to (re)assert the Americanness of Arabs in the U.S. Note what counts here as evidence of “diversity.”

Arab Americans are being discovered, or should I say being rediscovered, by the same papers and networks that have discovered us twice before in just the past decade. As I speak to those assigned to do the story, they discover yet again the diversity of my community. The fact that we are not a new ethnic group in America (we’ve been here for 120 years). That most Arab Americans are not Muslims (in fact, only 20% are). That most Arab Americans are not recent immigrants (in fact, almost 80% are born in the U.S.). And that many Arab Americans have achieved prominence and acceptance in America (two proud Arab Americans, Spencer Abraham and Mitch Daniels, serve in President Bush’s cabinet, and Donna Shalala served in Bill Clinton’s cabinet).

The numbers, proportions, and terminology are all debatable, but Zogby’s narrative is flawless in its ability to map the terrain of Otherness in which many Arab Americans, especially those in Detroit, now live. The Arab community Zogby does not speak to (and would encourage his readers not to dwell on) is new, Muslim, born overseas, unknown, unaccepted, accented, culturally peculiar, and politically untouchable. In Arab Detroit, people who belong to this zone of Otherness must keep their heads low and (just as often) their mouths shut as their own community leaders renegotiate the terms on which Arabs and Muslims will be tolerated in the American mainstream. The legal distinctions between “citizen” and “alien,” between “legal alien” and “out of status,” are gradually eroding, yet many Arab American spokespeople are publicly falling back on a set of binaries—an identity code spoken widely among Arabs in Detroit, but formerly as a kind of private, in-group classification system—that equates American-ness with security, loyalty, trustworthiness, and respect: “Arab Americans,” “the Americanized,” and “Arab Americans proper” are set apart from “Arabs,” “im-
migrants," “temporaries,” “illegals,” and, in a more disparaging vein, “boaters.” The fact that nearly every church, mosque, village club, and extended family in Arab Detroit is made up of people who belong on both sides of this taxonomy all but ensures that defensive labeling strategies will reinforce (and become part of) the marginalizing trends they are designed to combat.

To show the degree to which every gain in this process of remedial identification brings with it a setback, we have assembled the events of a three day period in early November, 2002, a time of national elections and the onset of Ramadan, when civic duty and religious sentiment were prominently on display in Arab Detroit and across the U.S.

On November 5, 2002, George and Laura Bush extend Ramadan greetings to Muslims in America and abroad: “Islam is a peace-loving faith that is practiced by more than one billion people, including millions of American Muslims. These proud citizens contribute to the diversity that makes our country strong, and the United States is grateful for the friendship and support of many Muslim Nations that are vital partners in the global coalition to fight against terrorism” (White House Press Release).

On November 6, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) requests that all Muslims currently held in U.S. jails and military prisons receive proper accommodation for fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. ADC and the Arab American Institute (AAI) ask the White House for guidance on holiday charitable contributions. No one wants to have their property confiscated, their accounts frozen. No one wants to face detention or deportation because they gave money to the wrong people.

On November 5, Imad Hamad, head of Detroit’s ADC chapter, votes for the first time. He has spent the previous seven years fighting legal challenges, the use of secret evidence against him, and threats of deportation. His 2002 swearing-in as a U.S. citizen was attended by FBI officials, who praised Hamad for his cooperation in recent months.

On November 6, AAI announces, on its website, that 70% of (40) Arab American candidates were successful nationwide in the November 5 midterm elections. Ismael Ahmed, Democratic candidate for Regent of the University of Michigan, was not one of them. A Republican activist ran a smear campaign against Ahmed, who is Director of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), a social service agency
based in Dearborn. The activist claimed Ahmed was a supporter of “Islamic terror groups.” A public letter of support for Ahmed signed by Jewish members of Michigan’s Democratic congressional delegation came too late to kill the rumor.

On November 7, over 30 Arab American activists from across the nation convene at ACCESS to discuss plans for a $9,000,000 National Arab American Museum and Cultural Center. The museum, first of its kind in the country, will be designed and built by Jack Rouse Associates, an exhibit production firm that specializes in tradeshows, theme parks, and zoos. The museum’s focus will be placed squarely on Arabs in America, not on ties to the Arab world, a separation that troubles some people involved in the project, even as it thrills others. “This is the great divorce,” one observer told us. “They’re going to replace two thousand years of culture with Casey Kasem’s Top Forty Arab Americans.” “It’s time for us to define who we are where we are, which is in America,” said another. “This is my home. I’m not foreign. We’ve got over a hundred years of history in this country. People need to hear that now more than ever.”

Such is life on the margins of the American body politic, where acts of inclusion and exclusion are hard to distinguish. The Arabs and Muslims of Detroit must contend, for now—as Japanese, German, and Italian Americans have done in the past—with the dangers that accompany their status as political and cultural “dirt,” what Mary Douglas so famously defined as “matter out of place.”

Edward Said, in one of his recent (and more pessimistic) essays, confesses that “I don’t know a single Arab or Muslim American who does not now feel that he or she belongs to the enemy camp and that being in the United States at this moment provides us with an especially unpleasant experience of alienation and widespread, quite specifically targeted hostility” (Gabriel 2002:23). Mainstream Arab American advocacy groups repeatedly remind us that, although the conditions we explore in this essay are frightening, the majority of Arab Americans have not suffered direct abuse (though most know someone who has). Nonetheless, the alienation Said describes has forced many Arab Americans into a position reminiscent of the “double consciousness” W.E.B. Du Bois saw as a central aspect of African American life in the early 1900s. For Du Bois, this predicament brought about “a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double
ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radical-
ism” (Du Bois 1903:202).

The range of options Du Bois laid out was not at all attractive, largely because it was (and still is) so effectively constrained by the defining, disdaining power of a dominant white society. The transnational and multicultural pluralism that became available to minority populations in the U.S. in the final decades of the 20th century was, some would argue, an effective means by which to alleviate the most “wrenching” effects of double vision.7 The benefits of multicultural citizenship have never been fully extended to Arabs and Muslims in America, however, for reasons deeply embedded in popular religious sentiment and the logic of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (McAlister 2001). As the U.S. prepares for another war—perhaps a series of wars—against Arab and Muslim people, the inhabitants of Arab Detroit are increasingly seen, and must increasingly see themselves, through a doubling lens.

Postscript—April 20, 2003

The U.S. invasion of Iraq has triggered predictable responses in Arab Detroit: protests, calls for tolerance, “intensified scrutiny,” political estrangement, assertions of patriotism, and widespread depression. Yet the responses, as always, have been contradictory and hard to read. During the early days of the war, crowds of Iraqis shouted “death to Saddam” at public demonstrations in Dearborn—and some kissed pictures of George Bush—while much larger crowds (mostly Lebanese, Palestinian, and Yemeni Americans) shouted “no war!” just across the street. Why, many wondered, was the FBI interrogating 11,000 Iraqis in the U.S. when Iraqis seemed to be the Arabs most adamantly opposed to Saddam? Once again, patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and the political lines between “us” and “them,” were overlapping in messy ways. The close cooperation between U.S. occupation forces and Iraqi expats, for instance, who are expected to predominate in Iraq’s interim civilian government (whose leadership has already been culled and equipped by the U.S.), is yet another example of the formative relationship between the American nation-state, its geopolitical interests, and immigrant diasporas that are subject to both.

It is worth restating a point central to this essay. In the post-9/11 era, transnational ties that connect the U.S. to Arab and Muslim countries will be acceptable only insofar as they strengthen sites of belonging and social reproduction that are located in America (in the form of “ethnic communities”) or are subject to U.S. sovereignty (in the form of allied regimes). As the U.S. solidifies its control over
Iraq, the relationship between Arab Americans and Iraq will be subordinated to the demands of military occupation. Any movements of expertise, money, technology, or information that might support opposition to the American presence will be deemed illegal, then rigorously disciplined, both “here” and “there.” If accusations of developing or hiding “weapons of mass destruction” are the telltale precursor to American-imposed “regime change,” then recent statements by U.S. government officials—who now claim that Syria is stockpiling chemical and biological weapons, as well as supporting terrorists, and harboring Iraqi war criminals—suggest that Syrian and Lebanese Americans might soon be called upon to participate in (or keep a respectful silence concerning) the Bush administration’s plans for change in their homelands. Those who resist U.S. policy, if they are not citizens, will be intimidated or forced to leave. If they are citizens, their resistance to U.S. policy, should it include financial transactions or political networking overseas, will land them in the newspapers, courts, and jails, alongside the accused cigarette smugglers, the document forgers, the unfortunate souls who overstayed their visas, and all those who merely acted or looked suspicious. As dire as these predictions sound, it is important to realize that such things are already happening in Arab Detroit.

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NOTES

1 For more detailed and carefully documented treatments of this terrain, see Kim Shopmeyer’s (2000) essay on the demography of Detroit’s Arab communities, which is based on 1990 U.S. Census figures. In 2000, according to the census, there were 96,625 people in metropolitan Detroit who claimed an Arab ancestry; there were also 27,638 Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Maronites (mostly immigrants and descendants of immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries). For additional accounts of immigration history, identity politics, and transnationalism in Detroit, the reader should refer to recent essays in Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream (2000) and to the earlier work of Sameer Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (1983). Larger (that is, nationally oriented) analytical frames are available in The Development of Arab American Identity (McCarus 1994) and Arabs in America: Building a New Future (Suleiman 1999).

2 We were on hand to hear this comment, having arranged the delegation’s tour of Dearborn.

3 Detroit’s largest, most outspoken secular Arab American organizations (ACCESS, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, and the Arab American and Chaldean Council) were es-
tablished in the 1970s and 1980s in climates that parallel, in many ways, the current political moment. Of the three, only ADC (a national organization with an active local chapter) attributes its establishment directly to the escalation of anti-Arab sentiment that followed the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, when Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and Sinai set in motion a series of regional wars, embargoes, and armed Palestinian and Lebanese resistance. Still, all three organizations have struggled to address the basic needs of a community that has grown steadily as a result of the human displacements and political instability created by the Arab-Israeli wars and other Middle Eastern conflicts in which the U.S. plays a leading role. If ACCESS, ACC, and ADC are deriving temporary funding benefits in the wake of 9/11, these must be understood as aspects of a much larger, undesirable political situation. The predicament is not unique to Arab Detroit’s advocacy groups. The ACLU, founded in 1920 in reaction to the roundups, detentions, and deportations of the anti-communist Palmer Raids, has doubled its membership since 9/11.

It also functions well as a silencer. Salam al-Marayati, head of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, grappled with these issues in a recent lecture at Stanford University Law School (11/2/2002). After pointing out the number of Islamic charities shut down in 2002 (three in all; more have been closed in 2003) and the number of Muslim American leaders (14; more again in 2003) whose homes and offices have been searched and their property seized by federal authorities, Marayati added the obvious: that many Muslims in American are justifiably afraid to criticize government policy. The barely concealed suspicion with which Muslims are often greeted, when they do appear as “public” spokespeople, especially in mass media venues, is both offensive and politically injurious.

On September 11, 2002, the San Jose Mercury News ran a story entitled “U.S. Muslims Held in Higher Regard” (pp. 18a), announcing results of a new Knight Ridder poll in which 58% of Americans claimed to have “favorable feelings” toward Muslim Americans. Only 45% expressed such feelings in March of 2001. A similar pattern held for Arab Americans.

Responding to these pressures, the American Arab Chamber of Commerce recently announced the postponement of the Economic Forum to September, 2003.

It is also true, but generally harder to discern, that regnant multicultural policies and the politics of representation they entail can be oppressive in their own right, stigmatizing forms of cultural difference that cannot be easily accommodated in American settings (whether these are institutional, interpersonal, juridical, political, or moral). In two recent essays on public culture in Arab Detroit (Howell 2000; Shryock 2000), we explore the complex (often counterintuitive) ways in which these stigmatizing effects are produced. For a more general take on identity politics among Arab Americans, see Naber (2000).

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