

On Talking Back and Taking Back: Arab American Poetry and the Refusal to Comply

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The Arab diaspora worldwide is extremely varied and articulated in myriad ramifications, intersections, and stratifications formed and informed by provenance, location, communal and personal experience, as well as overlapping identities and belongings. Racism and exclusionary logics, however, work in the erasure of complexity and through the extremely simple vocabulary – and discourse – of hate speech. The response to Arabophobic and Islamophobic attacks has been a dominating conversation in the Arab diaspora community, especially within the artworld, and perhaps even more strongly in the literary field. Deeply rooted in the constitutive racial politics of the US, the material and discursive assaults on Arabs and Muslims saw a turning point after the September 11th 2001 attacks, growing into a deluge that has never stopped since. Poets and writers of the Arab diaspora have responded to such waves of hate speech and assaults producing some of the most interesting contemporary works of literature in English and in many other languages. However, the “obligation” to respond, or the “responsibility to educate” the Western audience has also become a terrain for critical reflection, with many authors affirming the wide spectrum of their experience and identity as – one could say – “decolonized” from the task of talking back, thus taking back instead word and speech, and possibly, then, disempowering the hate.

This paper will look specifically at the way the works of written- and spoken-word poets Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad, and Safia Elhillo, among others, trace stratified maps of re-significations, inventions, and palimpsests, claiming and re-claiming words and languages through and within community.

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This article will look at the specific context of racism and hate discourse directed at Arab Americans, while at the same time attending to the structure of feeling, or “climate of ideas”, in Pankaj Mishra’s words, that circulates globally in our present world; a dominant climate of hate and, more specifically, of resentment. Hate and resentment, arguably falling under the category of “affect”, are also deeply embedded in the structure of language and – therefore – discourse. And, as with all dominant – or hegemonic – discourses, whether local or global, forms of resistance exist and emerge, in other languages, forms of art, lifestyles, communities and counter-discourses. Some of those languages and artforms have taken the shape of poetry, spoken-word or printed, performed and circulated online and offline by Arab American poets over the past decades and in a painfully renewed wave of engagement today, as a response to the Israeli massacre of Palestinians. As Palestinian-American poet George Abraham said in an interview, “if we can't imagine a free liberated world in language, how can we build one?” (Syed 2024, n.p.). Poetry and political organizing have become, evermore, the foundations of this literary community.¹

The Arab American community is sometimes referred to as the “Arab diaspora”, and I will sporadically use the term in this article. A premise is necessary here, given the complexity of the term “diaspora”, which implies the necessity of attending to the specificities and intersectionality that it inevitably carries. “Arab diaspora” encompasses many varied provenances, descents, rootedness and identities, starting with the complexity of how “Arab identity” itself is articulated and interpreted. It also encompasses the stratifications and multiplicities of localities, of where people live in the diaspora and within wider diasporic communities. Furthermore, in the hegemonic discourse of hate and white supremacy that appears to have been “authorized” since the Trump era in the US, Arab and Muslim communities are very often conflated, clearly (and often deliberately) overlooking the distinction between Arab and Muslim identities, or, more widely speaking, between the articulations of belonging to an ethnic/cultural background and community on one hand, and to a religion/religious background on the other. (Civantos 2015; Dakkak 2023, among others).

At the same time, the commonality of the experience, the shared threads of cultural belonging and longing are also clearly there (as in any diaspora), as is, indeed, the shared predicament of being collectively “othered” by the country/place/hegemonic discourse in which one lives, even in the language one has come to inhabit.

Arab immigration to the United States dates back to the second half of the Nineteenth century, with immigrants coming mainly from the province of Syria, then part of the Ottoman Empire, and which included the semiautonomous district of Jabal Lubnan (Mount Lebanon) and the province of Palestine. This first wave was made up in great part of Christians, who were referred to as “Syrians”, “Syro-Arabs”, or more rarely as “Arabs”, and largely found employment initially in peddling, to then branch out in other businesses and enterprises. It is difficult to estimate precisely the numbers making up this initial community because the Bureau of Immigration recorded all individuals coming from the Ottoman Empire as “Turks”. Following the highly restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, the next wave of immigrants arrived when the US began making exceptions for highly educated individuals and refugees after World War II

¹ Cultural and literary work as inseparable from political engagement is part of the mission and practices of organizations like RAWI, Radius of Arab American Writers (<https://www.arabamericanwriters.org/>); Mizna, a critical platform for contemporary Arab film, literature, and art (<https://mizna.org/>); the North American festival Palestine Writes (<https://palestinewrites.org/>), among others.

(Naff 1985; Boosahda 2003).² These new arrivals largely came from Palestine, Egypt and also Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. This new group came at a different historical moment, both in terms of the changed immigration policies and political asset of the US, and of the politics and reorganization of the region of provenance, with discourses and practices of nationhood, nationalism, and Arab identity widely debated and circulating at this point in time. The newly arrived were predominantly Muslim and on average highly educated. The gap between the different generations of Arab Americans was bridged over time, and led to redefinitions and discussions (not only in the US) of the Arab identity, at home and in the diaspora, ultimately also partaking in the wider discussion of what and if hyphenation is useful or necessary when identifying as, for example, both Arab and American. (Naff 1985; Boosahda 2003; Malek 2009; Suleiman 1999)

Racism towards to the Arab American community is not a new phenomenon, and has undergone various stages throughout the over 150 years since the first Arab immigrants arrived (Salaita 2006; Jamal and Naber 2008, among others). In a 1987 article, then deputy-director of the Arab American Institute, Helen Hatab Samhan, wrote that “[w]hat is called racism against Arabs in America today is in fact not racism in its classical sense” (Samhan 1987, 11). Samhan observed that while “generalized, societal discrimination” did affect the community, this was different in terms of integration, from what she later reads as “anti-Arab attitudes and behavior [having] their roots, not in the traditional motives of structurally excluding a group perceived as inferior, but in politics” (Samhan 1987, 11). This form of “political racism”, as Samhan calls it, is deeply rooted in the Arab-Israeli conflict and constitutes “an ideological struggle more than an ethnic one” (Samhan 1987, 11). However, though it is important to keep in mind these fluctuations in historical context and political discourse when looking at the specificities of the Arab American experience, it is also crucial to note that, whether politically or ethnically motivated (and given the two can be at all separated), racist stereotypes and ethnic profiling of Arabs have been amply spread in pop culture for decades. Only two years before Samhan’s observations, in 1985, the “Libyans” were shrieking terrorists appearing in a mall parking lot and gunning down Doc Brown for stealing their plutonium in *Back to the Future*, just to cite one example (Shaheen 2012).

The experience is, clearly, not exclusive to Arab American immigrants. Looking at the US specifically, the narrative of the nation carries a fundamental and constitutive element of racialized violence: the violence of conquest at its inception, and the foundational economy of slavery. Embedded, here, in the logic of the “frontier”, is the constant idea of “the enemy” to be warded off and hunted down. It is a logic that scholar Steven Salaita has qualified as “imperative patriotism”, which “relies on a certain ethnic imagery to produce a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ with ‘us’ representing good Americans and ‘them’ representing evildoers” (Salaita 2011, 88). Imperative patriotism, Salaita adds, “is more likely to arise in settler colonies, which usually need to create a juridical mentality that professes some sort of divine mandate to legitimize their presence on indigenous land” (Salaita 2005, 88), thus repeating and legitimizing the logic of identifying, othering, and isolating “the enemy.” In the specific case of the Arab

² The 1924 Immigration Act restricted the number of immigrants allowed entry into the United States through a national origins quota; the Act allowed immigration visas to be issued to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States as of the 1890 national census. It completely excluded immigrants from Asia (<https://history.state.gov/>).

diaspora – in both Europe and the United States – racism towards Arab immigrants, and people of Arab descent is, of course, deeply rooted in the orientalist discourse that Edward Said so crucially theorized with reference to European modernity (Said 1978). This othering practice is construed along color lines, and the Arab “other” is inscribed in the long-lasting discourse on “the Orient”, with its potent and surely still persistent mix of fear and fascination, desert-disorientation and objectified/objectifiable bodies.

The racial and racialized relations of power at play in the US and, more widely, in the West intersect with the specific climate of hate and resentment that Pankaj Mishra so effectively calls the “age of anger” that we are living in. Looking back at the rise of the industrial capitalist economy in Nineteenth century Europe and the disorder it brought in social relations and power dynamics, Mishra underlines how “the West’s own fateful experience of [...] modernity” (Mishra 2017, 10) and gross unequal wealth distribution are directly correlated to a sense of “ressentiment”, or negative solidarity (in Hannah Arendt’s terms), and an exaltation of violence and war.³

These circulating structures of feeling not only ushered Europe into the technologies of death over the first half of the Twentieth century, in the aestheticization of war and revolutionary messianism, but are also crucially revived today, on a globalized and accelerated scale, where “grossly unequal distributions of power have created humiliating new hierarchies” (Mishra 2017, 12). The lower-middle class, indicated by Marx himself as the most unreliable in revolutionary terms, and yet also fundamental – since its shift one way or the other might have tipped the scale in favor or against the working class – has become, one could argue, pervasive in its (res)entiment. If, in Stuart Hall’s words, “a sense of classlessness” (Hall 2017 [1958])⁴ has become true in terms of social identity – with status replacing class, and the “whole way of life” of a class broken down into “several styles of living” determined more by what one buys than what one produces –, then we can read perhaps more clearly how the relevance of belonging (discursively) to a social group, where owning objects, or “new things” (Hall 2017, 37) deeply changes the “affective existence” of the masses. In masses that have shifted from identifying as workers to identifying as consumers, frustration for the constant reach for the next “new thing” breeds social resentment, so widespread that one could indicate the lower-middle class as the largest social component worldwide. Clearly, this does not reflect the actual material conditions of the different sectors of society, but, again, this is where “classlessness” reorganizes belongings and desires, or styles of living. Contributing even more to this phenomenon of a “common present” of resentment and anger is that, as Mishra writes, “[t]his proximity [...] is rendered more claustrophobic by digital communications, the

³ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt depicts what she calls the origin of the “mass man”, “furious individuals who had nothing in common except their vague apprehension that the hopes of party members were doomed”, born out of the breakdown of class at the turn of the Twentieth century, and the consequent tearing down of the fabric that bound individuals to the body politic. This led to “this new terrifying negative solidarity”, which appears extremely fitting to describe our present-day reality, as noted also by Mishra (2017).

⁴ It is worth noting here that the Chapter 10 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which Arendt writes about “negative solidarity”, is titled “A Classless Society”; Hall published “A Sense of Classlessness” seven years after Arendt’s book, and though the two embrace different perspectives and developments (Hall’s analysis looks specifically at the British context and would take him to a Marxist and later post-Marxist stance), the common reference to the loss of a sense of class is interesting and telling of a specific junction in theoretical thinking. The crucial transformations that shaped mass society then still do today, especially in terms of the relationship between the individual, the power apparatus, and the body politic.

improved capacity for envious and resentful comparison, and the commonplace and therefore compromised, quest for individual distinction and singularity.” (Mishra 2017, 12)⁵

Socio-economic resentment, the climate of insecurity and fear, and the normalization or even institutional authorization – specifically in the Trump era – of hate speech are all elements that coalesce into the phenomenon that Stuart Hall et al. already analyzed in 1978 of “moral panic” and the “scapegoating” of racialized social minorities (Hall et al. 1978), or, in Mishra’s words, a condition in which “[h]ate-mongering, against immigrants, minorities and various designated ‘others’ has gone mainstream” (Mishra 2017, 9).

In this sense, the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the US were definitely a turning point for Arab Americans. The effects were felt not only culturally but also institutionally. The USA Patriot Act of 2001 hugely expanded the search and surveillance powers of Federal law-enforcement and intelligence agencies, highly enhancing practices of racial profiling directed at Arabs and Muslims all over the US (Pitt 2011; Musabji and Abraham 2016; Carosso 2021, among others).⁶ The Act was re-authorized in 2005 and was in effect until 2015, when the Obama Administration replaced it with the USA Freedom Act, which reduced the authority to collect data by the government, largely in response to the Edward Snowden case.⁷ The pigeonholing and profiling of individuals for belonging (or even “looking like” they belong) to Arab or Muslim backgrounds has never died down. The US saw yet another institutional turning point in such practices when in 2017 Donald Trump signed what has come to be known as the “Muslim Travel Ban”, which prohibited travel and refugee resettlement from a number of predominately Muslim countries (later extended to other non-predominantly Muslim countries such as North Korea and Venezuela, among others).⁸ The ban is no longer in place as of 2021,⁹ but it is certainly an indication of the climate of suspicion and prejudice that has never really died down since 2001, in a shift onto the institutional and juridical discourse that solidifies and authorizes cultural and social waves of scapegoating.

In this context, the Arab American literary community has worked and responded in the past decades within interesting positionings and negotiations, between invisibility

⁵ There appears to be a resonance, here, with Pier Paolo Pasolini’s reflections on the role of television in creating conformism and therefore blind acquiescence across society, with the proletariat shifting to a complete adherence and identification with the lower-middle class’s “anxiety for the future and phobia of poverty and failure” (Pasolini 1999). Taking into account the different historical contexts and technologies of mass communication, the parallel with social media and social anxiety and anger does seem to stand.

⁶ On October 25, 2001, the US Congress passed the USA Patriot Act, acronym for: Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act. For further details: https://www.justice.gov/archive/ll/what_is_the_patriot_act.pdf. For further data on racial profiling and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims in relation to the Patriot Act, see among others: The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding 2004; ADC 2001.

⁷ For an overview of the Freedom Act, see: <https://www.intelligence.gov/ic-on-the-record-database/results/787-fact-sheet-implementation-of-the-usa-freedom-act-of-2015>.

⁸ For full text of “Presidential Executive Orders 13769, 13780: Protecting The Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States”, see: <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/executive-orders-13769-and-13780>.

⁹ USA President Joe Biden reversed the ban on his first day in Office on 20 January 2021.

and overexposure. It is a writing community that is growing, today also very young and experimental, outspoken, intersectional, and “multi-modal”.¹⁰

Talking back

One of the poets that is considered groundbreaking, and an inspiration for the “new” generation of Arab American writers and poets, is Suheir Hammad. Born in Amman to Palestinian parents and having moved with her family to New York as a child, Hammad is a spoken-word poet, has published five books of poetry and is the protagonist of Annemarie Jacir’s film *Salt of This Sea* (2008). In her poem “mic check” (2005), Hammad literally “talks back” to the Patriot Act and its othering practices, while also *taking back* speech and words.¹¹ The poem opens with the title word play:

one two one two can you
hear me mic check one two

mike checked
my bags at the air
port in a random
routine check

(Hammad 2005, 62)

The “mic” the poet is “checking” – significantly checking if her voice can be heard – is juxtaposed with “mike” the airport security agent, by whom she is “randomly” checked. In these first lines the power dynamics of racial profiling and identity positionings are laid out very clearly. One voice is not sure it can be heard; the other, unwritten yet forcefully present, is that of a man who has the power to single out and lay suspicion on the body carrying that (silenced) voice. Immediately following, we are ushered into the timeframe in which such dynamics are played out. The attacks of September 11, 2001 are never mentioned, but narrated with the potency of their aftermath, and recontextualized within the articulations of power deeply embedded in the history of the United States:

i understand, mike, i do
you too were altered
that day and most days

¹⁰ George Abraham, Omar Offendum, Randa Jarrar, Fargo Nissim Tbakhi, and Marwa Helal are just a few of the of a new and highly experimental generation of Arab American/SWANA writers, poets, performers and artists.

¹¹ Suheir Hammad has published 5 books of poetry and was a performer at the Def Poetry Jam Series (HBO). Hammad uses all low-caps letters in her published poems, in a parallel of the Arabic language, in which there are no capitalized letters. A compelling performance of “mike check” at Def Poetry Jam (2007) is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxXv7JHAoOU>. The title appears as “Mike Check” in Hammad 2005, “Mic Check” in Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway ... and MORE, and “Mike Check” when it aired on HBO’s “Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry” (Pickens 2009, 11).

most folks operate on
fear often hate [...]

i understand it was
folks who looked smelled
maybe prayed like me

can you hear me mike
ruddy blonde buzz
cut with corn flower
eyes and a cross
round your neck...

(Hammad 2005, 62)

“That day” stands here in the middle of a geography of asymmetries that clearly pre-existed 9/11: “folks who looked smelled maybe prayed like me” and “blonde buzz” and “a cross round your neck” are the racialized narrative of the making of American nationhood. To reinforce this perspective, Suheir “responds” to her “checker” by reinscribing his narrative into the genocidal history of white America:

folks who looked like
you stank so bad the
Indians smelled them
mic check before they landed

they murdered one two
one two as they prayed
spread small pox as alms...

(Hammad 2005, 62)

As Theri Alyce Pickens writes, “Hammad’s double speak continues throughout the poem [...] where she mobilizes the language of hip-hop to promulgate a stringent critique of the links between the United States’ historical relationship to imperialism and racial profiling targeted toward Arabs [...]” (Pickens 2009, 8).

As already mentioned, the discourse of fear and prejudice around Arabs in the United States reaches back to before the “breaking point” of 9-11. Its persistence is evident in political rhetoric and explicit legal and institutional documents and acts, as well as in pop culture. It is, of course, the way dominant discourse works. Arabs – and Muslims, again, any distinction very often completely disregarded – have been othered, from “odalisques” to “terrorists”, more or less incessantly, albeit more openly in the paroxysm of the “moments of national crisis”, whether actual emergencies or identity crises.

In 1995, well before 9-11, Syrian American poet, novelist and scholar Mohja Kahf¹² wrote a poem, later published in her 2003 collection *E-mails from Scheherazad*, titled “Hijab Scene #7”. Here, too, the poet gives us one side of an imaginary dialogue; it is the answers to (unspoken) questions that come as repeated aggressions, judgement, diffidence, and, clearly, prejudice:

No, I'm not bald under the scarf
No, I'm not from that country
Where women can't drive cars
No, I would not like to defect
I'm already American
But thank you for offering

(Kahf 2003, 39)

The statements are answers to unasked-yet constantly asked questions, as underlined by “the 1st, 2nd, and 4th lines by means of anaphora [...]: ‘No, I’m not’ to state the persona's refusal of all the misperception connected to Arab/Muslim women” (Al-Shaia 2023, 430). In the lines following the incipit, Kahf addresses the juxtaposition of ethnic, cultural, and religious identity through the sarcastic question she poses to her invisible interlocutor: how is the hijab – which the title tells us is the signifier determining the entire scene – relevant to her going about everyday, mundane actions, like reserving a flight, or accessing insurance?

What else do you need to know
Relevant to my buying insurance,
Opening a bank account,
Reserving a seat on a flight?

(Kahf 2003, 39)

The series of answers relate the questions and their tone. Carol Fadda-Conrey observes that “[t]he [Muslim woman’s] repetition of ‘no’ and ‘yes’ suggests that these answers are tiredly offered in response to a set of hackneyed questions reminiscent of cross-examinations rather than constructive dialogue, with the end result being to instill difference instead of overcoming it” (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 168, qtd in Al-Shaia 2023).

Yes, I speak English
Yes, I carry explosives
They're called words

¹² Mohja Kahf has published 4 poetry collections and a novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). She is also the author of the scholarly volume, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Terzagant to Odalisque* (1999 University of Texas Press). Kahf is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at University of Arkansas.

And if you don't get up
Off your assumptions,
They're going to blow you away

(Kahf 2003, 39)

Kahf talks back, certainly, but also “takes back”, if you will, the question not only of identity but also of citizenship, of inhabiting “normality”, everyday gestures and conversations, and, at the same time, the explosiveness of words, not only hers, but also – and firstly – of the questions asked of her, over and over.

Taking Back, Lifting the Burden

The answers to the unspoken conversation that Mohja Kahf proposes, as well as Suheir Hammad's dialogue with “mike”, who is never heard and yet so invasively there, are responses to precisely that: a pervasive – and therefore apparently invisible – constant questioning, checking, diffidence, and ultimately anger directed collectively at the Arab American community. Hate and anger directed, in other words, at the vague idea of a collective identity, which of course translates into harassment of individual, specific lives and forms of control over personal and social identities.

There is, in this sense, a “burden of representation”, a “cultural responsibility”, shared by Arab American writers (and, certainly, all diasporic communities); the responsibility to “educate” an audience that in this case knows very little if often nothing about the Arab world and the countries of origin of the diaspora (Gallien 2017; Elia 2011; Valassopoulos 2008). Clearly, as the community of authors grows, the burden is in part lifted. This is true for any community. The “obligation” to respond, or the “responsibility to educate” the Western audience has also become a terrain for critical reflection, looking crucially at the need to “decolonize” writing from the task of talking back, thus taking back instead word and speech, writing one's own story and history, rendering the cardinal points of the Western narrative upended and temporary.

Sudanese-American poet Safia Elhillo engages with the power of hate and racialized discourse – so, the power of words, in what is, indeed a “response”, but also a re-writing, or upending, of the American space.¹³ In her poem “portrait with asylum”, apparently starting mid-story (or history?), the poet captures a frame of the political geography of violence, where the sense of community is immediately tied in by the words of her mother:

¹³ Safia Elhillo was born in 1990, “Sudanese by way of Washington, DC”, as she states on her website (<https://safia-mafia.com/bio>). She is the author of *The January Children* (2017), *Girls That Never Die* (2022), the novel in verse *Home Is Not A Country* (2021) and the Young Adult novel *Bright Red Fruit* (2024). Elhillo was awarded several prizes, amongst which the Arab American Book Award in 2018 for *The January Children*; in her acceptance speech she addresses the complexity of defining her identity, with specific reference to defining herself as “Arabophone” and not “Arab”, while still finding “great community among Arab and Arab American writers” (Elhillo 2018).

& then two boys from sunday school identical twins
beautiful boys like the moon my mother said dressed in matching
outfits long into our teenage years both dead by twenty-five

(Elhillo 2017, 39)

And more mothers, all the mothers come into the picture to engage:

& all the mothers in dc maryland virginia [crossed an ocean &
thought it was enough to keep up safe
[...]
to trade theories gang violence mugging hate crime islamophobia
xenophobia because they were too black because they were not
black enough murder mistaken identity accident though
probably not both times

but all agreeing this would never have
happened if we'd never come to this godless country each still haunted
by the brother back home twenty years missing the husband shot in
the street daughters whipped through thin cotton blouses but back
home this would never have happened not both not both

(Elhillo 2017, 39)

In this poem, and throughout the entire collection in which this poem is included, *The January Children* (2017), Elhillo constructs a “counter-discourse” in which “home” is questioned, and safety and security are neither here nor there. The fear- and hate-mongering against designated others, what Mishra writes about as tied to the “moral flaws of our universal commercial society”, and that feeds off its own alienation and hostility, is staged here on the American ground, carried across and shifted in the shifting positionings of immigrant grief, of denied refuge. Elhillo, in short, takes the “moral” out of the “panic”, when fear and violence show their multiple and interlocking faces. As Afis Ayinde Oladosu writes in a review of *The January Children*, “[i]n this collection, nothing, in the postmodernist sense, is permanent; it is the allure of the impermanent that makes the representation of ‘and’ as ‘&’ a categorical imperative.” (Oladosu 2017, 10). The unsettling “&” and the spaces in the middle of the lines offer an uneven rhythm that culminates into the grief of “not both” repeated at the end. Nothing, and no words, are permanent or permanently safe, not for the immigrants, fleeing danger and finding death in what was supposed to be a safe space. The panic is that of those who are caught on the worst end of the age of anger.

Elhillo, Hammad and Kahf’s poems put forth the intersection of diasporic identity with gender in their corporeal positionings. Hammad and Kahf speak subjectively as women in very clear corporeal geographies of power, and Elhillo writes of “all the mothers” who gather to discuss the horrors of violence and their predicament. These elements in turn become articulated with class and religion (and the racialization of religion), all emerging as part of the charged question of language. The multiple exclusions that work within this intersectionality are made clear in the question

summarized by anthropologist Barbara Nimri Aziz: that “Arab and Arab American women writers must “assert [their] responsibility [...]. ‘Write or be written’” (Aziz 2004, xii).¹⁴

On “not being written”, Suheir Hammad, again, offers words that are poetic and political, more incisive than so much theory. In her poem titled “Exotic”, she touches very explicitly and directly (starting with the title itself) on the orientalist and sexist tropes of middle-eastern and Arab women, and reminds us that violence and hate start not in the battlefield, nor even in the lexicon of open confrontation, but in the acts of – never innocent – description; it started long, long ago. Hammad opens her poem stating:

i don't wanna be your exotic
some delicate fragile colorful bird
imprisoned caged
in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings

(Hammad 2010, 64)

Further down, the affirmation is clear, political, definitive:

don't seduce yourself
with my otherness...

(Hammad 2010, 65)

The age of anger and resentment that Pankaj Mishra discusses is, indeed, not new nor recent; Western modernity brought with it social insecurity and angst that exploded in a furious combination of technology and violence. This, as we know, determined the unfolding of events in Europe and worldwide starting with the Twentieth century, which are still fully influencing the global geopolitical and social asset today. Of course, these forms of anger and violence were not born out of a vacuum. European modernity is violent in its matrix, and this violence is inscribed in constitutive colonial relations (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2007) and (therefore) along color lines. The forms and practices of racism and hate against non-white people are embedded in the episteme of the Western “worlding” of the world (Spivak 1985). In the case of the US, as we have briefly seen in this article, one of the articulations of such racism (intersected with sexism, no doubt) regards the Arab American community. This community has negotiated with invisibility and hypervisibility for over a century, but the acts of talking back, and now also *taking* back speech beyond categories and definitions of fixed identities, work language into (poetic) acts of persistence and resistance.

¹⁴ With “write or be written” Aziz here quotes “one of the three guiding principles by the Italian American Writers Association” (Aziz 2004, xii).

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