Arabs in America

Building a New Future

EDITED BY
Michael W. Suleiman

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
PHILADELPHIA

Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Arab Americans—Social conditions. I. Suleiman, Michael W.
E184.A65A72 1999
305.8927073-dc21
99-22775
CIP

Excerpts from the poems "Breath" (p. 331 herein), "Available Light" (p. 331), and "Lasts" (p. 332), David Williams, in TRAVELING MERCIES (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 1993), reprinted courtesy of Alice James Books.


Excerpts from the poems "Different Ways to Pray" (p. 328 herein), "Remembered" (p. 329), "Kindness" (p. 329), "For Lost and Found Brothers" (p. 330), and "The Man Who Makes Brooms" (p. 328), Naomi Shihab Nye, reprinted by permission of the author, from WORDS UNDER THE WORDS: SELECTED POEMS, copyright © 1995, and used by permission of Far Corner Books.
20 Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations

This essay examines the complex location of Arab Americans within the American multiculture. Ethnicity is most often discussed with reference to cultural pluralism, a theoretical model that, in its affirmation of ethnicity, tends to emphasize relatively stable boundaries among groups, but as contemporary Arab-American writing increasingly suggests, ethnicity is articulated within and across boundaries of group identity. This chapter examines the significance for Arab Americans of moving away from cultural insularity and toward a stance emphasizing connections with others. After a discussion of the relevance of theoretical frameworks of ethnicity to Arab-American experience, this chapter explores the work of two contemporary Arab-American writers—Palestinian-American Naomi Shihab Nye and Lebanese-American David Williams—who seek to affirm and assert Arab-American identity while establishing connections across and beyond the boundaries of ethnicity. Their efforts are representative of growing attempts among Arab Americans to situate themselves in relation not only to group identity and concerns, but also to the global multiculture.

Theoretical Negotiations

Discussions of ethnicity are typically situated within paradigms of assimilation or cultural pluralism—interpretive frameworks that reflect, respectively, the conformist pressures exerted on immigrants to the United States during earlier periods, and the current emphasis on celebrating cultural diversity. Central to cultural pluralism is ethnic assertion, or what Charles Taylor calls “the politics of recognition”—the quest for public affirmation of group identity for the purpose of cultural survival.1 Such assertion is of particular importance to Arab Americans, who have historically been rendered invisible in the American context by their relatively small numbers, by their ambiguous location within American racial and ethnic categories, and by their tenuous status...
within American political and cultural contexts. Excluded from American citizenship at various times on the basis of being "Asian" or "nonwhite," Arab Americans currently are officially classified as white. This classification, although seeming to grant inclusion in mainstream American society, is ambiguous. Arab-American "whiteness" is at best a merely "honorary" status, one readily stripped away at moments of crisis. As an example, consider the targeting of Arab Americans during the aftermath of the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1995. At the same time, classification as "white" means that Arab-American experiences of racism and discrimination often go unaddressed on the basis that "white" people cannot suffer racism. Such contradictions have significant implications for Arab Americans as they attempt to articulate a viable ethnic identity within the American context.

Earlier Arab immigrants, situated within a pre-World War II context that strongly emphasized assimilation, were by most accounts fairly successful in their efforts at assimilating into the American context. Historian Alixa Naff has stated that were it not for renewed Arab immigration in the postwar period, Arab Americans might have "assimilated themselves out of existence." However, Arab Americans now face rising forces of hostility, violence, and discrimination. In contrast to the earlier Arab immigrant population, composed largely of Christians from Mount Lebanon, the current Arab-American community is far from homogeneous. It includes people of many different national origins and religions; recent immigrants and assimilated descendants of earlier immigrants; dark-skinned and light-skinned individuals; people who speak no Arabic, those who speak no English, and those whose dialects are unintelligible to each other; and children of mixed marriages whose hybrid identities locate them at the margins of "Arab" and "American" identity. This increasingly diverse population often finds itself negotiating a political and cultural context that demonizes Arab and Muslim culture while implicitly excluding Arab Americans from perceptions of "American" identity.

A study carried out in 1981 documents the negative attitudes of Americans toward Arabs. A large proportion of respondents in the study held Arabs to be "barbaric, cruel" (44 percent), 'treacherous, cunning' (49 percent), 'misstrust women' (51 percent), 'warlike, bloodthirsty' (50 percent)"; similarly, respondents viewed "most or all" Arabs [to be] 'anti-Christian' (40 percent) [and/or] 'anti-Semitic' (40 percent). Moreover, the study showed that the term "Arab" elicited more hostility than did individual Arab identities such as Lebanese, Egyptian, Saudi, or Palestinian. Such negative perceptions have not dissipated in the late 1990s. As Nabeel Abraham argues, not only does "anti-Arab racism, like other types of racism, [permeate] mainstream cultural and political institutions," but "unlike other forms of racism, anti-Arab racism is often tolerated by mainstream society." The hostility toward Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners in the United States that peaked during the 1980s and that continues to spiral during periods of political tension has not abated. It appears that Arab Americans are one of the few ethnic groups it is still "safe to hate." Contemporary efforts at asserting and celebrating Arab-American ethnicity are grounded in this intertwined history of earlier assimilationist forces, contemporary hostility, and unclear racial status. In response to these pressures, Arab Americans have increasingly sought to assert their ethnicity on a political and a cultural level. National Arab-American organizations such as the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination
Committee (ADC) and the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) work to oppose anti-Arab discrimination, to protect Arab-American interests, and to disseminate accurate information about Arabs and Arab Americans. Meanwhile, Arab-American culture is celebrated and affirmed through national artistic events such as the traveling exhibit *Community Between Two Worlds,* through journals such as *Al Jadid: A Record of Arab Culture and Arts,* and through conferences and books exploring and documenting the experience of Arab Americans throughout this century.10

Such ethnic celebration and assertion reflects an important shift away from earlier generations' attempts to deny or hide their Arab identity. However, emphasis on ethnic affirmation is not unproblematic. Celebrations of Arab-American identity are often predicated on an implicit marginalization of individuals who do not fit into community norms (e.g., gays and lesbians). A focus on ethnic celebration may distract attention from problems within the Arab-American community (e.g., urban poverty, deteriorating family and social structures, domestic violence, youth involvement with gangs). Although Arab Americans are highly cognizant of the politicized context situating their attempts at ethnic assertion, a focus on cultural pride may gloss over concerns such as ethnically and religiously motivated anti-Arab violence, employment discrimination, targeting by law-enforcement agents and airlines, and exclusion from resources aimed at improving minority educational, economic, social, and political conditions.

At the same time, the tenuous location of Arab Americans within American political, cultural, and racial frameworks complicates efforts at organizing around a clearly identified minority status. This is evident in the internal debate within Arab-American communities about whether to lobby for official minority status as Arab American. The debate turns on the choice between claiming ethnic (and sometimes racial) distinctiveness as Arab Americans and using this identity as a basis for activism or emphasizing the formal classification of Arabs as "white" and seeking to make inclusion in mainstream American culture a matter of fact, not just nomenclature. The debate points toward a split in the Arab-American community between those who wish to safeguard whatever privileges Arab Americans possess as nominal "white" people and those who feel that Arab Americans have more to gain and more to contribute by identifying with people of color. The tension between inclusion and exclusion that results hinders efforts to organize Arab Americans on a national level and complicates efforts at coalition building between Arab Americans and other ethnic and racial groups.

The narration of Arab-American history in popular and scholarly contexts is informed by this tension between inclusion and exclusion. Consider the 1994 collection of essays, *The Development of Arab-American Identity.* This collection begins by situating Arab Americans in relationship to white immigrant groups of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and implicitly traces a trajectory in Arab-American history from assimilation through acculturation, awareness, and ethnic assertion. However, the collection also demonstrates the ways in which this transition from assimilation to cultural pride is complicated by forces of politicization, racism, and violence. The concluding essay by Nabeel Abraham documents anti-Arab racism and violence in the contemporary American context. The content of the essay and its placement implicitly disrupt the smooth flow from assimilation to ethnic rejuvenation, forcing readers to shift from a framework of assimilation to one of confrontation and to grapple with the
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as texts is informed selection of essays, by situating Arab eighth and early can history from. However, the col- similation to cul- violence. The con- d violence in the cinement implicitly ng readers to shift grapple with the sometimes violent implications of exclusion and difference. Documenting incidents of assault, murder, arson, bombings, vandalism, threats, harassment, and discrimination against Arab Americans, Abraham demonstrates the extent to which “anti-Arab racism continues to lie just beneath the surface of society.” He makes clear that, in contrast to white ethnic Americans, who enjoy what Mary Waters has called “ethnic options”12— the choice to affiliate with or distance oneself from one’s ethnic identity at will—Arab Americans experience their identity not as a choice but as a fact from which they cannot escape.13

Central to the workings of ethnicity is the concept of boundary mechanisms. As Frederik Barth observed in the 1969 introduction to his pivotal Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, it is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.” In their celebration of diversity, proponents of cultural pluralism tend to privilege relatively stable boundaries between groups, emphasizing internal group affirmation, cultural specificity, and the distinctiveness of ethnic groups. If it is at the site of the boundary that ethnic delineation occurs, however, it is also here that ethnic trans- formation and ethnic interaction take place, as groups both police their distinctiveness and come into contact with each other, forging cross-ethnic connections and coalitions.

Although the experience of exclusion and discrimination experienced by groups of color and by more ambiguously located groups such as Arab Americans frequently elicits a reactive focus on ethnic assertion and boundary maintenance, such experiences may also provide the basis for coalitions between similarly marginalized groups. Con- sider the phenomenon of racism. In a discussion of the stereotyping of Arabs, Ronald Stockton argues that racism has less to do with the actual group being targeted than with the process of maintaining boundaries between “us” and “them.” Contemporary stereotypes of Arabs, he asserts, are not specific to Arabs; they are instead based on ethnic archetypes repeated in different contexts with different groups. For instance, “an exceptional proportion of all hostile or derogatory images targeted at Arabs are derived from or are parallel to classical images of Blacks and Jews, modified to fit contempo- rary circumstances.”15 For Stockton, “Images of Arabs cannot be seen in isolation, but are primarily derivative, rooted in a core of hostile archetypes that our culture applies to those with whom it clashes. When conflict or tension emerges they can be conjured up and adapted to new situations.”16

As Stockton’s discussion suggests, ethnic affirmation requires not just an assertion of group identity, but also a consideration of the broader implications of cultural identities within a multicultural, transnational context: an awareness of how issues affect and unite people across the divides of ethnicity. Groups such as Arab Americans, with little visibility of their own and therefore little power, stand to benefit from forming coalitions with others around issues of common cause—as when Japanese-American, Jew- ish-American, and Arab-American groups took joint action during the 1991 Gulf War in response to infringements on the civil rights of Arab Americans. Such coalitions make clear that it is possible to bridge the insularity of identity politics without diminishing the specificity of ethnic concerns.

The need to interrogate multiculturalism’s emphasis on ethnic insularity has been voiced by critics on the right and the left. Although some commentators view multi- culturalism and ethnicity as implicitly threatening to a presumed American “unity,”17
other critics of multiculturalism speak from a position receptive to ethnic and racial realities, even as they seek a median space between ethnic particularity and a more unified common ground. David Hollinger articulates one such view. Calling for a movement beyond multiculturalism as it is currently deployed, Hollinger makes a case for a “postethnic” perspective that would build on, but not be limited by, ethnic identification and that would infuse the current emphasis on roots with a “critical renewal of cosmopolitanism.”

In Hollinger’s desired “postethnic” America, the affiliative nature of identities would be emphasized over the prescribed, “ethno-racial groups” would be recognized as constructed rather than biological categories, and ethnic identity would be treated “as a question rather than a given.” The current conflation between race and ethnicity, argues Hollinger, is a result of the extent to which our current classifications depend on classic race thinking even as they seek to escape that legacy. This conflation brings to a point of contradiction “two valuable impulses in contemporary America: the impulse to protect historically disadvantaged populations from the effects of past and continuing discrimination, and the impulse to affirm the variety of cultures that now flourish within the United States.” Calling for a more precise distinction between races, which he defines as “culture free” categories that are not “real” but that provide a necessary political tool for affirmative action and cultures, which he defines as spheres of voluntary affiliation, Hollinger proposes that “ethno-racial affiliations” be viewed like religious affiliations, in which individuals possess “the right of exit and also the dynamics of entry” into cultural spheres. By pursuing this parallel, Hollinger argues, educational institutions would no longer need to fulfill the “need for cultural self-validation on the part of ethno-racial groups,” and affirmative action programs could “continue to occupy the political space that was theirs alone before culture began to take over the ethno-racial pentagon.”

Hollinger’s understanding of ethnicity as something to be negotiated rather than simply asserted and his emphasis on flexibility and choice within a framework of necessary commitments offers a possible point of entry into the problem of negotiating the claims of identity and community. Despite its theoretical promise, however, Hollinger’s “postethnic” framework does not adequately account for the complexity of Arab-American identity and experience. For instance, Hollinger attempts to “symbolically cut down to size the whites who would otherwise continue to be anomalously unhistoricized” by defining “white” as “European.” However, this definition explicitly excludes Arabs and Arab Americans, despite their official governmental categorization as whites. As non-Europeans racially included in “white” America but culturally excluded from this category, Arab Americans are relegated to an undefined space. Similarly, the distinction between “culture” and “race” fails to account for the extent to which cultural identities such as those of Arab Americans may elicit the same kind of discrimination as racial identities. As a result, Arab Americans are pushed to the margins of available definitions.

Part of the problem lies in the reliance on liberal individualism for an understanding of identity. “A postethnic perspective challenges the right of one’s grandfather or grandmother to determine primary identity,” Hollinger asserts. “Individuals should be allowed to affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to an extent that they
choose, while affiliating with whatever non-Arabic communities are available and appealing to them." However, although ethnic identity may be a matter of individual choice for some European ethnic groups, whose place in American society is at this point in time unquestioned, for Arab Americans—still subject to identity-based discrimination—and to repercussions from political events in the Middle East—ethnicity cannot be understood in isolation from factors affecting the group at large.

More applicable to the Arab-American experience are theories of ethnicity and cultural pluralism that seek to grapple with power relations as well as cultural dynamics and that negotiate ethnic boundaries on both individual and group levels. Two examples include Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's discussion of multiculturalism and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's discussion of ethnic coalitions. In Unthinking Eurocentrism, Shohat and Stam critique the cultural focus of liberal pluralism, seeking to move multiculturalism away from essentialist assumptions about identity toward "a radical critique of power relations" and to turn it "into a rallying cry for a more substantive and reciprocal intercommunality." Their discussion emphasizes "ethnic relationality and community answerability" over issues of "blood" heritage, assuming that the basis for identity and relationships is affiliation rather than kinship. At the heart of this concept of polycentric multiculturalism are identifications that are "multiple, unstable, historically situated, the products of ongoing differentiation and polymorphous identifications." Within this framework, identity serves as a marker both of who one is and of what one does with that information. Similarly, group identities "open the way for informed affiliation on the basis of shared social desires and identification" and for "cultural exchange . . . between permeable, changing individuals and communities."

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's discussion similarly emphasizes the process of building coalitions across ethnic boundaries in the context of shared struggle. She calls for an 'imagined community' of third world oppositional struggles. 'Imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of the nation, calls "horizontal comradeship."

This concept of "horizontal comradeship" turns to "political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance": rather than being based on ethnicity, race, sex, or class, group identity and action are grounded on the implications of such delineations—"the political links we choose to make among and between struggles." It is through such linkages, Mohanty asserts, that issues of racism, marginality, and exclusion can be challenged.

The question of how to establish connections and coalitions across ethnic boundaries is of increasing importance within Arab-American discourse. Given the marginalization of Arab Americans within American culture and the on-going reality of anti-Arab discrimination and violence, the need to focus on protecting and strengthening Arab Americans as a group remains strong. However, it is also increasingly clear that ethnic identity cannot be constructed in isolation. On an ideological level, the insularity that arises from a singular focus on Arab-American issues may result in an obfuscation of the principles of justice and equity that underlie Arab-American struggles,
leading to a lack of solidarity with other groups. On a pragmatic level, the anomalous position of Arab Americans within American racial categories means that Arab Americans may be unable to elicit responses to their concerns without affiliating with other minority groups.

**Literary Negotiations**

Contemporary Arab-American literature increasingly reflects the awareness of the need to forge connections beyond the insular boundaries of group identity. In contrast to earlier Arab-American writers, contemporary writers increasingly seek to articulate identity not only within but also across ethnic lines, from a stance of “reciprocal intercommunalism.” Particularly important is the work of Naomi Shihab Nye and David Williams, two writers whose work makes clear that Arab-American identity is not an end goal to be celebrated but a starting point from which to redefine and resituate concepts of identity, relationship, and community. Instead of focusing on “Arab-American” themes to the exclusion of other concerns, Nye and Williams write about a variety of issues, peoples, and locales: Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, South Asians, Lebanese, and Palestinians; immigrants, laborers, and family members; North and South America, Asia, and the Middle East; urban, village, and wilderness contexts; war and poverty; resilience and joy. Their poetry and prose demonstrate the extent to which ethnicity may provide a foundation for new kinds of relationships across cultural divides.

**Naomi Shihab Nye**

Naomi Shihab Nye is a poet of Palestinian and American background whose work has received much attention within the United States and the Arab world. Daughter of a Palestinian Muslim father and of a European-American, Christian mother, Nye is one of the most widely known Arab-American writers. The author of six books of poetry, a book of essays, a novel for young adults, several children’s picture books, and a number of edited collections of poetry, she has been featured on American national television programs such as Bill Moyers’ “Language of Life” and is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the prestigious Guggenheim Award. Nye is also increasingly well known in Arab literary contexts; her work has been translated into Arabic and has been included in anthologies of Arab writing. However, Nye’s literary activities are not bounded by these two facets of her identity, Arab and American. Her edited collections and her own writing draw on and reflect a wide variety of cultural contexts and sources.

This diversity of subject matter sometimes appears to complicate Nye’s categorization as an “Arab-American” poet. For instance, in a 1991 essay discussing the Arab aspects of Nye’s work, Gregory Orfalea observes that although Nye is the outstanding American poet of Palestinian origin, and one of the premier voices of her generation... of 155 poems in her three published collections, only 14 have a recognizable
Arab or Palestinian content—less than 9 percent. More deal with the Hispanic Southwest where she lives, and Latin America, where she has traveled extensively, than the ancestral homeland of her father.  

Orfalea's essay was written before the publication of Nye's recent work, which includes much material on Arab and Palestinian themes. However, it remains true that Nye's poetry cannot be completely accounted for in terms of her ethnic identity, nor can her work be adequately described by a simple division into "Arab" and "non-Arab," "ethnic" and "nonethnic." Nye's writing is undergirded by a consistency of approach best described as a stance of engagement with the world. As reviewer Philip Booth writes, in a discussion of Yellow Glove,  

All her [Nye's] questions (and her own response to them) suggest to me an unstated question which seems to inform her best work: How do we come to terms with this world (literally this world) we cannot bear not to be part of? ... Nye may not know any more than the rest of us what to do, but she knows more than most of us how many people(s) live, and she does justice to them, and to the need for change, by bringing home to readers both how variously and how similarly all people live.  

From this stance of listening and narration, Nye forges connections across boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class. Although these connections are most often personal rather than communal, they provide the basis for linkages that take on metaphorical resonance. As Nye writes in the poem "Strings," “Tonight it is possible to pull the long string and feel someone moving far away / to touch the fingers of one hand to the fingers of the other hand / [ ... ] to be linked to every mother / every father's father.”  

In preface to the selection of her poetry in Grapeleaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry, Nye writes of the “gravities of ancestry,” the sense of “rapturous homecoming” that she experienced in meeting Arab-American writers. Although “all writers are engaged in the building of bridges,” she observes, “maybe bicultural writers who are actively conscious of or interested in heritage build another kind of bridge as well, this one between worlds. But it’s not like a bridge, really—it’s closer, like a pulse.” In such passages Nye draws on ethnicity as a foundation for the self. However, the imagery of a pulse not only suggests the notion of ethnicity as a blood inheritance, but also evokes processes of flow and interchange: much as a pulse signals the flow of blood through the body, ethnicity, for Nye, signals communication and interchange. Heritage, Nye suggests, matters not just for what it tells us about who we are, but also for how it informs what we do, the ways in which we draw on our cultural identity for our interactions in the world. Although ethnicity does not provide a priori answers, it nonetheless makes it possible to ask necessary, if not always answerable, questions.  

An essay about Nye's grandmother's home in Palestine, "One Village," clarifies this sense of ethnicity as the basis for a movement not only backward and inward, but also forward and outward. Describing her return to her Palestinian grandmother's village after fifteen years of absence, Nye at first seeks to relocate herself. "The village smells familiar," she writes. "Whole scenes unfold like recent landscapes." However, the village not only affirms who she is, but also shows her how to listen to differences. "I was a teenager when last here, blind in the way of many teenagers," Nye writes. "I wanted
the world to be like me. Now there is nothing I would like less. I enter the world hoping for a journey out of self as much as in."39

In this “journey out of self,” Nye draws on her ethnic background to make connections beyond the boundaries of ethnicity. Consider the title poem of her first book of poetry, *Different Ways to Pray*. Although Nye clearly evokes her Palestinian Muslim background here, this is not simply an “ethnic” poem. Rather it uses the imagery of an Arab landscape to make a larger point about diversity and commonality. “Prayer,” here, is not just the conventional act of religious worship but a generally reverential approach toward life. In addition to the expected modes of kneeling and making pilgrimage (both described with implicit reference to the Palestinian Muslim context), it also includes—in what is for Nye a characteristic homage to dailiness—such activities as “lugging water from the spring / or balancing the baskets of grapes.”40 The pious, Nye suggests, include not only those who “bend to kiss the earth … their lean faces housing mystery” but also others such as “the old man Fowzi … Fowzi the fool / who … / insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats, / and was famous for his laugh.”41 Nye’s receptiveness here to a variety of perspectives points toward an ability to move beyond conventional boundaries while honoring the identities they delineate.

As the daughter of a European-American Christian mother and a Muslim Palestinian father, Nye has a particular interest in challenging rigid boundaries of identification. In a poem titled “Half and Half” that evokes her mixed background, Nye describes an interlocutor for whom multiple allegiances are an impossible fragmentation: “If you love Jesus you can’t love / anyone else. Says he.”42 In contrast, Nye celebrates difference, invoking the possibility of transformation and a wholeness woven of multiplicity: “A woman opens a window—here and here and here—/ … She is making a soup out of what she had left / in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean. She is leaving nothing out.”43

“Leaving nothing out” may be viewed as a metaphor for Nye’s poetic practice and her approach to identity. Her poems are often about everyday objects and seemingly insignificant incidents, “the things which often go unnoticed.”44 Similarly, Nye draws on all parts of her identity, background, and experience for a wholeness that eschews artificial unity. In an essay about her part-Palestinian son, Nye asks, “Why, if we’re part anything, does it matter?”45 It matters, she suggests, because identity is constructed in relationship to difference. “I had to live in a mostly Mexican-American city to feel what it meant to be part Arab,” she writes. “It meant Take This Ribbon and Unwind It Slowly.”46

“Leaving nothing out” for Nye, as for other Palestinian Americans, also means the need to come to terms with Palestinian history and with a legacy of occupation, injustice, and exile. Given this history, Palestinian-American writers carry the burden of using their talents for Palestinian causes. Nye evokes this burden in “The Man Who Makes Brooms.” The poem begins,

So you come with these maps in your head
and I come with voices chiding me to
“speak for my people”
and we march around like guardians of memory
til we find the man on the short stool
who makes brooms.47
Given the dearth of spokespeople for the Palestinians in the American context and Nye's stature as a prominent Arab-American writer, it is not surprising that Nye feels the pressure to "speak for [her] people." However, being a "guardian of memory" suggests the task of defending borders, a stance Nye would not be expected to take to readily. She instead chooses to depict the resilience demonstrated by Palestinians in their daily life. Although on the surface a simple evocation of a craftsman in Jerusalem, her poem is a political poem affirming Palestinian experience; as Nye explains in an interview, for the broom-maker to carry out his work with such precision and care under conditions of occupation is "a political act. . . . Politics also involves the dignity of daily life."48

In addition to depending on ordinary activities and objects that resonate across cultural lines for her depiction of "ethnic" themes, Nye also draws connections between Palestinians and others. In the poem "Shrines," a response to the massacre of Palestinians in Lebanon at Sabra and Chatila in 1982, Nye writes, "We cannot build enough shrines. . . . If we light candles, we must light a million. / Lebanon, Salvador, Palestine, here."49 The tragedies of the contemporary world cannot be viewed in isolation. Even Nye's approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is informed by this desire to find points of connection. As she writes in "Jerusalem," "I'm not interested in / who suffered the most. / I'm interested in / people getting over it . . . It's late but everything comes next."50

Nye's poems about other peoples and other locales grow out of this sense of connection across even the most intransigent of boundaries. Her work conveys a sense that to tell a fragment of a story—her own or that of someone else—is to forge a link in the chain against erasure. In the poem "Remembered," Nye writes of the "need for remembrance," a "ringing rising up out of the soil's centuries, the ones / who plowed this land, whose names we do not know."51 The gesture of remembrance carries particular weight for Palestinians, whose history is so often obscured or denied. However, those "whose names we do not know" do not only reside within one's own ethnic group, as is clear in a poem "The Endless Indian Nights." "I lay thinking of Afghanistan," Nye writes, "men who live in caves / eating potatoes till their faces grow longer, their eyes blacken and will not close. / Someone said the world has never forgotten anyone better. / And I vowed to remember them / though what good it would do, who knows."52 Such poems situate Nye within a global community.

Establishing such linkages is not easy. In the poem "Kindness," Nye writes, "Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, / you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho / lies dead by the side of the road. / You must see how this could be you, / how he too was someone / who journeyed through the night with plans / and the simple breath that kept him alive."53 A sense of connection requires not pity, with its implicit stance of superiority, but rather the ability to recognize human commonalities without glossing over the specificity of others' experiences. To arrive at this sense of connection one must move beyond personal experience, viewing oneself within a wider context. You must "lose everything" and "wake up with sorrow," Nye writes; you must "speak to it [sorrow] till your voice / catches the thread of all sorrows / and you see the size of the cloth."54

Nye's understanding of her location within this wider context underlies the more joyful linkages that emerge throughout her writing. This is evident in the poem "For Lost
and Found Brothers," in which a sense of familial and ethnic connections reverberates outward in widening ripples, suggesting connections that transit the globe:

For you, brothers.
For the blood rivers invisibly harbored.
For the grandfather who murmured the same songs.
And for the ways we know each other years before meeting,
how strangely and suddenly, on the lonely porches,
in the sleepless mouth of the night,
the sadness drops away, we move forward,
confident we were born into a large family,
our brothers cover the earth.55

David Williams

The poetry and prose of Lebanese-American David Williams also makes clear the need to make connections with others across the boundaries of ethnicity.56 Like Nye, Williams is a writer whose work defies simple categorization, making linkages between individual lives in diverse contexts. Throughout his work, Williams traces the ways in which a legacy of Arab heritage may lead not simply to the preservation of insular boundaries of group identity but also to cross-ethnic connections, grounding, as it does in Nye, a movement not only inward but outward as well.

Drawing on his own experiences as a Lebanese American, an activist, and a teacher, Williams writes of war, refugees, poverty, oppression, and injustice. However, his poetry also searches for and identifies sources of hope, affirmation, endurance, resilience, and joy. Situating Arab-American identity within a global and a continental American context, Williams celebrates individual lives while forging connections between Arab Americans and others subjected to the vicissitudes of history, making clear the need for self-criticism and for coalitions across ethnic lines. As one reviewer observed of Traveling Mercies, Williams "attempts to find connections in a divided world.... In a time that exalts the individual and the virtue of separate heritage, Williams recognizes that true heritage is never diluted by knowledge and understanding of other cultures."57

In his poetry collection, Traveling Mercies, and in his unpublished texts, Quick Prism (poetry) and Coyote Wells (a novel), Williams refracts multiple histories through a voice passionate about the "need to join with everyone trying to say something true,"58 a voice that carries many stories and lives within it. His work points toward the possibility of uniting communities across cultural, ethnic, and national boundaries, even as it honors and affirms individual resilience. The structure of Traveling Mercies echoes this insistence on interconnection, moving from a grounding in personal identity and history to a recognition of the wider context of ethnicity and identity. Although the two parts of the book correspond in a general way to a division between personal experience and public testimony, the book interweaves public and private themes, establishing connections between family, ethnicity, and community while situating these within a historical and geographical context that extends from North and South America to the Middle East.
Although grounded in Arab-American realities, Williams’ poetry holds the potential of speaking across cultural boundaries to people from many different backgrounds. “Breath,” the opening poem of Traveling Mercies, brings together themes of ethnic identity, connection, and communal activism in a manner that is at once specific and general. The poem implicitly draws on the links in Arabic between the word for “spirit” and the word for “breath,” suggesting that Williams’ Arab heritage underlies his poetic perception. However, it refrains from specifically naming Williams’ Lebanese ancestry, speaking instead more generally. “The people I come from were thrown away,” writes Williams, “as if they were nothing, whatever they might have / said become stone, beyond human patience, / except for the songs.” Despite the specifically Arabic resonances of “breath,” the poem turns on a sense of common humanity, linking Williams not only to “the people I come from” but also to other peoples “thrown away / as if they were nothing,” with whom he can join in common cause. “Breath” invokes the individual, ordinary lives that profoundly matter amid the sweeping devastations of history.

Williams’ ability to transform grief into something life-sustaining turns on this recognition of the communal nature of suffering and of the communal efforts required to confront and transform it. Instead of claiming a solitary voice of testimony, Williams seeks to “join that song” of resistance and transformation—a song larger than he is, but one to which his voice is indispensable. He writes, “I’m thirsty for words to join that song—/ cupped hands at the spring, a cup of / rain passed hand to hand.” His poetry embodies a faith that what sustains people—poetry, water, bread—can be passed on, “a cup of rain passed hand to hand . . . a clear / lens trembling with our breath.”

The need to move beyond ethnic insularity and to recognize commonalities of both suffering and hope emerges with particular clarity in the poem “Available Light.” Juxtaposing personal grief over the death of an unnamed girl in Beirut to the historical resonances of a Vishniac photo of the Warsaw ghetto, this poem suggests that, in the same way that historical images make claims on us beyond the specificity of group boundaries, individual suffering may perhaps be best understood by recognizing how our own experiences are reflected in those of others. “When I think of how / you bled to death / during the siege of Beirut,” Williams writes, “your face dissolves into grains of silver / bromide, rocks on the moon / we see as a human face.” This stark dissolution of grief leads to a more public image, that of the girl in the Warsaw ghetto “who spent the winter in bed / because she was hungry and had no shoes.” The two images intertwine, as the connections between the Arab in Beirut and the Jew in Warsaw emerge like shadows in a developing photograph:

I pick you out among all the lost
a Jew, an Arab, who both could have passed
for my daughters, your trace dark crystals
on a negative, breath on a mirror,
a steady, invisible light.

Belying the politics of cultural particularity and assumptions about relationships between Jews and Arabs, Williams challenges the most intractable of boundaries. In this and other poems, the possibility of forging connections emerges slowly but steadily, like human features becoming discernible in the moon’s far face.
Throughout his work, Williams makes clear that ethnic identity in and of itself cannot always provide a sufficient basis for agency and resistance even though it provides a source of sustenance and strength. Affiliation instead is based on many factors—gender, class, health, the experience of war—none of which can be viewed in isolation. The prose poem “Lasts” makes clear such intersections. “I think of my mother heading back to the shoe factory the morning after her father told her, scholarship or no scholarship, girls didn’t go to college,” writes Williams. “... I can’t help it, I think of the millions killed with no testament but their shoes tossed in a heap, and the others who, being barefoot, are even easier to forget.”63 This linkage between his mother’s experience and the suffering of millions suggests that individual experience can never be viewed in a historical vacuum. Although the connections linking people are too often commonalities of suffering, these links also provide a source of sustenance and resilience. “I need to join with everyone trying to say something true,” Williams writes, and this communal context lends strength and clarity to his voice. The final lines of Traveling Mercies offer a compelling evocation of hope that parallels that put forward by Nye: “Everyone I have ever touched has put more life in my hands, and entered my blood, and lit my brain, and even now moves my tongue to speak.”64

Nye and Williams draw on their Arab-American ethnicity in their writing not simply to celebrate their heritage, but because this identity has serious implications in the contemporary context. As Williams suggests in the poem “Almost One,” in the current American context, Arab-Americans are not quite “white” enough, not quite “American” enough, not quite whole.65 By recognizing the fragmentation and complexity of their identities and their commonalities with others, however, Arab Americans may begin to join forces with others marginalized by categories of identity or by structures of violence and power. Evoking a radical, polycentric multiculturalism in which essentialist categories of kinship have been replaced by affiliative categories of relationship, Williams and Nye make clear the need to focus on Arab-American ethnicity in relation to other issues and groups and to situate ethnic expression within a context of committed activism. Although their poetry and prose may be read as an affirmation of Arab-American identity, it also should be read as an exploration of how to situate that identity within a contemporary multicultural context in which Arab Americans have a great deal to lose by isolation.

Until now, few have aligned themselves with Arab-American causes, and it could be argued that it is premature for Arab Americans to become involved with the issues of others and that they should instead focus on asserting their own identity within strong cultural parameters. However, at this time of global interconnection, individual causes can no longer be viewed in separation from the global structures of power that situate them, nor can the effects of these structures of power be isolated to a single group. To discuss Arab-American identity requires something more than nostalgia or simple celebration; what is needed is activism and agency on issues of justice, issues that traverse cultural and national boundaries. Whether undertaken from a sense of humanism or from a pragmatic understanding of the need for allies, such communal activism is crucial if Arab Americans are to achieve success in their goals of fighting racism, violence, and injustice and of ensuring a more just and fulfilling future for themselves and others. The result of such communal awareness and agency can only be empowerment.
Notes

Acknowledgment: I am grateful to Souad Dajani and Therese Saliba for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this essay.


3. In the wake of the bombing, amid runaway media speculation on the presumed “Middle Eastern” connection, journalists expressed surprise at government statements that the suspected perpetrators were two “white males,” a response that indicated the extent to which “white” and “Arab”—and by implication, “Arab” and “American”—are presumed to be mutually exclusive categories.


7. Abraham cites the case of a school newspaper that ran an advertisement for a roommate specifying “No Arabs.” “One need only imagine the public outcry had a similar notice read ‘No Blacks,’ or ‘No Jews,’” comments Abraham, “to appreciate the level of complicity on the part of the school paper in this bit of racism.” See Nabeel Abraham, “Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States.” In Ernest McCarus, ed., The Development of Arab-American Identity (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 159, 190.


9. This exhibit, developed and curated by the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) and the Michigan State University Museum, in collaboration with the Detroit Historical Museum, and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, opened at the Detroit Historical Museum in March 1998, with the intention to subsequently travel to different cities across the United States. The exhibit features historical and contemporary photographs taken from family albums and from the archives of professional photographers, as well as cultural objects made by Detroit-area Arab-American artists. The exhibit is based on an earlier photographic exhibition presented by ACCESS and the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution.


11. This hostility surfaces, Abraham says, in “ideologically motivated violence” against Arab Americans by Jewish extremist groups (p. 180), in anti-Arab xenophobia manifested through “locally inspired hostility and violence toward [ethnically visible] Arab Americans, Muslims and Middle Easterners and their institutions” (p. 188), and in “jingoistic racism,” which Abra-
ham describes a "curious blend of knee-jerk patriotism and homegrown white racism toward non-European, non-Christian dark skinned peoples" (p. 193). See Abraham, "Anti-Arab Racism."
16. Stockton, "Ethnic Archetypes and the Arab Image," p. 120.
20. Hollinger, Postethnic America, p. 49. This confusion between race and ethnicity is particularly apparent, Hollinger argues, in the classification of Hispanic or Latino Americans—previously classified as Caucasian and identified according to their country of origin, but now increasingly considered a "race" (pp. 31–32). The lobby for a mixed-race census classification brings these contradictions to the forefront and "threatens to destroy the whole structure" of the ethnic-racial pentagon by challenging the "one-drop rule" (pp. 44–45).
23. The exclusion of Arabs from American citizenship has on occasion been justified on the basis that Arabs are inherently non-European. In the same way that Jews were once considered a separate "race," Arabs occupy a different space in the American imagination than that indicated by their official classification.
28. An anecdote will clarify this point. In a discussion about the stereotyping of Arabs in the movie Aladdin on the Internet mailing list Arab-American in the fall of 1996, one participant commented that, because the Aladdin story is actually Persian, not Arab, Arabs should not feel offended by the stereotyping. The flawed logic in such reasoning becomes clear when one considers the example of Pakistanis and Iranians physically assaulted during the Gulf War because they were thought to be Arab; those injured were doubtless not comforted by the knowledge that it was not their own identity that was being targeted. Such dismissal of discrimination and injustice when it does not directly affect one’s own ethnic group ultimately limits the ability to address these problems when they are directed at one’s own group. Such attitudes rarely cultural identification to the point that it loses its meaning.
29. For instance, despite the problems of including Arab Americans under the rubric of “Asian American” (in the case of Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, and other west Asians) or "African
American" (in the case of Egyptians, Moroccans, and other North Africans), such classification may be necessary to facilitate Arab-American inclusion within the American context.


37. Orfalea and Elmusa, eds., *Grapeleaves*, p. 266.

38. Orfalea and Elmusa, eds., *Grapeleaves*, p. 266.


40. Nye, *Different Ways to Pray*, p. 22.

41. Nye, *Different Ways to Pray*, p. 23.


47. Nye, *Words under the Words*, p. 127.
51. Nye, *Different Ways to Pray*, p. 11.
52. Nye, *Yellow Glove*, p. 46.
53. Nye, *Different Ways to Pray*, p. 54.
54. Nye, *Different Ways to Pray*, p. 54.
60. Williams, *Traveling Mercies*, p. 5.
63. Williams, *Traveling Mercies*, p. 69.
64. Williams, *Traveling Mercies*, p. 65.