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DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE:
THE US IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY
AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

PAPERS FROM THE 21ST AISNA CONFERENCE

Edited by Giovanna Covi and Lisa Marchi

Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Filologici

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LISA MARCHI

MAPPING DEMOCRACY AND DISSENT IN ARAB-AMERICAN POETRY

In “Creativity, Dissidence, and Women,” Egyptian feminist, activist, and scholar Nawal al-Saadawi explains that dissent and creativity are tightly interrelated and that creativity plays a crucial role in fighting social injustice and challenging power. This is particularly true in the case of Arab-American poets Naomi Shihab Nye and Suheir Hammad, who use their creativity to denounce the abuses of state power and counterbalance the dominant reductions of Arabness and Islam as the embodiment of evil and threat after 9/11. Writing in the aftermath of 9/11 means being confronted with the difficult task of opposing stereotyped representations of the Arab and Arab-American identity, and fighting the increasing hostility against Arabness and Islam in the American society. Indeed, as Shu-Mei Shih rightly notes: “When the time is post-9/11 and the place is the US, we see the rise of Islamophobia, a not-so-new but newly racialized racism” (1357). As Shih powerfully argues, since 9/11, Arabness and especially Islam have come to embody Otherness and threat.

The deliberately created association between Islam/Arabness and evil is clearly not a new phenomenon but rather the final development of a historical process during which Arabs have been discursively constructed as Others. According to Edward Said, Orientalism itself was “a mode of discourse” (*Orientalism* 2) “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2); this discourse, as Said impeccably demonstrates, was produced by different power institutions with the aim of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Michele Foucault’s conceptualization of *discursive formation*, as a systematic knowledge through which power exerts its authority on the subject that it contributes to construct, is particularly useful to understand the challenge that Arab-American writers face today.¹

Whereas until recently, racism in the US has been largely constructed within a white/non-white paradigm,² today racialized discourses tend to develop around the construction of Arabness and Islam as markers of an intrinsic and therefore essential “difference” from whiteness. Racism based on ‘color’ has thus been gradually replaced

¹ For an overview on the stereotypes diffused by the media and Hollywood film industry, see Shaheen 2001, 2008.

² Race has been a crucial category of difference for Arab immigrants arriving in the US, who were intermittently constructed and perceived as white or not enough white and whose position consequently shifted from being recognized as full citizens to being marginalized and refused naturalization. On the ambiguous racial status of Arabs in the US, see Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White. Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2009. Consider, in particular, the second section “Claiming Whiteness” and the fourth section “The Lynching of Nola Romey.”

by a so-called ‘cultural racism.’³ Indeed, as Joanna Kadi rightly notes, in times of crisis and war, such as the oil embargo of 1972, the Iran Revolution in 1979, and the Gulf war in 1991, Arabs have been constructed “as a distinct racial group” (xvi). This is also the case of the crisis engendered by 9/11, a period during which Arabs have come “from being considered white or almost white to being ‘colored’” (Shih 1357). The “changed political atmosphere” that followed the attack to the Twin Towers gave rise to an intensification of the hostility against Arabs, “a much more aggressive American attitude towards the world, and ... a much exacerbated conflict between what have been called ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’” (Said, *Humanism* xvi). The Patriotic Act, in particular, supporting “indefinite detention; searches, seizures and wiretapping, and guilt by association” (Orfalea 312) contributed to raise a sense of persecution among Arab-Americans who felt once again stigmatized and marginalized. The increasing hatred against Arabs and Muslims reached a point of non-return with the circulation of photos witnessing the torture and humiliation carried out by US soldiers on Arab prisoners in Abu Ghaib and Guantanamo. These photos declared to the world the failure of the American “civilizing mission,” the dangers embedded in the American theorization of a “state of exception,” and the necessity to urgently rethink America’s democracy in terms of empathy, shared humanity, ethics.⁴

Arab-American poets Nye and Hammad intervene in this debate, by providing an uncompromising critique of America’s war on terror and by denouncing the terrible consequences of the so-called “civilizing mission” that the US were carrying out in the Middle East. In “He said EYE-RACK” (2008), Nye expresses a harsh critique against America’s foreign and imperialistic policy and openly condemns the American invasion of Iraq. The poet sarcastically ridicules America’s “civilizing mission” and shows that the war against Iraq is not innocent and harmless but implies the use of a devastating force causing destructions and deaths:

Relative to our plans for your country,
we will blast your tree, crush your cart,
stun your grocery.
Amen sisters and brothers,
Give us your sesame legs,
your satchels, your skies.
Freedom will feel good
to you too. Please acknowledge
our higher purpose. No, we did not see
your bed of parsley.

In this poem, Nye reverses Bush’s construction of Iraq as a rogue state and shows how, in the name of “a higher purpose,” the US themselves have become a threatening

³ A similar development can also be seen in Britain where the Arab-Muslim minority has been racialized in terms of cultural difference. See Max Silverman and Nira Juval-Davis, “Jews, Arabs and the theorization of racism in Britain” (25-39).

⁴ See on the specific regard of photos, Judith Butler “Sexual politics, torture, and secular time.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 59.1 (2008): 1-23. In her thought-provoking article, Butler interprets the “barbarism” of these coercive practices as “the barbarism of the civilizational mission” and sees the necessity of articulating a “counter-imperialist politics, especially a feminist and queer one” (19) to fight state violence and its abuses. Butler concludes by invoking a new conceptualization of freedom that rejects coercive state power and recognizes instead “the already existing alliances and sites of contact, however antagonistic, with other minorities” (21).

power that disregards human life and turns blind eye to the sufferings of the civil population. Nye dissents here on the instrumental use of fundamental rights, such as freedom and democracy, to justify the invasion of Iraq. Freedom, in particular, is outlined here in contradictory terms: rather than being represented as a right that people are legally entitled to have, the poet constructs it as an exclusivist possession that only certain countries own and can decide to unilaterally and compassionately hand down on “less civilized” and “less democratic” populations. Nye’s critique against what she considers America’s fake and well advertised humanitarianism is further emphasized through the representation of Bush as a tactless, stiff, and aggressive despot. By drawing a sombre portrait of the former US President, Nye highlights his insensitivity, roughness, and belligerence. While reading these lines, the reader cannot but dissociate from Bush and disagree with his pitiless generalizations:

On St Patrick’s Day
 2003, President Bush wore a blue tie. Blinking hard,
 he said, ‘We are not dealing with peaceful men.’
 He said, ‘reckless aggression.’
 He said, ‘the danger is clear.’

 He said, ‘We are
 against the lawless men who
 rule your country, not you.’ Tell that
 to the mother, the sister, the bride,
 the proud boy, the peanut-seller,
 the librarian careful with her shelves. (142)

Nye opposes here the cultural reductions circulated by the Bush administration to justify the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq. Whereas Bush constructs Iraqis (and Arabs more in general) in abstract terms, as harmful, dangerous and aggressive men, Nye turns to the concrete everyday life of Iraqis and provides readers with an alternative representation that allows them to recognize Arabs as human beings and therefore people they can identify with. The Arabs mentioned by Nye are concrete and ordinary people who are, quoting Judith Butler, “worth valuing” and whose lives “are worth safeguarding, protecting ... precarious, and worth public grieving as well” (“Sexual Politics” 15). In contrast to the state propaganda that de-humanizes Arabs in order to justify the war on terror, Nye draws the reader’s attention to the everyday life of Iraqi men and women and unsettles the dominant misrepresentations with a new cartography of creative images that foregrounds the humanity of Arabs and therefore their affinity with us.⁵ By providing us with a humanizing framework, Nye promotes human connectivity and enables empathy. This is clearly not an innocent or innocuous gesture but rather a form of civil disobedience through which the poet expresses her dissent on the US foreign policy and its subsequent power abuses. This interpretation is confirmed by Samina Najmi who observes: “For Nye, precise, concrete language—that is, language committed to realities on a small, measurable scale—is a matter of both poetics and politics” (160).

⁵ This poetic gesture, as Catherine Wagner underlines, is not free of contradictions. Nye’s inclination to depict Arabs as entirely loving and perfect, Nye risks the danger of replicating the opposition good vs. evil that she wishes to subvert. On the limits of Nye’s a-critical representation of Arabs, see Catherine Wagner’s review “19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East by Naomi Shihab Nye; E-mails from Scheherazad by Mohja Kahf” in *MELUS* 31.4 (Winter 2006): 235-241.

Like Nye, Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad takes a “politically defiant posture” (Najmi 158) towards US foreign policy, and subverts the dominant misrepresentations of the Arab and Arab-American identity as the symbol of evil. Hammad’s uncompromising critique of US state violence is particularly evident in *Zaatar Diva* (2005), a collection in which the poet interweaves personal, political and figurative dimensions and addresses crucial issues such as the iniquity of state violence, the celebration of her hyphenated identity, the traumatic events and brutality unfolding in Palestine. The Arab term “Zaatar,” that gives the name to the collection and indicates a typical Middle Eastern spice mixture, is a clear anticipation of what the reader will encounter in this book: a collection of spicy and passionate poems. Hammad’s writing is indeed simultaneously lyrical and belligerent, compassionate and critical. This doubleness is particularly evident in the poem “What I will” (60-61), where Hammad openly dissociates herself from the US’s imperialistic agenda and refuses to take part in the American triumphalistic celebration of the war on terror:

I will not
 dance to your war
 drum. I will
 not lend my soul nor
 my bones to your war
 drum. I will
 not dance to your
 beating. I know that beat.
 It is lifeless. I know
 intimately that skin you are hitting. (60)

In this poem, Hammad distances herself from Americans’ blind support to the war on terror and declares her disloyalty to a hypocrite nation that pretends to be ‘good’ and democratic but is in fact spreading destruction and death. Hammad compares war to an unpleasant and disturbing dance in which Americans lightly and quickly take part but in which she refuses to participate. The reference to the drum and its sombre and unstoppable beating conveys feelings of fear and unease and contributes to construct an atmosphere of disorder and impending disaster. Hammad constructs here the continuous beating sound of the war propaganda in opposition to the “humming” of an intimate circle of people that she decides to join to celebrate life. Hammad appears here to embody a particular type of intellectual, the one so powerfully described by Said as “a kind of counter-memory, with its own discourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep” (*Humanism* 142). Hammad refuses to listen to and take part in the hysterical dance (and war) carried out by a dazed nation and invalidates the state’s apologia of war, by reaffirming instead life as “a right / not collateral or casual” (60). The poet wishes to heal a wounded nation hardened by a harsh state rhetoric supporting the war on terror, and in order to do this, she zooms in on the everyday life of the victims of the war, by providing the reader with a close-up picture of the concrete damages of the war and by reaffirming her alliance to that vulnerable “skin” being hit.

In *Zaatar Diva*, Hammad uses her poetry not only to oppose America’s war on terror and shake the conscience of her fellow citizens, but also to fight the dominant cultural reduction of Arabs and Arab-Americans as a threat to national security. This critique is clearly expressed in “mike check” (62-63), a poem in which Hammad expresses her disagreement with the institutionalization of racist practices after 9/11. As Thery Alyce Pickens observes, this is a complex and multi-layered poem in which “Hammad blends

the art of emcee-ing (one of the four main elements of hip-hop culture), with the typical language of a sound check and her experience of being racially profiled in, presumably, an American airport" (08). The poem, in fact, stages a sort of spoken-word competition between a supposedly Arab-American citizen going through airport check, and Mike, the American airport officer who is checking her bag. The two contenders are described in antithetical terms: Mike is blonde, wears a cross, and looks harmless; the speaker, on the contrary, is affiliated with "folks" who "murdered ... as they prayed" (63) and therefore with 'evil'. What initially looks like a normal routine check turns out to be a security procedure based on racial profiling. As the speaker soon realizes, her bag is not checked in "a random / routine check" (62), but is the object of a discriminatory practice.

In "mike check," Hammad expresses a harsh critique against the racist assumptions lurking in post-9/11 US national security procedures and launches an attack to the American nation that pretends to be fully inclusive and democratic but carries out racist practices against Muslims and Arabs. The opening lines "one two one two can you / hear me mic check one two" (62) are not just a sound check but a strategy through which the speaker attempts to establish a relation with her interlocutor and expresses her sense of impotence in the face of a cultural racism that clearly dis-empowers her. This sense of vulnerability and persecution is further conveyed through the hasty and agitated words that the speaker directs to her interlocutor in a confused and disoriented way: "mic check yes i / packed my own / bag can you hear / me no they have not / been out of my possession" (63). In "mike check," Hammad represents an unbalanced and potentially explosive relation and reproduces in poetic terms the feelings of fear and sense of treason experienced by Arab-Americans after 9/11. She further expresses the "anger" and "agony" of Arab-Americans and especially their deep "fear of being mistaken" (Orfalea 299) as fanatical Muslims and potential terrorists.

As I have intended to demonstrate, in "mike check" Hammad mirrors the increasing hatred, anxiety, and public hysteria corrupting America's democracy after 9/11, and puts us on guard against the power abuses carried out under the flag of America's "state of exception". On this regard, the final question that the speaker directs to the US officer and that closes the poem raises uncomfortable questions, by highlighting the dangerous and authoritarian drift that America's democracy has taken after 9/11. The question, "a-yo mike / whose gonna check you?" (63), is a clear challenge to the authority of the US officer checking her bag and an act of civil resistance through which the speaker puts mike as well as America's apparently exemplary and moral behaviour in question. The speaker skilfully overturns the hatred and distrust that have been directed towards her: first, she refuses to be accommodating and complicit with power; then, she advances the idea that evil may be hiding there where we do not expect to find it. By and large, Hammad subverts in this poem the negative polarities officer vs. potential terrorist, American vs. Arab, Christian vs. Muslim, good vs. evil, completely altering the point of view from which we see the scene. She further complicates the simplistic association Arab/potential terrorist, Islam/evil by mixing literature and performance, creativity and dissent, thereby demonstrating that spoken word poetry has the power to detect and denounce the flaws of an all-too good and complacent American democracy.

Thus, I have intended to show that, both Nye and Hammad use their creativity to fight and neutralize the dominant representation of Arabness and Islam as the embodiment of evil. Far from reconfirming the uniform, simplistic, and abstract

representations diffused by power, the writers at the centre of this study turn to the rich everyday life of Arab and Arab-American subjectivities to stress their humanity and promote intercultural understanding. In line with Nouri Gana, I have argued that Arab-Americans use their art to invalidate “the inimical image of Islam and Arabness as well as the continual violence of which it is simultaneously the target and the product” (“Introduction” 1573). Moreover, I have also intended to show that Nye and Hammad’s poetic and political gesture is not simply reactive to a state of things pre-existing their poetry, but rather proactive in the sense that it shows the limits of an all too self-satisfied approach to American democracy. Indeed, I claim that their works urge us to rethink and re-articulate America’s democracy in a more radical, and therefore more responsible and inclusive way along the lines indicated by the New Americanists. Nye and Hammad fully participate in the effort to produce a frame of ongoing critical thinking that is hospitable to an ever growing number of diversities and transnational relations.

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