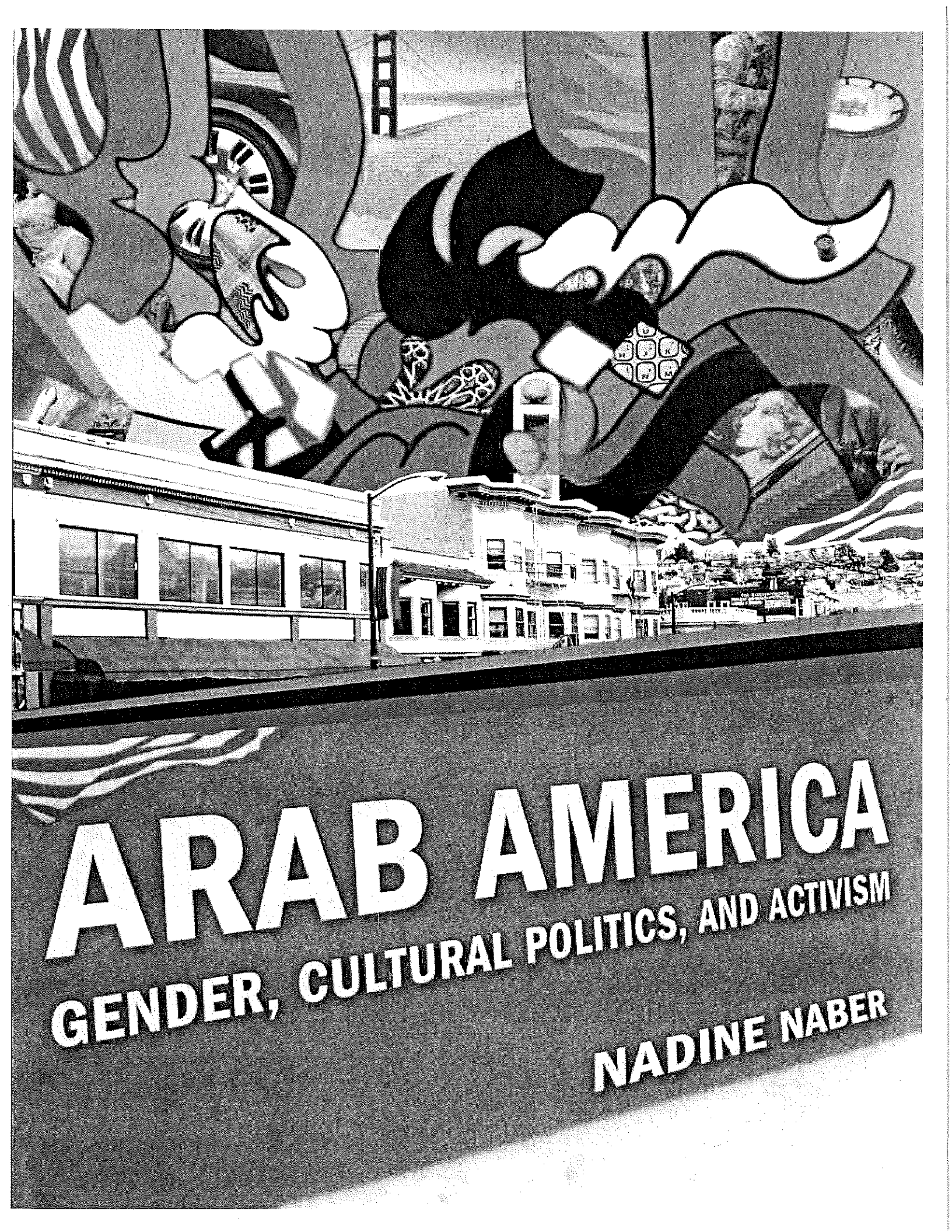




ARAB AMERICA

GENDER, CULTURAL POLITICS, AND ACTIVISM

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1

From Model Minority to Problem Minority

In the 1990s, Arab immigrants who had come to the Bay Area between the '50s and the '70s spoke about their early years in America with a sense of nostalgia reminiscent of conventional immigrant stories. They dwelled on positive experiences about their homelands and idealized their first years in their new country. Yet these immigrants had a distinct story about the past and the present—one that sheds light upon changing geopolitical relations between the United States and Arab- and Muslim-majority countries throughout the Cold War era and on the way these relations crept into the daily lives of Arab Americans in profound ways. In 1999, Jamal, a Jordanian who came to the Bay Area in the 1950s, told me, “At that time [in the '50s] there was no ‘the ugly Arab’ or ‘the bad Arab’ or ‘the Arab terrorist.’ American society wasn’t the way it is now. They [Americans] opened their homes to us. I felt it later on, after twenty years in San Francisco. It was really nice in those early days.”

Scott Kurashige, analyzing the status of Japanese Americans after World War II, uses the term “model minority” to refer to a racial-ethnic status in which group members find acceptance from white America by proving that they are model American citizens, an ideal that he argues is dictated by the American state (2010, 204). Many Arab immigrants with whom I worked narrate stories in which they too were perceived as model minorities. They recall

an America in which they enjoyed a general proximity to whiteness and a sense of acceptance within white middle-class America up until the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period in which the United States was consolidating its growing imperial interests in the Middle East and North Africa.¹ As the Soviet Union (soon to collapse in the summer of 1991) withdrew from the world stage, the possibility of a full-scale U.S. military intervention in the Middle East opened up. This occurred almost immediately with the Gulf War, commencing in the spring of 1991. Developments in U.S. intervention in the Middle East paralleled an intensification of U.S. imperial expansion on a global scale in the 1990s. Throughout the 1990s, U.S. policy shifted toward more openly militaristic forms of expansion and a commitment to strengthening economic neoliberalism on a global scale (Foster 2005; Duggan 2003; Ong 2006).

In the 1990s, the period framing this book, Arab immigrants of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s and their children met the expansion of U.S. empire in the Middle East through their encounters with the stories the U.S. government, the corporate news media, and Hollywood tell about the Middle East, stories that reinforce the interests of the U.S. state. U.S. imperial discourses of the 1990s can be understood in terms of the new U.S. Orientalism, a discourse that constructs an imagined "Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim" as the enemy of the nation as a justification for imperial expansion.² Over the years, the ways in which Arab immigrants, followed by their children, have articulated Arabness, have been entangled in the shift in their status from model minority to problem minority. Their articulations of Arabness range from ethnic accommodation or what I term, in [chapter 2](#), the politics of cultural authenticity to the politics of anti-imperialism, the focus

of chapters 3, 4, and 5. The politics of cultural authenticity and the politics of anti-imperialism represent two poles along a spectrum of articulations. Here, I map the local and global conditions in which these two poles of Arabness in the Bay Area were produced while tracing the multiple articulations in between. Cultural authenticity, by supporting an accumulation of wealth through hard work and an avoidance of associations with the decolonizing and anti-imperialist political movements of Arab homelands in U.S. public space, provides Arab diasporas with a framework for maintaining their middle-class U.S. socioeconomic status. The politics of anti-imperialism, while still at times deploying the logics of liberal multiculturalism, prioritizes the aim of ending U.S.-led war and domination in the Arab region and elsewhere. Several interconnected factors helped birth these articulations of Arabness: ongoing diasporic relationships to the homeland(s), an expanding U.S. empire, and changing immigrant and racial politics in the Bay Area, in California, and in the United States.

Articulations of Arabness are best understood through the concept of diaspora.³ Seen through the lens of diaspora, “cultural identity is hyphenated, wherein the hyphen does not mark a simple duality between two distinct cultural heritages.” The hyphen between the categories “Arab” and “American” “emphasizes the multiple local and global conditions that shape identity” and happens when different narratives of nations, classes, genders, generations, sexualities, and so on collide with one another as “interstices” or “third-space” (Bhabha 1994, 224).⁴ Yet my interlocutors’ stories reflect a distinct diasporic state of consciousness, a sense of belonging to a diaspora of empire.⁵

Many people with whom I worked spoke out of a tacit knowledge that Arabs or Muslims living in the United States have been forced to engage with U.S. imperial discourses in their everyday lives, discourses that associate Arabs and Muslims not with the U.S. nation but with real or fictive places outside the boundaries of the United States, and against which the United States is at war. While transnational cultural studies often invokes the way in which diasporic immigration traces a route back to the formerly imperial metropole, my theorization of the “diasporas of empire” emerges against the highly invasive and shifting relations of power central to contemporary U.S. neocolonialism and imperialism. Here, empire inscribes itself on the diasporic subject within the domestic (national) borders of empire.

Methods and Terms

Virtually no scholarly research exists about Arab immigration to the San Francisco Bay Area.⁶ I gathered the accounts I narrate in this chapter by spending time among community-based networks, listening to people’s stories, and scouring through community-based publications. Between January 1998 and August 2001, I conducted participant observation within community-based organizations and at community-based events and gatherings that brought together Arab immigrants from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. Most early Arab immigrants who set up Arab community-based collectivities in the Bay Area were from these countries. From that time until 2008, I conducted interviews with fifteen women and men who came to the Bay Area between the 1950s and the 1970s. These individuals were either heavily involved in Arab cultural politics or community-based

organizations or had engaged with them from a critical perspective. All of the men were married. Four out of seven women I worked with were unmarried; three had been divorced and one self-identified as queer. This lopsided gender structure reflects a pattern in which married immigrant women of this generation were more involved in domestic forms of labor and less involved in community-based leadership compared to their male counterparts. Community-based publications authored by organizations such as the Ramallah Club, St. Nicholas Church, and the Arab Cultural Center provided me with additional material.

There exists a major discrepancy between U.S. Census and Arab American community-based accounts of the population size of Arab Americans (El-Badry 1994; Zogby 2000). Afaf Laffrey et al. argue that the U.S. Census's underestimation of the number of Arabs in America results from the absence of a category for Arabs on the U.S. Census's short form and that many Arabs are reluctant to disclose their country of origin or ancestry even on the long form (1991). As a result, it is difficult to estimate the population size and other demographic details about Arab Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area. I use the term "immigrants" as shorthand to refer to diverse immigration experiences, ranging from forced displacement (Palestinian refugees) to migration for socioeconomic mobility.⁷ I use the term "Arab American" for people who live in the United States and who trace their ancestry to one or more of the twenty-two member nations of the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. I often use the word "Arab" and

couple it with “Arab American” (e.g., “Arab and Arab American”) to acknowledge the fluid and changing ways these terms operate in people’s lives and to recognize people who do not have the privilege of U.S. citizenship or who do not identify with an American national identity.

Throughout the book, the terms “Arab” or “Arab American” remain contested and take on different meanings depending on the context. At times, individuals use “Arab” as a cultural and linguistic term to refer to persons from countries where the primary language is Arabic. Another definition, influenced by the Arab nationalist movements that peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, assumes that Arab is also a national identity and that Arabs share a language and a common cultural and imagined national community. Since 1945, nations whose primary language is Arabic have combined to form the Arab League, and official international discourses consider members of the Arab League to be the Arab nations.

In response to U.S. racial discourses that construct an imagined “Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim enemy,” some critics, while recognizing its arbitrary and fictive nature, use similar designations to refer to the diverse people targeted by this racial schema (Volpp 2003a; Maira 2008; Rana 2007). My interlocutors often use the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” to refer to the people who share similar experiences with this racial schema as they recognize that these categories do not map onto each other. The six countries with the largest Muslim population are Indonesia (170.3 million), Pakistan (136 million), Bangladesh (106 million), India (103 million), Turkey (62.4 million), and Iran (60.7 million) (Central Intelligence Agency 2009). None of these countries is considered Arab. Arab countries include a diversity of linguistic,

ethnic, and religious groups. Religious groups include, but are not limited to, Christians, Jews, and Druze. Non-Arab ethnic minorities include, but are not limited to, Kurds, Amazighs, and Armenians. Thus, there are many challenges that come with efforts to name Arab immigrants and Arab Americans. The religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the Arab region gives at least some insight into why the federal government as well as Arab individuals and communities have found reaching a consensus over who is an Arab and what constitutes Arabness to be a particularly arduous task. Suad Joseph writes,

There are Palestinians, Iraqis, Kuwaitis, Yemenis, Saudi Arabians, Bahreinis, Qataris, Duabis, Egyptians, Libyans, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Sudanese, Eritreans, and Mauritaniens; there are Maronites, Catholics, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Jews, Sunnis, Shia, Druze, Sufis, Alawites, Nestorians, Assyrians, Copts, Chaldeans, and Bahais; there are Berbers, Kurds, Armenians, bedu, gypsies, and many others with different languages, religions, ethnic, and national identifications and cultures who are all congealed as Arab in popular representation whether or not those people may identify as Arab. (Joseph 1999, 260)

Ever since the late 1880s, when the first significant group of Arab immigrants came to the United States, the terms of identity have been contested and shifting.⁸ The first significant group of immigrants was from the Ottoman provinces of Syria, Mount Lebanon, and Palestine. The federal government classified the early immigrants along with other Ottoman subjects as originating

from “Turkey in Asia” (Samhan 1999, 216). Immigration reforms that were passed in 1893 led to the classification of Arabic-speaking immigrants as “Syrians” after 1899 (216). These identity categories diverged from the familial, village, or religious modes of categorization through which early immigrants tended to identify (Majaj 2000, 321). The end of the Ottoman Empire in 1917 and the emergence of distinct Arab nations that are often referred to collectively as the “Arab world” marked another shift in the identity terms deployed by both the federal government and Arab individuals and communities. For example, Alixa Naff argues that for early immigrants from Mount Lebanon, an area formerly located within the Ottoman province of Syria, the term “Lebanese” was given political legitimacy in the 1920s as a national label or identity and was adopted by most immigrants originating from Mount Lebanon (1985, 2).

On the level of federal government racial categories, a 1978 classification scheme located Arabs within the broader rubric of “persons originating in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa” (Samhan 1999). In 1997, the Office of Management and Budget, in collaboration with various Arab American community organizations, noted a lack of consensus about the definition of an Arab ethnic category and suggested that further research be done to improve data on this population group. Census 2000 added the classification “Arab ancestry” in a separate part of the census to obtain specific information about persons from the Middle East and North Africa who identify an Arab ancestry. The federal government and the major national Arab American community organizations have yet to reach a consensus on the appropriate term for immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries. Within the field of Arab American studies, scholars have tended to refer to

immigrants from the Ottoman province of Syria before 1920 as Syrian and to post–World War II immigrants as Arabs or Arab Americans.

Some Arab and Arab American activists contest the terms “Arab” or “Arab American,” arguing that these terms are nationalist, exclusionary toward non-Arab minorities in the region, and limited for purposes of coalition building beyond Arab communities. Collectives of feminist and queer activists across the United States have proposed the geography-based term “Southwest Asian and North African” (often referred to as “SWANA”) to include non-Arab minorities, transcend patriarchal and homophobic nationalisms, and expand alliance building between people from Arab nations and other nations in the region, such as Iran, who share similar histories with U.S. imperialism and war. Others have privileged religious identities such as Muslim or Muslim American over the nation-based label “Arab American” on the grounds that their primary loyalty is rooted in faith and the divine.

Elders and Old-Timers: The Conditions of Early Immigration

Most Arab immigrants of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s knew someone already living in the Bay Area when they arrived through family- or village-based networks. Many of these immigrants referred to themselves and their peers as the old-timers. They initially worked in factories and did menial jobs such as painting bridges and cleaning businesses and gravitated toward one another. Although most did not intend to stay, a range of factors made it increasingly difficult for them to return to their countries of origin. The 1948 war and the creation of the state of

Israel meant the displacement of approximately seven hundred thousand refugees. Some of the Palestinian old-timers were among these refugees. Since then, the Israeli state has denied Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homes or villages (Aruri 2001). For other Palestinian old-timers, the ongoing conditions of Israeli military occupation and expansion made returning to Palestine increasingly unviable. Most Lebanese old-timers considered themselves visitors until the onset in 1975 of the Lebanese civil war, which contributed to a shift in their perspective, and they began to view themselves as residents. Many found the idea of returning to Lebanon after the civil war unimaginable. Nadya, a Lebanese woman who had been actively involved in leftist Arab movements in the Bay Area, was the director of a cultural arts program at a multiracial community organization in Berkeley in 2008. She told me she migrated to the Bay Area in the 1960s on her own, planning to stay only temporarily. She returned to Lebanon in the 1980s, after the civil war began. She recalled,

I thought that was it, I was going back home to Lebanon. I gave away all of my stuff in San Francisco, got rid of everything, packed up my suitcase, took my clarinet, and went home. I got pregnant after being married in Lebanon. And then—the war. After spending a couple of nights in a shelter while pregnant, all of a sudden came the fact that I had this baby with me—and I said, I’m not gonna risk that life.

Nadya returned to the United States to stay. Old-timers who did not come in a context of war remained in the Bay Area as a

consequence of the imbalance in socioeconomic opportunities in the United States compared to their countries of origin. The old-timers came to the United States during a period when dominant U.S. discourses were emphasizing racial integration and, to a large degree, assimilation (Brodkin 2002). Most of them were not exceptionally wealthy in their homelands and came primarily from families involved in trading and agriculture. Most often, their extended family members pooled funds so one or two family members could migrate to the United States. After their arrival, relations with other Arab immigrants who had already established themselves in the Bay Area allowed them to develop the means to invest in business entrepreneurship within a few years.

One old-timer celebrated the idea that “anyone can make it in America.” His perspective reflects a key pillar of dominant U.S. nationalism of this period that inspired the migration of his generation to America. Most old-timers spoke to me about Arab histories in the Bay Area from the standpoint of immigrants who were, like them, entrepreneurs or business professionals. They spoke to me in celebratory ways about their elders—the Arab immigrants who came before them and had been coming to the Bay Area since the early 1900s. Many of their elders, after working as peddlers, became store owners and manufacturers. The old-timers were particularly inspired by the few elders who went on to become producers, theater managers, doctors, lawyers, and engineers. The elders had paved the way for newcomers like my interviewees to establish small businesses. For instance, the elders advanced newcomers money for a small fee.⁹ Together, the experiences of the old-timers and their elders shaped what became the dominant middle-class Arab immigrant narratives that circulated the Bay Area in the 1990s, which heralded the

socioeconomic success of predominantly male Jordanian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian immigrant business entrepreneurs.¹⁰ This coincides with a broader pattern in scholarly and community-based histories that privilege this story over others—such as the stories of poor immigrants, women, queers, or social justice activists.¹¹

The old-timers inherited a great deal from the elders, who were predominantly Christians from Mount Lebanon and came from Greater Syria at the turn of the twentieth century (Naff 1985; Suleiman 1999; Shakir 1997; Aswad 1974). Paralleling patterns of migration from the Arab world to the United States in general, the elders came to the Bay Area in the early 1990s out of economic necessity and for personal advancement. The old-timers were heavily influenced by their elders' immersion within white middle-class America. Many elders had become financially successful and rarely faced obstacles in white middle-class settings. At the same time, the relationship of Arab Americans to whiteness is complex and has been changing and contradictory. Before 1940, the position of Arabs with regard to race in the United States, in terms of immigration and naturalization, was unclear and often contested. This was a period in which the U.S. government used racial schemas to allow citizenship and eligibility for naturalization. The U.S. government did not permit immigrants who were not determined to be "white" by law, and as the outcome of court decisions, to become U.S. citizens. Before the 1940s, Arabs were classified both as white and not white, depending on various court decisions, as different judges and courts came to different conclusions about the "race" of Arabs. In the 1940s, however, the United States Census Bureau determined that Arab Americans were to be treated like European immigrant

communities, effectively categorizing them as “white” in the eyes of the U.S. government (Samhan 1999; Majaj 2000).

By the 1960s and ’70s, ideas about race had shifted in the United States, due in large part to the civil rights movement. Race became an increasingly contested term. Yet even though the biological idea of race was generally refuted, structural racism persisted (Gaines 1996; Omi and Winant 1994). Around this time, the U.S. government increasingly began relying upon the U.S. Census and racial categories for statistical information (Lopez 1996; Samhan 1999). Within this schema, a new civil rights–based racial discourse emerged that categorized people with shared histories of racial oppression into racial categories. This discourse used the language of race not in terms of biological race but to name collective experiences of racism. After the 1960s, alongside U.S. imperial expansion in the Middle East, it became clear that the long-standing question of whether or not Arabs were “white”—whether in terms of historical concepts of biological race or post-1960s concepts of community experiences with racism—was never quite resolved. As we will see, while the U.S. Census has continued to classify Arab Americans as Caucasian, U.S. media and government policies have consistently represented Arabs as different from and inferior to whites. In addition, Arab Americans have also put forth differing ideas of race, some claiming whiteness and others refuting such categorizations.

Unlike their elders, the old-timers who came to the Bay Area after world war II found themselves interacting with more and more immigrants from every Arabic-speaking country. In particular, more Arabs immigrated from the Gulf states and North Africa. And unlike the previous generation, who migrated mostly of their own volition, a rising number of postwar immigrants

came as a result of displacement caused by war. Finally, postwar Arab American communities were comprised of nearly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims (Suleiman 1999, 9). Post–World War II immigration and displacement to the United States was much more diverse and dynamic than in the previous years.¹² New transnational dynamics framed the postwar period in terms of vigorous anti-European colonial nationalisms in the Arab world. In the Bay Area, unlike their elders, who self-identified primarily by family name, village of origin, or nation of origin, most old-timers shared a generalized loyalty to Arab nationalism, even as some of them established loyalties to the United States. The Arab nationalism that predominated in their homelands during this time was primarily directed at European domination (Lockman 2010; Choueiri 2000; Barakat 1993; Khalidi et al. 1991).

Arab nationalism of the 1950s emerged out of the interrelated conditions of European colonialism in the Arab region, early Zionist settlement in Palestine, and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Khalidi et al. 1991; Barakat 1993; Choueiri 2000).¹³ Anticolonial Arab nationalist ideologies, while diverse, were generally based on the precept that Arab countries form an integral and indivisible whole and on a commitment to the achievement of independence and self-determination with unity. Anticolonial Arab nationalism of this period assumed that European colonialism is incompatible with “the dignity of the Arab nation and that the Arab nation rejects it and will resist it with all the means at its disposal” (Choueiri 2000, 92). This idea culminated after 1945 when several Arab countries began to engage in projects for Arab

unity.¹⁴ This was a time when the United States had just entered the political arena of Middle East politics. Britain and France were no longer in a position to maintain control of the Arab region, and the United States deemed it necessary to step in and assume the mantle of the former colonial powers as the guarantor of stability (Lockman 2010, 117). Yet the United States was not yet a global superpower and the idea that the United States was at war with Arabs had not yet become a common sentiment among Arab Americans. In fact, when I spoke with them decades later, the old-timers often waxed nostalgic about the 1950s and '60s as a simpler time, before they faced the consequences of an expanding U.S. empire in the Arab world. Monther, a Palestinian man and the founder of the Arab Cultural Center and the first local Arab TV station in San Francisco, told me,

We were not seen as terrorists or whatever people think about Arabs today. Most people didn't know what an Arab or Palestine was. Even though there was a lot going on in our countries—Israel was created, Nasser's revolution—the U.S. was not involved like today and the West Bank was still in Jordan.

In the 1950s, American interests in the Arab region were mostly related to investments in oil companies in Saudi Arabia known as Aramco (Arabian-American oil company) (Choueiri 2000; Khalidi 2004). Also in the middle of the twentieth century, the United States replaced Britain as the superpower responsible for working out a solution to the Palestinian problem. Historian Zachary Lockman, writing on the early development of the United States' relationship with Israel during this period, argues that the

Arab-Israeli conflict contributed to growing U.S. involvement in the region and that while Arabs sought the independence of a Palestinian state, Zionists fought for the creation of a Jewish state in as much of Palestine as possible. Lockman adds that the Truman administration pressured Britain to accept Zionist demands, and

when an exhausted Britain turned the Palestine issue over to the New United Nations, the US (along with the Soviet Union) endorsed the UN plan to divide Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states. A Jewish state was established in most of Palestine in 1948, and Israel refused to allow the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arab refugees who had fled or been expelled from their homes during the fighting to return.

Since then, the United States has attempted to reconcile its support for Israel with its relations to Arab states, “which, while friendly to the U.S., regarded Israel as a colonial-settler enclave illegitimately established on Arab land by violent means” (Lockman 2010, 118).¹⁵ Despite these developments, the United States did not perceive Israel as a major asset until the 1960s (Khalidi 2004). For the old-timers in the Bay Area, the 1950s was not only a period of relative calm, politically speaking, but it was also a different period in intra-communal relations. In the 1950s, several old-timers contended, intra-communal differences had not yet become politically charged. Zuheir, a business entrepreneur and former president of the Jordanian American Association, expressed this analysis as follows:

I never heard such words “Muslim” and “Christian.” When I graduated from college in 1957, I didn’t know which of my classmates was Muslim or who was Christian, because we never asked such questions. These things just popped up later and more and more lately. Before, we never had such words “Christian” and “Muslim.” We’re all one family, one people.

Zuheir’s words reflect the beliefs that proliferated in the Arab Bay Area in the late 1990s, that sectarian differences were a new phenomenon. Hatem, a Palestinian and leader in Muslim American institutions who came to the Bay Area in the 1970s, shared a similar analysis about a shift towards increasing intra-communal divisions based upon religious affiliation:

More recently, some elements of Arab Christianity have become attuned to thinking of Christianity as a Western construct, not as an Eastern construct. They sometimes feel distant from Muslims because they are trying to perceive themselves as part of the West, a West in an antagonistic relationship with the Muslim East. That is a learned viewpoint and needs to be challenged. Also, in some Muslim perspectives, there is the view now, more than before, of thinking of Christians as a Western concept, and they need to de-Orientalize their view.

Zuheir’s and Hatem’s statements concur with a growing academic and political critique about the rise of sectarianism in the Arab world in the context of growing of U.S. imperial wars

(Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Marr 2004; D. Cole 2003).

Becoming a Problem Minority: 1960s–1980s

Melanie McAlister (2001) argues that the U.S. government's conflict with Arab nationalists first took shape after 1945, when the United States supported Israel's attempt to defeat them. Like many scholars, she explains that Cold War terms determined the strategic relationship during the really important period of the 1960s and '70s when the alliance between the United States and Israel was consolidated. The United States intended to build alliances in the Arab region (e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia) within a post–Cold War moment, or within the twofold U.S. struggle against the Soviets and against pan-Arab nationalist regimes under leaders like Nasser, who were connected to the Soviet Union's hegemony in the region (McAlister 2001). The United States confirmed its alliance with Israel in the context of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War as a proxy against the Soviets. The 1967 war began an intensification of U.S. military, political, and economic intervention in the Arab region. McAlister writes that the end of the Vietnam War produced a crisis in masculinity for the U.S. government. When Israel won the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the United States admired Israel and considered the country a strategic ally. Aligning with Israel helped the United States recover from what McAlister refers to as “the Vietnam syndrome” (2001).

The 1970s U.S.-Arab oil crisis brought about increased U.S. government and media representations of Arab men as potential threats to American finances and American national security. The proliferation of U.S. media images portraying Arabs as the enemy

of the U.S. nation paralleled the increasing significance of oil to the global economy. As U.S. policymakers and oil companies joined forces to exert pressure on the Arab world, the imperial interests that produced “the Arab” as an enemy of the nation emerged, reinforcing long-standing U.S. concepts of the uncivilized, savage, potentially dangerous, exotic Oriental, Eastern, Arab, Muslim. The 1970s brought racial images of rich, greedy Arab oil sheiks, murderers, or slave owners threatening the U.S. economy alongside images of harems and belly dancers. Amira Jarmakani argues that in the 1970s, “oil sheik images emerged in a moment of greatly intensified political conflict between the United States and the Middle East, and they reintroduced the concept of the harem as a prisonlike space for women who were, by nature, at the mercy of brutal or greedy patriarchal figures” (2008, 166). Images of greedy patriarchal oil sheiks who hoard both their natural resources and their women reinforced the idea of Arabs as a threat to American finances and American national security (174).

The 1970s was also the period of the Iranian revolution and the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-1980, along with a rise in racialized portrayals of Arabs as the enemy Other. The United States engaged in various covert and over expansionist projects in the Middle East such as the intervention in the Lebanese civil war in 1982 in support of Israeli objectives, and the bombing of Libya in 1986 (Lockman 2010). U.S. media images of the 1980s increasingly portrayed Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular as terrorists (Stockton 1994, 133).¹⁶ The idea of Arabs as a threat to America conveniently rationalized U.S.-led war. By the late 1970s and '80s, predominant U.S. media images increasingly relied on constructs of Islam as an uncivilized

religion within an emerging new U.S. imperial discourse of the “Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim” as a potential terrorist threat (Hudson 1980; Said 1981; Shaheen 1984; Terry 1985; Suleiman 1988; Jarmakani 2008). According to McAlister, “In the years after the Iranian hostage crisis, an impressive array of cultural and political texts described American bodies as vulnerable to a terrorist threat mapped as Islamic and Middle Eastern” (2001, 232). Jarmakani contends that the potential Arab Muslim male terrorist counterpart is the veiled Muslim woman who represents an oppressive, hyperpatriarchal, and irrationally violent Arab Muslim culture (2008, 174).

These factors form the bases upon which U.S. politics in the Arab region have been conceptualized as enactments of empire. U.S. empire in the Arab region has worked through a range of structures, including neoliberal economic expansion and domination (Mitchell 1991; Elyachar 2005); support for the NGO-ization or the professionalization of revolutionary social movements (Incite! Women of Color against Violence 2007; Abdo 2010); support of puppet governments through the threat of military or economic domination (e.g., Jordan and Egypt); wars on countries that do not comply with imperial interests; the economic and military backing of Israeli-settler colonialism and expansion; and the circulation of media and government discourses on terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism.¹⁷ The development of U.S. empire in the Middle East between the 1960s and 1980s marked the beginning of a new era for Arabs in the United States. In the Bay Area, a general sentiment developed in which people began to consider whether other people were suspicious of them, perceived them as un-American, or wondered whether they were connected with people the U.S. government

and media were portraying as enemies of the nation. In the dominant U.S. national narrative, Arabs in the United States were now a potential problem minority. The consensus among my interviewees was that the post–World War II era in which Arabs enjoyed a general proximity to whiteness was disrupted.

Several old-timers traced the proliferation of anti-Arab U.S. sentiment to the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and especially the Iranian revolution. Karam, who immigrated to the United States from Syria in the late 1970s, told me, “The U.S. stance and the ways that Iranians were represented devastated me.” She said that many people she interacted with did not know the difference between Arabs and Iranians and often bought into dominant U.S. narratives. Many Arab Americans with whom I worked also became aware of a series of U.S. government policies that drew them into the increasingly fraught relationship between the United States and the Middle East. They told me how stories about these policies circulated in the community—around the coffee table, within community organizations, and at social gatherings. Some immigrants recalled Nixon’s ostensible counterterrorist measure, dubbed “Operation Boulder,” in 1972, which signaled the beginning of a series of FBI policies to target students of Arab descent. Presidential directives authorized the FBI to harass Arabic-speaking individuals with phone calls and visits, without evidence of criminal activity, on the assumption that they might have a relationship with “terrorist activities” in Palestine and Israel (Akram 2002, 5). The state targeted these individuals and denied them their constitutional rights.

Several immigrants mentioned the U.S. government’s surveillance of Arab Americans in the 1970s, when several government agencies, including the FBI, the Justice Department,

and the Immigration Department, carried out a wide-ranging campaign of investigation and surveillance of Arab Americans, including spying and wiretapping, that was ordered from the White House under the guise of uncovering the activities of persons potentially involved in sabotage (Hussaini 1974). The collective sense of belonging to a community whose homelands are becoming increasingly important to U.S. imperial expansion after 1967 ignited what many scholars have referred to as an “Arab American awakening” (Suleiman 1999). After 1967, and particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, throughout the United States and in San Francisco, the first pan-Arab community-based organizations were formed. This trend drew upon the heightened pan-Arab nationalist tendencies in the Arab world of this period and a current that had shaped the politics of U.S. racial-ethnic communities in which engagements with colonial, racial, and economic domination reignited movements for self-determination in the United States. The following quotation from civil rights lawyer Abdeen Jabara’s 1977 Community Day speech in Dearborn, Michigan, captures this sentiment:

These attitudes frequently govern how people act in employing Arab Americans, promoting Arab Americans, renting or selling homes or apartments to Arabs, or in characterizing Arabs in the local media.... It was the July 1967 war in the Middle East that had the effect of galvanizing what had been a dormant giant. Second- and third-generation Arab Americans were confronted with a historic challenge to their self-identification.

The ways in which Arab Americans began feeling the impact of U.S. empire in their own lives in the United States crystallized the sense that one could potentially be perceived as an “enemy within,” particularly if one were politically engaged in activities that countered or critiqued U.S. government policies in the Middle East. A common knowledge developed in the Arab Bay Area that activists challenging the United States’ support for Israel over Palestinians could be put under surveillance, detained, or deported at any time. The L.A. 8 case of 1987 played a crucial role in shaping this common knowledge. The Reagan administration targeted seven Palestinians and one Kenyan for deportation, a civil proceeding, on charges of being affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), then the second-largest faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Peter King (2005) writes that their arrest was sparked particularly by one event, whose “purpose, organizers said, was to generate donations for ‘the homeland,’ in particular, to provide medical care and schooling in Palestinian refugee camps.”

The U.S. government claimed that the PFLP advocated world communism, making affiliation with it a deportable offense under the McCarran-Walter Act. Although FBI director William Webster testified before Congress that none of the eight had engaged in any criminal activity, the case dragged on in federal court for twenty years as the Justice Department pressured the courts to deport them. Finally, in 2007 an immigration judge ruled that the government had violated the defendants’ constitutional rights.¹⁸ Furthermore, court proceedings revealed a Justice Department contingency plan providing a blueprint for the mass arrest of ten thousand alien terrorists and undesirable Arabs within the United States (Joseph 1999).

Internment of the Psyche

The ways in which U.S. imperial structures took on local form in U.S. government practices and media discourses contributed to what I term an “internment of the psyche,” or a sense that one might be under scrutiny—by strangers, hidden cameras, wiretaps, and other surveillance mechanisms of the security state, as well as invisible arbiters of the legality and normality of behavior, rendering them vulnerable to the “truths” contrived by the state—even if they were engaging in lawful activity. Particularly for political activists, living with these specters became a normative pattern of life (Naber 2006). Nayla, a Lebanese woman who came to the Bay Area as a teenager in the 1970s, said, “The L.A. 8 case scared people out of their minds. It stopped a lot of people in their tracks.” The internment of the psyche worked like Foucault’s “panopticism” (1979, 209), the disciplinary mechanism of generalized surveillance that brings the effects of power to the psyche. As a form of discipline, it “induces within individuals a state of consciousness that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). The internment of the psyche became a covert and unspoken medium that linked sociopolitical institutions and the individual psyche together, “making it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements” (Foucault 1979) of everyday life. Several interlocutors reflected on this sense of collective fear, a fear of being monitored by the state or simply mistrusted. Karam was living in the suburbs in the late ’80s. She told me this was about the time she learned that in order to survive she would have to remain silent about her heritage.

People who had enjoyed the privileges of white middle-class

acceptability, whether or not they were activists, feared criminalization or social, political, or economic marginalization. Fuad, an entrepreneur who identifies with the Republican Party, is deeply invested in the ideal of assimilation, and came to the Bay Area in the 1950s, told me, "I may have my own opinion with or against what's happening, but I'm not gonna share it with the American people." Dozens of stories circulated about fathers, uncles, and family friends who owned small business and were the targets of racial slurs or actions when their customers learned they were Arab. One old-timer told me about a customer who asked for a refund for his sandwich and soda after he realized he had just purchased his lunch from an Arab. Many grocers quickly learned that changing their name from Yacoub to Jack, Mohammed to Mo, or Bishara to Bob could help expand their clientele. These stories reflect the views that many middle-class Arab immigrant business entrepreneurs shared. They understood that making it in America would require silence about U.S. policy in public spaces or even hiding one's Arab identity altogether.

As these stories show, Arab immigrant narratives of this period do not fit neatly into a category of either assimilation and racial privilege or marginality and racial Otherness. The old-timers with whom I worked expressed desires for middle-class assimilation as well as a political understanding that the discourses of U.S. empire positioned Arab diasporas as potential enemies of the nation. As we will see, another set of factors complicated Arab American identity in the aftermath of 1967: the interconnected global processes of neoliberal economics in the Middle East, militarism and war, and increased displacement and migration had been taking on local form in the changing demographics of the Arab Bay Area.

Changing Demographics: Unimagined Arab Communities

In the aftermath of 1967, more Arabs came to the Bay Area than ever before as a result of displacement and war and the migration patterns of economic neoliberalism. Fundamental shifts in U.S. immigration policy also occurred during this period. The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished the national origin quotas that had been in place since the Immigration Act of 1924. Immigrants could now enter the United States because of their skills or professions rather than their countries of origin (Cainkar 2009; Ngai 2005). Monther referred to the 1960s and 1970s as a time “when things exploded for the Arab community in San Francisco.” There were more Arabs in the Bay Area than ever before, and they were more diverse in terms of socioeconomic class, religion, political ideology, and country of origin. The middle class began to diversify along the lines of grocery store owners and professionals. Monther said,

More Arabs from Gulf States came to the Bay Area and more and more from Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and we also saw more and more North Africans and more Muslims. Some were already educated and economically sufficient. They became professionals who came directly into banking, real estate, and engineering. Others were not—they became farmers, taxi drivers, janitors, dish-washers.

The sudden diversification of the Arab Bay Area brought about new interactions across different Arab communities. What many called “the Arab community” in the San Francisco Bay Area

could no longer be described as primarily Christian and primarily Jordanian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian. Middle-class Arab immigrants who came to the Bay Area between the 1950s and 1970s formed a range of community-based collectivities in the Bay Area in the context of a rapidly expanding U.S. empire. The collective articulations of Arabness that emerged among Arabs in the Bay Area came out of the interconnected conditions of race, class, empire, and diaspora between the 1950s and the late 1990s.

*From Ethnic Accommodation to Diasporic Anti-Imperialism,
1950s–1970s*

Within community-based organizations and within social and family-based networks, many old-timers institutionalized a middle-class articulation of Arabness in the Bay Area. One of the first Arab organizations in the Bay Area has represented one of the largest groups of Palestinians from the historically predominantly Christian village of Ramallah. Palestinian old-timers inherited the Ramallah Club, a local chapter of the American Federation of Ramallah, Palestine (AFRP) from the elders who came to the Bay Area in the early 1900s. AFRP has remained one of the largest Arab organizations in the Bay Area, reflecting the reality that Palestinians, due to decades of engagement with Israeli colonization, have tended to be most active in maintaining collective identity and sustaining community-based institutions. Many old-timers shared the collective sense that one day Palestine may cease to exist, inspiring a plethora of community building activities. The Palestinian old-timers I worked with were primarily from Ramallah. They spoke about Ramallah nostalgically as one big

family where everyone was related to one another. One old-timer told me,

We all came from one grandfather and his wife. We then bought the building on Ocean Street in 1961. It's a social club and has nothing to do with politics. It's for bringing the family together. To socialize. To let young people meet each other. There were no other groups at the time, other than a Lebanese club and the church.

After many of the old-timers first arrived in the Bay Area, the church was a crucial institution for community building. Jameel told me,

The Arab churches and seeing each other—Muslims and Christians—at the church functions was one of the most important things to us. Muslim guys from Syria used to come with us. We loved eating the food together. At that time, there were about twenty to thirty Palestinian families and three Jordanian families around. We were very close and the church was our base. We tried to keep our culture alive and judged each other in terms of how good we were in keeping our culture.

These stories reflect how a politics of ethnic accommodation has shaped middle-class Arab organizations in the Bay Area such as the Ramallah Club and, later, the Arab Cultural Center. These organizations have tended to celebrate both middle-class

assimilation and “ethnic difference” while ignoring material realities or structural inequalities (Lowe 1996). Lisa Lowe argues that such politics diffuses the demands of material differentiation through homogenization and the incorporation of signifiers of ethnic difference (86). Immigrants who helped found the Ramallah Club tended to frame the story of the club around memories of immigrant men gathered in grocery store stock rooms. They proceeded into celebratory accounts of middle-class entrepreneurs who pooled their resources to buy the building that has housed the organization since 1961. They herald the club as a place for preserving and promoting Palestinian cultural heritage in America—a place designed solely to promulgate friendships that have “nothing to do with politics.” It is a place that “brings the family together” and “lets young people meet each other.”

A posting on the Ramallah Club of San Francisco’s website tells the story this way: A young Palestinian couple were planning to marry in 1955 but “were just finishing college and getting started on their lives in the community and could not afford anything like a hall for their wedding reception.” A leading Palestinian entrepreneur responded to this predicament. He said, “The Ramallah Club needs a hall!” He then wrote the first check for five hundred dollars that began the fundraising process for the property on Ocean Avenue, which is still in use today.

The story of the Ramallah Club reflects a dominant articulation of Arabness among middle-class Arab diasporas in the Bay Area that took shape among the old-timers of the 1950s and was consolidated in the 1970s within the framework of ethnic accommodation and a politics of cultural authenticity. Here, entrepreneurs accepted and rationalized a particular narrative of American assimilation that diverged from the New Deal or

working-class notions of Americanism that arose in the mid-twentieth century, when America emphasized the importance of social contracts and an interventionist state (Gaines 1996). The middle-class politics of cultural authenticity both asserted a distinct Arab culture and supported the ideal of American middle-class success and mobility.

Another articulation of Arabness that circulated in the Bay Area during these years privileged a commitment to self-determination and decolonization of the Arab world. In the 1950s, some old-timers were working in solidarity with pan-Arab anticolonial nationalist organizations of the Arab region. By the early 1970s, Arab nationalism, in its various guises and modes of application, took on a distinctly socialist dimension. Arab nationalism had developed in relationship to the rise in socialist nationalist movements globally, particularly among the nonaligned countries of the third world (Choueiri 2000). Several old-timers recalled the Arab student organization at San Francisco State as one of their first experiences in forming a collective “Arab” identity. One old-timer told me, “It included students from Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. We were like family.” He explained, “They issued membership cards with one flag that was supposed to include all the Arabs.”

In general, whether they were committed to ethnic accommodation or anticolonial nationalism (or both), old-timers’ access to social and economic resources facilitated the formation of their community-based institutions and the ability to purchase property to sustain them. After most old-timers graduated from college and worked for several years, they learned from their elders that opening grocery stores was their ticket to upward mobility. They gained access to socioeconomic resources similar

to those of their elders, and developed similar kinds of relationships to the U.S. market economy of the mid-twentieth century. Their increasing access over the years to human capital, such as educational status and accumulation of personal savings and, in some cases, property ownership, allowed them to accumulate further capital from economic institutions such as banks and investment firms. Collective borrowing strategies provided them with start-up capital or capital to maintain businesses, and they shared networks of low-wage workers or relied upon unpaid family members. Over several decades, many old-timers used the wealth accumulated in their small businesses to invest in real estate and eventually became wealthy, inspiring many of them to move from San Francisco to the suburbs, including the San Francisco Peninsula, East Bay, and South Bay.¹⁹ San Francisco proper became home to younger Arabs and Arab newcomers, and less to the old-timers. Despite the dispersion of middle-class Arab immigrants throughout the Bay Area, their familial, social, and political networks remained in place. This network of middle-class Arab immigrants formed a variety of pan-Arab, nation-based, and village-based collectivities over the next few decades. They also developed diverse religious institutions. Maronite Catholic, Antiochian Orthodox, and Roman Catholic were the primary Christian groups. Each group has formed its churches and church-based communities. Most Arab Muslim immigrants were Sunni Muslims, and they developed their own religious institutions.²⁰

Cultural Authenticity of the 1970s and 1980s

The formation of the Arab Grocers Association in the 1970s

reflected the continued process by which a dominant trend among middle-class Arab immigrants would deploy the concept of pan-ethnicity to secure their access to middle-class resources. Fuad, a leading member of the association, told me that the Arab Grocers Association provided grocers with a mechanism for ensuring they would “get good services, better prices, and respect” from the large companies they dealt with for their products. It helped to “stop companies from taking domestic advantage of us because we are foreigners and don’t speak the language well.” The association was one of the largest Arab American organizations in the Bay Area of this period. One community leader told me, “We had five hundred grocers in San Francisco at that time. We were very big. All of San Francisco’s little grocers were Arab American.” As a result, Arabs from other community-based institutions often turned to the Arab grocers for help with nongrocery issues, and the association also provided a mechanism for engaging in the politics of civic participation and advocacy. For example, members of an Arab American Democratic club turned to the Grocers Association for help in obtaining signatures to promote the two-state solution in Palestine at the U.S. Democratic Convention. Monther, a long-time contributor to various Arab community organizations and a leader in this effort, told me, “This showed people that we can come together and make changes. It inspired people. This was around the time that the city of San Francisco started knowing who we are.”

The possibilities the Arab Grocers Association created reflect the values of a liberal multicultural America that requires immigrants to identify as different, as Arab, in order to gain recognition. Recognition, in turn, offers the apparent promise of

equal rights and acceptance. Zuheir told me,

Every government official who is going to run for any position in local, state, or federal government used to come and beg to meet with our community and to listen to us. And we helped those who helped us. We later helped Mayor Frank Jordan become a mayor. And sure enough, Frank Jordan appointed six commissioners from the Arab people.

Within the framework of liberal multiculturalism, America celebrates racial and cultural diversity as a way to suppress the more politicized mobilizations of difference produced during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) contends that “multicultural domination works ... by inspiring subaltern and minority subjects to identify with the impossible object of an authentic self-identity—a domesticated nonconflictual traditional form of sociality and intersubjectivity.” The nation, she explains,

stretches its hand to them, and they are led on to perform an authentic difference in exchange for the good feelings of the nation and the reparative legislation of the state. This does not simply produce good theater, it inspires impossible desires: to be this impossible object and to transport its ancient meanings and practices to the present in whatever language and moral framework prevails. (6)

The Arab Grocers Association, operating within this

framework, relied on liberal multicultural categories to articulate a pan-ethnic Arab identity as a strategy for gaining racial-ethnic recognition, thus reifying the ideal of racial-ethnic recognition that obscures the realities of economic-class inequality. Indeed, this move was also informed by pan-Arab nationalist trends of the Arab world of this period. In the 1970s and '80s, people who previously identified with their nations of origin or family names came together around a pan-Arab identity more than before.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the bifurcation at the heart of liberal multicultural discourse, which assumed a separation between two domains—a cultural domain on the one hand and a political domain on the other—could be seen within most middle-class Arab organizations. Lisa Lowe argues that multiculturalism is central to the maintenance of a hegemony that relies on a “persistent distraction away from the historically established incommensurability of the economic, political, and cultural spheres.” In this sense, the production of multiculturalism “at once ‘forgets’ history” (1996, 86). This bifurcation could be seen in the formation of strictly “cultural” organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, organizations that consolidated the hegemony of “Arab cultural authenticity” as the dominant articulation of Arabness in the Bay Area. The cultural organizations worked through a weblike structure that made room for intra-communal differences of village or nation of origin or religion while connecting people to one another through the concept of a pan-ethnic Arab cultural heritage. The Arab Cultural Center is the largest and most well established of these institutions. At the time, its constituents were primarily middle-class Arabs. Old-timers spoke about the ACC as a place that attracted community support because “it was not specialized in some political disaster area but

for the Arabs here ... for all the Arabs in the area to get in touch with their culture and maintain our roots, meet each other and bring the community together.” They share a collective memory of the ACC flourishing in the 1970s and 1980s because it brought people together. Many other social and cultural institutions representing villages or nations of origin were formed that reified middle-class cultural authenticity at this time. Village-based organizations like the Ramallah Club were primarily Palestinian, reflecting the significance of village-based identities in the Levant, the large numbers of Palestinians in the Bay Area, and the disproportionate desire for cultural continuity among Palestinians. But Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian American, Egyptian, and Yemeni organizations, among others, were also founded.²¹ This plurality of affiliations involved a critical inheritance of homeland categories for organizing social differences and accommodating them into liberal, multiculturalist categories. Yet, tensions often emerged over “homeland” (nation- and village-based) and “hostland” (pan-ethnic) frameworks that often went unresolved. One old-timer told me,

We tried to convince the community that it’s important to be Arab here more than anything else. The more you live here and see the reaction of the bigger culture to the Arabs, the more you felt like an Arab organization would be a much stronger purpose to work for. What unifies everyone is how the American culture viewed us.

Amidst these different affiliations (pan-Arab, nation-based, village-based), middle-class organizations conceptualized

“culture” in a separate domain from “politics” and defined “culture” as fixed and unchanging. Here, “culture” was to be expressed through the components of music, food, art, and language or through essentialist notions of kinship, relationality, and community. One old-timer told me that “culture” is what connected him to other Arabs in the Bay Area. It is the sense that “we are all part of the same world” and share “a closeness with each other.” Several old-timers recalled moments where they felt closeness with another person as soon as they learned he or she was Arab. Monther told me this was not “something you teach” but something you “have to live.” Old-timers also tended to hope that their generation would transmit their culture to the new generation at social events such as dinner banquets and music and language classes, thus reifying concepts of an authentic culture frozen in time and abstracted from history.

Many political organizations assumed a similar separation of politics from culture. Old-timers helped form organizations that relied upon a concept of pan-Arab American political identity that paralleled the dominant trends among middle-class Arab activists across the United States during this time. These activists were responding to the sentiment of the late 1960s and '70s—that the U.S. state and media had waged a war against them—by establishing several Arab American organizations, many that were based upon civil rights concepts of pan-ethnicity, such as the National Association of Arab Americans (1972) and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (1981).

Arab American political organizations of the 1970s and 1980s tended to define their work in terms of civil rights or lobbying. Civil rights organizations, such as the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, San Francisco Chapter, shared a

commitment to claiming political rights through the concept “We are Americans, too.” Their claims focused on equality for Arab Americans in government policies and in the law. Lobbying organizations such as the National Association of Arab Americans sought to promote an evenhanded U.S. policy in the Middle East, particularly in relation to Palestine. Several factors explain the centrality of Palestine to Arab American civil rights. A large majority of Arabs in the Bay Area are Palestinian. In the 1970s and ’80s, Arab Americans faced racism based on racist attitudes in the United States about Palestinians (Abraham 1994). In addition, Palestine was at the center of anticolonialist Arab nationalist ideology (Khalidi et al. 1991). By often distinguishing between domestic and global issues, Arab American civil rights frameworks favored problems such as discrimination against Arabs in the United States over U.S. foreign policy issues. Arab American civil rights frameworks aimed for the acceptance of Arabs in the United States as Americans and thus often avoided asserting a transnational critique of the interconnections between U.S. imperial formations and anti-Arab discrimination in the United States.

Diasporic Anti-Imperialism

In the 1970s, ’80s, and early ’90s a vibrant anti-imperialist Arab movement focused primarily on Palestine. It was based in radical-socialist national liberation theory. This movement worked through political channels rather than fixed or coherent organizations, though some of the ideologies became attached to particular organizations. The dominant middle-class Arab American narrative considered such groups as outside the

boundaries of community acceptability, deeming them too radical, or as obstacles to middle-class acceptability. While most activists did not explicitly advocate for middle-class assimilation, they saw themselves as people who were forced to come to the United States and make a living. Hussein, one activist from this period, told me,

If I'm going to be here, I'm going to take care of my family until the atmosphere of war is over. But we also brought our politics with us and maintained that political commitment. The people who started the more mainstream Arab organizations here distanced themselves from what was happening and wanted to be nonpolitical.

Activists were primarily Palestinian but were also from other Arab nations and included some non-Arabs. This movement was connected to Palestine and experienced a range of sectarian solidarities and tensions. Early on, since a majority of activists were people who came to the United States at college age with a political consciousness formed before they arrived, this movement was connected through a student organization, the Organization of Arab Students (OAS). Hussein, a Palestinian exile, told me, "I was demonstrating in my high school. So were the Iraqis, the Lebanese, and people from the Gulf. All of us found a home in the OAS." OAS had dozens of chapters throughout the United States.

The support for Palestinian national liberation worked in a broader environment of leftist Arab long-distance national liberation movements, some of which also existed in the Bay Area

during this period, such as supporters of the Lebanese Communist Party, leftist progressive groups within the Lebanese civil war, the Arab Labor Socialist Party–Lebanon, the National Democratic Front in North Yemen, the Yemeni Socialist Party, and the Arab Labor Socialist Party. These movements emerged within a 1960s and '70s global context of widespread anticolonial, anticapitalist sentiment for sovereignty, national liberation, and self-determination. Arab anti-imperialism in the Bay Area was shaped by global trends of the time in which nationalist movements in China, North Vietnam, Algeria, Uruguay, the Philippines, and beyond were demanding liberation from imperialist powers (Chang and Chung 1998). They were also shaped by trends within the United States and the Bay Area specifically that drew on these global trends, as we will see. Arab anti-imperialist activism strengthened in the mid-1970s as more and more young people, particularly student immigrants, claimed a seat at the table. Palestinian and Arab national struggles peaked in the '80s. Especially after the 1982 U.S.-backed Israeli siege of Beirut, more than ever before, the Bay Area Arab movements recognized that they needed to establish themselves deeply in North America. One activist told me,

[B]ecause Lebanon was more accepted in the U.S. and seen as more civilized compared to Palestine, this moment provided us with an opportunity to talk to mainstream Arab and American organizations. After Beirut was under siege, we had a joint struggle between Lebanese and Palestinians speaking out to a larger circle than just activists.

This period birthed a new collective, the November 29th Committee for Palestine, which later became the Palestine Solidarity Committee. The aim was to avoid sectarianism and avoid turning away Americans who might prefer affiliating with a solidarity committee rather than a political party. The Palestine Solidarity Committee was a national group with a national newsletter published in the Bay Area. Throughout the '70s and '80s, activists developed a range of community-based programs that focused on political education and grassroots political organizing. The Bay Area was indeed a major hub of activism related to Palestinian and Arab national liberation. In the 1970s, activists supporting Palestinian national liberation opened the only Arabic bookstore in the United States in San Francisco's Mission District. This store included hundreds of leftist books in Arabic. Hussein told me, "We had international novels, Tolstoy, Rosa Luxemburg, all in Arabic. People never had access to progressive books like this before. People would visit the bookstore from other states and buy books in the dozens." Not all anti-imperialist politics emerged within secular leftist formations. Some Arabs, Muslim and Christian, were developing anti-imperialist politics through religious frameworks. Muslim anti-imperialist politics peaked in the late 1990s, as we will see.

Camaraderie and Exclusion

The multiple collective articulations of Arabness in the Bay Area have coexisted and intersected with one another. An overarching sense of belonging to an imagined Arab community connected these different collectivities to one another at varying moments and to different degrees. The Arab Cultural Center is a San

Francisco-based institution where multiple articulations of Arabness have interacted. A plurality of Arab community-based collectivities have held meetings at the Arab Cultural Center at one point or another—forming an interconnected web or a new, unimagined, “unanticipated community” (Ono 2000). Also, while pan-ethnic collectivities shared a critique of village- or nation-based formations, their members tended to attend the annual gatherings and conferences of village- or nation-based organizations and often turned to them to meet relatives from their home countries. Members of anti-imperialist organizations often joined village-based organizations with the aim of politicizing them. The lines between the various groups that interconnected the Arab Bay Area were not always clear. Despite the realities of sectarianism and intra-community differences (family, village, religion, or nation of origin), the immigrants with whom I worked repeatedly made statements such as, “We are all one family, one people”—even if the unity to which they referred was unstable. Monther, reflecting upon intra-communal differences, told me,

Each group still wants their pride ... they want to be Lebanese, Jordanians, Palestinians, Yemenis, Iraqis, all that. And we wanna be Christians, Muslims. There's no cement. In the '80s, there was more cooperation between groups. The ACC was the beehive and they had their meetings there (all the different groups). Yet most were Palestinians ... and there were views that this was a Palestinian organization because Palestinians are most active of all of them.

Many internal critiques circulated within this unimagined Arab community. One critique contended that Arab community organizations unfairly prioritized Palestinian issues over others. Another, particularly among some Jordanians, Syrians, and Lebanese, viewed Palestinians with antagonism, as the “real” Arab enemy of the U.S. nation who stood in the way of their own efforts to gain acceptance in America. Some Muslim Arab Americans argued that Christians were granted more representation and leadership privileges in Arab community organizations. There were indeed more Christians than Muslims involved in Arab community organizations. Two factors contributed to this imbalance. First, the first two generations of Arab immigrants to the Bay Area up until the late 1960s were primarily Christian. Christians were already established within the community’s leadership. Second, the Arab nationalist tendency underlying pan-Arab community organizations had secular Arab undertones, inspired by mostly Christian political figures and intellectuals of the early twentieth century (Khalidi et al. 1991). In the Arab world, Arab Christians tended to be particularly attracted to the ideal of pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism offered them a more inclusive space than religious structures for organizing society, particularly since the majority of people in the Arab world are Muslim (Majid 2000).²² There were also differences and hierarchies that were left unspoken—especially differences of socioeconomic class, gender, and sexuality. Aliya, a Palestinian old-timer who worked with the Arab Cultural Center for decades, told me, “They [the old-timers] didn’t know how to outreach to the *entire* community, to the different neighborhoods where lower-income communities live inside the city, in the inner-city, even in public housing or low-income housing.” I interacted with

dozens of women who worked with the middle-class Arab community organizations over the years who expressed critiques of sexism and shared experiences of marginality. Aliya told me, “I faced a lot of challenges trying to do my work to build the community center by men who felt intimidated. They don’t really necessarily want women here to take initiative and to take a leading role.” She also thought that patriarchy was more prominent in the United States than in Palestine because, she explained, “people there evolved in a way where they accept women in leading roles.” During this period, several women leaders, such as Aliya, left leadership positions in community organizations because of the sexism and referred to them as men’s clubs.

Some interlocutors argued that idealized concepts of gender and sexuality led to the exclusion of people who transgressed those ideals. Karam, who was politicized and active in racial justice, queer, and feminist movements, told me, “People in the mainstream Arab organizations couldn’t handle me. I did not look like what an Arab woman should have looked like.” Karam told me that at first, she stayed away from these institutions and found a sense of home in the formation of queer Arab or Middle Eastern collectives. Writing on the history of these collectives, Bay Area-based scholar and activist Huda Jadallah affirms that “although there have always been Arab Americans who have transgressed sexual and gender boundaries, the communal identities and histories of LGBT Arab Americans were largely undocumented until the 1980s.” Writing on networks similar to those to which Karam belonged, Jadallah writes, “Queer Arab Americans are active members of queer communities, Arab communities, and many other communities.... Formal organizational structures for

Arab American lesbians and gays began to emerge as part of a larger movement of lesbian and gay people of color in the United States who organized to create visible structures of support” (2003, 76). Huda Jadallah founded the first Arab American lesbian organization, the Arab Lesbian Network in Berkeley, California, in May 1989. Queer Arab American organizations changed shape over the years. As queer activist Lana told me,

while these collectives have tended to prioritize the goal of creating a sense of home and community and promoting visibility in our community, they have supported different political causes and have explicitly or implicitly shared an anti-Zionist, anti-occupation, anti-colonial U.S. presence in South West Asia and North Africa. It can’t be just about being queer—the Palestinian issue is important to us, Iraq is important to us.

In the 1980s and early ’90s, Karam said, “We were seen as freaks” in the “straight Arab sphere of things.” More recently, she added, things changed for queer Arabs, who felt more and more comfortable among straight Arabs. For instance, by the turn of the twenty-first century, the leftist Arab movement became a space where this convergence could be seen, as we will see in [chapter 5](#).

From Dormancy to Action: The 1990s *Dormancy in the Early ’90s*

Elders tend to remember the early 1990s as a period of dormancy

in which they did not have the tools to respond to new contradictions and tensions related to the ever-diversifying demographics of the Arab Bay Area and intensifying U.S.-led war. As we will see, the 1990s brought the failed Oslo Accords, the first Gulf War, growing numbers of political and economic crises in the Arab region, and a massive increase in the number of Arab refugees and poor immigrants to the Bay Area. Mary, a Syrian woman and former president of the Arab Cultural Center, told me that the Arab Cultural Center, which had always brought people together, faced divisions during this period, and their events and gatherings increasingly diminished. She explained that there was such a massive decrease in their resources that they had only one employee who worked a few hours a week. Aliya became a board member of the Arab Cultural Center in the early part of the decade, when the ACC was what she refers to as “yet another dormant community organization.” People involved in anti-imperialist movements of this time had a similar experience. As the Oslo Peace Accords were signed in 1993, major political movements committed to Palestinian liberation globally and in the Bay Area began declining. By the mid-1990s, collectives that were based upon a leftist national liberation-based politics such as the Palestinian solidarity movement and the Arabic bookstore became dormant. Yet around the same time, momentous shifts were taking place that would bring the Arab Bay Area into a new period of revival by the late 1990s. These were related to an intensified period of anti-Arab racism and a new racial consciousness sparked by the first Gulf War; the Oslo years leading up to the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising); generational changes in the Arab Bay Area; more diverse migration patterns; and increased sectarianism.

The Consolidation of U.S. Empire in the 1990s

The first Gulf War brought one of the most intense moments in the history of anti-Arab racism up until this period, paralleled by violence directed against symbols of U.S. empire among fringe extremist groups in the United States, such as the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, which exacerbated anti-Arab racism. The 1990s also brought mounting U.S. military interventions and economic neoliberal expansion in the Arab world. For Arab diasporas, Clinton's Omnibus counterterrorism bill of 1995 added to the growing sense of belonging to a diaspora of empire. The Omnibus counterterrorism bill called for the deportation of noncitizens based on evidence known only to the government; in some cases, defendants and their attorneys did not receive a summary of the evidence. A *New York Times* article stated that there were twenty-five immigrants facing deportation or exclusion from the United States largely on the basis of secret evidence from unidentified people. All the accused men were of Arab descent or were Muslims (Smothers 1998). Media and popular-cultural representations of Arabs and Muslims in the United States also took a turn for the worse (Sabbagh 1990; Kamalipour 1995). The Hollywood film *The Siege* (1999) represents new popular-cultural representations that brought the "enemy of the nation" home—where the Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim terrorist lives in the United States and blows up a bus in New York City, killing elderly Americans and American children. U.S. media images of Palestine and Israel hailed Arab Americans into a racial discourse that distinguished between Palestinians and Arabs, on the one hand, and Jews and Israelis on the other. Scholarly and community-based publications

documented a massive rise in hate crimes against Arabs in the United States in the first five years after the beginning of the first Gulf War (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee 1991; Wingfield and Karaman 1995; Sabbagh 1990; Hatem 2001). In the following quotations, young adults who entered high school and college in the 1990s discuss encounters with anti-Arab racism of this period.

Samia: When people hear I am Arab they associate it with war. All you hear in the media is when Arabs kill people, so they assume that I am a radical or terrorist.

Mazen: As long as the U.S. has an interest in Israel, Arabs will never be mentioned unless they're mentioned as terrorists. The closest we will ever get to being recognized is seeing Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn.

Raydah: I always felt that either I didn't know enough to defend myself or it didn't matter how much I knew—people already labeled me. Oh, Palestinians are terrorists, or Saddam Hussein is the worst. You feel like they see all Arabs as terrorists.

Salem: I don't know how much it matters, but I wouldn't tell people ... at least when I first joined the company, I wouldn't tell people I was Palestinian unless someone really asked. I only told one guy I was Palestinian.

David Theo Goldberg uses the term “racial Palestinianization” to refer to the kinds of racial ideas my interlocutors encountered: “Israel is taken as an outpost of European civilization in an altogether hostile and alien environment.... Israelis occupy the structural positions of whiteness in the racial hierarchy of the Middle East. Arabs, accordingly—most notably in the person of Palestinians—are the antithesis” (Goldberg 2009, 116).²³ Joseph Massad analyzes racial discourses about Palestinians, arguing that parallel U.S. and Israeli racial discourses provide the logic that blames Palestinians for violence and represents Palestinians as uncivilized barbarians: “Palestinians are asked to give up violence so that Israelis can give them peace” (Massad 2010). This racial logic shaped the dominant terms of debate about Palestine and Israel in the United States in the mid-1990s, after the Oslo Peace Accords.

Arab American feminists have analyzed racial discourses of the 1990s about Arabs, stressing that sexism permeates anti-Arab racism. One strand of this diasporic Arab feminist critique argues that two images reinforced anti-Arab racism in U.S. popular culture and academia in the 1990s: that of the victim or escapee of Arab Muslim patriarchy who needs to be rescued by an American hero (Kahf 2000; Amireh 2000) or the absent Arab woman, which juxtaposes excessively patriarchal Arab men and white women who liberate themselves from Arab patriarchy while Arab women are completely absent from the scene (Saliba 1994). According to their analyses, racist media images of Arab Muslim patriarchy and misogyny help to consolidate dominant U.S. imperial discourses about an apparently backwards, uncivilized Arab Muslim culture and superior, civilized American culture. Here, racialized distinctions between the figure of the Arab Muslim woman and

the white American woman reify the imperialist hierarchies between us and them/Americans and Arab-Muslims (Kahf 2000; Jarmakani 2008; Saliba 1994; Amireh 2000). Indebted to the discourse of Orientalism, this sexist racial discourse relies on arguments that assume that an essentialist Arab Muslim culture or religion, based in violence and misogyny, is the primary difference between “Arabs” and “Americans” and the primary source of global conflict.

In the 1990s, Arab American community leaders saw the consolidation of racist U.S. discourses about Arabs and Muslims take on a local form in institutional changes on the ground. For instance, queer Arab activists distinctly name the first Gulf War as a catalyst for the consolidation of queer Arab American organizing. Huda Jadallah writes,

“The first Gulf War ... can be seen as a particularly potent moment in the history of queer Arab Americans as they bonded together for social support as Arabs in the United States. As a community, they came together to respond politically, holding educational teach-ins and fundraisers.” Through a much more widespread political consciousness than before, Aliya, reflecting on her work with the Arab Cultural Center, told me,

People stopped saying, “We’re not gonna get involved in *any* political activities and we should focus more on culture.” It became for us very apparent that we can no longer differentiate between the two. We’re not talking about politically being active, demonstrations—that’s not our job. But we had people who started coming to the Center saying, “Look, my son went to school and he was called all kinds of names because he’s an Arab!

What should I do about it?”

Louai, a Palestinian man, told me that he became determined to help revive the ACC after his son experienced racism. Aliya explained, “We became reactionary because of what was going on. We could not separate the need between having culture and teaching our kids the language, and at the same time, how can we make them feel safe?” As Arabs and Arab Americans were forced to face the realities of anti-Arab racism and increased U.S. military violence in the Arab region, massive demographic changes were also underway, changes that contributed to a revival in Arab American cultural politics in the mid- to late 1990s.

Changing Demographics

In the 1990s the second generation were now adults, and many were joining the leadership of community-based organizations and movements. This shift gave rise to new tensions and contradictions within Arab collectivities in the Bay Area. Jameel, an old-timer reflecting a dominant middle-class perspective, told me, “The new generation has their own agenda. They are American-born, and they want to do things differently.” Jameel’s remark points to the increase of second-generation activists socialized and politicized in a different geographic location and historical moment and to the way their presence brought new logics for articulating Arabness. The presence of more second-generation young adults led to a significant shift in the Arab Cultural Center’s agenda. In 1997, ACC elected a new president, Monther. He told me,

They had just started the Arab Cultural Festival, which brought together five or six hundred people. The second year, when I worked on it with Nadya, it grew to three thousand people. Old people come and say to me, “What’s this music you’re playing?” and I tell them, “The youth wanted hip-hop. You had your turn. It’s the younger generation’s turn now.”

In addition, Arab migration patterns to the Bay Area were rapidly diversifying. The Gulf War brought thousands of Iraqi refugees to the Tenderloin, one of San Francisco’s most impoverished neighborhoods. A significant number of low-income North African and Yemeni Muslim immigrants also moved to the Bay Area at this time. Many became service workers, such as dishwashers, taxi drivers, and janitors (Rafidi, Howell, and Elkarra 1999). The arrival of a disproportionate number of low-income refugees and immigrants broadened Bay Area Arab communities in terms of class and religion; there were now larger numbers of Muslims and people living in poverty. Census data from 2000, although not fully representative of migration patterns, indicates that over 50 percent of the people originally from the Arab world in the Bay Area are foreign born, reflecting this increase in migration from the Arab region to the United States that culminated in the 1990s (Ahuja, Gupta, and Petsod 2004). A massive growth in Muslim-based institutions in the Bay Area came with these shifts. This came with a growing current in which Arabs who were Muslim increasingly organized their concepts of community, affiliation, and political participation in primarily religious (Muslim) terms.

The Late 1990s Revival

An expanding U.S. empire, growing anti-Arab racism, and massive demographic shifts in the diaspora sparked new collective articulations of Arabness in the Bay Area, new forms of activism, and new languages and strategies for conceptualizing community, belonging, and nonbelonging. Business owners faced engagements with racism that impacted their businesses after the Gulf War. In the late 1990s, two community activists, a Lebanese immigrant woman and a second-generation Palestinian man, spearheaded a campaign for Arab American business owners to gain minority status in the city of San Francisco. They contended that there is a tendency to view Arab business owners as violent and that this has limited their business opportunities.²⁴ They argued that while Arab American business dropped in 1992 during the Gulf War, they are not recognized as a minority and therefore cannot receive the support from the city that other minorities receive. Despite the lack of statistical data available about Arab Americans, they called for Arab American inclusion in the city's minority program for business owners. In 1998, the city and county of San Francisco became the first government entity in the United States to recognize Arab Americans as a legal minority class and therefore to afford them all the rights and benefits available to other minorities under the city's contracting ordinance (Rafidi, Howell, and Elkarra 1999).

An alternative response spearheaded by the Arab Culture Center leadership focused its attention on the impact of these new transnational conditions on recent immigrants living in poverty. Responding to the growth in the number of Arabs living in poverty in San Francisco in the early to mid-1990s, the president

of the ACC at the time told me she worked to change the politics of the center:

We spent the first month logging the kinds of phone calls and requests the administrator at our center was getting. Then we brought people from different parts of the community together and told them, here are the requests: an immigrant woman asked for help with an immigration case, another called about domestic violence, one person asked for a legal referral. I then said to people, “Do we want the ACC to continue to be only a meeting place or do we want to address the needs of the community?”

Aliya and her counterparts met with the mayor of San Francisco “to lobby as a community. We agreed that everyone would leave personal or small issues aside. Leave our gas stations and stores behind and go for the major thing here—we have issues.”

ACC then received a grant to conduct a community needs assessment study. As Aliya put it, “We then received funding for domestic violence, children, and youth, for educational and cultural programs, then for immigrant services and health services. Since then, the Arab Cultural Center became the Arab Cultural and Community Center.” The ACC became a cultural *and* social service organization that reached out to different neighborhoods where lower-income Arab immigrants from a range of countries lived “inside the city, in the inner city, even in public housing or low-income housing.” The ACC also developed a closer relationship with mosques in these neighborhoods, as

well as with the many communities of the Tenderloin.

This was surely not all that happened in the late 1990s. New institutions and social movements appeared: an Arab TV station, Arab broadcasters on local public radio stations, the Arab Film Festival of San Francisco, South West Asian Bay Area Queers, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (San Francisco Chapter), *Shilla* (an e-mail network of Bay Area Arab American professionals), *Aswat* (an Arabic music choir), and new religious institutions. As we will see in the pages to come, leftist politics was revived in new form along with a globally focused Muslim social-justice, anti-imperialist consciousness. The political vacuum of the early 1990s had been filled.

The revival of Arab American politics also came about in the context of the profound significance of California as a hotbed of immigrant and racial politics in the 1990s. California, the largest and most racially diverse state, had undergone a massive demographic shift between 1997 and 2000. By the 1990s, half of its population was immigrants (Gibbs and Bankhead 2001). Also in the 1990s, California became a battleground of racial politics with issues ranging from tensions over four highly racialized, politically explosive campaigns to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.²⁵ These events mobilized young people, primarily young people of color, into new multiracial political alliances and social movements (Maira and Shihade 2006). The increased reliance on the internet as a method for political organizing also contributed to this revival. Queer Arab, Arab feminist, Muslim, and leftist Arab political organizing of this period relied heavily on internet lists and websites. Several founders of the local chapter of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA SF), for instance, were actively involved in Cyber AWSA, an internet discussion

group including Arab feminists living in North America. Also, Southwest Asian and North African Bay Area Queers (SWANABAQ), the support group and discussion forum for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people, was founded in 2000. By 2002, they had 183 e-mail list members. The internet has deeply enhanced their efforts to build community and organize regular gatherings and parties (Jadallah 2003).

The changes of the mid- to late 1990s and through the turn of the twentieth century fundamentally altered concepts of Arabness. These changes were welcomed by some, and not by others. Many old-timers were now nearing retirement and were more interested in social and cultural forms of community building than political activism. Yet they were no longer waxing nostalgic about the 1950s. They were remembering the '70s and '80s as the golden years, before the momentous changes of the '90s. As the twentieth century became the twenty-first, the year 2000 brought the beginning of the second *intifada* and unprecedented Israeli violence against Palestinians and was followed by the horrific attacks of September 11 and their aftermath, transforming Arab American community politics once again.

The Arab Bay Area is in constant flux. The changes that take place are shaped by the constant interplay between U.S. empire and U.S. politics of race and culture, processes of immigration and displacement, and many local conditions specific to the San Francisco Bay Area. Many Arab immigrants who came to the Bay Area in the 1950s, like their elders before them, imagined themselves through the lens of the American dream. Many enjoyed a general proximity to whiteness and gained access to the resources required to open their own businesses. Over the years, expanding U.S. imperial ambitions in the Middle East, coupled

with changing global economics and migration patterns, radically altered their communities, the way many of them perceived themselves, and the way they imagined their future. Their daily experiences, the fears many internalized on the level of the psyche, and their hopes for their communities had a great deal to do with their increasing sense of belonging to a diaspora of empire. Black British cultural studies writers have theorized the diaspora of empire in terms of people, such as Algerians in France, who reside in countries that formerly colonized them. Kobena Mercer theorizes the diaspora of empire as a “reminder and a remainder of the nation’s historical past” (1994). Yet the Arab Bay Area, as it went from model minority to problem minority in the U.S. public eye, cannot be understood as a postcolonial diaspora wherein the diaspora moves into the seat of its former empire. Rather, the stories of Arabs in the United States becoming a diaspora of empire points to a moment in which the empire and its subjects exist in a transnational frame. The subjects of the current empire “over there” also reside “over here” within the empire itself.

Yet their stories reveal much more than the changing shape of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East or the way the U.S. empire constructs and portrays Arab diasporas. Their stories reveal how the logics of U.S. empire, as they take on local form in the everyday lives of Arab diasporas in the United States, are entangled in multiple forms of power such as the structures of religion, class, gender, sexuality, and immigration, as well as the changing realities of U.S. immigrant and racial politics. The stories of Arabs in the United States becoming a diaspora of empire take place in the context of the local and global realities of imperialism, displacement, and economic neoliberalism and

across a spectrum of accommodationist, civil rights, and anticolonial/anti-imperial politics.

The stories in this chapter ground the remaining chapters in the historical conditions that have shaped the Arab Bay Area between the 1950s and the turn of the twenty-first century. The remaining chapters are framed by two events that defined the decade of the 1990s for the people who are the focus of this book: the first Gulf War (1990-1991) and the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Punctuating this decade were also the U.S.-led sanctions on Iraq (beginning in 1990) and the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising). The 1990s was also a distinct moment in the San Francisco Bay Area and California. In the 1990s, California became one of a small but growing number of states with a nonwhite majority (Maharidge 1996). California also continued its legacy as a battleground for U.S. racial politics, a battleground that intensified during this decade. Those battle lines were drawn in four campaigns in the 1990s that positioned California as a “pace setter in the nation’s ambivalence towards immigrants and people of color” (Gibbs and Bankhead 2001). Racial-justice and immigrant-rights movements also peaked in the 1990s in California following the 1992 L.A. riots, a “flashpoint in which struggles of blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans converged” (Gibbs and Bankhead 2001).

Historically and politically situating an ethnography of Arab American life in the 1990s challenges what has become a disempowering habit of viewing 9/11 as an essential break or rupture, more properly understood as an unprecedented “state of crisis,” instead of understanding it properly as an extension if not an intensification of a post–Cold War U.S. expansion in the Middle East. Ann Stoler, for one, has called critical attention to

the persistence of this “imperial formation” that “thrive[d] on the production of exceptions [such as the idea of 9/11 as a state of crisis] and their uneven and changing proliferation” (2006). My focus on the 1990s similarly resists the entrapment of Arab American studies within the idea of an entirely new, exceptional, post–September 11 moment. This approach is grounded in the wide range of studies about the relationship between U.S. empire and Arab diasporas that Arab American studies scholars had been developing long before September 11, 2001 (Suleiman 1988; Abraham 1992; Saliba 1994; Majaj 2000).