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Perspectives on Violence and Reconciliation: Arab-American Women's Writing about September 11

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Reconciliation, Memory, United States, Arab-Americans, Women, Politican Violence

DISSIDEN**CES**

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*Perspectives on
Violence and Reconciliation:
Arab-American Women 's Writing
about September 11*

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The national tragedy and traumatic experience of the 9/11 events, represented by the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, marked an irreversible change in the life of the American nation and in the world. Not unlike other Americans, Arab Americans were confronted with the devastating consequences of this tragedy; however, unlike other Americans, they were

also victimized by the “war on terror” initiated by the Bush Administration. They found their civil liberties hijacked and were suddenly recast as a threat to the security of the American nation.

The repercussions of 9/11 altered the position and visibility of different communities of Arab origins in the United States. In fact, although American society occasionally acknowledged an Arab-American entity before 9/11, the community was largely, in Nadine Naber's words, “the 'invisible' racial/ethnic group” of the United States (37). This description echoes Arab-American writer and activist Joanna Kadi’s characterization of Arab Americans in 1994 as “the Most Invisible of the Invisibles” (xix). The problem of visibility this community suffered from in the United States is mainly due, as Louise Cainkar, Therese Saliba, Suad Joseph, and Lisa Suheir Majaj, have shown, to its ambiguous “racial formation” on the map of the United States.

The charges of collective responsibility were coupled with a need to know the Arab-American other, in an effort to unveil the complexities of the supposed hatred leading to 9/11. From the perspective of mainstream America, this knowledge was necessary because of the links Arab Americans have preserved with their country of origin and the Middle East. As Steven Salaita puts it,

Before 9/11 scholars examined Arab American invisibility or marginality--or whatever other term they employed to denote peripherality--but after 9/11 they were faced with a demand to transmit or translate their culture to mainstream Americans. The demand was matched by an insatiable curiosity about Arabs and Arab Americans; everybody from “everyday” Americans to high-ranking politicians wanted to know about the people who had irrevocably altered American life. (149)

The demand for cultural translation and mediation put specific pressures on Arab-American intellectuals, poets, novelists, and journalists, who realized the complexity of their role. Their efforts to answer such needs were marked by a repeated stress on the necessity of historicizing the events and dehomogenizing Arabness in order to challenge essentialist assumptions and classifications. Arab-American writers also attempted to throw light on the role of US foreign policy in antagonizing different groups without trying to project this approach as a way of justifying the attacks. Among these authors, Arab-American women have been extremely active in their fight to make their voices heard and to dehomogenize their communities as well as experiences. These women include authors such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hammad, Rabab Abdulhadi, Mohja Kahf, Elmaz Abinader, Dima Hilal, and D.H. Melhem who wrote essays, poems, and letters weaving their personal experiences and the pain of the American as well as Arab nations. Titles of their work on this topic include “Where is Home? Fragmented Lives, Border Crossings, and the Politics of Exile” (Rabab Abdulhadi), “first writing since” (Suheir Hammad), “america” (Dima Hilal), “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers” (Mohja Kahf), “Letter from Naomi Shihab Nye, Arab-American Poet: To Any Would-Be Terrorists” and the introduction of 19 Varieties of Gazelle (Naomi Shihab Nye), “Profile of an Arab Daughter” (Elmaz Abinader), and “September 11, 2001, World Trade Center, Aftermath” (Diana Helen Melhem, known as D.H. Melhem).

Probing these women’s literary production on 9/11, this article examines the complexities mediating the articulation of individual and collective identities in the context of violence and reconciliation. In broad terms, these women’s work could be described as revolving around the following themes: emphasis on intersections between Arab and American contexts, contextualization of the events while refusing any justification or rationalization of violence,

revision of the concept of home and homeland in light of the notion of the “enemy within,” questioning of the bases of national exclusions and boundaries, bringing individual and collective memories (Palestinian displacement, sickness of a parent, the Lebanese civil war) to bear on the framing of the 9/11 tragedy, and challenging Americans’ perceptions of Islam as a religion and a way of life. What the majority of the texts share, despite the unique style of each work, is an insistence on dehomogenizing the Arab as well as the Arab American in order to counter biased political discourses advocating the essential difference of the ethnic and Arab other. Authors in these texts thus negotiate possibilities of peace and reconciliation through their insistence on challenging Manichean logic and problematizing boundaries between America and its Others, while at the same time acknowledging and paying respect to the pain of the 9/11 victims and their families and friends.

In their reaction to the events of 9/11, these women stress the singularity of their location both in the United States and the Arab world. Throughout this process, they attempt to project alternative versions of both worlds and reframe them for audiences who are unaware of their multiple dimensions and polyvocality. Addressing herself not only to the “would-be terrorists” but also to audiences in the Arab world, Nye, for instance, debunks the assumption (made by Arab populations) that military actions perpetrated by the military against innocent civilians in the Arab world reflect the position of all Americans and their perception of their role in the world. As she puts it, “Many Americans do not want to kill any more innocent people anywhere in the world. We are extremely worried about military actions killing innocent people. We didn't like this in Iraq, we never liked it anywhere. We would like no more violence, from us as well as from you. HEAR US! We would like to stop the terrifying wheel of violence, just stop it, right on the road, and find something more creative to do to fix these huge problems we have” (par.

12). Condemning the use of violence, Nye also addresses American audiences whose association between Islam and violence was reinforced by the events of 9/11; she explains, “Reading about Islam since my grandmother died, I note the ‘tolerance’ that was ‘typical of Islam’ even in the old days. The Muslim leader Khalid ibn al-Walid signed a Jerusalem treaty which declared, ‘in the name of God, you have complete security for your churches which shall not be occupied by the Muslims or destroyed.’ It is the new millenium [sic] in which we should be even smarter than we used to be, right? But I think we have fallen behind.” (par. 11). Nye’s last statement about Islam links violence and fundamentalism perpetrated by Muslims with forms of regression and with treason to the spirit and teachings of Islam. Also worthy of note is the fact that in the letter, Nye positions herself as the would-be terrorists’ “distant Arab cousin” and “American neighbor” (par. 15). Her use of the pronoun “we” to simultaneously include herself in the Arab community and project her belonging to the American community adequately reflects the duality of her national and cultural allegiances.

From this position located at the intersection of the inside and outside of communities and belongings, she invites the “would-be terrorists” to learn how to differently read the other by looking at alternative signposts and questioning conveniently packaged truths about the United States. As she states in her introduction to 19 Varieties of Gazelle, this process reveals commonalities and paves the way for possible configurations of difference as a site of enrichment rather than a source of threat. As such, it highlights possibilities of bringing the unfamiliar closer home and reframes the subjectivity of the other in “homely” terms by making possible an understanding of the “much larger story.” Citing her mother and criticizing biased reporting, Nye adds, “If you knew the story, you would not jump to conclusions from what you see in the news” (par. 5).

Equally concerned with issues of voice and representation, Suheir Hammad registers her shock at the events and the effect of trauma in her poem “first writing since,” which was circulated online in the first weeks following 9/11. In this poem, Hammad paradoxically deplores the difficulty of recovering faith in the power of words to convey meaning and mediate representation. Her questioning of the role of poetry and words in the aftermath of 9/11 is conveyed in the following passage,

1. there have been no words.
i have not written one word.
no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.
no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.
not one word. (98)

The silence induced by shock and the inability to reconcile event and poetic expression are reinforced by the paradoxically “abstract reality” Hammad sees from her kitchen window, as represented by “sky where once was steel./smoke where once was flesh” (98). This effect is compounded by forms of fear “for [her] sister's life in a way never/before, and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us” (98). Stressing the possible repercussions of the events on Arab-American men, she implores the divine, “please god . . . don't let it be anyone/ who looks like my brothers” (98). Reflecting the complexity of her location, Hammad moves between two identities that she represents as intersecting, Palestinianness and New Yorker (particularly Brooklyn) identity, characterized by marginalization and struggle.

Hammad's portrayal of the events, however, refutes immediate rationalizations and explanations of violence, which taint her intimate right to grieve her friends and family. She says,

yet when people sent emails saying, this was bound to happen, lets
not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second i felt resentful.
hold up with that, cause i live here, these are my friends and fam,
and it could have been me in those buildings, and we're not bad
people, do not support america's bullying.

can i just have a half second to feel bad? (99-100)

Describing her emotional ambivalence at the emails linking 9/11 to US transgressions, Hammad, not unlike Nye, challenges the notion that America is a homogeneous entity and that all Americans are "bad people" who "support [their country's] bullying" (99-100). Her poem thus reflects the existence of another America, whose people are not fooled by the network air footage of hungry Palestinian children "bribed with/ sweets" and dancing to celebrate the 9/11 tragedy to allow for "correspondents [to] edit images" and practice "lazy and inaccurate/journalism" (100). By refusing to vilify Americans and Palestinians and by insisting on the contextualization of images as well as suffering, Hammad counters easy generalizations that facilitate a polarized perspective, based on the animosity between an American "Us" and an Arab "Them." In the same vein, Hammad refutes the violent narratives of revenge that some Americans, such as "ricardo on the radio", try to perpetrate against a collective Arab "them". These narratives rely on empty signifiers demonizing the other and allowing people such as Ricardo to assert that he "

will/ feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there. and [his]/friends feel the same way” (99).

Against such configurations demarcating the otherness of the Arab and his/her inhumanity, Mohja Kahf’s poem “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers” celebrates forms of continuity linking the Arab and American experiences and underlining the possibility of overcoming death in memory and history. By twinning the “jumping man and woman” of the World Trade Center and the “bride and groom of bombed Beirut,” this poem conveys the resilience of human beings across different times and spaces. It also brings together traumatic structures of experience to establish links between Lebanese and American cultures, reminding human beings “Of what we can never forget again:/That our lives have always been as fragile,/as dependent on each other, and as beautiful/as the flight of the woman and the man” (83). The reality that these events and their trauma unveiled is also connected to what Michael Rothberg calls “a vista of global suffering”. Discussing the repercussions of 9/11 on Americans, Rothberg states, “The attacks on New York and Washington . . . have awakened some people in the United States . . .to a vista of global suffering. They have put Americans in touch with parts of the world, such as Afghanistan, that had previously occupied the most restricted possible zone of public consciousness for the majority of citizens. For some, the attacks have also resonated with more intimate sufferings in ways that suggest how traumas can feed off of each other” (148). Poetically enacting this connection between forms of trauma in Lebanon (Lebanese Civil War) and the United States (9/11), the coupling effected by Kahf replaces the “one-nation” rhetoric which figured prominently in mainstream discourse on 9/11 with a “one world” rhetoric, effecting transnational linkages and mapping the events in relation to the world itself. As such, this coupling defies the rhetoric of the west and the rest. At another level, Kahf’s choice to open

her poem with the image of strangers holding hands to jump from one of the towers of the World Trade Center in order to meet their fate is significant in that it “brings out the collective anguish of witnessing the 9/11 experience” (Fadda-Conrey 63). Despite the tragic character of the events outlined, the poet calls for the transformation of this catastrophe into a source of reconciliation with selfhood and otherness, where healing becomes possible when human beings are reminded of the fragility of their existence. In this context, the gesture of the strangers holding hands becomes symbolic of continuity and evokes a chain of compassion linking people as they “walk the earth/carrying . . . [their] small supplies of grace” (83). As Carol Fadda-Conrey concludes, “this poem reveals how a devastating event like 9/11 can bring about reconciliation . . . and understanding between people, whether they be Americans, hyphenated Americans, or non-Americans; between strangers, even if it means taking a step, hand in hand, into a dangerous and even fatal unknown” (63).

Kahf’s challenge of exceptionalist renderings of suffering and trauma reverberates with D.H. Melhem’s perspective on 9/11 and her blurring of the boundaries between the inside and outside. Melhem’s poem, “September 11, 2001, World Trade Center, Aftermath”, straddles the personal and the collective to end with a call to curb human greed and restore the balance of the earth and nature in order to pave the way for healing and reconciliation. Speaking of the connection between 9/11 and other catastrophes, Melhem attempts to locate this tragedy in the context of human history. This gesture points towards continuity and sequence, as it rejects the idea that this event is isolated and refutes the presumed absence of narratives prior to 9/11. In this respect, Melhem’s poetic strategy attempts, to use Judith Butler’s words, “to start the story earlier.” As Butler states,

There is as well a narrative dimension to this explanatory framework. In the U.S., we start the story by invoking a first-person narrative point of view, and tell what happened on September 11th. And it is that date, and the unexpected and fully terrible experience of violence that propels the narrative. If someone tries to start the story earlier, there are only a few narrative options. (par. 4)

Butler continues to explain that these narratives are based on the isolation of “the individuals involved” which “absolves us [Americans] of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events” (par. 4). In a gesture which does not pretend to offer alternative narratives but rather points to the existence of an alternative narrative origin for the understanding of the events of September 11, Melhem situates these events in a chain of violence and locates them in world history, calling for forms of self-understanding which go beyond simplistic explanations. As she says using the voice of the earth addressing humans, “Confront the suffering/you mutually inflict” (122). Melhem does not attempt to minimize the importance of first person narratives and their limited, yet important, role in expressing trauma and its aftermath. However, she ultimately stresses the fact that reconciliation, understood in broad human terms, cannot preclude alternative forms of centering of the 9/11 narratives and the revision of the politics and poetics of their framing. From a poetic perspective, this recentering happens in a Saidean vein and evokes the need for a redefined version of humanism to inform one’s vision of the other as well as the self.

Melhem’s text, in fact, is informed by a humanist perspective on suffering and reconciliation, reflected in her refusal to adopt a Manichean logic and her insistence on the redefinition of boundaries and the reclamation of the voice of the silenced and unaccounted for. The version of humanism she adopts shows her understanding of the tensions underlying the

complexity of representing the national and the transnational as well as the private and the public. It is important to note that the version of humanism reflected her text is not the “traditional” one, based on Eurocentric and Imperialist models. Rather, this author’s use of humanism serves the revisionist purposes discussed by Edward Said. As he puts it, this form of humanism “is not a way of consolidating and affirming what ‘we’ have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritically codified certainties . . .” (28).

Melhem’s stress in this context is on locating this tragedy in a series of events marking human history and represented by the “the ceaseless sacrifice/of innocents.” (117). This form of sacrifice, as she explains, is tainted by people’s cry for vengeance, resulting in an oxymoronic second death of the dead and the living when “[a]nger rolls over grief and prayers./‘Vengeance!’ echoes from toxic caves./Like spores of a giant fungus,/rage races through the air./‘Vengeance’ the people cry./All die again.” (118, italics mine). Actual and figurative death results from the fact that willing revenge reproduces forms of violence that have been inflicted on the victims. As Melhem makes clear, such forms of revenge will not ease the pain of the victims’ parents, whose flowers, candles, and messages represent poignant attempts at memorializing the tragic events. Away from calls for revenge, Melhem projects the spirit of a different America, best embodied through the statements she finds “anointing” the George Washington pedestal, “‘Love One Another, Give Peace a Chance’” (118).

The representation of 9/11 and its aftermath in Melhem’s poem and in the writing of the other Arab-American women discussed attests to the diversity and complexity of their perspectives on violence and reconciliation. For some of these women such as Nye and Hammad, writing about 9/11 is deeply informed by their ambiguous location inside and outside both Arab and American

communities, a symptomatic manifestation of their hyphenated existence and responsibility as mediators and cultural translators. For other women writers such as Kahf and Melhem, the events of 9/11 become a catalyst for alternative forms of mapping of trauma to read it through a transnational lens or use it as a springboard to call for a revision of humans' attitudes via-a-vis each other and nature. For all these authors, however, the process of understanding 9/11 and its repercussions is marked by an insistence on challenging simplistic dichotomies opposing authentic and hyphenated Americans, Sameness and Difference, Insider and Outsider, and patriotic and unpatriotic citizens.

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