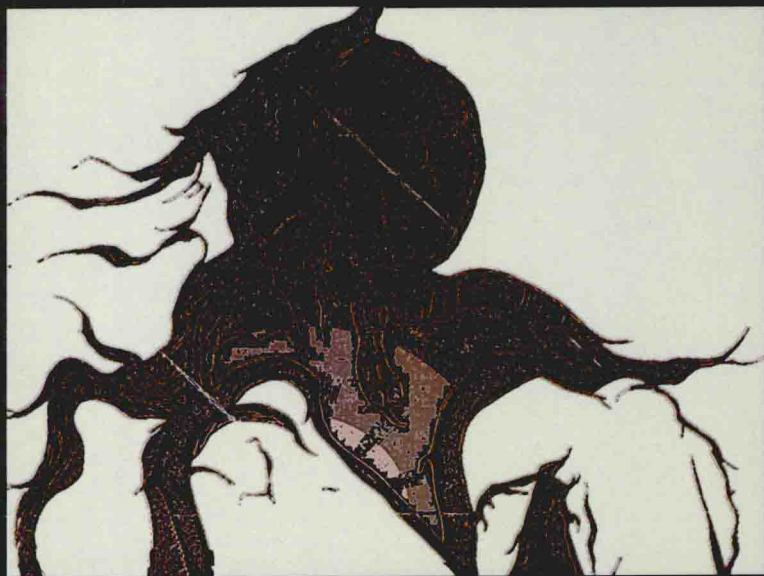


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& NADINE NABER



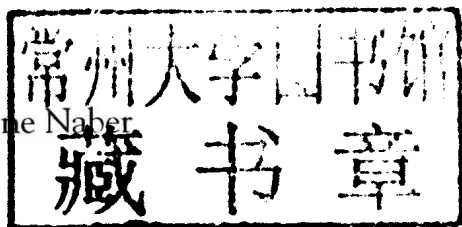
ARAB & ARAB AMERICAN *Feminisms*

GENDER, VIOLENCE, & BELONGING

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*Edited by Rabab Abdulhadi,
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Cover art by Christina Dennaoui. *Seeing Yourself in Fragments* is the final piece of the "Rendering the Arab Woman Visible: Constructing the Self in a Cultural Diaspora" series. The series addresses the complex relationship between culture, transnationalism, and positionality through the repetition of a central figure, an Arab Muslim woman, situated in various visual contexts, each differentiated by the use of cartographical imagery.

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Arab and Arab American Feminisms

An Introduction

RABAB ABDULHADI, EVELYN ALSULTANY, AND NADINE NABER

Episode 1: November 22, 2002

In Brooklyn, Yusra Awawdeh, a sixteen-year-old Arab American student at Franklin D. Roosevelt High School, wore a “Free Palestine” T-shirt, a Palestinian flag pin, and a *kufiya* (checkered Palestinian scarf) to school. A security guard removed her from class and took her to the dean’s office, where a female school safety officer patted her down and told her to remove her shoes and socks while the dean looked on. The guard told Yusra to empty her pockets and then checked to see if she was hiding anything around her abdomen. “I was really embarrassed,” said Yusra. “They made me feel like I was a terrorist with weapons.” After the search, the dean told Yusra that she could no longer wear her scarf or flag pin. “The only flag I can represent at the school is the American flag,” said Yusra, who was born and raised in Brooklyn. “I am American but I also want to represent my heritage. I felt like they were trying to take something away from me. They never said I broke any rules.”¹

Episode 2: June 16, 2008

At a Detroit rally for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign, volunteers removed two Arab American Muslim women from behind the stage where Obama was to hold his speech to prevent their appearance in photographs and television frames with the candidate. In a statement released to the *New York Times*, the two women, Shimaa Abdelfadeel and Hebba Aref, explained that the campaign volunteers told them that they were not allowed to sit in that area because of the *hijab* each wore on her head. Koussan, Hebba’s friend who also attended the rally, said that the Obama volunteer told her that it was “not good for her to be seen on TV or associated with Obama” because “of the political climate and what’s

going on in the world and with Muslim Americans.” Obama released a public apology following the incident, stating that “the actions of these volunteers were unacceptable and in no way reflect any policy of my campaign. I will continue to fight against discrimination against people of any religious group or background.”²

Episode 3: January 5, 2009

“Get the F*** out of the USA . . . NOW!!!” wrote a Mark Redlich, responding to a statement issued by California Scholars for Academic Freedom that denounced the Israeli war on Gaza. In one of several hate e-mails the group received, a Keith Weinman accused the Arab media of lying and referred to what he claimed to be a prototypical Arab woman who appeared repeatedly in different contexts: “One fat arab cow has appeared in 3 different photos bemoaning the loss of a home in Gaza, children in Baghdad, and a husband somewhere else and under three different names.”



Why do we begin with these three episodes, and what do they tell us about the subject of this book: gender, violence, and belonging and the relevance of these concepts to the lives of Arab and Arab American feminists in the United States today? Conventional analysis might suggest that the three episodes are isolated incidents that do not constitute a pattern especially now, in a country such as the United States that purports to be “postracial,” as evidenced by the election of a Black man as president. We insist that the three episodes are anything but isolated and that, in fact, they represent a pattern of rising xenophobia against Arabs and Muslims in the post–September 11, 2001, United States. Backlash against persons perceived to be “Arab or Muslim or both” has become an increasingly widespread consequence of the construction of the “Arab and Muslim” as an Other in the dominant “American” imaginary, revealing how long-term trends of racial exclusion intensify during moments of crisis and war.³ Episode 1 demonstrates how a dominant U.S. imperialist ideology inscribes meanings of anti-Americanness, foreignness, and treason upon certain symbols, such as the Palestinian flag and *kufiya*. New York City continually reinforces liberal multicultural notions of “diversity” in multiple ways within restaurants, theater productions, art installations, fashion exhibits, and so on. New York City is home to countless holidays, parades, and festivals—the Chinese New Year Celebration, St. Patrick’s Day Parade, Arab American Day Parade, Puerto Rican Day Parade, Lesbian and Gay Pride March, Sweden Day, African American Day Parade, West Indian–American Day Parade, and Pagan Pride Day. These events are not seen

as threats, or instruments meant to undermine the “Americanness” of the city or its patriotism. They are, rather, cited as proof of the diversity New York City embraces. Yusra’s case, however, reminds us of the clear limitations of multiculturalism when tested at this particular moment in history. Indeed, Yusra’s experience illuminates the tenuous sense of belonging for diasporic communities while the U.S. government wages war on their homelands. But if Yusra’s experience exemplifies tensions around nationness and belonging, how gender specific is it?

We part ways with conventional women’s studies approaches that attribute any victimization of women, regardless of the cause, to gender inequality, we argue that what happened to Yusra could have just as easily, if not more violently, happened to someone perceived to be an Arab male, a queer Arab, or a transgender Arab. This episode calls for an analysis of gender oppression in relationship to collective engagements with racial oppression.

In Episode 2, the removal of the two Arab American Muslim women from the backdrop of Obama’s rally is a variation on the long-standing vilification of Arabs and Muslims in the United States that has resurfaced with a vengeance in the post-9/11/2001 climate. Just as Zionist sympathizers have sought to equate Palestinian the flag and *kufiya* with “terrorist” symbols, so has Islamophobia marked the *hijab* as negative and threatening. Although we are troubled by this incident, we do not share its interpretation as evidence that Obama’s campaign actively sought to exclude Arabs and Muslims. We suggest that the subtext of the removal of the young women resonates with the persistent construction of Obama not as a qualified Black candidate but as a qualified candidate who happens to be Black. In other words, in removing the young women from the backdrop, Obama volunteers merely translated what they understood to be the message of the campaign, namely, that Arabs and Muslims were welcomed to the ranks of Obama’s diverse and broad-based campaign as long as they did not bring along telltale signs of who they were.⁴ This “postracial society” notion is problematic on two levels: First, it inaccurately equates the election of a Black president with the disappearance of the wide gap between whites and people of color in all facets of life. Second, if Arabs and Muslims (or even Obama himself) must normalize themselves into hegemonic whiteness as the price of acceptance into the American imaginary, while the same is not expected of dominant white ethnic groups, we would infer that Arabs and Muslims would be welcome as long as they accept remaining in their marginalized place and do not demand more prominence.⁵

Supporters of the Republican presidential nominee, John McCain, sought to discredit Obama by labeling him as an Arab or a Muslim. This action demonstrates how Arabness and Muslimness have been seen as irreconcilably different from and

opposed to anything remotely resembling normalized Americanness. It speaks to an “America” that might be ready for a president who “happens to be Black” but not for a “Black president” or a president who “might ‘happen to be Muslim.’” McCain’s defense of Obama by announcing that the latter was not an Arab but in fact a “decent family man,” and Obama’s thanks to McCain for defending him against such libel, further indicates the extent of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim consensus in U.S. public discourses today. Obama’s apology for his volunteers’ removing the young women, which demonstrates the candidate’s familiarity with the depth of anti-Muslim bigotry, is welcomed. His avoidance, however, of any mention of widespread anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry—a topic that was a consistent staple of his stump speech before he started his presidential campaign—underlines the heavy price he must have felt that he had to pay in an environment in which there is a relative ease with which anti-Arab racist statements and actions could be made without fear of retribution or accusations of hate speech.

In Episode 3, four scholars received e-mails that attacked them and challenged the political stance of their group, the California Scholars for Academic Freedom; offensive and foul language, however, was reserved for the one scholar whose last name sounded as if she were an Arab or a Muslim.⁶ These hate e-mails worked with and through racist and Orientalist U.S. discourses that dehumanize Arab women and further claim not only that Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights are fabricated but that they are not legitimate concerns for the U.S. population or the U.S. academy.

Each of the three episodes points to the intensification of ethnic profiling and rising xenophobia toward Arabs and Muslims in the post-9/11/2001 United States. Does this focus then mean that racial profiling against other communities of color has disappeared, that Arabs and Muslims are the most persecuted communities, or that we have a monopoly on oppression? We do not think so: we are not claiming an Arab or a Muslim exceptionality, but we do argue that historical and contextual factors related to the imperialist relationship between the United States and the Arab world have produced distinct forms of racism against and criminalization of individuals and communities perceived to be Arab or Muslim, especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Our analysis is based on a historically specific approach toward gendered racialization that assumes that racial logics are flexible and mutable to accommodate imperialist power in different temporal and spatial contexts.⁷

The three episodes above, then, reflect the historically specific logic underpinning *anti-Arab* and *anti-Muslim racism*. We locate this logic within the histories of U.S.-led military, political, and economic expansion in the Arab world and