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Arab American Theater and its Relations to the Public Sphere

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies

by

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September 2021

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August 2021

Arab American Theater and its Relations to the Public Sphere

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by

Hala Baki

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ABSTRACT

Arab American Theater and its Relations to the Public Sphere

by

Hala Baki

Contemporary Arab American theater makers have to contend with unreliably supportive institutions and biased narratives that are conditioned by xenophobic, especially anti-Arab and Islamophobic, socio-political contexts within the United States. These conditions of production have been understudied in academia, where scholarship has predominantly focused on the discursive response of Arab American theater to post-9/11 hostilities, cultural alienation, stereotyping, and transnational politics. However, this project seeks to expand the field by exploring the production processes behind these responses and to illuminate how the conditions of the public sphere instill systemic challenges to Arab American theater practice. It combines ethnographic and archival research with literary and material analysis to study three examples of theater making: play development and publication; stage production; and festival organization. Case studies include the works and experiences of playwright Yussef El Guindi; the practices of Golden Thread Productions, the leading American theater company dedicated to Middle Eastern plays; and the grassroots organization and stand-up comedy interventions of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. Through these cases, this project reveals the complex, tensile relationships between Arab American theater makers and their biased conditions of production. It shows how these relations manifest in

and through practical challenges to theater making. I use these findings to posit and support the *correlation dilemma theory*, which argues that the interdependence of multiple actors and conditioning factors creates systemic issues that inhibit sustainable Arab American cultural production on its own terms. In the process of mapping out this theory onto the various case studies, this project also reveals the strategies and practices used by contemporary theater makers to build discursive and institutional networks that support the unrestricted development of Arab American art, identity, and publics. These combined findings help Arab American artists and similarly marginalized theater makers navigate their complex relations to the US public sphere and its theater industry.

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I. Introduction: Arab American Theater and the Traps of Correlation

“Yes, we’ve achieved as individuals, achieved greatly in some cases, and we’ve built some terrific institutions and organizations, but as a community, I would argue that we’ve fallen short, failed to meet some critical benchmarks. For every time our country profiles us, or bombs an Arab city, or conflates our narratives through some national security lens, we are reminded of all we haven’t achieved as a community. And for that reason and countless more, I believe that Arab American artists are poised to lead our community. It is our artists who will emancipate us from cultural dystopia and political powerlessness.”

— Jamil Khoury, Founding Artistic Director of Silk Road Rising

Contemporary Arab American theater makers operate in a public sphere whose dominant discourses and institutions are unreliably supportive of their work, let alone their existence and belonging in the United States. In the post-9/11 decades of the twenty-first century, terrorism and war commanded headlines and imaginations across the US, and they were almost always associated with Islam and the Arab world. The US government enacted several domestic national security policies in the name of “war on terror,” the majority of which implicitly and explicitly targeted Arabs and Muslims (Cainkar 53). This ramp up of rhetoric and policy exacerbated anti-Arab sentiments in the public sphere, whose social media networks combined with traditional and new digital mass media to spread hateful ideology at unprecedented rates. The phenomenon helped fuel an increase in hate crimes against Arab and Arab-affiliated citizens and added to the social and political repression of the Arab American community (Wiggins). However, it also invigorated Arab American theater makers who found themselves thrust into the spotlight, compelled to speak for a misunderstood and marginalized public. They responded to their conditions by producing critical plays, countering biased artistic processes, and building networks of support across cultural borders.

As interest in Arab people and stories grew, mainstream American narratives tried to embrace more nuanced depictions of Arabs. Yet media scholar Evelyn Alsultany claims that despite increasing representations of “good” Arabs in television and film, negative stereotypes continued to dominate the media landscape and public imagination. She further argues that “simplified complex representations” of Arabs that tried to depict them in a more positive light failed to create three-dimensional portrayals and instead reinforced the reductive binaries of Good/Bad and Us/Them (Alsultany). The boiled down message of these representations was that “good” Arabs were with “us” and “bad” Arabs were against “us” and with the terrorists. Despite the discursive and institutional efforts at change, the simplistic underlying biases remained firmly ingrained in popular narratives and production processes.

These biases affect American theater practices as well, where well-established companies continue to steer clear of developing and producing nuanced Arab American works. This leaves their production up to smaller non-profit companies that specialize in work by Middle Eastern artists, such as Silk Road Rising in Chicago, Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco, Noor Theatre in New York, and New Arab American Theater Works in Minneapolis. According to Silk Road Rising artistic director Jamil Khoury, most mainstream theater companies cite perceived— often imagined— cultural and economic barriers as reasons for their disengagement with Arab subjects and stories (94-95). They sometimes claim that audiences cannot relate to Arab American experiences, or that Arab American plays are too financially risky to produce, thereby rendering this body of work unproducible. Playwright Yussef El Guindi similarly characterizes this bias and adds that Arab American theater often “gets dismissed as social activism rather than being judged on its artistic merits. The very act of rendering a group of people usually depicted negatively in

a three-dimensional way is deemed a political act,” making Arab American theater inherently too controversial to produce (“Arab and Muslims Onstage”).

Moreover, Khoury asserts that the proliferation of anti-Arab prejudice in the public sphere has forced Arab American theater artists into “an intentionally humanizing aesthetic” born of the need to “react and respond” to these changing socio-political conditions. “This need [to defend Arabness], demanded externally and experienced instinctively,” he explains, “consumes us as Arab American theatre artists. It begets fodder for artistic creation and spurs representation that wouldn't otherwise exist” (Khoury 90). In other words, the current socio-political climate in the US propels Arab American theater production that (sub)consciously tries to counter the widespread preconceptions and negative portrayals of Arabness by being unapologetically subversive or (self-)critical.

Therefore, even though Arab American theater as a field has expanded in response to its contexts, it remains artistically constrained by obstructive forces. The biased dominant narratives and institutional practices of the theater industry straightjacket the genre’s potential. In order to challenge and dismantle this systemic issue, we have to first identify it and understand it. This study takes the first step toward that goal. In this chapter and the following case studies, I define the complex relationships between Arab American theater makers and their various conditions of production. I argue that the interdependence of these factors creates *correlation dilemmas* for Arab American theater makers and inhibits sustainable cultural production on their own terms. I expand on and illustrate this new concept while also revealing how developments in the field have begun providing the infrastructure and strategies needed to sustain creative independence and self-representation in Arab American theater.

Key Terms and Contexts

Before delving into my exploration, I want to define certain terms and contexts that I use in this research. First, the term *Arab American* in this study refers to any self-identifying member of American society who claims roots in the Arab world, that is the twenty-two Arabic-speaking countries of Southwest Asia and Africa sharing cultural and historical ties. Arabs have been immigrating to the US since the 1880s, and today, an estimated 3.7 million Americans have Arab ancestry according to the Arab American Institute (“Demographics”). Many of these early immigrants arrived to the US by way of Europe and Ellis Island, the gateway that welcomed most migrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and helped globalize New York City, making it a cultural capital of the world. But many others, as historian Sarah Gualtieri demonstrates in her book *Arab Routes*, settled in South and Central America before joining other economic migrants headed north for the US. Regardless of the path they took, most Arab immigrants in the US maintained social and economic ties to their homelands by way of family connections, remittances, and even long-distance political activism (Farenthold; Nagel and Staeheli). These truly global journeys—beginning predominantly in modern day Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Iraq—helped establish a diverse and transnational Arab American population. Thus, this diaspora came to encompass various geographic, religious, linguistic, and socio-economic characteristics.

This plurality has at times challenged definitions of Arab identity in the US and at other times been erased by them. Early immigrants from *bilad al-Sham* (بلاد الشام), “the lands of Syria,” or Greater Syria) in the Eastern Mediterranean sought the economic and socio-political benefits of whiteness in the early twentieth century by fighting for that ethnic designation in US courts. They often cited Christianity and their roots in the Holy Land in their legal arguments for inclusion. This was a strategic attempt to distance Arab Americans from other non-European immigrant groups at a time of heightened US nativism in the

context of intensifying globalization. Anti-Asian immigration policies of this period, such as the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act and the Immigration Act of 1924, targeted “undesirable” migrants from the Global South for exclusion based on perceived racial inferiority (Ngai). Therefore, highlighting Semitic roots in the Mediterranean was an attempt to distance Arab Americans from their Asian geographic origin and align them with Jewish European migrants who had relatively more success assimilating into the US within existing racial and global political frameworks.

Arab Americans succeeded in these early legal efforts, temporarily consolidating and whitewashing Arab identity in the process. However, this approach became complicated by increased Arab immigration in the 1920s and 30s from areas outside of *bilad al-Sham*, which introduced a greater number of Muslims and a phenotypic diversity that troubled the whiteness that earlier immigrants sought within US racial frameworks. The growing diversity of the Arab American population paradoxically “helped refine the legal arguments that repeatedly called into question the suitability of non-Europeans to ‘become American’” (Gualtieri 48). It therefore further entrenched the Otherness of Arab Americans and doubts of their belonging within US society, the legacies of which continue to haunt the group today.

In the 1960s and 70s, another wave of pan-Arab immigration coupled with growing Arab American activism further troubled this ethnic label and the group’s inclusion. Arab immigrants increasingly sought the US to escape political and economic instability in their postcolonial homelands. Meanwhile, Arab Americans began politically mobilizing in response to biased US-Mideast policies, foreign interventions that undermined Arab independence, and a rise in anti-Arab narratives in the US and its spheres of influence, which resulted mainly from the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and its aftermath. Activist groups

rallied to affect change both in the Arab world and in the US, undoubtedly invigorated by the zeitgeist of the American civil rights era as well as liberation and anti-war movements resisting US military incursions in Southeast Asia, the Americas, and the Middle East. These global historical conditions drove disparate Arab populations to seek each other out and build supportive social and political networks in the US diaspora.

Yet sociologist Gary David claims that these attempts revealed the challenges of consolidating a singular Arab American identity that encompasses national and religious plurality. He argues that, as Asian Americans did before them, Arab Americans resorted to creating a “strategic political community” in order to help them garner resources and influence within US society (David 840). Thus, David suggests that the shared ethnic label of “Arab American” should be seen as a socially constructed and politically effective designation that is legitimized through community institutions (852). The most salient of these institutions were religious and cultural organizations that contributed to the social construction of a pan-Arab American identity.

This brief history reveals only part of the complexity of the “Arab American” label, which is at once singular and plural. There are other factors to consider in addition to the above, including inter-generational and intra-communal marginalization, questions of “authenticity,” and the politics of transnational ethno-political activism. A full exploration of these dimensions is beyond the scope of this work. However, for the purposes of this study, I must acknowledge that there are inevitable pitfalls in any discussion of Arab American identity and people, including this one. The label is one that is constantly being re-negotiated and re-conceived, both at the individual and collective level and particularly in the face of changing socio-political contexts such as those seen in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Thus, this study tries to nuance its conception of Arab American theater and artist

communities as much as possible while, at the risk of further complicating matters, drawing connections to affiliated non-Arab MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) and Muslim communities. These diverse communities are drawn together by similar cultural histories and values as well as religious affinity or influence stemming from their origins in the Islamic world. By defining them as “affiliated” publics, I am careful not to equate these various groups with one another. Such an equivalency would only support common and problematic connotations within US discourses, such as that of “Arab” and “Muslim”, as well as exacerbate the stereotypical application of the colonial terms “Middle East” or “Middle Eastern” to refer to disparate regions and peoples from North Africa to South Asia. This study will utilize all of the above terms even as it questions their stability, accuracy, and colonial legacies. In some cases, it will show how contemporary theater makers reclaim and redefine them through their artistic practice.

As I apply these complex terms, I filter them through the frame of *diaspora* which helps analyze the nuances of Arab American identity and theater within their contexts. I consider Arab American artists diasporic regardless of their specific immigration backgrounds or statuses because, as the historical examples above show, their lived experience is one of dislocation and ongoing social (re)formation. As scholars in the field of diaspora studies would suggest, their designation as “diasporic” thus represents more of a stance or process of becoming than an ethno-demographic category (Brubaker; Butler). Arab American artists embody — and their work betrays— a diasporic consciousness defined by cultural hybridity and tensile relationality, including a feeling of not fully belonging in either their home or host society (Safran; Tölölyan). This internalized tension was exacerbated in the early twenty-first century by their vilification in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which added to existing animosity toward Arab subjects resulting from a long history of Orientalism and

American affairs in the Arab world (Salaita). Consequently, this phenomenon complicated the relationship between diasporic Arab American theater artists and their support structures.

The structures I will discuss are twofold: the discursive and the institutional. I use the term *discourse* to refer to the process of information circulation that creates systems of knowledge production. My understanding of the term stems from Foucauldian theory which frames it as a practice that systematically creates the subjects and institutions of which it speaks. It is an act of formulation connecting words and things through a self-referential circuit of statements (Foucault). This concept has been the foundation of a variety of critical studies on the relation between knowledge and power, especially in the context of cultural, political, and economic hegemony.

However, this research more specifically builds on Edward Said's theoretical legacy, which articulates the role of discourse in the development of a biased Western stance towards non-Western peoples. His critiques in *Orientalism* (1979) and its sequel *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) demonstrate the deeply rooted Euro-American tradition of disparaging and suppressing Arabs and Muslims in particular. Said illustrates how this is done through self-referencing circuits of narration spread via mass media, such as novels, academic journals, newspapers, and products of popular culture. They support the idea— which becomes unquestioned knowledge— that Arabs and Muslims are dangerous, exotic, or in need of civilizing.

Similarly, groundbreaking film scholar Jack Shaheen shows the negative effect of discursive repetition in the imagery and rhetoric of the US film industry. In his books *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (2008), Shaheen surveys over one thousand films spanning an entire century that perpetuate stereotypes and clichés about Arabs and Muslims. He argues that such vilifying depictions deeply influence

public opinion, not only because they cement bias through reiteration but also due to the medium's illusion of authenticity. Film's realism blurs the line between reel Arabs and real Arabs. Thus, thanks also to its ubiquity and accessibility to the masses, the medium very effectively shapes dominant public perceptions and discourses using anti-Arab mythology.

This phenomenon consequently affects the conditions that shape and contextualize Arab American theater production. Unsupportive narratives that spread fear or misinformation in the public sphere create discursive structures that spur the "react and respond" stance among Arab American artists. Meanwhile, supportive narratives that embrace nuanced representation and expression help create opportunities for artists to determine their own social formation and representations. Current discursive trends lean towards the first category and pressure theater makers— often for the sake of their livelihoods— to engage with dominant (pre)conceptions of Arabness rather than disrupt or displace them with more accurate ones.

Nonetheless, supportive and unsupportive discursive structures often work in tandem to articulate Arab American theatrical productions. For instance, intensified post-9/11 discourses tying Arabs and Muslims with terrorism generated counter-discourses denouncing the mass application of guilt by association, especially in light of US government targeting of these communities (American Civil Liberties Union). These conversations inspired some Arab American playwrights to explicitly tackle the topic, such as Yussef El Guindi did with *Back of the Throat* (2005) and *Language Rooms* (2010). These plays, which premiered within a decade of the 9/11 attacks, explore the government profiling and interrogation of Arab Americans while pushing back against the repressive narratives of guilt reinforced by these practices. They engage critical counter-narratives refuting that imposition while also raising questions about the unjust practices that make second-class citizens out of diasporic

Arabs and affiliated groups in the US. These plays continue to be produced and relevant today thanks to the ongoing dialectic of debates that either vilify or exonerate these groups.

Discursive structures create and scaffold into *institutions*, which in this exploration refers to the networked systems of operation that manifest in both formal and informal organizations. These bodies are sites at which ideology gets processed, simultaneously being created, enforced, and circulated through patterns of production. For example, scholars have long addressed the methodic institutionalization of race and racism in American society, especially through governing bodies (Gualtieri; Omi and Winant; Jamal and Naber). One need only look at any sample of government surveys or legal applications to see how checkboxes figuratively categorize us into limited understandings of our social identities (Cainkar). Such phenomena concretize imagined communities of difference and normalize the divisions between dominant and marginal groups that legitimize racist discrimination, bias, and xenophobia within our society.

Likewise, the American theater institution and its organizational bodies (companies, professional networks, unions, etc.) mutually shape one another as well as the industry's culture. They establish patterns of material and cultural production that are informed by dominant discourses and tend to box minoritarian expressions into fixed parameters of social formation. However, they also promote agency and unrestricted self-representation among minority groups by helping artists generate their own narratives. For example, The Lark Play Development Center in New York explicitly highlights equity, diversity, and progressive discourse in its mission. While it serves a general public, several of its programs target playwrights from underrepresented communities. The center has helped develop numerous works by artists of color— including Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* and David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish*— and currently runs three programs that specifically support Middle Eastern

work. They include the Middle East America initiative, a partnership with Silk Road Rising and Golden Thread Productions aimed at creating a pipeline for new plays by Middle Eastern American artists, with “Middle Eastern” conceived broadly (The Lark). Such practices help institutionalize the values of diversity and inclusion in US theater.

Organizations like The Lark combat the systemic exclusion of marginalized artists and their narratives by providing the material infrastructure and institutional support that helps build a body of work and bring it to the forefront of the industry.

In contrast, I consider theater organizations that choose to reproduce marketable stereotypes and harmful dominant narratives, or repress marginalized voices and perspectives, to be unsupportive of minoritarian artists. Two illustrations come to mind: the mainstream popularity of Ayad Akhtar’s *Disgraced* in the 2015-2016 US theater season, and the indefinite postponement (read: cancellation) of the slated New York Theater Workshop (NYTW) production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* in 2006. In the first example, Theatre Communications Group declared *Disgraced* to be the most produced play in the US according to their annual survey of regional theaters (Tran). The play garnered massive success despite stirring controversy with its depiction of a self-hating and violent Muslim character, one that the playwright himself admits can be problematic (Younis). However, the play’s popularity revealed the potentially harmful effects of the US theater institution’s capitalist drive. It showed how mainstream companies can contribute to the marginalization of Muslim and Muslim-affiliated minorities by amplifying representations that peddle dominant Islamophobic narratives in order to garner profits.

Meanwhile, in the second example, NYTW’s artistic director James Nicola faced accusations of censorship after pulling the plug on *My Name is Rachel Corrie* due to its critical take on the Israeli occupation in Gaza (Hernández; McKinley). He justified the

decision by stating that the play, which depicts an American activist's struggle against and death at the hands of the Israeli occupation, was too controversial to produce in a way "where the art could be heard independent of the political issues associated with it" (Hernández). This was far from being an isolated situation. Taken with similar controversies — such as those surrounding John Adams' opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) and Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* (2009)— these instances suggest that US theater companies avoid politically provocative art that specifically explores the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, challenges dominant pro-Israeli narratives, or appears to humanize or sympathize with Palestinian ones (Cooper; Kushner and Solomon). As a result, they suppress counter-discourse by excluding underrepresented voices from their repertoires rather than allowing them to create meaningful dialogue despite any potential controversy.

These illustrations paint a picture of US theater as a neoliberal institution competing in free-market capitalism at the expense of Arabs, Muslims, and affiliate groups who are pawns in the game. On the one hand, we have seen how the system clearly supports the hegemonic status quo through practices that exclude marginalized Arab American artists and narratives specifically. Companies avoid challenging dominant narratives about these communities while opting to support what is sure to be popular and profitable. On the other hand, while the system may try to support these underrepresented artists by creating specialized development programs for them, it also indirectly reinforces the peripheral status of Arab Americans and their narratives in doing so. It contributes to their tokenization as minorities whose inclusion or elevation serves only to make the host organization more "diverse." In addition, as El Guindi points out, US theater's aversion to politics also prevents it from fully embracing Arabs, Muslims, and affiliated groups in its fold thanks to their implicit politicization. "'Diversity' as it's spun today has been smoothed over to appeal to the greatest

number of people, with the least amount of friction. Commonalities are sought, and differences are ignored or diminished. It's a way to bring people out of politics and into a gentrified history" (El Guindi 2019, 317). Therefore, because the personal is tangibly and inevitably political in the lived experience of many (if not most) diasporic Arabs, theater companies automatically see them as controversial and risky subjects to engage with.

All of this results in the prevalence of marketable reductive representations that end up reinforcing anti-Arab and Islamophobic public opinion. Hence the barrage of subtle and not-so-subtle stereotypes we continue to see on stage, everything from Aladdin to would-be or actual terrorists. These trends confirm Khoury's claims that bias in the theater industry inhibits Arab American artistic production on its own terms. His claims have been echoed by leading American artists, producers, and scholars of MENA descent, who assert that their systemic marginalization requires a collective and organized response (Ibrahim). To confront these interlocking systems, theater makers — and their advocates— need to articulate their relation to the institution and its narratives in order to strategically build their own support structures and break their dependence on biased systems.

Relational Entanglements and the Dilemmas of Interdependence

Discourses and their related institutions together form the pillars of hegemony in the public sphere by mutually shaping culture and society through acts of (hyper)circulation. We have seen how pervasive anti-Arab discourses generate narrow conceptions of Arabness that limit representation in various cultural media. We have also seen how the theater institution and its organizations reinforce those ideas through their practices. Together, these pillars create conditions that dictate Arab American (in)visibility, police artistic expression, and narrowly mediate audience engagement with Arab American theater.

Working within these discursive and institutional webs draws Arab American artists into a mutually dependent relation with their conditions. In other words, they depend on the forces that oftentimes work against them to be seen, produced, and demanded by an engaged audience. As the earlier evidence demonstrates, this dynamic pressures artists— both directly and indirectly— to confirm existing bias and conform to the conditions of production. It limits them to “reacting and responding” to their contexts without the likelihood of making a lasting institutional impact on the industry’s practices. Meanwhile, the theater institution itself depends on Arab American artists to brand itself as “diverse” and inclusive, especially in the era of twenty-first century anti-Arab bias and Islamophobia. It supports marginalized subjects and their stories only to the extent allowed by market demands and the tolerance of the preconditioned theatrical public.

Therefore, Arab American theater makers who partake in the US theater industry inevitably contribute to and sustain the system that represses their work due to this *de facto* interdependence. I argue that this system of entanglement creates *correlation dilemmas* for Arab American theater makers, whose cultural production must contend with their multiple and intersecting relations to their biased conditions. In every creative attempt, the primary threads of artist, audience, and theater organization weave with a multitude of others —such as institutional norms, popular perceptions, and market demands— all of which generate tension within and between these factors. The process of Arab American theater production is thus shaped by these tensile interactions. Ideally, if we may indulge the metaphor further, this weaving process would create a balanced relationship between all of its threads resulting in a rich tapestry that is greater than the sum of its parts. Each strand would maintain its integrity and uncoerced contribution to the whole without being frayed or misshapen by the pull of other forces. However, in reality, these relations are seldom balanced for Arab

American theater makers who are driven to self-compromise by the pressures of their conditions.

For example, let us take the “react and respond” scenario discussed earlier. When the market demands for dominant narratives or stereotypes are great, their influence forces interdependent factors— such as the production company, the artist, the play-in-development, and so on— to alter their message or mission in a production process.

Institutional bodies feel pressure to comply with popular opinion and trends for the sake of organizational and financial stability. Artists feel a similar urge to “react and respond” to those demands for the sake of their artistic identity and livelihood. The products of their work are therefore correlated to and shaped by these dependencies, and the presence of bias in any part of that web ultimately causes dilemmas for Arab American theater makers. The greater the demands of these conditioning forces, the more acutely compromised the marginalized theater makers and products become.

Within the existing system, this correlation dilemma poses a serious challenge to the artistic self-determination and sustainability of Arab American theater as a field. For instance, how are theater makers supposed to choose or negotiate between disrupting the status quo and sustaining their livelihoods? How are they to navigate the “react and respond” stance and resist its imposed limits at the same time? How are they to leverage their conditions to their advantage without contributing to their own marginalization? These dilemmas foreground the importance of studying in more detail the systems at work in theater production in order to bolster the support structures for marginalized artistic practices.

However, Arab American theater scholarship has thus far focused predominantly on historiography and dramatic criticism, with an emphasis on identity and representational

politics. Michael Malek Najjar's foundational work, *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: a Critical Study from 1908 to the Present* (2015), argues that Arab American artists restage and recast their identity through their art as a way of resisting negative stereotypes. Najjar assesses that plays, stand-up comedy, films, and solo performances sometimes fruitfully disrupt and other times unintentionally reify stereotypes. Though he does not unpack the question of support structures in detail, he concludes that the greatest obstacles to Arab American performing arts is the lack of support from the community itself (which is discouraged by the lack of visible representation) as well as limited opportunities in the mainstream that force competition with other minority groups.

Existing scholarship also skirts local systems analysis by focusing on Arab American theater's discursive relation to diasporic subjectivity and transnationalism. For example, artist-scholar Laila Farah's performative essay "Dancing on the Hyphen: Performing Diasporic Subjectivity" (2005) portrays and challenges racial constructions of Arab Americans by demonstrating their complex intersectionality and transnationality. Likewise, books by Somaya Samy Sabry and Carol Fadda-Conrey complicate ideas of intercultural negotiation and citizenship. Sabry's *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of the Arabian Nights* (2011) analyzes Arab American women's writing and performance, arguing that they utilize "Shahrazadian" orality to "essentialize racism and how it functions, instead of essentializing race" (139). The author suggests that by resituating their narratives within the non-Western oral tradition, these diasporic artists resist their cultural fixation according to stereotypes of the "silent willing victim" and perform their intersectionality in a way that empowers them. Meanwhile, Fadda-Conrey's *Contemporary Arab American Literature: Transnational Configurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (2014) explores how Arab American dramas attempt to

destabilize the homogenization of cultural identity and uplift transnational belonging, thereby creating a space for reformulating hegemonic understandings of US citizenship. The author emphasizes that the contemporary trend in transnational reimaginings is less concerned with assimilation or nostalgia and more geared toward interrogating the constructions of Arab American identity through a diasporic lens.

Additionally, many scholars tend to emphasize 9/11 as a turning point for Arab American theater, both in the conceptual and practical sense. Dalia Basiouny, one of the earliest scholars to do so, highlights how 9/11 drove artists to intentionally seek each other out and “reclaim their Arabness” through unprecedented collective work (145). Her chapter “Descent as Dissent: Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11” (2012) uses case studies of playwrights Rania Khalil and Laura Shamas to argue that post-9/11 drama serves both to resist invisibility and to provide a glimpse of the new Arab American reality to non-Arab American audiences. The theme of resistance in response to the aftermath of 9/11 can also be seen in the work of Sarah Giese, who’s chapter “‘This is my country too, you know!’: Intercultural Encounters in Post-9/11 Arab American Drama” (2016) argues that playwrights challenge the ways Arab American identities are mediated, narrated and constructed. Giese points out that the post-9/11 theater movement emerged as a response to hypervisibility but did not constitute a homogenous group or common agenda (170). Instead, it was unified by a discursive tactic of “strategic essentializing” to challenge stereotypes and appeal to non-Arab American audiences to reconsider their prejudices (Giese 182). Similarly, Roaa Ali writes about the pivotal effect of the 9/11 era on Arab stereotypes and, consequently, Arab American theater’s treatment of them. Her article “In Response to Narratives of Stereotypes: Arab American Playwrights Reclaim and Fortify Arab American Representation” (2017) notes how post-9/11 narratives of collective blame and terrorism elicited responses from

artists that forced them to contend with their conceptual trappings on individual and social levels (Ali 84). Through an analysis of plays by Sam Younis and Yussef El Guindi, she shows how Arab American artists internalize their conditions and use their dramas to reclaim agency within discriminatory systems.

While this valuable scholarship models and encourages reflection on the contexts that shape Arab American theater, it overwhelmingly focuses on the discursive dimension without analyzing actual theatrical practices. Some scholars cite issues relating to the institutional conditions of production as supporting evidence for arguments about the increase in ethnic consciousness and artistic resistance to bias (Arida; Ali; Giese; Najjar; Sabry). For instance, Ali's textual analysis indirectly highlights how practices within the US government and entertainment industry force Arab American artists to comply with dominant discourses. Meanwhile, Geise's study implicitly raises awareness of institutional and organizational issues through her analysis of playwriting strategies. Only Najjar has more recently delved into the explicit topic of theatrical practice with his chapter "Casting Middle Eastern American Theater" (2019), where he explores specific cultural, academic, and professional obstacles to the full inclusion of MENA actors in American theater. Needless to say, the field of theater studies lacks research that specifically analyzes the practical challenges faced by Arab American theater makers. Therefore, it cannot effectively question and dismantle what it has yet to define and understand.

Scholarship needs to explicitly interrogate the correlation of actual theatrical practices to the discursive or institutional conditions that shape them in order to better support and sustain the Arab American theater movement. This will help theater makers— not to mention advocates, critics and policy makers— collectively build a more supportive theatrical ecosystem not just for Arab Americans but also for similarly marginalized groups

in the industry. The research presented here takes one step in the direction of defining and challenging these systemic issues. It introduces the concept of the *correlation dilemma* and uncovers its impact on various production processes within Arab American theater. By illustrating the dilemma's manifestations in playwriting, stage production, and festival organization, it highlights the pitfalls of the contemporary Arab American theater movement as well as strategies that theater makers can (and do) utilize to mitigate the dilemma's challenges.

The first case study looks at how plays by Yussef El Guindi dramatize the relation of industry practices, dominant narratives, and Arab American cultural expression. *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* (2019) and *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2015) simultaneously demonstrate and critique correlation dilemmas. They invite audiences to consider the practical negotiations that Arab American artists are forced to make between disrupting and conforming to expectations. By exposing biased processes, these plays resist repressive systems and assert the need for uncompromised Arab American self-expression in the culture industry.

The next chapter explores the dilemma's manifestation in the practices of Golden Thread Productions, the oldest theater company in the US solely dedicated to works by and about the Middle East. It utilizes participant observation and interviews with company members, which I conducted while I served as assistant director on the world premiere of *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War* (2018) by playwright Mona Mansour. The chapter examines how companies within the US theater institution can use culturally competent production practices to leverage the relation between Arab American theater makers and their conditions, thus building the necessary support structures for sustaining the field.

The final chapter examines the New York Arab American Comedy Festival as a site for popular performance that centers, negotiates, and celebrates plural Arab American identities while resisting the limitations of correlation dilemmas. It analyzes the festival's development and impact through the lenses of eventification and collaboration, using digital archives as well as ethnographic observations and interviews. This study suggests that the ritualization of the festival as well as the creation of grassroots, organizational networks offer a model for resisting (even altogether circumventing) unsupportive infrastructures. They ensure that Arab American performance counters its dilemmas by maintaining its own cultural presence in the public sphere and disrupting dominant narratives through the accessible popular genre of stand-up comedy.

This research concludes by asking what the future of the field could look like and what needs to be done to achieve long-term sustainability for Arab American theater practice. It calls on theater makers to create dedicated infrastructures that can help this movement assert and center itself in the US theater, build its own means of production, and counter the narratives and practices that repress its cultural agency. Such institutional and discursive support would give contemporary Arab American theater a greater degree of independence from the correlation dilemma that currently limits its potential. It can allow the movement to sustainably develop beyond its "react and respond" stance. Perhaps by branching in more inventive and progressive directions, Arab American theater can change dominant perspectives on Arabness in the United States and help make theater a more inclusive social institution in the process.

II. Writing Arabs: The Negotiations of Yussef El Guindi

“There’s been a deep indifference to stories by and about Arabs and Arab Americans, just startling. There’s no cultural framework to receive those stories, and in the history of this country, the first frame is always a negative one. Arab Americans have become a problem race. Your integration becomes a painful birth into the mainstream.”

— Yussef El Guindi, Playwright

Since the late nineteenth century, Arab American artists and intellectuals have built a canon of literary work that grapples with their particular diasporic experience. Like many immigrant groups before and after them, they used cultural expression to explore their sense of Otherness and construct a collective identity within American society. According to theater scholar Michael Malek Najjar, the earliest known Arab American drama titled *Andromak* was performed in New York in 1896. The years following this production saw the flourishing of *al-mahjar* (المهجر, the name for the Arab diaspora) literary movement led by immigrants from Greater Syria (بلاد الشام), predominantly from modern day Syria and Lebanon. In the United States, this movement was driven by an influx of immigration between 1890 and the 1930s as well as the establishment of several independent Arab American newspapers starting in 1892 (Najjar, *Arab American Drama* 71). It included such notable writers as Kahlil Gibran (جبران خليل جبران), Ameen Rihani (أمين الريحاني), and Mikhail Naimy (ميخائيل نعيمة), who were central figures of the Pen League (الرابطة القلمية), the first Arab American literary society established in 1915. Though primarily known as novelists and poets, these authors also wrote plays that captured their diasporic experiences and were “resistant” to various aspects of their home and host cultures. Najjar claims that these plays were “foundational works that defined how Arab Americans would create dramatic literature after being influenced by life and study in Europe and the United States” (Najjar, *Arab American Drama* 72).

Contemporary twenty-first century Arab American playwriting certainly carries the legacy of that “resistant” literary stance in the form of social and political critique. We’ve seen from the earlier chapter how scholars have highlighted this stance — which is a response to anti-Arab discourses and policies— as one of the defining features of Arab American drama and performance (24-27). It often grapples with what scholar Nadine Naber calls the “internment of the psyche,” which is the constant awareness of suspicion and fear of racist backlash that afflicts the post-9/11 Arab American lived experience (Jamal and Naber 292). Contemporary playwright Youssef El Guindi similarly writes about “political baggage” that Arab American artists and characters have to carry with them, and how it calls on artists like himself to either subvert or confirm a set of preconceived and forcibly politicizing notions (El Guindi, “Rosencrantz” 315). The playwright often tackles this “baggage” through his plays by critiquing the systemic conditions that create it. Those conditions are not only central to the questions posed by his plays, but they also influence El Guindi’s playwriting and publishing processes, thus working on both the textual and contextual levels and providing effective proof of the correlation dilemma theory in practice.

For this reason, this chapter analyzes two of El Guindi’s plays that directly interrogate Arab American agency within the US culture industry. *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* (2019) and *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2014) dramatize correlation dilemmas in action by showing the interdependent relation of Arab American theater makers to their discursive and institutional conditions of production. Furthermore, the chapter compares this dramaturgical analysis to El Guindi’s own professional experience as relayed in my interviews with the playwright. Using this case study, I argue that contemporary Arab American playwrights negotiate their correlation dilemmas through

plays that expose the lack of structural support and agency for Arab American artists. Their strategies reveal how important it is to build unbiased infrastructures for Arab American cultural production— or even independent ones, such as those built by *al-mahjar* writers in the last century. Through their work, playwrights like El Guindi utilize the constructive and critical potential of drama to generate counter-discourse, create agency, and call for more supportive cultural and material conditions for Arab American theater.

Systemic Bias in Publishing

El Guindi shared the surprising inspiration behind his play *Our Enemies* in an interview that we conducted in 2018. Back in the 1980s, he was struck by an ongoing controversy within literary circles about the danger of black women writers reinforcing stereotypes about black men through their writing. Responding to discourse following the 1982 publication of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Ishmael Reed (a black male poet) criticized black feminist writers like Walker for their negative representations of the community and its men in particular. These feminist writers were expanding the literature on the black experience by exploring women's oppression and abuse at the hands of black men, which contradicted the prior black literary tradition of uplifting positive depictions of the community. Reed claimed that stereotypes of violent black men were the "marketable element" in black feminist novels, adding that there were "many talented black women writers... who because they have avoided these attacks have not been as successful" (Watkins). The crux of this controversy lay in the intersectionality of race and gender in the figures involved. Women writers were increasingly addressing intra-racial gender oppression in addition to tackling anti-black racism in US society. Their critics, many of whom were black men, accused these women of sowing division in the black community and adding to their racial oppression. This communal conflict revealed a lack of agreement on self-representation underscored in part

by the assumption that individual stories stand in for the whole. It also exposed a cultural crisis that challenged women's inclusion and agency within black literature.

The incident stayed with El Guindi and triggered him when he realized that, in his own literary milieu, "the novels and articles and plays that were getting successful were those that were reinforcing the mainstream narratives of the Middle East and of Arabs" (El Guindi, 2018 Interview). That is, successful cultural products relied on the "marketable elements" of negative Arab, Muslim, and MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) stereotypes. This got him thinking about the questions: Who gets to speak for whom within a marginalized community? And how do the politics of this question play out in the culture industry?

Decades after its inspiration, *Our Enemies* suggests that Arab American writers grapple with similar intra-communal and intersectional dilemmas as they negotiate their own relation to the culture industry. They want to speak for themselves while the institution that they operate in compels them to speak for a collective and to do so in a way that reinforces marketable stereotypes. In the play, three Arab American novelists are confronted with cultural and structural hurdles in their journeys to publication. On the one hand, Mohsen, Gamal, and Noor are American writers who want to put their talents and narratives in the service of American multiculturalism. Their diverse perspectives on the Arab diaspora and representation clash, leading them to struggle with one another. On the other hand, they are Arab Others whose narratives are under pressure to conform to mainstream American expectations. These characters are therefore facing correlational battles on two fronts: inside and outside the Arab American public.

The internal confrontation with the self and with one's community has to do with conflicting ideas of cultural authenticity and representation. Due to their different experiences of immigration and assimilation, these characters developed diverse worldviews

and different versions of Arab Americanness. This is a quintessential phenomenon in the diasporic experience. As the political scientist William Safran points out, the diasporic identity is complicated by intersectionality and a triangular relationship with the homeland and host nation. He adds that diasporic status is relational and contextual, and that “triggering” events in either the homeland or hostland “tend to revive the diasporic identities of ethnic or religious groups” (Safran 15-16). This underlines the conflict between El Guindi’s Arab American characters and explains their varying responses to anti-Arab triggers that they encounter in US society. Those responses reflect their different intellectual, emotional, and lived conclusions of diaspora— especially in the context of post-9/11 US politics.

The varying perspectives of Mohsen, Gamal, and Noor also show a spectrum of negative and positive constitutions of Arab diasporic consciousness. For instance, Mohsen is an immigrant who has bought into dominant US narratives of Arab backwardness. He represents the voice of a self-hating Arab who believes that progress means complete assimilation and disavowing one’s heritage. Meanwhile, Gamal is of the opposite camp, a writer who defends Arab identity and believes that his mission as a cultural producer is to protect it from the stains of imposed narratives, both within the Arab public and outside it. Both Mohsen and Gamal’s stances respond to the same triggers— anti-Arab hostility and (white) American superiority. One character internalizes the concept of Arab inferiority and the other adamantly fights against it, neither dealing with the triggers constructively. Yet between the two extremes lies Noor’s perspective. She believes that cultural progress and empowerment comes from within her interculturalism. She represents the diasporic hybrid subject who neither internalizes her oppression nor lashes out against it. Instead, she tries to use her cultural fluidity to find her place in the host nation, resist domination, and

foreground her intersectionality as an Arab woman on her own terms. Therefore, Noor represents the most complex Arab diasporic subject in El Guindi's play, one who grapples with her dilemmas through honest engagement and negotiation.

It's no surprise then that the plot of *Our Enemies* revolves around Noor's big break, when a publishing company finally becomes interested in her work and offers to publish her novel. However, we learn that the manuscript Noor submitted "doesn't quite land on the target it sets up" according to the reviewers at the company. By that, they imply it is not ethnic enough coming from an Arab American writer. Olivia, the editor that solicits Noor, projects the common image of a repressed Arab woman onto the writer as well as her novel's protagonist. She also assumes that the character and the story are autobiographical. Reflecting on the character's conflicts, Olivia says, "I'm not sure these are your typical concerns of a young *American* woman. Perhaps a young, *Americanized* woman. A young *immigrant* woman who is trying to strike out on her own and break away from her traditions" (El Guindi, *Selected Works* 66, emphasis original). She tries to convince Noor to play up "intimate stories" of Arab "women's issues" because that allegedly holds more interest for readers— and probably more profit for the publisher. At the same time, Olivia paints herself as an advocate for Arab voices, saying she wants to help "correct" misconceptions about the Arab world by launching a new Middle East book division.

This example illustrates the correlation dilemma theory at work and shows how the publishing institution, like other culture industries, often treat Arab American subjects as symbols of difference to either be celebrated or rejected. Noor's diasporic hybridity gets erased by the projections, demands, and conditional inclusions made by the publishing institution— and by extension, her host society. El Guindi acknowledges this pitfall in his assertion that Arab American characters carry "political baggage" regardless of a

playwright's intentions. He writes that stereotypes and political intent get projected onto them and contribute to confirmation bias among producers, publishers, and audiences ("Rosencrantz" 314-315). This scene in *Our Enemies* demonstrates that imposed politicization as well as the artist or writer's correlated dilemma which results from direct pressure to conform to biased projections and institutional demands.

For her part, Noor has no desire to write what she condescendingly calls the "woman unveiled" story. However, perhaps due to her internalized insecurity as a diasporic subject, she does grapple with this dilemma and toys with the idea of giving in to the pressure. We see her working on her manuscript in the next scene, with a passage projected on stage. The audience follows as she edits, replacing the name "Melanie" with "Khadiga" then with "Hela." She deletes the name "Rafael" and types "Mohammed" then "Waleed." Soon after, she deletes the entire passage and, struggling to rewrite, turns off the computer. The audience is left wondering if this means that she has acquiesced to the editor's wishes or chosen to stand by her original work.

The question remains unanswered in the following scenes, but we see the editor and publisher try hard to convince her to comply with their desires. At a dinner party they throw with the aim of wooing her, they task Mohsen (who is already contracted with them) to persuade Noor to rewrite her book. The conversation between the two writers quickly escalates, and Noor accuses Mohsen of being a "fake Arab" who has made himself into a "performing fool" in order to find success in the US. He retaliates by accusing her of being a coward who refuses to speak out against her own people, saying: "How dare you even think to criticize me, you, whose denial of everything that's wrong with us is killing us as much as the lunatic who straps on bombs and slaughters people" (El Guindi, *Selected Works* 101). What follows is a debate about the deep-seated misrepresentations of Arabs in the Western

world, as well as a demonstration of the opposing perspectives on self-representation. Accusations of victimhood, ignorance, and complicity fly from both sides. Finally, Mohsen confronts Noor with the bottom line: “I’ll tell you why you came: you *do* want to be persuaded. You want out of this heavy suit of armor you always wear. That’s weighted down with all that politics and dogma, and that stops you from coming into the mainstream and be[sic] celebrated for your talents, without having to worry what your banner-waving buddies might think” (El Guindi, *Selected Works* 103, emphasis original).

Echoing the debates within black literary circles that first inspired El Guindi, this conflict encapsulates a wider phenomenon of inter-group power imbalance but also demonstrates the intra-group disjunctures that undermine Arab American unity. This particular exchange between two individuals exposes the real-life structural pressures faced by underrepresented artists to give in to the mainstream narratives that sell. It also justifies these narratives as acts of socially responsible self-criticism that need to be performed by Arab Americans for their own sake. This is Mohsen’s chosen stance, that of the *us* in “those of us who are actually trying to do good.” Meanwhile, the *us* in Noor’s “don’t take your self-hatred out on us” stands for the imagined (and victimized) community. That stance resists the civilizing narratives imposed on and, in the case of Mohsen, internalized by the Arab American public. It is also one that is less validated and supported in hegemonic cultural institutions where Arab Americans are not the gatekeepers or decision-makers. El Guindi carefully avoids taking sides when it comes to the questions of who represents whom or which representations are deemed honest and authentic. Instead, he gives equal voice to the divergent arguments and exposes the flaws in both communal and institutional politics. The enemies in this play, both inside and outside the Arab American public, are given equally

valid arguments, making El Guindi's work a compelling embodiment of the correlation dilemma theory.

Such a scenario is not entirely imagined by the playwright, as El Guindi himself experienced a similar conflict during one of his play development processes. In 2003, El Guindi was commissioned by the Los Angeles-based Cornerstone Theatre Company to write what would eventually become *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (2018). This community-based theater company, founded in 1986, collaborates with underrepresented locals in rural and urban neighborhoods to create artistic works of civic engagement "based on the stories, concerns and issues of a given community" ("About Cornerstone"). El Guindi's commission was part of their Faith-Based Cycle project, whose goal was to work with Los Angeles communities of faith to create plays that address the question "How does faith unite and divide us?" ("Cornerstone Faith-Based"). It called on the playwright to interview members of the local Muslim community and write a play about their experiences.

El Guindi took up the project, developing a family drama about a Muslim Arab American family struggling with the tensions of their diasporic experience. In the play, intergenerational differences animate debates over cultural preservation, religious belief, and gender norms. Among the contentious issues are two instances of coming out, so to speak: one son reveals he's an atheist and the other a homosexual. These two pivotal issues rock the foundation of collective family identity in the play and, as El Guindi would learn, prove to be highly problematic for the commissioning organization and its target audience.

When his first draft had a public reading at a local mosque, some conservative members of the community objected to the depictions of homosexuality and atheism in a play that was supposed to represent Muslim experience. This faction of the community apparently wanted to limit the play's interpretation of Muslim identity. They preferred to fashion the collective

representation to match their desired social construct, which conceptually purges the Muslim public of perceived deviance. Of course, this desire didn't erase the reality that homosexuals exist in the Muslim community, that atheists do leave the faith while still identifying with Islamicate culture (such as Arab culture in this case), and that some members of the Muslim public in fact accept these differences rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive.

This critical uproar ironically answered the Cornerstone project's central question by demonstrating how faith can divide people intra-communally. It showed how Muslim audiences and a Muslim playwright could find themselves on opposite sides of an identity debate. This disjuncture can likely be attributed to the fact that Muslims of different ethnic and national backgrounds vary in their practices and interpretations of Islam. A 2012 Pew Research report on the world's Muslims found that "the most diverse views on Islam's interpretation are found in the Middle East and North Africa," a predominantly Arab region, while in South and Southeast Asia roughly 70% of respondents "agree that there is only one true interpretation of Islam's teachings" (Pew Research Center 85). This suggests a greater level of orthodoxy in the latter group. In South Asia specifically, this report also found the largest gender gap in mosque attendance, which it attributes to differences in "cultural norms or local customs" rather than religiosity (8, 19). This suggests that in addition to their higher orthodoxy, South Asian Muslims also tend to be more socially conservative than Arab Muslims. Coincidentally, South Asian Muslims make up the majority (41%) of Southern California mosques and mosque attendees, while Arabs are only 27% of that population (Bagby 14). Taken together, these findings suggest a possible explanation for the different perspectives between El Guindi, an Arab Muslim playwright, and the predominantly South Asian Muslim community of Los Angeles that he was commissioned to work with.

Nonetheless, the dilemma triggered by the audience's negative response placed pressure on the theater company to exercise its institutional power and change the play's development. Given that Cornerstone's mission was to collaborate with local communities on this project, they were compelled to address the concerns presented. They also likely felt obligated to uphold the audience's desired narrative out of cultural sensitivity, especially given that—unlike El Guindi—the organization and its leaders were outsiders to this community. As a result, the company asked the playwright to change the play to accommodate the response, but El Guindi refused. “Their loyalty was to the community, not the playwright,” he explained in our first interview, “So when I said I wasn't going to do it, we amicably parted ways” (El Guindi, 2018 Interview). He and the company mutually decided to cancel their collaboration rather than compromise the play's integrity.

This experience parallels that of Noor in *Our Enemies* in that the unfavorable discursive and ideological conditions around the writing process resulted in the explicit repression of the writer's subjectivity. In El Guindi's case, it also resulted in the withdrawal of material support for his work. This shows the precarious correlation between dominant narratives, cultural institutions, and Arab American writers. It further demonstrates the resulting dilemmas and complex negotiations that novelists and playwrights have to contend with, both with the diverse communities that they represent as well as the cultural production process. They cannot possibly satisfy all the interests and perspectives that are involved while maintaining the independent integrity of their creative voices. Thus, they must continually (re)negotiate these relations as part of the creative process, largely at the mercy of their conditions.

Spoiler alert: What happens by the end of *Our Enemies* proves that the conditional pressures are too strong for Noor to resist. We learn that she eventually makes creative

concessions in order to get her book published, such as renaming it *The Crescent's Horns*, a title that merges the Islamic crescent and devil's horns in a blatantly sensational and marketable way. But her struggle with the institution doesn't end once she's been accepted into the fold, as she continues to face scrutiny *after* her book enters the market. In the penultimate scene of the play, she realizes that her decision to cave into institutional demands was not as unproblematic as she expected and has in fact amplified her earlier struggles of conscience. Noor is being interviewed on TV and faces off with a talk-show host who can't seem to stop treating the book as a "scathing commentary" about Arab women's lives. Not only that, but we also learn that her editor has been marketing the fictional book as a "roman à clef" based on Noor's own life. Noor defends her work during the interview, saying that readers should not make sweeping generalizations about the Middle East or its people based on a single fictional story. However, the TV host keeps trying to shift the conversation back to talking points that confirm normalized narratives about "challenges facing Arab and Muslim women."

What this unfortunately suggests is that the rigid lack of support within the publishing institution extends to related media industries and the discursive superstructures that they both depend on and foster. The entire network relies on fixed, biased narratives that are hard to disrupt, even after one has been admitted by the gatekeepers of the industry. The discursive policing continues inside the gates. Demand for and perpetuation of marketable ethnic imaginaries prop up the thorny essentialized categories of identity. As the earlier chapter showed, the work of scholars Edward Said and Jack Shaheen argues that the issue is systemic and self-sustaining (17-18). It utilizes the circuitous media exchange of cultural mythology to manufacture "fact" through repetition.

Our Enemies presents an example of the dangerous potential of such a phenomenon and the harmful effects that correlation dilemmas have on Arab American artists and women in particular. It shows how hegemonic institutions, such as publishing and marketing, cycle through processes of material and discursive production in a problematic way. Each node in the interdependent network of cultural producers cites the other, thereby sustaining one another's dominance and that of their chosen narratives in relation to Arab American artists and subjects. This reifies the stereotypes that institutions rely on for cultural capital, such as the ever salient "oppressed Arab woman" stereotype that Noor faces, which contributes to the further marginalization of artists and their extended communities. For Arab Americans, this coercive system lacks the space for honest or equitable negotiation, encourages (self-) censorship, and limits the potential agency for nuanced diasporic social formation. *Our Enemies* critiques these systemic issues, prompting the audience to question institutionalized bias and the conditions that sustain it.

Interrogating the Reel Arab

A similar critique is made in El Guindi's *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*, which addresses the phenomenon as it manifests in the film industry. This farcical play tells the story of Ashraf, an Arab American actor who is offered the opportunity of a lifetime to work with a top director and leading actress on a film that will make his career. The catch is that he has to play a despicable, stereotypical terrorist— a common dilemma that various MENA actors have reported experiencing in Hollywood (Ronson; Fleishman). Over the course of the play, Ashraf struggles with his conscience and the unsupportive decision-makers of the institution. His agent, Barry, pushes him to take the role, tempting him with the fame and millions that he (or *they*) will reap. But the actor protests as soon as he finishes reading the screenplay, which is where the plot in *Jihad Jones* begins.

Addressing Barry as a “polluter,” Ashraf confronts his agent’s conscience: “I’m talking to you as a regular person who has to walk out into the same world where this ka-ka is brought to life. Which people like *you* bring to life, and me, when I don’t have the balls to say no because a million dollars would mean everything” (El Guindi, *Jihad Jones* 17, emphasis original). This statement makes clear that Barry is a gatekeeper in this industry who uses his productive power to “bring to life” whatever narratives carry greater cultural capital (ie. marketable stereotypes). It demonstrates that Ashraf’s relation to Barry, and to the institution as a whole, is one of comparative powerlessness. When he doesn’t “have the balls” to refuse the institution’s demands, he clearly lacks agency. The only way he can garner some influence is through money and fame, which he currently doesn’t have and hence “would mean everything.”

According to Barry, Ashraf’s ethical concerns are unwarranted because he thinks that the contemporary public is immune to the type of misconception that the actor is afraid of:

BARRY: Hasn't it occurred to you that nobody would be so off the scale of dumb that they would buy this? [...] We've moved beyond that. Nobody does stereotypes anymore. We're living in a post-stereotypical world.

ASHRAF: What are you— ? People always want bad guys; it's human nature.

BARRY: I understand you may be so deep in victimhood that you can't distinguish a real cause from one of your crazed out-to-get-me fantasies.

ASHRAF: Have you switched on the news lately?

BARRY: We set a higher standard here. (*Ashraf's mouth opens suggesting a slew of retorts but Barry continues.*) Audiences are too savvy now to buy the type of blackface bullshit you think this film pushes. Stop being so arrogant you little shit (El Guindi, *Jihad Jones* 22).

Barry not only dismisses Ashraf’s concerns as “arrogant,” but he also implies that his client is unreasonably self-victimizing and paranoid. However, this exchange suggests that Barry himself is out of touch with the real world, which is certainly not “post-stereotypical” but rather full of anti-Arab racism. This ignorance can be explained by his elite status as a privileged cultural gatekeeper. It also suggests that he lacks sufficient understanding of the

Arab American experience to accept the ethical dilemmas faced by artists of that community. To him, Arab stereotyping is far from a “real cause” to fight against and Ashraf is simply grinding a dull political ax.

This dismissive phenomenon also affects Arab American playwrights, who often face accusations of writing with a political agenda. El Guindi has experienced this on several occasions. Though he often denied having political intentions in his plays, he nonetheless admits, “my imagination coughs up characters and situations that end up expressing the concerns and arguments I’m having over something happening in the world, and that has me riled up consciously or unconsciously” (Najjar, “Yussef”). El Guindi attributes this to the Arab American lived experience, whose transnational connections and relations to US government and society are politically fraught. Arab Americans have to contend with everything from discriminatory travel bans to the abuse of their civil liberties to the threats posed by global conflict on their families. “The home life of a lot of Arabs and Muslims *is* filled with political chatter. To dramatize the daily lives of these two groups [...] is to unavoidably include the political element as part of normal, domestic interaction” (El Guindi, “Rosencrantz” 318, emphasis original). The cliché that “the personal is political” applies in a tangible way when one’s identity, existence, and belonging are deemed politically contentious.

This explains why even El Guindi’s “domestic” plays would be judged as politically motivated. They largely deal with issues that speak to his own lived experience, such as immigration and Otherness. In addition, they run counter to dominate mainstream depictions by featuring three-dimensional Arab or Arab American characters, disrupting harmful conceptions of Arabs and Muslims. His approach tries to demonstrate that Arab characters

can be more than just stereotypes, symbols, or arguments in a play. They can instead be fully developed with moral agency and aspire to be unburdened by imposed political frameworks.

Nonetheless, El Guindi's plays at times still get politicized by both in-group and out-group members, as we saw in the case of *Ten Acrobats* discussed earlier. Producers, publishers, critics and audiences tend to automatically assume that El Guindi's work is making a statement or, worse yet, dismiss it as "social activism" and diminish its artistic merits (El Guindi, "Arabs"). In fact, some reviews have described *Jihad Jones* as "preachy" or "sermon"-like (Flavin; Art Blog). One reviewer of the 2009 InterAct Theater production in Philadelphia even countered the play's critique of the Hollywood industry saying, "Film studios are after all businesses, not social service agencies." This person goes on to justify the pervasiveness of the Arab terrorist stereotype by pointing to real-life stories of terrorism, which in his words "makes it possible for such a story to be told" (Rutter). This example confirms El Guindi's claim that Arab American plays, playwrights and characters regularly face politicizing and dismissive—and I would add, degrading—attitudes.

In real life as in play worlds, institutional success and the preservation of norms further marginalize underrepresented groups and sweep any arguments for socially responsible art under the rug. *Jihad Jones* illustrates this phenomenon in the film industry while also exposing how cultural gatekeepers invert the argument for social responsibility to force Arab American artists to conform to their repressive conditions. In the play, Barry's strategy of luring Ashraf with money fails, so he adopts a new tactic in which he tries to convince Ashraf that the film is in fact a parody and claims to be empowering his client to disrupt the institution from within. "Ashraf, my friend: what's the point of having principles if you're not around to show people you have any" (El Guindi, *Jihad Jones* 13). With this move, Barry uses his powerful status as gatekeeper to suggest that he is actually supporting

Ashraf's mission for socially responsible representation. He justifies his insistence on the film as a way to give his client leverage by making him an insider— to get him in the gate even at the expense of his dignity and ethics. Barry finally succeeds, and Ashraf agrees (or rather is coerced) to audition with the director and leading lady, Julius and Cassandra.

The audition quickly devolves into a nightmare for Ashraf, whose initial dilemma and concerns become more pressing with every page they perform. As he reads with Cassandra, he purposely magnifies his stereotypical acting in an attempt to prove to the others that this character is absurd and unethical. He suggests the use of a prop gun, a *keffiyeh* (كوفية, traditional Arab headdress), and a fake accent to further embellish the trope. He also plays up the character's brutish aggression, which everyone eats up. However, none of the other characters seem to notice the dangerous potential in this farcical caricaturing. Rather, they take for granted the stereotype that Ashraf performs and fail to see its construction happening before their eyes. This shows that what they were looking for all along was simply a confirmation of the image that sells— the *keffiyeh*-wearing, accent-wielding, violent Arab.

This iconic Hollywood stereotype, well documented by scholars like Jack Shaheen and Evelyn Alsultany, was not just problematic in the play itself but also confronted El Guindi during the aforementioned 2009 production of *Jihad Jones* at InterAct Theater. The production poster featured the actor playing Ashraf wearing a *keffiyeh*, wielding a machine gun in the air, and scowling at the camera with his mouth open, mid-scream. Meanwhile, the actress playing Cassandra, dressed in a glamorous red dress and heels, was draped over his other arm in a seductive pose invoking Hollywood melodrama. Under the play title, the poster's captions read: "Heritage or Hollywood? Star or Stereotype? Morals or Millions?" There was no doubt that this poster was dangerously playing with the same Arab terrorist

stereotype that the play tackles. El Guindi recognized its attempt to parody sensationalist Hollywood print imagery and therefore approved it despite his reservations about its problematic nature. While that poster might have helped sell tickets or lampoon racist Hollywood sensationalism, I argue that it also contributed to cementing the harmful terrorist stereotype in the public imaginary. Members of the public who might have seen the poster but not the play, or didn't even bother reading the captions or learning about the production, likely did not view the image in the intended frame of parody. They interpreted it at face value instead, immediately connecting the word "jihad" with the image of a violent Arab male to identify the terrorist trope. To those individuals, the poster replicated and confirmed the stereotypical representation rather than critiqued it. This begs the question, which I will revisit in the following case studies, of whether such design and marketing choices are socially responsible. It further asks whether the use of Arab stereotypes with subversive intention can ever be unproblematic. These questions and their ethical ambiguities are typical of the correlation dilemmas experienced by Arab American artists.

In the play, Ashraf grapples with his own uncomfortable dilemma and the apparent impossibility of resolving it. He clearly understands his relative powerlessness yet desperately fights back against his coercive conditions. Having failed at the caricature experiment with his colleagues, he pleads with the ultimate gatekeeper, the director Julius Steele, to withdraw from the project. He tries to appeal to his conscience and his sense of responsibility to audiences. Ashraf stresses to Julius the "deadly" power that he wields in his work, which "blows a hole in the minds of the audience until they actually think this garbage is true. That people of my ethnic persuasion are naturally violent and [...] a menace to decent people everywhere" (El Guindi, *Jihad Jones* 45). This statement shows Ashraf's keen understanding of the media's power of repetition and the dangerously thin line that Jack

Shaheen points out between “real” and “reel” Arabs. Yet as hard as he tries, he fails to communicate the gravity of this phenomenon to the decision-makers in the room.

After Ashraf has a minor breakdown, Julius steps in to exercise his institutional power for negotiation. He discusses the issue with Ashraf one-on-one and attempts to make minor changes to the script that would mitigate his dilemma. However, it quickly becomes clear that no concessions short of rewriting or scrapping the entire character would address Ashraf’s ethical concerns. This is simply not an option for Julius. He’s got a lucrative blockbuster to make. At this point, he resorts to the same pseudo-supportive tactic that Barry used earlier, reassuring the actor that he will have more agency once he is inside the industry gates and has made his own concessions first. He makes his case for Ashraf’s cooperation with some compassion:

I know there are bad feelings out there right now. Focused on a group of people, a religion, yours, but that will pass. It always does. It's an old tradition of this country that all newcomers pass through this gauntlet of negative crap before being accepted into the fold. It's like a reverse welcome mat. [...] My advice? Don't run from it. Don't stand on the side and lob rocks. Get in this film and shake it up. Within limits, of course. We don't have the luxury of these discussions when we start rolling. But do it. Risk it. The more you do, the lighter the load gets for those that follow (El Guindi, *Jihad Jones* 51).

This speech is telling because it demonstrates Julius’ cultural sensitivity to the historical diasporic (American) experience. It shows that he understands Ashraf’s struggle as an Arab American who feels unwelcome and powerless in relation to the society he lives in. His reassurance, coupled with him sharing his own immigrant family history with Ashraf earlier, shows that he indeed is compassionate and sensitive to the ethics of his work. El Guindi leads us to believe that Julius may even genuinely be concerned for the future of “those that follow.” However, the speech also reveals that his feelings don’t translate to acts of real

empowerment or advocacy. He is supportive of Ashraf's agency "within limits," as long as it doesn't disrupt his film project or challenge his authority as a gatekeeper.

Interestingly, the tactics used by both Julius and Barry reflect the ways in which institutional norms and power structures dominate the interdependent relation with Arab artists. Yet they also show different approaches to coercing marginal subjects into complicity in maintaining the status quo. Barry first plays down the film as a parodic critique of harmful stereotypes rather than a straightforward perpetuation of them. He tries to persuade Ashraf that audiences would not fall for the "blackface bullshit" that he thinks the movie peddles. On the other hand, Julius tries to soften the blow of the film's stereotypes by negotiating cosmetic script changes with Ashraf. He also sympathetically shares his own immigrant background and argues that Arabs are just the latest "strangers" that have to contend with the US's Jungian shadow projections of suspicion. Failing to address the actor's concerns, Julius finally admits that he only feels responsible for telling a good story. "You want to do morality, become a preacher, or write a book," he tells Ashraf (El Guindi, *Jihad Jones* 51). Ultimately, both gatekeepers close with the argument that Ashraf should commit to the project in order to create change from within the system. Their approaches and ulterior motives differ due to their own positionality within the industry's power structures (Barry being an agent and Julius a celebrity director), but their bottom line is the same—the maintenance of the status quo that benefits them.

Whichever way it is arrived at, this outcome proves the overwhelming influence of institutions and dominant narratives on Arab American artists' conditions of production. Moreover, it perfectly illustrates Julius's "reverse welcome mat" analogy, thereby drawing a connection between the struggles of Arab Americans and those of other minoritarian groups in the US. The diasporic "newcomer" and the film industry Other both gain acceptance and

belonging in their society or industry only on the condition of maintaining existing power structures and perpetuating often unwelcoming dominant narratives. In both cases, the resulting correlation dilemmas add to the subject's repression and forces them to become complicit in their own marginalization.

By shedding a light on this issue, *Jihad Jones* tackles the pitfalls of (self-)representation in what is arguably the most pervasive institution shaping cultural and ideological worldviews. It highlights the problematic and systemic circulation of negative stereotypes of Arabs, as well as the need for more nuanced positive representations. However, media scholar Evelyn Alsultany has theorized through her study of media depictions that even simplified *positive* images of Arabs can reinforce the cultural capital of *negative* stereotypes (31). This appearance of “balance” in representation supports the reductive conceptual binary of good Arab/bad Arab. Furthermore, it leads to the institutionalization of racism in the process of cultural production and reception alike. Alsultany's theory backs up the argument made by *Jihad Jones* that the media industry hijacks the ideological work done by images and narratives. That is, this institution has the power to both manufacture and legitimize misconceptions by producing a repetitive discourse as well as a viewing public to substantiate it. For this reason, its practices are fully self-sustaining and particularly dangerous.

In addition, *Jihad Jones* reveals the relative powerlessness of Arab American subjects in the face of these hardened trends. Unsupported actors advocating for more complex images of Arabs cannot change the limited choices given to them, especially when they depend on the institution for their livelihoods. Nor can they sufficiently resolve their correlation dilemmas without becoming complicit in their own marginalization. Similarly, El Guindi writing three-dimensional Arab characters that defy stereotypes does not guarantee that his

work will be read or produced. Yet despite their economic dependence, and in spite of repressive cultural and industry pressures, these artists resist their conditions. They negotiate within these systems of production— with the little power they do have— to insert the slightest disruption into the discourses and institutions that affect their work.

Playwriting Problems and Interventions

As the plays and experiences explored above suggest, the biases of US cultural institutions challenge Arab American artists, including playwrights like El Guindi, in more ways than one. The challenges intensify when artists try to balance truthful, pluralistic representation with measured self-criticism of their own Arab culture. Self-reflexive and subversive explorations risk being turned against the public that produces them. This increases the ethical burden on contemporary Arab American playwrights, especially given their charged historical context and relative lack of support within the industry and public sphere. Together, these conditions shape a playwright's intersectional correlation dilemmas.

Theater companies that engage Arab American playwrights operate within this matrix of challenges as well. Whether explicitly or implicitly, they steer a playwright's work to either comply with dominant narratives and practices or resist them, depending on their particular mission. Most theatrical organizations, however, inherently reinforce ideologies and biases of the dominant culture through their publishing and production choices. Producer and playwright Jamil Khoury echoes El Guindi's earlier sentiments when he states that "elite decision makers and cultural arbiters within American theatre barely take notice of our [Arab American] work, yet they're quick to straightjacket them with 'red lines'" (94). As we've seen, these plays are often deemed too "political" or "unbalanced," especially if they touch on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or disrupt the dominant social and political narratives that shape American reality.

As a result, Arab American playwriting “habitually plays defense and spews apologetics” which creates a “react-and-respond aesthetic” that lacks agency (Khoury 95). Much like the characters in *Our Enemies* and *Jihad Jones*, playwrights struggle between fighting for the integrity and ethics of their work and making a living by compromising those values. The theater institution has a pivotal role in this negotiation, as plays usually go through multiple rounds of development and production at different companies before they are even considered by publishing houses (Garrison). From shaping a play’s content, to publishing and marketing, to selling production rights, the institution and its organizational bodies exercise a great deal of influence over a playwright’s work.

It begins within an organization’s immediate sphere and the play development process. From the inception of a new play to its first production, theater companies— not to mention academic and play development programs— provide the creative and material support that allow a playwright to develop their work. They shepherd the play through numerous workshops, readings, and rehearsals that impact the final product both directly and indirectly. Therefore, plays are often a product of not just their writer’s creativity but an entire team’s process of cultivation. The overall impact of this typical process is hard to measure due to the collaborative nature of the work and, moreover, too broad to be contained within the scope of this study.

However, this section will address this impact as it relates to the unique experiences of contemporary Arab American playwrights, who are, more often than not, writing in a climate of anti-Arab hostility, ignorance, or indifference. El Guindi’s encounters illustrate some of the challenges specific to Arab American playwrights. For instance, in the *Ten Acrobats* development process described earlier, Cornerstone Theater Company did its best to support both parties involved (the playwright and the audience) but ultimately had to side with the

local community that it served. It withdrew material support for El Guindi's work because it chose to uphold the audience's ideological perspectives over his. While this decision was in line with the organization's community-based mission, it resulted in an unsupportive situation for the playwright and the disruption of his creative process. Nonetheless, from a different point of view, the company actually did support the playwright by not leveraging its institutional and economic power over him to impose changes to the play. Instead, as El Guindi recounted, Cornerstone respected his creative independence and "amicably parted ways" with the playwright.

Luckily for El Guindi, the severing of ties with Cornerstone freed his play from the conditions of the commission and allowed *Ten Acrobats* to get picked up by another company, Silk Road Rising (SRR) in Chicago. This organization supported the play's development and gave it its first professional production in 2005. Being a company specifically dedicated to representing the Middle East and Asia, as well as one led by MENA producers from those regions and cultures, SRR was far more sensitive to the nuances of Muslim and Arab identity. As such, their development process actively incorporated that nuance and their production process prioritized cultural competency, a concept we will explore in more detail in the next chapter. The company was also more inclined to inclusivity and activism in their work due to their own mission, which states that they aim to tackle contentious issues with "deep understanding, a breadth of perspectives, and a shared humanity" ("Mission"). Therefore, the company fully embraced the exploration of homosexuality and atheism within *Ten Acrobats*, unlike Cornerstone where the negative audience response to these issues was detrimental to the play's development.

Overall, SRR was better suited to support the development of a play that dramatized dissensus and pluralism within Muslim and Arab publics. This preserved the integrity of the

work and the playwright's intention. "Now that the play is done," declared El Guindi, "people understand it for what I meant it to be, which is a portrayal of a loving Muslim American family" (2018 Interview). His statement supports the claim he has made, cited earlier, that even such ordinary domestic representation of Muslims and Arabs gets complicated by political baggage. It implies that their stories sadly need defending from theater practices and narratives that want to restrain them into politicized one-dimensionality. For this reason, Arab American playwrights like El Guindi need theater companies like SRR to provide critical developmental support. Such organizations work with nuance and cultural competency, and can discursively and institutionally resist the systemic bias that harms Arab American artists in the theater industry.

In addition to contending with the influence of theater companies through the development process, El Guindi shared some challenges that he faced in publishing practices. These relate to print editing and aesthetics, which may seem like benign considerations but in fact impact the work in subtle ways. For example, he suggested that questions of punctuation and formatting are potentially crucial because the choices made could influence the way in which a play is read and interpreted. Similarly, decisions on the use of stage directions, the specification of a character's emotional state, or the detailing of design elements influence a play's reception. Among these common concerns, the unique conditions of production surrounding Arab American playwrights lead them to exercise caution in how they present their work in print lest it be misinterpreted by readers who may be preconditioned by anti-Arab bias. They not only have to consider potential actors and audiences, but as El Guindi puts it, "it's all about presentation to the gatekeepers: the literary managers, the artistic directors, the designers" (2019 Interview). These particular individuals decide whether plays are worthy of production or not. Therefore, Arab American playwrights

who wish to be published *and* produced need to exercise some level of impression management throughout their playwriting and publishing process to boost the potential success of their work while protecting its integrity.

One example that El Guindi shared was of his experience with inserting pauses in plays. He explained that he recently adopted the practice of writing long descriptions of these pauses in the stage directions rather than simply designating a silence: “Ten years ago I might have just written ‘Long silence’ but now I think I need to be explicit, maybe I need to say a little more” (2019 Interview). While El Guindi made clear that this was mostly a creative choice that reflected changing trends in playwriting, he revealed that one of the underlying factors was a desire to clarify the objectives and cultural sensibilities of his characters. He felt the need to spell out long pauses in order to avoid readers or artists imposing their own biased assumptions on a character’s psyche (ie. assume the worst of an Arab character in thought or intention). This reasoning shows El Guindi’s own suspicion of the US theater institution and its participants. It further echoes his concerns about the burden of “political baggage” on Arab and Muslim characters. It proves that, for Arab American playwrights, it is not enough to consider the optics of formatting on a page or to follow the latest playwriting trends. They need to consider how their printed works might be (mis)interpreted by readers and decision-makers whose (un)conscious bias could prevent them from publishing and producing them.

As this aspect of the dilemma suggests, institutional negotiations for Arab American playwrights don’t stop once a play is in print but extend to the conditions of publicity and a play’s reception. The publishing process also involves navigating branding, distribution, and control over production rights, all of which shape the way in which a play is received by the public. These considerations are especially tricky for Arab American playwrights because of

their dependence on a biased and profit-driven market. As the characters in *Our Enemies* and *Jihad Jones* illustrate, Arab American artists who are caught in correlation dilemmas often compromise their work's integrity for the sake of marketability and economic survival.

In El Guindi's experience, that pressure has never been more palpable than in the way publishers and agents have branded him. For example, he recalls that his first agent explicitly asked him "right off the bat" whether he would mind being presented in an Orientalist way. "At the time I was so excited to get an agent that I said, no don't worry," he explained, adding that there is a "showman" side to him that is sometimes willing to indulge Orientalist tropes if they serve a purpose. "Sometimes I just grin and bear it, as long as it sells out. But if it gets too much, then I say no" (2019 Interview). This ironic anecdote shows how both institutional gatekeepers and Arab American playwrights strategically negotiate the (dis)advantages of ingrained popular bias. One has to admire the critical awareness of Orientalism that they both possess but cringe at the self-serving disregard of its dangers.

In another instance, reminiscent of the poster design choice for *Jihad Jones* discussed earlier, El Guindi became the agent of Orientalist branding himself. When Broadway Play Publishing was choosing cover art for his play *Threesome* (2016), the playwright told the publisher that he wanted the cover art to indirectly speak to the play's topic of sexual assault in Egypt. He requested that the photo be of a strong Egyptian woman, reflecting the central character of the play. When El Guindi did not like any of the selections made by the publisher, he suggested finding a representation in ancient Egyptian art and, in fact, chose the bust of Nefertiti as the final image. This was a surprising choice of self-Orientalization by the playwright. While it was not entirely problematic and probably boosted his marketability, it perpetuated a typical association of the Arab world with antiquity. It further supported the fantasization of Arab identity and women in particular. This example shows

the pitfalls of marketing Arab American plays and of strategically tolerating Orientalist discourses and practices for the sake of economic viability.

Negotiating publicity for Arab representations captures the essence of the correlation dilemma theory as it applies to El Guindi and other Arab American playwrights. On the one hand, they have to engage dominant narratives and stereotypes in order to subvert them. On the other hand, they cannot dismantle these narratives if they play into them because they would be supporting their continuation and bolstering their cultural capital by lending them some perceived legitimacy as Arab American representatives. Perhaps these precarious subjects cannot completely avoid the pitfalls of publicity in the US theater industry given their conditions of production. However, they do need to negotiate the greatest influence possible in the face of these intersecting discursive traps and the institutional norms that perpetuate them. By actively overseeing their own representation and making calculated decisions around it, as El Guindi has in the above examples, they can at least exercise more agency and control over how they engage potentially dangerous depictions.

Yet as we have repeatedly seen, competing interests between artists and their institutions tend to limit their absolute authority over their finished work. This is especially true for playwrights in the early stages of their careers who have little to no popular and economic leverage to counter institutional demands. “In the beginning, you just want to get published, then other factors come into play,” explained El Guindi, adding that a playwright will desire more control over their material and its dissemination as they advance in their career (2019 Interview). This partly comes as a result of gaining a better understanding of how the mechanics of the publishing industry can influence a play’s reach and reception.

Aside from marketing considerations, the factors that El Guindi was referring to relate to the accessibility and distribution of printed texts. One of the playwright's concerns was (and

still is) for his published plays to be affordable enough to reach a large and diverse number of readers, bookshelves, and potential producers. For example, El Guindi reflected on the publication of his first anthology of plays which was released in early 2019 by Methuen Drama, a division of Bloomsbury Publishing. The initial proposal included seven full-length plays, edited and introduced by Arab American theater scholar Michael Malek Najjar. However, in order to keep costs down, Bloomsbury had to enforce a strict page limit, and so two plays were cut from the collection. In comparison, when the proposal was considered by McFarland & Co., that company was willing to publish the wider set of plays but at almost three times the price of Bloomsbury's offer. El Guindi correctly attributed this to the fact that McFarland's target buyers have historically been large academic libraries who could afford to purchase copies at such a cost. In fact, the company initially built its business as an academic publisher and later diversified its publishing to non-fiction in a variety of non-academic fields ("Company History"). Inversely, Bloomsbury began as a publisher of non-academic works for a mass market and branched into academic publishing in 2006 with the purchase of Methuen Drama ("History of Academic Publishing at Bloomsbury"). This explains why the two companies developed very different marketing strategies, as well as why El Guindi considers financial accessibility a major factor in his choice of publishers.

Additionally, the type of publishing institution a playwright contracts with determines the reach of plays within networks of readers and producers as well as the level of control they can maintain over production rights. Earlier in his career, El Guindi published several works through what he referred to as the industry's "establishment" publishing houses, including Dramatists Play Service and Samuel French, now owned by Concord Theatricals. These publishing houses specialize in printing dramatic texts and target buyers such as theater companies or professionals rather than libraries or the general public ("Our Mission");

“Who We Are”). According to the playwright, their superior reach among networks of theater producers means that plays published through them have a higher chance of being produced and influencing a theater-going public. However, contracting with such companies also means that playwrights have to give up control of production rights. Drama publishers generally manage production licensing once they acquire a play from a playwright. While this practice is meant to ensure the playwright’s fair compensation, it can restrict their agency in deciding when, where, and by whom their play may be produced. In contrast, this practice is not typical of non-specialized publishers, who allow playwrights to retain full licensing rights while still protecting their copyrights.

Over time, control of production rights became a growing concern for El Guindi because he came to understand the pitfalls of plays about Arabs and Muslims being produced in a US context. In his opinion, most theater companies and industry gatekeepers are “ticking boxes” in the name of diversity at the expense of culture or religion, privileging stories that reinforce bias and commoditize precarious identities. This implicitly requires a more proactive and protective stance from Arab American playwrights. “Here [in the US] we are in a culture where it comes down to you fighting for your space in the culture,” he claimed, adding that for Arabs and Muslims “what’s at stake is very different.” Contextualization of plays and narratives, as well as the lack thereof, could seriously impact a play’s reception and related discourses. This in turn can lead to real life consequences, such as the support of discriminatory policy or war. “It all comes back to major representations [...] You have to do a real dehumanizing job, to strip people of their humanity [to justify discriminatory policy and war]” (El Guindi, 2019 Interview). Consequently, this is one of the reasons why El Guindi now prefers to retain control of production rights after publishing. He wants to

ensure that his work is not propagandized by the theater institution against the public it is supposed to represent and empower.

This impulse for control and calculated decision-making mirrors that of the earlier examples, such as the choice of printing explanatory stage directions or strategic stereotyping in poster and cover designs. It points to El Guindi's desire to shape both the production and reception of his work in a constructive way that agrees with his ethical considerations. Furthermore, it confirms that the negotiation of Arab American playwriting's social implications is not confined to any stage of the work, but it follows playwrights at every step of their creative and production processes. The conditions of production and their resulting correlation dilemmas force these precarious artist-subjects to repeatedly contend with the changing dynamics between their subjectivity, the theater industry, and the reverberations of their work in the public sphere.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that contemporary Arab American playwrights navigate their correlation dilemmas through plays that directly expose systemic bias and through strategies that negotiate their level of influence within the intricate networks of cultural production. Its analysis has exposed the intersectionality of the struggles that they face with the wider social implications of their work. The cultural products that they create risk being politicized and propagandized against the same Arab American public that they represent. In some cases, these playwrights themselves risk reinforcing stereotypes by strategically engaging them, despite any subversive intentions they may have. Either way, their work may contribute to rather than disrupt the ingrained biases that marginalize their communities in dominant US culture and society. Arab American artists must navigate the pitfalls of representation and

their own ethical dilemmas even as they use their craft as a vehicle for challenging and dismantling the systemic traps of the US theater institution.

Additionally, these playwrights make their negotiations under restrictive conditions which limit their ability to represent themselves freely and subjectively. They include challenges inherent to representing a pluralistic public whose social formation is shaped by a diverse diasporic experience. Diasporic subjectivity forces Arab Americans in general, but art and thought leaders in particular, to exist in a state of fluid cultural relationality and contend with their intra-communal differences. The phenomenon further complicates their correlation dilemmas within the artistic production process, disowning Arab American playwrights of their subjectivity to a certain extent and burdening them with the duty to speak for the imagined community. Thus, Arab American playwrights must repeatedly (re)negotiate who they are as individuals and as members of a collective in the face of conflicting demands.

Moreover, this chapter reveals how important it is to build unbiased infrastructures to support Arab American playwriting and theater on its own terms. El Guindi's work shows how artists can challenge and disrupt systemic bias. It offers lessons on navigating pitfalls and generates dialogue about the lack of institutional and individual agency for Arab American artists. As a result of such constructive critiques and discourses, at least within the theatrical public sphere, the theater institution is beginning to listen to MENA American artists who are increasingly organizing and advocating for systemic change and agency (Ibrahim). Professional organizations are responding with greater ideological support and inclusion, like Theatre Communications Group did by adding MENA representatives to its 2019 cohort of its Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Institute ("TCG").

El Guindi's *Our Enemies* and *Jihad Jones* underscore these efforts by arguing that the US culture industry needs to include more Arab American "gatekeepers" in decision-making if it is going to center these historically underrepresented artists and fundamentally erase institutional bias. MENA theater producers Jamil Khoury and Torange Yeghiazarian have similarly called for greater inclusion, equity, and cultural competency among American theater leadership in a 2017 open letter to the industry (Khoury and Yeghiazarian). Through their respective companies, Silk Road Rising and Golden Thread Productions, they have also partnered with The Lark to establish the Middle East America Initiative, a collaborative play development program that fosters Arab and Middle Eastern playwrights through formal organizational support (Lark). Since the establishment of this program, The Lark has added two more MENA-specific playwriting support programs.

Such efforts to improve MENA inclusion in the theater institution show that these marginalized artists and their allies understand that true sustainability comes from building reliable support structures, ones that address the shortcomings of the existing system. As we'll explore in the following chapters, MENA-centering organizations and artist networks are not only building these structures individually and collectively but also developing strategies to combat invisibility and bias. They reimagine theater production processes in ways that prioritize agency, cultural competency, and community building. By doing so, they pave the way for large-scale institutional change that helps Arab American artists, and MENA communities more broadly, find sustainable support for their creative work.

Arab American playwrights not only benefit from efforts such as these, but they also take advantage of professional networks in related culture industries. For example, organizations such as the Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI) and Mizna foster Arab American literary production. RAWI is a non-profit collective that provides mentoring, community,

and support for all types of Arab American writers, including playwrights. They host a biennial conference that brings together a variety of Arab American artists to create a discourse and an organized network of their own (“About RAWI”). Similarly, Mizna provides a forum for the promotion and expression of Arab American culture in all its forms, even extending that platform to “Southwest Asian and North African” artists of non-Arab heritage. The Minnesota-based organization supports these underrepresented artist groups by publishing a journal of literature and presenting public arts events that foster visual arts, film, theater, and music. In this way, Mizna helps expand the related infrastructure necessary for the circulation of Arab American culture and gives audiences “the opportunity to engage in the work of Arab and Muslim artists on its own terms” (“About Mizna”).

This expanding network of both theatrical and interdisciplinary arts organizations bolsters Arab American playwriting and production. In particular, the growing cohort of theater companies that focus in part or whole on Arab American artists— including Silk Road Rising, Golden Thread, Ajyal Theater Group (فرقة مسرح اجيال) of Michigan, Noor Theater of New York, New Arab American Theater Works of Minneapolis, and Masrah Cleveland al-Arabi (مسرح كليفلاند العربي) in Ohio— form the backbone needed to provide sustainable material and creative support to Arab American playwrights. These communally-focused companies serve as key sites of negotiation and intervention, elevating the work of diasporic playwrights and helping disrupt biased conditions of production within the mainstream US theater institution. Through a combination of discursive resistance and organizational reinforcement, Arab American playwriting and its developing support structures seek to change industry practices and pave the way to a more inclusive and sustainable future.

III. Cultural Competency on Stage: Golden Thread Productions

“We are activists, but we are activists in the sense of the creation of the work. We’re subtle activists.”

— Torange Yeghiazarian, Founding Artistic Director of Golden Thread

After trekking through the steep San Francisco streets of Potrero Hill, I arrived at my destination at about 11:30am and waited to be let in. At the foot of the tall residential building, only a corner window revealing a narrow lobby and ticket stand gave any indication that a theater lies inside. This was Potrero Stage, the home of Golden Thread Productions. In a moment, artistic director Torange Yeghiazarian greeted me at the gate. She led me into the back of the building and through a door in the corner of its lobby, which felt a lot like the portal to Narnia. The hidden world that I discovered was The Annex, Golden Thread’s basement loft and base of operations.

Torange introduced me to managing director Michelle Mulholland and newly-hired production manager Grisel Torres before giving me a tour of the Annex. A large open rehearsal space lay in front of me. The odd shaped office to the left of the entrance was crammed with work stations, which I was told were shared with another local company, Crowded Fire Theater. To the right of the entrance, there was a small kitchenette with a large meeting table squeezed into it. I was immediately struck by a floor-to-ceiling wooden silhouette of a tree hanging on the wall above it. It was adorned with leaves bearing the names of Golden Thread donors. With time I came to understand this homage as a family tree, and its presence in that particular space — where we would have many a production meeting, lunch chat, and cast party— reminded me of the communal dedication that has sustained this company for more than 25 years.

So began my intimate encounter with Golden Thread. Between August and December of 2018, I immersed myself as a participant-observer at the company in order to research its operations. I wanted to find out how the oldest American theater organization dedicated to Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) work supports the needs of a culturally specific theater practice. More importantly, I wanted to see how Golden Thread, which helped pioneer contemporary Arab American theater in production, would produce the world premiere of *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War*, a new play by Arab American playwright Mona Mansour. I offered to assist director Evren Odcikin on the production as well as help conduct outreach and draft dramaturgical material for marketing purposes. However, my role also ended up including Arabic language translation and dialect coaching as new development and production needs arose. In exchange for my work, Golden Thread made me an honorary staff member, giving me a window into their operational process. I learned about the inner workings of the company through archival digs, office chats, staff meetings, and interviews, while I absorbed every moment of the production process as it happened.

In this chapter, I look at Golden Thread as a case study of how theater companies support the creation of Arab American works by weaving cultural competency into various stages of the production process. I explore the company's practices through archival and ethnographic research, analyzing its distinct approaches to play development, stage production, and audience engagement. While highlighting facets of Golden Thread's process, I argue that the company faces its own correlation dilemmas in the ways that it navigates the pitfalls of Arab American representation within US contexts. Its methods offer key lessons for developing support structures for Arab American theater, while also revealing the challenges of sustainably producing intercultural theater by diasporic communities— particularly ones as marginalized and politicized as Arab Americans. Golden Thread shows how theater

companies versed in cultural competency can help counter the systemic bias of the US theater institution and create more supportive conditions for Arab American artists within the industry.

Building a Company

Artistic director Torange Yeghiazarian founded Golden Thread in 1996 “with the help of her most excellent friends and family members” (“History”). Its first production brought together a core public that included Yeghiazarian’s artist colleagues from San Francisco State University and members of a local Iranian diasporic theater company called Darvag Theater Group. Yeghiazarian credits this company with helping pave the way for Golden Thread with its existing audience base. “Having an audience that was ready to listen, watch and respond and, more importantly, provide financial support, made all the difference for us” (Yeghiazarian qtd in Hill and Amin xvii). Together, this public would serve as a foundation for Golden Thread, which continues to rely on grassroots, collective support today.

In the years following its inception, Golden Thread grew its modest one-play season to include a short play festival that would become its signature production, ReOrient. Despite its increasing success, the growing company still depended on the labor and financial assistance of friends and family. This eventually drove Torange to quit her day job as a biologist and fully dedicate her time to establishing Golden Thread as a non-profit theater. She assembled a Board of Trustees in 2001, and together, they shaped the mission of this newly formalized organization: to be an artistic home and catalyst for provocative works that bring the Middle East to the American stage and engage in dialogue with a diverse audience.

Shortly thereafter, the attacks of September 11, 2001 thrust the company into the spotlight as a representative of a monolithic MENA public. “All of a sudden we were under

this huge national lens,” described Yeghiazarian, who started receiving scrutiny for Golden Thread’s work following the attacks. As a result of the backlash, several organizations in the Bay Area, such as the Arab Film Festival, suspended programming that year due to security concerns. But Golden Thread’s local service organization Theater Bay Area supported the company’s continuing programming, “lending their agreement that this [work] must move forward” (Yeghiazarian, 2018 interview). In fact, the backlash against Arabs and Muslims in the wake of the tragedy reaffirmed the need for dialogue and fair representation of the MENA in the US public sphere. It also made Golden Thread’s mission more pressing than ever.

The company embraced that attention and momentum to continue growing its programming as well as its community of supporters. In 2002, it added a youth initiative that evolved into the Fairytale Players program, which presents plays for school-aged children based on traditions and folklore of the MENA. The performances employ MENA languages and indigenous performance forms (such as storytelling, puppetry, song, and dance) to engage youth in cultural appreciation and education. In addition, Golden Thread added various special events that were programmed between mainstage productions. For example, *What Do the Women Say?* became an annual celebration of International Women’s Day that brings artists and activists together in an evening of performance and dialogue exploring MENA women’s perspectives. Other events include artist workshops and salons that focus on building Golden Thread’s creative community— their skills, networks, and goals. Thus, the company expanded its public to include artists, activists, scholars, and audiences of all ages that are engaged in its mission of centering MENA stories.

This breadth of output raises the question of how Golden Thread sustains itself financially. Today, the company has come a long way from the shoestring theater of its

beginnings. “A lot of people who are not familiar with the company, who just look at it from the outside, they think we really are a five million dollar organization,” said Yeghiazarian during our interview, as she emphasized the extensive feats of a company with only a 3-person full time staff and a budget just shy of \$400,000 (Yeghiazarian, 2018 interview). Based on the company’s approved 2018 budget, contributed income makes up nearly 85% of Golden Thread’s revenue, with approximately one third of that coming from private foundation grants for the arts. Government grants, individual, and board contributions make up another third. Surprisingly, earned income from ticket sales and performance fees account for only about 15% of the budget.

This dependency on contributed income is consistent with industry trends reported by the annual fiscal survey conducted by Theater Communications Group (TCG) of its member theaters. According to their *Theater Facts 2017* report, small non-profit theater companies (with budgets under \$1 million) relied more heavily on contributed income and attracted more foundation funding and government support at the federal and local levels. The smallest of those theaters (with budgets under \$500,000) “brought in more of their total resources from foundations than other groups [ie. government grants or individual trusts]” (Voss et al., “Theatre Facts 2017” 5). Incidentally, these companies— which make up 60% of US non-profit theaters— were also more likely to be operating out of rented spaces in urban areas and tended to hire only 6% of their workforce in administrative positions (Voss et al., “Theatre Facts 2017” 5-6).

Golden Thread’s profile fits into that category of small theaters in TCG’s report, and it was, in fact, among the companies surveyed. Its major grantors include private Bay Area foundations like The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Walter & Elise Haas Fund, and Sam Mazza Foundation. The company is also supported by local, state, and national

government funders, such as San Francisco Arts Commission, California Arts Council, and National Endowment for the Arts (“Donors”). These donors primarily sustain the company’s operational costs, among which are space rental and administrative staff salaries.

The financial dependency illustrated above makes small non-profit theaters like Golden Thread susceptible to economic shocks. Of course, recent examples of that include the 2008 recession and the ongoing crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter can be addressed once we have enough research and historical distance to understand the full picture. However, *Theater Facts 2009* summarized the former issue in this way: “The 5-year period ending 2009 finished in negative territory. Contributed income barely outpaced inflation but could not offset the erosion of earned income and the growth in expenses” (Voss et al., “Theatre Facts 2009” 1). So while funders gave at a 5-year high in 2009, they could not help theaters cope with rising inflation and a 23% drop in earned income. Due to this strain, Golden Thread suspended operations in 2010 for some “planned downtime for the company to regroup and adjust” (Mulholland, 2018 interview).

Since then, the company has recovered and reached a phase of stable growth thanks to its strategic planning initiatives. Between 2013 and 2018, Golden Thread focused heavily on capacity building. It grew the staff from 2 to 3 full time positions using grant funding and sustained them by increasing its unrestricted revenue (ie. ticket sales and individual giving). Furthermore, it developed a multi-year fundraising plan that included aggressive Board of Trustee cultivation, which helped lessen its reliance on foundation donors. The staff also invested in arts management training opportunities, through both the Bloomberg and Hewlett Foundations, that helped increase their efficiency and effectiveness. As a result of these changes, Golden Thread grew its budget by more than \$100,000 to its current size.

In addition to this strategic planning, the company refined its operations and programming to increase its visibility and impact. Between 2015 and 2016, newly hired marketing director Evren Odcikin upgraded Golden Thread's branding and key messaging to give it an online presence it did not have before. Social media became a central method of marketing, which likely contributed to the doubling of ticket sales in that time as well as the diversification of its audience. According to audience surveys, the company now attracts a public that is generally younger, educated, and culturally diverse. Notably, only 32% identify as Middle Eastern, which points to a high level of cross-cultural interaction in the Golden Thread theater experience ("About Golden Thread").

These developments bode well for the relatively young company, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2021 and continues to affirm its leadership in MENA American theater today. Golden Thread has garnered local, national, and international recognition for its work. TCG has awarded the honor of Legacy Leader of Color to the company's founding artistic director Torange Yeghiazarian, who recently passed the leadership torch to Lebanese theater maker and academic Sahar Assaf. Golden Thread is ever evolving but continues to lead the way as a catalyst for underrepresented MENA theater by supporting new play development, culturally competent production practices, and meaningful audience engagement. In the next section, I explore how these three elements converged in the company's 2018 production of *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War*, using my fieldwork to analyze how Golden Thread's practices impact Arab American theater through critical institutional support.

***We Swim* In "Development Land"**

According to playwright Mona Mansour, *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War* reveals the complex relationship between "two very different people speaking untidy truths to each other despite themselves, with space around them for everything to bubble over" (Odcikin,

“A CLOSER LOOK”). The play takes place almost entirely in the Pacific Ocean, where an aunt (She) and her nephew (He) have a tradition of swimming together and catching up on each other’s lives. Its nonlinear events center on the conflict that arises from the pair’s diverging political views and family tensions, prompted by He’s decision to join the US military in order to fight “bad guys” in the Middle East.

To understand Mansour’s inspiration for this semi-autobiographical play, one needs to first look at her upbringing and complicated relationship with her multi-ethnic heritage. The playwright grew up in San Diego with a Lebanese father and an American mother. Her father, in her words, was of the “assimilation generation” and did not instill Arab culture into his children. However, Mansour “never felt fully American” either, especially growing up in an Arab home in pro-military San Diego (Odcikin, “A CLOSER LOOK”). Her difference, as well as her ties to the Arab world, intensified when in the 1970s her cousins escaped the Lebanese Civil War and came to live with Mansour’s family. “It was all brought very close,” she said of those events (Svich). These early experiences, as well as a desire to more deeply excavate her heritage, led Mansour to write about issues of family, identity, and politics, especially in the Arab world and diaspora.

What inspired Mansour to write *We Swim* was yet another sense of difference, this time within her own family. When her nephew decided to join the US Army, the playwright was moved to intervene because she couldn’t fathom him potentially fighting against his own kin in the Middle East. What resulted was a series of intense exchanges between them that eventually led her to dramatize the conflict. True to real life, the half-Arab aunt in the play clings to her roots while the quarter-Arab nephew distances himself from them, sometimes defiantly. The exchanges between them interrogate various aspects of diasporic belonging

and cultural identity, dovetailed with questions about the ethics of US military operations in the Middle East.

For Mansour, *We Swim* was not just about identity politics but about creating dialogue between politically divided publics. “One of the things I’m trying to do in this play is find out what it is that makes a young man or woman want to join the military, in addition to money, and I am very much hoping to skewer some of my own knee-jerk liberal responses to all that” (Odcikin, “A CLOSER LOOK”). Mansour’s intention was to explore the complexity of intersectional identities and to challenge herself to see past her own worldview enough to be able to write compassionate, equal arguments from both sides. As we saw in the previous chapter, writing about personal perspectives and experiences proves especially challenging for Arab American playwrights, who tend to be viewed as purely political when in fact their work does not distinguish between the political and personal. Mansour’s case further proves this pitfall of institutionalized bias. Despite its political facets, *We Swim* should be seen as a product of Mansour’s entire life experience, a personal story which fully integrates her upbringing, cultural identity, family dynamics, and political views.

The bias-induced challenges to Arab American playwriting, which we covered in the earlier chapter, extend throughout development and into the production process. In response, three theater organizations— Golden Thread in San Francisco, Silk Road Rising (SRR) in Chicago, and The Lark in New York— partnered together in 2008 to establish the Middle East America Initiative (MEA). In three-year cycles, this fellowship program supports the creation of new works by and about the MENA diaspora “to develop an ongoing pipeline of new plays that challenge stereotypes of the Middle East.” In addition to a \$10,000 financial award and play development support, the MEA premieres these new plays in full production at either SRR or Golden Thread. It then advocates for future production opportunities,

expanding the awareness of MENA voices in mainstream US theater companies (Lark, “Middle East America Initiative”).

Mansour received the 2014 MEA fellowship, which commissioned her to write *We Swim* and provided her with three years of development support through residencies, workshops, and staged readings. “I came into it knowing that there are these different entities with their different emphases,” she recalled of the collaborative experience, adding that she “wanted the first outing to be at the Lark [playwriting lab] because that place, its audience, understands that this is a new play in development” (Mansour, 2018 interview). Knowing that she would be supported by fellow playwrights and dramaturgs, a room full of “makers” as she called them, made her feel a lot less vulnerable. Mansour grew the excerpt that she shared to a full draft through a week-long residency at the Lark Playground with director Evren Odcikin, adding new characters and a key new scene about the “awkwardness” of her Arab American character wanting to feel Lebanese while being a tourist in Beirut. At a subsequent Lark Studio Retreat, the playwright, director, and actors explored the “theatrical playfulness” of the work by putting it on its feet and adding active staging choices to the script.

The next round of development took place at Golden Thread during a two-week residency culminating in a staged reading of *We Swim* at the 2017 Bay Area Playwrights Festival. Mansour found this process unique, saying, “They made you, as a playwright, read your own play [...] in front of the gathered people, who were all the writers and the directors [in the Festival].” She had never done something like this before in her writing process but found it so helpful that she adopted the habit into her personal practice. “I now would almost never work on a play with someone if I haven't had a chance to sit down with that director and read it out loud myself” (Mansour, 2018 interview). The playwright also underscored the

“joy” of working with Golden Thread at that stage, saying that when questions arose, it’s not because her collaborators were responding to an Otherness in her work but rather helping her clarify the writing.

Another reading happened a few months later at SRR in Chicago, which explicitly declares itself a collective of “activists and agents of social change” who empower marginalized Asian and MENA communities (“Mission”). Therefore, in contrast to the first two rounds of development, the SRR experience reflected the company’s activist-oriented mission by focusing on audience reception and feedback. Mansour recalled that, in a heated moment of the post-show talkbacks, an audience member challenged “the point of the play” saying that the Arab American dilemma regarding involvement in US wars in their countries of origin was “not special” (Mansour, 2018 interview). This question underscored an apathetic and dismissive attitude toward the play, mirroring similar attitudes toward Arab American stories and lived experiences that we’ve discussed in earlier chapters in the context of institutional bias (11, 51, 101). For Mansour, it confirmed how crucial it was for her work to voice and complicate Arab American narratives, especially in a politically charged era that deems these stories unworthy of being told.

Mansour appreciated the MEA’s supportive process and juxtaposed it to her previous experiences at less culturally equipped US theater organizations, where she said she sometimes felt the need to censor or over-contextualize her writing to make it more palatable. “It can be a problem [for Arab American playwrights] in development land when you’re developing a play at a primarily white institution, with white collaborators, and the questions start from page one [...] There’s such a lack of understanding, even at the best of intentioned places” (Mansour, 2018 interview). During their interviews, Mansour and Odcikin both asserted that the biggest challenge to MENA play development within the US

theater institution was the pressure from dramaturgs and directors to add excessive exposition in a play. This danger of overdevelopment led Mansour to turn down other opportunities outside the MEA.

In contrast, the playwright found it “enormously helpful” to work with companies “steeped in cultural understanding” and with “people who are used to talking about this part of the world with other people” (Mansour, 2018 interview). She illustrated this by highlighting the treatment of certain words that describe the Arab world as triggering for non-Arab collaborators. Mansour gave the example of the word “Hezbollah” (حزب الله) which is discussed in *We Swim* and is understood narrowly as a terrorist organization in dominant US discourses. However, working within the MEA network, the playwright felt empowered to nuance the word and its connotations from an Arab perspective without being misunderstood. She explained to her collaborators how some alternative narratives mobilized within Lebanon itself (and, as such, not exclusively shaped by international politics) define the group differently. They do not consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization *per se* but a national militia that defends Lebanon in the absence of a capable military or government, which has been a historical pattern for that postcolonial country. In a “primarily white institution,” as she calls them, such an explanation might have been interpreted as defensive or politically radical. But among companies that understood the complex dynamics of the MENA— not to mention the history, plurality and sectarian intricacies of Lebanon in particular— Mansour was able to nuance dominant American conceptions in a way that contributes to the richness of her work and the dialogue that it generates.

Overall, the MEA development experience has helped Mansour fulfill her self-declared mission of complicating narratives about the Arab world and Arab American experience. As the first new play incubator of its kind, the MEA shows how necessary it is to empower

Arab American playwrights through the right network and support. This collaborative initiative, and similar MENA-centered support programs like Lark's more recent Middle Eastern American Writer's Lab, help playwrights counter their correlation dilemmas by providing a safe space for artistic creation. Such groundbreaking efforts slowly chip away at the wider institutional conditions that repress Arab American play development and production. They help change industry attitudes, institutionalize cultural competency, and empower Arab American playwrights like Mansour to contribute much-needed diversity to the theatrical public sphere.

From Page to Stage

Cultural competency not only shaped the development process of *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War*, but it also played a significant role in the play's translation to the stage during its 2018 premiere at Golden Thread. The concept in practice followed Yeghiazarian and Khoury's definition in their 2017 open letter to the US theater industry. In this document, they define cultural competency in production as "the ability to fully dive into the cultural context of a particular story" and recommend that producers work with consultants who have "embodied knowledge," especially when producing plays that deal with unfamiliar cultural and historical territory. Meanwhile, they clarify that "the job of the cultural consultant is not to police the creative process or product" but rather "to provide creative options plucked from within the actual cultural practices, history, aesthetics, and sensibilities of the community in which the play is set" (Khoury and Yeghiazarian). Most importantly, these producers assert that cultural competency without the agency to impact decision-making is meaningless.

Using these guiding principles, Golden Thread makes every effort to involve members of the community that is represented on stage in various phases of its production process. In the

case of *We Swim*, that involvement began on day one when members of the local Arab American community were invited to attend the first table read and directly give their feedback to the playwright. After hearing the play, these guests expressed enthusiasm for its complexity but also concern over one of the ways it represents Arab identity. They noted that the Arabic language was only spoken in the play by a single character, an angry male soldier who was a figment of He's imagination and physically attacks him in a disturbing nightmare sequence. Thanks to the correlation of "foreign" language, anger, and violence as characteristics distinguishing the common Arab terrorist stereotype, these discerning audience members believed that the onstage pairing reinforced a harmful stock character.

This critical feedback launched the playwright and production team into a self-reflexive discussion on the pitfalls of linguistic representation and how *We Swim* can subvert anti-Arab bias rather than confirm it. To navigate this correlation dilemma, Mansour rewrote the existing "angry" dialogue in English and used Arabic in an alternative scene, where the character She has a flashback to an awkward interaction with an antique seller in Lebanon. Their Arabic-English exchange includes a metatheatrical inner-monologue by the shopkeeper that gives audiences a glimpse of his life and historical context (to be discussed further in the following pages). Mansour decided to keep the Arabic in that scene, reasoning that this alternate depiction avoids reinforcing the harmful stereotype that triggered the community consultants while allowing her to utilize (and normalize) Arab linguistic representation onstage.

In addition to community members, the playwright herself served as a cultural consultant and was empowered to affect production decisions at every stage. Mansour declared early on that she preferred to give producers her own dramaturgical material when working on culturally specific plays. She cited her mistrust of other people's research and the abundant

biases on the internet, whose commentators use the platform as a “forum” or “referendum” on the MENA (Mansour, 2018 interview). For example, a Google search of the word “Lebanon” could send someone down a cyber rabbit hole of mostly negative news and information. These correlations put pressure on the playwright to manage impressions in productions of her work. As such, Mansour shared her own research with the director, designers, and cast of *We Swim* in order to make sure that the perspectives represented in the production were the ones she intended.

Most of the resources she provided included historical information about the MENA and Lebanon, such as the origins of the ancient city of Ba’albak (بعلبك) which features in the play as well as articles about Hezbollah and the ramifications of US military involvement in the region. It also included samples of Lebanese pop culture that are referenced in the play, such as the songs of the musical icon Fairuz (فيروز) or a clip from the contemporary TV show *Albi Dak* (قلبي دق, “My Heart Beat”). Mansour made sure to select resources that can help the production accurately understand and represent the historico-political and cultural dimensions of the play. Meanwhile, the Golden Thread team recognized her concerns and actively incorporated her input at all stages of the production.

Mansour’s dramaturgy helped prepare the artists for their work without policing the process, but it was still necessary to consult sources of embodied knowledge throughout rehearsals, especially in the absence of a fully Arab American cast and creative team. Therefore, my involvement as an assistant director and native consultant fulfilled that need. I provided the context that informed various production choices, in particular the actors’ constructions of Arab characters. At one point, for instance, a question arose about the symbolism of the Lebanese flag and its emotional significance (Fig. 1). The non-Lebanese actor playing She wanted to understand the motivation behind her character’s impassioned

exchange with her nephew over the centrality of the flag to her Lebanese identity. So I shared the knowledge I had embodied since my childhood, explaining how the white stripe



Fig. 1. She (Sarah Nina Hayon) tells He (Joshua Chessin-Yudin), her nephew, about Lebanon where their family is from. Photo by David Allen Studios. Courtesy of Golden Thread Productions, San Francisco, 2018.

on the flag represents peace and the snow of Mount Lebanon, the two red stripes represent blood shed fighting for the motherland, and the native Lebanese cedar standing in the middle symbolizes survival and

permanence despite colonization, war, and oppression. As a woman of Lebanese heritage, I was able to communicate the historico-cultural and— more importantly— the affective meanings of that symbol to help the actor achieve a more genuine representation on stage.

In another example, actors asked why the singer Fairuz (who features strongly in the play) was so iconic and closely associated with Lebanese identity. This required an explanation beyond a list of her artistic accomplishments, of the complicated historical and political backdrop to her success. The actors needed to empathize with the devastation of the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), its sectarian violence and societal wounds, in order to fully appreciate Fairuz's patriotic symbolism to the Lebanese people. She sang many songs about love of country, unity and coexistence, and she refused to choose a political side throughout the conflict. Hence, many saw Fairuz as the voice of Lebanon itself, bridging divides between religious sects and even distances among the diaspora. Translating this cultural understanding to an American cast required multidimensional dramaturgy,

similar to that of the flag, which used historical, cultural, and emotional nuances to help actors embody their characters.

Besides being a dramaturgical resource, I also served as an Arabic language translator and coach as needs arose. I had no professional experience in translation but took on the task of translating the previously mentioned antique shop scene since I was the only fluent native speaker on the production team. The task challenged me to accurately transfer the scene's original meanings into Lebanese dialect, which has many unique turns of phrase with no sensible English equivalent. In addition, I grappled with representing the difference in proficiency between the shopkeeper and She: one is a fluent colloquial Arabic speaker and the other is a diasporic individual who acquired language skills in *fusha* (فصحى, formal Arabic known as Modern Standard). I felt that highlighting this difference helped justify the “lost in translation” moments between the two characters. Mansour and the Golden Thread production team understood the nuances of these considerations, having encountered them before in their work. They agreed that we needed to cater to a native-speaking audience who could potentially discern and criticize such issues, and they empowered me to make creative decisions informed by my embodied knowledge.

After I completed a full translation and we played the scene in various combinations of Arabic and English, a problem appeared in a pivotal moment of the scene. Mansour had intended the miscommunication in the exchange between She and the shopkeeper to provide some awkward, intercultural humor. Meanwhile, she also wanted the shopkeeper's monologue to punctuate that humor with sobering insight into the war-time context of the scene and its grave effects. While going on about his lunch plans, errands, and favorite TV show in his monologue, the shopkeeper also wonders to himself about the origin of some of the antiques in his shop, which he buys from a middle man and suspects are stolen from war-

torn Arab neighbors like Syria and Iraq. Mansour believed that the critical subtext in this message was being lost to the non-Arabic speaking audience because of the Arabic language monologue.

The playwright and production team (myself included) collectively debated the dilemma of linguistic inclusion and exclusion, and we decided to compromise by keeping the monologue in Arabic while adding projected English supertitles. However, this solution also faltered during technical rehearsals when the projections could not be executed due to conflicting design elements. Mansour decided that the level of audience alienation was too high without supertitles and opted to change the shopkeeper's monologue back to English. Yet the question remained: how can the English monologue, sandwiched between Arabic exchanges, be understood as "Arabic" by the audience? To resolve this, Odcikin suggested having the actor step into a downstage spotlight and speak in unaccented English directly to the audience. This theatrical visual cue established a fourth wall break as well as a bending of linguistic reality. Meanwhile, the other characters looked on from the shadows, and She "translated" poorly in overlapping dialogue:

THE ARAB, WHO IS NOW THE OLDER MAN IN BEIRUT: (in "Arabic") Here are the things I'm thinking about: One, what should I eat for lunch today?

HE: What's he saying?

SHE: Lunch, about/lunch.

THE ARAB, WHO IS NOW THE OLDER MAN IN BEIRUT: Two, I need to move some of those tables to the other part of the store. And move the ones from the back up here.

HE: (this can overlap with above) What's he saying now?

SHE: He has to move out of his apartment.

THE ARAB, WHO IS NOW THE OLDER MAN IN BEIRUT: Three, I am wondering where those mother-of-pearl cabinets came from. These things come to me, there's a middle man; I don't ask questions.

SHE: He doesn't like/questions.

THE ARAB, WHO IS NOW THE OLDER MAN IN BEIRUT: I used to know every country they came from, and the story that went with

each piece. Now I have so much coming in every day, nice pieces, real antiques-

SHE: Antiques!

THE ARAB, WHO IS NOW THE OLDER MAN IN BEIRUT: I think it must be from people leaving where they are quickly. And if I think it could be something from antiquity, stolen? I don't ask questions. The world is falling apart. I'm just selling bits and pieces of it here (Mansour, *We Swim* 38-39).

Given the constraints, this approach made the most artistic and practical sense. It maintained the intention of the playwright to balance levity and gravity, and it resolved both the issues of audience accessibility and the correlational dilemmas of linguistic representation (ie. avoiding stereotypical characteristics). This creative negotiation showed how Golden Thread's quest for cultural competency balanced embodied expertise, collective input, and social responsibility in representation all while centering the playwright's goals.

The company not only prioritized competency in dramaturgy and translation, but in accurate diction as well. As *We Swim*'s default language coach, I had the task of teaching non-native speaking actors how to articulate Arabic words. I learned that Yeghiazarian herself took special interest in proper pronunciation whenever she attended rehearsals. For example, she often focused on the Arabic pronunciation of "Iraq," the first letter of which (ع - 'ain) is hard to convincingly voice for non-native speakers. Despite not being an Arabic speaker herself, she could discern inaccuracies and told me that it would be "problematic" for Golden Thread audiences if the word even remotely sounded like EYE-rack (à la G.W. Bush). Afterwards, in our interview, she explained how her concerns with language came about over the years: "What I noticed was that, a) when you don't have actors who can actually pronounce the language, it becomes very problematic and ridiculous and sometimes even disrespectful to the culture, so it does the opposite of what you want it to do; and b) when you do have actors who can pronounce it and have fun with it, then it becomes an

exotifying element” (Yeghiazarian, 2018 Interview). These dilemmas again reveal Golden Thread’s sense of social responsibility and explain why that level of detail in cultural competency got scaffolded into the production process.

The linguistic complexities and pitfalls of representation that the company grapples with while producing Arab American work extend to the area of design as well. Odcikin and the designers of *We Swim* emphasized cultural competency in visual representation since the earliest production meetings, especially in the making of costume decisions. The challenge for this show, which ran with no intermission and had the actors on stage at all times, was to create costumes that could fulfill multiple functions and represent different culturally specific characters without a major costume change. At the first production meeting, costume designer Michelle Mulholland highlighted the particular challenge this poses to the two supporting characters (called The Arab and The American). The Arab transforms from an old man in a Beirut shop to a vaguely defined soldier in a nightmare sequence. Meanwhile, The American transforms from an athletic ocean swimmer to a young US Army veteran. The two characters also serve as narrators throughout the play, which meant that their costumes needed to be neutral as well.

In the end, the costume designs lightly hinted at cultural specificity without losing their aesthetic neutrality, and costume props became the differentiating pieces for each character. The Arab’s transformation from narrator to old shopkeeper in Beirut illustrates this well. To gesture at this character change, the actor was given a *misbaha* (مسبحة, traditional string of prayer beads) which is commonly carried by elders in Lebanon, religious or not. This recognizable item signaled cultural specificity and, to those more familiar with it, older age. Yet even for audiences that were not keen to the nuances of its symbolism, the item could have achieved the intended differentiation. Plus, it was supplemented by narration which

contextualized the scene as well as variation in the actor's physicalization of the character. Having embodied knowledge of Arab culture thanks to his heritage, the actor was able to employ gestures and physical attitudes (in addition to vocal tones and patterns) that felt culturally genuine.

However, it turned out that the *misbaha* was not enough for the director, designer, and playwright, who felt the need to further accentuate the character after the first preview performance. In a follow-up interview, Mulholland shared that the issue was not so much cultural specificity as it was distinguishing between The Arab as shopkeeper and as soldier (who had no identifying prop). Therefore, the decision was made to add another costume piece to the shopkeeper: a *taqiyah* (طاقية, skullcap). This piece of crocheted head covering is used for religious purposes by some Muslim men who traditionally cover their heads during prayer. Variations of it are worn by Muslims all over the world, which makes it more religiously specific to Islam than culturally specific to the Arab world. Its use and significance also make it more iconically recognizable to non-Arab American eyes as a symbol of Islamic religiosity.

The addition of this costume prop did in fact achieve the desired differentiation, but it also had an unintended effect that the artistic team did not consider. By using a piece that specifically signals Islamic religiosity, the choice inadvertently reinforced the common conflation of Muslims with Arabs. This was particularly interesting to me because of an earlier exchange I witnessed between the director and projection designer that actively avoided making that conflation and showed the correlation dilemma theory at work. During one of our production meetings, they discussed options for depicting a family picture of She's cousin from Lebanon. Odcikin requested that the projected image be of a “contemporary Lebanese woman” and specifically asked that she not wear a *hijab* (حجاب, a

head covering worn by Muslim women), citing his own “political reasons” for this choice. From these comments, I inferred that *hijab* was not being considered “contemporary” and that the “political” reasons had to do with not wanting to perpetuate the Arab/Muslim conflation and other dominant misconceptions within US discourses, such as the notion that *hijab* signals women’s oppression. Odcikin would later confirm this implicit desire in our interview (Odcikin, 2018 Interview). However, his two inclinations contradicted one another in this case, because *hijab* in the Arab world is actually contemporary, common, and even fashionable while its counterpart the *taqiyah* is old-fashioned and uncommon as an everyday piece of clothing except in the most orthodox religious communities. Therefore, this latter choice ultimately supported the misconception (at least in part) that the first choice was trying to avoid.

These ironically conflicting approaches demonstrate that even culturally competent, well-intentioned artists or companies could make choices that unconsciously reinforce misperceptions of Arab subjects. In the process, Odcikin clearly grappled with the correlation between the cultural components of the production, popular stereotypes that precondition its reception, and institutionalized norms of representation that he wanted to disrupt. This condition produced a conscious dilemma for the director as he tried to put cultural competency and social responsibility into practice. In the process of negotiating this dilemma, the director fell into an invisible trap of Arab representation. Yet it would be unfair to single out Odcikin as the sole decision maker in this situation, because the discussion leading up to the use of the *taqiyah* involved the costume designer and playwright as well. All three agreed on the basic practical need to distinguish the shopkeeper and that the *taqiyah* gave the character the desired “old world” feel.

In a follow-up interview, Mulholland reflected on the trappings of symbolism in costume design and the collective dynamics that led to this decision. She explained, “I sometimes think about [design choices] in terms of how much I have to convey and how many clothing items I have to convey that with, and the less items you have to convey [meaning with], the more message there has to be in a single item. I think that can reinforce stereotypes but also inform with little material.” In addition, Mulholland explained her own oversight of the *taqiyah*’s religious symbolism saying, “I would not be able to make that distinction necessarily, although when I look at [the *taqiyah*], that is what I feel and think. But I wouldn’t with any confidence be able to sit with that group of people and say ‘Wait a minute guys...’ I rely on them to say that’s not appropriate, because I think they are more knowledgeable than I am” (Mulholland, 2018 Interview). These comments suggest a possible reason for the lack of debate over this visual representation. Mulholland is not Arab or Middle Eastern, and as her quote reveals, that leaves her feeling less knowledgeable than her native collaborators despite having years of experience working with Golden Thread on MENA content. Her latent insecurities kept her from speaking up even when she had an instinct about the object and its symbolic meaning.

If we accepted this explanation, then what of the others involved in the decision? Odcikin is of Turkish descent and has largely built his career on MENA theater, so he is both a native and well-informed artist. Mansour is a playwright of Lebanese descent who has traveled to Lebanon and has strong political and emotional ties to her heritage. Why didn’t either of them recognize the symbolism in this costume piece? One possible cause could be the fact that they are both diasporic artists who are not intimately knowledgeable about that part of the world. We have seen, for instance, how Mansour grapples with interculturality by doing her own extensive dramaturgical research. This suggests that she doesn’t think of

herself as an expert who relies solely on embodied knowledge. In fact, neither of them claims to be an expert on MENA or Arab culture, nor do they claim to speak for the cultures they represent through their work. In any case, the most viable explanation remains the one that Mulholland alluded to: the decision was mainly a practical one that was made late in the production process with minimal consideration. This shows how easily the slippages of aesthetic choices can complicate Arab representations on US stages no matter how culturally competent the decision-makers. The contexts of production and reception set up inevitable correlational pitfalls, which at times create conscious dilemmas for theater makers while other times they go unnoticed until after the process concludes.

Building a Public: Outreach, Marketing, and Deeper Dialogues

Golden Thread's commitment to cultural competency in its production process extends beyond the performance itself to the company's audience engagement practices, which begin with pre-production outreach and culminate with "deeper dialogues." Since its inception, Golden Thread has been building a theatrical public around its work that bridges local groups and diverse perspectives by embedding discourse generation within their art practice. According to Odcikin, this desire to create an inclusive and dialogue-centered theater company came from founding artistic director Torange Yeghiazarian's own intersectionality as an Iranian-Armenian-American immigrant who grew up in a Muslim-Christian household (Odcikin, 2018 Interview). Indeed the company developed as a passion project not only for Yeghiazarian but also for the network of diasporic artists and audiences who invest in Golden Thread as an artistic home for MENA cultural life.

Golden Thread's foundation story, built on personal outreach and collaboration, exemplifies its intimate relationship with the public and inspires its current engagement strategy, the first step of which is pre-production outreach to local communities. For each

play, the company identifies specific groups to target with customized communications. It selects groups that are represented in whichever play it is producing, but it also tries to pair them with less connected communities that could find common ground or relation through their experience of the play. In the case of *We Swim*, the company chose to focus on engaging Arab Americans— as seen in the production process— as well as US military personnel since the play touches on issues that intersect both groups. The play highlights potential conflicts between the two publics and their perspectives, yet it explores those differences through the relatable frame of family dynamics. Therefore, Golden Thread saw an opportunity to facilitate meaningful dialogue as well as help diversify the audience of Arab American theater.

Generally, the entire staff contributes to Golden Thread's personalized outreach efforts, though much of that labor falls to the artistic director due to understaffing. Yeghiazarian was instrumental in shaping the language and appeal of outreach material for each community during her tenure. She was careful to consider the various groups and discourses that each production engages. For instance, when I helped conduct *We Swim* outreach to the Arab American community, Yeghiazarian asked me to use a familiar rather than formal tone in my letters and to highlight how my own Arab American identity makes this production personal to me. The goal was not just to promote the play or its subject matter but to foster a connection that signalled Golden Thread's relatability to and belonging in the target community.

To enhance that connection, Golden Thread maintains a physical presence among its public through various networking efforts. For example, company representatives attended a number of public fairs, theater performances, and service organization meetings during my time with Golden Thread. Among them was a local Palestine Day Festival which attracted

Arab Americans from around the Bay Area and Yeghiazarian herself attended to reach out to new and old audiences. These efforts suggest that Golden Thread's grassroots, community-centered approaches to outreach play a significant role in building and sustaining its public.

Much of the company's outreach depends on existing personal and professional contacts among local leaders and organizations. However, in rare cases where those connections do not exist, Golden Thread hires an outreach coordinator to lead efforts for a specific project. This was the case in *We Swim*, where the company needed help reaching out to the local military community since it did not have an existing relationship with them. The coordinator, Erin Merritt, was a member of that community as well as an artist and supporter of Golden Thread's work. Therefore, she was able to utilize her intersectional experiences and relations to effectively appeal to the target group.

Interestingly, Merritt reported difficulties that demonstrate one of the potential challenges of performing outreach for Arab American theater within US contexts. She found that veterans and their service organizations were reluctant to participate in a theatrical event that was related to the Middle East. During one of Golden Thread's staff meetings, Merritt explained that this was perhaps due to a mistrust of "liberal" institutions like theater to represent military culture and communities without critical bias— especially as they comment on US military interventions in the Middle East. Potential audiences from that group expressed reservations about the production itself as well as any post-show discussion that might get contentiously political. To mitigate this discomfort, Golden Thread decided to share the *We Swim* script in advance with community leaders to assure them that this play did not attack their work or identity. Merritt reasoned that if audiences were encouraged to attend by somebody who was not affiliated with the theater company (ie. their own community leaders), they would be more trusting and willing to attend.

Golden Thread utilizes the same careful consideration for outreach and its relations with the public in its marketing strategy, which shapes the discursive sphere around productions in a way that facilitates intercultural exploration. The staff thoughtfully designs key messaging that filters into emails, press releases, video trailers, blog posts, and social media posts. They make sure to expand the appeal of their culturally specific work to as many audiences as possible. In addition, they attempt to reach the widest public possible by focusing their efforts online and maintaining a constant presence. However, the company also relies on Theater Bay Area, the local theater service organization, as well as Golden Thread's affiliate network of MENA cultural bodies to distribute physical marketing material (posters and postcards) across the region.

In the case of *We Swim*, marketing efforts began nine months in advance of opening night and primed the audience to receive the play using rhetoric that Golden Thread had developed around the themes of family, identity, and politics. They made this culturally specific play accessible by highlighting its universality, most prominently through its tagline "What if you fundamentally disagree with someone you deeply love?" Whether audience members were Arab American, military members, or neither did not matter, as long as they connected to the play's conflict and the dialogue that it encouraged. Additionally, Golden Thread shaped *We Swim* marketing to mirror the national political divisions that the public was experiencing at the time of the production, which coincided with the 2018 US midterm elections. This helped sell the play as current, relevant, and relatable, especially to audiences who might dismiss an Arab American story as niche theater. It showed those audiences that Arab American narratives are already woven into national discourses of ideology, identity, and belonging.

We Swim's marketing plan, like Golden Thread's general approach, primarily relied on online promotion to generate interest in and conversation on the production. It utilized the official Golden Thread website and the company's Facebook page to distribute information as well as sustain visibility and discourse among the public. However, each platform had its own strengths. For example, the company website served as the central archive for all digital marketing materials, such as promotional photos, videos, and blogs that introduced audiences to the production and dramaturgically contextualized the play. Blog topics included a behind-the-scenes look at the rehearsal process, a history of the play's 3-year MEA development process, and a biographical profile of the Lebanese singer Fairuz. They also included reflections from the cast on their characters and personal connection with *We Swim*, which goes beyond making the play accessible to making the artists themselves relatable to audiences. In addition, the website featured *We Swim* production reviews as well as previous press coverage of Golden Thread and its artists (ex. an *American Theatre* magazine interview with playwright Mona Mansour). This helped connect this particular production to an archive of existing works and conversations in the theatrical public sphere.

Meanwhile, the company's Facebook page helped circulate this archive in the interactive world of social media, among existing followers and potential audience members alike. All of the marketing materials featured on the official website were linked to corresponding Facebook posts. These appealed to the reader in the company's signature familiar tone with taglines like "Did you know that Fairuz's music plays a big part in our world premiere of '*We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War*'?" By using direct address, Golden Thread encouraged their online audience to respond to rather than passively consume their marketing. For instance, one follower commented on the post above by sharing a childhood memory of her listening to Fairuz music with her late father. This shows how audience members personalized their

connections to *We Swim* — and how Golden Thread used this to recruit them— through the exchanges that social media facilitated.

In addition, what Facebook provided that the company’s static website did not was the opportunity to check in with followers on a regular basis and to draw them in with snapshots of the production’s progress. For instance, in a series of weekly photos, Golden Thread invited audiences to witness the transformation of the wall-to-wall chalkboard set from model to stage. At one point, the company shared a shot of the completed and lighted set

with this caption: “Look at this photo that director Evren Odcikin snuck at a break during tech rehearsal! We can't wait to share the finished product with you” (Fig. 2). The company again used direct address to turn audience members into production insiders, inviting them to follow its process and invest in it. Golden Thread later posted a candid photo of an audience member utilizing that same chalkboard set during a post-show activity. The caption introduced the activity and said, “We've been moved by the generosity of everyone's responses” (Fig. 3).

This approach to social media marketing further personalizes the audience’s connection to a production and helps Golden Thread build a more intimate relationship with existing and new audience members.

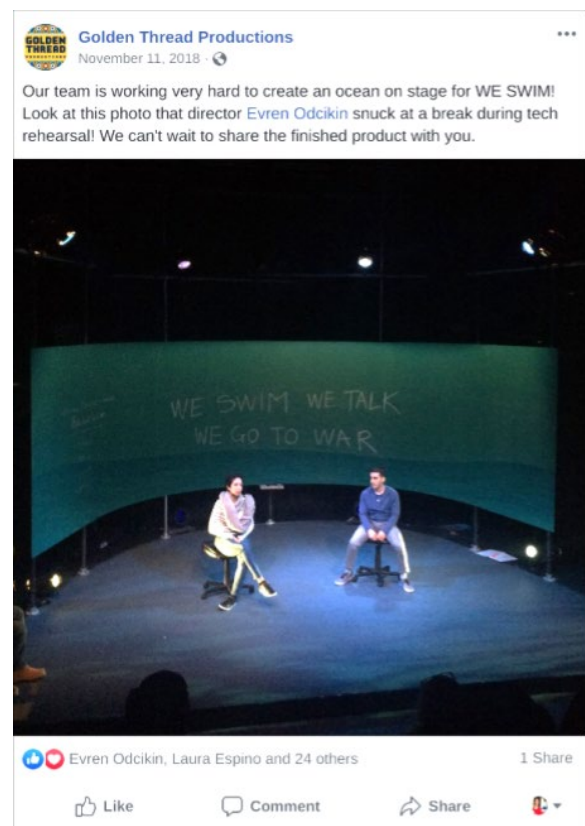


Fig. 2. Snapshot of Golden Thread's social media campaign for *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War*. Facebook, November 11, 2018.

Moreover, the company's interactive online discourse spills out of the ether and into the company's face-to-face public interactions when audiences attend a performance. Golden Thread's post-show engagement strategies build onto that discursive foundation and stress the importance of listening to and engaging with audiences in genuine multidirectional dialogue. I argue that this approach is the biggest factor in Golden Thread's success at public formation. In fact, Yeghiazarian shared that in a study commissioned by the Performing Arts Program of the Hewlett Foundation, one of the company's donors, survey data showed that Golden Thread audiences experienced a higher than average level of social bonding compared to similar non-profit theaters among the Foundation's grantees. "That proved to us that there's something about what we do that is so different," reflected Yeghiazarian, "[W]e are interested in dialogue. We don't just say that, we practice it. We actually listen when people talk, and we don't just have five questions that we're going to ask no matter what the feedback is" (Yeghiazarian, 2018 Interview).

This dedication to meaningful exchange and community building led Golden Thread to implement an initiative they called Deeper Dialogues in their 2013 five-year strategic plan. The measure institutionalized the company's inclusive philosophy by establishing new protocols for post-show engagement as well as the recording and analysis of audience feedback for future use. Protocols included tactile engagement methods (where audiences would leave open-ended input on site) and



Fig. 3. Snapshot of Golden Thread's social media campaign for *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War*. Facebook, November 24, 2018.

email surveys (where audiences would leave quantifiable and qualitative responses through an online form). Together, these methods gave Golden Thread a more nuanced understanding of its public and their response to the company's work, which informed all aspects of programming, marketing, as well as donor and patron cultivation.

Each production had a different audience engagement plan customized to its themes and projected audiences, and the company gave careful consideration to the design and execution of the *We Swim* plan. During the numerous staff meetings at which we debated potential on-site activities, Yeghiazarian stressed that "everybody's opinion matters when it comes to the [post-show] engagement because everybody is the audience. We want to create something that can talk to different kinds of people." This invitation to raise our awareness of diversity led us to consider and accommodate many limitations, including ability, cultural knowledge, and mental health. We also wanted to ensure that the communities we were specifically drawing together (military and Arab American) would be able to find common ground through the resulting dialogue.

Ultimately, our team decided to use the chalkboard set for a tactile engagement activity that dissolved the barrier between the audience and the stage. We would invite the audience to record their responses to an open-ended prompt directly on the set, while staff and actors joined them for a complimentary drink and conversation. For the prompt, we chose the question "How has the military or war touched your life?" because, even as we reflected on it ourselves, we found that it was impossible for anyone to honestly say that they (or someone they know) have not been affected. The US has one of the largest militaries in the world whose funding and reach is unparalleled. Its branches touch American lives in both subtle and profound ways, through everything from global wars to domestic disaster relief.

Therefore, we believed that this question would bridge the gap between the potentially disconnected communities that were congregating around *We Swim*.

The activity's execution and the recording of audience responses followed the usual Golden Thread practice. The company ensured that a senior staff representative attended every show, meeting and greeting audience members as they arrived as well as leading the effort to generate conversation after the performance. At the end of each evening, the representative took photos of the chalkboard responses for Golden Thread's archive and reported the highlights of their conversations in writing to the rest of the staff. Even actors and the backstage team were encouraged to share their conversations with audiences. I found that exercise enriching both as an artist on the production and a repeat audience member, because it helped me see the work through various perspectives that would otherwise elude me. Finally, during our weekly meetings, the staff collectively reflected on this information to assess the intrinsic impact of *We Swim* and our audience engagement methods. Golden Thread would later combine this qualitative analysis with data from online surveys, which quantifiably record audience demographics as well as motivations for attendance and levels of emotional and intellectual response to the play.

As this account demonstrates, Deeper Dialogues exemplifies Golden Thread's commitment to fostering dialogue while giving the company a detailed understanding of their public that shapes its strategies moving forward. This "unconscious learning," as Yeghiazarian called it, inspires rigorous intellectual exchange among the staff and filters into everything from production decisions to grant applications. Most importantly, it helps build a dedicated public that supports the company's work. Survey reports between 2014 and 2016 have shown that Golden Thread's young, educated, and culturally diverse audience is growing, with 49% reporting as first-time attendees. They also reveal that the top reasons for

attending include wanting to learn something new (30%), to be emotionally engaged (29%), and “to discover alternative perspectives on the Middle East” (26%) (“2014-16 Cumulative Audience Data Report”). These insights compel Golden Thread to continue producing work that nuances dominant narratives about the region and creates meaningful new connections to it. By being in tune with their audiences and the contexts in which they operate, the company models cultural competency, inclusivity and impactful social engagement.

Conclusions

This case study of Golden Thread Productions offers some key lessons for building the support structures necessary to sustain Arab American theater production while navigating its potentially complex conditions. They include providing reliable financial and artistic development support for new plays; scaffolding cultural competency into various stages of the production process; as well as engaging audiences through socially and culturally responsible strategies that foster a theatrical public for this work. More importantly, the case study illustrates some of the pitfalls and correlation dilemmas that inevitably impact Arab American theater. It suggests no easy answer to navigating these challenges beyond due diligence in upholding the integrity of culturally specific work in the production process while deeply engaging with one’s intercultural audience in order to productively facilitate their encounter with the work. Together, these lessons draw attention to the pressing needs of the contemporary Arab American theater movement, the missing infrastructures and institutional practices that can help achieve long-term sustainability.

Building on the previous chapter’s conclusions, this study argues for increasing development and production opportunities that offer culturally competent support for Arab American and MENA artists. Mansour’s reflections on her MEA development experience and the approach of Golden Thread to the *We Swim* production highlight the benefits of

working with culturally savvy theater organizations that can minimize the challenges of interculturality and biased conditions of production. Such companies foster a creative space in which theater makers can grapple with the messy contradictions of Arab American diasporic experience and identity without the pressure to self-censor or justify their work. Mansour's feedback in this study shows how invaluable that safety is to artists whose work so often gets misunderstood or politicized in the public sphere.

By creating that safe space and embracing the contradictions and complexities of Arab American theater through the production process, Golden Thread brings that messiness to the fore and compels audiences to confront it. This is the heart of the company's public-facing cultural work. Their artistic practice—and even their artistry—lies in the willingness and ability to tackle difficult or stigmatized subjects, including Arab and Arab American people, stories, and plural identities. Through culturally competent support, Golden Thread models how theater companies can better help marginalized artists counter their correlation dilemmas in practice and manage the pitfalls of Arab American representation as best as possible.

Meanwhile, this study also reveals the need for a collective approach to Arab American production that can tap into the potential of collaboration to create a sum effort or product that is greater than its parts. This especially applies to companies like Golden Thread and its cohort of MENA-centered organizations—small, non-profits whose limited resources and specialized focus tend to marginalize them within the larger theater institution. In other words, the MEA consortium financially and professionally supports Arab American theater production better than any one of its companies could individually. It also ensures that the cultural education and development taking place, as well as the discourse generated among their audiences, spread beyond any single company to a wider (and in this case national)

theatrical public sphere. Through networking and collaboration, these organizations have a better chance of helping each other grow, driving the industry toward greater engagement with Arab American theater, and promoting diversity and cultural competency in institutional practices overall.

In my interviews with them, Golden Thread staff reinforced the value of collaborating with the right theater makers and recruiting culturally knowledgeable staff in all aspects of their work. Yeghiazarian shared how isolated she felt when she first set out to establish the company and hinted at the unique dilemmas that she encountered in producing MENA theater: “I felt alone. I felt like no one on earth understood what I was going through, nobody had the same issues” (Yeghiazarian, 2018 Interview). But by reaching out to local theater companies with similar missions (ex. Darvag Theater Group and Crowded Fire Theater) as well as cultural organizations that served MENA populations (ex. the Arab American Cultural Center), she built a network that developed mutually supportive relationships. In the case of Crowded Fire Theater, that partnership grew deeper with respect to operations, as the two companies now share space, staff members, and back-end services— what they hope will become a new, financially sustainable model for small non-profit theaters. Mulholland also affirmed the importance of hiring theater makers who are steeped in cultural knowledge, if not of MENA heritage. She explained that Golden Thread often has to compromise when it cannot find those collaborators or invest additional labor toward mentorship and training to create a supportive production environment (Mulholland). These comments reveal how theater companies serving culturally specific publics, particularly ones as marginalized as Arab or MENA Americans, need to adapt or overexert their resources in order to provide the necessary support for that type of theater. This further underscores the need for collaboration and the pooling of resources among affiliated theater companies.

In addition to providing social and practical support, collectivity among under-supported organizations helps fight the anti-professional stigma attached to culturally specific theater companies. Mulholland shared that Golden Thread used to not be “taken seriously” as a professional organization because of its focus on MENA artists and stories. Yeghiazarian also highlighted this disadvantage, saying, “We're not being trusted to become institutions. We constantly have to prove ourselves and it's exhausting. I've been proving Golden Thread for 22 years” (Yeghiazarian, 2018 Interview). Research has shown that anti-professional stigma reverberates in many community-centered companies and performances because of entrenched taste hierarchies in the US theater institution (Cohen-Cruz). However, by joining with like-minded organizations, Golden Thread was able to subvert that stigma, build legitimacy, and establish MENA-centering infrastructure within a biased industry. This also reinforces the conclusion that networking and collectivity among such companies, as underrepresented or lacking in resources as they might be, creates more effective and inclusive support structures for marginalized theater makers.

In the case of culturally specific theater, the synergistic potential of collaboration becomes even more essential in the process of gathering, understanding, and incorporating the knowledge necessary to create a culturally and socially responsible performance. We have seen how *We Swim* theater makers and consultants collectively shaped the production within the inclusive process that was led by Golden Thread. Their collaborative efforts suggest that theater companies wishing to support Arab American works need to commit to finding qualified human resources as well as creating a safe space in which everyone (but especially cultural consultants) have the agency to respectfully educate each other and impact production decisions. However, as this case study also urges, they must keep in mind that even well-intentioned and culturally competent artists can fall into the traps of

(mis)representation no matter how diligent their dramaturgical or creative process. In diasporic work, there is no surefire way to anticipate, mitigate or eliminate the conflicts brought about by interculturality— both in production and reception. Therefore, theater makers must tolerate the inevitable pitfalls and prepare to navigate them responsibly, especially if the marginalized culture they are representing is one that is often misunderstood or mobilized against its own community like Arab American culture. This phenomenon is both a consequence of practical correlational dilemmas and a manifestation of them at an institutional level.

This point brings us to the second major need that this case study highlights, which is for the US theater institution to adopt an approach to Arab American work and cultural competency that pushes beyond getting the proper costume or casting somebody who is “the right shade of brown,” as Odcikin describes the trend (2018 Interview). Instead, the process should include sustained educational engagement with the cultural elements and contexts of a play, preferably through the direct involvement of the represented community.

Yeghiazarian even suggests that attention to cultural competency should begin in season selection as she makes sure to get “the artists that can do justice to [a] piece” before committing to it (Yeghiazarian, 2018 Interview). In fact, play selection is one of the areas that Yeghiazarian and Jamil Khoury advise on in their open letter to theater industry leaders, along with casting, consulting, and “facilitating the conversation” (Khoury and Yeghiazarian). Through this advocacy and their own production work, they model ways to reimagine institutional norms in ways that disrupt the bias that Arab American theater makers have highlighted (Khoury; El Guindi; Najjar) and that this research has tried to address.

One of the biggest obstacles to this type of institutional change is the perceived lack of producibility and relatability to audiences, which needs to be dismantled for Arab American theater to have a fair chance at sustainability. To that end, this case study proves that Arab American works *can* be produced with competent theater makers and practices. It also shows that companies *can* help audiences relate to these works by facilitating connections across perceived differences, both behind the scenes and in front. This case emphasizes the value of engaging both artists and audiences in critical dialogue in order to build a receptive theatrical public—a shared investment in production, their narratives, and the communities they represent. In order to do that, the mainstream theater institution needs to take a page from the Golden Thread playbook. It needs to employ the appropriate dramaturgical and marketing tools to make Arab American plays accessible (even personal) to diverse groups of people; to create interactive dialogues that bridge presumed cultural and political differences; and to embrace the stance that this genre is already woven into the plurality of American identity and narratives.

The institution should also aspire beyond Golden Thread's playbook, which stopped short of engaging the audience in the intercultural conflicts of *We Swim* more explicitly. Beyond universal themes of war and family, the company could have produced a dialogue that unpacked the tensions of diasporic experience, questions of belonging, or debates over perceived cultural authenticity. For instance, the post-show activity could have invited audience members to consider the representation of Arab characters in *We Swim*, mirroring the critical behind-the-scenes discussions that the production team was having about stereotypes. By transferring such conversations into their audience engagement strategies, theater companies can directly involve their public in the valuable processes of cultural inquiry and negotiation.

However, that is not to suggest that culturally specific theater companies like Golden Thread should carry the burden of representation, interrogation, and advocacy. All theater companies— which is why I refer to the institution as a whole— have the social responsibility of leveraging their power to create a cultural shift and to ease the burden of the conditions of production on marginalized and Othered artists. Diligent companies like Golden Thread serve as the few nodes within the theatrical public sphere in which hegemonic ideologies and structures that negatively affect under-represented artists can be dismantled and reimagined. Therefore, I suggest that their collective efforts, especially with regard to audience engagement strategies, should actively spark and elevate critical counter-discourses whenever possible in order to affect institutional change.

Arab American theater today largely depends on Golden Thread and similar companies, no matter how small or powerful, to form the backbone of its support structure. For her part, Yeghizarian considers Golden Thread's mere existence and survival to be a success: "Even if we can't support everybody, the fact that they know we are here makes a difference for people" (2018 Interview). Her statement affirms my assessment of the company as a pioneer for Arab American theatrical infrastructure and one that offers valuable insight for its future sustainability. My first-hand experience, along with this larger study of Arab American theater, have illuminated the tremendous benefit of culturally competent development, collaboration, and audience engagement to this field of theater production. This kind of "subtle activist" approach, as Yeghiazarian puts it, empowers marginalized theater makers to tackle the complexities of their correlated dilemmas and lean into the messy task of intercultural negotiation without fear of erosion. Its adoption across the institution, across communities of difference, would herald a truly inclusive American theater that not only discursively advocates for diversity but fundamentally weaves it into practice.

IV. “Cousins Doing Comedy”: The New York Arab American Comedy Festival

“NYAACF matters because unfortunately hatred towards others, including Arabs, has increased in the United States. The festival is more important than ever, and it should continue because there's so much more talent to be discovered and because it helps humanize us.”

— Maysoun Zayid, NYAACF Founder and Comedian

When I first encountered Arab American stand-up comedy in the mid-2000s, I felt both excited and oddly confused. It was the first time I had seen Arab comedians in US popular culture, not to mention getting laughs for critical jokes within that context. Watching *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* on cable television’s Comedy Central, a performance featuring Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) comedians Ahmed Ahmed, Dean Obeidallah, Aron Kader and Maz Jobrani, felt like discovering a new planet never before seen in our mainstream media universe. That discovery led me down a rabbit hole of Arab American stand-up comedy, eventually taking me on a pilgrimage in 2014 to the New York Arab American Comedy Festival (NYAACF).

This annual festival was founded in 2003 by comedians Dean Obeidallah and Maysoun Zayid “to battle the negative images and stereotypes of Arabs flooding the media” (Zayid). They wanted to create a platform for marginalized Arab American artists to express their perspectives and, as Obeidallah puts it, “celebrate our heritage unapologetically”(Lichter). This desire to respond to stigmatizing discourses arose in part out of post-9/11 backlash against Arabs and Muslims. Obeidallah, a lawyer turned comedian of mixed Sicilian and Palestinian Arab heritage, described this historical moment as a converting experience that led him to embrace his Arab roots and utilize comedy to tackle Islamophobia and anti-Arab hatred (Sprusansky). He pitched the idea of creating a festival that showcases Arab

American comedy to Zayid, a fellow comedian he had met on the New York comedy circuit who frequently introduced herself as a “Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey.”. Zayid immediately embraced the project but, as she put it, they “had no idea how much work creating a festival would be” (Interview).

What the pair of producers did not anticipate was being on a collision course with biased conditions of production that would bring substantial and correlated organizational challenges. In our interview, Zayid recalled that they were initially in over their heads as they struggled to recruit talent, fundraise, and secure a performance venue in their first year. Many of the difficulties they faced due to inexperience were worsened by the anti-Arab climate in which they were trying to operate, particularly so soon after the attacks of 9/11. For instance, Zayid said that NYAACF was rejected by several performance venues until they finally “found someone that was just happy to have the cash.” The festival changed venues for the first five years until it was welcomed into Gotham Comedy Club, where it has been ever since. She attributed this challenge to the climate of fear and hatred in which “people shied away from doing something with the word ‘Arab’ in the title” (Interview). Her comments on this experience support the correlation dilemma theory, which manifested in these artists’ struggle to find actual and conceptual space in the comedy industry. Institutional bias coupled with the charged post-9/11 context to create a critical organizational obstacle for the emerging festival.

Despite such difficulties, the producers managed to navigate their conditions and build a foundation for the festival with a few strategic collaborations. In their first year, they overcame the lack of institutional or organizational support by partnering with existing Arab American organizations both within and outside the performing arts. Co-sponsors of the inaugural festival included the New York chapters of the Network of Arab-American

Professionals and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (Ferguson). In addition, the festival partnered with Nibras Theater Collective, which was founded in June 2001 to create a network of Arab American theater makers looking to increase the “positive visibility” of the community (Ferguson; Hudes). This slightly more established company helped NYAACF with their artistic administration and development in their first year. Afterwards, the festival’s producers enlisted the help of actor Waleed Zuaiter who co-organized NYAACF with them for several years before his move to Hollywood. Zayid said that she and Obeidallah have produced the festival themselves since then. However, she added, “now my assistant does everything because the two of us are too busy and the festival is a well-oiled machine” (Zayid).

Early versions of NYAACF featured a variety of comedic performances, including sketch comedy, stand-up and short films, but that format “became unrealistic” due to the producers’ time constraints. Nevertheless, the festival attracted more collaborators, trimmed its programming to a sustainable level, and became that “well-oiled machine” which went on to feature over a hundred artists. By its sixteenth iteration in 2019, which I also attended and that featured five different shows over the festival weekend, NYAACF was running on its historic momentum and selling more tickets than ever according to Zayid (Interview).

This chapter explores NYAACF using my experience as a participant-observer in the 2014 and 2019 festivals, as well as data from archival research and interviews with producers and participants. It examines the festival’s challenges and achievements within the frames of eventification, organization, and genre. Throughout this chapter, I argue that NYAACF has helped Arab American comedians tackle their correlational dilemmas by keeping with its stated goal to increase the positive visibility of Arab American artists and creating a safe space that centers their marginalized voices and comic critiques. Most

importantly, the festival has supported Arab American voices by building up an informal artist and audience network that helped launch, amplify, and sustain the careers of many comedians, in some cases facilitating their successful crossover to the mainstream entertainment industry. While NYAACF has established itself as an annual cultural marker, a vehicle for professional advancement, and a forum for the negotiation of Arab Americans' tense correlations within US popular culture, I also argue that the festival has limited its own development due to its loose structural organization and reliance on grassroots production methods. These various features of the festival raise questions about long-term sustainability, but they also reveal some ways in which popular culture movements can strategically and effectively navigate biased conditions of production within the performing arts.

Festivals as Sites of Subjunctivity

Festival studies have taken a variety of perspectives in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and performance. In many cases, as the folklorist Jack Santino points out, these “public display events” resist concise theorization and analysis due to their multilayered dimensions of expression and instrumentality (“From Carnavalesque”). My own premise for this chapter, however, is this basic understanding of festivals: they are liminal events defined in time and space, where participants gather in a shared experience and *something happens*. This purposely broad definition frames my examination of NYAACF and its implications for minoritarian popular performance, drawing from the following perspectives in festival studies.

Early approaches, according to scholar Laurent Sébastien Fournier, analyzed these events through the lens of the “carnival model.” Despite privileging Euro-Christian centrality, this viewpoint touches on potentially universal dimensions of the festival as a collective public

celebration. Sociologists understood festival as a temporary inversion of everyday life, while psychologists focused on its cathartic psychic dimension, interpreting the event as a “moment for transgression when cultural standards get loose” (Fournier 152). Whether they marked cyclical social celebrations or provided a society with a psychic release valve, studies suggested that festivals in fact support the existing social order by reinforcing dominant culture. They condition the public to relate in specific ways to each other and to state or religious authority, cementing the structures of social stratification in the process. By allowing the participating public to intermingle across classes (or other social groups), festivals temporarily invert the established structures before ultimately restoring them to their norms.

More recently, this “carnival model” of analysis has given way to the “heritage model” in which festivals are understood as ritualized cyclical celebrations of shared culture rather than as liminal social equalizers. “Unlike social scientists, folklorists argued that festivals were a privileged place where traditional popular cultures could develop. As periodic collective celebrations, they revealed local beliefs and values and played a part in political and cultural legitimization processes” (Fournier 153). Particularly after World War II, festivals became a feature of the modern culture industry in Europe and the US, acquiring greater economic and cultural capital. They became rooted in the local while also celebrating and engaging the global or diasporic. Additionally, they found their place within hegemonic cultural institutions such as museums, transforming from celebrations of popular culture to vehicles of high culture. Despite its own Euro-American centrality, this “heritage model” provides a helpful lens for examining the ritualized festival traditions of diasporic communities such as Arab Americans, who hold a marginal social status in US society and use festivals to center and celebrate their identities within dominant culture.

In my study of NYAACF, I employ a blended approach to analyzing festivals that recognizes both its subversive qualities and its celebratory nature in relation to diasporic cultural heritage. Taking up Santino’s conceptualization, I suggest that this festival exists on a continuum between the carnivalesque and the ritualesque, joining multiple cultural, social, political, and economic dimensions (“From Carnavalesque”). NYAACF resistantly— or as Obeidallah put it “unapologetically” — inverts the norms by centering, negotiating, and celebrating Arab American identity within a generally anti-Arab hegemonic context. It gives its performers, who would normally be marginalized in the public sphere, the unchecked power to engage and critique uniquely Arab American perspectives. Moreover, the festival’s ritualization (ie. its annual recurrence as a cultural marker) as well as its development of a collaborative network of underrepresented artists make it an essential node in the infrastructure supporting Arab American heritage, cultural expression, and public formation through performance.

Festivals like NYAACF embody inherently political goals within multicultural societies like the US due to this support of minoritarian public formation. They not only help diasporic groups explore the complexities and contradictions of their hybrid cultural identity, but they also create a political union out of that identity’s diversity. As the scholar Temple Hauptfleisch points out, festivals exemplify “poly-systems” whose process “usually involves the creation or construction and propagation of a sense of unity [out of plurality], a set of shared intellectual, societal, religious, cultural and political beliefs” (41). Furthermore, he suggests that festivals derive influence through their “eventification” — their framing as a meaningful public event— and thus impact the cultural and political memory of a society on a recurring basis (Hauptfleisch 39). They therefore serve as a useful vehicle for supporting

marginalized publics, like Arab Americans, in their efforts to consolidate and express their political identity and power within a pluralistic public sphere.

The temporal and social liminality of the festival, characterized by what Victor Turner calls “cultural subjunctivity,” also facilitates such a political potential for this type of event (“Liminality and the Performative Genre” 20-21). “Subjunctivity” implies possibility within public performance, where space, norms and participants are temporarily transformed into what *could* be instead of what *is*. This makes festivals a liminal site for radical (re)imagining of collective identity through collective reflexivity, particularly so through the dialogic genre of stand-up comedy and in ways which will be explored later in this chapter. However, this same agonistic feature which empowers marginalized groups sometimes challenges the unity of a festival and their *communitas*— or the “relatively undifferentiated” yet unstructured community created among its participants (Turner, “Liminality and *Communitas*” 360). Hauptfleisch argues that the tension between a festival’s *conceptual* unity and *actual* difference makes it difficult for the event to fulfill its socio-political purposes effectively (42). In other words, the dynamic forces shaping the festival (especially its intra- and inter-group aspirations) compete for dominance within this subjunctive space, thereby threatening the efficacy of the event and its impact on its public.

These arguments support the correlation dilemma theory, especially as it applies to Arab American public formation, the group’s pluralistic self-expression, and the pitfalls of that expression within a biased public sphere. I suggest that NYAACF faces dilemmas similar to those of Arab American playwriting and stage production, at least in terms of being forced to navigate specific obstacles in the production process. Yet unlike the others, this festival does so more responsively and impactfully due to aspects of its eventification, organization, and performance genre. These dimensions also shape what I see as the festival’s paradox; it is

both a structured organization and a fluid institution, a body and a process, that unevenly leverages its agential impact on its relations to the public sphere. The next sections will analyze the features of NYAACF within the above framework to illuminate the mechanics and significance of such public performance events to Arab American culture and marginalized groups more generally.

Eventification as Empowerment

Using Hauptfleisch's concept of eventification, I read the annual NYAACF as a marker of time, place, culture, and status. Every year, the festival gathers Arab American comedians with their audience in the heart of New York City, one of the capitals of national and global culture. In addition, it takes place at Gotham Comedy Club, a landmark venue for stand-up comedy in the US and one that has been regularly featured in mainstream media outlets like the Comedy Central cable channel. NYAACF's venue and urban location signal that the festival aspires to a relatively prestigious place in popular culture, particularly in the field of stand-up comedy. While Arab American comedians perform regularly in New York's comedy circuit, often toning down their cultural specificity based on their specific correlations (ex. venue or audience), NYAACF seeks to eventify such a regular occurrence and to frame it within specific temporal and cultural parameters. Thus the festival adds to the meaningfulness of the common performance by making it exceptional and curated. Its framing signals to all participants, whether performers, audiences or critics, that this event is culturally significant and that engaging in it holds symbolic value. This magnifies the visibility of Arab American culture and talent, fulfilling the core mission of the festival and fortifying the public that it represents against the correlational dilemmas affecting their regular performances.

In doing so, the eventification of this festival intentionally responds to its public sphere contexts and conditions of production which brand Arab Americans as Others. As asserted by the producers before, NYAACF was established in part to counter the growing anti-Arab climate in the US after 9/11. Negative narratives about Arabs not only drove the organizers' mission for the festival, but they also stigmatized the event to some extent, as Zayid's earlier account of venue challenges shows. Therefore, NYAACF's eventification within its particular contexts helped make it a counter-discursive platform as well as a safe space for the marginalized Arab American public to navigate their biased conditions.

Evidence of this strategic eventification can be found in the language used by NYAACF and its producers to distinguish the event. For instance, the festival's name insists on the



Fig. 4. The 2019 New York Arab American Comedy Festival poster featuring their signature camel cartoons. (Source: www.arabcomedy.com)

ethnically specific label “Arab” despite the term’s confirmed stigmas. Moreover, the producers’ previously cited description of the festival and its mission on the official website emphasize the “unapologetic” quality of the event. NYAACF thus defies the antagonism of the public sphere by directly highlighting and celebrating Arabness in spite of its negative correlational pitfalls. These choices explicitly signal the event’s resistant stance and response to the biased conditions in which it operates.

Further evidence of strategic eventification can be found in the festival’s use of imagery in

its problematic yet catchy marketing campaign, which annually features cartoon camels

spoofing various pop culture icons. For example, 2019's poster not only featured camels posing as the cast of the iconic television show *Friends*, but it also pictures a hookah water pipe and *keffiyeh* (كوفية, traditional Arab headdress) print on an umbrella (Fig. 4). These elements are not inherently problematic until they are framed within an Arab context and made into reductive cultural symbols. In fact, camels, hookahs, and *keffiyehs* frequently appear in media that stereotypically depict Arabs, just as the play *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* revealed in the earlier chapter (46). These items have gained iconographic capital within US popular culture as tokens of Arabness associated with backwardness, terrorism, or exoticism (Shaheen; Alsultany).

NYAACF's satirical usage of these symbols works both for and against its eventification due to the dilemmas of visual representation outlined in the last chapter. On the one hand, using these images signals ethnic specificity, critiques their stereotypical iconography, and generates interest and recognition among potential audiences. However, the cartoons can also discourage potential engagement due to bias or offense and further reinforce the stereotypical associations of those images, just like the costume props analyzed in the production of *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War* (84-86). Such depictions can unintentionally secure instead of subvert anti-Arab or Islamophobic misconceptions, adding to the harmful cultural capital of those icons within the US public imagination. Whether positive or negative, the use of these visuals adds another layer of symbolism to the festival which distinguishes it as a special event that centers heritage while being in dialogue with popular culture and its assumptions.

These examples of labeling and marketing not only frame NYAACF as a cultural marker with conceptual unity, but they also express agential wisdom on the part of its organizers and in the face of correlational dilemmas. In other words, these decisions subvert the power

structures that impose stigmas and stereotypes on Arab Americans while restricting their ability to freely and critically respond through performance. NYAACF's eventification creates the opportunity for this marginalized group "to reflect its identity, to attain recognition, or even to juxtapose itself to the prevailing culture in order to [...] *confront it*" (Cremona 7, emphasis mine). Thus, the strategic embrace of the "Arab" label and of problematic icons to punctuate eventification acts as a performance of "agentic power." As opposed to *power* defined as "possession of control, authority, or influence over others" ("Definition"), which a marginalized group does not actually have, *agentic power* refers to the character of the action itself. It is independent or in defiance of the constraints of social structures and so transforms the willful actor into an agent (Campbell 409-410). Through this lens, NYAACF's strategic eventification does not necessarily restore power to Arab Americans within the larger scope of social and institutional structures, but it asserts their free ability to challenge those structures that wield power over them. Through the carnivalesque lens, this agential cultural event disrupts or temporarily inverts the marginal position of Arab American comedians in their relation to conditions of production while ritualizing the marking of their heritage and pluralistic identity on their own terms.

This makes NYAACF a cultural institution of its own within the Arab American public and the comedy industry more broadly. It is an agentic cultural practice that facilitates the building and binding together of a self-identifying Arab American collective. Meanwhile, it circumvents, not just subverts, that group's correlational dilemmas, which result from their misrepresentation in and exclusion from US popular culture. These features distinguish NYAACF from the subjects explored in previous chapters— playwriting and stage production— because those practices are constrained by more rigid infrastructures and conditions of production. Their correlation dilemmas have to be negotiated within existing

institutional norms dictated by the publishing and theater industries. In contrast, NYAACF has the benefit of being a grassroots popular performance event, relatively more independent of mainstream demands and support structures. This allows the festival to circumvent conventions, express “agentic power” through eventification, and mobilize a marginalized community in order to amplify its counter-narratives. In other words, NYAACF benefits from being a fluid institution that makes its own rules, shapes its own events, and works outside of established producing organizations, as precarious as that mode of operation may be. I will return to this last point later, but for now, it’s important to note this advantage and its role in unconstrained Arab American public formation.

Another way in which NYAACF enhances this formation is through its festival culture, which is an important social dimension of its institutional character. Not only is the festival’s comedic performance itself a negotiation and celebration of identity, but the festival experience facilitates communal identification through direct post-show interaction, similar in ways to Golden Thread’s audience engagement practices. After the 2019 festival performances that I attended (and those in 2014, for that matter), festival participants flowed into the long, narrow lobby of Gotham Comedy Club. We — performers and audiences — mingled freely until club employees ushered us out to make way for the next show. Even then, the crowd spilled onto the sidewalk in front of the club where we continued to chat, take photos, and network (overwhelmingly using social media, of course). This went on for a good part of an hour and would have lasted longer had the cold weather not motivated us to disperse.

In both my 2014 and 2019 experiences, I was struck by how relaxed that lobby space felt despite being cramped and how that matched the ease with which the performers and audiences interacted. There were no bodyguards or velvet ropes or other tangible barriers

separating participants from each other. In fact, the performers (including the producers, Obeidallah and Zayid) made themselves easily accessible to their audience and engaged them with a welcoming, familiar attitude. Everyone shared the space freely, collectively agreeing to relinquish the sanctity of personal boundaries in order to commune with one another. In addition, the conversations I heard and took part in mirrored that physical intimacy, with much of it revolving around shared heritage and personal stories.

These features of NYAACF reflect what Vicki Cremona defines as a nonhierarchical festival. Coupled together, the interactive stand-up performances and the post-show socialization “create[d] a theatrical event where [...] the whole community participating in the festival, identify themselves as a single homogeneous group, and by this process is [...] transformed into a temporary ‘communitas’” (Cremona 11). This sense of oneness extended to the public space of the sidewalk, where groups of participants continued to huddle together and enjoy personal interactions that traversed any imagined difference between them.

My own experience of this communitas didn’t end on the sidewalk in 2019. I was invited to join the afterparty each night of the festival at Jake’s Saloon, two doors down from Gotham. This social space was slightly more exclusive, reserved for the performers and their guests. Most of those guests were friends, family, or professional acquaintances of the comedians like myself. Because of the selective demographics, the gathering was more hierarchical, but its atmosphere was even more relaxed than the lobby or the sidewalk. People were mingling over food and beverages, conversations got more nuanced, and in some cases plans were made for future gatherings or creative collaborations. Thanks to the exclusivity of this isolated social space, there was a higher level of intimacy and networking among the remaining participants.

It became clear to me from the conversations within these various social spaces that many people were locals and regular participants in NYAACF. To them, this festival seemed to be a communal ritual that annually impacted their lives in that liminal time and space. Even if audiences followed a particular comedian on their regular circuit, they came to this festival to experience something different— an *event*. This further enhanced my understanding of NYAACF as more than a subversive annual performance but as a social and cultural institution that contributed to public formation. In fact, Zayid suggested that this communal dimension was the key to the festival’s successful establishment and longevity. She largely credited the audience for sustaining NYAACF, adding that “consistency is crucial. People look forward to Fest every year.” Moreover, Zayid suggested that participation was primarily motivated by social rather than commercial benefits. “Dean and I don’t do this for money,” she explained. “The comedians in the festival are like family to us. We love discovering talent each year and doing comedy with people who have been in the festival from the start. The festival is fun first and that has made all the difference” (Zayid). These statements echo Yeghiazarian’s from the previous chapter, which similarly emphasize the central role of social bonding among artists and audiences in sustaining Golden Thread as a community-centered organization (93).

Therefore, one can conclude that public formation and social bonding are critical to the sustainability of Arab American performance, performer networks, and their supportive organizations. They create value and cultural capital for the marginalized public that they represent which is denied them within the wider societal spheres. Case in point, while NYAACF’s social dimension resonates differently for me as a California resident who lacks regular access to the festival, I still value its imprint on national Arab American culture as well as the sense of *communitas* that it creates. NYAACF’s eventification as a venue for

“unapologetic” counter-discursive expression helps build conceptual unity and respond to anti-Arab bias in a way that fulfills the various needs and aspirations of the Arab American public. In doing so, the festival reclaims agentic power on behalf of that public, navigating correlational dilemmas, social stigmas, and belonging within the US and its pop culture industry all at once.

Organization, Networks, and Collaborative Economy

Behind the festival’s experiential dimension lies the production process that shapes it, which this study will turn to now in order to explore the structures and creative momentum supporting NYAACF. The concept of agentic power again plays a role in this piece of the examination. In minoritarian festivals like NYAACF, which are not sponsored by church, state, or commerce, I echo Santino’s assertion that the very act of their organization is a political act within dominant culture (xii). NYAACF organizers bring participants together from across the US to claim public space and intervene in national popular discourses on behalf of a marginalized social group. They also assert their stake in the New York culture economy by engaging in the monetized and standardized operations of festival production despite the discriminatory obstacles that they faced. In these ways, the agential act of organizing, simultaneously national and local, takes on political and economic power that is otherwise limited due to systemic biases against Arab Americans.

The festival derives this agentic power both from its grassroots organization and its charismatic leaders, founding producers Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid. As mentioned earlier, the pair met while performing on the New York stand-up circuit, and the idea of NYAACF took off with urgency shortly after the attacks of 9/11. According to Zayid, the first year was a challenging one, and the co-founders “had to beg people to be in the festival” because they couldn’t recruit enough talent. “We had nothing to show for ourselves,” she

recalled, referring to both funds and reputation (Zayid). In addition, the same stigmatizing correlations that made it difficult to book a venue also likely posed some challenge to finding comedians willing to perform in an explicitly Arab American festival.

However, the producers did find a grassroots network to lean on during this critical time. They partnered with Arab American theater collective Nibras, which was already established in the New York fringe scene and had a similar mission to NYAACF. Partnering with this group helped Zayid and Obeidallah scout Arab American talent, fundraise, and administer the organization in their challenging first year. It also connected them to actor Waleed Zuaiter, who was a member of Nibras and would become co-producer of NYAACF for the next five years. These grassroots connections decisively circumvented the obstacles of stigma and shaped the organizational model of the festival, reflecting and supporting the founders' vision for a community-centered event. In addition, these methods fulfilled another goal of theirs, which they state as the desire “to challenge as well as inspire our fellow Arab Americans to create outstanding works of comedy” (“NYAACF History”). Therefore, their outreach to and partnerships with Arab American artists and organizations was both a means and an end of their work— a way to showcase hidden talent *and* boost cultural production in a biased field.

The statement also implicitly reveals their wish to build a professional network that centers the value of collectivity and collaboration, despite their seemingly fixed status as the leaders of NYAACF. Obeidallah and Zayid have grown the Arab American comedy network to the point where, as Zayid puts it, they now “have to reject amazing comics” due to overwhelming applications (Interview). Interestingly, this grassroots growth and focus on the collective has not yet resulted in changes to the leadership model at NYAACF, as the founding producers continue to occupy the most visible roles in the festival more than

sixteen years after its founding. They were the *de facto* hosts of the event at both of the festivals that I attended in 2014 and 2019— and presumably at every annual iteration. They could also be seen in and out of the lighting booth throughout the shows, running the cues and keeping time for performers. Needless to say, they hold a significant amount of control in the festival's operations.

In addition to being the face of the event itself, Obeidallah and Zayid exert their authority by being the primary voice of NYAACF in its marketing and promotion. One example of this, explored earlier, is the power of labeling that the producers assert by choosing the symbols with which to represent the festival. These choices reveal their subversive motivations as organizers and artists faced with correlational dilemmas that stigmatize their Arab identity. Moreover, Obeidallah and Zayid extend this outspoken resistance to their interactions with the press. They are by far the most frequently interviewed in national outlets such as PBS (Baker and Naim) and the New York Times (Buckley; Czajowski; Haberman), as well as internationally by MENA networks like Al Jazeera (Jamjoom) and Al Arabiya (Barghouthy). They use this coverage to regularly and explicitly highlight NYAACF's mission to positively change perspectives on Arabs in the US and globally.

The co-founders also help promote the festival within their independent careers, both directly and indirectly. For instance, Obeidallah, a lawyer turned comedian, radio host, and columnist, sometimes includes his NYAACF producer credit in his bylines and plugs the festival when he covers entertainment news as a writer. Zayid, a comedian, actress and disability advocate, receives steady coverage for her work and more so since she gave the number one TED Talk of 2014 titled *I got 99 problems... palsy is just one* (TED). NYAACF often features into Zayid's artist profile as does the festival's mission, because this intersectional artist advocates for better representation across disabled, Arab, and Muslim

publics alike. Additionally, both producers drive the social media promotion of the festival, using their personal accounts to amplify it beyond the followers of the official NYAACF account.

In spite of their centrality at the helm, the pair of producers have prioritized collectivity and extended their grassroots leadership to Arab-affiliated stand-up communities by supporting a variety of comedy events similar to NYAACF. Among the more visible are *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, the Big Brown Comedy Hour festival, and the annual Muslim Funny Fest, which they co-founded in 2015 to be more inclusive of Muslim comedians of non-Arab ethnic heritage (Silverman). Obeidallah also co-produced the 2011 documentary film *The Muslims Are Coming!* with Iranian American comedian Negin Farsad, which followed Muslim American comedians combating bigotry with free performances across the US South and West (“About Dean”). These valuable developments have created a horizontal network of artists who mutually inform and support each other’s work as they face similar correlational challenges performing within US contexts. In this way, the contributions of each node within the network triggers a reciprocal return in several forms (ie. financial, promotional, social) but above all acts as a support system that helps sustain the artists and their resistant work.

This grassroots ecology exemplifies what Savage and Symonds define as the “collaborative economics” of arts production. The group dynamic among this horizontal network creates the optimal conditions that trigger the “multiplicative” potential of collaboration, which not only “doubles energy resources by putting together two or more people’s efforts toward a shared goal, but also [...] create[s] a further reserve of energy” from the synergy of that teamwork (Savage and Symonds 86). Thereby, this network of diverse yet similarly marginalized artists (Arab, Muslim, South Asian, etc.) generates a

cultural product, or movement, that is greater than the sum of its parts and builds momentum for future growth and sustainability.

To illustrate, a survey of the social media pages of the various related festivals shows how critical cross-promotion is among their organizers and performers. Savage and Symonds refer to this relationship as a “communo-ludic orientation” in their study of a similar trend in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world’s largest arts festival, where artists and companies mutually advertise each other’s work over the course of the month-long event (264). This phenomenon of solidarity utilizes the network possibilities of online platforms to establish and promote a horizon of expectations for related events. “Thus, the liminal experience of the festival begins for many as one [...] brought into being *collaboratively* through the posted and reposted iterations of social media” (Savage and Symonds 265, emphasis mine).

On a related note, Zayid’s insight into festival followers suggests that NYAACF’s connections and their amplifying effect extend to audiences as well. She stated that despite NYAACF being an “ethnic festival,” it has appealed to non-Arab American groups because of the quality and intersectionality of its performers as well as the diversity of their networks. Zayid also affirmed the importance of online cross-promotion to growing that intercultural patron base, saying: “[Social media] expanded our audience beyond Arabs coming to see their cousins doing comedy” (Interview). Her use of the term “cousin” here echoes her earlier characterization of the festival comedians being “like family” and further reinforces the important role that social bonding and social media play within this growing network of artists and audiences.

These collective dynamics boost the agentic power that NYAACF has to respond to the repressive conditions of production affecting Arab and Arab-affiliated artists within US

popular culture. They allow the connected participants to collaboratively build and circulate narratives that counter biases and negative misconceptions about them. For instance, NYAACF's intercultural network is united by the common goal to combat the xenophobic hatred and systemic injustices that mutually affect its particular communities (ex. racial profiling, government surveillance, or travel bans). The stand-up comedy on these subjects that emerges from the NYAACF network transcends the varying degrees of co-identification among its member groups. That is, when an Arab jokes about being racially profiled at an airport, their South Asian audience relates to their critique as much as their Iranian colleague, who also addresses the issue in their own performances. Therefore, through "multiplicative" creative and discursive exchanges, this performer-audience network magnifies and sustains its responses to correlational dilemmas and critical socio-political issues affecting its members. Collaborators also debunk their perceived homogeneity by demonstrating their pluralism through dialogic co-production. This collective phenomenon adds leverage to Arab and Arab-affiliated comedy networks in their relation to unsupportive structures, just as it did among MENA-serving theater companies in the previous chapter (62-63). Collectivity makes responses to hegemonic conditions more disruptive and subversive due to their circulation across multiple platforms and audiences.

While NYAACF has served as a fertile ground from which these grassroots matrices could emerge and expand, it risks undermining its achievements and leverage due to certain organizational factors that weaken its sustainability. These factors stem from the reality that the festival's production process overly relies on the status quo of collective responsibility as well as on a limited leadership structure for direction and execution. With the exception of the administrative collaborators that helped establish the festival in its early years, NYAACF's production process has mostly fallen to Zayid and Obeidallah. Moreover, Zayid

does admit that the two have been less involved recently and that her assistant mainly runs the “well-oiled machine” that is the festival. Such a loosely structured model dilutes the responsibility of organizing and maintaining momentum among a collective that is loosely tied together by their shared correlational struggles. It tends to build, as we have established, a sense of *communitas* and group flow, but it also jeopardizes the festival’s sustainable growth beyond its current level of operation.

One of the most consequential costs of depending on unstructured group effort appears to be limited public reach or exposure, a major challenge not helped by correlational stigmatization. Ironically, while NYAACF’s social media reliance has helped grow its performer-audience network, the festival’s lackluster online presence and promotional strategy has also hindered that growth in some ways. For instance, as of this writing, NYAACF’s official website has been outdated and inconsistent in its output for several years. Its “Home” page simply gets updated with a new festival poster each year, as does the “Shows” page that lists the current year’s schedule and line-ups. Meanwhile, the “Media” page that contains promotional materials, like photos and videos, has not been updated since 2012. The “Press” page has been similarly neglected, receiving an update in 2020 that was ten years overdue. This lack of upkeep results in a confusing and, at best, underwhelming official public face for the festival.

Furthermore, the festival’s marketing almost exclusively takes place on free social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. These accounts are also inconsistently maintained, which results in frustration for existing and potential audiences. For example, one follower on Facebook admonished festival organizers in an October 2019 comment saying, “I’m very interested in this [festival], but am having great difficulty getting information. The website shows dates in November 2019, but the listed show schedule and ‘buy tickets’ link display

dates for October 2018. If you want to sell tickets, please straighten this out” (Fig. 5). Other followers agreed, and one respondent suggested that the commenter search for tickets on the Gotham Comedy Club website instead. This exchange illustrates how NYAACF’s loosely structured and executed operations can be perceived as unprofessional by patrons. It also shows how this practice can create a prohibitive barrier for those trying to engage with the festival, including audiences, performers, and reviewers.



Fig. 5. Snapshot of NYAACF’s Facebook feed, showing a potential audience member’s response to poor accessibility. Facebook. October 7, 2019.

Ironically, Zayid seems to be of two minds about social media. She has credited it with helping recruit diverse audiences and emerging comedians to NYAACF as well as inspiring more Arab Americans to pursue comedy. This suggests that social media has been a key tool in circumventing obstacles brought on by unsupportive conditions, such as stigma or lack of infrastructural support. At the same time, she cited “too much competition online” as one of the challenges to promoting the festival and gaining press coverage: “In the beginning, it was really easy to get press but 16 years later, it's harder to get them to bite” (Zayid). Her perceptions, and the festival’s organizational practices, seem to place the onus of efficacy on the online medium itself rather than the steady and strategic labor required to optimize its impact.

To make up for this, it appears that NYAACF relies on external professional support to sustain its operations where its own resources or organization fall short. The Gotham Comedy Club stands out for its major role in this respect. Zayid has stated that the club has

“supported” and “amplified” the festival over the years, allowing it to “survive and thrive.” Her description suggests that NYAACF’s success has depended to a large degree on Gotham’s operational support, which provides a staffed venue, reliable online promotion, and box office management. In addition, the landmark comedy venue with its long prestigious history in the comedy industry likely lends legitimacy and status to the festival that it might not otherwise garner by itself. It especially helps NYAACF gain acceptance and traction as a culturally specific festival operating within biased contexts.

Gotham’s well-established reputation and business seems to have also been a crucial factor in NYAACF’s talent and ticket sale increases, to the point where Zayid explains, “We no longer need to fundraise. The festival funds itself” (Interview). Yet even if potential sponsors wanted to, they would have difficulty funding the festival since NYAACF does not provide clear and working pathways for financial support. The official website’s “Sponsors” page lists multi-tiered advertising and sponsorship opportunities, with incentives varying from VIP tickets to program mentions. They also give visitors the option to donate by credit card through a direct link to The Field, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that provides access to resources and facilitates funding for artists “who experience barriers to advancement based on race, cultural identity, disability status, sexual orientation, or other identities” (“Mission & History”). Unfortunately, none of these fundraising opportunities appear up-to-date. The listed sponsorship structure dates to 2014 and the link to The Field’s donation page is broken. What’s more, I neither received a program nor encountered any sponsor acknowledgements at the last festival that I attended, and NYAACF no longer appears on The Field’s database of artists.

These issues within the festival’s current production model prove the lack of a reliable independent infrastructure for administrative and financial sustenance. Despite being a

charged product of its time that helped spark a new minoritarian movement within the American stand-up tradition, NYAACF continues to conduct itself as a dependent amateur enterprise. The festival has not yet maximized the energy and resources available to it in order to transition into a more structured, efficient, and self-sustaining production model. Without this dependable foundation, NYAACF's grassroots efforts and charismatic leadership alone cannot effectively ensure continuity and institutional memory. This makes the future existence of the festival rather precarious even if, for the time being, "the festival funds itself" and enjoys steady support under the status quo.

NYAACF's current organization further suggests that the festival's impact on the entertainment industry and popular culture will remain limited in scope unless the model changes. On the one hand, the festival has already helped increase the visibility of some Arab talent in mainstream media. Zayid recounts, "We had casting directors reach out to us from the very beginning [...] excited to find a pool of Arab actors to choose from" (Interview). Some comedians have found success on screen while maintaining their stand-up roots at NYAACF, such as Golden Globe award-winning comedian Ramy Youssef and his colleagues Dave Merheje and Mo Amer. Others have launched careers as writers, producers, and radio hosts (including Obeidallah himself), all of which points to more inclusive conditions and growing opportunities for Arab Americans in mainstream entertainment.

However, NYAACF has not fully utilized that network potential to secure a more visible and sustainable model for itself in the pop culture industry. The festival instead keeps its sphere of influence insularly centered on the discourses and publics that it already engages. As a result of this self-imposed ceiling, NYAACF's talent pool fractures or trickles away in pursuit of other projects and lucrative individual opportunities. Savage and Symonds warn of such a missed opportunity to grow an arts organization. They suggest that surplus energy

generated through collaborative economics often risks dissipating or getting wasted or appropriated by more mainstream capitalist enterprises (Savage and Symonds 281). This supports the possible conclusion that NYAACF's organizational status quo might cause the festival to die out as comedians—including its own producers—outgrow the festival and exhaust their individual and network energies.

Stand-Up as a Disruptive Genre

Even if NYAACF does not optimize its organizational potential, it still circumvents obstacles and dilemmas caused by its conditions thanks to the potency of the genre of stand-up comedy. In the US, stand-up has had a long history as a subversive and empowering popular performance form, which since the emergence of its contemporary format in the mid-20th century has overwhelmingly been driven by ethnic minority performers (Boskin and Dorinson). The genre has been used to unpack social and political concerns for a variety of marginalized US publics, including Jewish, Black, and Latinx communities. Stand-up allows the comedian to publicly broach sensitive topics, like prejudice or systemic racism, that people might prefer to dissect in the safety of private spheres. It succeeds in highlighting oppositional views or controversy — even calling out people and practices— while cushioning any potential conflict with levity. In addition, stand-up comedy's uniquely dialogic form often invites audience interaction, thus turning every performance into a collaboration and conversation.

These features make stand-up comedy an agonistic rehearsal of politics and discourse, especially because the form inverts the audience's usual passivity. It gives spectators a chance to actually talk back to the performance and potentially change it. Whether the exchange is spontaneous or semi-scripted, verbal or non-verbal, it introduces a degree of agentic power to the role of the spectator and gives them a chance to participate actively in

discursive generation with the performer. Leaning into that feature of the performance can make for thought-provoking interactive comedy or painfully uncomfortable (maybe even hostile) tension in the room. Either way, it opens the door to multiple and potentially conflicting perspectives that add depth to the topics being probed in performance.

At the 2019 NYAACF, comedian Ramy Youssef tactfully used this dialogic potential to engage audiences on the divisive topic of contemporary US politics and anti-Arab bias. In his setup for the joke, he primed the room by acknowledging that we (the American public) were living in a volatile national climate. The comedian lamented the current state of affairs in a sincere and grave tone, suggesting that we could start to overcome our divisions if we listened more closely to one another. The applause he received for that comment confirmed that spectators agreed with Youssef's sentiments and signalled that he had successfully created a sense of safety in the room, which allows him to proceed with the next bit. In a gesture that cemented this safe space, he acknowledged his own liberal political views before asking who in the audience supported Donald Trump, the US president at the time. Some members applauded hesitantly while others looked around, seeking the source of applause. Needless to say, this moment of transparency was an uncomfortable one where many in the room, including myself, held our breath in anticipation of conflict. Youssef leaned into the rising tension and asked one spectator why he supported the president. Hearing his answer, the comedian said that he respected the man's views despite disagreeing with them, then eased into a story on his surprising family connection to Trump. Youssef's father allegedly worked for Trump and met him several times. The comedian claimed that he even grew up with a photo of his dad posing with "Uncle Donald" in his family home (because "when you're an Arab kid, anyone who's friends with your dad is your uncle"). He spoke directly to this imaginary personification of Uncle Donald, confronting it with

disbelief and dismay at the president's politics. The critiques that Youssef leveled were mostly implicit or reserved, leading this audience member to expect a harsher or more explicit punchline.

Yet having drawn us in with this unusual and personal narrative, the comedian suddenly pitched his plan to solve our political divisiveness: he would become Trump's secret lover! He reasoned that as a Muslim, Arab, son of immigrants, their union could help stifle xenophobia and hatred among Trump's conservative base. Laughter exploded at the incongruity of Youssef's family connection to Trump and his absurd punchline, which not only played on Trump's unlikely affinity for Arabs and/or Muslims (let alone men) but also on potential discomfort with homosexuality among conservative Arab and/or Muslim audiences. Thus, in this comedic journey, Youssef started out establishing a sense of safety embracing the diversity of the room, then slowly violated that safety with tension, and finally released the tension by shocking his audience into laughter.

Youssef's performance created a space for conversation about volatile politics, anti-Arab and Islamophobic attitudes, and social stigma where there has usually been silence, stonewalling, or outright conflict. It showed how stand-up comedy's clowning "disrupts and interrupts customary frames and expected logic" to create the opportunity for a reflexive and ironic dialogue (Babcock 107). Youssef used stand-up's dialogism and play frame to respond to the breakdown of constructive public discourse and surreptitiously tackle multiple intersecting correlations at once, influencing his audience to face their own biases as well as their differences. By directly and indirectly engaging members of the audience with oppositional views, the comedian took advantage of the social and political discomfort that many felt both publicly and privately. He manipulated these conditions to remind us that our public— both Arab and non-Arab, on micro (NYAACF) and macro (national) levels—

was singular plural, unified and divergent at the same time. He took the risk to show us that dialogue, and perhaps humor, was a necessary means for building a collective consciousness that encompassed that plurality.

As Youssef's example demonstrates, stand-up comedy offers participants the chance to observe themselves within a collective body and flex their understanding of self, community, and context through active dialogic interaction. The festival setting facilitates this pluralistic reflexivity and magnifies its impact by expanding the number and diversity of participants and perspectives involved. While most festivals support dominant cultures by temporarily subverting the status quo only to restore it, stand-up comedy festivals challenge them by explicitly skewering norms and popular narratives. These disruptions undermine the status quo even after the conclusion of the festival, especially since audience members are actively engaged in co-creating or engaging in critiques during the performances.

Stand-up comedy festivals that center marginalized communities and voices, like NYAACF, intensify that disruption even more as they push against dominant culture and beliefs from the peripheries. To illustrate, both NYAACF 2014 and 2019 featured several female comedians who discussed gender and sexuality from their different points of view. They used their platform to address common stereotypes of Arab women in particular. Nina Kharoufeh joked about her awkward personal dilemmas as an Arab woman who wears *hijab* (حجاب, a head covering worn by Muslim women) while also seeking sexual liberation on the dating scene. On the same topic, Maysoon Zayid questioned the modesty of women she punningly called *hojabis*, who wear *hijab* while also dressing in alluring skin-tight clothing. Meanwhile, Eman El-Husseini joked about Arab strip clubs being the reverse of American ones, where women start out naked and seductively put on layers of clothing. Within the context of an American stand-up comedy festival, these jokes directly challenge the

obsession of dominant discourses with Arab or Muslim women's bodies. They further challenge the simultaneous conflation and reduction of Arab and Muslim women by showcasing different perspectives and intersecting identities (ex. divergent views on veiling from female comedians who are both veiled and unveiled). As self-identified Arab and/or Muslim women, these comedians demonstrate how the correlation dilemma theory maps onto intersectional and multiply marginal subjects. Performing jokes that address the conditions imposed on them effectively disrupts their treatment as passive symbols of conservatism and silent oppression. Instead, it highlights the absurdity of such conceptions and skewers the correlated expectations placed on them by conditioning factors.

Interestingly, (self-)deprecation is a common vehicle for such disruption due to its directness in addressing hot topics. This tactic works just as effectively at critiquing inter-group and intra-group assumptions, which simultaneously affect Arab American female comedians. The earlier examples show the inter-group disruption at work. However, when Zayid jokes about the pressure to marry as an aging Arab woman with cerebral palsy or when El-Husseini jokes about being a Muslim, Palestinian, lesbian married to a Jewish woman, these comedians dig into their intra-group subalterity to tackle taboo subjects head on. In this case, they take a stab at Arab stigmas surrounding spinsterhood, disability, sexuality, and Arab-Jewish relations. Nonetheless, their target audiences for both types of joking include Arab, Arab-affiliated, and non-Arab Americans alike, as the butt of such jokes are the various norms and correlations underlying those groups and their relations to one another.

These illustrations not only show stand-up comedy's subversive potency but also the agonistic function of a stand-up festival that sets it apart from other performance festivals. NYAACF provides a space where comedians and audiences can collectively negotiate Arab

American pluralism and how it shapes Arab American relations to the rest of US society. Participants may have congregated at the festival thanks to their shared interest in or identification with Arab culture or issues, but their differences are not erased through their participation. The festival foregrounds these distinctions instead, allowing them to contradict each other either explicitly (through verbal response) or implicitly (through applause or heckling). This agonism not only encourages negotiation but also reinforces the heterogeneity of the “Arab American” label. Thus NYAACF impacts its participants by safely dismantling expectations of similarity and strengthening the idea of pluralism within a shared identity.

Consequently, the stand-up comedy festival as a genre benefits marginalized Arab Americans in their endeavors to build a sense of *communitas* while also strengthening their collective response to biased socio-political conditions. Zayid got to the heart of the matter when she expressed, “There’d be no festival if the public wasn’t afraid.” She asserted that NYAACF is important because anti-Arab hatred has increased in the United States and the festival “helps humanize us” (Zayid). Zayid’s statements reinforce the founders’ rationale for NYAACF’s mission— part networking tool, part public relations event. They further hint that the festival has sustained itself *because of*, not *in spite of*, the fear-mongering that circulates in dominant discourses, which conditions both an activist performance response as well as driven audience engagement.

Nevertheless, ephemerality and the relatively small-scale reach of live stand-up comedy performance do limit this response function of NYAACF. Ephemerality is not unique to this genre but a general characteristic of live performance, which is either created to disappear or created through its disappearance— or even articulated by both conditions simultaneously depending on how one defines it phenomenologically. Either way, live performance leaves

traces in the minds of the participants who engage it. These ephemera transmit social knowledge and a sense of shared identity, as this case study establishes, but they also embody a sense of hope that inspires a kind of future-gazing that looks toward positive change in conditions. In this way, the live stand-up comedy performance becomes a conduit for collective dreaming of an alternate reality, a space where Turner's "subjunctivity" takes on real utopian potential. The audience plays a more active role in this phenomenon thanks to stand-up's loosely scripted and dialogic form, which allows a high level of improvisation and interactivity. Therefore, each performance is truly unique and molds itself to the participants involved, with audiences unpredictably altering its ephemera every time. This means that the distinct content of each recurring performance of a comedian's set hardly repeats itself, particularly with regard to social knowledge and bonding. Therefore, it is lost to a wider public and that loss becomes more acute when considered in relation to stand-up comedy's typical performance setting. Thanks to its popularization through night clubs and similarly intimate venues, stand-up comedy continues to be performed in front of mostly small audiences (with some exceptions which will be discussed shortly). The microscopic reach that results from this performance convention compounds ephemerality's limitation on stand-up comedy's impact. Not only does the live performance itself disappear, losing all of its unique content and traces each time, but it also becomes much less effective at generating and disseminating a consistent macroscopic discourse.

While NYAACF's eventified ephemerality and localized reach have helped it become an agentic cultural institution within the Arab American community, they have also threatened the festival's sustainability and limited the macroscopic influence of its other features—subversion, dialogism, and agonism. Regarding the first point, recall that the festival's loose structural organization and over-reliance on grassroots efforts already threaten the long-term

sustainability of this event-*cum*-institution. Ephemerality and limited public reach further exacerbate this situation by making it harder for mainstream audiences to discover and invest in NYAACF, both economically and socially. Moreover, these features curtail the ability of the festival to have a deeper cultural impact within the wider stand-up comedy institution. They keep NYAACF's provocative qualities — its ability to challenge anti-Arab bias, negotiate pluralistic identity, and debate shared values or conditions— somewhat insular and limited to a microscopic impact.

However, this reality is changing thanks to the effect that streaming media has had on the theater and entertainment industry, some of the benefits of which help Arab American comedy overcome the limits of ephemerality and reach. The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed an exponential growth in digital content and accessibility, permanently altering the way most audiences consume popular culture. Streaming giants such as Netflix now commission and produce a vast number of stand-up comedy specials, which traditionally only enjoyed limited release on television, video, or audio records. This has elevated the now lucrative performance form in prestige and further magnified its impact with celebrity power. Comedians who have long relied on touring the comedy club circuit to build an audience base now have the advantage of streaming media (not to mention social media) to increase their reach and influence.

For marginalized Arab American comedians, this trend alleviates some of the conditions of institutional bias, such as lack of visibility and influence. It makes it relatively easier than before to generate and disseminate counter discourse beyond their own network. Thus, the groundwork that was laid by NYAACF now serves as a mainstream launchpad for Arab American comedians. As Zayid has stated, the festival attracted casting directors looking for new Arab talent from the beginning. Several of the comedians who performed at NYAACF

have made the jump to streaming platforms, most notably Mo Amer with his 2018 Netflix stand-up special and Ramy Youssef with his 2019 HBO stand-up special and Golden Globe-winning Hulu original show *Ramy*.

Now that these comedians enjoy a greater mainstream presence, their work achieves a level of reach and sustainability that was less probable before. Their stand-up performances get documented for wider distribution along with all their ephemeral social and political implications. They become available for a more diverse national, even international, public to engage with. In addition, by archiving and cataloguing Arab American comedians, streaming media companies ensure that their performances and perspectives continue to impact future generations of audiences. This development ironically fulfills NYAACF's mission better than the conventional live performance and festival setting. It amplifies permanent records of Arab American comedy, increasing their possibility of having a macroscopic cultural influence. On the other hand, this trend also hampers other effective qualities of live stand-up comedy performance discussed earlier, such as interactive dialogism and agonistic diversity. Without the live performance and festival forum, audiences become confined to screen-mediated spectatorship as well as the limited perspectives of one specific comedian. They miss out on the *event*, in both the solidarity of co-presence and the diversity of outcomes that live festival performances present.

The streaming media trend also introduces its own opportunities and challenges by altering the institutional dimension of the comedian-public relationship. Crossing into mainstream media results in the production vehicle shifting from a non-profit, grassroots body (NYAACF) to a profit-driven, industrial body (major media companies). On the one hand, this shift provides more economic sustainability for Arab American stand-up comedians and greater professional opportunities beyond stand-up, such as with Youssef's

show *Ramy*. However, this model also means that new industry gate-keepers now influence an Arab American comedian's work and its relation to the public, which can be problematic based on what we have seen in earlier case studies. This change likely disempowers Arab American comedians in their relations to mainstream culture and leads to increased correlational dilemmas and compromises in creative control. Specifically, comedians need to conform to the industry's market-driven demands in order to maintain their newfound economic sustainability. Further exploring these emerging new media challenges exceeds the scope of this study, but this analysis does reinforce NYAACF's critical role in supporting the uncensored work of Arab American comedians, laying the foundation for the Arab American stand-up tradition, and facilitating its transition to the digital mainstream.

Conclusions

This study has explored how NYAACF created an unprecedented cultural event through grassroots artistic and entrepreneurial efforts, giving participants an institution through which to celebrate Arab American heritage and resist biased dominant narratives through comedy. Since 2003, the festival has established itself as a collaborative generator of counter discourse by building a dedicated and diverse public around itself. This informal network of performers and audiences is perhaps the most important contribution NYAACF has made to Arab American popular culture, as it supported the formation of a collective pluralistic identity. It also helped Arab Americans and affiliated communities leverage their unified energies against biased conditions of production and the resulting obstacles. Thus, these grassroots approaches, combined with the potency of the stand-up comedy performance form, allowed this marginalized public to navigate their correlation dilemmas and build their political and cultural legitimacy independent of institutional and market demands. As a hive of productivity, NYAACF improved the visibility of Arab American comedians through live

and digital activity. It also increased the potential for its talent pool to cross over into mainstream media. In this way, it expanded the impact of Arab American artistic work as well as contributed to greater inclusion and diversity within the popular culture industry.

However, this study has shown that the festival's lack of sustainable organizational structure and innovation seems to have stunted NYAACF's growth despite its continued success. Over-reliance on its status quo and the founding producers' leadership limits the festival's institutional memory as well as raises questions about succession and continuity. While it has inspired a popular movement among Arab and Arab-affiliated comedians, even branching into multiple related stand-up comedy festivals, NYAACF remains largely a grassroots annual event that risks being as ephemeral as its performances. Its responsiveness to and long-term influence on the public sphere depends on whether the festival can convert its momentum and collaborative energies into a more structured organizational model. That is, NYAACF needs to evolve from an informal network-driven event into a formal artistic organization in order to sustainably grow its output and cultural capital.

This evolution is necessary in order to create permanent infrastructure for the support and development of Arab American stand-up comedy and popular culture. Marginalized artist groups and grassroots networks need formal collective representation to help change the institutional norms and dominant narratives that constrain them. Without reliable structural support, Arab American comedians have to contend with their correlational dilemmas within the culture industry without the weight of organizational backing. Moreover, the dearth of related artistic bodies that specifically represent Arab Americans underscores that necessity for increased structural support. The preceding case studies have proven the crucial difference that such organizations make for Arab American artists faced with institutional bias. Thus, in filling that void, NYAACF lays the critical foundation for a

more sustainable Arab American cultural practice and acts as a political call for change by its very existence.

NYAACF signifies a disruption of the status quo within the American stand-up comedy institution and popular culture more broadly. It introduces Arab American comedians as a distinct group to the stand-up comedy world. It “unapologetically” centers this marginalized group, claiming space for them and countering stereotypical narratives about them through its mission, marketing, and subversive performances. In this way, NYAACF asserts Arab American visibility and voice within the repertoires of American pop culture. Furthermore, the festival supports the task of constructing and advocating for a collective identity within a pluralistic public. It thus fortifies Arab Americans’ sense of community, solidarity, and belonging within an often unwelcoming societal context. More importantly, NYAACF acts as an agonistic rehearsal space that explores subjunctive presents and futures based on the diversity of Arab American experiences and narratives. Through dialogic reflexivity, the festival’s public can collectively dream up possibilities of relation and being, both within the group and with the rest of US society.

Thanks to this particular function, NYAACF shows how a stand-up comedy festival can be more intimately responsive to conditional and correlational challenges than other forms of theater and performance. The genre’s interactivity makes such festivals direct conductors of social and political energy as well as excellent forums for the negotiation of difference. As we have seen, stand-up comedy’s flexibility, subversiveness, and dialogism adapt to public discourses more effectively than a script or a production might be able to. It also leans into conflict and stigma for comedic effect, putting marginalized perspectives center stage and explicitly calling out systemic bias at times. The genre therefore gives NYAACF special leverage as an event representing a marginalized public and contending with the repressive

conditions of cultural production. Moreover, this festival's grassroots production process makes it less subject to the external pressures of correlation, be they discursive or institutional. Its loosely structured format provides artists and producers a greater degree of freedom from the typical market-related concerns of playwrights and theater companies. In other words, NYAACF can support Arab American comedians with little to no censorship or limitation while generating economic and cultural capital for the group within the public sphere.

All of these features of the festival provide a model for similarly marginalized publics who face systemic bias and want to disrupt those norms by defying the institution in order to change it. The combined advantages of eventification, grassroots organization, and the genre of stand-up comedy far outweigh the risks of unsustainability that NYAACF's model carries. This study has shown that festivals like this also have the added value of network building, not only within a particular public but outward to affiliated publics and areas of the entertainment industry. Therefore, this model has the potential to increase cross-cultural solidarity among similarly marginalized groups in the US. In doing so, it can multiply their discursive output and institutional influence through network collaboration. Such a development would eventually pave the way for more inclusive practices at a mainstream level, shifting the balance of relations that currently works against these marginalized groups.

NYAACF's impact has been culturally and politically significant to Arab American performance in the meantime, despite its momentum being largely driven by its specific historical context and the opportune collective energies of a small network of collaborators. Therefore, precarity still haunts the festival and not just organizationally. As the public sphere unpredictability changes, especially in response to the turbulence of the US political

climate, so do the conditions correlating with and shaping the event. One wonders, for instance, what would happen with NYAACF if society's discourses continued to grow more xenophobic and less tolerant of national plurality. In the event of yet another Middle East conflict, would the festival and its network be able to sufficiently respond, rally publics, or even survive the likely backlash without a secure structure? Would such conditions reaffirm the importance of NYAACF to the group it represents or cause a protective retreat from the public sphere? Most importantly, would the invaluable network that the festival has built support constructive Arab American agency under such duress? One cannot predict where the unfolding conditions will steer NYAACF's evolution and how they will shift its relation to the public sphere. In the meantime, there remains much to be done to secure the long-term sustainability of the festival as well as ensure that it continues to be a subversive and impactful cultural event for the Arab American public.

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