From:

Silke Schmidt
(Re-)Framing the Arab/Muslim
Mediating Orientalism
in Contemporary Arab American Life Writing

Media depictions of Arabs and Muslims continue to be framed by images of camels, belly dancers, and dagger-wearing terrorists. But do only Hollywood movies and TV news have the power to frame public discourse? This interdisciplinary study transfers media framing theory to literary studies to show how life writing (re-)frames Orientalist stereotypes. The innovative analysis of the post-9/11 autobiographies »West of Kabul, East of New York«, »Letters from Cairo«, and »Howling in Mesopotamia« makes a powerful claim to approach literature based on a theory of production and reception, thus enhancing the multi-disciplinary potential of framing theory.

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Contents

INDEX OF GRAPHS

INDEX OF TABLES

INDEX OF IMAGES

Preface

Is it daring to think only in black and white colors? Can border drawing go on in a globalized world where borders are said to have disappeared? Is this ethnocentric? Is it Orientalist? Is it merely human? The following pages pose a challenge upon the reader. They require him to explore the deep roots of thinking – daily practices, long-standing judgements, the foundation of belief. This is particularly difficult for the postcolonial critic. He/she will face words such as truth, authenticity, and binary thinking. For him/her, these words do not actually exist because they are mere constructs – concepts the human mind has brought into existence and which the scholar can erase. For the world of readers outside the academy, however, these words cannot easily be dispelled because they *do* carry *meaning*. They are crucial parts of life and of identity.

Only the one who is willing to leave behind the ideology of postcolonialism and constructivism to a certain extent, in order to make room for contact with the real world of cultural discourse and materialist practice, will be able to allow for this insight. Only the literary scholar who is willing to look at literature from a new perspective will be able to see new possibilities of literary impact. Above all, life is lived in the real world and books about life reflect this. How they do this is not only a matter of artistic creation and critical investigation – it is a matter of strategy, logical insight, and political interest.

After all, life writing is a matter of power, just like life itself, especially for those without agency, is a constant struggle for power. How significantly life writing impacts life in the real world above all becomes a matter of comparison. Comparison helps highlight black and white, but it can also reveal the brightness of the black and the blackness of the white. Comparison therefore is not a matter of hierarchies, it is a matter of information and knowledge. Knowledge is transmitted in books and where else could it have a greater impact than in the books of life called autobiographies?

1. Introduction

> We've learned a lot since 9/11 about places like Kandahar and Fallujah and Guantanamo Bay, about al-Qaeda and the Middle East, and about ourselves. What have you learned since 9/11? Our phone number is 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation at our website. Go to npr.org, and click on TALK OF THE NATION. (Chertoff et al.)

The year 2011 witnessed the tenth anniversary of the most cruel terrorist attacks the U.S. has ever faced. Months before the commemoration day, TV broadcasts, radio shows and panel discussions across the nation called attention to the attacks themselves, their immediate consequences and their present-day impact. Prominent politicians, journalists, as well as average Americans shared their memories and insights on how 9/11[1] changed the country. There was a lot of grief and pain in these reports. Most importantly, however, this discourse did not focus on terrorism only. Instead, the question was one of information seeking and knowledge gain. "What have you learned since 9/11?" the talk-show host Neal Conan asked his audience. An e-mail by a listener in Chapel Hill provided an answer that summarized what others had expressed before: "I've come to realize just how fundamentally 9/11 altered our national consciousness, our world view and our sense of ourselves and others" (Brandon qtd. in Chertoff et al.).

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1   The author is aware that the abbreviation 9/11 without the use of quotation marks appears problematic because it supposedly reifies the dominant American narrative on this series of events. While this is an important aspect to acknowledge, this study still uses the unmarked spelling of 9/11 to also account for the fact that various disciplines, e.g., Media Studies, also use the abbreviation in different contexts without stressing a particular interpretative lens.

The question of learning about "ourselves and others" turned out to be the most challenging one in the aftermath of 9/11 because Americans for the first time in their history had to realize that the very limits between self and other, between *us* versus *them,* could get blurred. Not only did they discover cruel and bloody terrorism on the day of the attacks. 9/11 also constituted "the day on which Americans discovered the Arab world," as the Arab American author and literary scholar Gregory Orfalea provokingly stated (224). All of a sudden, one of America's previously forgotten minorities – Arab Americans – stood in the spotlight. For many centuries, Arabs had been living in the United States mostly unnoticed by the public. They counted as the "Most Invisible of the Invisibles" among America's minorities, as the Arab American writer Joanna Kadi strikingly put it (qtd. in Fadda-Conrey, "Arab American Literature" 187; Salaita, "Ethnic Identity" 148). Exactly *these* Americans now constituted the most visible subjects and objects of national discourse. After all, the terrorists who hijacked the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center were Arabs from the Middle East. The public and political attention, however, quickly shifted to Arabs living within the borders of the United States. Consequently, they became major targets of racial profiling, ethnic discrimination, and human rights violations (Salaita, "Ethnic Identity" 152). Along with political decisions made by the Bush administration, the media started to spread a "discourse of fear and hatred," intentionally labeling Arabs and Muslims as enemies (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 150). Binary rhetoric ruled the public and political agenda; "either with us or against us" was the credo initiated by the president (qtd. in Fadda-Conrey, "Racially White" 171).[2] There were only "good Arabs or Muslims" and "bad Muslims" and nothing in-between (Naber, Introduction 3). This demonizing of Arabs and Arab Americans and those who were mistaken as such quickly turned into the new reality of America's public discourse.

No matter how fundamental the impact of 9/11 was for America and the world, it was also "The Day that Didn't Change Everything," as James Zogby provokingly puts it (11). Above all, the day revealed a general lack of knowledge about Muslims, Arabs, and Arab Americans and many unanswered questions which had existed long before the attacks. Who are these Arabs? What role do they play in the United States? Are they all terrorists, as popular sentiment seemed to suggest? What resulted from the attacks therefore was not only a literal war carried out in the battlefields of Afghanistan. It also caused what James Zogby calls "Knowledge

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2   This binary rhetoric is usually depicted to have affected mostly those targeted by the axis theory. This one-sided approach, however, conceals the fact that the 'us versus them' language also led to another internal division among the American population at large. The pressure to take sides in the war on terror thus led to a form of "imperative patriotism" that saw any dissent with government decisions as inherently unpatriotic and treacherous (Salaita, "Ethnic Identity" 154).

Wars" against misinformation and unanswered questions (41). The actors that are generally considered to have been the winners in this war of information are the media. Actors who have mostly been forgotten when the question of 'what have we learned from 9/11' is posed, can be found in the realm of literature. Both actor groups are usually treated as separate domains.

It is the intention of this book to shed light on the complex yet highly enlightening relationship between the media, literary production, and public discourse. Knowledge gain linked to the strategic framing of information on Arabs living inside and outside U.S. borders is seen as the key to analyzing the trajectories of Arabs' and Muslims' public image. Interdisciplinarity thus forms the core pillar of this book, which seeks to make a theoretical as well as an analytical contribution to American Studies as a field that has the capacity to accommodate approaches and research concerns from various disciplines. Theory and methods development at the intersection of Media and Literary Studies will be given just as much room as the application of a newly developed framing approach in the analysis of contemporary Arab American life writing. This study has therefore been written in a way that multiple audiences in the academy and beyond can hopefully derive valuable findings; above all for American Studies scholars who are open to the methodological incorporation of social science approaches, for Media Studies scholars who embrace the value of non-quantitative research methods, and for all those concerned with Postcolonial Studies and Orientalism in various other disciplines. In addition, this study wants to *practice* the very topic it *explores*, namely the mediation of Arab and Muslim lives as examined through multiple frames. This reflects the larger aim of the book to contribute to the status of Arab American Studies by tracing the past and present of Arabs and Muslims in the diaspora – groups that as yet have not been written into the multicultural history of the U.S.

Arabs in America – The History of the Invisibles

When speaking of Arab identity, it needs to be clarified from the outset that the term Arab serves as a "label" (Shakir, *Bint Arab* 1) rather than as a coherent description of an ethnic origin (Salaita, "Ethnic Identity" 157). As Yvonne Haddad states: "It is clear that the word Arab has meant different things to different Arab groups in this country" (79). "Arab" constitutes a pan-ethnic term that includes geographically, socially, and culturally diverse groups (Ajrouch, "Gender, Race" 377; Hassan and Knopf-Newman 11; Hopkins and Ibrahim 1; Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe 80). For those who self-identify as Arab, defining criteria are

the use of the Arabic language[3] as well as a national origin in one of the countries of the Arab League[4] (Naber, Introduction 5). Furthermore, a common confusion concerns the terms Arab[5] and Muslim. Whereas Muslim refers to anyone who adheres to Islamic belief, Arab is a more general ethnic category that does not include religious affiliation (Haddad 65). Suad Joseph identifies three types of commong misperceptions about Arab identity: 1) all people who live in Arab nations are considered Arabs, whether or not they identify with their ethnic roots, 2) the entire Middle East[6] is perceived as Arabic, and 3) Arabs are conflated with Islam (260).[7]

Clearly defining Arab identity becomes even more confusing if one considers the interdisciplinary dimension of Arab American Studies where the differentiation between Arab and Muslim identities varies according to the discipline and the national scholarly background. In Europe, for example, Middle Eastern Studies are often located within the Social Sciences with focus areas in politilal science, ethnography, geography, and linguistics. Social science scholars tend to follow official criteria of national and ethnic identification, such as home country in the Arab League, to delineate Arabs and Muslims. By contrast, Arab and Middle Eastern Studies Departments have a more hermeneutical tradition and focus more on Cultural and Literary Studies, particularly in the U.S. Accordingly, they tend to approach the study of Arab identity from a more inclusive perspective when it comes to categorization. While eschewing the reductionist confusion of Muslim and Arab identity, Arab American Studies scholars also investigate literature and other cultural material created by Muslims living in or originating from non-Arab countries in the Middle East, such as Iran and Afghanistan.

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3   Considering the large variety of local and regional dialects found in the Arabic language, these linguistic and national "unifiers" are highly "vague;" yet, they serve the purpose of analytical categorization (Hopkins and Ibrahim 6).

4   The Arab League is composed of 22 countries located in the "Old World," surrounded byAsia, Africa, and Europe. This conglomerate of nations constitutes the so-called "Arab homeland" for Arab immigrants living in the diaspora (Hopkins and Ibrahim 3).

5   Despite the confusion of Arabs and Muslims, Michael Suleiman finds alternations in the naming of Arabs, e.g., "Arabians." He interprets this "changeability of the name" as an indicator of the "absence of a definite and enduring identity" (Introduction 2).

6   As Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade point out, the Middle East as supposedly neutral geographical description also represents a "colonial construction of space," for it is always defined relative to what is seen as the center of the world map (129).

7   A common term used to refer to Arabs living in the U.S. is "Arab community" (Saliba 307). The unifying function of this umbrella term, however, obscures the internal heterogeneity among Arabs, which is why the concept will only be used in this text when specific commonalities justify its significance.

In order to prevent scientific reductionism and avoid confusion, the term "Arab" will be used throughout the present study to refer to members of the Arab diaspora who trace their origin back to one of the countries of the Arab League. The term "Muslim" is used to denote religious identity affiliation. These definitions leave space for aspects of self-affiliation, as Muslim and Arab identity characteristics can be assumed to overlap to varying degrees.[8] Literature produced by Arab Americans as well as works produced by Muslims originating from non-Arab countries in the Middle East, e.g. Iran, will be considered to be part of 'Arab American Literature' as an umbrella category frequently used in U.S. academic institutions. This practice prevents the complication of needing to separate Muslim from Arab American literature is by no means a homogeneous categorization.

The history of Arab life in the U.S. is as diverse as the term "Arab." The gene-alogy of Arab immigration to the New World dates back to the end of the 19th cen-tury. The first wave of immigrants reached the shores of the "land of opportunity" in the 1870s (Suleiman, Introduction 6). At the time, most of them were workers from Lebanon who came for economic purposes and in search of more favorable living conditions (Suleiman, Introduction 1). They considered themselves sojourn-ers with no intention of spending their entire lifetime in the U.S. (Haddad 62). The majority sought to help their families in "the old country" by means of the prosperi-ty pursued in America (Suleiman, Introduction 6). Until the 1930s, about 130,000 Arabs had thus started a life in the New World.

The second wave of immigration lasted until the beginning of World War I. During this period, mostly Syrians from well-educated families settled in the U.S. with the intention to find a permanent home there. This also affected their cultural attitude. Whereas former immigrants had mostly retained their cultural and national identity, second-wave immigrants due to their different immigration goals, were much more inclined to adapt to their host culture and leave behind their Arab cul-tural ties. This had the effect that by World War II, many Arab Americans could not be distinguished from their host society anymore (Suleiman, Introduction 8-9). Coherence could also be found with respect to religion. Up to the 1950s, 90% of Arabs were of Christian descent (Haddad 63).

With the third wave of immigration, this relative homogeneity in immigrant demographics changed again. Recent immigration spanning from the post-World War II period up to the present has been marked by an even more decisive degree of diversity; in terms of religious background, national origin, demographic structure, and immigration motivation. Arabs from various nations continue to settle in the

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8   Due to the conflation of the terms Arab and Muslim in mainstream literature, quotations will be used which differ from this rule. Explanations will be provided to clarify whether the given quotation is based on different criteria for defining the terms Arab and Muslim (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 26).

U.S. Despite economic reasons, which have always counted as a major pull factor for immigration, political conflicts and religious prosecution in the recent past have served as major reasons for Arabs from several nations to seek a home in the U.S. (Suleiman, Introduction 2). This has also altered the cultural attitude of the various immigrant generations. In the 1980s and 90s in particular, Arabs became more politically active and founded cultural and church organizations (Haddad 76). Contrary to the pioneer generation of the 19th century, Arab Americans of the later era have been especially eager to rediscover and retain Arab culture and language by rejecting the "melting pot approach" (Suleiman, Introduction 8-9).

Current estimates of the Arab American population in the U.S. range from 3 to 3.5 million (Tehranian 166; "Demographics").[9] The states with the largest Arab American population are California, New York, and Michigan, where about two thirds live in metropolitan areas. With 32%, the largest ratio is of Lebanese ancestry. Of this total, more than 80% are U.S. citizens ("Demographics"). What distinguishes Arab Americans from other immigrant groups is their fairly high level of education and their related socio-economic status. About 45% of Arab Americans hold a bachelor's degree compared to only 27% of Americans at large. Similar figures can be found when looking at higher levels of education. Here, 18% hold post-graduate degrees whereas only 10% in the average population reach this education level (Samhan; Kayyali 71). As a result, Arab Americans are facing lower than average unemployment and relatively high income. Due to this continuous development and to steady immigration flows, Arab Americans today count as "growing, wealthy and professional" (Samhan).[10] Scholars therefore predict Arab Americans will constitute "America's Next Top Minority" (Ta 155).

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9   The figures are based on the 2010 data of the U.S. Census Bureau. Despite verified methods of data collection, the figures still count as estimates due to the fact that the U.S. Census identifies only a portion of the Arab population through the question "ancestry." The Arab American Institute consequently assumes an undercount factor of 3. Reasons for the undercount, among others, include limits of the ancestry question and the lack of distinction between race and ethnicity, high levels of out-marriage among later immigrant generations and misunderstandings of survey questions ("Demographics"). Despite these difficulties in determining the exact size of the Arab population, the recent data show a growing trend in pan-ethnic identity affiliation with many respondents self-identifying as "Arabs" or of "Arab origin" (Samhan).

10 A *Time Magazine* article by Bobby Ghosh under the heading "Arab-Americans: Detroit's Unlikely Saviors" explores the economic force behind thriving businesses owned by Arab Americans. They now count as possible rescuers of cities with degenerate economies, such as the former auto industry hub Detroit. This underlines the relatively unusual status Arab Americans occupy within the landscape of ethnic minorities in the U.S. since the former usually count as those needing economic support rather than providing it.

When looking at these figures and the highly unique features of Arab Americans as an ethnic minority, it is quite surprising to learn about the relative historical and social invisibility they have been facing in the overall cultural landscape of the U.S. The American historian William Leuchtenberg has even called Arabs "a people who have lived outside of history" (qtd. in Suleiman, Introduction 1). In contrast to other minority groups, Arabs have thus never officially become part of the multi-cultural history of America (Saliba 307). Recent opinion polls on the awareness of Arab Americans as part of U.S. culture and history tend to confirm this image. A clear division among non-ethnic[11] Americans and Arab Americans and Muslims manifests social and cultural cleavages. In a poll conducted by *Time* magazine in 2010, 62% of American respondents stated that they did not personally know any Muslim Americans (Altman). Learning about Arabs and Muslims *from* the respective 'other' therefore hardly takes place, as these figures indicate. Learning *about* Arabs through other channels is common practice but still does not fill all knowledge shortages. Only 29% of the American respondents in a 2010 poll therefore stated they "knew enough" about Arabs and Muslim countries, whereas 60% were in favor of learning more ("American Views" 4).[12]

A very different picture emerges when it comes to the question of what Americans *seem* to know about Arabs. The investigation of this question reveals a series of "knowledge tales"[13] rather than fact-based information (Cainkar 163). As an

11 The term non-ethnic is pragmatically used here in order to demarcate Americans categorized as ethnic minorities and the mainstream American population without multi-ethnic background. This should not downplay the fact that the term 'non-ethnic,' despite its frequent usage by Cultural Studies scholars (see Shakir, "Mother's Milk" 44; Fadda-Conrey, "Arab American Literature" 204; Sollors xiv), is otherwise based on a tautology for a definition of self also entails ethnic origin as core factor (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 443). Hence, non-ethnic identity by definition cannot exist. Spivak once provocatively pointed to this finding by asking, "who is the nonethnic American?" ("Acting Bits" 788).

12 Interestingly, with respect to the question of knowledge about Islam as opposed to knowledge about Arabs, the figures are considerably higher. The number of respondents stating they knew enough about "Muslims and Islam" ranges around 36% with 49% stating they would like to learn more ("American Views" 4). This points to the fact that Islam is a more widely-discussed issue in public U.S. discourse than Arab and Arab American culture and ethnicity. It remains questionable, however, in how far respondents in the poll were able to differentiate between Arab ethnicity and Muslim religious identity.

13 Louise Cainkar in her study on the situation of Arab Americans post 9/11 entitled *Homeland Insecurity* defines knowledge tales as "discourses in which the speaker asserts informed knowledge about Arabs and/or Muslims using information gleaned from American popular culture […]" (163). The function of tales as sources of human knowledge has been a key concept in studies on the history of knowledge and ideas (Stark 310).

opinion poll from September 2011 reveals, one in three Americans believes that Muslim Americans are more sympathetic than Americans to terrorists. 55% say they at least know someone who holds negative prejudices against Muslims (Condon). Even though these figures have slightly dropped in the latter half of the past decade, widespread anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment persists (cf. Montopoli, "Poll"; Bayoumi 3). Verbal harassment such as e-mails sent to Arabs in the professional environment bearing the subject "Dear Terrorist"[14] (Elias) are only examples of the public inclination toward open racism which emerged post 9/11 (Salaita, "Ethnic Identity" 159; see Chapter 3.3).

Overall, this burst of hostility paired with lasting half-knowledge about Arabs constitutes a major factor for the emergence of a lasting "backlash"[15] in the struggle of Arab Americans to claim their position in the multi-cultural landscape of America (James Zogby 15; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 14; Naber, "Look, Mohammed" 278). Moustafa Bayoumi thus concludes that Arabs and Muslim Americans now constitute the "new problem" of American society (2). He thus takes up the question "How does it feel to be a problem?" which W.E.B. Du Bois' in *The Souls of Black Folk* asked more than a century ago (qtd. in Bayoumi 3; Du Bois 11). Contrary to the notion of many, however, the problem for Arab Americans did not start on 9/11 – it reaches back to a century-old history of stereotyping and emergent "Super Myths"[16] on Arab identity in the context of Orientalism (James Zogby 57).

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14 In an interview with *USA Today* conducted in the fall of 2006, a 28-year-old Muslim software engineer who was born and raised in the U.S. reported having received an internal e-mail from a co-worker with the opening line "Dear Terrorist." The e-mail was directly related to a current event a few days earlier, where a train bombing in India had killed more than 200 people and Muslim fundamentalists had been held responsible (Elias). This exemplary story gives a vivid picture of the daily discrimination faced by Muslims and Arabs living in the U.S.

15 As Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr point out, "backlash" is used like a household term by authors in various different fields, particularly feminism, to express the reversal of positive integration developments in the Arab American population, whereby it often lacks further conceptualization (14). Despite its negative connotation, however, the effect of suffering backlash has also proven to be a key factor in political mobilization and integration (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 14; James Zogby 33).

16 James Zogby, who counts as one of the best-known public opinion researchers on Arab American relations, clearly propagates the idea that the lack of knowledge on Arab Americans can only be solved by detailed public opinion research. As he explains in *Arab Voices*, "[w]e poll Arab opinion, let Arabs speak for themselves, and then listen to what their voices tell us about their political concerns [...]" (67). As his brother John in addition formulates in *The Way We'll Be* on the significance of polling: "We are prognosticators, of course [...]. But as I conceive of this work, we are equally priests and philoso-