

CHAPTER EIGHT

*Caught in Code**Arab American Identity, Image, and Lived Reality**Desiree Yomtoob**Prelude: An Intersectional Identity*

THIS PIECE IS WRITTEN AS A BEGINNING EXPLORATION OF THE experience of intersectionality in my life. I am the daughter of Iraqi-Iranian Jewish parents who immigrated to the United States in 1963. My parents came to the United States during the period when the Shah was in power and US relations with Iran were much different than they are now. My family is Iraqi and Iranian Jews. This is a fact that somehow surprises people in the United States. This surprise gives me pause. What is it about the perception of the Middle East that makes this ethnic configuration so difficult for people to perceive? Most likely it is the layers of Orientalism (Said, 1978) that are present in popular and high-culture textual representations of the Middle East (Shaheen, 2009). Even I make reference to stereotypical pop culture images of “the place I have come from” when trying to understand and place my cultural understanding and image of myself. Orientalism, alongside other racial and ethnic stereotyping, has been present for a long time in the United States (Prashad, 2000; Shaheen, 2009). This ongoing activity has been compounded by the current wave of prejudice against the group of people put together under the category of “Arab” in the United States. While more concrete forms of prejudice occur, in the form of unnecessary detentions, racial profiling, and so on (Bayoumi, 2008), the textual forms created by the mass media have produced a newer meaning of the racialization on the “Arab” body, affecting the mapping and configurations of race constructs in the United States.

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The following work speaks from my standpoint as someone who has experienced the US process of orientalization from childhood and who now experiences this new wave of racialization. The experience of understanding a process of racialization that is shifting and growing should not be underestimated.

The process of writing standpoint epistemology (Denzin, 1997) brings particular insight. For example, the value of interrogating the subjectivity of the author is invaluable towards understanding the particular accuracies of any work. While there are many critiques of autoethnography, I believe one of its many values is that it allows us to access the experience of discrimination and understand it from the perspective of the person it is happening to. While someone can take care in understanding and expressing the process another person is going through, nothing can take the place of someone speaking from their own position. Autoethnography can also give insight into embodied experiences (the way it feels, what is important, and what can be understood in a whole body sense). In this chapter I share an understanding of the way the process of orientalization and racialization feels and the knowledge that I bring to the spaces where I understand my own experience. I also offer insight from the knowledge of my experience.

Intersectionality suits my experience of lived reality, and certain themes I address could occur in the lives of other Arab Americans. However, we are much more than the lumping together of characterizations. We, Arab Americans, are people with multiple identity locations who are hurt by the misrepresentations and misrecognitions that occur through stereotyping. My identity, as understood from both the inside and out, is characterized by multiple layers of definitions and experiences as a gendered, ethnic, classed, and racialized person. I am defined by the intersections of my Jewish Iranian American self, my queer Third World feminist self, my working class living among the academic elite self, and my recognized/unrecognized light-skinned racialized self. I understand and speak from my intersections. I am also defined and understood by others through a lens of stereotypes. This work is about how I experience myself in those moments.

At the Borders—On the Television Screen

There are times when you watch your own life like you are watching a sports event, or your favorite Olympic gymnast vying for the gold medal. It is not the fun kind of watching, like when you wonder what kind of eye training those top notch Ping-Pong (table tennis) players use to know where the ball is in a quick flash (the way they locate the ball has to be sound based) or when you check out the female footballers for their power and grace. Instead, it's the kind of watching where you are rooting from the deepest

part of you for your side, or your hero to win, to win just this round, so they can stay in the game.

I watch the Olympic gymnast on the balance beam with the same kind of attention I give my own life, these days. I watch my own life with the same kind of attention that I give the Olympic gymnast, these days. Each move executed accurately, gracefully, a win, a pass, a chance to go on to the next move with no points taken off. Every falter, a flinch, and move on to the next move, knowing that there is no time to spend thinking about the last move. A nervous exhaustion at the end of each run, when you wait for your score, out of breath, tooth clutching lip, in nervous anticipation (Fanon, 1967).

I watched the 2012 Olympics, televised from Britain, in a local bar and at the student union in my central Illinois town. I watched for many reasons. I almost exclusively watched for women athletes. I also liked watching the male divers. At the local bar I watched alone, sitting at the bar drinking Cherry Pepsis. I watched, and because I cannot help it, I noticed the reaction of the people, almost all men, who were sitting alongside me.

I watched the men, as I watched the images of the adolescent women on the parallel bars, young and balancing and bending and twisting, on the television screen. I flinched, as I both anticipated and heard the men's comments, as the young women, who worked at the parallel bars, providing performative labor in countless ways in that moment to the global community, were being watched by their family, their coaches, the audience, the cameras, and the world. I couldn't hear exactly what the male spectators were saying, but they were lewd and leering at the television and snickering in a way that made my stomach curdle. I heard one of them say something to the other about the gymnasts' ages. None of the gymnasts were over 18. A similar thing happened when I was watching at the student union, always the women gymnasts, a group of young men slapping each other on the back, laughing and congratulatory, when together noticing the moves of a gymnast doing the floor exercises. Not with an eye of appreciation, or even an eye of enjoyment, but with a lewd eye, and a feeling of camaraderie because they had succeeded in a way of looking that is a way of taking. Their gaze was objectionable objectification.

I walk through the mall in a hurry to make my acupuncture appointment. I am thinking about intersectionality and wondering about the way I am perceived. I often have unexpected trouble in the town I live in and at the university I am affiliated with, trouble that I don't expect, trouble that seems to come from nowhere. I think about how I am often afraid. I think about how I complain to my loved ones, that I never know what the rules are. Today I am wondering if this is because of the way I am read as a body. I wonder if it is the class culture of my body movement and appearance, or some kind

of combination of the way my age and race/ethnicity and perhaps education, are read as I move through the world. I am thinking of this as I notice a man, who seems to be of European descent, walk by looking at me with an eye of anticipation. I don't think, as I glare at him, about how often I get these kinds of looks from men who appear white, or men in general. There were days last summer when I wouldn't leave the house if I didn't have to, because I had had enough. Men who not only look but would come stand next to me to talk, or act as if they know me from across a public space. They behave as if they are just being "friendly" and are offended when I don't return their interest; they are younger and older, and well-dressed or not so well-groomed, they are richer or poorer, and it doesn't seem to matter at all to them if I return their interest. It is all about what they want. They stare at me while they stand next to their girlfriends or wives, who seem hurt and offended. If I am alone, this evokes fear in me. I often wonder what I did to attract this kind of attention, or who I might resemble that may welcome these exchanges, but I brush it off as bad manners. They are just impolite, I think.

This summer I memorized some of my reactions from similar encounters with men, always too close, and always acting like they were entitled to their behaviors and I should enjoy the attention. Some would be angry if I didn't notice them or appear hurt if I did not return the gaze. I don't like the games they play, with rules they assume I will follow. There on public sidewalks and in store aisles, I was getting information I did not understand, and it was getting in the way of the comfort and freedom of my everyday movement in public spaces. Being a woman, especially a woman who is attracted to women, feels dangerous.

"They do not understand that I am not interested in men. Do I have to tattoo a rainbow on my face to get them to leave me alone?" These experiences were hard on my queer coming outness, which has taken five-plus years to happen. It made me afraid of what might happen if I kissed a woman in public.

After my acupuncture session, I went to the food co-op. In line, I saw an older lesbian couple. They looked at the people around them with discomfort. I smiled at them with my soft post-acupuncture eyes, and there was ease. I realize that who we are and how we think and feel about the ways people perceive us are legislated by the gaze in public spaces. Our sense of safety and possibility, our sense of belonging, our sense of power is oftentimes silently spoken with our eyes. I do not say, "stop" to the men who look at me, I simply do not look back at them. There is a whole dialogue and vocabulary in the way we look at one another.

I am so bothered by the way men stare, at me, at young gymnasts on the television screen, at lesbian couples in the food co-op line, that I start to

look at the way that men look at women in general. I pay attention when I see a man in his car, his own personal viewing room, staring out his front window at a large group of young women walking across the street. When I am with men friends who look at women in ways that make me uncomfortable I ask them about it. I even tried an experiment at a conference once. I stared at a very handsome close acquaintance of mine. He didn't notice, and I felt very uncomfortable looking at him in this way. There is power in the ways we look at each other. At best being looked at in this way, I feel noticed and erased at the same time.

I Am, Born to, Raised in

I am a queer Iranian-Iraqi Jewish American, born to Iranian Jewish and Iraqi Jewish parents on US "soil," in Chicago. I was born in a hospital and raised in an immigrant neighborhood, alongside Dominicans and Japanese and Danes. Later I lived in an assimilated European Jewish neighborhood that was solidly middle class, except for those people who weren't, and assimilated, except for the people who weren't, and Jewish, except for the people who weren't. I somehow passed for "white" (whatever version that assimilated American Jews carry), but I never really did. It was sort of a free pass that the people from the dominant culture gave some of us, to signal inclusion, but it never really did. Sort of like the family discount they gave us at the synagogue, where I had my Jewish education. I learned to read from the Chumash in Hebrew and had a Bat Mitzvah, where I chanted a Torah portion. We were 11 years old. It was from there I learned, every year, about the story of the founding of Israel, but I never heard about the Palestinian people until I went to university. I am as Jewish as the next Jewish person, and it was there in this community where I marveled along with the rest of us, at the fact that there were Jewish people living in Ethiopia.

At holidays our family, unlike the other practicing Jewish people, would go to large bodies of water to pray. There were other practices our family observed differently than the people at our Ashkenazi synagogue. Later when my family attended the Sephardic synagogue, their traditions seemed more similar to the Jewish traditions of my family, but still some were specifically our own. I have not had the time or energy to learn more about my Mizrahi background. I know that in Iraq we lived as part of tribal groups, but I still haven't talked to the family member who can give me information about what tribal group I come from. I also know that our family traditions have an earth-based feel to them, tossing green onions at each other during certain parts of religious celebrations, walking together to bodies of water to observe certain religious rites. I wonder about this difference in the ways

my family practices Judaism and wonder what if this points to something significant. It's something I have to do more research on. My background is something I always have to do more research on. Often I think about the difference between the people whose cultural backgrounds are more available to them, whose histories are "common" knowledge, whose histories are written down, whose histories have been passed down through generations by storytelling, and whose histories cannot be traced. I understand there is politics involved in this.

I am walking in the neighborhood where I spend much of my time, and I am watching to see who seems like they are on the inside, and the others, who seem like they are on the outside. It's a marked difference to me, qualitatively.

I think about myself, my struggles.

It feels as if what I want doesn't matter at all. It is a constant struggle to get the good things I deserve. It is as if my subjectivity is invisible.

I feel as if I am hardly seen or heard.

I think about how I feel I might do something "wrong" at any moment, about how I don't know the rules.

I know that others feel this way. I wonder if I can tell by looking who does and does not. I wonder if I can tell by the way others look at me, who does and does not.

I feel seen and unseen. Looked at and not seen.

The Crisis in New York City

Airplanes crash into the buildings in the busy metropolis of New York. The planes explode. Tall buildings go down, many die. We see on split screen television, televised again and again, burning buildings with people jumping out of high story windows, alongside small photos of men with bearded faces, and brown skin.

"Behrooz, listen to your father."

"Listen to your father," the dark haired woman on the television says to her son. She has hair like my mother did when my sister was born. She is living in a house that is decorated the way my aunt's house is, my aunt who lives in the valley. This female character has the high cheek bones and large dark eyes that I am so used to seeing reflected back to me in the faces of women of my family. The actress who plays the character is named Shoreh Anghdashloo. She is an Iranian actress who has played the role of a Middle-Eastern woman in many films and television programs I have watched. From Iran, from the US, she plays the wife of the terrorist, she

plays the wife of the disaffected man from the Shah's regime now living in California. The man kills her and then kills himself. The man is part of a terrorist organization that plans to blow up Los Angeles, Teherangeles, with a briefcase sized nuclear weapon. He loves his family and expects their loyalty. He is emotional and angry. He expects his son to join him.

For two episodes his wife, played by Shoreh Anghdashloo, drives around Los Angeles, injured by a bullet to the arm. Her long brown sultry hair, while a little mussed, seems sweaty but lays nicely along her face. I yell at the television, "What woman, when shot, would not put her hair up in a ponytail?" My long brown sultry hair goes up (in an unconscious move) into a bun when I am trying to get anything done. My aunt's house in Los Angeles, in the valley, is decorated on the inside in the same way the terrorist family's is. None of the men in our family are terrorists. As a matter of fact, I know a lot of Iranian men who are not terrorists. In my experience, Iranians are generally not terrorists. I met a terrorist once, actually he was an ex-guerrilla fighter; he was not Iranian. But living in houses that look generally like my aunt's house are men who are married to women who look generally like me; men who are terrorists that want to blow up Los Angeles with nuclear bombs that are the size of a briefcase. That is if you believe what you see on TV.

A new kind of stereotyping has begun. I can follow the implications of this along with stated political actions of the government. I wonder how the production of culture seems to work so explicitly with the nation's political goals.

A stereotype is when specific details describing a group of people are taken, and particular meanings are attached to them. Women from unspecified Middle Eastern descent have long sultry hair that stays nice, no matter what kind of trouble they are in, and they are usually in some kind of trouble, not because of their own doing, but because of the men they are married to, and they live in houses that are decorated the way my aunt's house is. These houses are in the valley, as they are shown in the television series *24*.

At the Borders—In the Airport Security Line

I am taking a plane for the first time in a long time. I have my passport instead of a state issue ID card. I am mildly nervous. I wait in a long zig-zaggy line that is held in by ropes at the airport. I am dragging my suitcase along with me. I stand there for so long that I become bored, and my nervous expectation of some kind of racist-inspired-airport drama lessens. When I finally get to the checkpoint, the man sitting at the entryway to the terminal

takes my passport. I am nervous even though I am a US citizen. He looks at the passport and then checks my name against the ticket. Then he takes a look at my face, and compares it to the photograph on the passport. "Pretty picture," he says and waves me in.

I am running late to catch the plane. I am not used to airport security. I have worn the lightest and simplest clothing possible so that there will be no belt buckles or jewelry to untangle at the security line. I walk confidently through the security gates. I am signaled to move behind the gate. I wait. I can't imagine what the problem could be. A woman waves a wand over me. It beeps when it goes over my head. "Oh, my hairpins," I say to the security officer. She looks sternly at me. I start to take out the 30 or so hairpins I have used to fasten my updo. It's my new look. I find the situation funny. She signals to me to stop. They put me in a three-sided transparent Plexiglas case. It is right behind the checkpoint. Now I am the one everyone sees. A large African American man is blocking the exit. He gives me a tough look. He is assisted by two shorter African American women. I wait in the Plexiglas holding space for longer than is comfortable. I start to feel cagey. I say to the guard, "Is this about race?" He and his coworkers become angry; they think I am talking about their race. I say, "I am Iranian American." His face softens.

I am at the airport. I am in line for security in a cramped area improvised for the occasion. We, the passengers, are in a long line that snakes around an area that has security gates and conveyor belts in the center. As I reach the front of the line I see an older gentleman struggling to get his shoes off. He puts them in the bin on the conveyor belt that will take them past the security monitor. The bins have advertising on them. They have been provided by Zappos. The older gentleman has a young man with him who tries to help. We are all waiting in line and watching as a young woman from the airlines brings four hip-looking rock star-type young men to the front of the line. They are quickly waved through security. They look like they are having fun. A young, modest, but well-dressed couple with small children looks worried as they are pulled out of line. They stand to the side as the airport security guard scrutinizes their passport booklets. The booklets are dark green with the words *Mexico Passaporte* embossed in gold. We are in Southern California, USA. The security guard has them wait as he sends a few more people through the line. When it is my turn, he glances at and gives me and my US passport an easy pass. I say to him, jokingly, "That is an Iranian last name you know."

He looks as if to say, don't tell me that.

In the years after the Bush administration's reaction to the events occurring on 9/11, I found myself in a process of being continually racialized. One layer over another. To go from someone who never felt racially profiled to being someone who is, is a shock to the system.

I now wonder if when I need to look for an apartment or a job, how my name, Desiree Yomtoob, will be read. I wonder how my name will influence who I am understood to be.

When I was in elementary school my name was always the last one on the alphabetical class roster. At the beginning of the school year I would have to teach the teacher how to pronounce my name.

I am dismissed by Iranians because I don't speak Farsi. I am dismissed by Iranian Americans because I wasn't raised with other Iranian Americans and because my mannerisms and behaviors are so clearly Midwestern. To Midwesterners from the US, who would be willing to engage with me, I don't really fit.

I lie to the bank manager when he asks me as a part of "friendly" banter where I am from. I tell him I am from Turkey. I have never felt the need to not disclose my background before. He is confused later when he mentions that his family, who lives in Germany, goes to Turkey for vacation, and I say I have never been there. It is a conversation I would have preferred to not have in the first place.

I falter when speaking to the Paris-educated Iranian feminist scholar who visits our campus. I talk to her about my family and our many Persian rugs. She says that we have them because we like to show off our wealth. I explain how my parents found them at garage sales and mended them. She tells me certainly that they were collected as a symbol of wealth. I tell her that I think it was more a signal that would allow my parents a feeling of nostalgia. She tells me, once again, that they were displayed as a sign of wealth, then turns her head to speak in French with another scholar, and in Farsi with another, and then in English with a third, and I think to myself, if there was wealth to be shown, surely my parents would have taught me to speak Farsi when I was a child, instead of carefully speaking to me in English, so I would not grow up with an accent.

The accent of the standard American English I speak signals privilege in the world I live in. The undergraduates at the Big Ten school I work at have no claims to "not being able to understand me" because of it. For the years that I taught English as a second language, I taught "unaccented" English, studying together with my students the way the sounds were formed by my tongue as they came from my mouth. I would listen for the vowels and

consonant sounds that could be "improved," make a list of words with them, and have the student read them. Then, when I would hear a "mistake," we would stop, and I would say the word, and they would repeat it, and I would listen carefully for the "problem," I would say the word myself and study the shape of my mouth, the action of my tongue, where the sound was being made in my face, and explain it to them, saying the word, making the sound, and explaining it, using parts of my own face to demonstrate, and leading the students into copying, from my face onto theirs, until they knew it well enough so that it could become their habit.

Noting that my constructed race and ethnicity has a different kind of visibility than it had before is not necessarily a complaint. I can tell that the reactions and expectations that others have of me are clouded by who they think I am. I am fascinated by how the public discourse shifts who I supposedly am, opening some doors if I position myself one way, and closing other doors if I am positioned in another (Sandoval, 2000). What is most fascinating to me are reactions that I encounter in public places, on the street, on the bus, by strangers, acquaintances, and even people I call friends. I am sure I do the same thing. We react in particular ways when we encounter what we understand as difference, but to sense your difference intensely on an everyday level is exhausting. I am part of several communities, each of which could out me for any reason (Anzaldúa, 1999). I travel in several spaces where I am misunderstood, as a woman who might be interested in men, as a person from the United States who has no minority status, as a Jew who could not be an Arab, and when I open my mouth to talk about my research, I scare myself because I fear I will be profiled for writing on US prejudice against Arab Americans. In certain groups I could be dismissed because I am a woman who is almost 50 years old.

A Woman of a Certain Age

Please dismiss me because I am almost fifty. Please, gross men who stare and expect me to talk to you, ignore me! Sometimes, I look forward to the invisibility I imagine comes with growing older.

"She is that way, cause she is an old woman," says one of the younger freedom fighters I know. She is in her mid-thirties, smart, and hates prejudice, and she calls someone "an old woman."

This "old woman" happens to be one of the people dearest to me, who is in her late sixties. I see her, this so-called old woman, and I watch her. I watch for when she is happy, and sad, and strong, and weak, because she is important to me and has taught me a lot about the world and how to be a person in it. She has given me many gifts. She is my friend.

Being a woman at 49 is complicated. I would like to imagine it is easier if you have some money and some steady lovers, but I have a feeling it is

complicated for all of us. Quickly, the physical characteristics we counted on—as we understood (or did not understand) our gender throughout the years—change. The ways we found our pride, the ways we masked our insecurities—shift. Sometimes, I find myself wondering about the length of my eyelashes. I never watch broadcast television, only TV shows when they come out on DVD, but once when I made the mistake of doing so I saw a commercial for a pharmaceutical that grows your eyelashes. It was being marketed to “older” women. The commercial ended with the eyelash woman reading to a child she loved and then looking lovingly into his eyes. Was this woman supposed to be an older woman who had a child late in life and wanted to be able to still love her child with her loving older woman’s eyes?

Sometimes when I wonder how I am changing as I grow older, in the middle of the night when I wake up in between dreams, I bring the side of my index finger up to gently brush up against my eyelashes. I wonder if they are shorter than they used to be. I do not know, because I never measured the length of my eyelashes. I think they are shorter than they used to be. That’s ok, they were already pretty long in the first place, I reason. I look in the mirror, and I confirm, they are shorter than they used to be. I am sad for a minute, and then I think, “Yay, now maybe the gross men will stop looking at me and trying to talk to me! Come on gross men, notice the eyelashes,” I hope.

My hips grow wider and move more sensually. I am happier and more comfortable knowing that I love women. I feel lucky that I know spectacular queer women my age. No one is more fascinating or sexy than a fifty-year-old queer woman you are interested in.

I understand that as we grow older we become more delicate and more vulnerable and somehow finer. I hate it when younger men make jokes about me, “looking not a year over thirty, wink, wink.” The implications that they think I would laugh at this puts their desire central. I love the sweet and interesting thirty-year-old men who earnestly flirt with me. They are polite and not pushy. They are curious and relatively respectful. Still, I think about what they might have seen on television about “cougars” on commercial breaks from major sports events, and how this colors who they might think I am.

This beginning of aging feels to me like going behind some kind of magic curtain, where there are certain things that happen that only people who are aging can understand. My friends who are older, almost lose their temper with me when I talk about aging. I know there are things I do not understand (yet).

We Live Together/Because It Left a Space in the Sky

We live together and apart. We live in groups that we name and that are named for us. As “Arab” Americans, we are a diverse group. As Iranians, we are a diverse group. As Iranian Americans, we are a diverse group.

Growing up, I knew I wasn’t the same as the people around me. I knew we were different. When I was young and lived with other immigrants, we were all different, and the whole thing was wonderful, and things like Christmas happened. Santa Claus was as important as the Japanese Bead Flower arrangements that my mother was learning to make from her friend who was visiting from Japan. We had a Chanukah tree in our house, and I totally flipped because there was a present for me under the tree on Christmas morning. We were Jewish, so that meant that there was a Santa Claus for sure. On Christmas, my Japanese best friend from nursery school and I made Christmas cookies with our Danish Grandma, Karen, who was our grandma and our babysitter. She used a cookie press, and we put sprinkles on them. They were melt-in-your-mouth delicious. Later when my Iraqi-Jewish grandma made those kinds of cookies for us in her tiny kitchen off of Queens Boulevard, they were made with a cookie press, decorated with chocolate chips, and melted even better in our mouths. She made them, and it wasn’t even Christmas. The dominant culture was so mixed up in the multiple celebrations of our everyday culture that we became central. The strong, brilliant, and loving women in my everyday life ensured it.

I often wonder about my own transnationalism. If you can be a transnational subject without traveling around the globe. I wonder what that looks like.

I was an ethnicity that was not usually identified in the United States.

If people were curious about where my family came from it seemed like it was from a goodwill kind of curiosity, to learn about me.

Then planes crashed into the buildings and the angry man we saw on television made some choices about war.

The buildings are gone from the cityscape that was part of my family home in New York City. Those buildings that my uncle showed me with pride, pointing with his fingertip to the Twin Towers, when they were first built, are gone.

An empty space is now there. That space that my sister later showed me with her fingertip, “See the sunlight on the other side of the street, it wouldn’t be there, but the towers are gone,” she said.

The towers are gone from the cityscape that I viewed from the balcony hallway in Queens that we walked across to go from outside, the city, to Grandma’s door, to the inside of her house, where my large extended Iraqi Persian family was waiting to greet me.

*The planes hit the towers, and everyone became more
afraid and suspicious, and we became more suspect.
Especially men with a certain skin color and hair color and hair
growth were profiled and profiled and profiled and profiled,
and some people said, now you know how it feels.
And most of us try to ignore it, because what can we do about it anyways,
but we always know it's there. And the ones who look like the ones being
profiled are upset, and the ones who are being profiled are angry.
Two wars were fought on this production of fear and anger,
especially the strange anger of the people who fight the
war for reasons, we can guess, but they don't tell.
And this affects mothers and fathers and grandmothers and
children and coworkers and jobs and homes and medical care
And lives,
And lovers.*

*Images created to support these actions spring from the depth of people who
produce our culture and let the whole thing make a kind of sense (Said, 1978)
that it would not otherwise. So it can continue without interruption.*

In the meantime, the Iranians and the Transnationals, and the "Arabs" and the Iranian Americans and the Arab Americans, and the Jews indigenous to Iraq, who now live in the United States, live in levels of meaningful and identity displacements, one two three four and more layers strong.

The US "Arabs" who are not Saudi Arabian blame the "real Arabs" in their telephone calls to family, and the Iranian men are blamed on the radio. In certain Iranian American communities, they claim model minority status. Some Iranians mix with Dominican and Puerto Rican street culture, while others make so much money that they can buy flights to the moon. The Iranians in the US are rich and educated, they are heads of businesses, they are excellent doctors, they are not like the minorities.

The lump sum category that racial and ethnic prejudice and profiling creates blurs our boundaries and imposes new ones on top of them as we struggle to redefine ourselves against what really amounts to nothing but a pack of lies. It is like sinking in quicksand, when you struggle to get out, it makes things worse.

I have always wondered about my skin color. My skin does not look "brown." It does not look "white." I look across the room at the skin color of a Palestinian man I know. His skin is lighter and has an undertone that is darker. I wonder if this is how my skin is. I wonder if this is where it is at, in the undertones. I remember how beautiful the skin color of my friend's face is. Her skin color is very dark with light undertones.

Conclusion: Caught in Cultural Code/s

My experience with cultural identity has been difficult during this media saturated period of globalization in the United States. I draw cultural understanding and live in many different kinds of meaningful communities, but my cultural location is not as cohesive as one might imagine cultural communities to be. While my sense of myself feels whole to me, the sense that I take from others' response to me is shattering. Clearly, to many others with whom I move in and out of a spatial community, I am positioned as a person who is embodied and imbued with meaning, meanings that make me foreign to them, other. My otherness is not organized in a clearly consumable package that meets their apprehensions and expectations. My otherness, like their reactions to me, causes some kind of erasure. In so many ways, my different cultural locations create the illusion of somewhat irreconcilable positions because I appear to be from traditionally marginalized communities and my concerns and stances appear to be at odds, foreign, or erased from what appears to be the everyday center. But these conditions only occur under the illusions that hegemonic factors negotiate. And so while certain types of people understand that their gaze, judgments, and preferences are central and can bring their gaze to notions of who I may or may not be, and how our differences position me as the "other," this is only from the perspective that hegemonies have created. Who is at "center" and who is at margin is changeable.

Certain appearances of multiple cultural locations occur because of the ways that symbolic codes of "who is who" have been produced and digested. They come down in the ways we treat one another, and how we are read, a kind of cultural code. Other experiences of multiple cultural locations come from each person's understanding of where they have been and what they have experienced, a different kind of cultural code. Structural forces such as law, gateways to institutions, and resource allocation have a hand in activities of marginalization that have different avenues of mutability and involve to a greater extent the first kind of cultural code. The fact that I pay attention to this at all, while it doesn't seem like a problem to others, whose identities are from cultural locations that are situated more centrally, is a problem. The time and energy that is expended dealing with issues of marginality is enormous. But for those of us who have our teachings and our pens and who appear to be at the margins but are at the center, we who appear to be fragmented but are whole, will prevail.

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CHAPTER NINE

Lather, Rinse, Reclaim
Cultural (Re)Conditioning of the Gay (Bear) Body

Patrick Santoro

I am caught, tethered to the system of my own and others' making.
(Pelias, 2011, p. 107)

THE FOLLOWING IS AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC SOLO PERFORMANCE depicting how I have become caught in a pervasive mediated consciousness, ever navigating and negotiating body image amidst a deluge of culturally “acceptable” images of gay men and masculinity. Specifically, it represents my experience as a Bear—a member of a gay subculture generally thought of as celebrating larger body sizes and/or significant amounts of body hair—lost among the portrayals of thin and hairless gay men that have become standard imagistic fare in mainstream media. Weaving formative moments of my childhood and adolescence with those of my adult life, “Lather, Rinse, Reclaim” reveals a developing identity through time to illuminate how the media and culture, as mutually informing entities, attempt to condition my “abject” body—a lathering in which I have succumbed to shame and guilt over my uncontrollably growing, differently marked flesh. Seeking assimilation in lieu of isolation, I adopted everyday performances of self that were attempts at silencing my body for the sake of social and cultural conformity—rinsing myself in a perpetuating, exclusionary system. While I may have heeded the expectations of “beauty” infinitely outlined and enforced throughout US culture, I have come to loosen the grip culture has had over me and heed the power of autoethnographic performance as an agent of personal change—a transformative act of reclaiming the self.

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