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Sofie F. Tholl

*Graduate Center, City University of New York*

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ARAB-AMERICAN LIVES IN NEW YORK CITY:  
THE VALUE OF CREATIVE NON-FICTION JOURNALISM TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by

SOFIE THOLL

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, the City University New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Mehdi Bozorgmehr

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Date

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Thesis Advisor

Matthew K. Gold

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Date

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Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## **Abstract**

### ARAB-AMERICAN LIVES IN NEW YORK CITY: THE VALUE OF CREATIVE NON-FICTION JOURNALISM TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by

Sofie Tholl

Advisor: Mehdi Bozorgmehr

Through three journalistic portraits of Arab Americans living in New York City today, this thesis adds to the academic work of documenting the post-9/11 Arab-American experience via creative non-fiction storytelling. The three portraits of different generation Arab Americans each touch upon major themes covered in the post-9/11 social science research on this population, themes that are discussed in the literature review of this thesis. Furthermore, the thesis argues that the choice of creative non-fiction storytelling contributes to the already existing research in the area by making otherwise specialized material readable and accessible for a non-academic audience. Additionally, this thesis addresses the most significant differences, i.e., method, execution, and final product, in journalistic interviews and interviews conducted for social sciences.

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## **Thesis Report: Journalism and Interview Studies Compared and Contrasted**

### **Introduction**

In this thesis, I will reflect upon my methods in writing the core of my thesis: three lengthy portraits of Munirah, Amira and Mostafa (fictive names), Arab Americans of different genders and ages in New York City. This work, three journalistic interviews, lies on the edge of two different genres: journalism and academia. The interviews are informed by social science, but are ultimately executed in the style of journalism. In this thesis I will discuss ways in which this comes across, why I chose to approach my work in this fashion, and its advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, I will use the literature to reflect on the differences between academic work and journalism and how research differs from journalism. I will argue that interview studies and journalism share many traits, however there are differences, and one of the major difference lies within the execution of the text itself; the style of the writing. Additionally, I will reflect on how I found my sources, and the extent to which I had discretion in choosing who I wanted to interview and write about.

After choosing my topic, reading on the subject, and then starting to search for the people that were going to become the core of my work, I quickly realized that I was in unknown territory. I was a white, European woman, looking for Arab Americans to share their personal stories with me. The challenge in finding sources (I refer to the people I have interviewed as sources and not respondents, because I consider my work journalism more than academic work) shaped my thesis, but also revealed something about Arab Americans and their current status in the US and specifically New York City (NYC). I will return to this point later in the thesis report.

## **The Process of Finding Three Sources**

It does not sound that hard finding three Arab Americans located in NYC to share their stories with me. They could even share whatever story of their own that they wanted to, there were not any rules: my interest was for them to decide which part of their life as an Arab American they wanted to share. My plan with the interviews was to let the sources choose which part of their experience they wanted to emphasize. I would be asking about their lives, from start to finish, and they would lead the conversation. However, I was surprised at the difficulty of finding people to participate in my thesis research.

Initially, my idea for this thesis was to interview a family of three or four Arab Americans about their experiences. My idea was to benefit from the family structure, in this way I would both tell individual stories and also touch upon the development of the family as a whole. I would be able to interview the family members about each other as well as about themselves. When I initiated my search for sources I excluded this when I reached out to people. I tried initially to get individuals to commit to the interviews, and then gradually as I got to know them I wanted to ask them about interviewing family members. However, after a while looking after participants, I started to be grateful for even hearing back: even if the answer was no. I sent out numerous emails and made many phone calls without getting responses. I came to terms with the fact that I probably would end up interviewing three different people who were not related. Retrospectively, I appreciate the diversity this model has afforded my project. I now have three completely different people with different backgrounds, origins and trajectories: with each their own set of values and stories, which I think consequently has been for the better of the diversity of my project.

In December 2014 I started my search by reaching out to the minimal network of Arab Americans I have here in the city. I wrote them emails and followed up with phone calls. As I did not want to interview someone I already knew, I urged them to ask around in their group of friends and family. It is not considered good ethics in journalism to interview people the journalist already knows, which I will return to later on. I sent them a short snippet of writing about the project that they passed along to people they thought were relevant. From this approach I did not get any suitable answers; I was put in contact with a 20-year old Palestinian, who had just come here from Palestine. I was put in touch with a man who had grown up in Canada, and neither of these matched my criteria of being Arab Americans (preferably Muslim, since Muslims experienced great scrutiny after 9/11) in the US for a longer period.

After exhausting my networks, I started contacting student clubs and groups at NYC universities. I sent emails and had telephone conversations with about 16 clubs and groups across the city. I was worried, however, that if I succeeded in my endeavor I might end up with a handful of people very similar in educational levels and status in society. In addition to getting in touch with groups via email and telephone I attended three different events with various Muslim American groups at NYC universities trying to get in touch with Arab Americans, but after three weeks of trying I still had not reached anyone willing to participate. At the events I was met with great skepticism and concern. Most people immediately said no when I tried to engage them in conversation, and they realized I was a journalist, while others agreed to exchange email addresses, and then never returned my inquiries. After the failure of I reached out yet another time to my network, and they reached out to friends and family again. Still I did not have any luck through my network.

Late in the process, after postponing my deadline due to the lack of results in my search for sources, I was introduced to an Arab-American activist from Brooklyn. She is a well-known person in the Muslim American community and an important voice in New York organizing for Muslims and Arabs. She agreed to help me out, and gradually she introduced me to Munirah, Amira, and Mostafa. I realized early on, that there was a possible downside to her being the facilitator of the sources, since she is a political person with a clear agenda on behalf of Arab Americans. Retrospectively I believe, though, that my portraits are three personal stories, more than they are political narratives. The sources' narratives about their lives also are shaped by their political standpoint, and the political reality they are living in, so throughout the portraits the political opinions of the sources do come across, but the center of the interviews are the personal, emotional experiences of Munirah, Amira and Mostafa. However, in my thesis two of the three interviewees are actively involved in activism around Arab American causes, so there is undoubtedly a bias to this selection of sources.

The complications I experienced, the many rejections, and the mistrust I encountered when approaching Arab Americans told me something essential about the Arab American experience in the US. First of all, it reveals how the group has been under scrutiny all these years. As I heard from many different people, the NYPD-surveillance of the group, and the many undercover informants have left the Muslim Arab American communities in a state of great mistrust towards outsiders. Furthermore, it is important to mention, that the group also experiences a large amount of inquiries from journalists. As one expert in the field, an Arab American as well, that I met up with for a background interview told me: "You should really be happy, that you're not

trying to find your sources around September 11th. That time of year journalists are lining up for the personal stories and the catchy headlines.”

After the process of finding my three sources, and also in my initial meetings with them, I did feel as if I had to - to a larger extent than usually as a journalist - make them at ease about my project and my intentions. I felt that I had an advantage in my connection to the female activist whom they all know, but still I had to ensure the three of them that I had good intentions, and that my interest was not to contribute to racist and cultural stereotypes of Arabs.

Overall, my approach in finding Munirah, Amira and Mostafa was influenced more by a journalistic method than an academic one. In journalism time is of the essence and you therefore often rely on networks in helping you find people for your stories. Often finding sources is a matter of luck, random connections, interest groups representatives helping you. If my work had been academic, I would have been in breach of the idea of random sampling, by choosing three people all recommended by the same person. In journalism however you often try to find people to fit your story, than you fit your story to the person. My approach lies somewhere in between the two: the interviews were conducted on the foundation of academic research, but executed in a journalistic manner.

### **Analysis of Sources, Themes, Stories and Biases**

In these paragraphs I will briefly describe my sources and the themes which they touch upon. Initially I will remark on the fact that Munirah, Amira and Mostafa are Muslim Arab Americans. I was not adamant about only wanting to interview Muslim Arab Americans, even though it was a preference, but by coincidence I ended up with three Muslims as opposed to

Christians or atheists. Furthermore, all of my sources dealt with the post-9/11 demonizing of Muslims in the US in their interviews. It has been a benefit that all of them were practicing Muslims, since in this way they could personally talk about how religiosity affected their lives. In the wake of 9/11 there was a dominating conflation between Arabs and Muslims in the public discourse, and often time all Arabs were seen as Muslims, while Muslims became the face of the Middle East and Middle Eastern immigrant communities.

**Portrait #1 Mostafa:** is a 68-year old retired doctor, who came here for medical studies. He sees himself as exempted from a lot of the stereotypes Arab Americans often meet from the majority of Americans, because he came here entering directly into the a professional career in the highest strata of society. He has been an important person in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bay Ridge, where he nurtured and invested in the build up of a strong Arab American/Muslim community. He spent a large part of the interview talking about how Bay Ridge has changed over time, and I chose to use a lot of that instead of focusing solely on his personal experiences in the piece. I wanted to be true to the interview and emphasize what Mostafa wished to emphasize as important elements of his US life.

**Portrait #2 Amira:** is a 53-year old woman, who came here as an adult to get a better life with her family. Contrary to Mostafa she was poor in the beginning and struggled to get her and her family's lives together. She is sharing a very different story than both M and M by having a hard time financially in the US. Furthermore her husband was deported post 9/11 and she was left behind with four children and a constant battle with the authorities. She was also very

critical of American values, the way Americans raise their children, and so on. This to me was a very interesting aspect on her Arab-American experience: the way she was adapting to a new culture, while still insisting on keeping her own and defending it to everyone who asks. I chose to focus parts of the portrait on that, since she talked extensively about that in the interview.

**Portrait #3 Munirah:** is a 23-year old activist female, who grew up in rural America and moved to New York City for work. She represents the second-generation experience. Shortly after we began talking she furthermore delved into an interesting area that I myself had hoped to touch upon: how it feels to be a feminist Muslim wearing a scarf, and constantly having to defend that decision, especially to white feminists. She also spent substantial time sharing her experience as a child before and after 9/11 in the interview.

Munirah has a political agenda in sharing her story, as she works for the empowerment of Muslim women in Brooklyn, and for an organization that has a public voice on behalf on Arab Americans. Because of this I chose to stick very closely to her personal story, details and personal, emotional experiences. I had to explain certain experiences in her life in as much detail as possible.

### **Differences, Similarities: Social Sciences vs. Journalism**

When writing my first paper in graduate school in the United States, I kept pondering the same question: How is this different from the journalistic work I have been doing for the past four years? I was writing a paper how the Danish media keeps referring to immigrants, even second and third generation, as foreigners. The paper could have been a feature article, had I myself

interviewed the researchers I was now quoting from their writings, and had my headline been more catchy.

Here, I will explore the differences between interviewing and writing for journalism and for social sciences, and the way in which the literature has talked about the differences in social sciences/academia and the non-fiction journalism writing, that I am practicing in my thesis portraits. Later in this thesis I will compile a list of differences, but in this paragraph I will elaborate on the most important differences that have influenced my work.

As Mark Feldstein argues in his article, “Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History,” there are many similarities in interviewing for oral histories and journalism, but there are also many differences. Both genres, oral history research and journalism, are on the surface concerned with recording information, that is accurate, and that relies on the interview as the primary source, Feldstein writes. The main differences, he goes on, are that journalists are dealing with current events (this seems to be an over-generalization, since reconstructive journalism has become very popular in recent years) while oral histories often deal with the past. He also remarks how journalism’s immediacy can benefit the accuracy in memory, while oral history often obtains more in-depth perspective. However, the differences between journalism and oral history are more than just whether it is reporting and reflection on current issues contra stories from the past, the author writes: more prominently the differences are in technique, style and purpose. Feldstein argues that journalism essentially is a vehicle for advertisement, and that this makes the ethics and goals murkier. Another point is that oral history-researchers rarely enter into interviews with a predefined conception of the outcome, the goal is the interview in itself, while journalists often have an idea of how they want to “angle” the story, as I mentioned earlier.

Mark Feldstein only deals with oral history, but I do believe that his exploration of the differences between journalism and oral history can be translated and used in the broader academic genre of interview studies, and his findings does not have to remain confined to oral histories.

In "Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies," Robert S. Weiss mentions the same core differences in between qualitative interview studies and journalism as Feldstein does between journalism and oral history, so I have chosen to categorize the two different genres as journalism and interview studies.

Another crucial and often mentioned difference is the speediness of interviews conducted for journalism, which can leave the source with a feeling of being exploited for a certain purpose. The working conditions for journalists often limit the time that can be spent on each source. I remember from my time as a news desk reporter, that an interview conducted in under 30 minutes, regardless of the topic —an asylum seeker sharing his tormenting story about fleeing his home country —was a success. A short time for each interview meant you could make it home in time for dinner with your family, or be done with the story today rather than tomorrow and satisfy your editor. The faster it was over the better. The nature of interviewing for an academic purpose is different, but the academic also structures the time very thoroughly, and more significantly the deadline for the project is more often weeks or months away than it is days. While the journalist will be looking for the spectacular, colorful quote, the researcher will be looking for the mundane, representative quote, and these preferences have great impact on style of the interview. At the same time, journalists are often very skilled at getting subjects talking, even though they might not want to participate the first time around, and this skill is fundamental for journalists. This could sound unsympathetic for someone on the outside, however it can in some in-

stances serve a purpose: journalists are often dependent on certain interviews to cover stories that for example reveal illegal matters or social injustices, and pressuring certain people to participate can be argued to remain an ethical choice, if it is for the greater good. However, getting someone who does not want to talk on paper, can also further the journalist's career, and this could be the underlying reasoning for the journalist, in which case the ethical choice for pressuring the source is not valid. Interviews for social science are by nature neutral and not confrontational for ethical reasons through IRB oversight. Feldstein also deals with these issues in his work and argues, that journalists and academics approach the question of ethics differently. He states that it is common among journalists to bluff a source into revealing something personal, maybe even incriminating, while he describes academics as quite the contrary:

Thus, academics worry about the often unequal status between interviewer and interviewee...Journalists are not immune from this concern, but typically tend to view it less as an ethical issue than as a practical one; constrained by limits of time and space, reporters focus largely on what will help or hinder their news-gathering. (2004:19)

The way in which Feldstein describes journalists seems to me to be partly based on stereotypes of journalists: the widespread idea that journalists are cold-blooded news hunters. Is it true that journalism like the one Feldstein describes does exist ( In the US we see it in tabloid newspapers) but the media world is a multitude of different approaches to ethics. In my experience in journalism, five years of reporting for both a newspaper and broadcast, ethical debates about possible exploitation of sensitive sources, and on-going debates about not publishing for the sake of sensation, were constantly aired in the news-rooms I encountered.

## **List of Issues: Journalism and Social Science Interviews**

In order to sum up, better understand and explore the differences between the journalistic interview and the interview for social sciences, I have compiled a laundry list of differences. I use "Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies" by Robert S. Weiss, and I draw on my own background in journalism, to list the differences. As a lot of the listed differences affect each other, some of these categories will overlap in content.

### **Time/Deadline**

**Journalism:** As mentioned above time is of great importance, when you work as a journalist. A journalist will likely be looking at either a daily deadline or the occasional weekly deadline, if he or her is working on a larger piece. This influences all elements of the interview. In the search for the source, the journalist will most likely pick the first person he or she will get in touch with who meets the criteria. Often the journalist will conduct the interview over telephone, leaving out the personal impressions from a face-to-face interview. The deadline furthermore influences the length of the interview and the subsequent depth of the interview.

**Interview Studies:** As Robert S. Weiss writes in his book qualitative interviews can stretch over months. First months of research, then extensive interviews of several times and several hours each time, and then months again for the analysis of the material.

### **Choosing the Source/Subject**

**Journalism:** As mentioned earlier, the journalist plays by his or her own set of ethic guidelines, to the set of guidelines set out by the media that he or she works with in contradiction

to academics who follow IRB guidelines. These are however rarely written down and often subject to change and bending. There can be reasons for pressuring someone into an interview, who was not willing to participate to begin with for a journalist. There are not many specific rules about who a journalist can interview. The rules vary from media to media, and from country to country. Some of the few universal rules are that journalist do not interview their own family, and it is generally frowned upon to interview someone you already know. However, in tight-knit communities of especially political journalists and politicians, this rule is often overlooked. At the same time the journalist will most often, if he/she has time to go over more sources, choose the source with the most compelling story, contrary to the source with the most representative source.

Interview Studies: The academic is bound to a set of rules when finding their subjects for interview. IRB, Institutional Review Board, is crucial for social scientist in the US to be familiar with, and the process from application to approval can be long. Concepts such as panels, random sampling and representative sampling is a set of rules and guidelines completely controlling the choosing of respondents/subjects for the interview. It is more important to find subjects with representative stories than sensational ones. All these rules provide the academic with a safety, his or her work can withstand the academic critique and scrutiny that is expected before publishing.

### **Ethics, Confidentiality, Anonymity, On/Off the record**

Journalism: In rare cases journalists use anonymous sources. It is, however, almost always the aim for the journalist to get the source to come forward with name and picture. This makes the story more believable and makes the source available for the public, and other journal-

ists with follow-up questions. There can be exceptions to this rule, if the safety of the source is at stake, and the identity has to be kept hidden. There is one somewhat blurry concept that is essential in journalists interactions with sources: on/off the record. This can be used by the source to indicate if he or she wants something left out of the interview, when it is published. However, it is not always upheld to the highest standards by journalists, and there have been many cases of journalist not respecting the wishes of the source.

Interview Studies: In academia anonymity is most often a requirement from the IRB in qualitative interviews, and the researcher is bound by confidentiality. The researcher can therefore promise the subject/respondent true anonymity in a way that the journalist cannot, and this is one way the researcher has an advantage in getting subjects to participate if the content of the interviews is private and delicate.

### **Language, Jargon, Editing, Transcription**

Journalism: As a rule journalists write for everyone to understand. There are differences in style and level of language from newspaper to newspaper, but the text always has to be comprehensible. Journalists are taught to write accessible and easy texts, where a new-comer to the subject would be able to follow the content. The journalist often knows his or her core reader-group, but their writings has to be able to attract new readers. Another important remark to make is that journalists often edit the source's quotes extensively. Quotes are turned around, shortened or lengthened to fit the format, sometimes quotes are used at headlines for the article, and that can lead to even further manipulation of the quote. This tendency often leads to frustration for the source. Sometimes to the extent, where a source wants a correction in the media outlet, but

since the journalist rarely writes complete transcriptions of the interview, it can be hard for the source to proof any wrongdoing. By not developing transcriptions of the interview the journalist will also to a higher extent rely on the memory of the interview. What stood out, and what was most shocking will often end up as representative for the sources comments, even though the source tried to emphasize another element.

Interview Studies: Jargon plays a large role in the way academics write. They already know their audience, and they primarily write for fellow academics. This often results in texts that are hard to approach for non-academics. The text will be full of long sentences and abstract concepts that are not necessarily explained. Jargon also originates from the academic being highly specialized within their field, which is yet another essential difference from journalists, who are often generalists. Another important difference to note is that academics as a rule note when a quote is edited, and this brings the reader a higher level of transparency, even if it does not reveal the entirety of the quote. Furthermore, it is essential in academia to transcribe the interviews to perform a thorough analysis of the interview for writing up the key findings.

### **Motives To Be Interviewed**

Journalism: In journalism sources will experience exposure through their participation in an interview. They will often have their photo shown in the media, and their quotes can be used in other media outlets. This can be an important incentive, when sources decide to participate, and this is important for the journalist to think about. As a consequence of this journalists have to be wary of sources wanting to promote a certain cause.

Interview Studies: There is not a lot of fame in academia, and being an anonymous subject in a larger study does not come with many tangible benefits. Therefore, the academic researcher will not need to be as wary of the motives of the subject/respondent, however this can also make it harder for the researcher to convince its subjects of the importance to participate.

### **Objectivity, “Truth” and the Dualism of Fact/Fiction**

There are more rules attached to interviewing, researching and writing for social sciences than there are when conducting journalism. Academic products are controlled by peer reviews, publishing process, and the language is subsequently often stripped of personal impressions, creativity and elements such as scenes, reconstructions, and casual dialogue. This was an important factor for me in choosing to do my thesis as a journalistic product and not in an academic qualitative interview format. Journalists, especially feature non-fiction writers, often add another layer of creativity that is not allowed in social sciences. As a journalist you can enter more into the text, describe the settings, make assumptions about what the subject’s clothes say about him or her: add impressions that tell the reader something about the subject that he or she would never say straight out.

In the article “Creative Nonfiction and Social Research,” Tom Barone talks about the prevailing mindset that consists about social science vs. fiction/non-fiction. How, if the story is fictional, it cannot in any way contribute to social science. This dichotomy is rooted in concepts like “truth” and “objectivity” that are used as validation for social science, and that are often questioned by readers of journalism. Barone talks about the “Single Drop of Blood”-perspective about the “clean” and “pure” social science that cannot in any way benefit from creativity. It can

only become dirtier, become smudged, by a single drop of fiction. Therefore, he adds, non-fiction must be as clean as social science to be respected within this dichotomy:

Stories categorized as non-fictional, and therefore as correct and useful, must at least strive toward “truth” as a regulative ideal. They must aim to consistently, directly, and precisely mirror the “real world.”...And to the extent that “nonfictional stories” tolerate ambiguity, imagination, or creativity—indeed, subjectivity of any sort—they may be seen as diminished in terms of the reliability, validity, and objectivity so important for conventional forms of research, and therefore are still reviled as tainted, dismissed as illegitimate half-breeds. (2008:3)

However, this dichotomy has been challenged by New Journalism since the 60s, and for centuries by novelists, who in detail reported on their surrounding world and whose work has been of great value to history. The journalists and writers in New Journalism took a stance against the idea of journalism as objective: “...and in favor of one who, employing an evocative and metaphorical language of description, also moves to interpret and evaluate those events from an obvious point of view.” (Barone 2008:5) New Journalism differed from conventional journalism by often time having an identified narrator, often the writer would include himself or herself in the writing and thereby openly declare opinions, and not claim the usual objectivity connected with journalism. The genre has a strong legacy, and its style is to be found often in newspapers, radio feature stories, and especially magazine stories, where journalists include themselves, add essayistic elements and portray opinions in their pieces.

The concept genre blurring was coined by Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who advocated for elements of creativity and poetics in ethnography. He argued that his critically acclaimed essays in a certain sense was work of fiction, at least in the sense “that they are something made, something fashioned” (Geertz 1983:16). He thereby broke with the dualistic fact/fic-

tion dichotomy, that Barone described, and his work inspired others to break the boundaries of these genres. Non-fiction, or creative non-fiction, the genre I am trying to strike in my work here, has become increasingly popular in social sciences in the last decades, despite the persistent focus on the fact/fiction dualism, Barone argues in his article. Creative Non-fiction demands something from the reader, he goes on to argue. The reader has to engage in kind of textual play, he argues, where the premise is, that there are no final meanings inscribed within the text. On the contrary the meanings are ambiguous. For a long time social researchers were trying as hard as they could to avoid any kinds of textual ambiguity. “They feared, they slide down a slippery slope from the safe, reassuring hard-high-ground of the literally true into the dangerous abyss of subjective fictions, the fantastic, even hallucinatory, realm of the madman.” (Barone 2008:15)

However, the times are changing, he adds, and what Geertz’ described as genre blurring is now much more celebrated and normal to find. I have stumbled upon several examples of academic writing, where a non-fiction creative writing style was applied without it being journalism or academically compromised. An example I found especially compelling was in the researcher Cathlin Goulding’s work on how Japanese internment camps can be taught about both in school and through memorial sites. The researcher gets personally involved in the material and her writing style is both poetic and of great academic rigor. The writer’s mother was born in an internment camp, and in Goulding’s writings she compares the American public’s silence and the nation’s reluctance to deal with its own dark past with her family’s silence about the subject. She also adds non-fiction creative elements as seen here in her preface:

“This research begins in a time and a place other than my own. It begins in Los Angeles, California on 1017 Dewey Avenue, an avenue of gabled roof tops, whi-

te stucco, palm trees, and telephone wires that criss-crossed cloudless, searing blue skies. It was on this avenue that my grandparents, Mitzuko and Tsugio Ojiri, lived in the year 1942. In March of that year, the white fliers with the bold black lettering appeared on telephone poles and storefront windows. The fluttering white papers announced that all persons of Japanese ancestry were to report to an assembly center within the coming weeks, and that they could bring only what they could carry.” (2016:1)

Goulding writes descriptively about what happened more than half a century ago, incorporating details that hold no academic value, but make the reading experience more engaging. She builds her paragraphs in a dramatic sense, as when she writes about her own imagination of what camp meant for her grandparents:

My grandparents grew old, closed their eyes, and began to lose their memories. When they talked of “camp,” we—their grandchildren—assumed that it was a place where they summered, grew gardens full of tomatoes and sunflowers, swatted at mosquitos, and played handball. In the decades after the exception, they wanted to forget and we forgot alongside them. When my grandmother died in 2007--my grandfather having passed away a few years prior--we cleaned out their house and prepared it for sale. It was then we found the photographs and we began to find out what had happened to them. (2016:3)

I find that genre blurring in this piece benefits the all over quality, and I have often misused this element in the social science writings I have spent my time on. As a journalist in social sciences the language of many researchers has been hard to understand, and when I have occasionally uttered this opinion in classrooms I have sometimes rightfully been set in my place: that it takes a certain language to talk about a certain topic. But sometimes I felt as if the difficulty of the language indeed just covering up for bad writing, making it sound more important that it is. The following quote is from “Writing for Social Scientists: How To Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article” by the well-known sociologist Howard S. Becker, who describes and teaches academic writing. In the book he describes teaching situations with both undergraduate students

and graduate students. He is very critical in his rendering of how academics use jargon and heavy language - and how this often does not result in a better text:

Some of those long, redundant expressions couldn't be replaced because they had no underlying sense to replace. They were placeholders, marking a spot where the author should have said something plainer but had at the moment nothing plain to say. These spots nevertheless had to be filled because otherwise the author would only have half a sentence. Writers did not use these meaningless phrases and sentences randomly or simply because they had bad writing habits. Certain situations evoked meaningless placeholders. (1986:7)

In his book Becker is suggesting that undergraduate students, graduate students, and academics look over their language and trim it down, because by doing this they might uncover theoretical mistakes or cover ups:

Writers routinely use meaningless expressions to cover up two kinds of problems. Both kinds of problems reflect serious dilemmas of sociological theory. One problem has to do with agency: who did the things that your sentence alleges were done? Sociologists often prefer locutions that leave the answer to that question unclear, largely because many of their theories don't tell them who is doing what. In many sociological theories, things just happen without anyone doing them. It's hard to find a subject for a sentence when "larger social forces" or "inexorable social processes" are at work. Avoiding saying who did it produces two characteristic faults of sociological writing: the habitual use of passive constructions and abstract nouns. (1986:8)

## **Concluding Remarks**

I chose to communicate my pieces as journalism, adding the creative layer of non-fiction observations, interpreting personality traits, observing environments and spaces, and thereby emphasizing the reading-experience by writing the pieces in a more approachable matter than academic language allow for. I did this because I believe I would be able to reach a larger audi-

ence. I subsequently want to publish in a mainstream media to meet a larger audience than what is usually obtained through academic journals.

Journalism is not always a praised medium. There are many myths or half-truths connected to the field, many stereotypes attached to the disorderly behavior of journalists, their self-serving agendas. And as an article mentioned: journalism does fundamentally have a commercial goal, and should be scrutinized accordingly. However, as a journalist I believe in the power of non-fiction elements, the observations, creative comments, descriptions of looks and movements, random interactions of the subjects. The creative style draws in the readers, that would not otherwise engage with these topics. Creative non-fiction elements add to the story, deepen the portrait, make it easier for the reader to imagine the subject, and thereby maybe easier to identify with him or her, and imagine his or hers situation. Had I chosen to completely stick with telling the stories of my subjects in an academic way, I would have already decided exactly what audience I am writing to: other academics. These were the dominating reasons for choosing to present my product as journalism and not as an academic project. In my project I was blessed with not having neither short deadlines, nor a commercial goal which provided me with great freedom in taking time with interviews and time with writing. I furthermore had an academic background in the subject, which provided me with a deeper sense of the topic than most journalists have. In that sense my project is a hybrid between the two, or as Geertz coined: genre blurring.

## **Literature Review: Racialization and The Supposedly Suppressed Arab Woman:**

### **Arab Americans Post 9/11**

This section does not stand alone. A literature review is built on the works of others: on the extensive scholarly work done on the complex predicament for Arab Americans post-9/11. This section is an attempt to organize other's research to better situate my thesis in this large body of work. My thesis is trying to contribute to the multitudes of post-9/11 Arab American experiences. It has asked three Arab Americans the simple question: What is your life like as an Arab American? Within this question they have themselves chosen which experiences to share, and what they wanted to emphasize from those experiences.

In order for me to do these three Arab Americans justice, as the facilitator of their words and story, I will in this literature review educate myself and the reader on the following topics: The speediness of the racial formation for Arab Americans in the aftermath of the largest terrorist attack in the US in September 2001. How this process changed the "racial common sense" associated with Arab Americans, and how the racial formation affected Arab Americans in terms of: heightened visibility leading to elevated discrimination — and last but not least how this affected Arab American women, who lost agency and was diminished into a stereotype: the suppressed wife, the unfree daughter, the ultimate victim.

### **Racial Formation Theory and Background**

When dealing with the concept of race and the racialization of Arab Americans in this literature review, I am using the racial formation theory as developed by Omi and Wynant in their seminal book “Racial Formation in the United States” from 1986 and 1994, in which race is understood as a socially constructed phenomenon, and racial formation is the process in which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. It is interesting to look at the way in which they describe the state’s reaction to race and how the state historically has treated races differently. My argument, as sought documented through the work of others, is that the group of Arab Americans have gone through a accelerated racial formation that has left the group intensely more visible and associated with a new "racial common sense" from the surrounding society. “Racial common sense” being the associations human beings make between individual characteristics, preferences, behaviors, and attitudes, and a particular physical appearance or perceived group membership. Furthermore I expand that argument by posing that Arab American women experienced a two-fold consequence of the 9/11 aftermath.

### **Heightened visibility**

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were 1,697,570 Arab Americans in the US, with 290,893 persons defining themselves as simply Arab, and 224,241 defining them as Other Arab. Besides these numbers several other Arabs might have been categorized in different groups, and it’s estimated by the Arab American Institute that there is around 3.5 million Arab Americans, with 371,233 based in New York City. They do not comprise a large minority in the

US, yet they have received intense attention and have faced serious discrimination, especially since the 9/11.

The othering of Arab Americans has during the past 14 years been on a historical high in the aftermath of 9/11. The group experienced a change in visibility within the American racial schema and American society in general post 9/11, several authors have argued. In the book “Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11” by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber the authors thoroughly describe the transition that Arab Americans experienced before and after the terrorist-attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. The authors describe the pre 9/11 situation for Arab Americans as the following:

Up until the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, several Arab American writers used the trope “invisibility” to refer to the place of Arab Americans within dominant US discourses on race and ethnicity. A common theme in this literature was that while most government definitions classify Arab Americans as “white”, popular U.S. discourses tend to represent “Arabs” as different and inferior to whites... Helen Samhan referred to the racialization of Arab Americans within U.S. government racial schemas as “white, but not quite. (Naber 2008:1)

Then the authors go on to argue that after 9/11 Arab Americans and Middle Easterners went from “invisible citizens” to “visible subjects,” who were now the target of negative national and global attention, fear and discrimination. 9/11 became the defining moment in which a racialization of Arabs took place. They went from not quite white, to non-white other, the authors argue.

### **Before 9/11**

Melani McCalister wrote her book “Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U. S. Interest in the Middle East” that describe the stereotyping of Arab Americans in popular culture and how these processes are intertwined with global politics and American military interventions in the

Middle East before 9/11. It was published in September 2001, just before the attacks, and this in itself speaks to the fact that Arab Americans and Arabs in general were subject to heavy stereotyping even before 9/11. This was seen during the oil crisis in the 1970's where Arabs were presented as greedy and selfish – when the OAPEC members (the Arab members of OPEC) proclaimed an oil embargo in response to the United States' involvement in the Israeli October War. This action from the Middle East was directly mirrored in how the portrayal of Arabs were then on presented in popular culture and discourses, McCalister argues. So it seems Arab Americans have been portrayed in an orientalist manner in popular culture and in politics, as backwards, irrational, unreliable and sexualized for decades – some argue centuries. However, 9/11 catapulted stereotyping into a national hysteria of fear and hate. This led to heavy discrimination partly due to the fact that the U.S. discourses of the “home-grown” terrorist won attention and the fear and stereotyping was no longer only oriented towards the “terrorists” abroad in the Middle East, but targeted Arab Americans within the US. In her book “Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11” Louise Cainkar explains how it within the U.S. population became more accepted to fear that all Arab Americans were possibly linked to or at least was in sympathy with the attacks of 9/11.

Those who posited Arab/Muslim collective culpability for the attacks did not necessarily charge that all Arabs and Muslims in the United States could have or would have committed such a deadly attack on Americans, but they did assert that Arab/Muslim communities silently supported the attacks and willingly hid terrorist sleeper cells. Pre-9/11 social constructions that had proffered the existence of a collective value-set and orientation shared by Arabs and Muslims, including a propensity to violence, a disposition to terrorism, and an entrenched hatred of America, had set the stage for these propositions to gain wide public support. (Cainkar 2011:64)

Louise Cainkar in 2011 makes an effort to describe in which way the generalization of Arab Americans was constructed. Even despite the fact that a majority of Arab Americans within the US are not Muslim, but Christian, Sikh or other religions, the idea of anyone Arab being Muslim –and therefore terrorist - - became dominating. And the book “Homeland Insecurity” also explains this tendency of how Americans have typically conflated Arabness with religiousness.

It is not the first time the US has constructed an internal enemy. Cainkar compares the development of othering towards the Arab Americans with the Japanese internment camps after WWII and in this way portrays a long American history of othering that subsequently have lead and still leads to harsh political and human repercussions. In this case relevant with the current situation in Guantanamo and the indefinite detentions of the prisoners. This is similar to what happened after WWII with the internment of Japanese American citizens. This comparison is also made by the Italian scholar Giorgio Agamben, who talks about the idea of an American “State of Exception”, in which he compares the production of the “other“ in the US to the production of the “other in Nazi Germany: the Jew. He goes on to compare the unjust and horrid treatment of these groups, legitimized by political decisions based on fear as seen under George W. Bush after 9/11.

### **American Fear of Islam**

This idea of enhanced visibility and stereotyping is not only rooted in discourses and lived experience from Arab American side, but documented in polls and surveys in the wake of the attacks of 9/11. A Newsweek survey made on September 13<sup>th</sup> –14<sup>th</sup> 2001 showed how 32 percent of Americans thought that Arabs residing in the United States should be under “special surveil-

lance.” Thirty-five percent of those questioned in a CNN/USA Today/Gallup survey on September 14<sup>th</sup> –15<sup>th</sup> 2001 said they have less trust in Arabs living in the United States following the attacks. Furthermore Gallup discovered in those same days in the immediate aftermath of the attacks that the general public is evenly divided over the question as to whether all Arabs—including U.S. citizens—should be required to have special identification with them at all times. Several other polls made in the wake of 9/11 established that the majority of Americans were in favor of profiling Arabs – also Arab American citizens - and subjecting them to special security checks before boarding planes (October 2001). Furthermore a University of Illinois poll (December 2001) found that nearly 70 percent of Illinois residents wanted to sacrifice civil rights to fight terrorism. Almost one year after the attacks in August 2002 a Gallup poll showed that a majority of respondents felt there were “too many” immigrants from Arab countries in the United States. All these numbers show a consistent image of the situation shortly after 9/11 for Arab Americans in the US. And If we fast-forward 12 years from 2002 to 2014 the picture has not altered all that much, despite the fact that 9/11 is more than a decade in the past. The poll ”American Attitudes Toward Arabs and Muslims” conducted on June 27<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014 showed that a significant percentage, 42 percent, of Americans support the use of profiling by law enforcement against Arab Americans and American Muslims.

### **Internalized Mistrust and Closing in on Themselves**

This increase in mistrust facing the Arab American population after 9/11 was also internalized by the group itself. The book “Citizenship and Crisis: Arab Detroit after 9/11” is focusing on the large Arab American population in Dearborn, Detroit. The book documents how

Arab Americans themselves became willing to give up civil liberties in these times of anti-Arab sentiment post 9/11. The numbers show how among conservative Arab Americans 50 percent were willing to sacrifice some rights of their own to fight terrorism (among liberals the number was 23 percent), and among Arab American citizens 21 percent supported surveillance of Arab Americans – among non-citizens only 9 percent were in favor. Amongst the respondents in the Arab American community in Detroit who

...felt September 11 was an attack on American values” 40 percent would detain suspects without sufficient evidence. These data also show how Arab Americans are similar to other Americans, and this speaks to the internalization of the public fear and inherent justification of discrimination towards Arab Americans. The authors of this study show how several factors shape the Arab American’s attitudes toward civil liberties: vulnerability, identity, and fear. And it furthermore shows how two population subgroups are particularly vulnerable to civil rights violations, noncitizens and Muslims. (2009:202)

Another consequence of the threat to Arab Americans, in this case the Muslim part of this group, was a stronger turn to religion and into Arab or Muslim communities. So argues the book “Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11” through interviews with American Muslims by the author Geneive Abdo, who also works journalistically. One of her interviews is with the young man Farhan Latif. He was the president of the Muslim Students’ Association at the University of Michigan Dearborn campus and in response to hate crime, violence and general opposition to his way of life, he was pushed further towards his religion.

...today’s young Muslims are coming together in student associations, mosques, and Islamic centers to work out for themselves what it means to be a Muslim in contemporary America... For many educated, upward mobile

young Muslims, the student associations are defining how to live as a devout Muslim in a secular and often hostile society. (2007:190)

Hereby she portrays one way in which the hostility within the American society towards Arab Americans and Muslims have lead to a closing in on oneself and the Muslim identity in order to fit in with society's expectations. When talking about stereotyping and enhanced visibility of Arab Americans post 9/11 it is impossible not to also deal with the media's role in this process of racialization within the United States. In her book "Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11" Evelyn Asultani discusses the media consequences for Arab Americans after the attacks. First of all the author remarks on the fact that sympathetic voices were present, protecting Arab Americans as a whole from full racism and persecution, even the president at that time reassured the public that Arab Americans and Muslims were his friends. However, racist media portrayals of Arab Americans and Middle Easterners and in particular Muslims both in news stories and in shows were indeed also present in the aftermath of 9/11, she argues. She mentions Fox News and other conservative outlets and television-shows such as *24*, where the main character is the anti-terrorism agent Jack Bauer constantly fighting off Muslims. This development also lead to a public condemnation of Islam and yet another layer in the heightened visibility that Arab Americans experienced after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, she argues.

### **Elevated Discrimination: Surveillance, Deportations, Hate Crimes, and Murder**

After going through the enhanced visibility and mistrust that was targeted at Arab Americans after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, it is obvious to look at the consequences of these sentiments.

In consideration of the length of this literature review I'll be disregarding the amount of human rights violated in Guantanamo, and in the wars abroad in Afghanistan and Iraq, and focus on Arab American citizens and non-citizens who experienced great hardship in the form of most significantly: surveillance, limitations of civil liberties, deportations, hate crimes and violence.

Let me begin in New York City -- the city where the attacks took place -- that took drastic measures into their hands consequently leading to limiting of civil liberties for Arab Americans in the city. In the wake of 9/11 a tailor-made NYPD program that had specialized surveillance squads was investigating and shadowing the Arab American population in the city – non-citizens and citizens as well. A direct and very concrete consequence for innocent citizens.

In their book “Enemies Within: Inside the NYPD’S Secret Spying Unit And Bin Laden’s Final Plot Against America” the journalists Matt Apuzzo and Adam Goldman explain how the NYPD commissioner Raymond Kelly initiated the Demographics Unit to track down so called “home-grown” terrorists. The unit mapped out Muslim businesses, mosques and people. The authors neither claim that this was legal nor illegal, but point to the fact that the NYPD interpreted the so-called Handschu guidelines (The Handschu agreement is a set of guidelines that regulate police behavior in New York City with regard to political activity) in a way that allowed them to investigate entire mosques as terrorist organizations “and to monitor people’s political views if they spoke Pashto. The fact that some terrorists had been members of Muslim student organizations was enough to justify monitoring entire groups.” (Apuzzo and Goldman 2013:279) The book about NYPD spying unit is a great example of how journalism has an advantage in covering ongoing cases as this one.

The NYPD spying unit is only a small part of a larger picture of discrimination towards Arab Americans post-9/11, and if we go back to the time just after 9/11 deportations were common. It has been documented that large numbers of Arab Americans were indefinitely detained by police, picked up and linked to terrorism for no other reason than their heritage, which led to deportations and the shattering of Arab American communities. The administration behind these detentions and deportations denies to reveal the actual number of people who were unjustly held back, says an article from ACLU (America's Civil Liberties Union). However, it seems that the estimated number of detained and deported Arab Americans in the wake of 9/11 is as high as 13,000 as shown in an article from 2004, that elaborates on the situation where more than 82,000 Arabs in the US came forward to the immigration administration on the demand of government officials. Despite the fact that only 11 out of the 82,000 were suspected of ties to terrorism (as reported by the New York Times) 13,000 were faced with deportation. This shows how the heightened visibility and focus on Arab Americans had very actual consequences for the group.

Besides administrative consequences Arab Americans were also faced with violent reactions from civilians. As described in the book "Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond" by Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr there were very immediate violent and murderous responses to the attacks on 9/11 – and in the days immediately after, there were four confirmed cases of hate-motivated murders with victims chosen due to their supposed, but false, connection to Islam:

Balbir Singh Sodhi was the first murder victim of the backlash because his traditional Sikh looks— dastar (turban) and kesh (unshorn hair)—were confused with Osama Bin Laden's kaffiyeh (male headdress) and beard... Hate crimes

and bias incidents spiked immediately. According to the organization South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT 2001), 645 bias incidents were reported in metropolitan newspapers across the country in the week after 9/11. The New York Times put it most succinctly: “Since the attacks, people who look Middle Eastern and Muslim, whatever their religion or nation of origin, have been singled out for harassment, threats and assaults. (2012:2)

The book offers an eye-opening account of some of the hate-crimes that Arab Americans experienced in the immediate wake of the terrorist attacks: hate-violence, denying of home mortgages, phone harassment, street harassment, and many others. The American government with their “War on Terror” had set the standard of the treatment – or rather mistreatment of Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans, the author’s argue: “These policies have been criticized for disregarding civil rights. Some scholars have gone so far as to call them “state-sponsored terrorism”” (2010:4). The book also describes how the Muslim Arab American community refused to stay silent in this hateful environment and mobilized to defend their civil rights both through among other things advocacy organizations.

### **The Supposedly Suppressed Veiled Woman**

I will now move on to speak about the group of Arab Americans that experienced several different forms of oppression in the aftermath of 9/11. The women. Not only did the women, as with the men, experience the different variants of consequences as I have listed above, the women additionally experienced being sculpted into a role as the oppressed. And especially one signifier has become loaded with politics and meaning: the Muslim veil. The veiled woman has become an icon of suppression and of backwardness. In order to legitimize their military interventions abroad the US needed to find a victim to save, and no one seemed more obvious

than the women supposedly forced into covering up, several researchers argue. We saw images in the media of the Afghani women in their bright blue burqas, and shortly after 9/11 this specific victim was firmly established, when the first lady of the United States Laura Bush called upon the people to understand the horrendous circumstances women and especially girls were living under in Muslim countries. In a November 17, 2001 radio address she claimed, that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women." The author Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad argues in her article "The Post 9/11 Hijab as Icon", how the media jumped along on this discourse and gives the example of MSNBC's Chris Matthews who stated: "They hate us because our culture teaches us to respect women." In her article Haddad argues, how the hijab became the ultimate symbol of this discourse, and how the veil became an equivalent to suppression: "Increasingly the American public has identified" the veil," whether a hijab (a covering of the hair) or burqa (a covering of the head including the face) with Islamic militancy, extremism, jihadism, and oppression of women." (Haddad, 2007:255)

In the above quote the author points to the two-fold way in which the Muslim women became targets in the "War on Terror". Firstly they were perceived as suppressed victims in need of rescue. And secondly the women wearing veils – or strongly associated with Islam in another way -- furthermore became a threat of militant Islam. Furthermore, the hijab wearing women were perceived as threats and consequently became targets of violence and hate crimes. Louise Cainkar's study from 2011 shows how a woman wearing a hijab was present in more than 90 percent of hate incidents reported by Arab Muslim women, while sixty percent of women who reported experiencing hate acts were wearing hijab when the incidents occurred, and an extra 30 percent were in the company of women wearing hijab:

In addition, more than half of the men who reported experiencing hate acts were in the company of women wearing hijab when the incidents occurred. Furthermore, when asked which sub-group of Arab Muslims was most affected (in any way) by post-9/11 events, 55 percent of study respondents identified women wearing hijab. Women wearing hijab were more likely than other women and than men to be spit at, to experience another driver's road rage, to have items thrown at their cars, to be followed by strangers, to be subjected to hateful language, and to report home vandalism and sieges. (Cainkar 2011:235)

The author Yvonne Haddad argues in her article "The Post-9/11 Hijab as Icon" that the increased visibility and targeting in society lead the Muslim women closer to their religion. Her article argues, that after 9/11 the hijab became the symbol of authenticity and pride, and the veil has increasingly been appropriated by second-generation, young, Muslim women in the United States. It has become a signifier of an identity that defies the typical Western demonization of Islam and the humiliation of its women.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is only a small part of the field of Arab Americans post-9/11 focusing on the racialization (heightened visibility), and the elevated discrimination and injustices, with a focus on how this it affected Muslim Arab American women. My focus in this literature review however shows a unified image of a population within society that has — as Omi and Wynant described in their work — experienced a fast alteration of their status within society, in tandem with a drastic change in their racial formation in society. My view furthermore points to the fact that Islam and Muslims have become vague ideas of a community that encompass entire world regions, enormous groups of different people, and people within other religions. So, if you are from the Middle East – then you are considered a backward Muslim, regardless of your origin,

and religion. It furthermore seems, that underneath the idea of Islam lies a conflation of phenotype, religious markers, and origin that consequently associates all women and men within the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa with Islam. This shows how the heavy antipathy towards Islam and Muslims could be read as sheer racism instead of the critique of religion, that many of the people who critique Islam claim it is. Generalizations was and is still today made, while differences within the communities — and successes in the communities — often time are denied in the West. These forms of generalizations ultimately serves the purposes of the Global North.

## **Portrait #1: Dr. G and the Bay Ridge He Built**

When walking down the streets of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn with 68-year old Mostafa Ghali, you are constantly reminded that here, besides you, walks an important man. A young man carrying heavy-looking bags walking out of the Arabic grocery shop, an older sister gently pushing - rushing a younger sibling down the street to make it home, a woman correcting her hijab before continuing on her way: they all respectfully acknowledge his presence: "Hello Dr. G," "Salaam, Dr. G." In the front windows of the Arab-American Association of New York (AAANY) on Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn hangs a large photo portraying three young people: in the middle a young woman wearing a bright red hijab, to her right a tall man in a blue shirt, and to her left a woman with a graduate cap planted on top of her black hijab. All flashing bright smiles. When the people of Bay Ridge pass by they are reminded of what happened just months ago, when three young Muslims, Deah Shaddy Barakat, Yusor Mohammed Abu-Salha and Razan Mohammed Abu-Salha were killed by a white man in North Carolina. The sturdy and efficiently walking Dr. G passes through the crowded waiting room of AAANY with three kids playing with building blocks, and a mother engaged in discussion with a friend. First whispering, then giggling. They are all here waiting for help, legal matters, health care, unemployment assistance. Essentials. Dr. G waves cordially to the receptionist of the AAANY and she buzzes us in. We have decided to meet here for our conversations, since he has put a lot of effort into the association since its birth in 2001. After his retirement from his medical clinic in 2009 located in Bay Ridge, this is where he has spent his free hours. He is opening a stack of letters with a knife, glancing through them quickly, while professionally making polite conversation, when he looks up from the other side of the desk. He runs his hands through his grey receding hairline, and then he talks about the killings in

North Carolina. “This horrible act of hatred speaks to the conditions for Arab Americans in the US today, I believe. It has never been worse to be Arab in the US than it is today.”

It was a humid June day in 1972, when the then medical student Mostafa Ghali landed in JFK international airport in New York City. Behind him he had left his entire family in the Middle East, two sisters and two brothers, parents and grandparents. In the arrivals section of the airport stood a dear friend awaiting, a fellow medical student. He took him to the dorms of the hospital, where they would be interning together. Mostafa stayed at the dorms for the following years, before he was offered an apartment with his medical residency. Back then he had not foreseen the fact, that he was going to spend the rest of this life in the US. He didn't know that he was no longer an Arab, he was an Arab-American.

As a Palestinian born in 1947, the year before the state of Israel was founded, he was used to making new homes. Mostafa first left his home, the now West Bank that back then was a part of Jordan, for medical school in Mosul, Iraq in 1966. He was ranked third in his class in all of Jordan and had a full scholarship waiting for him in Iraq. He continued to excel in his studies in the then thriving city of Mosul. When the 1967 war started and was won by Israel, new laws were implemented, and suddenly any Palestinian not inside the territories at the given time was no longer considered Palestinian. Mostafa Ghali was stateless and his entire family was in Palestine, where he could not go. He had his Jordanian passport, and after two years in Amman, in what felt like an ever changing region full of risks for a young Palestinian, he decided to leave: “Back then the US was the one country with open arms, and I wanted to be a place where I could pursue post-graduate studies. So I left.” As an intern at the hospital, he was happy. The attending physician was a Christian Lebanese man, and he had hired a large group of medical students

from the Arab world. Mostafa Ghali felt at home, and hardly any Americans really cared about where he was from. He was a medical intern, on his way to become an important man, doing important work. “Americans didn’t know much about Palestinians, and back then I never felt like a part of a visible or recognizable group. When they once in a while asked me where I am from, because of my accent I answered: Palestine, then they’d say: Pakistan?” he says and laughs. Lifts his eyebrows in disbelief. Despite the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that roared and divided nations politically Americans tended to not know much about Palestinians. Through his position in the medical world, where many employees come from all ends of the world, Mostafa Ghali went through his days without ever feeling different. When he read the news, he noticed changes though. The 1973 Oil embargo happened a year before his arrival in the US, and still he felt as if the Arab states were accused of being greedy and extreme. He remember how he wondered if the Arab Americans were portrayed in that light too.

When Dr. G first came to New York, there were only two mosques in the entire city. One was located in Manhattan on Riverside Drive, which was too far from Dr. G’s normal life in Brooklyn. So in the beginning he practiced his faith wherever it was possible to pray. Finding a room, at home, at a friend’s house, and when he and his Muslim friends and family celebrated Eid they rented out a big Manhattan hotel, decorated it, and ordered piles and piles of food, snacks, fruits and sweets. “Thousands of people came, because there was no place else to go for Muslims to celebrate Eid.” This went on for years, where he worshipped in his house and celebrated Eid in the middle of Manhattan, until he found his way to the other mosque in Brooklyn Heights. The Islamic Mission, or Dawood Mosque as it is also called, was founded in 1939. It doesn’t look like much from the outside. A white sign with blue writing in both English and Ara-

bic on the front of the house tells what the house is actually for. The red-brick house blends in on State Street in the neighborhood that is today a place where you must have money to live. A charming neighborhood for the wealthy Brooklynites. It was so different back then, Dr. G remembers, not fancy and exclusive. All Arabic activity in Brooklyn took place around Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn Heights back then in the 1970s, and all along the avenue were speciality shops with Arabic sweets, manakeesh with zaatar, shawarma and falafel. The mosque was founded for Muslim sailors coming to Brooklyn for a couple of days before heading out again, in need of a place to worship, and it was an obvious choice for him, since it was placed about ten blocks from Dr. J's residency.

Around five months after he arrived in New York City a world event occurred that would slowly start to change the way the majority of Americans viewed Palestinians and Arabs. In November 1974 Yasser Arafat talked at the United Nations with an olive branch in one hand, and a pistol in his belt: "Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom-fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand. I repeat: do not let the olive branch fall from my hand," Yasser Arafat ended his speech in front of a UN General Assembly in New York. Again Dr. G was following the news, his fellow Palestinian friends and family all felt more visible at once. In 1976 Dr. G moved to Bay Ridge. The neighborhood was starting to become the center for Muslims, who gathered here to live from all over New York City. It spoke strongly to him to live among other Palestinians, now that the group was a bit more visible. He had met a woman who was a medical intern in pediatric medicine, they got married, and together they bought a house in Brooklyn. "I always brought with me a guilt over leaving Palestine and not being able to

fight for my countrymen, so when I moved to Bay Ridge to live and work in my newly established clinic, I felt like I could finally, after ten years, give something back to my people”.

The number of Arabs who moved to Bay Ridge during the 1980s and 1990s is hard to precisely determine. The United States Census doesn't have a specific box for Arabs, they can either check the white box, or they can check the “Other”, so how many exactly live in the US is hard to determine. “We were many Palestinians already out here, but in the 80s and 90s many more came. Lebanese, Algerians, Egyptians, and the community started to really take shape,” says Mostafa Ghali. The neighborhood started to change rapidly. Before the 80s and 90s it was mainly inhabited by an Irish Americans, but as the Arab, and oftentime Muslim, population came, the Irish left or moved closer together. Dr. G followed the development closely, with his clinic and house and family in the the neighborhood, he spent his entire days, and every night in Bay Ridge. With it the Arab population brought less crime, Dr. G says:

“With more and more Arabs coming, not drinking, not gambling, no drugs, no violence — all haram — the places that served these habits started to close down.” Instead came restaurants serving shawarma and kebab, lamb and tabouleh, religious clothing shops with the newest fashion in Muslim clothing, and corner shops with large fresh bundles of cilantro and bulgur in bulk. During the 90s Dr. G helped start a Muslim school, and a Muslim high school, teaching both in English and Arabic, and when the Islamic Center opened in BayRidge 1999 he was on the board. These were the years when Dr. G became a local celebrity. By the time he retired in 2009 he had helped deliver 5000 children, and many of those were from women in this area.

In 1970s Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue was the only hub for Muslims Arab Americans, and there was only two mosques to be found in the entire city. The 80s and 90s made NYC feel more

like a home for Arab Americans. Dr. G remembers how the Arab community were friends of the American authorities. During the 1980's war in Afghanistan, where US-backed Afghan forces fought against the Soviet Union, Arab immigrants were recruited as soldiers and translators.

“Officers from the CIA would come to our neighborhood and recruit people, wanting them to be a part of the US abroad, and many people did participate. Being included in the forces felt like open arms.” Even though Bay Ridge felt like a safe haven for Arabs and Muslim, the surrounding world had started to change a bit. The 90s brought a sneaking sense of mistrust. Dr. G remembers that besides what felt like a silent and invisible existence lived by the Arab community, he noticed differences in the media and on the political level. “I felt it, and I think we all felt it, even though Bay Ridge was becoming more and more like a home.”

At his clinic in Bay Ridge one of his long-time patients had gotten American citizenship, and just days after it came through the patient had put in a application to legally change his name. No longer did he want to be Mehdi, now he wanted to change his first name to William and his last name to Johnson. Dr. G was surprised to hear this, he had always been a proud Palestinian himself and hadn't felt a lot of animosity. “I asked him frankly, why? Why don't you want to be you?” The patient explained that he had been looking for a job for months without luck, even though he was a highly educated engineer, so he wanted to see if changing his name would have an effect. When the patient later came back for a check up now legally named William, he had received several call backs from employers and had been offered a job. “This surprised me. I lived in a little bubble I felt, because I had come early and had been in a group of fellow Arabs in my residency and internship here. Never did I have the feeling that I had to hide who I was, but others did.”

On the 26th of February 1993 about 8 miles from Bay Ridge, a yellow Ryder van drove into the B2 platform underneath the North tower of the World Trade Center. A man named Ramzi Yousef lit a 20 foot fuse, and the van exploded. The group of terrorists behind the attack had Al-Qaeda affiliations, and the incident that left six people dead had the nation noticing Arabs in a whole new way. “It was terrible what happened to the World Trade Center, and it ignited something in the American population. We could feel it, as if we became just a bit more visible to everyone”. Still Dr. G felt sanctified in his position as a physician, he held a position of power, and people came to him for help: “So for a long time it didn’t feel like anyone thought about the fact that I was Muslim and Arab.”

Dr. G and the rest of the Muslim staff at his hospital had a good relationship with the management, and in the year 2000 they decided to celebrate Eid in the lobby of the hospital. They recently had a mosque open up for worship during the day at the hospital, and Mostafa Ghali felt good about being able to celebrate the end of Ramadan with his Muslim co-workers. So when the fast was over, Mostafa Ghali bought boxes of baklava in the local grocery shop in Bay Ridge. Together with the rest of the group of Muslim coworkers he put up stands where by-passing, doctors, nurses, patients and family of patients could have a treat, baklava, manakeesh, and join the celebration. Dr. G stood by the baklavas as his long time nurse and colleague came by. She stopped for a second, and looked at him, down at the table, then up at the sign explaining the reason for the treats and the celebrations. “Oh, I always thought you were Israeli,” the white nurse commented with an odd expression on her face. Mostafa Ghali had always worn a name tag on his work coat, but it merely stated his surname, an ambiguous name, that could be mistaken for a Hebrew name. Only a few of his colleagues knew his first name Mostafa, a common

Muslim and Arab name with the meaning “The Chosen One.” Equally surprised that his long time colleague didn't know his heritage, Dr. G answered: “Yes, I am Palestinian and I am Muslim.”

He looks up and smiles, a smile of defeat. It is 15 years ago, but that tiny incident changed something in him, and from that day forward he changed his name tag, so that everyone would know that his name was Arabic. “It seemed people had a hard time understanding that Arabic people could hold a position such as the one I was holding, a respectable, kind, and hard-working man. It made me sad, and I promised myself that I would always show who I was, where I was from, and that I was proud of myself.”

What had been simmering through the 90's, started boiling over in the beginning of the 2000s. An event occurred that had an enormous influence on world and came to signify the beginning of a new era. One would talk about the time before as pre, and the time after as post-9/11. On exactly that day, September 11, 2001, Mostafa Ghali and his wife were on their way back from several weeks of vacation in Europe. They had gone to Copenhagen, Stockholm, Finland and as the first plane hit the north tower, they were sitting in a hotel lobby in Moscow. Everything was ready, suitcases packed and passports ready, and they were to fly out from Moscow that evening. The words on the television didn't make any sense. Neither he nor his wife understood Russian, but the images were clear. About 8 miles from their home in Bay Ridge, their city had been attacked, and the now iconic images of the burning and crumbling towers left Mostafa Ghali in awe, his city was at war, it seemed. Mostafa Ghali rushed out of the hotel lobby and called his children from a payphone, all six of them, to make sure they were alright. The children in Brooklyn, were all safe and miles from the attack. Because of fear for more attacks

all air traffic in and out of the US ceased, and Mostafa Ghali and his wife had to wait until the next day to return to the US. Arriving at JFK they were greeted by their worried children. The world seemed so unstable and changeable with what had happened. They hugged and cried when they saw each other. “When we arrived in the airport there was a sense of relief. We were back, and were greeted with great respect from the authorities, everyone just wanted the Americans back.”

Soon after the safe return home Dr. G began to realize how this event would come to have enormous consequences for the Arab Muslim population in America. Stories about attacks on Muslim Arab Americans started to fill the news stream. The terrorists were Muslim Arabs, and a public frenzy against Arab Muslims started to grow. Only four days after the attacks on the World Trade Center a Sikh man wearing the characteristic turban was killed by gunshots at a gas station in Arizona, he was mistaken for a Muslim and killed. Everyone was afraid, that is how Dr. G remembers the time after 9/11. He knew of women who given the opportunity would stay home all day. They had heard stories from friends and family about other women having their hijab pulled off at the street. Wearing their religious head-scarves made women targets of harassment on the streets, they were spat on, and a woman in the neighborhood experienced having trash bags emptied over her and her stroller. The sentiment about Arab Americans in the US had changed. It had changed forever, Dr. G. states. He shakes his head: “Everything changed. It sounds so dramatic, but that is the truth. Everything changed after 9/11, and the life we led before never came back.”

Suddenly there were visitors in their otherwise quiet neighborhood of Bay Ridge. “We became familiar with FBI and later ICE in those years. ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs En-

forcement was established after 9/11) was seeking out Arab Americans without papers, while the FBI were trying to figure out who we had connections to,” Dr. G remembers. Two officers came to talk to Dr. G in the middle of the day. “I wasn’t surprised, that was the way the times were.” They came to him in his clinic. They sat him down at his desk and took the chairs opposite him. They weren’t rude, they were friendly and efficiently inquisitive, Dr. J. remembers. They asked him about his projects, clinic, his children and friends. “After we were told about the extensive spying on us by the NYPD we realized how all of this was hollow and fake. All the friendly questions were a cover for years of surveillance.” It wasn’t until 2010, where a number of news stories broke, that it was revealed to what degree the Muslim and Arab groups in New York City were surveilled during the post 9/11 years. The so-called Demographics Unit under NYPD had one task: to spy on Muslim Arab Americans. In order to legitimize their surveillance of mosques and the people who visited the mosques, they named the houses of worship as sites of radicalization. Under-cover officers were everywhere in the Arab neighborhoods of NYC and the surrounding areas. Listening in on lunch conversations, following people on their daily commutes, surveillance cameras were posted at strategic locations: in front of the mosques and other busy places. “We started noticing the informants very early on. Some even told us what they were being asked to do by the NYPD,” says Dr. G. It was often time undocumented immigrants, or arrestees, who in exchange for being allowed to stay in the country or stay out of prison, were ordered back into their neighborhoods, where they were to report to the NYPD about suspicious people and patters. Some informations were even asked to stir conversations about jihad and terrorism and then report back about the reactions of those at the other end of the conversation.

“It was frightening. It felt as if, you could very easily do something wrong that would be misunderstood.” In their community they decided that even though it didn't seem just, they had to start explaining to the surrounding world and majority Americans that Muslims weren't a threat to America.

The people of the Dawood Mosque in Brooklyn Heights, that Dr. G was now a big part of, noticed the animosity growing. They had experienced graffiti on the walls on the mosque, and at home in their houses and neighborhoods, friends, neighbors and family were reporting getting yelled at on the street, finding hateful writings on the houses of their walls. At a meeting they discussed how to take action against the growing antipathy against Arabs, and Muslims in general, and they decided to open the mosque to the public, to the people from the neighborhood. Several times they held open house events so that the surrounding people of New York City could see, that Islam was nothing to fear.

“It helped for a while, and people in the neighborhood felt fondly about the mosque. But there was a limit to how many people we could educate about the peacefulness of our religion. It was simply too big a task.”

This was eight years ago, and when asked about how he feels about being Arab American today, he sighs heavily. “I hate to say it, but it is as bad, as it ever was.” Dr. G. explains how the director of the Arab American Association of New York were recently attacked on the street, threatened with decapitation. This event happened just after ISIS had decapitated their first hostage to the horror of the entire world. “Being Muslim have become equal to being a terrorist. It has not become better since 9/11, actually it has only increased.”

## **Portrait #2: Amira and an America She Both Hates and Loves**

“You are coming straight home after that.” Amira is looking at her 19-year old daughter, pointing her index finger at her and curling her brows exaggerating a typical serious manner. Then she looks at me, smiles and winks. Usually they talk in Arabic, but because there’s a journalist in the house, she is including me in their conversation. The daughter smiles at her: “Yeah, mom. Sure.” Amira’s apartment in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn is distinctly Middle Eastern with three leather couches ready for entertaining guests, and Quran-quotes hanging on the walls. Amira has been in the US since 1990, but it is important for her to stay as Arab as possible, keep the traditions alive, raise her children within the Arabic culture. “I hand-picked what I like the best from the two cultures, but when it comes to raising my children, I like the Arabic way better, and my daughters are staying in this house until they get married,” she says and raises her voice loud enough for her daughter to hear, who is packing a backpack in the other end of the living room. “Ok, mom. Bye bye,” the daughter rolls her eyes and smiles, as if their interaction is a little show they put on when guests are around. The apartment still feels temporary to Amira who moved there because she no longer could afford her bigger apartment in another part of Bensonhurst. She misses her old life there. Moving here was one of the many consequences of what happened to their family in 2008, when Amira’s husband was deported after 7 years of legal back and forth. Like many other Arab-Americans he was deported after 9/11. And Amira and her four children was left behind, when he in the middle of the night was sent off to Jordan, where they moved from in 1990.

She had already migrated once, when she came to the US. Being from Palestine originally, she was a child when first uprooted and settled into a new home in Jordan. Moving to the US,

however, was a shock compared to what she had experienced before. It was 1990 when Amira, her husband and their oldest child, the two and half year old Fadi, came here. She was pregnant with her first daughter at the time, and when they landed at JFK airport in Brooklyn, a friend of her husband picked them up and took them to an apartment in Flatbush. They came on a tourist visa and for vacation, but in the back of their minds the hope was to find a better life than the one they were living in Amman, Jordan. War was always a threat, where they came from, and they wanted to bring their children to a safe place, where they would have opportunities.

“America sounded so good. My brothers were on the West Coast, and they were doing great. Everyone was talking about how easy life was here. Now I feel like, they were not speaking the truth. I feel they were telling a lie,” Amira says.

In the United States Amira, her husband was struggling to make a living for Amira, Fadi and their yet unborn daughter. In Jordan Amira had been a science teacher, and her husband had worked as an accountant in a big bank. Here, they had no papers, and it seemed impossible to find a job. In the beginning they lived off their small savings, and after a while Amira’s husband started working in a local grocery shop, where he was doing cleaning. Amira remembers those months as tough, her husband was making \$200 a week, and their apartment on the second floor of a Flatbush house cost them \$700 a month. In the apartment they only had a single mattress, because there was no money in their budget to buy furniture. It was the friend of her husband who owned the building and rented it out, but Amira didn’t think he was actually a friend to them in their time of need: “We didn’t speak English at that time, and he or his wife never helped us to understand what to do to help ourselves. The rent was very expensive for Flatbush back then, and we were desperate, and only had \$100 a month to live off,” she says.

During their stay in New York, the first Gulf War started, and when Amira was talking with her relatives from home, she got the same messages through those scratchy telephone lines: “Don’t come back,” they said to me. She shakes her head, even to this day she doubts if she made the right decision. “They were afraid of the war spreading to the entire Middle East, and even afraid of nuclear war. We thought we would be better off staying here,” she says.

Time passed by and they had overstayed their visa. Amira spent her days with her two children, but her husband was always away, trying to scrape by enough money for the rent. She hadn’t yet learned the language, and the US felt like a trap to her. No one had told her that she was to renew the tourist visa, and after they overstayed it, they knew they would never be let in again if they left. So they stayed, even though their life in the US was an even harder struggle than it had been in Jordan. “Time had run out. They were constantly discussing the war in the Middle East and we were so afraid. We didn’t mean to break the visa, it just happened,” she says.

After six months in Flatbush they moved to Bay Ridge. They had heard through other Arabs that this was a neighborhood where Arab and Muslim immigrants moved to. Amira was longing for friends to talk to. Other women like herself, who were staying at home taking care of their children, that she could share her life with. Her husband was now making a bit more money, but it meant that he was away more, and Amira felt as lonely as she had ever been before. “It was like I had been dropped in an ocean, and I had to start learning how to swim.”

In Bay Ridge she didn’t find what she was looking for. “It was a misunderstanding to think that just because there are other Arabs, that I will find happiness. The Arabs and Muslims I met there, were all from rural areas of the Middle East, very simple people. I had grown up in

Amman, and my husband and I had good jobs before we came here. We had nothing in common with the residents of Bay Ridge.” After 8 months they moved again. This time to Bensonhurst.

She and her husband were talking a walk by the water in their new Bensonhurst neighborhood, with one child in a stroller, and the 3 year-old Fadi running in front of them. Amira was crying. Today her husband was off from work, and they could chat and spend time together, but it was so rare, and she missed adult company. While they were walking down the waterfront only a few blocks from their new apartment, she suddenly spotted a woman sitting in the grass. The woman was wearing a hijab like herself. She couldn't believe it, her luck, so she handed the stroller over to her husband, and ran over to the woman, even though she was always too shy for these kinds of actions: “Salaam Aleikum,” Amira started. The woman looked up and smiled, Amira tried again: “Do you speak Arabic?” “Of course I do, sister,” the woman replied in Arabic. Amira started laughing. Houda, the Syrian woman, and Amira quickly became friends, and through her followed a larger network of Arab female friends. Ladies like herself that started their American life lonely and isolated. Through Houda Amira got in touch with an Arabic Center, where she started to learn English. “I am not the kind of person that gets involved with other people fast. I feel shy, and I take my time to trust them, but with Houda it was different, and I felt at ease more from that day on.” Amira started volunteering at her children's school, as she got better at English and could communicate with the other volunteers.

After a couple of years in Bensonhurst, the United States no longer felt as hostile as it had before. Even though the family was still struggling financially, and with the restrictions of being undocumented, they had found friends. During the 90's Amira gave birth to two more daughters, all American citizens, because they were born in the US. Now it was only Amira, her husband,

and their oldest boy Fadi, who were in the country without papers. Through the Arabic Center and her Arab friends she learned how to navigate her life as an undocumented migrant. She needed the help constantly having new experiences, that she didn't know how to handle. Just a year into her stay in the US, she had her first worrisome experience. She was on the bus with Fadi and her youngest daughter Maggie and, as she tried to move down the aisle, she tripped with Maggie in her arms. Someone had stepped on her long dress that she wore in respect to Allah. As she was looking back, she realized the woman who had stepped on her dress was smiling smugly. She didn't apologize, even though Amira had fallen with her baby in her arms. Amira was sure that the white American lady had done it on purpose. After that she started wearing her dresses a bit shorter, since she didn't want anyone to have an opportunity to do the same thing all over. She repeated these experiences to her newfound friends, and they discussed the matters: when to fit in to protect yourself, when to say something back, and when to get mad. "They taught me how to act, all the things I didn't understand about American culture, they shared with me," Amira says.

The 90's was an upward curve. Amira angles her arm to show how the 90's felt to her. Fingers at the top, and a lowered elbow by the center of her body. "We started at the bottom, and slowly things got better, but then September 11th happened. Everything was as bad as it had never been before," she says and lets her hand drop beneath the level of her elbow. Amira and her family experienced, as did many Arab-Americans, an increased discrimination after 9/11. The family was also pulled into a case that would eventually change their lives.

About six months after the terrorist attacks on The World Trade Center, in March 2002, Amira and a friend Nour from Bensonhurst were headed to Manhattan. It was two days before her daughter's birthday, and Amira and Nour were headed for the cheap stores on Broadway in Lower Manhattan to find gifts for Amira's daughter, and some goodie bags and fake crowns for the girls coming over for her birthday party. Amira did as she always does, took her car to the subway station on 79th street, parked it under the elevated train tracks, and met up with Nour. All the way from her house she felt as if a car was following her, and when she met Nour, she asked her if she had seen the man behind in the car before. Nour had never seen the man before. "I think I am being followed," she said to Nour, who now started laughing at her: "Enough with the drama, Amira, let's go to the city." "But he is looking at us," Amira said again, she felt so certain that something was up. Nour shook her head: "He must be looking after the children," she said and pointed to the school nearby. Amira decided to shake off her suspicion, and got on the train. They spent an hour in the city, and at around 11.30pm they headed back on the D train with shopping bags in every hand. When Amira was opening her trunk to store the bags a total of three cars and a jeep came, from what seemed out of nowhere, and surrounded her and Nour. She and Nour started screaming, as four men came out of the cars. "You have to come with us, madam," one officer dressed in normal clothes said to Amira as she was showing the group of men her New York State ID. It was noon and Amira's children were arriving with the school bus in an hour. She didn't know what was happening, and she didn't know what to do. As they were handcuffing her, she asked Nour, who was watching from the sidewalk, for help: "Please take care of them, I'll will come get them, when this is over." She wasn't under arrest, they told her. They called it detainment, but Amira couldn't tell the difference, since she was sitting in the

Downtown Brooklyn prescient with her hands cuffed. They told her, that it wasn't Amira they were looking for, but her husband. "He is at work," Amira said, and told them about her children and that she had to go home to make sure, that they were alright. "You'll have to wait here until your husband arrives," the officer told her. Amira wanted to call her brother in California, maybe he could jump on a plane and go look after her children, but the police officer didn't allow for a phone call. Instead he called for another officer to bring her to a cell: "Bring this bitch to a cell," he said to the another officer. Amira was shocked, she wouldn't stand for it: "Why are you calling me a bitch? I am not a bitch, it is your mother who is the bitch," she cried back at him, as she was being taken to her cell. "I felt like I was dying, they were holding me and disrespecting me, and worst of all keeping me from my children. I just wanted to go back and look after them, I wouldn't go anywhere else, just home. I didn't even care about the possibility of deportation at that time, even though I knew that they must have figured out that I was undocumented. All I was thinking was maybe my children were on the street, alone by themselves."

After some hours Amira talked to a lawyer. The lawyer asked her if she was involved in any illegal business, or if her husband was. But Amira had never done an illegal thing in her life, besides being in this country, and neither, to her knowledge, had her husband. Hours went by, and Amira was still in the cell. All day passed, and at 1am in the morning she was released. Her husband had showed up after he returned from work with police officers were waiting for him at the door. Amira hurried back to Bensonhurst, and walked to her friend Nour's house. She wanted to make sure that her children were alright, see them, and tell them that everything was going to work out. It was late at night and Nour's house was all dark, but Amira climbed the three steps to the front door and knocked. No answer. She tried again, nothing happened, the house remained

dark, and no one came to open. She sat down on the stoop, she wasn't going anywhere until she saw her children. Amira ended up waiting all night until the lights came on at around 7 in the morning. She knocked again and Nour opened the door. "They are here," she said, and when she returned with the children she said: "Take your children, but don't come back here anymore." Everyone was afraid back then, there had been a lot of talk about informants ratting each other out, and no one wanted to be associated with problems. No one wanted to be deported. Amira and Nour stopped being friends from that day on.

Amira cried all day, her husband was in jail, and she didn't know what was going to happen. The lawyer called and Amira was told what her husband was being charged with. First there had been talks about conspiracy against the nation, but later in the day Amira and the lawyer realized, that he had been arrested because he was bringing cigarettes from Virginia illegally and selling them in New York. This was the first Amira had heard about any of this. She felt stupid for not knowing, and deeply sad that her husband had done this to support the family.

After a while in prison Amira's husband was put in a detention center in New Jersey. The police realized he was undocumented, and he was placed in the center instead of prison, with the purpose of deportation. Undocumented immigrants that the authorities fear will go underground are often time incarcerated in detention centers until their deportation day. Years of lawyers and police started this day. Amira and her lawyer kept appealing, they did whatever they could to keep him in the country, and every six months he was put in front of a judge, and thereafter relocated to a new detention facility.

The process went on for years, and while they were fighting to keep him in the country, Amira's status changed. At the end of the 90's, Amira's brother had put in an immigration peti-

tion for her, and in 2006 she and Fadi, who was born in Jordan, got their green cards. Still her husband was detained, and despite their efforts, they were starting to think that keeping him in the US might be impossible. They were right, and in August 2008 in the middle of the night she got a phone call. Her husband was on the other end of the line, and he was calling from the airport. The officers had brought him there, and he was allowed one phone call before he was sent on an airplane back to Amman. Amira cries when she thinks about that night, and the hopelessness she felt afterwards. “The lawyer told me that when he is already gone, it is extremely hard to bring him back. We fought all those years, and we are still fighting to bring him back, but maybe it will never happen.”

Since August 2008 Amira’s husband has lived in Amman. She applied for a job in September 2008, and in October 2008 she started working in an insurance company.

“Despite all the bad things that happened, it was like Allah was helping me when I got that job, or else I wouldn’t be able to support our children.”

The years, since her husband’s deportation, have been a struggle both financially and personally. Her husband sends money back from Amman when he has some to spare, and the entire family pitches in. When possible she visits him in Jordan, which is typically once a year. That is all they can afford, but they stay in touch over Viber and Skype, they call and text every day. She saves enough money to send her children to Amman every summer, everyone but Fadi who is now married with children. She wants them to spend time with their father, and to get to know Jordan. “It could have been easy to just go back, take all the children and move back to Jordan, but it’s more complicated than that. They are still in school the youngest, and I must give them the possibility to finish,” she says and pauses for a while: “Also it is about more than that. They are

Americans now. As much as they are Arabs. It would be a crime to force them out of the nation they were born in.” When her children visit Jordan, Amira misses them. Her loneliness from the early days in the US has come back, now that her husband is gone. She tries to suppress it by spending a lot of time in the Arabic center, or with friends, but the sadness lurks under the surface of her life, and it’s especially hard when the children are away. The fact that this situation might never change makes her very sad.

The three youngest children always enjoy their time in Jordan, but when they return they tell Amira, that they would never live there. It is strange for Amira, how conflicted she feels about America and Jordan after her husband was deported. “It is hard to tell what is home now. I am so disappointed in this country, that split up a family instead of making him pay for his crime without taking his entire family away from him. I feel mad at America, but on the other hand Jordan isn’t a home anymore either, not when my children will never live there,” she says. In many ways Amira likes America. She raised her children here, they are Americans, and there are plenty of elements she likes about the culture. “My children got their educations here, Americans are taught to respect women, and the men help a lot, people get welfare, food stamps when they’re poor. All these things are beautiful, but then the rest, the ignorance, the lack of respect for family, and all the hatred towards other cultures, I don’t understand.” Therefore, Amira insisted on raising her children following mostly Arabic cultural traditions. The girls are staying at home until they’re married, and there will be no drinking and no drugs in their lives. “I think these are healthy things for children. Healthy rules that will make them decide to have a good life.” It hurts her profoundly, when she thinks about all the hardship being Muslim and Arab have brought her children in the US. The time some strangers threw trash on her walking with her two

children, all the comments about her and her daughter's hijabs, and the many accusations of wrongdoing Muslims always get thrown at them in the media. In many ways Jordan would have been a safer choice, they could have walked the streets free of judgement at least. Despite all her struggles and the time time after 9/11 that Amira describes as her nightmare, she has faith in the future. When she looks at her children, speaking fluently English, maneuvering the Arabic traditions and the American ones, she can't imagine all this suffering continuing: "I see the children of both the Middle East and the US as the bridge. The bridge between East and West. I pray to God that they will be able to help this gap and this ongoing war: terrorist attacks in the US, bombing of children and women in Gaza, all these fights back and forth. I think our children, half Arab, half American can build understanding and make this world better."

### **Portrait #3: The Muslim Feminist and Her Goodbye to White America**

“I wear my hijab for political reasons,” says Munirah, a second-generation Egyptian who spent most of her childhood in Ohio, US. It isn’t a hijab on her head though, the young woman is wearing an oversized green beanie as a substitute for a hijab. She smiles and pulls at it. “Sometimes if I’m in a hurry I just throw on a hat. I mean, it fits the same purpose.” Her studio apartment in Brooklyn, where she’s lived alone for over a year, is decorated with pro-Palestine posters, and on her table stands a vase with pink tulips. They’re drooping and a couple of leaves have fallen on the table. She is a busy woman. The 23-year old woman works with empowerment of Arab-American woman and runs a support group in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, a neighborhood with a large Muslim Arab community. She is about to get a certificate in physical self-defense, and has actively chosen to spend her life working for her community of Arab-Americans, a group she believes is under siege in today’s America.

In college and her entire life in the American educational system she has felt forced to explain her religion and defend her identity: why she wears a hijab, and why that does not mean she’s suppressed, contrary to what most white Americans think. “I want to take up space, especially in places like campus, and places like Manhattan where it is rare to see hijab-wearing women. It is also important for me to connect to other Muslim women through it. But mostly I just want people to be forced to notice the hijab.” Munirah didn’t always feel so assertive about her own identity and choices as an Arab American Muslim women. Growing up in America as a Muslim woman came with a lot of obstacles, and the road to this place in her life was long.

On her first day of school, in a classroom full of her new classmates, Munirah’s first grade teacher asked her a question: “So, do you need any ESL classes?” Born in the US, and spe-

aking English fluently, Munirah was puzzled. She looked to her mom standing besides her: the Egyptian immigrant looked so out of place with her headscarf, and Munirah put two and two together. The teacher assumed that Munirah needed extra classes because her mother talked with an accent. Instantly, Munirah was embarrassed. “I think othering for me happened very early. I would sometimes feel very ashamed, if my mom took me to school wearing her headscarf and talking with her accent. Just because people would ask, what is this? Who are they? Why are they here? And instead of understanding they were wrong, I internalized as so many marginalized folks do,” Munirah says.

In the place where Munirah spent the first 10 years of her life, there weren't many people that looked like her or her family. Actually she doesn't recall any other women besides her mom who wore a hijab, and any other children who had curly dark hair and a darker skin tone like herself. The Egyptian immigrant couple, Munirah's parents, had moved with their American-born children to the small town of Lima, Ohio, for work. They were the odd ones out, the only Arabic looking family on the block. They, as seemingly the only ones, spoke Arabic at home, and on religious holidays they got together with the small Muslim community in town. They kept feeling out of place though. Most of the other Muslims were Southeast Asians or Black Muslims. Munirah's parents missed the comfort of being around other Muslim Arabs, missed the affirmation of their lives, and missed that society too was shaped to respect them along with white Christians. Often time her parents would keep her home from school events like Christmas parties, even Halloween. They didn't want their children participating in events that wouldn't be reciprocated. If they were going to a Christmas party, Munirah's parents wanted the other families to celebrate Eid as well. “I totally understand it now, I would do it the same. Your Muslim or Arab identity is

not affirmed in any way, and for you to always have to affirm other religions and identities is hard. To constantly yield and bend over for others, but not have that be reciprocated will make you feel small.”

Lima, Ohio was a mostly white town, where diversity in school consisted of Munirah and her siblings. “You’re not Americans,” it started. Then came the threat: “I will beat you up.” The words came from a bigger boy at the playground, where Munirah and her siblings were playing, when she was about 7. Her parents, who were also there, rushed their children home. They understood that this was a case of racism, while Munirah and her siblings didn’t think about the underlying message. “It just felt like normal bullying to us back then, where now I can see how it was an example of the general condition of the small town.” The family met aggressions like this around Lima, and after a while they started to get paranoid, Munirah remembers.

“My mom didn’t want to go out that much, and after the playground incident, she didn’t want us coming there on our own anymore. All the antagonizing in the town left us with a lot of self loathing,” Munirah says today, where her parent’s reaction, isolating her and her siblings in the attempt of shielding them from an environment not affirming of their identity, makes sense:

“I would do the same, if it was my own children.” After a while, the parents decided it was time to part ways with Lima. In 2000 they moved to Toledo, Ohio, where they found the Muslim community they had longed for. Shortly after their move, great changes would be happening for the Muslim American population all across the United States.

In Toledo Munirah attended a Muslim school from 4th to 8th grade. The family was living in a neighborhood where ladies were wearing headscarves, and where accents were normal, where Arabic was actually spoken outside of the walls of Munirah’s home. Her parents were so

excited, Munirah recalls. In school Munirah went through a culture shock. All of a sudden she was surrounded by Muslims of all backgrounds, she was no longer the odd one out. She found a sense of comfort she had never before felt in school. She finally had friends she could confide in. They would talk about everything, share problems with their parents, gossip about the other children. “Suddenly my friends had similar names to me. We had a community, and a mosque to go to. It was liberating, especially for my parents who still live there today.”

A year after the family had settled in and found their community, 9/11 happened, and nothing was ever the same again. That morning Munirah had just been dropped off at school, when the first plane hit the North Tower at the World Trade Center. She and her friends were running around on the playground, before the bell rang, as they would do every morning. Suddenly a white man was standing outside the gates of the school. He was angry and was shouting: “We’re going to get you back for this.” The kids were confused, no one knew what he was talking about. Get us back for what? Before long the news of the terrorist attacks reached the school. Shortly after the news spread all over the nation and the world, Munirah’s mother and aunt were at the school to pick her up and get her home. Everyone’s parents were there, the atmosphere was hectic. No parents wanted their children to stay at school that day.

“There was an extreme fear that day and the following many weeks. My mother and father and aunts and uncles were all terrified, and us children didn’t understand the magnitude of it all,” Munirah remembers. The Twin Towers came down, there was an attack on the biggest mosque in Toledo. Munirah’s family didn’t go there for everyday worshipping, but would visit the mosque on big occasions, like Eid celebrations. The large white mosque was located by the highway and with its dome decorated with stained-glass windows and its two minaret towers it was the most

beautiful mosque around, and a landmark for the Muslim community in Ohio. The person who was driving by had brought rifle. With precision the attacker shot all the stained-glass windows and drove away. During those days, the voicemail of the mosque was constantly filling up with hateful messages. The incident spurred even more fear and anxiety in the Muslim community, now neither the school nor the house of worship felt safe. Besides going to school, the children weren't to go anywhere else, their parent's urged. Munirah's mother was the only family member wearing a headscarf at that time, and it became a constant worry for her, she felt visible and fragile. "It's a matter of safety," Munirah remember her parents explaining to her, about why she shouldn't leave the house. Family from Egypt would call in and check on them. The days were stressful, Munirah remembers.

Everything changed after 9/11, and the community members had to look out for each other now. Munirah, still a child, struggled with ambiguous feelings. She didn't understand how it was all connected. Her parents didn't have anything to do with the attack, so why did they all have stay inside? Why couldn't she just go out and play? "I remember thinking: I don't have anything to do with this, I have nothing to apologize for. And I know Islam, I know Muslims, this horrible act has nothing to do with either Muslims or Islam." Being at the Islamic school helped a lot. Munirah felt safe and she didn't have to explain herself or explain her religion or her family. While the surrounding world and the American society were constantly expecting her and her peers to apologize or explain the attack, the Islamic school was a safe haven, where everyone understood the gravity and horrors of the attack, while also understanding that they didn't share any blame for it.

It got harder once she went to high school. Munirah attended a small private liberal arts high school after 8th grade. Everyone there — at least outwardly — was liberal, left-leaning American. However, most of them were white and diversity was low. Today Munirah characterizes the school as a very white, lefty place where the hipster kids would reign. Since everyone thought of themselves as liberal, the racism was even more concealed and harder to call out. But it was always there. Munirah started to wear a headscarf in 9th grade, which made her a target, she realizes today. Subconsciously, she started to look for other young women of color and other Muslim students to hang out with. Today she realizes that she needed them to feel safe, back then she just did it without pondering why. There were 50 students in Munirah's grade, and 4 of them were Muslims, and before long she started to mobilize the very few Muslim students at the high school. She formed a tiny Muslim students group, and at Ramadan she and her fellow group members threw "Fastathons" to raise awareness, outside of Ramadan she had the few Muslim students meet for lunch. It had become everyday life being surrounded by likeminded Muslim students in her Islamic school, and she needed and missed the community. Outside of her group of friends she was always made aware of her ethnicity and religion. In class she was often asked to explain matters related to either the Middle East or Islam. There was one specific English teacher who she felt tormented by. He hand picked her to lead the discussion on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, and often he would start class by sharing an article related to either Islam or the Middle East. Once it was an article about stoning of Muslim women in Afghanistan. He handed out to the class — and then he asked Munirah: "So, what do you make of this, Munirah?" Another week he started the class by asking: "Munirah, have you heard that it's Islamo-fascism Awareness Week at a lot of colleges across the country?"

When the year was almost over, Munirah needed his recommendation to enter into one of the AP English classes. English and Creative Writing were Munirah's favorite topics, and her grades were among the best in her class. The english teacher wasn't going to sign: "I'm sorry, you're not ready. Just on the cusp, but not quite there." Munirah didn't understand, she was doing excellent, and it didn't make sense to hold her back. "I needed that class to enter into the colleges I wanted, and he didn't want to help me, even though I academically deserved it. It was hard to read it any other way, than that he just didn't like me." When Munirah graduated from high school she had already been admitted to the renowned Michigan University of Ann Arbor. At the graduation the high school gave her the English award of the year, and it was the same teacher who held her back, that handed her the award on stage.

Looking back at it, Munirah felt that she embraced the tokenization back then. Being the idea of the exceptional Muslim woman. But being an outspoken, highly opinionated young Muslim woman who wears a scarf, was not an exception, and she knew that. However, no one else knew that. She didn't know that she could do anything else, there was no other way for her to be affirmed in her identity than to embrace the tokenization, and she chose to get what could get. Inside she knew something was off: "I had to spend all my time explaining well meaning white people that I wasn't oppressed, that I wasn't the exceptional Muslim woman," Munirah says and continues: "I think by the end of high school I was done with liberal America. Done with the exceptionalism of Muslim women, done explaining myself and even if I didn't quite know it yet."

Looking back at college now, Munirah realizes that she probably couldn't have chosen worse majors than what she chose at the Michigan University of Ann Arbor from 2010-2014. She

loved the topics, but with Women's studies and International Relations, she was again surrounded by white students wanting constantly to inform her of what they made of the Middle East, what they made of Islam. In her Arabic classes, she felt surrounded by white students wanting to join to CIA or the State Department in their many assignments in the Middle East, often military interventions. In Women's Studies she most often felt that her being, her identity, was under siege, as if being feminist and being a Muslim woman was mutually exclusive. As if being Muslim meant she had to always educate others on the Middle East and Islam. All the agonizing over her courses and the role she felt her fellow white students were constantly casting her in, was more subtle and under the surface in the first years of college. But, throughout her four years she was slowly but steadily awakened. What she felt in spurts in high school, wanting to get away from white, liberal America with their confused ideas about everyone with another skin color than white, manifested itself. By the end of her college life she was the president of Muslim Student Association (MSA), and surrounded herself almost exclusively with fellow Muslim, black and brown students.

Initially, in her first years, she was excited to be away from home, to start her life in another city. In high school she didn't have a mosque to go to, here on campus she had one. She began to get involved with MSA, attending meetings and doing work for the association. At the meetings she met Muslim women who inspired her. "They became idols to me. They were brown and black Muslim woman, unapologetically taking up space, being loud and opinionated," she says. Munirah was all these things too, and they helped her with being her true self. Munirah's older friends in MSA talked openly about racism on campus, about micro-aggressions, they had when they were younger forgiven as mishaps, but that they now realized were a part of a larger

system of oppression. “They showed me that all the small everyday racist experiences I had weren’t anomalies, but actually part of systemic racism,” Munirah says. The women started as role models but ended up as best friends to Munirah, who stopped apologizing for who she was, and starting demanding space without excepting the tokenization as the exceptional Muslim woman. In MSA Munirah never feared that her words would be twisted or misheard. As with the tiny group of Muslim students and girls of color in High School and in the Islamic school, she found a community where she could talk about the up and downsides to growing up with Middle Eastern and Muslim parents without it being used to further a racist agenda. She could talk about the sexist men in the her community, without some white American suddenly talking about Islam or the Middle East as sexist in general.

Outside of MSA and her Muslim and Arab American friends campus seemed hostile to Munirah. Both in class and outside of class Munirah felt attacked for being Muslim:

“I was walking home with a friend on campus one night. We were both wearing a head scarf, and a group of men rolled down their car window and shouted: “Show me your ankles bitch.” He thought he was cute by saying ankles, because usually they say: “Show me your tits” to white women. These experiences were both misogynist and racist, and they lingered with me.”

It was as if it got worse year to year, as Munirah became informed about racism and became radicalized. Especially the women’s studies classroom was a place where Munirah never felt safe. The department was majority white, with a lot of feminists who talked and talked about intersectionality, but who never really understood it. “They would include one reading in the syllabus by an author of color or from the Global South, and then they felt as if they were doing the right thing, as if they were sufficiently representing everyone’s voices. But the actual curriculum

was never diverse.” It was both the professors and her fellow women’s studies students that she felt expected her to be an educator. As with the English teacher in high school, she was expected to educate the classroom about the Muslim, brown, and the Arab experience. And she was fed up. Fed up with always having to both do the reading and often also having to do a counter-reading that she found herself. “I would have to come prepared in order to protect myself. My identity was on trial, and I had to educate them about myself constantly, and I was expected to smile while I did it.”

In her fourth college year she was to lead a class discussion on the book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* by Lila Abu-Lughod. The book argues how Muslim women were constructed as victims of suppression, because it would then be easier for America to legitimize their military interventions in the Middle East and Afghanistan, when the women needed saving. The class was a 400-level course with advanced women’s studies students, and Munirah was excited about the book and the topic of the militarization of America and how it affected Muslim women. These were the kinds of subjects she had longed to discuss. In the middle of the class presentation on the topic a soft spoken white woman raised her hand and asked a question: “Isn’t the scarf forced on Muslim women?” Munirah was frustrated, she felt like it was high school and the first year of college all over again. She couldn’t believe that she once more had to defend herself and explain to yet another white student that she wasn’t oppressed by Islam, but rather by white America. She took a deep breath and tried to ask the woman a counter-question to let her think about the actual content of their reading: “How has the scarf as a concept been used to further American militarization and violence against brown people?” The white woman dismissed the question and talked again: “Well, if the scarf is forced on Muslim women, that’s pretty messed up.” Munirah

felt so triggered, she was standing in front of a classroom, as the only woman wearing a scarf, yet again forced to explain herself to white women. “Do your reading, so that we can have a productive conversation in class,” Munirah said to the class room, trying to move on from discussing hijab 101. Then the woman started crying. She stood up, and in tears she turned around on her feet and ran out of the class room. After the white woman left the classroom the professor interfered. He looked at Munirah and uttered: “We need to be respectful and civilized in this class room.” Everyone was now looking at Munirah, who already felt nervous about facilitating this conversation because so much was at stake, when debating Islam as a Muslim woman. Thoughts were running through Munirah’s head: “Why isn’t anyone thinking about how I feel?” “I am triggered up here, my entire being is being disregarded right now.” “No one believes me when I tell them, that I am not suppressed by my family or religion.” She felt lost: once again a brown, angry woman, was making a sweet white girl cry, it was living up to all the stereotypes. Munirah left the class room, she couldn’t take it anymore: “I wanted to cry every day in that class room, because of how nasty it was, but that was never taken into account. When white women cry the world stops for them.” The last couple of months of college Munirah stayed away from many of the women’s studies courses, she was fed up. “From then on I completely dropped the attitude of explaining to white Americans who we are, and what we do, and what we are not. Instead I chose to turn to the community and use my efforts there.”

When she graduated from college in May 2014 she moved to New York City, because she had been offered an internship. In New York City she moved to Bay Ridge, an area in Brooklyn where Arab Americans and Muslim Americans reside. In that neighborhood there were other women of color, other women with hijabs, there were signs in Arabic, there was affirmation of

her identity. All that she had so longed for in both Lima, Tolodo and in her women's studies program. But New York City wasn't easy. And an incident a couple of months into her life in the city for ever changed how she felt about the city.

In July 2014 people all over the world were discussing the ongoing war in Gaza, Palestine. The Israel Defense Forces were bombarding targets in the Gaza Strip with artillery and airstrikes, and Hamas fired rockets and mortar shells into Israel. The number of Palestinian casualties was shocking, and the U.N. stated that 7 out of 10 killed were civilians. Munirah was following the war from a far. For years she had been active in the battle against what she believe is an occupation of Palestine, and in college she was a loud voice in the pro-Palestinian debates. That summer of 2014 she had participated in several demonstrations against Israel's attacks on the Palestinians. The city was as always divided on this matter, and New York had demonstrations rooting for both sides. On July 20th Munirah coincidentally ran in to a pro-Israel demonstration on Times Square. She had just said goodbye to a friend from out of town at Penn Station and found herself in front of a demonstration full of Israeli flags. People draped in flags, holding signs and banners: "Free Gaza of Hamas" "Israel has the right to defend itself" "Hamas kills babies in sleep". She was wearing her keffiyeh, the Palestinian scarf, and immediately felt out of place. Times Square was even more crowded than usual, and as she was making her way through, she was pushed very close to the demonstration. "I was looking at them with disgust. So many people were dying in Gaza, and they were demonstrating for the right to kill," Munirah says. She got close to the crowd of pro-Israeli demonstrators, and suddenly she felt a punch to her face. A middle-aged white man had struck her over her jaw. "Nothing like that ever happened to me before." She looked at the man who punched her: "Why the hell did you do that?" She was

angry, and she threw the coffee she had just bought at him. It burned him. The demonstrators surrounding her started to yell at her: “Why are you even here? Are you just here to provoke us?” She looked around for witnesses, had no one seen, that he was the one that started it? Only one guy in the crowd seemed to be on her side: “I saw what happened, you’re not crazy”. Munirah looked around once more. She was surrounded by Pro-Israeli demonstrators, and she was afraid. There she was, an Arab woman wearing a hijab, and out of the corner of her eye she spotted a black female police officer and ran to her. Quickly Munirah told her the story and the officer asked her if she was hurt, and if she wanted to file a report. Together they walked to the Times Square prescient, a recognizable police station made out of glass. It looks like a square glass cage located planted right in the center of Times Square. When they entered, the black female officer went back to the street, and she found herself at a table with two white male officers. They were asking her for her ID, and Munirah pulled out her Ohio state ID. She hadn’t yet gotten an NY State ID, and the officers were skeptically asking her, what she was doing in the city. “I’m here on an internship,” she started and continued: “The guy who hit me is getting away,” she said, not understanding why they were wasting their time on her ID, and not out there questioning him. “Don’t worry about him, we will take care of him. What is it you want?” one of the officers asked. Munirah felt their mistrust early on, but told the story that had just taken place a few feet from the prescient. “I guess I was really naive. I thought they’d help me,” she says. After Munirah had finished the story, one of the officers quickly interfered: “That’s not how we heard it. We heard you agitated the crowd and threw coffee at them,” the white officer said and continued: “They all said the same thing.” Munirah was in disbelief: “Of course they’re going to say that. A small Arab girl walking through the demonstration. Of course, they’re going to tell you that.”

The officer interrupted her: “We have surveillance footage backing up their story.” She was shocked and most of all puzzled: how could they have retrieved footage in less than 10 minutes, Munirah thought to herself. “OK, listen. Regardless of what happened, someone just hit me, and I want to file a report,” she tried. “Well, where did he hit you?” She pointed to her jaw: “He hit my jaw.” “I can’t see any mark on your face,” one of the officers replied. Munirah felt like she was under interrogation. With her background in women’s studies she could’t help but think, that the officers were employing such a typical abuser logic: suspicious of the woman being abused instead of the other way around. “It doesn’t matter if you can see it or not, I was hit by that man, and people saw it.” The conversation went back and forth like that for a while. Munirah’s spirit was shot down. “They kept undermining me, looking for loop-holes in my story, second-guessing my story, and I realized that I was wrong for going to the police.” After that they went from suspicious to hostile, and Munirah asked them for their names. “What are you going to do with our names?” one officer asked. Munirah smelled trouble and she took out her phone and started recording. They were laughing: “Oh, you’re recording, that’s so cute. What are you going to do with that? Give it to the ACLU?” They’re were looking at her in disbelief, laughing ironically. “Look, listen up, I just need your names, that is all,” Munirah tried again. She didn’t want to leave the station without their names. One of the officers complied and showed her his badge. “I need your badge too,” she said looking at the other male officer. “Nope, you’re not getting my name,” he said and started laughing at her. “What are you even going to do with it?” She was desperate now, she just needed the names and then she wanted out of there. “I won’t leave until I get both of your names,” she said. The officers stopped laughing and one of them abruptly said: “You have to get out of here now.” Munirah stood her ground and repeated that she wouldn’t

leave before she got both of their names. Then the one officer reached out for her arm. He was grabbing her shoulder, pulling her arm back. “Why are you touching me?” she said, crying. He was pulling her out of her chair and up against the glass wall of the prescient. His pull had been so hard, that her shirt was torn. He held Munirah’s whole body and face against the glass wall, twisting her arm back, and everyone out there on the square could witness the incident in the glass cage. Tourists were walking by, all pretending nothing was really happening, looking at the police officer holding a small-framed woman up against a wall, and then looking away.

“Nobody was even so alarmed, that they said something, or intervened. Neither did the two female officers who were also in the room do anything.” Munirah cries when she thinks about the humiliating experience. Munirah was screaming now: “Get off me, get off me, I can’t believe you are touching me.” She gave up on getting the names of the officers, and agreed to leave without them, if they’d let her be. She got her Ohio license back, and one of the male officers told the female officer from the prescient to follow Munirah on her way: “Make sure she goes home, and takes the train, and if she goes back to the protest arrest her immediately.”

On the train home, Munirah had fellow passengers take photos of her torn clothes and her arm, she wanted to document the experience if she wanted to file a complaint afterwards. However, the incident paralyzed Munirah in the following months. She was anxious, and after a while her friends made her see a therapist. She debated with her friends and herself whether she should report the incident, and researched the procedure involving a complaint. Realizing that it would take a whole year for the review board to process the case, she gave up on the idea. She wanted to put it behind her and at the same time, the officers involved would be informed that she had

complained, and that made her afraid. “It didn’t feel safe to do so, and I slowly realized that there is no such thing as police accountability.”

Despite her experience Munirah decided to stay in New York City. She rarely goes to Manhattan anymore, she’d rather stay clear of the parts of the city that she feels are hostile to Muslim women. She tries her best in general to stay clear of White Liberal America:

“It’s over for me, I want to spend my life with Muslims and Arabs, I want to work to help the community more than anything else.”

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