

‘Talking Back’: Counter-Hegemonic Discourses of North American Arab and Muslim

Women Artists

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## ABSTRACT

### **‘Talking Back’: Counter-Hegemonic Discourses of North American Arab and Muslim Women Artists**

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This dissertation research examines expressions and articulations of counter-hegemonic discourses on the part of Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Middle-Eastern women in the U.S. and Canada, with a particular attention to race and gender. As they are predominantly constructed as passive and imperilled in mainstream media, this doctoral work looks at how some of these women take voice and ‘talk back’ by creating their own media texts. The methodology involves a selection of the following case studies: (1) the poetry and performances of Suheir Hammad; (2) the cinematic interventions of Annemarie Jacir (*Salt of This Sea*); (3) the cinematic interventions of Shirin Neshat (*Women Without Men*); and (4) the films and the television comedy (*Little Mosque on the Prairie*) created by Zarqa Nawaz. These case studies were selected because they constitute long-term interventions to alter the dominant media sphere and on the basis of their popularity – they benefit from a wide reach within particular ‘interpretive communities.’ This dissertation includes a textual analysis focusing on the use of language and imagery deployed by these artists in their various productions. The analysis is supplemented with individual interviews with the artists involved. Additionally, the research includes a performance analysis since some of the case examples involve an embodied performance of an alternative discourse.

The selected artists are here defined as “identity workers,” rather than the more common phrase “cultural workers,” for the purpose of signalling that the circulated works not only relate to culture, but also endeavour to provide alternative portrayals of identity. My central argument is that these works are constitutive of a discourse of resistance. This thesis posits resistance as being counter-hegemonic. It demonstrates how these representations signify a re-articulation of identity and a call for a redistribution of symbolic power. It also situates these acts of talking back as constructed ‘mad’ speech based on the argument that hegemonic culture often attempts to construct a particular type of speech as mad in order to contain it while this type of talk is not always literally insane.

Further, the works analyzed in this thesis can be understood as making ‘noise.’ I conceptualize noise as a counter-hegemonic language that disturbs the tranquility of the status quo and that celebrates difference. In making noise, the selected identity workers described in my case studies deploy a variety of discursive tactics as interventions. Most notably, they engage in discursive practices of re-writing historical narratives, revalorizing native languages, activating collective heritages, and deploying resignification and reversal. These interventions additionally archive erased stories. Moreover, these texts significantly re-center gender – by referencing the workings of patriarchy, positing women heroines at the center of their narratives, or portraying lead female and feminist characters. The results of this analysis reveal that these works are subjected to attempts of containment and appropriation. In effect, the very popularity of these works endows each artist with increased latitude to stage interventions but also dilutes their intended oppositional messages through circulation and cooptation within

traditional and new media. This study also demonstrates that the selected artists have been surprisingly burdened with representation.

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## **PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I moved to the U.S. in 1998 to seek a higher education that I could not get in my own country, Morocco, since today the university is so intimately connected to capital. During the climate of 9/11, I witnessed an intensification of race politics in the U.S., with measures like the USA Patriot Act and the war on Afghanistan. Having met and known Muslims and Arabs who had been randomly detained, interrogated, and deported (all of this within a “legal” framework enabled by the USA Patriot Act), I was experiencing the very real consequences of hatred. During these times, what the media was presenting was surreal – with phrases like “why do they hate us?” making headlines that were diluting the complexity of these issues, erasing Western and US responsibility, as well as framing Islam as the enemy. In this context, I actively sought out alternative discourses that counter hate speech. Suheir Hammad’s poem ‘First Writing Since’ marks a memorable rupture. The fact that it went viral online via email and that Russell Simmons signed her onto a deal with HBO def poetry jam attests that many others like me were thirsty for a different type of discourse. I discovered Hammad’s work as well as Annemarie Jacir’s poetry in Matthew Shenoda’s course on Arab and Arab American Literature, the first to be taught at San Francisco State University. While there was talk at the time that there would not be much interest in the material in the course he was proposing, the enrolment was impressive, and the quality of the conversations, incredible. These types of spaces are vital because they are rare and because they allow for a type of talk that is practically never broadcast on mainstream channels.

As an MA student, I became interested in studying mainstream media. I took a seminar with Rudolph Busby on rhetoric and communication theory in which I submitted a final paper on Arab and Muslim images in Hollywood. He told me once, as we were discussing 9/11, that one cannot punish entire populations for the actions of a few. This is what Hammad was talking about when she said: “we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma” (2005, 100). I thought that Rudolph got where I was coming from. So when I proposed to work on Arab and Muslim representations, he fully supported my project. More so, he pointed me in the direction of the history of representation of minority groups in the U.S. I went on to read about how Blacks, Latinos/as, Asians, and Native Americans had been horrifically represented at different times of history according to particular economic or political needs. I began my Master’s thesis on the coverage of Arabs and Muslims in the news with these connections.

When I applied for a PhD program, this time in Canada, I was still envisioning that I would be working on dominant representations of Arabs and Muslims. It was one of those days when you think that you are just talking but when you are actually thinking outside the box that my supervisor Yasmin Jiwani suggested that I study alternative media; she told me to just go there. Yasmin has pushed me to go places and to visit uncharted territories. For that and for the intensity of our conversations, I am eternally grateful. She saw that I was spending hours online watching videos, listening to music, and reading blogs that would heal some of the hurt that I would experience when I would tune in to mainstream channels, or when a random stranger tells me they have a problem with Islam as a religion, or when a student physically assaults me at 10 p.m. in front of a movie theatre in Montréal, or when a professor tells me that my work is ideological –

because I have not been that interested in bringing back to life on the page dead white men. This is how this work is connected to the works of Suheir Hammad, Annemarie Jacir, Shirin Neshat, and Zarqa Nawaz. It is an attempt to find voice.

In this doctoral work, I explore the creative works of these four significant women artists. In searching for a niche that was meaningful and that spoke to my reality, I came across these four artists, among others. But what struck me about these four women was their location as charismatic artists whose work has gone beyond the borders of their physical and cultural nations. This appeal rests on what they are saying and the realities of those who are located in these other nations and in similar situations.

This project would not have been possible without the contributions of Suheir, Annemarie, Zarqa, and Shirin, which have provided the inspiration for this writing. I thank each of them for their generosity and patience. I wish to acknowledge the tremendous contributions of my supervisor Yasmin Jiwani to the making of this project and to my growth as a scholar. I am forever grateful to Yasmin for teaching me so much and for her support and encouragement throughout the years. I also need to extend my thanks to my support system. I am incredibly grateful to my friends and colleagues Krista Riley, Alan Wong, and Sorouja Moll for editing different parts of this thesis. Thank you to my friend Merouan Mekouar who introduced me to the Interuniversity Consortium for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies located at McGill University. The bulk of the writing of this dissertation was done in my office there. I am grateful to the directors of the consortium Khalid Medani and Rex Brynen for providing such a nurturing space for scholars of Arab and Middle Eastern studies.

I would also like to thank my cohort of doctoral students in Communication at Concordia for many stimulating conversations, and particularly Michelle Aguayo and Bruno Cornellier. A tremendous thank you goes to my dear friends Tamara Shepherd and Mél Hogan for their unwavering encouragement for the past five years. I have also had the pleasure to work with wonderful professors from the Communication department at Concordia, including Jeremy Stollow, Leslie Regan Shade, Rae Staseson, and Kim Sawchuk. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the School of Graduate Studies and the Communication Department at Concordia.

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I would also like to acknowledge the support and guidance of Carmen Rico de Sotelo from the Communication department at l'Université du Québec à Montréal, Aziz Choudry from Integrated Studies in Education at McGill, Homa Hoodfar from the Anthropology department at Concordia, and Rachad Antonius from the Sociology department at l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Several people have supported my PhD dream at different stages. During the application process, my friend Amine Benneftah edited my description of envisioned research when I was drafting it in San Francisco. I wish to thank Adnan Bekdache for coming to my rescue everytime I had a technical problem and for always being there when I needed help.

Last but not least, I thank my family for their love and support. I am grateful to my sister Bahya Oumlil-Murad for being so amazing, to my father Ali Oumlil for practicing critical thinking and for encouraging us to “*voler de nos propres ailes*” (to fly with our own wings), to my cousin Zineb Majdouli for paving the way to a PhD in Communication studies, and to my niece Laila for making me smile. I wish to thank my stepmother Nouzha Amor, my brother-in-law Ghassan Murad, and my uncle Abderrahman Oumlil for being present in Montreal during the final stages. I thank my mother Zhor Medaghri Alaoui who has shaped the core of my being and taught me through her words and actions to speak feminism before I even understood it. This thesis is dedicated to her.

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation, entitled *'Talking Back': Counter-Hegemonic Discourses of North American Arab and Muslim Women Artists*, examines the expressions and articulations of counter-hegemonic discourses on the part of Middle Eastern and South Asian women in the U.S. and Canada, with particular attention to race and gender. In order to look at processes of taking voice and 'talking back' (hooks, 1989) to dominant media discourses, I selected the following case studies for analysis: (1) the poetry and performances of Suheir Hammad; (2) the films of Annemarie Jacir; (3) the visual art and films of Shirin Neshat; and (4) the films and the television comedy (*Little Mosque on the Prairie*) created by Zarqa Nawaz. These case studies were selected because they constitute long-term interventions to alter the dominant media sphere within the realm of popular culture, and benefit from a wide reach within particular 'interpretive communities.' As well, they are widely disseminated in sites other than mainstream avenues and media.

My central argument is that these works are constitutive of a discourse of resistance. And I define resistance here as being counter-hegemonic. More importantly, and taking the lead from bell hooks (1989), these acts can be categorized as "talking back." What I want to emphasize here is that these representations signify a re-articulation of identity and a call for a redistribution of symbolic power.

My interest in language stems from an understanding of words as not just words; but rather, as words that do things – that legitimize and underpin actions. For example, a

phrase like the “war on terror” provided the U.S. government with great latitude over space and time. Because “terror” is not a country, the war could be taken to different places. And when does the “war on terror” end? The state of imminent danger sustained in a climate of fear lays the foundation for an enduring “state of exception” (Agamben 1998). The systems created in the situation of crisis/emergency/exception (like the policies that legitimate surveillance and indefinite detentions on those grounds) have outlived temporality. This is not to deny the causality of economic and geopolitical factors but to emphasize that wars and policies are justified via discursive means.

It is no coincidence and at the same time very disturbing that the word ‘death’ (with its derivatives) appears so often in Hammad’s poetry. Themes of life, death, and suicide are also part of Jacir and Neshat’s works – a central part of the narrative of Neshat’s film *Women Without Men* is the suicide of a lead character.<sup>1</sup> But while Palestinians are dying, they are not dead. This context of crisis, of death, underscores what is at stake in these discussions of representation and self-representation, and highlights the reasons that the interventions discussed in this thesis are so critical.

Given that Arab and Muslim women are predominantly constructed as passive victims in need of saving and the prevalence of negative representations of Muslims, Arabs, Middle Easterners, and South Asians, it becomes imperative to think about how to respond and counter these portrayals, particularly because they have real material consequences. In this research project, I examine how the selected mediated interventions ‘make do’ of available stocks of materials from popular culture and the dominant mediasphere. I put theory to the service of linguistic resistance. I also endeavour to

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss this episode in Chapter 4: “The visual art and films of Shirin Neshat.”

inform theory from artistic engagements in order to maximize the potential for creating cultural and political change. I investigate whether creative imagination can constitute another weapon of the weak by making a commitment to an active kernel of utopian possibility.

However, sustaining an imaginary of freedom from the shackles of discursive oppression also involves reaching out to “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980). Creating change logically involves the mobilization of activist engagement and the use of the power of the masses. The idea of an “interpretive community” presupposes that any given text can have different meanings for different cultural groups.

Ultimately though, I am interested in the power of the imagination to transport us into another world of possibility. An interesting example here is a scene from Elia Suleiman’s film *Divine Intervention*, which seems to ask what if the Palestinian woman could be so beautiful that she could step out of a car at a checkpoint with her hair flowing in the wind, dazzle the Israeli soldiers and be able to cross the checkpoint (because she is beautiful). Notwithstanding critiques of Suleiman’s treatment of gender in his films, the point I am making with this example relates to inciting visions of freedom which might then materialize in collective action.

My thesis offers a mapping of different tactical interventions illustrated in the existing literature, and as evident in the selected case studies, in order to offer a practical reflection (and suggestions) on ways of generating increased agency and empowerment for marginalized communities. Whereas I examine tactical interventions which are emerging in distinct media genres, my thesis does not present a genre analysis as it is not the privileged nexus of analysis, but rather focuses on acts of ‘talking back’ in language.



While I do not engage in the classical type of audience research which focuses on individual and collective readings of texts, I do utilize audience responses that have posted in the public domain such as blogs and reviews. Hence, I examine resistance in language as it occurs through the performance/performativity of identity. It is through the performance and “(re)presentation” of identity that the selected identity workers circulate meaning. The identity workers that I focus on are immersing themselves in the public domain and in a mediated discourse in order to gain visibility.

I also locate moments of ‘talking back’ in terms of the spatio-temporality of the emergence of counter-hegemonic discourses. Drawing from Gramsci, this work also conceptualizes what I refer to as the conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence. I examine the content and form of the selected interventions and theorize their tactical interventions by situating them within the wider context of the hegemonic/counter-hegemonic system.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of my work is to derive from my case studies the constitutive ‘moments’ of counter-hegemonic emergence and hence a working definition for the notions of ‘counter-hegemony’ and ‘counter-hegemonic.’

Whereas this is the context that provides impetus for my research interest, my study looks at domination from a different angle – from the point of view of vernacular counter-productions from the margins. The analysis I present details the ways in which the selected productions emanate from the *cultural* margins. These are not synonymous with economic margins or works produced by those who are marginalized as a result of class, though cultural and economic marginality do interact. I also situate these acts of talking back as constructed ‘mad’ speech. My understanding of hegemonic culture

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<sup>2</sup>And here, I refer to Gramsci’s work as well as supplementary writings that have elaborated or clarified his analysis (Hall (1996), Williams (1977), Ives (2004)).

includes how it attempts to construct a particular type of speech as mad in order to contain it even though this type of talk is not literally insane but rather rendered unintelligible.

## **Noise**

What also brings all these cases together is that they are based in communication. These cases studies, I argue, make noise. In the basic model of communication (message, channel, noise), noise is the interference. Noise makes interpretation difficult and requires decipherment/decoding/elucidation. For Serres (2007), noise could also be what is not communicated or included and what is representative of chaos. His concept of the “parasite,” as noise in the channel, is interesting here. He also speaks of ‘non-knowledge’ and of noise as also necessary for the formation of knowledge. This view is close to Foucault’s notion of “suppressed knowledge” and to hooks’s idea of “talking back.”

My understanding of noise stems from an expanded definition of activism, not just as protests in the street but as also including everyday acts of linguistic resistance. With this said, the current student movement in Quebec against tuition hikes provides a striking illustration of how this metaphor of noise works well in relation to protests and mechanisms of the state to re-establish law and order. On 18 May 2012, the National Assembly of Quebec passed "An Act to enable students to receive instruction from the postsecondary institutions they attend," commonly known as bill 78, which restricts protest by prohibiting assembly, protests, and picketing without prior police approval. In response to the new bill, Quebecers have taken their casseroles from their homes to the streets and banged them to purposefully make noise. I also witnessed that when the

Service de Police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) came near the front line protesters to disperse the now “illegal” gatherings of crowds, the protesters became louder by vociferously banging their casseroles and chanting slogans to the top of their lungs – all to say we are here making noise and taking back the streets. The phone application i-cassolator was created in this context as a way of using mobile technology to protest. This is a literal example in which making noise and disturbing the tranquility of the status quo becomes a tactic of the protesters in order to deal with the province’s attempt to re-establish quietness in the streets. It is in this context that I view noise as representing a counter-hegemonic language that celebrates difference.

Postcolonial theory indicates three stages to mental decolonization and taking voice, which do not necessarily always occur in a clear-cut sequential manner. The first stage is a ‘counter-sensibility’ to one’s ‘own’ representation in the mainstream media – referred to as “aberrant” (Stam & Spence 1985) and “oppositional readings” (Hall 1980) of dominant media texts, and described as sense that is not part of common sense; meaning that there is something off here. The second phase is being able to articulate/deconstruct the dominant construction: to identify and define it. This is where studies of dominant discourse are crucial. Postcolonial theory and critical feminist race studies have greatly contributed to this area. The development of a language starts here. The third stage is one of transformation – making your own media, creating your own text. It consists of transforming the existing stock of material into something else, into your own language. This is where alternative media research is very helpful.

**Central Research Question: ‘Talking back’  
and Conditions of Counter-Hegemonic Emergence**

The central research questions underpinning this inquiry are; what are the different ways in which Arab, Muslim, South Asian and Middle Eastern women ‘talk back’ to mainstream discourses? When is it that they challenge, contest, or recreate dominant representations? Beyond talent and original ways of disrupting dominant discourses, what makes particular acts of ‘talking back’ emerge in specific historical conjunctures? A number of sub-questions derive from this research agenda: Do these ‘oppositional’ forms contest dominant representations and if so, how do they do this? Are these discourses vulnerable to cooptation? If so, how much ground do these texts concede to dominant western notions of Arab and Muslim identity? Which dominant frames do they utilize? When is the oppositional dynamic compromised and how? Further, I examine questions of access: What counter discourses are available and accessible in North America? What forms of identity are celebrated and valorized? What is permitted and what makes it permissible?

I posit the emergence of acts of ‘talking back’ as supported by larger movements and forces that permit or enhance their visibility. Inspired by Gramsci’s work on hegemony and Alarcón’s notion of “site of emergence,”<sup>3</sup> I argue that there are moments and sites of circulating disruptive discourses that contest and challenge power and that are therefore subject either to punitive measures or trivialized and dismissed as a way of neutralizing their power. This project thus involves tracing vulnerabilities of cooptation, containment, and appropriation – as vehicles for neutralizing counter-hegemonic art.

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 1 for further elaboration on these works.

## **Methodologies**

As this thesis focuses on distinct case studies that reflect different media genres, I deploy a methodological bricolage as required by the specificities of the various cases I am analyzing. Since I am interested in how these case studies ‘talk back,’ I conduct a textual analysis to scrutinize the use of language and imagery deployed in these sites and how they are mediated in the distinct genres of poetry, performance, cinema, or television. The theoretical framework of postcolonial theory is particularly useful for this part of the analysis as it offers a genealogy of dominant discourses of racialized ‘Others.’ It provides the dominant tropes against which alternative representations emerging from the selected media texts can be juxtaposed and assessed. I draw on alternative media research and work that can be broadly categorized under the rubric ‘literature on tactical interventions’. Some of this literature literally refers to disruptions of dominant discourses in tactical and counter-hegemonic terms. In Chapter One, I detail various discursive tactics outlined in this body of work. My analysis provides a mapping of tactics of resistance deployed by the selected Arab, Muslim, Middle-Eastern and South Asian artists. Furthermore, I incorporate in my analysis a consideration of what is missing. I look for the unsaid, as well as attempt to read between the lines and search for what is left to the reader/listener/viewer’s imagination. Hall (1997) argues that what is missing is as relevant (sometimes it is more relevant) as what is there.

I supplement my analysis of the content/context of these interventions with individual interviews with the performers involved, as well as secondary background literature pertaining to each of these counter-cultural productions. These individual interviews were designed to be semi-structured and focus on the individual motivations,

institutional barriers, access to distribution and possibilities of cooptation that these artists have experienced and encountered in the process of making their work. Here, the purpose of conducting interviews was to first elicit information that was not readily available through the available texts by asking precise questions pertaining to my research inquiry. The intent was also for the interviews to take the form of “guided conversations” in which the interviewer and the interviewee share information. I utilized what Kirby and McKenna (1989) call “conceptual baggage,” which consisted of drawing from my own research questions to design and conduct each interview. My questions were also informed by what others around me have been telling me when I discussed my research project. Finally, I formulated questions that were derived from my readings of the individual artist’s work and from the background literature. Here, I used the individual interviewee’s respective experiences as a guide for the interviews. I employed a combination of exploratory as well as specific approaches (i.e., related to their own ‘identity work’ and acts of ‘talking back’) to formulate questions. Following Kirby and McKenna’s ethical guidelines, I informed my interviewees about the topic of my research, as well as the rationale behind it and the approach taken to study it. In addition to informing the interviewees that the interviews were not confidential, I verified that they were comfortable with every inclusion of direct or indirect quotes before depositing my thesis. I have included a sample of these questions in the appendix.

After transcribing the interviews, I returned to the primary goals of the research in order to select answers to incorporate in the analysis. I extracted answers that spoke to processes of talking back and the conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence. Here I paid particular attention to the repetition of common themes, such as the centrality of the

notion of community in my interview with Suheir Hammad. In addition, I included answers that were surprising, such as Annemarie Jacir's discussion of the need for recognition of the historical harm done to Palestinians. This issue provided the material for a significant part of Chapter three.

I drafted the first questions of each interview as conversation starters. I started by asking questions related to background information, even though I had already gathered answers from online sources. This was also done in order to verify the accuracy of information provided in the public domain. Typically, the interviewees' answers to the initial questions were not included in order to avoid redundancy, as I had already cited this information from other sources. Other questions were targeted at inquiring about how to access their previous media productions, such as the question "is it possible to access or purchase your video installations online?" during my interview with Shirin Neshat.

During the interviews, I tended to move from general to specific questions that most specifically dealt with my research objectives. For example, about halfway through the interview I asked Zarqa Nawaz: "what do you think is the potential of using humour to convey messages about Muslim identity? Are there any limitations?" Hence, doing the interviews helped me to provide a more nuanced analysis, as I was able to listen to the artists talk about their own work and write my four case chapters in relation and response to their statements. Moreover, the interviews provided an additional way of threading through the different chapters (by revealing connections between the case studies). Finally, since this thesis is about the notion of talking back, I considered it imperative to include their perspectives and voices within the text of this dissertation.

Because this doctoral project incorporates different media genres and types of content (textual, visual, and embodied), I have refrained from applying the same methodological tools to all the case studies. In my analysis of Hammad’s poetry, I draw from Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “minor literature” and postcolonial theory. In addition, I use Taylor’s paradigm of *scenario* to analyze the performative aspects of her work – the embodied performance of an oppositional discourse. I focus particularly on her March 30, 2009 Montreal performance to examine how she performs her identity, through a “mise en scene” paying particular attention to her response to the current political climate, her enactment of identity, and her attempts to denaturalize its defining features.

For the film analyses, I deploy the notions of in/visibility (Said 2006) and “dialectics of presence/absence” (Shohat and Stam 1994). I also examine the films’ responses to dominant representations by analyzing the use of language and imagery, as well as the wider context that influenced these productions. Finally, my analysis of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* focuses on the use of humour in relation to counter-hegemonic emergence.

### **Case Studies**

As mentioned previously, my methodology involves a selection of specific case studies that represent counter discourses against dominant representations. In my investigation, I discuss how these counter discourses symbolize sustained, focused, and in-depth counter-hegemonic moments that are constitutive of an intervention. These case studies are relevant in terms of their location within the realm of popular culture, their dissemination



in sites other than mainstream avenues and media, and their positioning as alternative interventions. The four groundbreaking women artists that I examine are working against a backdrop of colonialist, orientalist, sexist, and Islamophobic discourses.

The first case study focuses on the writings of renowned Palestinian poet Suheir Hammad. Born in Amman, Jordan, Hammad grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Her writings are not only circulated in print, but they are also available on Google and YouTube videos. Shortly after 9/11, Hammad wrote a piece ('First Writing Since') articulating her reactions to the September 11 attacks, which was widely circulated and propelled her to fame. More recently, she starred in *Salt of this Sea*, an award winning film by Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir. Hammad is also the recipient of several writing, poetry, and book awards.

My second case study centers on the cinematic interventions of Annemarie Jacir, with a particular focus on her film *Salt of This Sea*, which is also the first feature film by a Palestinian woman director – and therefore worthy of analysis if only for that reason. Jacir is a Palestinian-American filmmaker and poet who grew up in Saudi Arabia and moved to the U.S. at the age of sixteen. Prior to releasing *Salt of This Sea* (2008), she directed the first Palestinian short film to be selected for the official Competition selection at Cannes International Film Festival. Tellingly titled “*Like Twenty Impossibles*,” this short film speaks of the extreme difficulties encountered in the making of such films and the apparent ‘impossibility’ of their materialization.<sup>4</sup> In spite of

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<sup>4</sup> In this film, a young female director returns to the West Bank after living in the U.S. and travels with her film crew in a taxi. As they await authorization for entry to Jerusalem at a military checkpoint, the crew exchange memories of what Jerusalem used to be. As the crew is already behind schedule, the director accepts the driver’s suggestion of taking a different road to reach their destination. The crew, however, encounters, on this alternate road, a second checkpoint where they are stopped and interrogated by Israeli soldiers.

considerable resistance to the release of this film, *Like Twenty Impossibles* won several awards at international festivals. Jacir was named one of the "25 new faces of independent filmmaking" by *Filmmaker Magazine* in 2004.

The third case study examines the visual art and films of Shirin Neshat, paying particular attention to her first feature film *Women Without Men*. Neshat is a celebrated visual artist based in New York City who moved out of Iran to receive her college education. She became known through her work in video and photography – particularly her videos *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, which won the International Award of the Venice Biennale. Her artistic debut via the photography series *Women of Allah*, depicting veiled women covered in Persian calligraphy with guns, had previously received considerable attention and acclaim. *Women Without Men* is her first feature film and offers an adaptation of Shahrnush Parsipur's magic realist novel, which was banned by the Iranian government in the mid-1990s. The film follows the stories of four female protagonists as it responds to the media's amnesia about Iranian- U.S. relations. It presents a view of Iran in 1953 when a British and American backed coup removed the democratically elected government.

Finally, this thesis examines the films and the popular television comedy *Little Mosque on the Prairie* created by a British-Canadian Muslim woman of Pakistani origin Zarqa Nawaz. Nawaz founded a production company called FUNdamentalist films, which in her words, is aimed at “putting the ‘fun’ back into fundamentalism.” She became known for her use of humour to explore the experiential realities of being Muslim in a North American context. Her television comedy series, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, aired on CBC for six seasons (from January 9, 2007 – April 2, 2012). In addition

to being a filmmaker, Nawaz is also a freelance writer, journalist, and broadcaster. This case study is particularly interesting because it allows for an analysis of the movement of alternative discourses into mainstream media. In tracing this movement, I make reference to Nawaz's previous work prior to *Little Mosque on the Prairie*.

These cases are selected on the basis of self-representation – they are defined by their actors as constitutive of counter cultural practices. Loomba (1998) describes self-representation of the colonized as spaces for negotiation, for change, and for resistance to colonial power. In a chapter called “Grandma’s story,” Trinh (1989) addresses the need for marginalized voices to be recorded and documented. Using a specific example of a woman of colour telling a story, she says: “even if the telling condemns her present life, what is more important is to (re-) tell the story as she thinks it should be told; in other words, to maintain the difference that allows (her) truth to live on” (p. 150). The importance of storytelling lies, in this case, in the telling of difference. It is not a matter of convincing the other party or winning an argument as much as it is one of preserving and circulating one’s truth, one’s difference, one’s reality. It reflects an effort to sustain the marginalized.

The importance of producing work in one’s own voice, of being one’s own storyteller to recodify one’s identity has been discussed by several researchers. Rodriguez (2001) participated in the production of a video about the grupos populares<sup>5</sup> work in the Columbian Andes and found that when the campesinos (or peasants) looked at themselves in the video, they transformed their self-images. She also noticed that by directing men in the process of making the video, women were empowering themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Rodriguez (2001), the term “grupos populares” is synonymous with “peasants” in Latin America and can also signify “grassroots group” (1).

Rodriguez relates that the campesinos' ways of looking at themselves changed and ceased being passive when they became producers of their own media images. Similarly, Juhasz (1995) reports on the vital significance of self-expression. She retraces a history of alternative media production, noting that 'minority' producers (mostly women and people of color) in the 1970s in the U.S. produced identity films for "the promise of personal and political liberation" (Juhasz 1995, 40). In this light, Ginsburg (1995) speaks of the liberationist potential of indigenous and alternative media mobilized for self-determination and to resist to cultural domination. Similarly, Baltruschat (2004) reports, in his analysis of Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), that in the 1960s Canada's First Nations started creating their own media and telling their own stories.

On the Arab-American side, Salaita (2006) argues that there is an imperative to speak: "Arabs don't speak, or aren't allowed to speak, very often in print and visual media" (105). Criticizing how often non-Arabs moderate and mediate discussions about Arab questions in the media, he posits this situation as "alarming" because it feeds into an environment of anti-Arab racism in which Arabs are not allowed to articulate their sensibilities. Whereas Salaita clearly distances himself from the view that only Arabs have the right to speak about themselves, he calls for discussion of Arab issues that would include and involve community members.

Considering the significance of representations, it seems logical that concerned communities would want to participate in how they are represented. As Hall (1997) explains, representation is the way in which meaning is given to what is depicted and a key element in producing culture. He draws the connection between representation and culture by arguing that culture, a system of representations, is about shared meanings and

that language (encompassing various forms of what we call today verbal and nonverbal communication) is the privileged medium for making sense of things. Thus, language constructs meaning as it operates through representations.

Several scholars have called for the self-representation of marginalized communities. In response to how this call has been associated with identity politics, which are supportive of the self-representation of marginalized groups, Shohat and Stam (1994) draw on Mohanty's work in order to argue that the question is not who can speak for whom but how to speak together with others rather than for them. Mohanty (1991) contends that it is a *common context of struggle* that is needed to build alliances/constitute commonality, rather than some essentialist understanding of identity: "[T]hus, it is the common context of struggle against specific exploitative structures and systems that determines our potential political alliances" (7). Hence, Mohanty challenges the essentialist understanding of identity politics in favour of a politicized understanding of *oppositional identity*. However, such alliances are not always easy to build as historical instances of the failure to stand in solidarity with other struggles demonstrate: "[S]adly, the record speaks for itself of many suffragists' failures to oppose slavery, of many abolitionists' failures to support women's suffrage, and of much of organized labor's failure in relation to both women workers and workers of color" (Downing et al. 2001, 8).

Identity politics are typically mobilized in order to achieve collective goals. Identity has always been used strategically. Spivak (2005) argues that "essentialism is always used strategically, to bypass or acknowledge difference" (477). Echoing the sentiment, Trinh advocates for the necessity on the part of the marginalized to maintain

their existence and difference. What should not be dismissed here is the imperative of taking voice by those who have been historically silenced; a need undergirded by the necessity to circulate different and empowering narratives. These narratives are not only ‘personal,’ they also reflect a position of shared marginality and *can thus be mobilized for collective political goals*. With this said, the cultural producers selected for this thesis are privileged economically in comparison to Spivak’s subaltern.<sup>6</sup> The hierarchy (within a marginalized bracket) creates another disjuncture in terms of who has access to speak.

However, the criterion of self-representation, though crucial, is not sufficient. Other criteria for the selection of these case studies include that they articulate different forms of ‘talking back.’ For example, Suheir Hammad writes and performs poetry; her work is circulated online. Zarqa Nawaz produces films and a popular television comedy. In addition to how their messages are mediated through these different channels, there are many ways to respond to and challenge mainstream discourses – one may use dissent, irony, humour, satire, appropriation, opposition, etc. Thus, these various genres and forms offer conceptual tools for defining what constitutes the counter-hegemonic and for making judgments about the effectiveness of the different tactics deployed. For example, several of Hammad’s interviews and performances are circulated through YouTube, a “site of participatory culture” (Burgess and Green 2009). Although national governments, corporate content providers, and other interest groups like Google and YouTube are

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<sup>6</sup> For Spivak, subalternity signifies a condition where one is removed from all social lines of mobility. In her seminal text “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Spivak (1988) cites the example of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, who committed suicide in North Calcutta in 1926. The young woman had been a member of an armed struggle group for Indian independence. When the group asks her to carry out a political assassination, she kills herself. Because she was menstruating when she committed suicide, Spivak interprets this act as a “displacing gesture” that denies the charge that she killed herself because of an illicit pregnancy (1988, 104). Spivak furthermore contends that as a subaltern, Bhaduri, re-wrote the social text of sati-suicide, challenging the practice of widow burning in colonial India. In a follow-up article titled “Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular,” she argues: “subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognisable basis of action” (Spivak 2005, 476).

starting to enact content filtering policies, YouTube is being used as a cultural archive: “YouTube is thus evolving into a massive, heterogeneous, but for the most part accidental and disordered, public archive” (Burgess and Green 2009, 88). Furthermore, these works are circulated through old and new media, which suggests that these sites of potential counter-hegemonic emergence are not only interesting in terms of their content but also because they are technologically-mediated.

I also selected these case studies on the basis of their widespread distribution and constitution as long-term interventions defined in terms of sustained efforts continued over time which display work made to counter mainstream stereotypes and representations. As Jiwani (2006) explains, interventions are

... momentary when viewed against the larger backdrop of the continuous and cumulative stock of knowledge being produced and reproduced by the media in their telling and retelling of stories. For such change to be long-lasting, the interventions must be equally consistent and persistent in challenging dominant definitions... (85)

Because the selected case studies reflect long-term engagements and involvements, they offer unique insights into processes of “talking back,” particularly as they point to some of the barriers, difficulties, and effective tactics that the individual artists have encountered.

These case studies are also ‘popular’, as I mentioned earlier. They benefit from a wide reach to particular ‘interpretive communities’ (Fish 1980). And here I refer to the following understanding of an “interpretive community:”

members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community’s assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because from each of their positions the other “simply” cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there: This, then is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same

community). It also explains why there are disagreements and why they can be debated in a principled way: not because of a stability in texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible. (Fish 1980, 15)

Thus, media texts have different meanings for different cultural/social/racialized groups. How the cultural readers who constitute a particular ‘interpretive community’ assess a performer’s ‘identity work’ varies. It is predicated upon the collective experiences of particular communities – in the sense that they bring to light structural social and political questions, problems, or barriers. The selected identity workers are thus interesting because of their popularity – they have the ear of marginalized communities – but also because they have also been able to infiltrate the mainstream. Finally, they are women embodying and performing identity and counter-discursive moves.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

Following this introduction, the thesis is divided into a theoretical chapter, four case chapters each focusing on a particular case study, and a conclusion. Chapter one situates the concept of ‘talking back,’ as it relates to structures of domination. It additionally summarizes the existing literature on hegemonic representations, feminist discourses of resistance and tactical interventions/tactics. Based on my analysis of this literature and my reading of Gramsci, I outline the constituent elements of ‘moments’ of counter-hegemonic emergence. This chapter also defines key concepts that inform the inquiry such as sensibility, sites of emergence, and popular culture.

Chapter two offers a detailed analysis of Suheir Hammad’s poetry. It discusses the oppositional stance of her poetry as well as its articulation of a suppressed knowledge, situating it as minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari). Drawing from



postcolonial theory and the tactical interventions literature, I analyze Hammad's various poems and interlace these insights with comments and observations drawn from an interview with her. The second part of this chapter examines the performative aspects of counter-hegemonic discourses. The principal focus is Suheir Hammad's poetry performance on March 30, 2009 at Club Lambi in Montreal. It explores how Hammad enacts her identity on stage in this particular alternative and activist space. This chapter utilizes Taylor's paradigm of *scenario*, paying attention to the milieu of the performance – to both space and narrative.

Chapter three examines the cinematic interventions of Annemarie Jacir, with a particular focus on the film *Salt of This Sea*. After providing a synopsis of the film and explaining its relevance, the chapter introduces the filmmaker and explains the approach taken to study the film. Chapter four focuses on the visual art and films of Shirin Neshat, paying particular attention to her feature film *Women Without Men*. It begins with an introduction and contextualization of the artist's cinematic interventions. I draw on Shohat and Stam's analysis of postcolonial films as well as relevant concepts from studies that incorporate gendered ways of staging a discursive intervention. Both Chapter three and four examine how the films talk back and respond to dominant discourses. I conclude with remarks regarding conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence.

In Chapter five, I examine the media texts produced and circulated by Zarqa Nawaz. I focus this time on the role of comedy as a genre and of humour as a form for counter-hegemonic discourse. I incorporate excerpts from an interview with Nawaz about her impetus for engaging in this work and the various issues or problems she encountered in disseminating her perspective. In addition, I reflect on the process of transitioning to

the mainstream and discuss the implications of the popularity of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* for counter-hegemonic emergence.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes how the case studies selected have ruptured the hegemonic discourses concerning Arab, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim representations, with a particular attention to gender. As well, I trace vulnerabilities of cooptation – how the very popularity of these works dilutes their intended oppositional messages, and how in circulating as they do within old and new media they are subjected to containment and appropriation by the dominant society. In spite of attacks on the contents and forms of these interventions, including threats directed at the artists themselves, my analysis demonstrates that they have been able to sustain marginalized perspectives, momentarily reverse common-sensical understandings of their identity, and re-write their narratives.

## CHAPTER 1

### TALKING BACK TO POWER: SITUATING THE ANALYSIS

The focus of this dissertation project is to investigate the possibilities of constructing discourses of resistance to domination. And here, my starting point is bell hooks' influential work on race, gender and representations. hooks examines the politics of representation from a counter-hegemonic perspective. While recognizing that one may occupy multiple subject-positions, the position from which one speaks (or conversely, from which speaking is disabled) is important. Reflecting on 'talk' that is unheard and simply not listened to, she says:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice. (hooks 1989, 9)

Thus, she defines these forms of responding to structures of domination and that move the speaker from an object to a subject position as acts of "talking back." For example, hooks (1998, 2003) discusses Black women filmmakers who work towards challenging dominant constructions by creating their own media texts. However, she criticizes some of this work which fails to present 'counter' discourses because the filmmakers did not go through a process of decolonizing their minds: "concurrently, since so many black females have not decolonized their minds in ways that enable them to break free with internalized racism and/or sexism, the representations they create may embody stereotypes" (73). Thus, 'talking back' refers to an oppositional stance; a discourse that

contests, challenges and responds to structures of dominance.

Furthermore, acts of ‘talking back’ can be punished, contained, and co-opted. hooks raises an important point here about the scarcity of decolonized acts of ‘talking back’ which I argue also applies to Arab, Muslim, and South Asian productions, which have been impacted by a long history of silencing and censorship. With this said, the recent visible emergence of North American Arab and Muslim artists who have reworked the post-9/11 genre of representations marks a significant turning point in this struggle over representation and the real, thereby calling for adequate academic attention.

The idea of ‘talking back’ implies that those engaged in such talking have been exposed to constructions and representations that do not correspond to their realities or that portray them in derogatory ways. ‘Talking back’ then becomes a way to counter these representations. Moreover, these ‘talking back’ discourses embody an articulated form of suppressed knowledge. Here I draw on the work of Razack (1993) vis-à-vis her analysis of storytelling, and Foucault’s (1972) description of suppressed knowledge, which refers to knowledge which has been evacuated and locked up (in the clinic or the prison) by dominant disciplinary institutions that are endorsed and legitimized by the established history of ideas or regimes of truth (the history of thought, or knowledge, or science, characterized by ruptures). Razack (1993) explains that “in the context of social change, storytelling refers to an opposition to established knowledge, to Foucault’s suppressed knowledge, to the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms” (100). While the oral tradition of storytelling, as in a court room testimony, is one form of articulating this suppressed knowledge, my thesis examines storytelling as it is mediated through different genres and forms of media.

## **The Context – Structures of Domination**

Dominant representations function as ‘packages of consciousness’ and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge that have often been strategically used to justify war, interventions, and occupations and to assert power. Hallin (1986) defines ‘packages of consciousness’ as “frameworks for interpreting and cues for reacting to social and political reality” (13). A clear example of the material implications of knowledge production is revealed in Edward Said’s seminal work on Orientalism, which is the Western discourse that concerns itself with the Orient. Said (1994) shows how ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ knowledge was created prior to colonial times mainly to dominate, occupy, colonize, and subjugate the Orient. Orientalists claimed that objective truth was in fact attainable. Said describes how in defining the inferior “Other,” the West has been creating boundaries that help it define itself. Orientalism reveals more about the West and its own fantasies than it does about the actual peoples, cultures, and history of the East. The East becomes a container for the repressed qualities that Westerners deny.

The mass media play a major role in disseminating information and significantly shapes perceptions of other cultures. In his extensive research dealing with the analysis of over 900 Hollywood films, Shaheen (2001), found that negative representation of Arabs have worked their way so thoroughly into literature, media, language, and history that the resulting stereotypes dominate Americans’ views of Arabs. On several occasions, Shaheen intervened to change representations in Hollywood productions. For example, he met with the director of the film *The Siege* Ed Zwick to contest the film’s stereotypes and

negative portrayals. Shaheen's work is directed towards how contemporary dominant cultural producers can change the kinds of messages that they choose to encode in cultural products. His particular interventions, therefore, reflect an effort to influence mainstream (Hollywood) productions, given that these cultural producers have the will and power to change their images and use of language. The Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) undertakes similar interventions as it monitors mainstream media, stages protests, and negotiates with dominant cultural producers to influence their representations. As Jiwani (2005a) explains, one of the driving forces contributing to recent changes in representations can perhaps be explained by the:

... increasing momentum on the part of media advocacy organizations in the last decade. In the last few years alone, the intensity of media education and literacy combined with the work of organizations such as the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) have advanced the issue of media representations to a broader arena. (5)

However, the struggle over representations is complicated by the disjunctive nature of most stereotypes – colonialist and Orientalist discourses construct the Other as both an object of desire and disavowal. The political harnessing of this split is evident in the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. Mamdani (2005) references this construction as it occurred in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. He argues:

President Bush moved to distinguish between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims." From this point of view, "bad Muslims" were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that "good Muslims" were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support "us" in a war against "them." But this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be "good," every Muslim was presumed to be "bad." All Muslims were now under obligation to prove their credentials by joining in a war against "bad" Muslims. (15)

Nevertheless, Mamdani explains how easily the “good Muslim” can become “bad” and lose their acceptable status. The idea of ‘proving their credentials’ can be tied to the notion of contingent or conditional acceptance. In other words, only those who will prove their allegiance and patriotic loyalty will be accepted. Jiwani (2006) shows how this kind of conditional acceptance, as a fiction, is used to obtain consent. In an article about Zinedine Zidane’s infamous head-butt, Jiwani (2008) describes his “fall from grace” following the 2006 World Cup final match between Italy and France (13). A French athlete of Algerian origin who had figuratively served as a public icon symbolizing the ideal citizen of colour, Zidane fell out of the public favour after his infamous head-butt of Marco Materazi, an Italian soccer player who presumably grabbed Zidane’s shirt and insulted him during the final match. Jiwani describes the Orientalist, racialized and at times racist references that were deployed to explain the incident. However, she reveals how Zidane was subsequently redeemed and exonerated in the news coverage; this in turn signified a benevolent and tolerant France *plurielle*.

As evident from this and other examples, Muslims walk a fine line of acceptability – between conditional acceptance (Jiwani 2006) and eviction (Razack 2008) from the West. In the Québec context, the Bouchard-Taylor 2006 state commission literally illustrates how Western states can at any moment pose the question of whether particular populations deserve to be accepted within the borders of the nation. The Commission was established to formulate recommendations to the government regarding accommodation practices related to ‘cultural differences,’ via consultations with the public. Muslim immigrants in particular were asked to ‘assimilate’ or ‘integrate’ into Quebec society if they were to be accepted. Mahrouse’s (2010) analysis of the citizens’

forums that were part of the debate and of the Commission's final report demonstrates that it ended up reinforcing racialized hierarchies and exclusions, in a climate of so-called crisis. Most relevantly, for the inquiry here, is how Muslims were stereotyped in the press and in testimonies presented at the hearings by other citizens.

### **Dominant Representations**

Since the events of September 11, 2001, there have been considerable studies mapping dominant representations of Arab, South Asians, and Muslims in the Western media (for example, Todd 1998; Vivian 1999; Wilkins and Downing 2002; Gavrilos 2002; Cloud 2004; Ayotte and Husain 2005; Jiwani 2006; Macdonald 2006; Parameswaran 2006; Mahrouse 2010). Yet, a review of this literature indicates that such representations existed even prior to 9/11 (Said 1978; Yeğenoğlu 1998; Karim 2000; Shaheen 1984 & 2001). Previous studies that examined the construction of Arab and Muslim identities in the media reveal that their representations have been negative and limited. They also document the history of these constructions, which date prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The studies demonstrate that Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiments in the Western media preceded September 11, 2001 (see for example, Said 1994 & 1997; Shaheen 2001; Salaita 2006; Wilkings and Downing 2002). My point of departure is rooted in these earlier studies, especially those focusing on race, gender and representation. Representations form a key element in the production of culture. The mainstream Western media contribute to shaping perceptions about the Muslim and Arab regions by constructing and defining the identity of Muslims and Arabs, both within those regions and outside of them.



The Enlightenment discourse of modernity has been particularly prevalent in representations of Muslims, indefinitely locating them in the era and space of the pre-modern. The construction of Muslim men as irrational has served to legitimize their eviction from modernity. Here, gender plays a crucial role in that it confines Muslims to this imaginary era and space. Several scholars, (Abu-lughod 2002, Razack 2008, Butler 2004, Ayotte and Husain 2005, and Vivian 1999) discuss the appropriation of feminist rhetoric to seek imperial expansion, notably through the use of military force. Leila Ahmed boldly coins this “colonial feminism” arguing that such ‘feminism’ has been “used against other cultures in the service of colonialism” (quoted in Abu-Lughod 2002, 784). Razack (2008) notes that:

Gender is crucial to the confinement of Muslims to the pre-modern, as post-colonial scholarship has long shown. Considered irredeemably fanatical, irrational, and thus dangerous, Muslim men are also marked as deeply misogynist patriarchs who have not progressed into the age of gender equality, and who indeed cannot. For the West, Muslim women are the markers of their communities’ place in modernity. (16)

A central figure of this dominant discourse is the veiled Muslim woman (Jiwani, 2010). The global mainstream media consistently dismiss the many meanings and symbols of veiling for Muslim women. Instead, the coverage links Muslim religious practices, symbolized by the veil, with women’s oppression. In analyzing the coverage of the French Education Minister Francois Bayrou’s attempt to ban the Muslim veil from public schools in the French press, Vivian (1999) explains that “the veil had to be removed, in Bayrou’s own words, because it is *the* symbol of Islam” (116). While the French press linked wearing the veil to ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘terrorism,’ French-Muslim girls were expelled from school because they refused to unveil, even though there has been no evidence of their practices of veiling as being linked to terrorist acts. This trend

has also been documented in the US (Macdonald 2006; Butler 2004) and in Quebec (Todd 1998).

It is important to note, however, that following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the circulation of images of veiled Muslim women increased considerably, repeatedly signifying women's oppression (Ayotte and Husain, 2005). Thus, images of joyful complete or partial unveiling were circulated in the dominant Western media after the 'liberation' of Afghanistan from the Taliban (Ayotte and Husain 2005; MacDonald 2006; Nayak 2006; Butler 2004). As Arat-Koc (2002) explains:

References to culture and religion as the cause of women's oppression are immensely useful and convenient to an imperialist project not just in justifying an otherwise destructive war as a "humanitarian" one to a Western audience, and claiming credit for what might appear to be the positive outcome of the war; but also in terms of disowning the failures, embarrassments or limitations of the war. For example, emphasis on culture as the central explanatory concept can help to attribute the atrocities committed by the Northern Alliance against prisoners of war as an unfortunate outcome of the innate wildness and barbarism of "our allies." If Afghan women do not achieve any improvements in their conditions at the end of war, invasion and Western involvement in Afghan government, this again can be blamed on "our allies" not being able to overcome "tradition" in a short period. (59)

While culture and religion have been ideologically useful in galvanizing missions to 'save brown women from brown men' as Spivak's famous expression indicates, representations of Muslim masculinities have also been confined to the realm of criminality and violence. As Karim (2000) demonstrates, these representations draw on stories of assassins, kidnappers, and hostages, relying on the core stereotype of the 'violent man of Islam,' while Christians are constructed as non-violent in mainstream discourses. The image of the Muslim jihadist occupies a central place in this discourse as it serves to justify violence inflicted on Muslim bodies such as the bombing of Iraqi cities during the Gulf War, the Serbian massacre of Bosnian Muslims, and the Russian attack

on Chechens. Therefore, "... the Muslim's depiction as a villain carries a high level of plausibility in cultural entertainment that portrays the struggles of the good against the bad" (65).

European powers during the colonial era were already using this core stereotype to legitimize structural and direct violence against Muslims. Karim contends that this image has survived into the present, referencing how "integration propagandists," who manufacture consent to legitimize the hegemony of the North, frame terrorism as emanating from the South, caused by "Oriental irrationality," and as a global concern that calls for military action (2000, 120). Drawing on Jacques Ellul, Karim defines "integration propaganda" as a more subtle discursive form that "... continually leads the members of a society to conform to dominant discourses and structures of power" (2000, 16). The essentialist notions deployed to construct Islam as a timeless entity, are evident in stereotypical generalizations and clichés such as the 'Islamic mindset,' and 'the Shiite penchant for martyrdom' casting one billion Muslims as monolithic, barbaric, and backward (Karim, 2000).

However, in this cluster of representations, the East is not only presented as evocative of danger and terror, but also of attraction and fascination (Karim 2000). One dimension of this binary focuses on the exotic. Here, the Muslim women is represented as the sexually fatal other. Yeğenoğlu (1998) demonstrates that:

... the Orient as it figures in several eighteenth and nineteenth century European texts is a *fantasy* built upon sexual difference. ... the figure of "veiled Oriental woman" has a particular place in these texts, not only as signifying Oriental woman as mysterious and exotic but also as signifying the Orient as feminine, always veiled, seductive, and dangerous (11).

Hence, the sexualisation of Muslim women and the feminization of the ‘Orient’ are central tropes of Orientalist discourse.

These studies provide the dominant tropes of Western discourse on Islam and Arab identity. Defining what constitutes a counter-hegemonic discourse depends on what is defined as hegemonic and this is where the previous studies are useful – studies that show constructions of the Arab and Muslim figure as terrorist/suicide bomber are hallmarks of the hegemonic discourse. Constructions which paint Arabs and Muslims as traditional, barbaric, pre-modern and as ultimate patriarchs, and the women as oppressed and victimized, are some of the other iconic figures of this hegemonic discourse. As Razack (2008) argues, three figures represent the war on terror: the ‘dangerous’ Muslim man, the ‘imperilled’ Muslim woman, and the ‘civilized’ European.

### **Hegemony/Counter-Hegemony**

The understanding of hegemony that I apply here in order to conceptualize what constitutes the ‘counter-hegemonic’ is that of a dynamic “moving equilibrium” (Gramsci 1916-1935). Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony offers a fluid understanding of culture. In Gramsci’s view, hegemony occurs in brief, historically specific periods in the lifespan of a society. The necessary unity to the formation of hegemony seldom takes place, as hegemony is always contested. Thus, when won, even temporarily, these periods of “settlement” do not last for too long. They do not come about on their own, but rather are the result of dynamic constructions. The unravelling of these periods is preceded by crises.

Hegemony needs consistent renewal, recreation, defense, and modification. It is also constantly challenged, opposed, and altered by outside forces, which are not only important in themselves, but also serve as indicators of “what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control” (Williams 1977, 113). Departing from viewing hegemony as static, I utilize an understanding of the hegemonic process (as articulated by Raymond Williams) as always working towards controlling, transforming, or incorporating opposition and alternatives. According to Williams (1977):

The most interesting and difficult part of any cultural analysis, in complex societies, is that which seeks to grasp the hegemonic in its active and formative but also its transformational processes. Works of art, by their substantial and general character, are often especially important as sources of this complex evidence. (113-114)

William contends that ‘authentic breaks’ disrupting hegemonic constructions have in fact occurred when works and ideas have offered original elements. These are described as irreducible to the terms of the dominant hegemony and occupy different positions ranging from total isolation to revolutionary activity. Within this cultural process, works of art carry special importance. However, they are always subject to attempts to neutralize, change, or incorporate them into the hegemonic.

For Gramsci, hegemony is not only secured via coercion and economic domination but also through cultural and social consciousness. Gramsci’s intellectual originality lies in his view of hegemony as exceeding the economic dominance of one ruling class over another: “the specific question of economic hardship or well-being as a cause of new historical realities is a partial aspect of the question of the relations of force at their various levels” (Gramsci 1916-1935, 208). Here, he refutes Marx’s emphasis on the economic relations as determining and argues that:

[I]t is therefore necessary to combat economism not only in the theory of historiography, but also and especially in the theory and practice of politics. In this field, the struggle can and must be carried on by developing the concept of hegemony... (Gramsci 1916-1935, 216).

While he acknowledges that hegemony must also be economic, he insists that areas of struggle exceed the domain of the economic. Therefore, hegemony is not only conducted in the economic and administrative fields but also in cultural arenas – it involves moral, ethical and intellectual leadership. Hence, culture plays a role in hegemony: it is the mainstreaming of culture that leads to hegemony, through the consent of the institutions of civil society. On this point, Gramsci states:

Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential, for though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity. (212)

Therefore, Gramsci contends that hegemony involves acquiring significant popular consent. In other words, it sets the tone and the standards of morality and social behaviour among the populace. The leaders of hegemony not only consist of the ‘ruling class’ but also of civil society, of some subalterns and dominated classes, who have been brought in via the means of concessions and compromises. They, with the ruling class, form the historic bloc but remain in a subordinate role. Here Gramsci offers a counter argument to economic reductionism. This is a shared concern from within cultural studies to produce analyses that are non-reductionist or economic in orientation. Slack (1996) suggests that:

... the anti-reductionist turn in cultural studies, as exemplified here by Laclau, effectively disempowered the possibility of reducing culture to class or to the mode of production and rendered it possible and necessary to re-theorize social forces such as gender, race and subculture as existing in complex – articulated – relations with one another as well as with class. (121)

Gramsci's serious attack on economism inspires interest in studying the inter-relationship between axes of identity like class and race, particularly as articulated in the realm of culture.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, such investigations of representations and language that draw on Gramsci's work have the potential to expose how common sense is actively constructed and how popular hegemony is secured. Keeling (2007) contends that "...common sense contains the seeds of good sense. For Gramsci, good sense is that part of common sense that might be elaborated into a conception of the world that is critical and coherent and thus capable of elevating to leadership the collective it consolidates" (22). Hence, the "good sense" inherent within critical conceptions of the world inserts into and infuses "common sense."

Common sense is contradictory and contains elements of truth within it. The slippery nature of hegemony leads us to consider how hegemonic discourses are contested and to examine the characteristic features that define counter-hegemonic discourses. The notions of *counter-hegemony* and *counter-hegemonic*, although never used by Gramsci, have been adopted in studies of alternative media:

Subsequently – although Gramsci himself never used the terms – notions of *counterhegemony* and *counterhegemonic* have become fairly common among writers influenced by his thinking, as a way to categorize attempts to challenge dominant ideological frameworks and to supplant them with a radical alternative vision. Many radical alternative media clearly belong within this

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<sup>7</sup> Hall (1996) further elaborates that the various modalities of power encompassing economic as well as cultural domains are all important sites of interest and investigation, especially since they articulate with other relations of power. He argues that Gramsci's theoretical framework offers some useful insights for the study of race, even though Gramsci did not write about race or racism specifically.

frame. A proliferation of such media would be vital, both to help generate those alternatives in public debate and also to limit any tendency for oppositional leadership, whatever forms it took, to entrench itself as an agency of domination rather than freedom” (Downing et al. 2001, 15).

Downing et al. (2001) cite some of the conventional terms of dissent – “alternative, radical, oppositional, counterhegemonic, resistance” (134) to suggest that, in effect, all attempt to convey the depth and extent of focus of that dissent. Thus, “...the counterhegemonic process operates at different depths...” (Downing et al. 2001, 141). In *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, Ives (2004) also mentions the absence of the term counter-hegemony. However, he notes Gramsci’s contention that subaltern groups have their own conceptions of the world. The question then becomes how they translate these conceptions into words and develop their own language.

In order to conceptualize counter-hegemony, postcolonial theory offers a very useful entry point to discover that which stands in opposition, or that which differs from dominant representations. Several studies lay down the tropes of dominant discourses. Ideally, counter-hegemonic interventions would depart from Orientalist and colonial narratives in order to contest hegemonic frames and offer other ways of speaking of these identities and peoples. Counter-hegemonic texts and sites should contest dominant discourses and present other ways of speaking of Arab, South Asian, and Muslim identities. In other words, they have to reflect a process of decolonization of the mind and provide informed critical responses to colonial and Orientalist discourse. They need to, in some ways at least, offer something different. Whereas these texts can be totally contained, they can also display irreducible independence and originality at particular moments.



Post-colonial theory is also relevant because of its connection to critical race analysis. I rely on Loomba's (1998) definition of "... post-colonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism" (12). As Young (2001) reminds us, we can today enumerate several of the still-extant colonies and dependent territories that are under colonial and neo-colonial rule. In addition, the everyday lives of the indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australia and of Palestinians also bear the familiar marks and traces of colonialism. Nonetheless, it is important to note that most colonies of the world have now achieved independence (Shohat, 2000). Young further argues that mobilizing postcolonial theory as a paradigm signals a recognition of the historical achievements of the fights for independence as well as a commitment to the continuing struggles against colonial domination.

Nevertheless, because the term 'postcolonial' can imply that colonialism has been eradicated, thereby denying that the ex-colonized and currently colonized are still suffering economically, politically, and culturally, an academic debate has emerged on its usefulness. Shohat (2000) explains how using this term has implied that colonialism had been defeated, regardless of its advocates' objectives and that we live today in a different spatio-temporality. This scholarship has outlined some of the failures of decolonization projects, including increasing debt, rampant poverty, disease and underdevelopment, ethnic violence and wars, and alarming ecological disasters (Said 1994; McClintock 1995). Nonetheless, Spivak argues that "historically these terms are always heterogeneous and so is neo-colonialism. You have to posit a great narrative in order to critique it..." (cited in Yeğenoğlu, 38). Postcolonial studies celebrate victories over

colonialism, analyze the aftermath of decolonization, and examine power structures that have yet to be transformed. As perhaps one of postcolonial theory's most fervent defenders, Young delineates the engagements of postcolonial critique: an analysis of colonial history from the point of views of its victims, as well as the identification of traces of the colonial past. In his view, postcolonial theory looks at the past to liberate today's marginalized. While postcolonial critique, as a form of activist writing, finds its inspiration in the anti-colonial movements of the past, it also keeps in mind how contemporary situations differ from the past as well as the specificities of contemporary political imperatives. My interest in colonial discourse and post-colonial theory arises from the concern with how certain bodies are represented, with who is doing the representation to whom and in whose interests.

The theoretical framework of 'post-colonialism' enables the researcher to address the question of power. It avoids the reduction of these representations as emerging from equal perspectives because of its potential to address institutional and material realities of colonialism, capitalism, globalization, and patriarchy. Said (1978) has argued that Orientalist stereotypes about the East have had a much more devastating effect than Eastern stereotypes of the West because of unequal power relations. Karim (2000) also links knowledge to power stating that "Muslim societies have not institutionalized their imaginaries about Northern societies to the extent that the latter have done of Islam, especially over the last two centuries" (55). European and North American societies have accumulated, legitimized and promoted an extensive body of knowledge about the "Orient," in comparison to the discourses about the West emanating from the Global South.

Fanon's work has been particularly influential in guiding contemporary postcolonial studies. His work underscores how the inferiority and dehumanization of the native is constructed. The colonized is always presumed guilty; is said to lack desirable values and to be devoid of any sense of ethics; and is quite literally declared an animal. In contrast with the settler's assumed impartiality, the native's knowledge is dismissed and unrecognized as "for the native, objectivity is always directed against him" (1963, 77). The colonized, however, have engaged in practices of resistance to colonial discourse (through laughter, for example). Fanon suggests that it is when the natives realize their humanity and refuse their inferiority and guilt that they begin to resist.

Studying colonial discourse sheds light into the processes of creating divergent ways of speaking. Creating alternative portrayals involves subjecting Western domination and White supremacy to scrutiny by first of all, rendering it visible as a form of domination. This can also take the form of playful reversal – by transferring the undesirable qualities Orientalist discourse inflicts on the imaginary East onto the West itself. As Said (1978) explains, Orientalist discourse ascribes its own repressed qualities onto the 'East.'

Césaire's (1972) text *Discourse on Colonialism* constitutes an early and highly significant study of Whiteness that unmasks the 'purity' of Europe. In this influential work, he performs a reversal of the qualifiers usually associated with the colonized and projects them on the colonizer. Resonating with Hall's argument that no discourse is innocent, Césaire attempts to break down the notion of an invisible, untouchable, normalized and exemplary Europe by questioning its innocence in light of its record of colonizing missions. As he puts it: "...no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes

with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization, a civilization that is morally diseased...” (Césaire 1972, 18). This utterance challenges notions of European superiority that have provided the foundation for colonial thinking and practices. Colonial discourse has implied that European countries (and culture) are developed and civilized, hence providing the model for how humanity should be lived. However, Césaire, here, draws attention to how colonial Europe has engaged in immoral acts of brutality to marshal its own advancement. Césaire’s statement urges us not be dazzled by European civilization –in other words to rid the mind of mental colonization. He posits colonialist Europe as dishonest because it has attempted to justify its colonizing activity. Furthermore, he demonstrates the hypocrisy of colonial discourse in observing that when the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia were demanding the construction of schools, ports and roads, colonial Europe was refusing these demands and worked towards holding back any ‘advancement.’ Césaire provides examples of colonial harm to illustrate how economies have been disrupted through the destruction of food crops, the introduction of malnutrition and the pilfering of raw materials and products. In addition, he points to the ways in which the colonized should be other than what they have been expected and constructed to be: “I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been thought to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys” (22).

However, Césaire tends to idealize the glorious past of “our” old societies as he expresses nostalgia for it. He describes these societies as having always been communal, ante-capitalist (before capitalism) and anti-capitalist, democratic, cooperative, and

fraternal. Nonetheless, in revealing some of the strategies of colonialism, this text offers a useful guide for constructing a framework that identifies linguistic tactics of resistance that are counter-hegemonic. For example, Césaire performs a counter-hegemonic move when he dissociates colonization from civilization, and hence refutes the rhetoric of the civilizing mission of colonialism.

Although such early postcolonial studies provide seminal insight into how one might go about studying alternative discourse, they often fail to include or emphasize the centrality of gender and its inter-relationship with other axes of power. As Yeğenoğlu (1998) reminds us: “a more sexualized reading of Orientalism reveals that representations of sexual difference cannot be treated as its sub-domain; it is of fundamental importance in the formation of a colonial subject position” (2). Thus, even liberatory discourses often embody a sexist tendency. Historically, Arab and Muslim women have also been racialized as oppressed non-entities that need to be saved from their backward culture and religion (Shaheen 2001)<sup>8</sup>. This particular representation classically draws from colonial discourse, which has frequently represented colonized women as in need of saving (Loomba 1998).

### **Tactical Interventions**

Considering that mobility is restricted for the subaltern, what is it that marginalized people (or Diva Citizens in this case) can do? De Certeau (1984) states that “people have to make do with what they have... there is a certain art of placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of constraining space” (18). What are the spaces and sites of

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the racialization of Arabs and Muslims, see the section on *performance and performativity*.

temporal interventions emerging from within the constraining meta-structure? De Certeau speaks about drawing unexpected results from difficult situations and diverting the dominant order without leaving it. It is interesting to think about how to ‘make do’ of the available stock of materials. How can one manipulate the imposed vocabularies of the established knowledge – composed of symbolism, representations, and practices? Here, he refers to the ‘art of the weak,’ which he develops through the concept of a tactic, or a clever trick:

It [a tactic] takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them... What it wins it cannot keep... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. (de Certeau 1984, 37)

However, while De Certeau describes a tactic as time-based, he situates it as standing against “strategy,” which is a force of domination (of the state, for example) that is space-based. What the marginalized can do within constraining space depends on their ‘sensibility,’ which Grossberg (1992) defines as:

For the individuals living within it, [sensibility] defines a historically determined and socially distributed mode of engagement with (or consumption of) particular practices. It determines the “proper” and appropriate way of selecting cultural practices, of relating to them, and of inserting them into daily life ... (72)

It is the population’s sensibility that allows it to select particular cultural practices for consumption, to relate to them in specific ways, and to consequently understand and interpret discursive formations. It is a dominant mode of organization “which describes its effects in people’s daily lives and thus the way in which a particular formation is lived” (Grossberg 1992, 72). Although identifying the sensibility at work is not a simple task, a particular kind of sensibility is typically dominant. The effects of a discursive

formation are not intrinsic to it; they depend on specific sensibilities. For example, laughter or tears reflect the ability of particular practices to have such effects for a particular interpretive community (Fish 1980). The notion of sensibility lends itself well to Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive community,' although it cannot be reduced to it.<sup>9</sup>

DeChaine (1997) follows Grossberg's lead in mapping subversion through queer punk music. In this case, mapping sensibilities aims to discover a subaltern group's motives through an analysis of tactical choices. DeChaine suggests that "by analyzing discourse in terms of sensibilities, one can not only chart particular group actions, but also tendencies, trajectories, and problematic implications of those actions" (1997, 8). In his case study, DeChaine finds that a sensibility of play enables the subversion of dominant culture materials. Using Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque to ground his study, he finds that resistance, from within the system, is temporarily accomplished through *tactics of play* such as appropriation, parody, pastiche, and bricolage. DeChaine posits these tactics of play as tools for resistance:

A discourse grounded in a carnivalesque, playful sensibility provides the subaltern participant opportunities for various tactical deployments. These moves, which I will term "tactics of play," signify the practical "tools" for a playful subculture. Within the purview of subcultural and postmodern theory, much work has been done to identify and elucidate tactics of resistance and subversion [...] *appropriation, parody, pastiche, and bricolage*. (1997, 15)

In his analysis, he found that participants inverted meanings, which gave them temporary escape from oppressive circumstances. They also offered a form of resistance that was therapeutic for their audience by creating moments of solidarity against an oppressor. However, according to DeChaine, this playful sensibility is limited in terms of its efficacy as a force of resistance as it only offers temporary and ambivalent

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see the Introduction.

empowerment. Further, it may also be ignored and trivialized because it engages the dominant culture playfully through mockery and laughter.

Bricolage is another tactic that DeChaine describes. Bricolage is also at the core of Hebdige's (1979) analysis of subcultural style. Hebdige argues that it is through consumption and "... through style, that the subculture at once reveals its 'secret' identity and communicates its forbidden meanings. It is basically the way in which commodities are *used* in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations" (1979, 103). Such bricolage may include appropriating commodities, subverting the meaning of conventional insignia (such as business-wear), dream work, collage, etc. in order to disrupt and organize meaning that resonate with and communicate aspects of an audience's lived reality.

The Situationist tactic of *détournement* for fighting The Spectacle also fits within De Certeau's notion of 'making do.' One of the founding members of the Situationist International, a group of leftist Europeans who significantly influenced the strike of May 1968 in France, was Guy Debord. He significantly shaped the ideas of the Situationist movement. His work on how social relationships are mediated is grounded in the concept of The Spectacle as a virtual place where it is impossible to distinguish the inside from the outside, or the representation from the social. For Debord (1994), The Spectacle is an apparatus of images that regulates public discourse and the social relations among people. It unifies and explains distinct social phenomena. It monopolizes appearance and subjugates men [and women]. According to him, the mass media is a glaring and superficial manifestation of The Spectacle; a "concentration" of communication in the hands of a system of administration. Hence, Debord argues that it is inseparable from the



state and from class domination. The Situationist movement deployed the tactic of détournement as a way to fight The Spectacle through the modification of ads, news items, cartoons, and other types of cultural products. Their aim was to use manipulation in order to strip these commodities and events of their intended meanings and to subvert messages. Bailey et al. (2008) situate détournement as the most relevant reference to what is described today as culture jamming. The idea of the ‘serious parody’ suggests reversing, transgressing, or subverting.

In more contemporary applications and discussions of alternative media, the concept of ‘culture jamming’ has come to the fore as a conceptual basis on which oppositional discourses are mounted and articulated. Branwyn (1997) relates jamming in alternative media to music and radio, defining it as:

...using media in new and creative ways, “jamming” like musicians jam, making it up as they go along. *Jamming* also refers to the scrambling of broadcast signals, as in the interruption of a radio signal by electronic means... The whole point of alternative media is to jam the status quo with ideas and viewpoints not found in conventional media and not subject to the tidal influences of commercial sponsorship and demographics. (14)

As Carty (2002) argues, culture jamming can be conceived of as a “type of ‘semiological guerrilla warfare (an idea advanced by Umberto Eco decades ago), in which the receiver of the message maintains the freedom to interpret the message in an individual way” (140).

In his proposal of montage as a visual practice prevalent in alternative media, Hamilton (2001) also articulates this idea of using the available stock of raw materials from popular culture and transforming them into something else. An interesting example of a montage which parodies Hollywood’s representation of Arabs is illustrated in *Planet of the Arabs* (2005) produced by Jacqueline Salloum and inspired by Shaheen’s book

*Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People.* This montage uses various shots from different Hollywood movies from 1896-2000 depicting Arabs to highlight the recurrent stereotypes and negative images that have been consistently circulating. The montage ends with a diagnosis of these images as mass-madness and a call for turning off television sets.

Studies of indigenous and “third world” films and media also offer some useful insights into different techniques of subversion that can be categorized under this rubric of tactical interventions. Ginsburg (2002) offers some important insights into indigenous ‘tactics’ such as rectifying the erasure of history. Hence, indigenous media has been characterized with endeavours to recuperate lost stories and histories on screen which have been erased in dominant narratives and are in danger of being lost and deleted from national memory. Ginsburg cites the Aboriginal producer Rachel Perkins’s work as exemplary of this effort to create screen memories in Australia: “her [Rachel Perkins] agenda, was in a sense, to create ‘screen memories’ for the majority of Australians – Black and White – who knew virtually nothing of the role of Aboriginal people in the formation of modern Australia” (2002, 49). Part of this effort takes the form of using footage to provide visual evidence of indigenous existence. In addition, technologies of representation have also been used as tools to secure cultural preservation (e.g., of language, rituals) and the communication of indigenous stories and cultural identity. In this light, indigenous media makers have produced new Aboriginal television networks which have been inserted in national television. Similarly, Stam and Spence (1985) speak of the effort to rewrite colonial history in ‘third world’ films.

Stam and Spence provide some useful indications in terms of identifying ‘tactics’<sup>10</sup> deployed in “third world” films such as reclaiming the past, noting that, “in response to such distortions, the Third World has attempted to write its own history, take control of its own cinematic image, speak, in its own voice” (Stam & Spence 1985, 638). They also document the use of *progressive realism* as a central impulse informing the efforts of women and “third world” filmmakers to challenge hegemonic representations. Thus, some of these filmmakers have countered patriarchal and colonial discourses “with a vision of themselves and their reality as seen ‘from within’” (Stam & Spence 1985, 639). Nonetheless, they contend that depicting ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ in film are not such evident tasks. The tendency to promote ‘positive images’ on screen raises similar sets of issue as it can also lead to essentialism and to reductionist simplifications. They reason that “a cinema dominated by positive images, characterized by a bending-over-backwards-not-to-be-racist attitude, might ultimately betray a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection” (Stam & Spence 1985, 639). Similarly, Hall (1997) argues that it is not a matter of replacing negative images with positive ones but to strive for diversity in representation.

Further, according to Stam and Spence, *spectator positioning* is a mediation specific to cinema. Positioning can become political when alternating the usual point of view and identification mechanisms. For example, reversing the impossibility of sympathetic identification with certain characters and groups, such as ‘Indians’ or Algerians, could constitute an inversion to the typical stereotypical representations. Making them into speaking subjects on screen also negates stereotypes of passivity.

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<sup>10</sup> Stam and Spence do not use the term ‘tactics’ but it could be argued that their work takes on the task of identifying different ways of responding to colonial and racist representations.

Infiltrating mainstream media represents another tactic of intervention. As previously mentioned, Shaheen intervened as a consultant to influence the content of Hollywood films on several occasions. Similarly, Carroll and Hackett's (2006) research on 'democratic media activism' led them to find that one form of action to democratize communication consists of "influencing content and practices of mainstream media" (88).<sup>11</sup> An example of a more radical infiltration can be found in the documentary *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), which revolves around the activism of the *Yes Men* who pose as executives of large corporations in order to gain access to business conferences and stage their comedic performative interventions there.

Shohat and Stam (1994) describe how reviving oral stories and oral methods of storytelling have served as an aesthetic of resistance. They comment on how written literature has often drawn from the repertoires of spoken literature in an effort to unthink eurocentrism, where the latter has equated the "non-literate" with the *illiterate*" (297-298). The emphasis on the oral often involves the use of the native language to communicate anti-colonial perspectives. Third Worldist filmmakers have used this practice of resistance in their narratives of anti-colonial struggles.

The reinscription of the oral can operate on a very practical level as a way of achieving collective agency: "in the arts, the aesthetic reinvoicing of tradition can serve purposes of *collective agency* in the present" (Shohat & Stam 1994, 300). Ong (2002) identifies the distinguishing characteristics of orality and describes characteristics of the

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<sup>11</sup> Carroll and Hackett (2006) identify four main forms of action to democratize communication: (1) "influencing content and practices of mainstream media;" (2) "advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media;" (3) "building independent, democratic, and participatory media;" and (4) "changing the relationship between audiences and media, chiefly by empowering audiences to be more critical of hegemonic media" (88-89). They also note that "this form of activism [media activism] may be fated to remain a 'movement in itself,' not consciously for itself" (100).

oral tradition which are interesting for the present study because they potentially energize particular interventions, especially since the oral tradition is embedded in lived culture. Some of these key characteristics of orality include memorization and the use of mnemonic techniques (or ways of memorizing such as rhymes, visual cues, and memory “theatres”). In addition, Ong describes how orality is communal, encourages the formation of group unity and invites participation. He argues that “primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself” (Ong 2002, 69). He further elaborates this in the context of participation: “when a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker” (Ong 2002, 74). Orality is also concentrated in the present moment. Certain ways of establishing authority are based on oral communication such as acts of bearing witness or providing testimony in court trials or in government-sponsored ‘truth and reconciliation’ committees.

Bearing witness has often been used as a tactical intervention. Montagner (2001) reports on how protesters at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Melbourne loudly chanted at the police “the whole world is watching” as they came with their own video cameras and recording equipment to document any potential abuse, and have their own coverage of the event. Montagner also identifies other Internet media groups who are similarly engaged. She concludes that “activists are now taking care of their own representation” and that political activists are now becoming media activists (2001, 16-17).

New technologies have clearly played a role in facilitating mounting challenges to dominance. Montagner (2001) describes this phenomenon as “cyber-democracy” while Carty (2002) speaks of it as “web resistance.” Carty examines technology and counter-hegemonic movements around issues of labour and consumption in her case study of Nike Corporation. In describing sites promoting activism on the Web, Carty reflects on how the Internet has served as activists as an ally through such examples as the use of open-publishing newswires for grassroots coverage of protests. Similarly, Hil (2008) describes the role of new technologies vis-a-vis creating political change in the anti-war movement in Australia following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Hil examines the global civil society’s use of new technologies and demonstrates how these pose unprecedented challenges to the mainstream political system as it is no longer possible to launch wars and escape public scrutiny (brought to light through the Internet).

Tactical intervention, as part of a “semiotic guerrilla warfare,” can take the form of resignification as Abel (2008) describes it in her case study of segregation signs in the U.S, which she describes as an “American graffiti.” She describes these acts as a playful recording of historical evidence of hate speech through reversal and pastiche. As she explains it, acquiring these segregation signs for the purpose of recording historical evidence of the Jim Crow era consisted of a form of activism as the underlying risk was often imprisonment. Furthermore, these activist collectors performed a reversal in that they turned the signs around in order to bear witness, as a burden of proof and as tools for shaming their creators. Abel thus examines the transformation and changes in the life of segregation signs since the 1960s and 1970s to their entry in the marketplace. She notes: “energized by consumer desire for a material record of a vanishing history, the

marketplace has become an engine of reproductions and reinventions whose diversions can be read, alternatively, as resisting or repressing the burden of that history” (Abel, 2008, p. 11). This industry serves such opposing camps as the Redneck Shop of the Ku Klux Klan Museum, an organization also interested in purchasing such products. Abel’s case study, therefore, provides a necessary reminder to the possibilities of co-optation of alternative media and counter-hegemonic discourses, particularly when they do not exist outside of the logic of capital, thereby turning into them into products (often exoticized) for consumption.

While alternative media is often organized around promoting social justice, it is important to acknowledge regressive uses of alternative media, as the studies of Atton (2006) and Daniels (2009) demonstrate. Atton asks if certain features typically associated with alternative media or citizens’ media (Rodriguez, 2000) such as participatory practices are sufficient enough to qualify particular media, such as the far-right radical media, to be categorized as such. Atton’s study, however, demonstrates how the British National Party’s (BNP), as far-right media on the Internet, creates racist discourses. Downing et al. (2001) argue that far-right media can be identified as “repressive radical media.” Similarly, Daniels’ (2009) study reveals how clocked websites, which are sites where authoring of material is hidden for political motives, promote cyber-racism. These sites act as propaganda tools in order to push forward a White-supremacist agenda and yet, can be categorized as forms of alternative media.

Hegemonic power draws ideas from alternative sources (to find news media information, for example) as well as engages in practices of containment and co-optation as it transforms various alternative cultural symbols and creations into goods for

consumption, thereby neutralizing their potential for resistance to cultural and political domination. Nevertheless, tactics of the weak need to be remembered as clever interventions which seize an opportunity at a particular moment to stage a linguistic coup. What happens after the text emerges in the public domain is beyond the control of the creator. When the exceptional diva's work is accompanied by the work of other divas, then the movement of culture starts shifting in divergent directions in more compelling ways.

### **Gendering Resistance**

One of the shortcomings of the previously mentioned literature on 'tactical interventions' is the failure to take into consideration gendered resistance. What does resistance mean from a gendered perspective and what are some of the contributions of "third world" feminists to this scholarship? Whereas several of the tactics described above have been used as tools for discursive resistance are also tactics of the weak and emerge from anti-colonial politics, they are not specific to women nor do they necessarily embody a feminist perspective. Many women scholars and artists have generated discursive resistance in specific ways, by tackling issues around women's lives and realities in the pursuit of a feminist agenda.

In an article titled "Mapping the Feminist Imagination: From Redistribution to Recognition to Representation," Fraser (2005) historicizes three phases of second wave feminism. Although she argues that the shift from phase one to phase two also applies to European and "third world" feminism, this article is very much written from a North American perspective. While she acknowledges the contributions of European feminists,



the history of “third world” feminism is here relegated to a couple of short paragraphs – claiming that “related processes” occurred there as well. Putting aside the accuracy and the degree of generalizability of this genealogy of the feminist imaginary, Fraser’s key notions of redistribution, recognition, and representation are interesting. According to Fraser, the first phase of second wave feminism occurred in the 1960s and was marked with a concern with social equality (redistribution). The second phase transformed an economistic political imaginary with “a politics of recognition,” which put the emphasis on cultural change. The problem, she observes, however, is that “we effectively traded one truncated paradigm for another – a truncated economism for a truncated culturalism” (Fraser 2005, 299). The cultural sphere thus became disconnected from political economy. The third phase involves transnational politics and the effort to exploit new political opportunities in a globalizing world. As “we” transition to the third phase, Fraser proposes to reintegrate, in a balanced way, the two privileged components of the first and second phases in a synthesis of redistribution and recognition. She states that this is already taking place as feminist organizations are taking into account the role of transnational factors and dynamics in shaping women’s realities across nation-states. Changing the frame (i.e., uncovering “misframing”), Fraser argues, is a necessary part of this transnational vision – by highlighting transnational sources of injustice; this is what she calls “representation.” Hence, in this view gender justice becomes a three-dimensional issue: redistribution, recognition, and representation. These three concepts are useful insofar as they point to the dangers of privileging an economistic or culturalistic point of view, to the detriment of the other. Moreover, Fraser’s analysis points to how globalization is increasingly shaping women’s realities, although a more

nuanced rendering of what occurs in the so-called 'third world' in terms of feminism would have effectively de-centered Western feminism.

Several women scholars of colour have critiqued the privileging of gender in analysis to the detriment of other structures of oppression. In "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," Abu-Lughod (2002) calls out the use of the woman question in colonial history as well as the continuing colonial appropriation of indigenous and "third world" women's voices. She argues that what is needed is an appreciation of differences among women in the world: instead of saving "others," we need to work with them and "consider our own larger responsibilities," (Abu-Lughod 783) particularly, first world women's implication in the maintenance of global injustice.

Mohanty's important contribution to the area of "third world" feminism sheds light on some of the ways that women from the Global South have challenged structures of patriarchy. While she recognizes that it is difficult to generalize about "third world" feminism, she calls for an imagined community organized around the notion of "common context of struggle"<sup>12</sup> as she identifies some of the trends of "third world" feminist writings:

To sum up, third world women's writings on feminism have consistently focused on (the idea of simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism; (2) the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/our daily lives and survival struggles; (3) the significance of memory and writing in the creation of oppositional agency; and 4) the differences, conflicts, and contradictions internal to third world women's organizations and communities. In addition, they have insisted on the complex interrelationships between feminist, antiracist, and nationalist struggles... Thus, third world feminists have argued for the rewriting of history

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<sup>12</sup> See the Introduction for further discussion of this notion.

based on the *specific* locations and histories of struggle of people of color and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples. (1991, 10)

A common “third world” feminist project includes engaging in practices of re-writing histories from specific locations of struggle (Mohanty 1991). From this perspective, political and nationalist struggles for independence, liberation, and decolonization are intimately linked to a feminist agenda of achieving gender equality. Such a testimony can be found in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* where bell hooks (1981) presents a particular re-writing of history – of Black women’s involvement (or lack thereof) in women’s movements. hooks explains how White women took the lead of feminist movements, whereas Black women were pushed away from the forefront of such movements because of racial and imperial structures within U.S. society. An example of a historical moment of segregation took place within what was considered the most militant and radical women’s movement in the 1920s in the U.S., the National Woman’s Party, which promoted the interests of White middle and upper-class women. Thus, hooks departs from the dominant perception of Black women’s lack of commitment to women’s rights, although she acknowledges that Black women have dissociated themselves from the feminist movement during particular historical conjunctures. She calls for recognizing “that racism is not the only form of domination and oppression that affect us as a people” (1989, 178) and denounces opportunistic academics who have used feminism to fulfill their own personal interests.

While acknowledging differences between women (arising from different localities of race, class, sexuality, religion, or nationality) is a crucial part of the global project of building gender justice, several scholars identify everyday forms of gendered

resistance as equally important. For example, Barry et al. (2007) discuss the work of femocrats in organizations who push forward a feminist agenda of gender equality from within – for example, by hiring other women and increasing their likelihood to occupy positions of power and leadership. Nonetheless, they also recognize that this type of work can become contained in larger organizational structures; hence “there is always the possibility that women and femocrats will come to be assimilated and energies diverted or dissipated, leaving the hegemony of men and masculinist discourses unchallenged” (Barry et al. 2007, 14).

Some of the tactics of the weak that women have also used include drawing power from collective memory: “historical knowledge functions as an alternative myth-making process that rearticulates the experiences of subalterns” (Perry 2004, 826). This also involves drawing on one’s heritage to create cultural works, as for example, Chapman’s (2006) study which describes how Korean-Japanese women (Zainichi) incorporate theoretical knowledge (on gender and feminism) to vocalize their resistance to dominant discourses.

Janeway (1980) outlines some of the advantages that women ‘possess,’ such as freshness of vision, or the ability to see things from a new angle. Women, she argues, are more aware of life as a process. She describes a type of knowledge typically perceived as “women’s concerns,” which is an awareness of the intentions and emotions of others induced from their nonverbal behaviours. Women’s particular ability to read nonverbal behaviours as well as their sensitivity to the emotions of others may potentially enable survival. Janeway remarks that this can be said for marginalized groups in general. Like women, the weak are often unaware that they can withdraw their consent. Other powers

of the weak include distrust, disbelief, bonding, joint action, and seeing power as relational.

In speaking to methodologies of discursive resistance from a gendered perspective, Stillman (2007) proposes three methods for analyzing feminist media activism: the diagnostic (which includes naming and shaming), the theatrical, and the archaeological. The second method that Stillman proposes (the theatrical) has been previously elaborated in Taylor's (2003) work. A diagnostic approach presents a cultural vocabulary for unpacking media stereotypes. For example, in her investigation of violence against women but more particularly her unpacking of the media's construction of "worthy" and "unworthy" victims, Stillman examines the technique of naming used by activists to bring to light the identity of dead and disappeared low-income women of colour. She argues that the act of naming, as the primary diagnostic tool, can have a significant impact on national and international coverage of women victims of violence. In addition, the act of shaming, particularly through the deployment of satire and humour, can successfully gain the attention of mainstream newsrooms. Nonetheless, she offers an important critique of the potential of satire to create lasting change: "satire has the potential, when carelessly wielded, to invite the very kind of dehumanization that it claims to resist, belittling the suffering of White female victims and those who mourn them" (2007, 494). According to Stillman, a theatrical approach revives marginalized bodies through storytelling. As a more creative form of feminist and media activism, this approach inserts stories of women victims of violence into the public imagination with the aim of securing their protection. This proposal resonates with Taylor's studies of Latin American performance, which Stillman acknowledges, citing one of Taylor's case

studies (the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who for decades called out the names of their disappeared children in front of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires). Hence, the theatrical method incorporates learning from the practices of theatre and stage by transforming bodies into “walking billboards” (Taylor, 2003). Finally, the archaeological method involves digging (i.e.; searching for, bringing to light, unearthing) the lost and disappeared stories of disenfranchised bodies. This persistent and proactive digging is a form of media activism which Stillman describes as “feminist archaeology” that could lead to reclaiming a particular memory or showing the state’s failure to protect an endangered woman (2007, 498).

### **Sites of Emergence**

If we think about these ‘counter’ interventions as *identities in emergence*, we can begin to trace the contours of the rapid movement of culture in the realm of the popular. Working from within a constraining structure, these works attempt to produce something different because they are dissatisfied with their representation in the dominant public sphere. Although they circulate ‘identity work,’ these *sites of emergence* are inevitably open to co-optation. Alarcón argues for “identity-in-difference” as a privileged nexus of analysis:

By working through the “identity-in-difference” paradox, many racialized women theorists have implicitly worked in the interstice/interface of (existentialist) “identity politics” and “postmodernism” without a clear-cut postmodern agenda. Neither Audre Lorde’s nor Chela Sandoval’s notion of difference/differential consciously subsumes a Derridean theorization – though resonance cannot be denied and must be explored – so much as represents a process of “determinate negation,” a nay-saying of the variety of the “not yet,” that’s not it. The drive behind the “not yet/that’s not it” position in Sandoval’s work is termed “differential consciousness,” in Lorde’s work, “difference,” and in Derrida’s work *différance*. Yet each invokes dissimilarly located circuits of signification codified by the context of the site of emergence, which nevertheless does not obviate their agreement on the “not yet,” which points

toward a future. The difficulties of articulating these sites across languages, cultures, races, genders, and social positions are painfully hard but yield a space for debate beyond “ethnocentrism” without denying them. (129)

Alarcón locates these interventions from the margins in a space of in-betweenness articulated as a “not yet/that’s not it” (referring to the marginalized’s disenchantment with their representation(s) in the dominant mediasphere as well as to their effort to envision and imagine alternatives in the future). However, as these identities temporarily emerge, “two basic strategies have evolved to deal with this threat. First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here the difference is simply denied (‘Otherness is reduced to sameness’). Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless *exotica*...” (Hebdige 1979, 97). Nevertheless, this does not mean that making an absolute distinction between the ideological and commercial ‘manipulations’ of subcultures in the arena of popular culture is justified.

### **Popular Culture**

The realm of popular culture is one, albeit significant, site of struggle of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. It can offer opportunities to challenge the status quo and to disseminate alternative perspectives to a wide audience. However, it is also the arena of dominant cultural production. Williams (1977) posits dominant culture as constantly seeking to appropriate the emergent. As Hall (1981) explains, popular culture cannot be viewed as independent from the monopolization of cultural industries and from dominant cultural production. But the field of hegemony is a battlefield where dominant cultures constantly struggle to organize popular culture:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply ‘expressed.’ But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. (Hall 1981, 239).

As Grossberg’s (1992) puts it, “the popular can only be understood historically as located in a set of cultural sensibilities” (85). The ability of certain practices to generate visceral responses upon the body such as tears or laughter precisely determines the role of popular culture. Part of the struggle over popular culture is precisely to be able to generate such effects. It is its articulation with particular sensibilities that permits such reactions and responses.

Hence, the transition from alternative to popular and what happens in this process is particularly interesting for this type of inquiry. For instance, Newman (2009) discusses indie culture and the “branding of alternative culture.” Whereas ““indie” connotes small-scale, personal, artistic, and creative,” the mainstreaming of indie cultural texts has been taking place via their transformation into products for consumption that are attractive because of their unusual or exotic branding. Here, Newman brings to light how counterculture has been turned into consumer culture as alternative cultural movements become indie products for consumption. Thus, Western consumer culture has engaged in the packaging and selling of countercultural products.

In his study of American independent cinema, Newman posits that ‘indie’ culture “...is a contradictory culture insofar as it counters and implicitly criticizes hegemonic mass culture, desiring to be an authentic alternative to it, but also serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite of upscale consumers” (2009, 17). From this



perspective, to not appear as courting the mainstream's audience is key to preserving an indie sensibility. Newman posits that too much popularity can decrease the 'indie' artist's credibility. Newman's discussion, however, lacks an acknowledgment of exceptional artists who also benefit from a great degree of popularity. For example, the singer Oum Kulthum is still today regarded as a performer of high Arab art while she was also, in her lifetime, incredibly popular as a respectable female figure. Oum Kulthum's musical performances were ground-breaking insofar as she was a lone female figure to sing in front of a predominantly male audience, thus pushing forward a feminist agenda. She also sang canonical Arabic poetry as well as political and religious songs.

### **Implications for Organized Action & Social Movements**

In order to reflect on what these cultural productions 'do' in the hegemonic/counter-hegemonic system, a discussion of the role that cultural production can play to shake or even transform what appears to be stagnant – or how it can influence collective existence – seems appropriate at this point.

Berlant's concept of "Diva Citizenship" (1997) is a useful point of entry here as it sheds light on the 'public' significance of the contemporary case studies selected:

Diva Citizenship does not change the world. It is a moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subaltern political activity. Diva Citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startling the public, she puts the dominant story into suspended animation ... she renarrates the dominant history... (223)

Even though the long-term effects of these 'dramatic' interventions are limited, Berlant argues that Diva Citizenship cannot be underestimated because it "tends to emerge in

moments of such extraordinary political paralysis” (223) and appears to be transformative, impacting on collective existence.

Berlant’s more recent work on "cruel optimism" is also useful here because it points to how upward mobility is severely restricted for marginalized communities. For Berlant (2011), cruel optimism is “the condition of *maintaining* an attachment to a problematic object” (33). The concept of “cruel optimism” illustrates how problematic desiring political and economic status could be for marginalized communities whose upward mobility has been severely restricted. However, she regards the interventions of Diva Citizens as significant because they tend "to emerge in moments of such extraordinary political paralysis" (although she concedes that diva citizenship does not change the world). Therefore, Berlant’s two texts (*Diva Citizenship* and *Cruel Optimism*) can be linked in the following way – on one hand the figure of the exceptional (Diva Citizen) can stage a dramatic coup in the public sphere but on the other hand the concept of cruel optimism points to the function that the figure of the 'exceptional' serves in society. In an interview with the magazine *Variant*, Berlant argues that the battle is to be thought and won at the level of the imaginary (Helms, Vishmidt, & Berlant, 2010).

In a similar vein, Kelley (2002) stresses the importance of visions, utopia, and imagination – what he calls “dreams of freedom” and “poetic knowledge” (inspired by Césaire):

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way. It is *that* imagination, that effort to see the future in the present, that I shall call “poetry” or “poetic knowledge.” I take my lead from Aimé Césaire’s great essay

“Poetry and Knowledge,” first published in 1945. Opening with the simple but provocative proposition that “Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge,” he then demonstrates why poetry is the only way to achieve the kind of knowledge we need to move beyond the world’s crises. “What presides over the poem,” he writes, “is not the most lucid intelligence, the sharpest sensibility or the subtlest feelings, but experience as a whole.”(… ) Poetry, therefore, is not what we simply recognize as the formal “poem,” but a revolt: a scream in the night, an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking. (9-10)

I have quoted this passage at length because it explicates the linkages between social movements and “poetic knowledge.” While Berlant speaks of the uses of re-narrating known stories, Kelley in a similar vein calls for the necessity of building visions of freedom: “without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever manoeuvres and tactics but a process that can and must transform us” (Xii). Furthermore, and as evident from this quote, Kelley attempts to depart from a tendency in social movement literature to focus on manoeuvres and tactics to the detriment of paying attention to visions that could fuel such movements. In this view, it is still (always) important to engage in a type of practice that first asks about the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of the struggle before and while engaging in action. Here it is important to note that social movements have and are generative of knowledge as Kelley clearly states. This calls for the necessity to ask which world to struggle for and that it does not emerge from an elitist understanding of how cultural and political change is created, especially since historically such change has not necessarily been led (on the ground) by intellectuals/artists or exceptional divas. They can however contribute to keeping certain ideas alive, above the surface of the water, as well as generating new dreams of freedom. In his investigation of the history of black radical imagination, Kelley

cites several activists and cultural workers who have been involved in this work of dreaming and creating cultural works which sometimes enabled communities to envision change through collective action.

Similarly, Choudry and Kapoor (2010) call attention to the lack, in the social movement literature, of learning from the ground up (i.e., from social movements which are generative of knowledge – academic and otherwise): “Given the academic emphasis on whether an action, campaign, or movement can be judged a ‘success,’ the intellectual work that takes place in movements frequently goes unseen, as do the politics, processes, sites, and locations of knowledge production and learning in activist settings” (1). Choudry and Kapoor’s edited book aims to rectify this gap by calling for deducing knowledge from social movements while paying attention to the production of knowledge in activist environments.

In a similar vein to Kelley’s emphasis of dreams of freedom emerging out of the Black radical imagination, one can find numerous examples of dreaming, social movements, and the activation of a kernel of utopian possibility in circulated Arab cultural works. The poet Mahmud Darwish provides such a striking example of cultural influence on political life – his work is considered to have metaphorically shaped Palestinian resistance. Other examples include the *Dailymotion* “El Helm El Arabi” (2006) music video, which literally translates as “Arab Dream” and promotes pan-Arab nationalism as well as the YouTube video “YouTube - Dream With Me (Ehlam Ma'aya) - 25 Jan Revolution” which uses the Egyptian artist Hamza Namira’s song “Dream With Me” (Ehlam Ma'aya) (2008) as a backdrop for this activist critique of the Egyptian government during the period of the January 25, 2011 Revolution. Another example is

the very recent YouTube video “Arabs Got Talent - Ep 1 - بث شدي تي عصام” (2011) featuring a Palestinian child reading a poem called “Ahlam Atufala” or “Dreams of Childhood.” This poem references the military occupation of Palestinian land. Hence, this notion of dreaming is closely linked to collective transformation in various cultural works. This type of “poetic knowledge” (Césaire, quoted in Kelley 2002) can be brought to light in the analysis of Suheir Hammad’s poetry, a subject that I turn to in the next chapter.

### **Summary**

‘Talking back’ to power, as outlined by hooks (1989), involves the movement of the speaker from an object to a subject position. Rather than a mere act of speech, it is an effort to liberate the voice of those who stand and represent the margins of society. Nonetheless, structures of domination inevitably subject these acts of ‘talking back’ to containment and appropriation in a dynamic movement of cultural/symbolic power, well illustrated by Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Gramsci conceptualizes hegemony (1916-1935) as a “moving equilibrium.” While it is secured via coercion, economic domination, and cultural consciousness, it is always contested. Part of Gramsci’s originality is situated in how he conceives of culture as a significant arena within which dominant powers attempt to win popular consent. In this regard, Gramsci denounces economism, critiquing Marx’s emphasis on the economy as a determining force. Whereas Gramsci never uses the terms counter-hegemony and counter-hegemonic, these notions have been applied in studies of alternative media and post-colonial analyses of liberationist struggles. Postcolonial theory outlines the central tropes of hegemonic thinking and identifies types

of interventions that depart from, and are founded on critiques of, colonial and Orientalist narratives. These interventions can be conceptualized as counter-hegemonic.

What the marginalized can do to challenge structures of domination depends on the tools available to them (de Certeau 1984). Describing a “tactic” as time-based, de Certeau defines it as opposed to “strategy,” which is a space-based force of domination. And here, identifying the sensibility at work is a key part of mounting a challenge to dominant cultural ideas. Ways of “making do” (de Certeau 1984) that cohere around notions of tactical interventions include the tactic of *détournement*; rectifying the erasure of history through the rejuvenation and reactivation of the past; promoting positive images; using spectator positioning; infiltrating mainstream media; reviving oral stories; bearing witness; and resignifying. Most of this literature is derived from alternative media studies. While alternative media has been endorsing social justice change, it is important to note the regressive use of such media.

Resistance, from a feminist perspective, has meant using the tools of the weak (tactics) in specific ways, in the pursuit of gender justice. The history of feminist visions and interventions in this regard cannot be generalized across historical periods and geographical locations. With this said, the emphasis within second wave feminism has been on economic and transnational sources of injustice, along with cultural elements (Fraser 2005). ‘Third world’ feminists, in particular, have emphasized the role of other axes of identity (e.g., race, class) in significantly shaping inequality. Discursive resistance, from a gendered perspective, has also meant deploying specific tools, such as diagnostic (naming and shaming), theatrical, and archeological (digging for lost stories) methods for undertaking feminist media activism (Stillman 2007).

Such counter-interventions emerge in sites that are rapidly recuperated in the realm of the popular. Hence, popular culture is the site of struggle of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. The significance of tacticality in terms of its connection to social movements depends on the role that cultural productions can play to inspire and influence collective existence through the kinds of visions they uphold and the dreaming they allow.



**Figure 1: Suheir Hammad. Photo Credit: Tarik Aylouch**



## CHAPTER 2

### THE POETRY OF SUHEIR HAMMAD

don't wanna be  
your erotic  
not your exotic

- Suheir Hammad, *Born Palestinian, Born Black*

Suheir Hammad is a prominent Palestinian-American poet who has achieved the status of a public figure after receiving a number of awards for her writings and significant contribution to contemporary poetry. Indeed, she has been associated with Darwish (for example, see Christoff's 2009 interview with Hammad), who was regarded as the Palestinian national poet. Although this comparison to a well-celebrated male poet is flattering, Hammad's poetry stands out insofar as it is dedicated to women and speaks of womanhood from a feminist perspective. Hammad is additionally a beloved poet, since numerous community, activist, and university groups regularly invite her to perform poetry readings. The language of her poetry is unique; she draws from the material of her life (difference) to create captivating ways of talking back to power. Her words are also spoken poetry because she performs them on stage so often and because they are readily accessible via audio and video recordings. In this way, Hammad succeeds in playing with the ephemerality of oral communication because she leaves a physical, virtual, and embodied trace of what she wants to say. While the first part of this chapter focuses on her writings, the second part centers in on performance and deals specifically with how reading her poetry on stage complements the word on the page. It brings it alive to

crowds of listeners around the world. In this sense, Hammad is out there spreading her word and intervening to counter erasures of perspectives and to unsettle embodied domination.

### **Suheir Hammad, poet**

Born in Amman, Jordan in 1973, Suheir Hammad immigrated to the U.S at the age of five with her family, as Palestinian refugees. She grew up in Brooklyn and attended Hunter College but never graduated. As revealed in an interview with Knopf-Newman (2006), she was never formally trained as a writer and never took any writing classes. At the age of nineteen, Hammad authored *Drops of This Story*, a memoir which chronicles her life as a young Palestinian female growing up in Brooklyn. It was subsequently published four years later in 1996 by the Harlem River Press. She also published three collections of poems: *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1995), *Zaatar Diva* (2005), and *Breaking Poems* (2008). *Born Palestinian, Born Black* was also published by Harlem River Press, a community publishing initiative started by African-American and Brooklyn-raised activist Glen Thompson, who became involved in the Black publishing movement and was committed to publishing local working-class writers and young poets. *Zaatar Diva* and *Breaking Poems* were published by Cypher Books, a New York City-based independent publisher whose mission statement emphasizes its commitment to publishing the most necessary and cutting-edge poetry. Versions of the poems of *Zaatar Diva* were previously published in about a dozen journals and books prior to their publication as a collection of poems.

Hammad is the recipient of several writing, poetry, and book awards. Shortly after 9/11, she wrote a piece (*First Writing Since*) articulating her reactions to the September 11 attacks. Hip-Hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons came across it and signed her onto a deal with HBO's Def Poetry Jam. Today she performs her poetry around the world. She has also starred in the film *Salt of This Sea* by Palestinian female director Annemarie Jacir and gained increased popularity through her acting in this film.

### **Significance**

Hammad's writings pose a challenge to preferred gendered readings because of their profound disruptions to commonsensical notions of Palestinian and Arab womanhood and their grounding in an explicitly feminist agenda for change. Her work presents extensive material for the analysis of counter-hegemonic emergence for all the reasons cited in the Introduction (self-representation, long-term interventions, popularity), but also because it often presents itself as engaged with theoretical notions. For example, in the same interview with Knopf-Newman (2006), Hammad expresses her own critical engagement with Foucauldian ideas. His influence clearly appears in her poem "letter to anthony (critical resistance)" (2005) which discusses the U.S. prison industrial complex: "they believe human/ beings can never be reduced/ to numbers not in concentration/ camps or reservations not in/ refugee camps not in schools/ and not in jails" (67-8). Here one clearly hears a Foucauldian articulation in Hammad's voice. In addition, in an interview with GRITtv with Laura Flanders (2008), Hammad references Shaheen's work on Hollywood representations of Arabs.

Hammad's texts are interesting not only in terms of their content but also because they are technologically-mediated, circulating through print, television, and online media. Her poetry is further relevant for the analysis of hybrid cultural material produced in the diaspora that has traveled, virtually and physically, to practically every part of the world and is inextricably linked to the politicized turmoil in Palestine.

### **Creating Style on the Run**

I will now situate my analysis of talking back to hegemonic discourses by launching this discussion with a significant comment derived from my interview with Hammad about having to create her work on the run:

Whereas if you're seen as a topical or political writer, somehow you're always supposed to create your craft on the run. It's always part of the struggle and you don't always get the time to think about your art and how you want it to evolve... That's probably the worst part – realizing that you have to work double as hard to write as a good a poem as someone who might not be dealing with all this content. I keep saying content because I really feel like content and form are really related... There's a fight for the legitimacy of your very form, not only your content...

What Hammad expresses here is unequal opportunities in the process of creating work from the cultural margins when that work is highly politicized and based on the harsh realities of an ongoing struggle. Having to create one's work on the run is an important limiting and challenging part of producing subversive art, which does not receive much support from the institutions of power (government financial aid, academic attention, and mainstream media coverage). This cannot be dismissed as an excuse for making mediocre art. Critical race theorists have long denounced the ironic inequity in the process of producing work from the margins. Whereas the same opportunities are not

available and accessible, the artist of colour is required to provide similar outcomes (which are not the “same” considering the unfair distribution of resources).

What Hammad is also saying in the above-mentioned quote is that subversive content and form are interrelated. This is critical especially in terms of her position as a poet, the ways in which she sees her poetry and how she stylistically makes a contribution to the fight against social inequality. As part of her tactical intervention, Hammad has increasingly been injecting Arabic words, expressions, and imagery into her poetry; an intervention that clearly capitalizes on using the native language. More recently, and more specifically in her *Broken Poems* collection, Hammad takes the liberty of inserting Arabic words in her written work. In the interview I conducted with her, she spoke of this recent process of not having to translate as liberating and related how she had previously been censoring and keeping Arabic words and expressions out of her writings. But this preoccupation is evident even in her earlier writings. The poem “Ismi” (“my name” in Arabic) in *Born Palestinian, Born Black* expresses how the poet refuses to renounce her name or the Arabic language: “please/ learn to pronounce/ the name of my spirit/ the spirit of my name/ correctly” (Hammad 1996, 77). A younger Suheir writes in *Drops of this Story* about a particular turning point when she did not wish to continue diluting her name to become more ‘American-sounding,’ (read White/European/Christian); she thus stopped answering to “Sue.”

A defining character of Hammad’s poetry takes the form of unapologetically inscribing Brooklyn and hip hop parlance on the page in an effort to revalue and resignify them in the form of orality and language: “for jason/ his rap poetry more eloquent than any Shakespeare” (from the poem “99 cent lipstick” in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*

(1996, 57). And here, the form of hip hop enables access to the media; as Al Maleh (2009) put it, Hammad is a “hip” poet. Hammad has been featured on Russell Simmons’ *Def Poetry* alongside well-known stars like Alicia Keyes, Lauren Hill, Kanye West, and Erykah Badu. Even if only by association, Hammad has had access to the realm of the popular through hip hop culture.

Hip hop is a cultural form that has gained popularity and access to the mainstream. Hammad was raised on the cultural influences of Brooklyn, New York. According to MacGillvray (2007), hip hop is “a cultural style emanating from New York in the 1970s and 1980s that spawned rap music, hip hop break dancing, graffiti, and tagging” (2007, 358). Before hip hop was commercialized and co-opted, as can be seen in numerous MTV music videos, it was also envisioned as an underground force of resistance attempting to articulate counter narratives to dominant discourses. Today, along the commercialized versions, underground and alternative hip hop continue to exist (for example, see the Narcicyst, Shadia Mansour, Omar Offendum, DAM and several other Palestinian groups represented in Jackie Salloum’s (2009) documentary *Slingshot Hip Hop*). Nonetheless, it is important to note here that these artists’ circulated works are always subjected to containment and co-optation, as is common of other alternative work emerging from the cultural margins.

Whereas Hammad intervenes via content and form to talk back to power, the ways in which culture circulates in the realm of the popular demonstrates how this type of work is inevitably subject to co-optation, as evident in a case that Hammad discussed during the interview:

What do you do when your writing, whatever your intention was for it, becomes part of something that’s outside of you? I could give you an example.

One of my poems was used by the U.S. Department of State without my permission in a magazine which was given free to Arab youth. They printed millions of copies for free of this magazine to distribute on campuses. I didn't know. It was only because a professor who follows my work and who was in Beirut found this magazine and wrote to me that I found out that the State department had used my poetry. Now, what do you do with that?! First of all, all these people have now been introduced to me through the Department of State who used a poem about being immigrant and now are presenting me as the American who supports the Department of State's initiative to "democratize" and "open-up" – whatever this means – the Middle-East. And I'm introduced to these people through this conduit without any choice in the matter. I got an apology after things were already printed. I mean what is an apology going to do?

Yet, even within this context of unequal opportunities and co-optation followed by inconsequential apologies, it is important to note the oppositional stance of Hammad's poetry as well as its articulation of a suppressed knowledge (Foucault 1972) and to study how she presents discursive innovations.

In an interview with Iraqi-Canadian painter and multimedia artist Sundus Abdul-Hadi on Montreal/McGill Campus Community Radio (CKUT)'s show Caravan, Hammad talked about the point when an alternative style becomes *the rule* (my emphasis)! She noted:

But check it Sundus, what happens when you are the rule? Ana wa iyaki [me and you] we have media right now and people are listening to our voices right now. We are the rule. So there's two chicks now listening to this, not breathing down our necks in a negative way, but listening to us waiting to hear some new language, some spark that is going to take her canvas or her page yaani [meaning] somewhere completely different. And I think I can speak for my generation with the Internet and media and social networking. Some of us did not have the opportunity to imagine what artist life should be – yaani how we want to represent ourselves. You know again if I hadn't come from the family that I came from, there were many decisions that would have been made for me as to how I was presented in the public. Now we have a lot of young women who are coming up who are our age – maybe a little bit older, maybe a little bit younger – and we have to help them break the mould that we created for freedom. Now that's complicated. (Hammad 2012)

She continues to further explain in the same interview:

We now became them [the rules]. You know how many times I read a poem and I can see my influence or I see someone on stage and people think: “that’s your influence.” Ok but from my influence, I can give you the recipe of who influenced me. I think that’s the part of the generational divide and the class and economic divide. Technology really matters to get Sundus’ artwork seen. It’s the same. People always tell me I YouTubed you or I Googled you...

The fact that other people are recognizing her influence in the writings of young poets attests to how the form that she is using has become canonical. Key features of her writing include inserting the native language (Arabic), hip hop expressions, everyday speech (including curse words) and her lack of punctuation and capitalization. I found it fascinating to read online “Suheir Hammad Imitations” written by (probably young) women writers (Kellie Leonce, Olivia Kahn, Stephanie Apollon, and Jennifer Joseph) and published on Scribd (a social publishing site for sharing original writings and documents). There they comment about how Hammad refrains from using punctuation, which opens up various possibilities for how her poems can be read, thus I would argue her ability to speak to multiple communities at once – each in their coded language – demonstrates the degree of her influence. These writers identify Hammad’s emphasis on the personal as a central component that makes her stories relatable. In effect, Hammad’s readers know quite a bit about her family (even the names of her sisters) and her past, to the point where she does not need to write her autobiography. It is the specificities of her stories that make her work so compelling, rather than speaking in generalities (which she refrains from doing). Apollon notes how Hammad plays with the double meanings of a given word (like the word “check” in the poem “mike check,” which I discuss below).



Her first public poem was “First Writing Since,” which is a long piece that reads like a text. It uses very direct and clear communication that is easily understandable. It was a highly successful poem, enabling Hammad to reach out to masses of people because they could understand what it was about. It was not written in the style of high culture literature.

In contrast, her more recent poems rely on the use of short lines. In others she alternates between long and short lines to give vibrancy to her poetry. Her latest collection *Breaking Poems* (2008) is not as transparent, in comparison to *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* or *Zaatar Diva*. There she uses coded languages to speak to specific communities. As she explained when I interviewed her, she did not try to communicate so clearly anymore because she realized that many Anglophones would not understand her – even though she speaks to them in English. I would argue, however, that Hammad’s earlier written legacy (her direct and clear verb) gave her access because it was accessible poetry. Today in her performances, she mixes old poems with newer ones, similar to other writers in their poetry readings. But in Hammad’s case, the new poems make the reader think a bit harder. For example, the poem “break,” which opens *Breaking Poems*, is about bodies – the discourses inscribed on them, broken bodies, living in a body, trying to get out of that body (by making a new language – seeking a new form) while her earlier writings situate her as a writer and reveal where she stands politically. The language of *Breaking Poems* is more subtle. Here she uses pauses at definite moments to establish significance, to draw attention to key topics – refugees, death, sexism, materialism, occupation. And most importantly, the continuing thread in

all her writings is building connections between struggles in a poetry of humanity and love.

### **Analytical Approach**

This section focuses on how Suheir Hammad's poetry talks back to dominant representations of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim identity. When is it that her work challenges, contests, or resignifies dominant discourses? Drawing from hooks, I am not merely interested in responses but in endeavours to 'talk back' – in discursive acts of healing and making new life and growth possible. I further extend my interest in the notion of "talking back" to the abilities and possibilities of generating counter-hegemonic discourse.

I locate Hammad's poetry as minor literature, which according to Deleuze and Guattari can be recognized by: (1) its high coefficient of deterritorialization (a minority writing in a major language); (2) its political immediacy; (3) and, its collective value. I also draw from critical race and gender studies and juxtapose the dominant tropes outlined in this literature vis-a-vis her responses to dominant constructions of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims. I interlace these insights with comments and observations drawn from an interview with the artist. Finally, I conclude with some remarks about tacticality and counter-hegemonic emergence. My analysis examines all of Hammad's publications (her memoir *Drops of This Story* (1996) and three collections of poems: *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1995); *Zaatar Diva* (2005); and *Breaking Poems* (2008)), as well as other poems circulated online and performed in various venues.

### *Hammad's Poetry as Minor Literature*

The three main features that Deleuze and Guattari outline for “minor literature” are readily recognizable in Hammad’s work. The political immediacy and collective value of her writings are vital components of her contribution as a poet. Her work furthermore engages in processes of deterritorialization of language. Scholars who have cited Hammad’s work in their studies have consistently identified it as political writing. Jamal (2010) describes Hammad’s work as “overtly political poetry” and as “clearly political.” Similarly, Al Maleh’s (2009) analysis of Anglophone Arab literature describes Hammad as “by all definitions a political poet” (26). Al Maleh also contends that Hammad’s poetry builds connections across various marginalized communities internationally.

In an interview with Riz Khan’s One on One in Al Jazeera English (2009), Hammad specifically tackles this issue as she responds to Khan’s question about to what degree she consciously adds a political message to her work. She responds that she doesn’t know how to separate the two and that decisions to keep politics out of one’s work are political. Hammad responds in the following way:

That’s an interesting question because I don’t know how to separate the political effects on a personal life. And so when I wanna talk about a family whose home has been foreclosed on in the States like 20 Million homes at the least that we know of are standing with families not in them. It becomes political when you’re talking about a family that could not keep their home because there are other political decisions that are being made in their name and on their behalf as tax payers – suddenly becomes political. You just wanna write about a dining room table that’s no longer there, right? The reality of that, the context of that affects all of us. So I don’t know; I think it’s a political decision to leave politics out of your work.

Furthermore, the collective nature of Hammad’s work (a minority writing in a major language) is evident since her earlier writings. A younger Hammad writes in *Drops of This Story* (1996) about how the “I” in her writings is a “we:” “... I’m still writing. So

that our stories be told. For revolution. For sanity. So that we don't forget. So we always remember. I is we" (Author's Note). In his analysis of Hammad's poem "First Writing Since," Rothberg (2003) speaks of this collective dimension: "the poem attempts to document something of the collective dimension of the trauma and of the heterogeneity of the city" (Rothberg 2003, 153). The poem effectively speaks to multiple realities by, for example, naming some of the victims of the 9/11 attacks who belong to different ethnic groups. From the names of the victims, we know that some of them were Latino/a and Arab.

The collective orientation of Hammad's work is grounded in a need to take voice which further delineates her writings as minor literature. In her author's note to *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, Hammad writes:

Why do I write? 'Cause I have to. 'Cause my voice, in all its dialects, has been silenced too long. 'Cause women are still abused as naturally as breath. Peoples are still without land. Slavery exists, hunger persists and mothers cry. My mother cries. Those are reasons enough, but there are so many more.  
(1996, ix)

When I interviewed the artist, she often mentioned the word "community" and the notion of collectivity. During the interview, she stated: "...I come from all these different communities who complement each other." Hammad hence views her standpoint as situated in multiple communities. Since she started writing, her poetry has been infused with a notion of coming together in respect and of building bridges of solidarity between different positions and locations of marginality.

Hammad's poetry responds to a large repertoire of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim representations that attempt to naturalize, normalize, and fix these images and dominant tropes. Said (1994) examines the large body of work that constructs the East as backward and inferior and labels it Orientalist discourse. Shaheen (2001) denounces how Palestinians are constructed as animals in Hollywood films and are quite simply denied

their status of human beings. Hammad attempts to make these stereotypes uninhabitable. Hall (1997) contends that we may reverse stereotypes if we make them uninhabitable by interrogating them and asking, among other questions, where the images come from, who is silenced in the production of the images, and what is missing (what is not there is just as important as what is represented).

In this light, Deleuze and Guattari posit deterritorialization as moments of alienation in language, in which the minority subject experiences the distancing between signifier and signified. This is how Kafka, as a Prague Jew writing in German, expresses himself in a deterritorialized language, "... appropriate for strange and minor uses" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 17). But relative deterritorialization is accompanied by reterritorialization, which occurs when the writer inserts their own ideas and perspectives. Writers who emerge out of displaced populations (deterritorialized) experience the alienation of living in a language other than their own. Yet paradoxically, this strangeness/alienation enables imagination and the creation of another consciousness and sensibility: "... the situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility..." (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 17). Here lies the potential for the displaced writer to produce a minor literature.

Hammad mentions on several occasions her own linguistic discomfort, as evident in the following statement: "I'm not here to make anyone comfortable, least of all myself. Just as I try to expand and sharpen my craft I push and challenge myself. With words, labels, and definitions" (Hammad 1996, ix). In *Drops of This Story*, a young Hammad describes how local Jordanians laughed at her accent in Arabic when she was visiting relatives in Jordan. The poet experienced displacement from her land of origin as well as a loss of the Arabic language (not a complete loss of the Arabic language per se but of language fluency).

I am interested in the potential of her work to talk back to dominant discourses

through a reassertion of self and articulation of voice. In her poem “Mic Check,” Hammad states: “Mic check Mic check can you hear me?” When performed, this also sounds as a sound check that could be performed by a hip hop mc or artist as a way to get the crowd’s attention. The second reference to the loss of voice (through displacement and marginalization) occurs when she reiterates, “can you hear me Mike?” Here she is addressing the airport security officer who is ‘randomly’ checking her. She is thus unsure of whether her voice can be heard. She directly addresses her need to take voice and express herself. Hammad juxtaposes her poetry to the dominant colonial tropes and undertakes several rhetorical interventions that include basing her poetry on her collective heritage and memory, and inserting Arabic words to communicate her identity.

### ***Juxtaposing Hammad’s Work to Colonial Discourse***

#### *Resignification – Gender*

Resignification, as a discursive tactic, can be defined as changing the meanings of signs and symbols in order to stage a discursive intervention (for example, see Abel 2008). Hammad’s writings re-write and at the same time re-create the discourses inscribed on Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian bodies. As demonstrated in the literature, women from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) region have been predominantly constructed as helpless and veiled victims in-need-of saving by the benevolent West. The literature on Arab, Muslim, and South Asian women’s representation in the dominant media (Yeğenoğlu 1998; Khan 1998; Todd 1998; Vivian 1999; Abu-Lughod 2002; Butler 2004; Cloud 2004; Ayotte and Husain 2005; Jiwani 2006; Macdonald 2006; Razack 2008) identifies the hegemonic ways of constructing this identity. This body of academic work can be summarized as demonstrating that: (1) there is a general lack of

representation of women from these regions; often Arab, Muslim, South Asian and Middle-Eastern women are constructed as non-existent, absent, and invisible. (2) However, when represented, these women are also portrayed as oppressed, imperilled (Razack 2008) and in need of saving (Abu-Lughod 2002); and (3) the other side of the coin is their eroticized and exoticized portrayals; they have also been represented as objects of desire for consumption – for example, as commodified sexual objects and belly dancers (Shaheen 2001). Domination has involved the sexual objectification of the mysterious unknown, or the land that needs to be colonized. McClintock (1995) explains how colonial men have used feminine descriptors and terms to mark the territories they sought to colonize. For example, the word “virgin” was used to describe unexplored/untapped territory; sailors engaged in linguistic acts of feminization of their ships. Moreover, the verb “occupy” is etymologically connected to sexual intercourse: “[occupy (v.)] during 16c.-17c. a common euphemism for "have sexual intercourse with" (sense attested from early 15c.), which caused it to fall from polite usage" (Online Etymology Dictionary 2012). Thus, these are the dominant tropes of hegemonic discourse that are documented in this body of work.

Hammad’s work contains numerous references to the workings of patriarchy. Her poetry reveals how women’s bodies are rendered invisible. In “Rafah,” published in the *Born Palestinian, Born Black* reprint, Hammad denounces how “the cameras leave with the men...” (2010, 90). This refers to how, during the attacks on Gaza, the women were left behind, inside the walls of homes, to deal with their grief and mourn the dead. They are also rendered invisible as cameras turn away from them. Hammad’s work simultaneously celebrates women, as in the poem “exotic:” “women everywhere carry

my nose on their faces/ my name on their spirits.” This poem, as much as it stands in opposition to sexualized and exoticized portrayals of women of colour (as revealed from the closing stanza: “don’t wanna be/your erotic/not your exotic”), celebrates the beauty of womanhood (Hammad 1996, 70).

Not only does Hammad dedicate her poems to women, but her poetry also acknowledges the institutional barriers to gender equality: “But I know for sure who will pay./ in the world, it will be women, mostly colored and poor./ women will have to bury children, and support themselves through grief” (“First Writing Since”). This is a much younger Hammad speaking as can be seen from this statement’s overarching generalization and dismissiveness of other positions of marginality. The generalizing element here is contained in Hammad’s hierarchy of oppression, in which “colored” and poor women are those who will pay the most. This statement, however, does not unsettle heteronormativity, or highlight differences between poor “colored” women in the North versus poor “colored” women located in the Global South. How about women who do not bury children? How do women who fall outside of the structure of the nuclear family unit pay for their life choices and circumstances?

Hammad’s poetry also denounces the responsibility of marginalized communities in sustaining regimes of oppression such as patriarchy and brings to light numerous forms of violence that are inflicted on female bodies, as in the case of honour killings, sexual assault, or Muslim women’s repressed sexuality. She complicates the images she paints by including concessions that discuss internal community issues: “poppin that yo baby yo/ yo baby yo?/ me to turn around you expect after/ you show me no kind of respect?” (Hammad 1996, 42). The same poem (*Yo Baby Yo*) denounces consumerism and



concludes with a reference to the times of slavery as it suggests that systems based on money stifle freedom: “yo baby yo/ yo brotha yo/ them gold chains/ are tighter than you think” (43). This poem recognizes what the margins encompass as it charges some segments of the Brooklyn community with violence, sexism, and materialism (signified via the gold chains), thereby highlighting various forms of marginality. Therefore, her writings depart from the tactic of creating or inserting positive images (i.e., attempting to replace negative images with positive ones). As Hall (1997) explains, the quest for positive images can dangerously fall into essentialist thinking; he suggests aiming for diversity in representation as an alternative. Hammad’s poetry moves away from such endeavour since it acknowledges and deals with internal community(ies) issues that contribute to maintaining structures of inequality. It adds complexity to the dominant constructions of these identities by not only negating some of the primary frames, but also proposing alternatives while attributing and acknowledging responsibility. The poems work out these contradictions on the page and demonstrate a commitment to think through issues of *difference and marginality* (whether these are articulated on the basis of race, gender, class) by connecting various forms of difference on the page. Her writings speak to the realities of various marginalized communities in their coded languages. For example, she often refers to the experiences of the working class. The poem *mariposa* (1996) contains words like food stamps, poverty, welfare, ghetto, and cheap jewellery. Feminist and postcolonial scholarship has described building connections between different axes of identity and with other disenfranchised groups as “intersectionality.”

### *Intersectionality*

The concept of intersectionality highlights how different axes of identity come to intersect, interlock, or interact. Mohanty explains that different axes of identity intersect, thus constituting positionality: “it is the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation, then, that position us as “women” (1991, 13). Marchand (2003) explains the necessity of recognizing politics of location and situating gender in relationship to other structures of inequality (race, class...) in order to analyze feminist resistance: “in sum, a gender analysis of the politics of resistance involves relational thinking. Relational thinking tries to connect the (material) context, perceptions or particular views with subjectivities and identities” (3). Alexander-Floyd (2010) also refers to this as “intersectionality.”

Nonetheless, it has been argued that the language of ‘intersectionality’ is limited because it suggests that discrete systems are crossing at particular moments. As Razack contends, the term intersectionality does not reflect how “these systems *are* each other and they give content to each other” (2008, 62). Razack also proposes to adopt the idea of “interlocking” as an alternative. This alternative terminology, she argues, makes it possible to track “how multiple systems of oppression come into existence through each other” (Razack 2008, 62).

Mason (2002) also attempts to work through this terminology. As she explains, feminist research introduced the notion of intersectionality as an ‘anti-essentialist tool,’ in order to posit how axes of identity such as race, gender and sexuality jointly constitute identity. However, she proposes the term ‘interaction,’ instead of ‘intersection,’ to attest to how regimes of difference interact in the making of subjectivity. She references

Ahmed's (1998) discussion of how racial and gendered identifications 'collide,' rather than simply 'collude.' Such an understanding challenges the assumption embedded in the notion of 'intersectionality' - that distinct regimes of difference operate separately and only come to intersect at particular moments or conjunctures. Speaking of 'mutual constitution' then leads to the recognition that regimes of difference form the privileged and the subjugated. Thus, to posit differences as mutually constituted, rather than independently structured illustrates the interactive relation between race, gender, and sexuality. Whether we privilege the term intersect, interlock, or interact, it is apparent that all of these concepts contain within them the notion of multiplicity, of various axes of identity coming together. The debate is about the process or the image if you will (how they come together). Do they meet at a particular point in space (intersect)? Are they inseparable (interlock)? Or do they act one upon another (interact)? I would argue that the concept that best describes how Hammad builds these connections between different axes of identity and communities of struggle is "interact." Her poetry criticizes how communities of colour can be well-aware of racism but dismiss sexism; how many Arab Americans (who are statistically middle-class and upper-class) are insensitive to class issues, or how all of these groups can communicate homophobic thinking.

Hammad's poetry presents contemporary counter-narratives of race and gender. Whereas it gravitates between impulses to translate these "profane" bodies and reminders that they are closed to translation. Hammad's writings break stereotypes and expose what was made unreal in an effort to re-write experiences of otherness and marginality. Here I refer to Butler's (2004) notion of the "derealisation of the other," which, when applied to existing stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims, frames them as beyond discursive

dehumanization. For Butler, “derealisation” implies that these bodies are neither alive nor dead. Violence inflicted on unreal bodies cannot be conceived as causing injury or death because their lives have already been annulled. Butler adds that these lives become ungrievable.

Hammad connects various forms of oppression based on difference and describes them as situated in a “system based on money” (quoted in “letter to anthony (critical resistance)” published in 2005 in *Zaatar Diva*). The author’s note in the first edition of *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996) opens the volume with June Jordan’s poem “Moving Towards Home:” “I was born a Black woman/and now/I am become a Palestinian” (ix). Furthermore, in “letter to anthony (critical resistance), Hammad writes: “...and these people/ bronx bomber they imagine a world/ where money can’t be made off the hurt/ of the young the poor the colored the/ sexualized the different...” (2005, 67).

When I interviewed the artist, she spoke about how her language is changing, as reflected in her most recent publication, and how coming to an understanding that they are many coded languages even within the same language was a liberating process:

...so that freed me to be able to use other languages and what languages bring with them — world views and ideas – in the same piece, in the same book, in the same poem because that’s how I think. If I talk to my parents until this day, my father would speak to me in English and then say “yaani” or “yallah” or “baba” or “wa” and that’s how I was editing all these things out of my work without realizing it – to be understood. However, you might never be understood. And everything is coded. Everything does have a code within this greatest book. If you understand hip hop culture and have a lot of records, you’re going to have a code. If you studied the Zionist expansionism in Palestine, there’s a code there. If you’re a woman who’s dealt with certain issues or if you have certain illnesses in your life, there are all these things in the book that are there to be understood by the people who carry that language.

In addition to speaking to multiple interpretive communities within the same text, Hammad's writings increasingly provide space for her native language and expressions, which in a sense constitute how she thinks and inform her voice as a poet. Although this becomes more apparent as she is growing as a poet, her earlier writings already carried the traces of these connections:

Little kids wanted to grow up to be movie stars. Acting out famous movie scenes on Brooklyn stoops. Too bad all Latina girls had to play sluts. Asian boys had to be grocers. Black boys, thieves and pimps. Someone always had to play the Indian. Too bad the slut was always shot, the grocer always robbed, the thief always lynched, and the red land was always stolen." (1996, 87)

Not only does Hammad here cite the dominant colonial tropes in Hollywood portrayals but she also points to the harmful implications of these representations. Hence, for example, Blacks have been lynched; violence against fallen women is a statistical actuality.

In "we spent the fourth of july in bed" (1996), Hammad denounces the economic precariousness of women's globalized labour. The poem "break," which opens the collection *Breaking Poems*, also moves through different locations of marginality in the same temporality (from Beirut to Gaza to Khan Younis to New Orleans to Baghdad to Brooklyn). But it also frames locations of privilege, geographic or otherwise, in the form of the tactical intervention identified in the literature as resignification. For example, Hammad includes voices from the mainstream in a sarcastic juxtaposition which brings to light the superfluous character of privileged 'concerns,' especially when paralleled with environments which breathe of death but aspire to life:

(houston)  
a family says this is the summer of sacrifice  
no vacation no new car no addition to the study

but pedicures and hair relaxing and shape-ups and gyms  
mandatory a body must keep up must be presentable

a husband says i wake up and sleep and wake up  
and all i think about is gas prices

Hammad deploys the tactic of resignification by building bridges across ‘different’ races. The poem “Scarlet Rain” (1996) resignifies the infamous narrative of *Gone with the Wind* and its character Scarlet O’Hara: “mama stop cryin over/ scarlet o’hara.” Bringing attention towards the narrative constructions that create sympathetic relationships with certain characters, Hammad encourages her readers, through this poem which is addressed to her mother, to construct an oppositional reading to the text: “save your tears your/ people need them to/ water soil of uprooted olive trees/ stop sobbin over that/ confederate curtain wearin slave owner/ believe me she/ don’t give a damn” (1996, 27). Highlighting that Palestinians are not grieved, the poem moreover presents a reminder that the heroine of this narrative is a slave owner – this mention alone is sufficient for an anti-colonial readership. Finally, she says that characters like Scarlet O’Hara “don’t give a damn,” in a reference to the lack of care for the well-being of marginalized communities like Palestinians, who are constructed as non-existent and inhuman.

*‘Feminist Archaeology’*

In addition, Hammad’s poetry presents another significant feminist intervention: it archives missing stories. Stillman (2007) posits the deployment of diagnostic (naming and shaming) and archaeological tactics as a methodological approach for undertaking feminist media activism.<sup>13</sup> In “of women torn,” Hammad (2005) provides a telling illustration as the poem names the victim of an honour killing. The poem brings back to

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<sup>13</sup> For further explanation, see Chapter One.

life the story of Nora, who was killed in Cairo in 1997. It shames the male relatives who perpetrated the crime by subjecting their masculinity to ridicule. Attempting to lift the taboos on Muslim women's repressed sexuality, the poem condemns honour killings and shames the community that witnessed how her body was torn, tortured and killed. Hammad resuscitates the violence when she says:

did her skin smell  
of zaatar her hair  
of exploded almonds

This stanza sensually and painfully brings to life the fragrance of Nora's skin and hair and hence the body of "Palestine's daughter" who committed the crime of loving. Nora's father and brothers were the engineers of her death as they diligently carried her assassination "in a world of men" and under the watchful eye of Cairo's citizens.

This poem brings to the fore the brutality of the violence in its emphasis on how Nora's relatives beat her "blue" and "ripped each hair" out her head. Hammad expands on the violence inflicted on Nora's body and she wonders aloud if Nora was at least loved and touched "right," thereby denouncing Arab women's repressed sexuality. Whereas shaming the community at large carries significant implications in terms of the cooptation of the discourse on honour killings and Muslim women's oppressive conditions to justify war, occupation, and the expulsion of Muslim men from North America and Europe, Hammad not only condemns violence inflicted on Muslim women, but also the killing of Rachel Corrie, a White American activist in "on the brink of..."

### *Resignification – Negation*

Further to the ways in which Hammad's poetry unsettles dominant discourses, it negates pejorative linguistic constructions and offers alternative portrayals to these hegemonic representations. Her writings often identify the dominant categories constructing subordinated identities (Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, woman) in order to unmask the workings of linguistic domination. She sums up these central tropes as operating under a dehumanizing framework imposed by "those who've denied our humanity eternally" (1996, 7). Simultaneously, she creates categories to talk back by using both literal and subtle language. For example, the poem *Exotic* (1996) contains a literal double negation that brings together race and gender: "don't wanna be/ your erotic/ not your exotic." Therefore, she refuses eroticization and exoticization of her self. In her memoir, Hammad relates an experience of being criminalized and proposes instead a portrayal of herself as intelligent, a characteristic that is seldom associated with the colonized who are often portrayed as backward, uncivilized, and pre-modern:

SWAM the ocean to be written. I wrote this out in English class in high school, while my teacher kept her eye on me, 'cause she was sure I was gonna cheat. She was so busy copping me, wouldn't notice the other students scheming right under her nose. These drops dripped off the Shakespeare I had to re-read so new teachers would believe that I understood it. (1996, 75)

The above quote addresses institutionalized racism in schools and discrimination due to difference. It also challenges the notion of the classroom environment as separate from the 'real world' and any notion that presupposes that instructors encourage an environment of equal learning for all.

An example of proposing an alternative portrayal to the dominant notion of Muslim masculinity as dangerous, threatening, and violent can be found in *First Writing*



*Since* in which as well as offering different possibilities for how the poem can be interpreted (read sarcasm). Hammad associates Muslim masculinity with being “gentle:” “both my brothers, gentle Muslim men.” This statement negates the central trope of the violent Muslim man. Like all statements that talk back, it is inevitably positioned vis-à-vis a dominant logic that has been widely disseminated through mainstream media.

In an early postcolonial text that deconstructs the dominant tropes of colonial discourse, Césaire (1972) identifies and denounces the framing of the colonized in animalistic terms. The mainstream media has often constructed Palestinians as less human and more animal like. In his analysis of representations of Arabs in Hollywood films, Shaheen (2001) describes how Palestinians and Arabs are described as animals, pigs, dogs, rats, and savages. Hammad brings this central colonial trope to the surface through a sarcastic reiteration in her poem “letter to anthony (critical resistance)” when she says:

the world pointed and said  
palestinians do not exist palestinians  
are roaches Palestinians are two legged dogs  
and Israel built jails and weapons and  
a history based on the absence of a people  
Israel made itself holy and chosen  
and my existence a crime. (2005, 66-67)

In this case Hammad uses sarcasm to express the opposite of what “the world” says – “the world” here points to how overwhelming and powerful dominant discourses about Palestinians are; it highlights the repetition of these hurtful images that depict Palestinians as animals. Hammad does not use capitalization throughout, hence further emphasizing that language is a construction (i.e., something that is not real). Immediately after de-naturalizing (by revealing) the colonial trope of Palestinians as animals, Hammad

follows with the real implications of these words: "... Israel built jails and weapons..." At the same time that she denounces the irony of representing Palestinians as animals, Hammad reveals the erasure of the existence of Palestinians – "the absence of a people," thereby showing in one stanza the binary and paradox of this representation. On one hand Palestinians do not exist, yet, on the other hand, they are depicted as animals. Finally, she ends this stanza with how they are criminalized (another central trope of the same discourse).

Continuing with the theme of dehumanization, Hammad reverses the usual association of Palestinians as animals in another poem and creates other links with Bush, Blair, and Sharon by framing murder as inhuman. In the poem "On the brink of..." which mourns the murder of Rachel Corrie, a White American activist killed in the Gaza Strip by Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) as she was trying to stop them from demolishing a Palestinian pharmacist's home, Hammad says:

There is no "right wing" a wing is of nature, and murder  
may be human, but it is not natural,  
even if animals eat each other,  
is that what we are then, animals?  
If so, claim it, motherfucker.  
There is no "mother of all bombs".  
Blair, Sharon, Bush, all have  
mothers and no matter what they do, there is  
something they love.  
White power, oil, the need to be God's  
Only chosen, whatever, but they love something, because  
their mothers loved them.  
A bomb loves nothing, has no mother and  
is not about life.  
There is no mother of all bombs,  
only more mankind self-destruction.

Hence, she resignifies the language so as to make clear the absurdity and the essentialist ways in which the dominant discourse about others is operating.

In Hammad's poetry, resignification operates through negation by denouncing and resituating violence (a trait typically associated with Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians); she attributes the violence done to subjugated peoples to dominant powers. She consolidates her commitment to non-violence as a vehicle for peace and resolution in her more recent writings. In an interview with Hedgebrook, a writers' retreat in the state of Washington of which Hammad is an alumni, she answered a question about the recurring themes in her work in the following way: "for me at the end it's love. But some people hear it as militancy; some people hear it as political; some people hear it as compassionate. But for me ultimately it's love and I hope, I think that that will come across as a legacy."<sup>14</sup> More recently, Hammad was invited as a guest speaker at TED, a nonprofit organization devoted to "Ideas Worth Spreading" (official motto) that organizes conferences and invites noteworthy speakers whom the organization considers to be "the world's most fascinating thinkers and doers."<sup>15</sup> TED is increasingly selecting Muslim, Arab and Middle-Eastern speakers, which is indicative of how doors are nonetheless opening up for the airing of typically marginalized views within the current climate of increased xenophobia post 9/11. For example, Shirin Neshat was invited on TED in 2011 and is featured in one of their educational videos<sup>16</sup>.

When invited to speak, Hammad performed two poems which communicate her commitment to peace. In *What I Will* (2005), Hammad affirms her stand against war violence as she says: "I will not/ dance to your war/ drum." She re-affirms this

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<sup>14</sup> The interview was conducted in April of 2009 and can be found in the Hedgebrook website: <http://www.hedgebrook.org/alumnae-interviews.php>

<sup>15</sup> The TED video can be found here (posted in February, 2011): <http://www.ted.com/speakers/suheir.hammad.html>

<sup>16</sup> The video was posted in May, 2011 and can be found here: [http://www.ted.com/speakers/shirin\\_neshat.html](http://www.ted.com/speakers/shirin_neshat.html)

commitment in the more recent poem *break (clustered)* (2008) through which she denounces man-created violence: "...but my head/ unwraps around what appears/ limitless man's creative violence;" domestic violence: "bitches get beat daily;" and war violence "cluster bombs left behind/ de-facto land mines." Here, one can see a clear contrast to the dominant portrayal of Arabs, Muslims and Palestinians as inherently violent. Several other poems testify of this commitment to peace. For example, in *Blood Stitched Time*, Hammad says: "i am the mother/ no longer willing to sacrifice sons/ to wars of men and/ gods of war i/ mother refuse to lose/ more daughters to sons gone crazy/ watching kids get bombed and blown/ into bits of brain and bone" (1996, 7). Using very strong language to convey the horrors of war, Hammad emphasizes the loss of human lives in the occupied territories as a way of claiming non-violence.

#### *Resignification – Presence/Absence*

Further on the tactic of Resignification, a critical theme in Hammad's poetry is the issue of Palestinian *presence/absence*. The words "life" and "death" (along with their derivatives) are omnipresent in her writings. I am using here the words 'presence' and 'absence,' rather than 'life' and 'death,' because although many Palestinians are dying, they are not dead. Colonial discourse operates through claims of their death, extinction, and non-existence whereas Palestinians struggle to make their existence real, as Said (2006) demonstrates. In a similar spirit to the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1986) who says "we have on this earth what makes life worth living," Hammad insists on affirming and celebrating Palestinian life. After his passing in 2008, she wrote a poem

celebrating Darwish's poetry that she entitled "Mahmoud Darwish"<sup>17</sup>. Prior to that, Hammad recommended reading Darwish (1996, 13) to her readers in her poem "Taxi." Darwish also wrote and published a book of prose poetry called *In the Presence of Absence* (2006).

It is striking how often the words "life" and "death" (with their various derivatives as well as related themes) are used in Hammad's poetry. Death is included in her writings as part of everyday life. In her poem "on the brink of..." (2003), Hammad says "something like ten Palestinians have been killed since/ yesterday."<sup>18</sup> But in Hammad's poetry, life and death are often juxtaposed. For example, in the poem *break* (2008), she refers to Beirut, stating that "...all that is life all that is death" (13). In 1996, she published a piece in which she claimed she was dead and at the same time called for collective salvation: "i am a dead woman/ until we inhale our collective" (54). Thus, Hammad also strives to "affirm life" and to re-establish Palestinian existence. When Hammad wrote *First Writing Since*, she called upon her audience to "affirm life." Her most recent work reveals how "there is no body/no matter." Nonetheless, she affirms the existence of the same body through the repetitive use of the Arabic word "ana" (me/I). Thus, she says: "ana gaza/ you can't see me." As a young writer, Hammad wrote about the denial of Palestinian existence in her memoir:

...Teachers would challenge me:  
*There's no such thing as Palestine. Where is it on the map? Why do you people make so much trouble? Don't you know what the Jews have been through?*  
That's when the kids would realize what hell I am.  
You're a terrorist. One of those animals that bombed the marines in Lebanon.  
Those gypsies who hijack planes and kidnap athletes. We know about you.  
Terrorists. Animals. Murderers (1996, 73-74).

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<sup>17</sup> This poem can be found here: [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=23986170804](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=23986170804)

<sup>18</sup> <http://electronicintifada.net/content/brink/4466>

Here the contradiction that Said (2006) outlines clearly surfaces. He states that whereas Palestinian existence is denied, it also stands against a large repertoire of negative representations. The aforementioned quote brings to light this contradiction. If Palestinians do not exist, then how is it that they can also be called terrorists and animals?

### *Collective Heritage*

These types of interventions hence also build on a gendered tactic of drawing on collective heritage and memory, which Hammad's writings also undertake.<sup>19</sup> In this light, Césaire talks about the forgetting machine of colonialism and its effort to silence the colonized. In an effort to keep memory alive, Hammad's "open poem to those who rather we not read... or breathe" (1996) draws on her collective heritage and memory as a daughter of immigrants and refugees: "we children of children exiled from homelands/ descendants of immigrants denied jobs and toilets/ carry continents in our eyes/ survivors of the middle passage/ we stand/ and demand recognition of our humanity" (81). Furthermore, the reference to "the middle passage" – the forced journey of African slaves to the Americas – encapsulates the same effort to build connections and to bring to light intersectionality. As a text, "Broken and Beirut" also makes a commitment to keeping this collective memory alive: "never forgetting/ where we come from/ where we've been/ and how sweet honey/ on the lips of survivors" (1996, 97). Hence, Hammad's effort to record and archive untold stories as well as re-tell normalised ones speaks of an effort to voice difference, leading her to publicly perform her poetry. The following section examines her embodied deployments of identity and performance of alternatives.

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<sup>19</sup> I discuss the contribution of feminist scholarship in this regard in Chapter One.

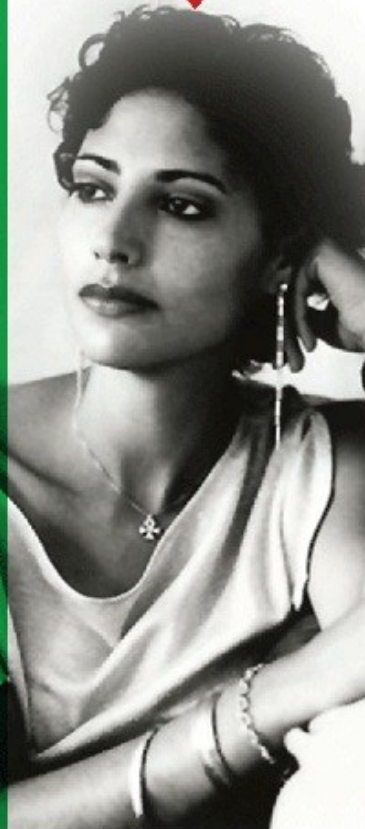
Monday March 30<sup>th</sup> 2009

# SUHEIR HAMMAD

+ guests

Suheir Hammad  
is an award winning  
Palestinian-American  
poet, author  
and political activist.  
She lives in Brooklyn,  
NYC.

*Winner of:*  
*The Audre Lorde*  
*Writing Award,*  
*Hunter College*  
*(1995, 2000)*  
*New York Mills Artist*  
*Residency (1998)*  
*Van Lier Fellowship*  
*(1999)*



## FREE

Doors open at 7 p.m.  
Show Starts at 8 p.m.

Club Lambi  
4465 blvd St Laurent  
(corner Mont-Royal)

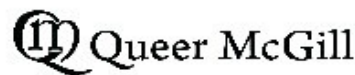


Figure 2: Montreal performance Poster

### **Performing Alternatives: Embodied Deployments of Identity**

March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I walked into Club Lambi on Saint Laurent in Montreal to see Suheir Hammad perform. The organizers, (mainly from the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia), chose this alternative venue for the event. Club Lambi is called after a mollusc in the Carribean Sea, which was used as an instrument for music by slaves in Haiti's independence. The Club has been open for about a decade and provides a platform for the emerging music scene in Montreal. The venue is quite small and the place had been darkened, creating a sense of intimacy and camaraderie in a communal atmosphere.

When we entered the room, Suheir was sitting at the bar counter with her back to the door. I noticed how there was not any distance between the artist and the audience. She then kindly got up to greet us (I had met Suheir earlier that day for the first time to talk about my research project). This was the second time that I saw Suheir on stage. The first time was about a decade earlier in the San Francisco Bay Area. Yet the crowds in both places/countries were very similar; the audience was community-oriented and mostly composed of college students and activists. In Montreal, Suheir was dressed in modest clothing that was not revealing, a long skirt and a top with a long red scarf with sparkles parted around her neck. Other young women performers, who opened her poetry reading, donned more obvious cultural and activist symbols, with knitted head coverings and large Afros. Nirah Elyza Shirazipour, the producer of the non-profit film company EyesInfinite Films, hosted the event and performed one of her poems. Valerie Khayat, who was an MA student in Communication at Concordia in 2009 (she completed



her Master's thesis a year later), performed a spoken word piece titled "A Chance, to Rise" which she wrote in 2008 and which, to date, remains unpublished. This poem denounces the binaries of underdevelopment and industrialization; it states that "the world does not need saving" and calls for respecting and loving difference. She also performed a song called "Jacob," which is featured on her first full length CD (independently released in 2007 through her company Quietivity), while playing the guitar. The song has as an interlocutor a boy who is suffering because of war and "divisions of land." The narrator (in the voice of Khayat) tells him to not weep and assures him that his story will be told. Meryem Saci (aka Meduza from Nomadic Massive), delivered a powerful accapella singing of "Falasteen" (Palestine in Arabic), mesmerizing the audience with the beautiful musicality and strength of her voice. The pieces performed all dealt with the themes of occupation, colonization, and war.

Shirazipour then proceeded to introduce Hammad, describing her as the "bomb." When she spoke about Hammad's leading role in Annemarie Jacir's film *Salt of This Sea*, she referred to the director as her "home girl." As soon as Hammad reached the stage, women in the audience voiced their enthusiasm by performing zaghareet, which I explain further below. Hammad's immediate vibrancy on stage, punctuated by her rapid movements of speech and gestures captivated the audience's attention. She opened with: "Wassup Montreal? Let me hear you make some noise. Yo, I'm happy to be here." Hammad's first poem that night was "Exotic." Upon hearing the familiar words, the audience screamed in encouragement.

Performativity is an essential attribute of the alternative counter-hegemonic discourses that Hammad circulates – embodying a corporeal dimension that co-exists

with the oral delivery, thereby enunciating the potency of the message in ways that are calibrated across the senses. It is a defining characteristic of her trajectory as an artist. Not only does Hammad regularly perform her poetry around the world, but her interventions also capitalize on the power of orality. It is significant to note that Hammad's breakthrough moment (in terms of achieving fame) occurred during the particular 9/11 historical conjuncture. Hammad was in New York and writing from a divergent perspective at the right time. In an interview with Riz Khan in 2009 on Al Jazeera English, she notes, "I sent it ["First Writing Since"] to fifty friends. By the time I was on HBO, it had been translated into twelve languages; it had been published in dozens of journals and had gone around the world because people needed to hear something from America that wasn't so vengeful." Knopf-Newman's (2009) review of *Breaking Poems* attests to how the online circulation of Hammad's poems propelled her into a larger public consciousness. According to Rothberg (2003), "First Writing Since" expresses Hammad's search for language to deal with the traumatic experience of September 11, 2001:

The poem begins by locating itself in a tradition that questions art's ability to respond adequately to historical trauma: "there have been no words. I have not written one word. no poetry in the ashes south of canal street. no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna. not one word." (1). The paradoxical temporality of this opening ("I have not written one word") emphasizes both the gap between language and bodily remains (ashes, DNA) and the attempt to saturate language with materiality – an attempt that is necessary precisely because "there is no poetry in this" (7). (153)

Here, Rothberg describes the wordlessness attached to a state of traumatic shock. He describes "First Writing Since" as an unsettling poem which attempts to move us away from an "us or them" rhetoric, referencing President Bush's infamous speech post 9/11 where he stated "you are either with us or with the terrorists."

This quest for a new language, in Hammad's case, has drawn on the repertoires of various forms of orality for increased potency over the dominant tongue. Her writings transpose oral ways of speech into the written page. She further links orality to writing, hence rendering the ephemeral 'everlasting.' Leaving a material trace of her spoken word effectively overcomes the ephemerality of oral communication, giving it a permanence that it otherwise would not have. Ong (2002) explains that orality and oral performances require memorization and the use of mnemonic techniques (or ways of memorizing such as rhymes, visual cues, and memory "theatres"). Hammad performs memorized poems; very often she does not read when performing and instead recites to her audience. Furthermore, Ong describes how orality is communal and encourages the formation of group unity as it invites participation.

In an interview with Knopf-Newman, Hammad talks about being influenced by "the oral tradition of Arabic poetry:"

Well, I grew up with Darwish because my parents would often sing nationalist songs. My father always sang these very nationalist PLO chants and shit, and a lot of it was poetry—and not just Darwish, but Fadwa Tuqan and her brother [Ibrahim Tuqan]. People who were guerillas that my father knew. You know, he'd say my friend wrote this. They'd chant it in that oral tradition of Arabic poetry. (2006, 78-9)

Hence we can see here how Hammad's language as a poet derives from oral and written communication. She continues to draw from this heritage since she has been performing the word on the page on stage. So it is not possible to speak of Hammad's work without the experiential embodied experience of being in a room where she performs as well as watching the videos of her performances online and listening to audio recordings of her passages on stage. In this way, Hammad's poetry is very much embodied. There is an

energy located there – in speaking the word in front of a crowd and in how the crowd interacts with her. Having viewed so many online videos of Hammad’s poetry readings, it happened to me several times to hear her say the poems when reading them. For me and for many others who follow her work, the word and the sound of her voice have become one.

As mentioned in the previous section, Hammad’s writings are decisively collective in their orientation. Acts of ‘talking back’ attempt to move the individual creator/artist from an object position (e.g., from being represented as ‘other’) to a subject position (hooks 1989). These acts of ‘talking back’ are mediated by the performance of identity. Such performances often include a subversive component. In the section that follows, I focus on Suheir Hammad’s poetry performance at the Club Lambi in Montréal, the evening of March 30, 2009. I draw on Taylor’s work to guide my analysis. Taylor posits performance as episteme, or “way of knowing” (xvi) – as a “system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge” (2003, 16). Hence, studying performance entails taking seriously “the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge” (26). After discussing how this event constitutes a performance and providing background information, I describe the paradigm of scenario, which I utilize to conduct this analysis. I subsequently identify and examine the two scenarios of victimization and criminalization that were simultaneously operating at that performance.

### *Performance and Performativity*

Taylor (2003) draws on Schechner’s distinction between “is” and “as” performance. She explains that “something ‘is’ a performance when historical and social context,

convention, usage, and tradition says it is” (38). An object, action, or work could be described “as” a performance when one privileges what it does: “to treat any object, work, or product “as” performance – a painting, a novel, a shoe, or anything at all – means to investigate what the object does, how it interacts with other objects or beings. Performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships” (30). Hence, what ‘is’ a performance does not depend on the event itself but rather on how it is perceived, received and showcased or displayed. What is considered a performance then depends on specific cultural circumstances. Looking at what an object does (i.e., its performative dimension) entails considering it ‘as’ performance. Any event, action, or behavior can be analyzed as performance when one examines, for example, what roles are played or how the event is controlled, distributed and evaluated. Nonetheless, Taylor specifies that the lines can be blurred between the two distinctions – saying that something is a performance or describing something as a performance – as the cultural definition or interpretation of a particular object (is) - may overlap with its performative function (as). Thus, one of the problems in using performance, and its cognates performative and performativity, comes from the extraordinarily broad range of behaviours it covers, from the discrete dance, to a technologically mediated performance, to a conventional cultural behaviour. However, this multi-layeredness indicates the deep interconnections of all these systems of intelligibility and the productive frictions among them (2003, 6).

This blurring of the lines between naming something a performance (saying that it ‘is’) and analyzing its performative function recalls Butler’s notion of performativity. Extending the Foucaultian idea of the body as an inscriptive surface, Butler (1999) contends that bodies are constituted through acts, gestures, and enactments, which are

performative in that they create identity discursively and on the surface of the body. In this view, identity is constructed through the “stylized repetition of acts” and “these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (Butler 1999, 186).

According to Mahtani (2002), however, Butler’s conceptualization of performativity, although very useful, lacks an acknowledgement of processes of racialization. Mahtani suggests extending Butler’s notion of performativity by analyzing the relationship between performativity and race. In her analysis of the performances of ‘mixed race’ women, she argues that they enact performances in order to disrupt racialized social scripts as well as create their own constructions of meaning by strategically deploying their identity. Hence, she sees them as “embodied actors who engage with their life-worlds in imaginative and innovative ways, employing particular stances within the grids of racist and sexist containment” (437). In this case, Mahtani posits that the position of mixed race people in society facilitates the performance of “potentially enabling political identities” because readings of these individuals’ bodies do not always fit socially constructed categories of race. Whereas they might be seen in some spaces as White, in others they are regarded as people of colour. Although she acknowledges their limited ability to subvert, Mahtani argues that the racial ambiguity that some (but not all) experience can enable them to contest racial designations.

Mahtani’s discussion of racialized performances by mixed race women can be applied to my own analysis in the sense that ‘Islam’ is not a race, although it has been racialized. In her book *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, Razack (2008) explores the racialization of Muslims and the explicit racism

directed at them; she explains that the eviction of Muslims from the West is a racial process: “in using the term ‘casting out’ for the title of this book, I wish to underline that the eviction of Muslims from political community is a racial *process* that begins with Muslims being marked as a different level of humanity and being assigned a separate and unequal place in the law” (176). Thus, we are used to seeing monolithic representations of Muslims in the mainstream media, which promote a simple perception of practitioners of Islam – as bearded brown men and veiled brown women. Seldom do we see White Muslim converts as representative of this ‘group,’ or for example African-American Muslims.

In addition, the ‘Arab’ category is also racially ambiguous. For example, Arab Americans pushed for their inclusion in the ‘White’ category in the U.S. census. Iranian-American comedian Maz Jobrani claims that ‘Persians’ are White. Indian Actor and former Miss World Aishwarya Rai’s fair skin has been widely commented on; she is also described as the most beautiful woman of the world. Poet Suheir Hammad says that Arabs are not quite Black, not quite White. She speaks of her father’s complexion being classified as fair and her mother’s as medium. This may even be extended to Mahmood Mamdani’s discussion of the binary of the ‘good Muslim’ versus the ‘bad Muslim’ as they can at any time lose their peculiar status of ‘good’ (White) to become ‘bad’ (people of colour). My point is that although these categories (‘Muslim,’ ‘Arab’) can be racially ambiguous, they have been flattened out in representations in the mainstream media. I would argue that racially ambiguous spaces of in-betweenness can offer particular sites for the performance of “potentially politically enabling identities.” In this regard,

Hartman's (2006) observation concerning how Arab Americans have been historically located in a position of in-betweenness is particularly cogent:

Arabs in the United States fit uneasily into a racial schema that identifies individuals and groups as either "black" or "white." The many studies on Arab American ethnicity and racial formation show that historically Arab Americans were first considered "not white," then "not quite white," then later legally "became white." This study explores the vexed notion of Arab American "whiteness" or "in-betweenness..." (145)

However, Hartman details the racialization of Arab Americans in the United States who have been marked as different and discriminated against long before 9/11, commenting that: "Long before September 11, 2001, issues on which Arab Americans expressed common ground with African Americans and other people of color have included: racial profiling; detention and murder for political organizing or even for the suspicion of political organizing; and the lynching of Arab Americans in the US South" (2006, 146). Racial ambiguity is not shared by all, as in the case of Black Muslims, Black Arabs, or of many South Asian Muslims.

Nevertheless, even in the most seemingly impossible situations, as in the state of exception, Mbembe (2003) reminds us that it is still possible to draw objects, instruments, language, or gestures into a performance. He cites as an example the slave in the plantation world who "in spite of the terror and the symbolic sealing off [...], he or she maintains alternative perspectives toward time, work, and the self" (22). In a book discussing Black female identity in rap music performance, Keyes (2002) also discusses African American performances, first in the rural context of the South and then in urban centers, commonly referred to as "the streets," that he likens to an institution teaching survival and on "how to combat economic and social oppression from mainstream society. A major requisite for survival in the streets is learning how to communicate



effectively” (29). It is thus interesting to ask if this particular case study presents a performance of identity that exposes its performativity (as seen in dominant representations in mainstream media) and disrupts essentialized and naturalized perceptions.

Hammad has been repeatedly described as a performer. For example, in 2004, Birzeit University described her as “visiting Palestinian performer.” Similarly, the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University described her poetry reading as a performance in the flyer that they circulated for the event. Nonetheless, during the interview I conducted with the artist, she spoke of her need to write and of having started as a reader as her first motivation. Hammad spoke of the poem as having a life on the page. She explained her practice of poetry readings in the following way:

I think that the need to deliver them comes from a vacuum in the dominant narrative of Palestinian experience, a vacuum within the Palestinian experience of women’s narratives, a vacuum within women’s narratives of marginalized voices within that framework. So I’m always back and forth between the utter fear of getting up on stage and the craziness of people watching me. There’s a fine balance between that and knowing that I have the opportunity. I have a privilege; I have a microphone. I have an opportunity. I have people’s attention and I want to deliver something that is important and needed.

The production of creative work that is grounded in a principle of self-representation involves a performativity of identity, which carries particular implications. As Hammad described in this interview, “... the concept of a religious or ethnic identity by its nature flattens all these other things that you are. So when I say, I’m an Arab American or I’m a Muslim American, I’m depending on your definition of what those things mean to identify me.” This is a crucial reference here to interactivity – between the audience and the performer where the performer relies on the audience to ‘get it’ – to invoke within them resonances and their own store of knowledge regarding what she is talking about.

But furthermore, what Hammad is pointing to here is prior knowledge that the audience has about (for example) Arab Americans, which is often counter to the type of identity work that she attempts to communicate. This stock of knowledge, along with identity politics, excludes all of the other things that she is. It simplifies what it means to be Arab American. This is precisely what mainstream media does; it constructs Arab Americans in clichéd terms (as predominantly Muslim, terrorism suspects, and veiled oppressed women). These are the types of portrayals that Hammad's poetry stands in opposition to. But paradoxically, she still operates within the parameters of this identity as journalists, editors, and event organizers categorize her as an Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian woman and she herself identifies as such in order to stage her discursive interventions. In talking back, Hammad searches for "lines of escape" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). This is why she denounces how "the concept of a religious or ethnic identity" flattens other things that she is while she builds connections with other key components of her identity (like her working class background) in order to put to the fore her hybridity. In her effort to reach for alternative ways of presenting herself, Hammad uses performance to intervene in the current political and cultural climate. I am here interested in how her Montréal performance responds to dominant discourses. How does she enact the various components of her identity on stage? Does she discursively de-naturalise its defining features?

### *Paradigm of Scenario*

Taylor defines scenarios as "meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potentially outcomes..." or "culturally specific imaginaries" (13). Within this framework, the following questions are critical: "Why do

they [such performances] continue to be so compelling? What accounts for their explanatory and affective power? How can they be parodied and subverted?” (Taylor 2003, 28).

The paradigm of *scenario* enables the researcher to not only take into consideration the *archive* – by focusing on the narrative analysis of seemingly lasting materials (such as written documents) but also the *repertoire* (what has been dismissed as ephemeral – the embodied dimension, including corporeal behaviours, actions and practices). Taylor’s paradigm thus facilitates paying attention to the milieu of the performance – to both space and narrative. She recommends key ways of using scenario as paradigm:

1. Conduct a description of the scene (the physical location of the performance – the material stage as well as the “codified environment” (class, race...));
2. Analyze the embodiment of the social actors (gestures, roles, attitudes);
3. Explore how scenarios are not only formulaic structures (quoting words and gestures, replaying scenarios) but also allow for reversal (change, parody, recasting a scenario);
4. Keep in mind that scenarios are multifaceted (they could incorporate “writing, telling, re-enactment, mime, *gestus*, dance, singing”);
5. Scenarios involve participation (disabling any kind of distancing of the self as we are there as participants, spectators, or witnesses);
6. Scenarios operate through reactivation (as a “once-againness” – rather than duplication) (32-3).

Several studies deploy Taylor’s methodology of scenario to analyze distinct phenomena such as scenarios of conquest (Melo 2006); colonial encounter (Fellner 2009); ‘scenarios of discovery’ in relation to performance of racial humour (Bell-Jordan 2010); death of a beautiful woman; “evil barbarians, threatened damsels protected by heroic males”; and scenarios of the disenfranchised as criminal. The following analysis first identifies the operating scenario(s) and subsequently examines how they

disrupted/subverted and potentially recast the frame/narrative to produce a counter-hegemonic discourse.

### *Victimization and Criminalization*

Upon examination, two operating scenarios emerge from Hammad's Montréal performance: (1) the scenario of the victimization of Palestinian/Arab/Muslim woman and (2) the "scenario of the disenfranchised as criminal" as described by Taylor (2003, 274).

Unlike the scenario of the disenfranchised as criminal, the scenario of the victimization and erasure of Palestinian/Arab/Muslim woman is not a scenario that Taylor identifies in her list of possible scenarios. Yet, the organizational features of the performance and narrative cohere in a way that fits the template of a scenario. The literature on Arab, Muslim, and South Asian women's representations in the dominant media (detailed in the previous chapters) can be summarized as identifying the hegemonic ways of fixating this identity. On the one hand, existing studies report on a lack of representation; often Arab, Muslim, South Asian and Middle Eastern women are constructed as non-existent. Their missing presence has been documented as they are often erased in dominant representations. However, they have also been portrayed as oppressed, imperilled (Razack, 2008) and in need of saving. Third, the construction of this identity revolves around eroticized and exoticized portrayals; these women have also been represented as objects of desire for consumption – as commodified sexual objects, as for example, belly dancers (Shaheen, 2001; Yeğenoğlu 1998). These are the dominant tropes of hegemonic discourse that can be grouped under the umbrella of a meaning-

making paradigm of the ‘victimization of the Palestinian/Arab/Muslim woman.’ I argue that the silencing and erasure of Palestinian women’s voices/presence in dominant representations, as well as their framing as imperilled bodies in need of saving, or as commodified, exoticized and eroticized objects for consumption all operate as forms of victimization – as disempowering acts directed at a particular subject and relegating her to the status of object. My analysis of this performance night in Montréal reveals how this scenario was brought to life.

In addition, I argue that the scenario of the disenfranchised as criminal, which Taylor identifies in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003) was also operative in that performance. As an example of the scenario of the disenfranchised as criminal, Taylor relates how Cubans who had been expelled by Castro were playing Rumba in Central Park in New York, alongside Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean musicians. Upon their arrival, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) attempted to put an end to the performance and hence to ‘criminalize’ it. In an act of defiance, the musicians continued playing. Taylor describes this moment as a temporary triumph of art over oppression. However, she states that it was the last performance of Rumba in the park. Several poems performed the evening of March 30, 2009 speak to the “criminalization of the disenfranchised.” For example, Hammad’s poem *after and before the flood*, which is an unpublished journal entry, identifies the victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans as refugees. Before she reads her poem, Hammad tells the audience: “you know there’s a West Bank and an Algiers in New Orleans.” Although the police did not come into Club Lambi to stop the performance and the same kind of scene was not operating, this scenario still works here

in that Hammad's performance brings to the fore the criminalization of particular populations.

These two scenarios disrupted and subverted the hegemonic discourse in three particular ways. First, Hammad uses the very act of taking voice to counteract the invisibility of Palestinians and of marginalized perspectives. Her performance reclaims space as it articulates a counter-hegemonic language. The poet endeavours to leave a physical trace of this language and to materially mark her passage in that scene. As Hammad reads her poems, she lets papers fall on the floor. She is dropping words to make them last, as if she is sharing her words. Anyone can pick up her poems from the floor and keep them. Here she plays with the notion of the "ephemerality" of oral communication as she connects the repertoire (the ephemeral) with the archive (acts of writing and leaving a physical/material trace of her work, all of which are constitutive of the notion of 'talking back'). Taylor speaks of the dominant erasure of archival presence as having historically been used to deny the existence of particular disenfranchised populations (123). In this light, Hammad's Montréal performance cannot be quickly relegated to the realm of the ephemeral; it is also archived online. The Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University posted pictures of the event on its blog<sup>20</sup>. The event was also posted on YouTube in seven sequential videos.<sup>21</sup>

In the Montreal performance, the two operating scenarios were also disruptive via embodied participation of the marginalized or "disenfranchised" (Taylor, 2003). As mentioned previously, Taylor identifies embodiment and participation as two of the ways of using and disrupting scenarios. A quick examination of the scene reveals that the event

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<sup>20</sup> Source: <http://thesimonedebeauvoirinstitute.wordpress.com/2009/>.

<sup>21</sup> I was also able to get an audio recording of the event from Iraqi-Canadian painter and multi-media artist Sundus Abdul Hadi.

took place in an underground, alternative location in Montréal and involved multiple communities and activist groups on site and in the organizing of the event. The event was hosted/sponsored by the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia and the McGill Middle East Studies Students' Association (MESSA). It was co-sponsored by the student-based organizations Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights (SPHR), Queer McGill, and Arts Undergraduate Society of McGill (AUS).

Hammad's physical embodied participation emerges from the beginning of the performance as she immediately recognizes her *embodiment* as female. Staging herself in the repertoire of strong womanhood, she is introduced and preceded by several women artists of colour who *speak* and take voice. When she first gets on stage, she says: "I am about to recycle. Estrogen love." Furthermore, Hammad sets the ground rules for the event before she begins her performance. To participants in the audience who might disagree with the content of her work, she suggests that they write a good poem and send it to her. She opens the reading with *Exotic*, which contains a double negation; this poem directly engages with the dominant eroticized and exoticized construction and refuses both portrayals – hence the racialized gendered body is performed as one: "don't wanna be/ your erotic/ not your exotic." It also announces that the performance addresses the interacting influences of gender and race (Mason 2002).<sup>22</sup>

The physical embodied participation and involvement of 'distinct' groups who are also often connected through their marginalization, along with linguistic acts of 'talking back' to the criminalization of the disenfranchised, operate as interventions which attempt to contextualize and historicize these scenarios. As well, these acts involve an attempt to de-particularize and use the power of generalization to demonstrate how

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<sup>22</sup> I discuss this concept in the previous chapter.

different groups have been victimized and criminalized at particular historical conjunctures. In this sense, Hammad tries to establish grounds of solidarity.

Further, Hammad disrupts the two operating scenarios concerning victimization and criminalization by way of reactivation. For Taylor, “scenarios conjure up past situations...” (32). She further explains that “rather than a copy, the scenario constitutes a once-againness” (32). The continual reactivation of repertoires sustains notions of who we are. Hammad’s Montréal performance reactivated cultural heritage and historical memory. The audience witnessed an unfolding of cultural memory actuated by the sounds, symbols and icons derived from Arab popular culture. For example, the playing of the late Egyptian singer Oum Kulthum’s music to open the reading of Hammad’s poem *bint il neel*, (which honours Kulthum) reactivates particular cultural memories. This reenactment of identity resuscitates a counter-hegemonic image of a strong and loud Arab feminist artist who enjoyed great popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. The symbolism of Oum Kulthum, as a well-known Arab popular culture icon, serves to reaffirm the existence of strong Arab womanhood. Words complement the auditory sensory experience as Hammad says that she (Oum Kulthum) “sang for women” and talks about her “voice so big” – as a voice that refused to be silenced.

The audience’s welcome to Hammad as she came on stage presents another example of reactivation of cultural memory. Some performed *zaghareet*, which is an ululation or a high pitched sound produced by rapid movement of the tongue which exists in some cultures. Arab women typically perform it to express joy, particularly at weddings. It is also used to honor someone or to celebrate good news. Producing this sound at this venue marks their presence, their ability to utter sounds (to speak and take



voice), as well as to celebrate life. Here emitting a sound of difference, which might be irritating to some, reflects a particular cultural politics of taking up sound and situating their own bodies as making sound (and even noise). Performing culture could be said here to constitute a political act, particularly in an ambient climate of fear that fuels impulses to hide one's disturbing identity. Shaheen (2001), for instance, describes how Arab youth in the U.S. have communicated shame about their cultural background and expressed a desire to change their names to more 'American'-sounding ones. And Salaita (2006) discusses the imperatives for Arabs to demonstrate their patriotism in the U.S.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, Hammad's poetry responds to dominant constructions of racialized and gendered bodies as simultaneously non-existent, irrelevant, exotic and threatening. It can be readily situated in the genre of minor literature as it is political writing (by default), has collective dimensions, and engages in deterritorializations of language (by inserting Arabic words, Quranic metaphors, and hip hop language). Her writings pose a challenge to commonsensical notions of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim identity. Although she has been creating her style on the run, she has managed to establish the legitimacy of her form. She has also used media and technology to advance her message.

Hammad's poetry reveals how particular bodies are rendered invisible, as it acknowledges the institutional barriers to racial and gender equality. It responds to harmful portrayals by negating their very foundation while also offering an alternative language. Her writings celebrate her heritage and speak from the power of orality and the location of community. But her poetry also denounces the role of marginalized

communities in sustaining regimes of oppression such as patriarchy and brings to light numerous forms of violence that are inflicted on female bodies. Her work furthermore represents a feminist effort to create a multi-media archive of missing stories. It thus points to stronger possibilities for Palestinian and Arab womanhood and for the possibilities of creative mediated works to sustain or inspire liberatory socio-political change. Although such interventions can always be recuperated, they propel her into the public sphere, thereby affording opportunities to present discursive innovations.

My analysis of Hammad's 2009 Montreal performance found that two scenarios operate as organizational devices making apparent the specific ways in which Hammad talks back: the scenario of the victimization of the Eastern woman and the scenario of the disenfranchised as criminal. Hammad's performance re-enactes these two umbrella meaning-making paradigms. However, it also disrupts these scenarios through taking voice, *embodied participation*, and reactivation. This performance simultaneously links victimization and criminalization with marginality to show the workings of domination as it calls for building networks of solidarity across various locations of difference and marginalization. I will now turn to the pioneering interventions of Annemarie Jacir, who also engages in discursive acts of challenging dominant notions of Palestinian identity, but this time through the medium of cinema and with a main focus on issues of in/visibility.



**THE ROLEX MENTOR AND PROTÉGÉ ARTS INITIATIVE 2010-2011, Film**  
Annemarie Jacir on the set of her film *When I saw you*, a tale of families, homeland and exile.  
Dibeen Forest Reserve, Jordan, 2011  
RMP5F1105\_02-012 | ©Rolex/Reto Albertalli

**Figure 3: Annemarie Jacir**

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CINEMATIC INTERVENTIONS OF ANNEMARIE JACIR

Annemarie Jacir is the first Palestinian female filmmaker to make a full-length feature film. For this reason alone, her work and first feature film *Salt of This Sea* deserve a critical examination. *Salt of This Sea* was filmed in the most hostile conditions, in a climate of occupation and continuing subjugation of the Palestinian people. Jacir is also the creator of the *Dreams of a Nation* project, a Palestinian film festival in New York City which, at its inception, encountered disturbing levels of opposition but yet managed to showcase endangered cultural products as well as establish a digital archive of Palestinian films, creating a permanent filing system and resource for these imperilled films. This chapter focuses on Jacir's feature film *Salt of This Sea* in terms of its potentiality as expressive of a counter hegemonic discourse. In the process, I also examine her efforts to secure financial support for her endeavours and the various struggles she has experienced.

The need for counter-hegemonic interventions has been well established by important studies that have documented the underrepresentation and harmful images constructing the peoples of the Middle East North Africa South Asia (MENASA) region in the mainstream (Western) media. The central tropes of dominant Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian discourses have been found to be grounded in a colonialist and Orientalist framework as outlined in the Introduction and throughout this thesis. In addition, such identities have been shown to be located in the indefinite time and space of the pre-modern. Thusly located, these identities are then fixed by dominant gendered discourses

that play a crucial role in the imagining of Muslim men as fanatical, dangerous, and misogynist patriarchs and Muslim women as imperilled victims in need of saving, thereby justifying evictions from the West, suspension of the law, and other similar acts of discrimination (Razak, 2008). Karim (2000) further demonstrates how representations of Muslim masculinity have relied on the core stereotype of the “violent man of Islam.”

However, the East is not only constructed as dangerous and threatening; it is also the object of attraction and fascination (Karim 2000). In terms of Muslim representations, Mamdani (2005) posits that they are organized around the binary of the “good Muslim” and the “bad Muslim.” He further explains how easily the “good Muslim” can turn into “bad” and hence lose their status of acceptability. Jiwani (2006) argues that Muslims in the West are subjected to “conditional acceptance.” Admissible status depends upon behaving in ways that are consistent with “good citizenry” and can be lost at any given moment.

Although the MENASA region is not composed only of Muslims, Shaheen (2001) reveals how the Hollywood film and television industry tends to group all Arabs as Muslim. In his seminal work on Arab representations in film and television, Shaheen (2001) provides a summary of the dominant representations of Palestinians in U.S. cinema:

The Palestinian equals terrorist narrative initially surfaced in 1960, in Otto Preminger’s *Exodus*. In the 1980’s ten features, including *The Ambassador* (1984), *The Delta Force* (1986), *Wanted Dead or Alive* (1987), and *Ministry of Vengeance* (1989), put into effect images showing the Palestinian Muslim as Enemy Number One. Feature films tag him as “scumbag,” “son of a bitch,” “the Gucci Terrorist,” “a fly in a piece of shit,” “animals,” “bastards,” “f-in’ pigs,” and “stateless savages” who “massacre children.” The slurs are not rebuked by other characters. Several made-for-television movies also paint the Palestinian as a despicable being, including TV movies such as *Hostage Flight*

(1985), *Terrorist on Trial* (1988), *Voyage of Terror* (1990), and Cinemax's April 1998 documentary, *Suicide Bombers Secrets of the Shaheed*. (27-28)

Shaheen (2001) further describes the portrayal of Palestinians in Hollywood films as religious fanatics and as demonic and threatening, as well as being infamously and almost exclusively associated with terrorism. In contrast to these stereotypical images, Shafik (2005) describes the very recent and difficult emergence of Palestinian cinema, which she argues is inseparable from the region's historical turmoil:

Film in Palestine is a sad chapter in the history of film. It is inseparable from the history of the Palestinian people, a history characterized by war, expulsion, and diaspora. While European and Jewish circles had been familiar with films from the 'Holy Land' since the beginning of the twentieth century, the region's original inhabitants did not get to know the medium of film until much later. (202-203)

In comparing the struggle-filled journey of Palestinian films with those of American and European films about the region, Shafik relates how Jewish American and European filmmakers started shooting films in and on the country even prior to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Consequently, the first film on Palestine, *Ha-Seret Ha-Risbon shel Palestina* (1911) is also the first Zionist film, according to Shafik (2005, 203).

In contrast, it was not until the 1930s that a Palestinian, Salah al-Kaylani, ventured into documentary filmmaking. However, political and economic difficulties at the time of the British occupation, forced al-Kaylani to immigrate to Egypt, where his work was tolerated only insofar as it served the local political interests. Subsequently, and in spite of the difficulties, Palestinian cinema slowly began to develop, but mostly in the diaspora. Initially, Palestinian filmmakers also predominantly envisioned cinema as a "contribution to the liberation of Palestine," particularly with the encouragement and

support of activists and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) who shared this vision (Neidhardt 2005, 207).

The first Arab countries to produce films about Palestinians were Egypt and Syria in the 1950s and the 1960s (Tawil-Souri 2005). Tawil-Souri describes the pan-Arab days as a “haven” for Palestinian and pro-Palestinian filmmaking, as demonstrated by, for example, the Festival of Young Arab Cinema in Damascus (115). In retracing the history of Palestinian filmmaking, Tawil-Souri notes that the early days of Palestinian film production were formed in exile, without any significant cinematic development within the Occupied Territories. In 1967/1968, “the first Palestinian film unit was founded and annexed to [the Palestinian political party and largest faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization] *Fateh*” (115). Other Palestinian organizations like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine also began to produce films. This Palestinian cinema concentrated on documenting Palestinian/Israeli military actions as well as Palestinian “... life in the refugee camps” (Tawil-Souri 2005, 115). The early days of Palestinian cinema took the forms of news and documentary films – “a situation common in societies struggling for political definition” (Shohat & Stam 1997, 290). As the authors explain, Palestinian film production since the 1960s has predominantly produced documentaries and very few fiction films. They note:

Palestinian film production, from the establishment of ‘Unity Cinema’ in 1967 through the ‘Palestinian Cinema Group’ in 1973 to ‘The Palestinian Cinema Organization,’ under the auspices of the PLO, has always been intended as an instrument for the promotion of the Palestinian national cause and the registering of revolutionary events related to the Palestinian resistance. Virtually all production, therefore, has been devoted to news and documentary films – a situation common in societies struggling for political definition (and reminiscent, ironically, of Zionist film production in the pre-state era). The few

fiction films sympathetic to the Palestinian cause... were made by non-Palestinian Arabs” (Shohat & Stam 1994 , 290).

Gertz and Khleify (2011) describe the 1970s Palestinian cinema as representing and reviving Palestine’s traumatic history and documenting contemporary events. However, Palestinian cinema shifted in the 1980s following the escalation of the Palestinian struggle, most notably the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 targeting the PLO presence there and the first Intifada in 1987. Filmmakers in this period started to depart from reviving the past and to re-centre their narratives on the actual land, which came to stand as a symbol for identity and nationality. Tawil-Souri (2005) similarly contends that this shift, which she describes as “artistic” and “political,” took place in the 1980s, when independent Palestinian filmmakers living in exile began to move beyond the nationalist character of most previous productions (117). The work of Suleiman (a noted Palestinian filmmaker), she argues, is exemplary of this new cinema in that it attempts not to be constrained by an essentialist understanding of Palestinian identity emerging from a pressure to link it to the national liberation struggle (Tawil-Souri 2005, 133).

In the following section, I focus on the film *Salt of This Sea* (2008) and assess how it responds to this long, well-documented history of dominant representations of Palestinians. My choice of this film is based on its significance as a contemporary cinematic text that aims to present alternative portrayals to dominant representations in the media.



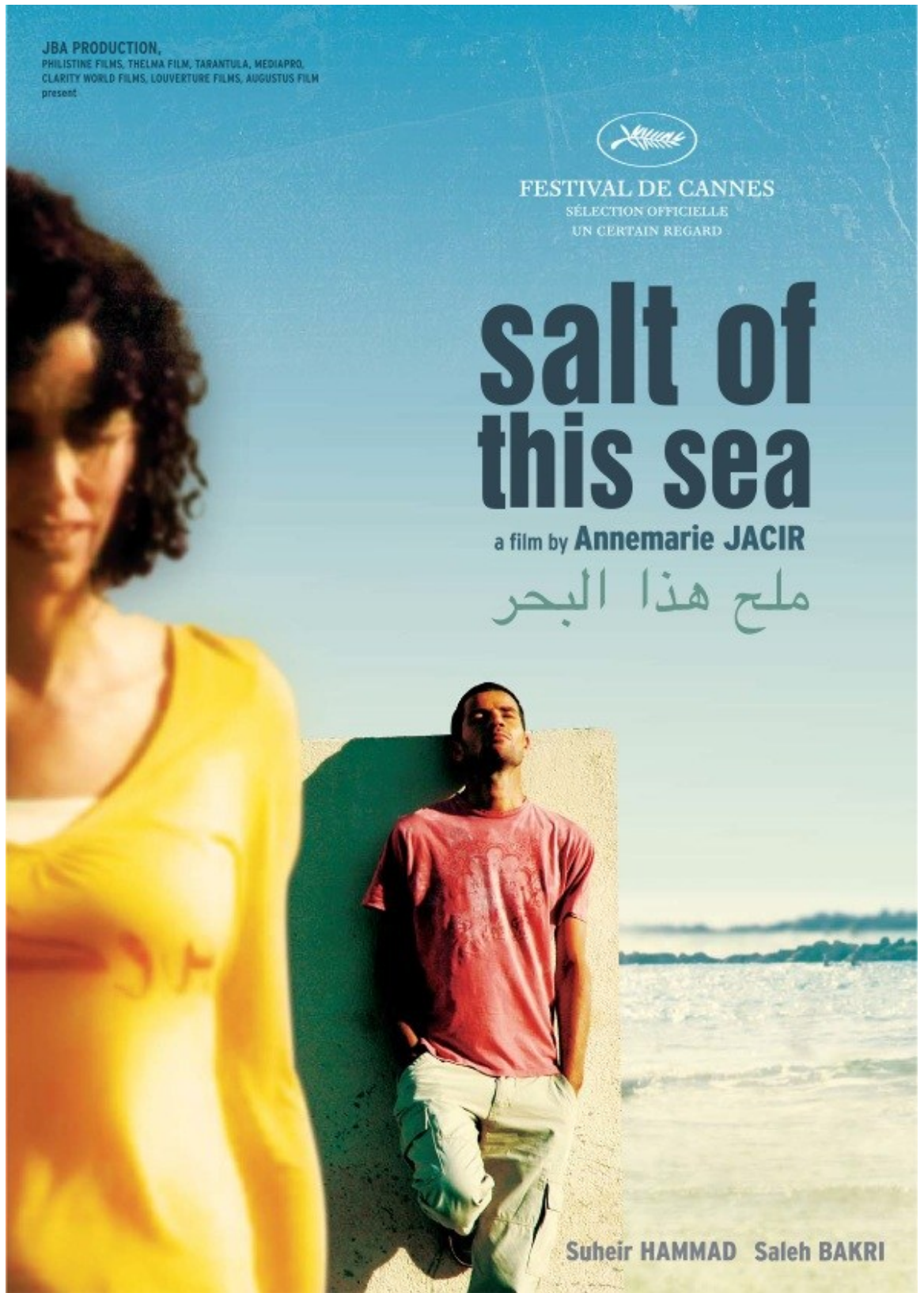


Figure 4: Poster for Salt of the Sea

## Significance of *Salt of This Sea*

*Salt of This Sea* presents a unique case study for several reasons. First, it is the first full-length feature film made by a female Palestinian director, Annemarie Jacir. Prior to Jacir, as Hillauer writes in her *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* in 2005,

[t]he first female Palestinian filmmaker was Khadija Abu Ali, who made the documentary film *Atfal, walakin* (Children, But) in 1982. To date, not a single Palestinian woman has directed a full-length feature film. In their works, the female directors examine Palestinian history, their own exile, and political conditions in their homeland. (200)

In addition, a number of other female Palestinian documentary filmmakers, including Mai Masri, Lina Makboul, Helga Tawil Souri, and Nabiha Lutfi, were producing work before *Salt of This Sea* was made. However, it was not until the latter film in 2008, that a female Palestinian filmmaker created her own fictional media texts to challenge dominant constructions of her people.<sup>23</sup>

Shortly after the release of *Salt of This Sea*, another female Palestinian filmmaker released her debut film. Cherien Dabis, a Palestinian-American director, producer, and screenwriter, directed the film *Amreeka* in 2009; but here the narrative is different. It is only momentarily set in Israel and the occupied territories, with most of the film taking place in the U.S. *Amreeka* tells the story of an immigrant family—a mother and her son—who make the journey from Ramallah to suburban Chicago, Illinois. Before that, in 2006, Dabis directed *Make a Wish*, a short film featuring an 11 year-old Palestinian girl who is determined to buy a birthday cake despite tremendous obstacles. *Make a Wish*

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<sup>23</sup>It is also important to note here that Palestinian Sulafa Jadallah is the first female cinematographer in the Arab world. Further, Mona Hatoum is equally renowned for her video installations. Additional information can be found in Ginsburg, Terri (2010).

premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival and was the recipient of a number of awards at other festivals.

Jacir's film is interesting if only for being the first Palestine-set feature film with a fictional narrative directed by a female director from the region. Furthermore, as she herself points out, *every* Palestinian film that is made is an exceptional event, considering existing difficulties, including lack of funding, technicians, and permits to enter certain areas for Palestinian film crews, among many other obstacles (Mullenneaux 2010). Suffice to say, it took Jacir five years to find support and funding for this film, and she refers to its making as a "miracle," (Mullenneaux 2010) since it emerged out of a context of tremendous hostility. Not only was it difficult for her to make this film, but it also suffered a limited distribution and was not readily available the first couple of years after its release.<sup>24</sup> As I discovered, since 2010, it has been difficult either to rent or buy this film in North America or in the U.K.; I had to purchase my first copy from Amazon France. I subsequently bought a second copy from Switzerland so I could transcribe the official English subtitles, as opposed to using my own translation from the Arabic script/French subtitles.

Despite its hard-fought creation and lack of accessibility through commercial channels, *Salt of This Sea* has been bestowed with many awards, and was officially selected for the 2008 edition of the Cannes Film Festival; thus, it could further be described as being popular in particular "interpretive communities" (Fish 1980).<sup>25</sup> To

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<sup>24</sup> I had a similar experience when I attempted to obtain the film *Like Twenty Impossibles* from the interlibrary service provided by Concordia University, which is typically able to provide material from lending institutions. In this case, I received an "item not available" message, indicating that the requested item is not available through interlibrary loan from the libraries where they located it.

<sup>25</sup> Other awards and distinctions include Best Screenplay at the Dubai International Film Festival and the Cinema in Motion Prize, as well as four awards at the San Sebastian Film Festival.

date, it has screened at more than one hundred film festivals, and as of February 9, 2012, the *Salt of This Sea* Facebook fan page shows 9679 fans. It has had a theatrical release in eight countries and has been sold to more than 35 territories. As well, it has played in French theatres for four consecutive months.

As a final note, Jacir's work has not benefitted from adequate academic attention, except for some short film reviews and essays, most notably Tawil-Souri's (2005) review of *Like Twenty Impossibles* and Abu-Lughod's (2004) review essay on the *Dreams of a Nation* project. The hostility towards this type of work—including death threats—as mentioned in the latter's essay, poses urgent questions regarding the conditions of emergence and sustainability of these types of interventions.

### **Annemarie Jacir, filmmaker and poet**

Born in 1974 to Palestinian parents from Bethlehem, Annemarie Jacir was raised in Saudi Arabia and moved to the United States at the age of sixteen. She received her BA in Political Science and English Literature in 1996 from Pitzer College in Claremont, California (Oweis, 2008). She subsequently moved to Los Angeles to work in the film industry before moving to New York City to study film at Columbia University, where she obtained her MFA in film. In New York, Jacir co-founded with Professor Hamid Dabashi the *Dreams of a Nation* Project, for which she was the chief curator. This project aims to provide support for Palestinian filmmaking, access to Palestinian films and a digital archive of Palestinian cinema. Furthermore, the *Dreams of a Nation* official website articulates the mission of the project within the larger framework of self-representational art, as only films made by Palestinians are included. *Dreams of a Nation*

was envisioned as an “intervention” based on a dissatisfaction with existing portrayals of Palestinians in the dominant mediascape. The project was consciously launched to mark a rupture, to make an alternative contribution to the dominant public sphere.<sup>26</sup> As Jacir puts it:

This project, of which the [2003 *Dream of Nation* film festival in New York] was a part, of presenting, archiving, and studying Palestinian cinema, in an effective manner to support the continuing struggle of Palestinians to use colors, symbols, and images to represent ourselves in the peril of the destruction of our culture... In organizing *Dreams of a Nation* we wanted to highlight and discuss the impressive feat that Palestinian filmmakers were attempting – to develop an aesthetically and socially relevant body of filmmaking just when decades of cultural development in the West Bank, Gaza, and elsewhere, were being newly threatened, and we wanted to intervene and contribute to the present rather disappointing cultural discourse on Palestine in the US by introducing the nuanced and compelling work we were seeing from Palestinian filmmakers around the world. (2006, 25)

Jacir is also the co-founder of Philistine Films, an independent production company whose projects include the documentary film *Until When* (2006), directed by Dahna Abourahme and shot and produced by Jacir.<sup>27</sup> She is also known for her poetry, which is published in several literary journals and anthologies, including *Mizna*, the *Crab Orchard Review*, and *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*. She has taught courses at Columbia University, Bethlehem University, Birzeit University, and in Palestinian refugee camps.

While *Salt of This Sea* is her first feature film, Jacir has been working in independent cinema since the early 1990s. She has written, directed, and produced

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<sup>27</sup> This documentary film follows the lives of four Palestinian families living in the Deheisha refugee camp near Bethlehem. It was also chosen as an official selection for numerous film festivals, including the Official Selection Chicago International Film Festival (2005); Official Selection Vermont International Film Festival (2004); Official Selection Vancouver International Film Festival (2004); and Official Selection 3 Continents Human Rights Film Festival (2004).

several short films and videos since 1994, including *A Post Oslo History* (1998), *Sayyad al-satilyat/The Satellite Shooters* (2001), *Filastin tantazir/Palestine is Waiting* (2002), and *Kanhun 'ashrun mustahil/Like Twenty Impossibles* (2003), which also premiered at Cannes and is a winner of several awards.<sup>28</sup> The symbolism of the title *Like Twenty Impossibles* tellingly reveals the impossible conditions of doing this type of work and producing such films.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Synopsis of Film***

Released in 2008, *Salt of this Sea* stars Suheir Hammad in the role of Soraya, a Brooklyn-born woman of Palestinian parentage who heads to Palestine for the first time in her life. When her dream of “return” to her land of origin is finally fulfilled, she is confronted with the daily realities of living under occupation. Through this journey, she also begins to understand her own privilege as an American citizen when she enters into relationships with Palestinians living in Ramallah and, particularly, through her romantic involvement with Emad (Saleh Bakri), a Palestinian from the refugee camps who dreams of moving to Canada. The plot revolves around Soraya’s decision to recuperate the money belonging to her grandfather, whose bank savings were frozen when he was exiled in 1948. However, she does not define this as theft; she clearly states that she is taking back what

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<sup>28</sup> The awards and distinctions include: World Premiere, Cannes Film Festival, Official Selection, Cinéfondation; National Finalist, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Student Academy Awards; Best Short Screenplay, Nantucket Film Festival; Best Short Film, Palm Springs International Short Film Festival; Best Short Film (Emerging Narrative), IFP/New York; Silver Plaque, Chicago International Film Festival; Best Short Film, Institute Du Monde Arabe Biennial; Audience Choice Award, Polo Ralph Lauren Columbia University Festival; Special Jury Prize, Ramallah International Film Festival; Best Films of the Year list, 2003, *Film Comment Magazine*; and 25 New Faces of Independent Cinema, 2004, *Filmmaker Magazine*. More recently, Jacir was selected as one of 2010/2011’s Rolex Protégées and worked under the mentorship of acclaimed Chinese director Zhang Yimou.

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion, see the Introduction.

belongs to her family. With the help of her two new “friends,” Emad and Marwan (Riyad Ideis), Soraya plans a “robbery,” and, subsequently, they all escape to the sea with her grandfather’s savings.

### **Analytical Approach**

My analytical approach is tailored to the particularities of Palestinian cinema. The study of indigenous Palestinian representations raises a different set of questions from the study of Arab representations, in general, or of “third world” productions in particular. Palestinian productions that manage to emerge within the tremendously adverse conditions of the contemporary socio-political context are still denied official recognition, as the example of Elia Suleiman’s film *Divine Intervention* unequivocally demonstrates. This film was ruled ineligible for consideration in the Foreign Language Film category of the Academy Awards by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which “did not recognize Palestine as a nation-state” (Tawil-Souri, 2005, 114). Other issues, such as lack of funding, make the production of Palestinian films a hazardous and precarious affair.

In the following analysis of *Salt of This Sea*, I deploy the notions of Palestinian in/visibility (Said 2006; Stam & Spence 1985)<sup>30</sup> and examine the film’s responses to dominant representations of Palestinians. As Shohat (2010) notes:

The iconography of Palestine and Israel is dominated by images of the land. In Zionist cinema, the barren desert allegorizes the absence and the future presence of the land’s true heirs – the Jewish people. In Palestinian representations, meanwhile, the land is imaged not as barren but as fertile and productive (289).

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<sup>30</sup> For further discussion, see Chapter One.

Annemarie Jacir's work, although only mentioned in passing in Shohat's book on Israeli cinema, stands against this repertoire of images of presence/absence. I adopt Said's (2006) understanding of Palestinian cinema, whereby he contends that Palestinian cinema stands in relationship with and/or in opposition to two main elements: a forced position of invisibility; and a wide-reaching repertoire of dominant representations. As he argues, "Palestinian cinema must be understood in this context. That is to say, Palestinians stand against invisibility, which is the fate they have resisted since the beginning; and on the other hand, they stand against the stereotype in the media: the masked Arab, the *kufiyya*, the stone-throwing Palestinian—a visual identity associated with terrorism and violence" (3). Said (2006) also describes the Zionist effort to render the existence of Palestinians invisible, quoting an early rallying phrase of Zionism: "We are a people without a land going to a land without a people?" It pronounced the emptiness of the land and the non-existence of a people" (2). Furthermore, she has cited Said's work as being a significant influence on her thinking, referring to him as her teacher in Al Kury's interview about *Salt of This Sea*:

*Salt of This Sea* is about the Palestinian dream of return. It carries the story of millions of people, and the final dedication in the credits is in remembrance of the Nakba and the Dawiyima massacre, and in memory of my dear friend Hasan Hourani, my teachers Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu Lughod, and the fathers of three of our crew members who passed away that year. We were there for all of them and we felt their legacy, a legacy which inspires the heart of the film. It was an honor to be there in their name, and to show that sixty years later the Palestinian spirit will never be crushed and our struggle continues. (Jacir 2009)

As outlined in Chapter One, I deploy hooks's influential notion of "talking back" for this analysis in order to reflect on acts of speech that express the movement of the "oppressed, the colonized, the exploited" from an object position to a subject position (hooks 1989,



9). Here, I draw from the extant literature on tactical interventions to identify the tactics used in Jacir's work. Finally, in the concluding section I reflect on the conditions that make counter-hegemonic emergence possible.

## **'Talking Back'**

### ***In/visibility: Re-Writing History***

How does *Salt of the Sea* "talk back"? In response to Palestinians' forced invisibility, this film affirms their existence in an attempt to rupture efforts to erase history. Thus, the film deploys a tactic of re-writing history from the point of view of the "weak" – I derive this terminology from De Certeau's (1984) definition of a tactic as "art of the weak" that introduces clever tricks into the foundations of power. For de Certeau, while a tactic is time-based, a strategy (of the state, for example) is space-based. A number of scholars mention re-writing history as an intervention —which I refer to as a "tactical intervention" (Ginsburg 2002; Shohat & Stam 1997; and Stam & Spence 1985).<sup>31</sup> Ginsburg (2002) additionally discusses the use of footage as a means of providing visual evidence of indigenous existence, which serves to counteract against the erasure of indigenous stories and histories from dominant national narratives. *Salt of This Sea* opens with this type of historical footage<sup>32</sup>—which originates from the military archives in Jerusalem—showing soon-to-be Palestinian refugees being forced to leave from the port of Jaffa in 1948.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 1 for further discussion.

<sup>32</sup> This tactic is also included in *Like Twenty Impossibles*, in which Jacir relies on the use of documentary footage.

<sup>33</sup> This information is derived from Mullenneaux's interview with Jacir (2010).

After Soraya, Emad, and Marwan retrieve Soraya's grandfather's savings from the bank, they decide to travel to the sea. They first go to Jerusalem, then to the port city of Jaffa. In order to cross over to Israel, they need to disguise their bodies. In this scene, they each must pass for another body in order to have access—specifically, they must pass as Jews to enter Israel. Humour is also used in the same scene via carnivalesque tactics of play. For example, Emad wears a t-shirt that reads, “America don't worry.” This offers spectators a temporary and therapeutic escape from oppressive circumstances.

When the trio arrives at the beach, their presence bothers the Israeli sunbathers; they are clearly unwelcome. We hear and see a helicopter flying over the scene, which symbolizes the apparatus of high surveillance that polices the circulation of bodies. Foucault (1977) exemplifies such surveillance in the figure of the Panopticon. Visually represented by the watchtower within the prison, the Panopticon for Foucault is a structure of surveillance that disciplines subjects to behave in docile ways because they know that they are being watched. In this figure, the few see the many. Thus, one tower guard can oversee the movements of the entire prison population.

The beach scene in *Salt of This Sea* visually depicts that the Palestinian characters' presence as being uncomfortably noticeable. While they are delighted to have made it there, they are subjected to the dominant gaze when Israeli sunbathers start to look their way upon hearing them speak in Arabic. The characters' ambiguous relationship with this particular sea is introduced. Jacir tells us that, on one hand, every Palestinian wants to go to the *forbidden* sea: we see Marwan transported into a realm of joy; we see the sun kissing Emad's face in scenes that depict the characters' happiness when they finally

reach their destination. On the other hand, as Jacir notes, *this* sea has also taken refugees away from their homes.

The principal characters' journey also takes them to Soraya's family home in Jaffa. Here the discovery of her grandfather's house and the reference to how he "laid down this floor" reaffirms that her family had been there for generations. In the scene, Soraya has a heated discussion with an Israeli woman who settled in the house and asks her to recognize that this is not her home. In the filmmaker's own words, the character of Soraya embodies a lack of "elementary recognition:"

And then there is this lack of recognition of what has happened to us... leading to the altercation with Irit the Israeli artist who now lives in Soraya's grandfather's house. Irit is kind, that's not the problem. Palestinians visit their former homes frequently and Israelis are used to it – most of them know exactly where they are living. A lot of people think naively that the problem is that the Israelis and the Palestinians do not like each other and that this situation has lasted for centuries as if, genetically, we hated each other... But that's a way of avoiding the true problem. What Soraya needs at this point in the film is a form of elementary recognition that she has never received. (Electronic Press Kit 2008)

One of the pitfalls in responding to dominant discourses is the tendency to understand the process of "talking back" as destined to convince (i.e., viewing it as persuasive speaking), rather than talking back so that one's voice does not get drowned out. Operating under this understanding takes the speaker in the opposite direction than the one Trinh (1989) suggests, i.e., storytelling that recuperates and archives marginalized voices for the purpose of securing their survival.

When I asked Jacir about the scene in the house during my interview with her,<sup>34</sup> she reaffirmed that it is key to her and unexpectedly drew an analogy with other peoples in search of official recognition, such as the Armenians:

It's about recognizing something in order to move on from it, and I think that's the case with a lot of different peoples and not just with Palestinians. I think that's true in the case of the Armenians. The Turkish government continues to deny the Armenian genocide and it's not easy to move on from something and pretend that nothing happened. Something happened. Let's talk about it and then we can move on. You can't negate it.

Thus, it seems that this desire for recognition is also an issue of historical knowledge and of re-writing a page of history that has been erased, which is both a concern of this film and a tactical intervention described in the literature.<sup>35</sup> However, immediate recognition might not occur. I am thus inclined to question whether direct engagement logically leads to the understanding (and "recognition") of the harm that was done or of the legitimacy of the re-creation of a state. Alternatively, is it possible to re-write history without connecting it to notions of recognition? Is there something disempowering in asking someone for recognition?

At a macro-level, however, recognition of harm done (genocide, for example) by a federal government can provide material compensation to the victims and/or potentially delegitimize the state. Research on truth and reconciliation committees in South Africa and elsewhere might provide some interesting avenues for comparison and exploration of the potentially 'fruitful' results (to be defined) of such processes, although this notion of "recognition" certainly cannot be reduced to the sole practice of truth and reconciliation committees. International recognition, as in the case of the Palestinian Authority's more

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<sup>34</sup> I phrased this question in the following way: "There's a scene in the film where Soraya is having an argument with the Israeli woman who settled in her family home in Jaffa. Soraya wants her to recognize that this is not her home. Why was it important for you to have Soraya say 'recognize it'?"

<sup>35</sup> See Chapter One for further discussion.

recent efforts to gain membership into the United Nations, has also been a point of contention both within and outside Palestine. For example, Victor Kattan and Ali Abunimah debate the advantages and dangers of this “strategy” (see Kattan’s policy brief for *Al Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network* titled “The case for UN recognition of Palestine” (published on 27 May 2011) and Abunimah’s blog response “Why does anti-Palestinian Reut Institute support UN recognition of Palestinian ‘state’?” (published in *The Electronic Intifada* on 31 May 2011)). Abunimah had previously elaborated on this point in an opinion piece: “Recognizing Palestine?” (*Al Jazeera*, 13 April 2011).

My focus in this project has been about the tactical interventions that are (and can be) deployed. Hence, my concern here is with the question of temporality/timing (potential to succeed at this moment) and the potential benefit/compensation that results from this “recognition.” Yet, at a micro-level, one of the pitfalls of asking for recognition from the point of view of speech is that it does not challenge colonial logic and rhetoric. This speech act maintains the West/East binary and hierarchical structure intact. Orientalist discourse, as Said (1994) has explained, depends on positional superiority in which the West has the upper-hand. I do, however, acknowledge the centrality of this issue for Palestinians in terms of the recognition of saying the unsaid, of articulating a history that continues to be expunged at all levels of social reality. As Jacir explained in the interview: “When I screened the film for people, Palestinian refugees said: ‘Look, it’s amazing because Soraya says everything that I dreamed that I could say and I want to say; she says it.’”

Another attempt to re-write history is illustrated in one of the scenes of the film that shows piles of furniture, which originally belonged to Palestinians, being sold in

stores. This scene documents/archives their historical presence. We hear Arabic music in the background through the voice of Syrian singer Asmahan, which serves as a reminder of the indigene's concern with the "preservation" of culture. Asmahan died at the premature age of 26 in 1944 when her car crashed into the river Nile. While the driver managed to escape, Asmahan was trapped with her friend as they did not have a door on their side, and, consequently, they drowned.

The trio in *Salt of This Sea* also travel to Emad's village, Al-Dawayima. The name of the village has been changed. The images of the ruins act as a subtle reference to the 1948 Al-Dawayima massacre, which is invoked when Soraya and Emad light a candle over the ruins in a moment that most directly speaks to a knowledgeable audience. This scene not only attempts to archive history, to undo efforts to erase history, but it also deploys the tactic of bearing witness and of producing a counter-memorial. As Montagner (2001) explains in his analysis of Internet media groups, activists' own coverage and accounts of events can lead to "taking care" of their own representation.

### ***Responses to Dominant Representations***

In responding to dominant representations, *Salt of This Sea* puts gender at the center of the narrative. For one, Soraya, a courageous female character, is the main protagonist. Further, this film refreshingly departs from imposing a male gaze on the lead female actor. It counters the dominant construction of Arab and Muslim women as passive with the portrayal of a determined heroine. Both Jacir and Hammad state that Soraya is not sexualized or objectified. When I interviewed Jacir, she described Soraya's character in the following way:

Soraya is not a Hollywood character. She's not sexualized; she's not simple. She's not even sympathetic all the time. She's very complicated. She's a flawed character. People don't always get her. They don't always know what she's doing... And the way she's filmed. I don't believe in women's cinema and men's cinema, but I do believe that Hollywood trains people to film and portray women in a certain way and to portray men in another way. That's definitely something that I am against and I don't want to be doing.

Not only are the filmmaker and the lead actor women, but the plot furthermore revolves around Soraya's decision to reclaim her grandfather's money. Hence, Soraya is a key player in the discursive work of redefining criminality in the occupied territories where basic rights, such as freedom of movement, are denied to Palestinians. As this is a central theme, the film depicts representations of the hidden violence inflicted on Palestinians on a regular basis. Destabilizing their portrayal as criminals in the mainstream media, *Salt of This Sea* instead shows Palestinian bodies as targeted, suffering, and needing to be rendered invisible inside Israel. Shedding light on everyday humiliations, this film also humanely depicts the main characters. Thus, it paints innovative discourses on these bodies as it rectifies an *absence* of representations (Stam & Spence 1985). In depicting dimensions of their history and realities that are seldom shown in the dominant media, it attempts to reverse the Western commonsensical understanding of violence and criminality in the Middle East (e.g., the core stereotype of the violent Palestinian man).

### **Conditions of Counter-hegemonic Emergence**

In her discussion of diva citizenship, Berlant (1997) contends that re-narrating the dominant history cannot be underestimated, as these acts of language can influence

collective existence.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Gramsci (1916-1935) argues that hegemony is partly secured via consent to domination and common sense. Since “good sense” is part of “common sense” and can be elaborated to create new conceptions of the world (as further elaborated in Keeling 2007), this thesis project is concerned with the struggle over meaning. It is relevant to note a few characteristics of this work in order to reflect both on the potential of this intervention to create change and the question of its emergence.

First, such works and interventions threaten the cultural and political status quos. In my interview with Jacir, she spoke about how “New York was an aggressive atmosphere to screen those films” referring specifically to the *Dreams of a Nation* festival held in New York City in January 2003, and about the “harassment” that they experienced as organizers of that festival.<sup>37</sup> In a previous interview with *Eye For Film* (Hazzah 2008), Jacir spoke about other attempts to censor and silence her speech:

When I lived in the US, I was threatened several times - both as a filmmaker, while showing my work, as well as a festival curator and promoter of Arab cinema. That includes death threats. I have also been censored and silenced many times. But that's the case for all Palestinian filmmakers I think—and all we can do is keep making films, art, and believing in what we do.

Jacir was also banned from entering the Palestinian territories and has not been able to go back after screening *Salt of This Sea* there; she has been living in Jordan since

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<sup>36</sup> For further discussion, see chapter one.

<sup>37</sup> Jacir (2006) had previously elaborated on this point: “Sadly, there were difficulties in organizing the festival beyond simply logistical issues. As we began the preparations for the film festival, suddenly certain websties appeared attacking our festival. We also began to receive a barrage of hate mail, personal attacks, and death threats. The day before the festival was to begin, campus security and the New York police department became involved, upon receiving word that anti-Palestinian extremists were threatening to violently obstruct the festival. Our computers were hacked, our emails spammed, our voicemails flooded with racist, obscene, and threatening messages. The festival’s academic sponsor, Hamid Dabashi, came under pressure as head of the department hosting the event, and was made to explain numerous times to various university and other authorities the nature of the festival, so as to prevent the event from being cancelled” (30).



then.<sup>38</sup> She spoke about how she could see the land right in front of her (from Jordan), but yet has not been able to get to it. This simultaneous closeness and inaccessibility inspired the theme of her new film, *When I Saw You*.

Jacir's explanation of what made *Salt of This Sea* 'happen' consists of emphasising the will of the filmmaker to produce the work. Although I had not expected this answer, as I had been thinking about each artist as located in a larger system (beyond individual talent and determination), Shirin Neshat (as outlined in the following chapter) provided a similar argument when I interviewed her. Moreover, Gertz and Khleifi (2011) reiterate this argument concerning the importance of the will of individual filmmakers in their discussion of the new Palestinian cinema in the 1980s. They argue that "all of these titles allude to the nature of the cinema that originated, developed, and gained international acclaim as a result of the efforts of individual filmmakers. These directors operated without the support of either Palestinian public institutions or private Palestinian production companies" (Gertz & Khleifi 2011, 188).

Jacir also mentioned that her film is based on reality, re-emphasizing the notion of *Salt of This Sea* as real. Secondly, in regards to the conditions that make counter-hegemonic emergence possible, the content and style of Jacir's film (and her body of artistic work, more broadly) is imbued with the idea of "real" content and "realistic" style, which is a defining characteristic of her oeuvre. Although she expresses reticence to label her style, specifically with respect to *Salt of This Sea*, this notion of presenting "real" material was a recurrent theme in the interview I conducted with her and echoed

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<sup>38</sup> In a *Gulf News* interview conducted by Richard Holledge (2011), Jacir explains, "I have not been banned because of my filmmaking but because there is a silent Israeli policy which, in a random way, is excluding thousands of people."

her previous description of *Salt of This Sea* as a “realistic” film in a 2008 interview with Ali Hazzah in *Eye For Film*.<sup>39</sup>

In my interview with Jacir, she described how *Salt of This Sea* was inspired by and is based on real events, such as an actual bank robbery in Bethlehem and the story of her friend’s father whose bank account was frozen after he became a refugee in 1948. As well, she includes everyday events like crossing checkpoints. She stated that *Salt of This Sea*, similar to *Like Twenty Impossibles*, is a fiction film, “but everything is real; everything is true in it. There’s nothing created about the borders, the checkpoints, the nightmare of occupation.” This word association is interesting—for example, truth/reality juxtaposed with a “nightmare,” a bad dream that cannot be true, as in the recurrent denial of Palestinian experiences of everyday humiliation—what I understand as “constructed mad speech.” Thus, she aims, as a filmmaker, to accentuate a Palestinian truth that is at the same time caught in a cycle of denial.<sup>40</sup>

With respect to *Salt of This Sea*, the core of this struggle appears to be over the real (i.e., meaning). Within the circular movement of culture, this intervention relies on the following discursive tactics: re-writing history, bearing witness, re-centering gender, and archiving (arguably using an archaeological feminist method). Therefore, this film intervenes tactically in its attempt to re-write history (by using, for example, historical footage—here also an effort to archive Palestinian existence and culture) and to bear witness. In addition, it centres on gender in its narrative to provide an alternative portrayal of Arab femininity. Further, the film does not deploy a tactic of positive images,

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<sup>39</sup> Extracted from: <http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/feature.php?id=593>

<sup>40</sup> I explain what I refer to as “constructed mad speech,” in relation to my understanding of hegemonic power in the Introduction.

as illustrated in its condemnation of the Palestinian and Ramallah elite.<sup>41</sup> An empirical reception analysis would clarify the potential function of such works in terms of their potentiality to neutralize fear or inject political hope and thereby lead to collective mobilization in the pursuit of social justice.

Pointing to the conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence, I argue that creating a physical archive relates to what Stillman (2007) categorizes as a feminist archaeological method, which involves digging for and bringing to light “lost” stories (or films in this case). Jacir states that one of the aims of the *Dreams of a Nation* project was to provide access to these films after the organizers had heard many stories of people who could not view these works. She has since converted the *Dreams of a Nation* project into a digital resource.

The difficulty of securing funding for *Salt of This Sea* raises critical issues for the emergence of such works, and points to the fluid movement of hegemony and culture. Jacir explained to Mullenneaux (2010) that the financing of the film consisted of “a large number of European co-producers and small funders, each putting in a tiny amount to make this film happen. We never met our budget yet the film was made.” She also spoke of the difficulty of making this low-budget work when I interviewed her, although she mentioned the helpfulness of obtaining grants. The budget for *Salt of This Sea* was \$1.2 million, but she only managed to secure \$1 million (Hazzah, 2008). She had to resort to several sources of funding, which mostly consisted of small grants and financing through a co-production deal with Jacques Bidou & Associés (JBA), which was the largest producer. She relayed how the granting agencies also have their own requirements that need to be met and coordinated in relation to the artistic demands of the film; these

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<sup>41</sup> See chapter one where I discuss the critique of positive representations as a discursive move.

requirements were tied to the locations of the post-production work, rental of equipment, or hiring the funding country's citizens to work on the film. As Gertz and Khleifi (2011) explain, this is one of the defining characteristics of Palestinian filmmaking, which operates under unusual duress and an overall lack of support:

Palestinian directors have been working in a context in which the basic conditions for cinema are lacking; they are in want of national institutions for the advancement of cinema, of production companies, of companies supplying equipment, of film laboratories, and of skilled crew members. As an industry, Palestinian cinema does not exist. A Palestinian filmmaker who wishes to produce a film is compelled to use foreign crews or to make do with unqualified local teams. The post-production has to be done elsewhere. (189)

The budget for Jacir's new film *When I Saw You* is even smaller than that for *Salt of This Sea*—about \$400,000 (Dammann, 2011).

## **Summary**

*Salt of This Sea* attempts to undo-efforts to erase history; it tries to affirm Palestinian existence and document their passage through that land. Through a process of “talking back,” the film places a determined heroine at the centre of its narrative in opposition to more common representations, including the infamous figure of the oppressed veiled female in need of saving. It also attempts to reverse the understanding of criminality in the Middle East. Although emerging from a position of marginality, this film achieved considerable popularity among specific interpretive communities for whom it has attempted to alleviate certain socio-political stresses and provide mental nourishment through tactics of playfulness, as demonstrated by the characters in several scenes. Such scenes include: the planned robbery of the bank; the crossing into Jerusalem and then travelling on to Jaffa; and the journey on the road, which highlights their life on the run

and emphasizes the notion of escaping from a burdensome reality. However, as Entman (2003) and Said (1978) remind us, a single (or a few) divergent stories are not sufficient to fully destabilize well-established and naturalized discourses. These interventions are inevitably open to containment and co-optation. I would argue, nonetheless, that these interventions are still necessary because they create noise; they disturb the tranquility of the status quo.

*Salt of This Sea* communicates this understanding of its potential to create change, particularly through the ‘unhappy,’ but hopeful ending; Emad is arrested, while Marwan has an affair with the Israeli woman who had settled in Soraya’s family home and stays in Jaffa, thus appearing to “normalise” his relationship with the settler. Soraya, meanwhile, is forced to return to the U.S., but as she is leaving, she says, “I am from here...Palestine.” Jacir said that this was the only ending she could envision for this film considering the existing situation, but she also added, “I have to be hopeful” (Flanders, 2009).

Thus far, I have discussed acts of talking back that expose what can be seen through Palestinian eyes. These acts demonstrate an effort to decolonize the mind and to produce a politicized cultural production from the margins. Because it attempts to maintain an indigenous voice above the surface of the water, this intervention encourages a reflection on the role of culture to shake, move, and perhaps even transform what appears to be stagnant.

*When I Saw You*, Jacir’s follow-up to *Salt of This Sea*, is undergoing a different process. This latest film takes place in 1960s Jordan and seems to address the topic of Palestinian refugees and refugee camps in Arab countries. Jacir sees it as a film about

“the stupidity of borders,” as she declared in my interview with her. When I asked her why she produced this new film with a smaller budget, she said, “But there’s no other way to do it unless you want to sit. I didn’t want to wait ten years to be able to make my next film. There are many...great independent filmmakers; sometimes 10-to-15 years pass between each of their films.” She spoke about her decision to go ahead with the new film, in spite of the recent precarious financial situation of independent cinema.

Some scholars contend that mainstream cinema (most notably, Hollywood) can easily co-opt independent cinema. For example, in his study of American independent cinema, Newman (2009) argues that the mainstreaming of indie cultural texts occurs when they are transformed into unusual and exotic products or brands for consumption. For the present study, however, I am interested in the popular dimension of the selected case studies which, though popular, offer alternative visions and hence can be construed as belonging to the realm of alternative media. Some artistic practices suggest that these categories might not always work in opposition to each other, as in the music of Umm Kulthum, who had been during her lifetime, and until now, a very popular alternative cultural icon in the MENASA region. Independent cinema, as exemplified by Jacir’s oeuvre, can also be alternative, as revealed by the content of her productions, the tactics she deploys and conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence that influence her work.

As I put this analysis to rest for the time being, Jacir’s new film is due for release this summer of 2012. Looking at this new and different process and continuation of her artistic journey offers interesting avenues for exploration. The next chapter examines the visual art and films of Iranian-American multi-media artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat. Whereas Palestinian and Iranian cinemas differ in terms of availability of resources and

aesthetic sensibilities, Jacir's film *Salt of This Sea* and Nehsat's *Women Without Men* are both immersed in discursive practices of talking back and rectifying particular erasures of history.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE VISUAL ART AND FILMS OF SHIRIN NESHAT

Shirin Neshat is undoubtedly a great artist. Her visual innovations have attracted worldwide attention to the point that her touch, as an artist, has become recognizable. Juxtapositions of the veil and playing with binaries constitute the material richness of her artistic contributions. Neshat continues to innovate and to demonstrate her creative agility, as she skillfully transitions from photography to video installations to film, hence illustrating the power of her imagination and her vision as a multi-media artist.

Shirin Neshat's art has been internationally celebrated as groundbreaking. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the LillianGish Prize (2006), the Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art Peace Award (2004), the Grand Prix of the Kwangju Biennial in Korea (2000), and the Golden Lion Award, the First International Prize at the 48th Venice Biennial (1999). She has exhibited widely around the world at various institutions including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo in Leon, Spain; and the Tate Gallery in London (Electronic Press Kit, 2009). This chapter analyses the visual art and films of Shirin Neshat, with a particular focus on how the Iranian-American filmmaker's first feature film *Women Without Men* (2009) "talks back" (hooks, 1989) to dominant representations.

*Women Without Men* has also received significant praise, and has been widely distributed and is internationally popular. An award-winning film that premiered at the Venice Film festival, it is an adaptation of Shahrnush Parsipur's magic realist novel by



the same name, which was banned by the Iranian government in the mid-1990s. Neshat herself has not been able to travel back to Iran due to the “controversial nature” of her art (Electronic Press Kit, 2009). I selected this film as a case study for its significance as a contemporary “intervention” that positions itself as offering alternative representations to what is presented in the dominant sphere and mainstream cinema (primarily Hollywood).

*Women Without Men* follows the stories of four female protagonists as a means of responding to the amnesia in Iranian-U.S. relations as represented in mainstream media. Neshat’s film shows a view of Iran in 1953 when a British and American-backed coup d’état removed the democratically-elected government. In this analysis, I examine the notions of in/visibility as they appear in the film and identify the various responses and discursive tactics deployed to visually rewrite a page of history.

Directed and written by Shirin Neshat in collaboration with Shoja Azari, *Women Without Men* stars Pegah Ferydoni, Arita Shahrzad, Shabnam Tolouei, and Orsi Tóth. The plot of the film revolves around the four female protagonists, who seem to find themselves “without men,” as illustrated by the title of the film. Fakhri, an upper-class woman, seeks to separate herself from a distasteful marriage. As she is approaching menopause, her husband starts threatening to take a second wife. Quite unexpectedly, an old flame returns from America and initiates a flirtatious relationship with her; later, however, he arrives with his blond American fiancée on his arm at a house party Fakhri is throwing. Iranian female actors play the role of the principal characters - Fakhri (Arita Shahrzad), Munis (Shabnam Toulouei), and Fayzeh (Pegah Ferydoni). They have dark hair, thick eyebrows, and olive skin. Hungarian female actor Orsi Tóth plays the character of Zarin, who is a prostitute in the film. Tóth’s physiognomy somewhat differs

from the other women. While her hair is coloured in a deep dark brown, it is not as voluminous. She is also significantly thinner (anorexic in the film) and has lighter skin, with thinner eyebrows.

Munis is a political activist. In comparison to the novel, Neshat took on the liberty of further politicizing this character. While Munis is interested in following closely the political events taking place in Iran, her brother Amir attempts to force her into an arranged marriage because, according to him, she is getting too old. Struggling against his demand, she commits suicide, but then magically resuscitates. Faizeh is Munis' friend and plots to marry Amir, who is interested in a much younger woman. After being raped by strangers who see her standing in front of a cafe, she is most concerned with having lost her virginity and, in her mind, the status of a respectable female eligible for marriage.

The fourth character, Zarin, is a prostitute who escapes her line of work after male customers start to appear to her as faceless (another reference to magic realism). She also seems to be anorexic; her body, for sale, is also a sick body. One of the most painful scenes of the film takes place in a public Turkish-style bathhouse where Zarin furiously scrubs her body until it bleeds. This act of self-punishment illustrates a desperate attempt to cleanse her body.

In terms of its accessibility, *Women Without Men* is an award-winning film and has garnered much attention as a result. Among its many prizes and distinctions are: a Silver Lion for Best Director, 2009 Venice Film Festival; Official Selection to the 2010 Sundance Film Festival; and Official Selection to the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival. Likely due to this attention, the film is easily accessible for purchase, download, or online viewing. For example, it is available on Netflix Canada even though the director

is based in the U.S. In a discussion organized by the *Walker Art Center* and moderated by Sheryl Monsley (April 16, 2010), Neshat stated that she was delighted that the film has been available through a piracy distribution network in Iran.

Neshat's work has inspired at least hundreds of reviews and articles. In addition, it has received considerable academic attention (as for example, works by Dabashi (1997, 2005), Naficy (2000), Milani (2001), and Dadi (2008)), though none of these studies examine her film *Women Without Men*. Nonetheless, a film review in an academic journal (Bresheeth, 2010) and a few interviews that refer to the film prior to its release have been published (Ebrahimian, 2006; MacDonald, 2004).

Neshat's debut film is created from a position of distance from the "homeland," similar to that of other Iranian filmmakers forced to operate in the diaspora. Because the novel has been banned in Iran, and since Parsipur currently lives in exile after being imprisoned four times, the film was instead shot in Morocco. In her preface to the new edition of the novel, Neshat mentions that "*Women Without Men* has been banned in Iran, and Shahrnush herself lived in exile. Therefore, we had to abandon the idea of shooting in our native country" (2011, ix). Although *Women Without Men* is a French/German/Moroccan production of an Iranian American director shooting in Morocco with an Iranian crew, the tradition of making moving images goes back a long way in Iran. Indeed, Iranian cinema has received much international acclaim, including the very recent Hollywoodian "recognition" of *A Separation* (2012), which is the first Iranian film to receive an Oscar.

While Iran has long a history of cinema, Naficy (1995) outlines some of the threats that it has faced since its emergence. The first documentary was made in 1900,

and the first public theatre opened in 1903-1904.<sup>42</sup> The first feature film was made in 1930 (Naficy, 1995; Egan, 2011), although the Iranian film industry did not “blossom” until the 1960s and the 1970s during the reign of Shah Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, when Iranian films also received exposure and recognition abroad, most notably at international film festivals (Naficy 1995). Quoting Issari, Egan (2011) explains that “a country that had produced only 11 feature films until up to 1948 produced some 336 films from seventy-three local studios by the end of 1965” (41). Issari (1989) reveals how “according to the Ministry of Culture and Arts, by 1965 there were 72 cinemas in Tehran and 192 in the provinces” (198). During this period, the film *The Cow* (1969) is credited with bringing Iranian cinema to international attention. Revolving around a farmer’s relationship with his cow, this film tackles such issues as rural poverty, superstition, and fear during the so-called era of modernization of the Pahlavi regime through the use of a groundbreaking realist form that is said to incorporate elements of expressionism and surrealism (Egan 2011).

According to Egan (2011), “by the mid-1970s, the Iranian film industry was in crisis” (47); the regime of that time withdrew financial support and increased censorship to control societal discontent and growing criticism. Production subsequently slowed down after the 1978-1979 Islamic revolution. Naficy (1995) describes how since the introduction of cinema in Iran, religious leaders have characterized certain productions as immoral, unethical, and corrupt because of their “westernization” (548). Moreover, at the time of the revolution, cinemas nationwide were burned down and destroyed and the importation of foreign films was curtailed. During this period, many filmmakers were

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<sup>42</sup> Whereas Naficy (1995) retraces this to 1904, Egan (2011) states that the first public cinema was actually established in 1903.

banned from making films, threatened, incarcerated, or lost their properties, while others were forced to seek exile. In contrast, some religious clerics have also been promoting and favouring a particular type of cinema which would teach “Islamic values.” Despite this official policy, Naficy (1995) argues that a critical Iranian cinema that takes aim at “the social conditions under the Islamic government” has emerged (549). Paradoxically, the restriction of foreign films—particularly Hollywood productions—has also been accompanied by a strengthening of indigenous filmmaking since the 1979 revolution, “opening up unexpected possibilities for the presence of women in most aspects of the Iranian cinema” (Rezai-Rashti 2007, 191).

In terms of the representations of women as well as gender-balanced production teams, Naficy (1995) explains how

[f]or quite some time, filmmakers opted to downplay women (of 37 films reviewed by a magazine in 1987, the chief protagonists in 25 were men). When women were used, they were confined to the ideologically safe domain of home. Hejab rules necessitated that women actors wear scarves, wigs, or hats. These and other constraints, which gradually have lessened, affect the relationships among men on the screen as well, resulting in a fascinating gender reconfiguration. If women have had problems appearing in front of cameras, they apparently have had fewer problems attending film schools and working behind cameras as directors. (551)

Whereas, only one Iranian female, Shahla Riahi, had directed a feature film before the revolution—a film titled *Marjan* in 1956—Naficy (1995) contends that, since the time he wrote his contribution to Afkhami and Friedl’s (1994) edited collection on women in post-revolutionary Iran, “today there are at least seven women directors active” (133). These women feature film directors in post-revolutionary Iran include Tahmineh Ardekani, Feryal Behzad, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Marziyeh Borumand, Puran

Derakhshandeh, Tahmineh Milani, and Kobra S a'idi<sup>43</sup>; but Naficy (1994) points out that “it would be inaccurate to assume or to expect that women directors working in the Islamic Republic necessarily present a better rounded or a more radically feminist perspective in their films than do male directors” (133). Nonetheless, he argues that representations have improved as stronger female characters and examinations of women’s condition have emerged. Furthermore, Foster (1995) points out that since the 1960s, Iranian women directors have been taking the precaution of not labeling themselves as feminists while they continue to challenge patriarchal society and explore feminist themes.

Recent political developments in the country have led to the emigration of a number of Iranian filmmakers and others working in the film industry, who then started to operate from abroad. Yet, the question remains as to the potential of such films to influence political action? Iranian-American filmmaker Cyrus Nowrasteh’s film *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008), an adaptation of French-Iranian journalist Freidoune Sahebjam’s 1990 book *La Femme Lapidée*, is based on a true story of an Iranian woman who was stoned to death after being falsely accused of committing adultery. The graphic and long-lasting depiction of her stoning provides an archetypal example of the feminist tactic of shaming (Stillman 2007). Her hands tied up and her lower body buried in the ground, each hit from a stone bends Soraya’s body backwards until she collapses forward – her original white dress covered in blood. The director insisted on showing the cruelty

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<sup>43</sup> The films of Bani-Etemad stand out in this body of work. As Dabashi (2005) explains: “by 1997, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad had made *Nargess* (1992), a work that is indefinitely more daring and subversive both visually and thematically than anything that Shirin Neshat has done even now. In much of her work, and with very few exceptions, Shirin Neshat in fact abides by the strictest rules of the Islamic Republic so far as the public persona of veiled women is concerned. In fact, a crucial aspect of her visual vocabulary, and the power of her work, is how she *does not* trespass those rules and yet manages (ingeniously) to exude eroticism and sensuality in her art” (51). See also Cobbey’s (2011) analysis of Bani-Etemad’s film *Under the Skin of the City*.

of the killing. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad placed *The Stoning of Soraya M.* on a list of films for which Iran deserves an apology for “insults” and “slanders” (Tait 2009; Miraudo 2010).

Interestingly, shortly after the release of the film, Iranian lawmakers started revising legislation in order to outlaw harsh forms of punishment such as stoning. It seems that politicized creative expression has the potential to influence change on the ground in any context. However, considering that “colonial feminism” (Ahmed quoted in Abu-Lughod 2002, 784) may co-opt the telling of such stories, do they still need to be told? It is also likely that they may be fiercely opposed, such as when protesters attacked a Tunisian TV station that aired the film *Persepolis* in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. Directed by Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (2007) is an adaptation of Satrapi’s bestselling autobiographical graphic novel about a young girl who comes of age during the Islamic revolution. As a consequence of broadcasting the film, the director of Tunisia’s Nessma TV, Nabil Karoui, is currently on trial for “insulting sacred values, offending decent morals and causing public unrest.” His defense team qualified it as “a trial that was a test of Tunisia’s youthful democracy” (Agence France Press 2012).

Neshat (2010) speaks of how Iranian artists in exile are caught in limbo, somewhere between exercising a dangerous profession in Iran and life in exile, which involves separation from one’s relatives, friends, language, and land as well as being subjected to dominant reductionisms regarding Iranian culture(s).<sup>44</sup> The life trajectory of Parsipur, the author of the novel on which *Women without Men* is based, illustrates some of these difficulties. Born in Tehran in 1946, Parsipur was arrested and jailed four times,

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<sup>44</sup> Derived from: Shirin Neshat: Art in Exile (2010).  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/shirin\\_neshat\\_art\\_in\\_exile.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/shirin_neshat_art_in_exile.html)

the first time in 1974 by the Shah's intelligence agency and three subsequent times under the rule of the Islamic Republic. She left Iran after her books were banned and currently lives in exile in the United States as a political refugee. Parsipur has written eleven works of fiction and a memoir. *Women Without Men* was originally published as *Zanan bedun mardan* in 1989 in Tehran. Parsipur was jailed twice afterwards as a result of the novel's treatment of the issue of virginity.<sup>45</sup>

Neshat decided to create a film adaptation of the novel after Columbia University professor Hamid Dabashi reminded her of this work when she was looking for material for her first feature film. Neshat later said that she selected it because:

...it navigates between complex themes of socio-political, religious and historical realities of Iran; and yet profound personal, emotional, philosophical and universal subjects that transcend any notions of time and place. Also I was captivated by the poetic nature of the novel, and the use of symbolism and metaphor; for example how the orchard where the women take refuge functions as a place of 'exile,' a subject so poignant and relevant to so many of us Iranians. (Electronic Press Kit 2009)

Her previous work shares some similar concerns with those presented in Parsipur's novel, most notably questions of gender, East-West relations, political turmoil in Iran, censorship, and lack of freedom.

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<sup>45</sup> The book has been translated into English, Swedish, Spanish, Malayalam, Italian, Dutch and French. The English translation is published by Syracuse University Press and by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York. A more recent edition (with a preface by Shirin Neshat) and an author's note was published in 2011 by *The Feminist Press*, an independent nonprofit literary publisher that aims to "publish exciting writing by women and men who share an activist spirit and a belief in choice and equality" (back matter of the 2011 edition).





**Figure 5: Shirin Neshat. Photo Credit: Nabil Youssef**

### **Shirin Neshat, multi-media artist and filmmaker**

Born in 1957 in Qazvin, Iran, Shirin Neshat currently resides in New York City, where she is represented by the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, which is known for its support of popular contemporary artists. At an early age, she was separated from her parents, who sent her off to pursue a European education in a Catholic Boarding school in Tehran, where she developed a severe case of anorexia (MacDonald, 2004; Dabashi, 2005). She left Iran in 1975, just a few years before the Iranian revolution, and moved as a teenager to the U.S., where she finished her last year of high school in northern California. After attending Dominican College, she was subsequently accepted at the University of California at Berkeley, where she received her B.A., M.A., and M.F.A.; however, she describes herself in this period as an average student who was making mediocre art (MacDonald, 2004). Post-M.F.A., Neshat refrained from making art and focused on working at the Storefront for Art and Architecture art gallery in New York. It wasn't until

the 1990s that she designed, directed, and posed for a series of photographs called *Women of Allah* and became known for her juxtapositions of the veil, weapons, and the written text—specifically poetry written in Farsi inscribed as calligraphy on the body—hiring photographers such as Larry Barns and Kyong Park to create her images (MacDonald 2004).

Neshat started making moving images in the late 1990s: *The Shadow Under the Web*, 1997; *Turbulent*, 1998; *Rapture*, 1999; *Fervor*, 2000; *Soliloquy*, 1999; *Pulse*, 2001; *Possessed*, 2001; *Passage*, 2001; and *The Last Word*, 2003. During this time, she achieved global recognition, winning the First International Prize at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999 with her video installation *Turbulent*.<sup>46</sup>

Neshat's video installation *Turbulent* illustrates the impossibility of speaking, similar to Jacir's theme in her short film *Like Twenty Impossibles*.<sup>47</sup> Referencing gender roles, binaries, segregation, and particular Muslim practices/rules that forbid women from singing in public,<sup>48</sup> *Turbulent* simultaneously shows the gendered division and the relationality of this separation in a literal visual depiction. The two-screen video installation simultaneously shows the male singer on one side and the female character on the other. Whereas the male singer performs to a full house, the female singer faces an empty auditorium. His voice is loud and clear; he receives applause for his performance even though he has his back turned to his audience. Therefore, it is implied that he is not making an effort to be heard. In contrast, the female voice is struggling to utter indecipherable sounds, which then turn into beautiful musicality, but then becomes

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<sup>46</sup> Neshat's "solo museum exhibitions include shows at the Whitney Museum, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Arts, Athens; The Serpentine Gallery, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Hamburg Bahnhof, Berlin and Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montreal" (DVD Booklet 2009).

<sup>47</sup> For further discussion, see the previous chapter.

<sup>48</sup> See Naficy (2000).

disrupted again; the female singer holds her head as if she is becoming mad—the singing does not make sense, signifying the “irrationality” of the (gendered) East.

Neshat discusses this deliberate staging of the female character’s madness: “[T]he fast circular camera movement around her was meant to reiterate her mental state, her madness, her rage” (MacDonald, 2004, 632). Yet she also provides a hopeful element. While the female singer performs in an empty room and does not have an audience, her voice can be heard “next door” in the male auditorium, as the sounds come through. The film’s official press kit posits that in *Turbulent*, “Neshat explored singing as a metaphor for freedom, inspired by an Iranian ban on women singing” (2009, 6).

Neshat transitioned from this moving-image work, often characterized by double-screen installation and unconventional narratives, to cinema. *Women Without Men* is her first feature film.

## **Analysis**

In the following section, I examine the textual and visual language used to explore how *Women Without Men* “talks back” (hooks 1989). I begin with an analysis of the content of the film by identifying the tactical interventions it deploys; thereafter, I interrogate the conditions that make counter-hegemonic emergence, in this situation, possible by synthesising significant contextual elements. In analyzing the film, I focus on the “dialectics of presence/absence,” a framework I derive from Shohat and Stam’s (1994) pioneering work in this area and by examining the film’s responses to dominant representations. Finally, I draw on Gramsci’s work for the concluding section on the

conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence. I supplement the analysis with comments and observations derived from an interview I conducted with the artist.

### ***'Talking Back'***

#### *Visibility Through Visual Appeal*

Similar to Said's idea of in/visibility with regard to Palestinian cinema discussed in the previous chapter, Shohat and Stam's (1994) "dialectics of presence/absence" refer to the "iconic paradigm of the simultaneous presence and absence of marginalized communities" (224). They demonstrate how the racial representations of marginalized communities typically operate through a paradox – on one hand they take place in a fantasy space born out of a desire for otherness. On the other hand, this presence of otherness is paradoxically created through erasure. This binary and contradiction of visibility/invisibility or presence/absence is a key (and confusing) component of racist discourse. To be able to identify the existence of this paradox – absence of representations accompanied with limited portrayals – is the first step towards creating alternatives that would simultaneously rectify the erasure and challenge the limited portrayals.

Neshat has achieved visibility through an aesthetic focus on visual appeal. Referring to *Turbulent's* making, she (2001) speaks of this orientation as creating a visual narrative in the video installation: "It has been a great challenge for me to create a type of narrative that is not tied to language, but rather functions purely on a visual and sonic level. Since the narrative is non-literal, abstract and often quite ambiguous, the viewer must rely heavily on her or his own imagination to draw meanings" (60). Dabashi (2005)

perceptively notes that the strength of Neshat's art is its visual innovation. However, he also points to some of Neshat's verbal "generalizations," such as when she refers to "Islamic societies" and "Western societies," each imbued with "collective" and "traditional" versus "individualistic" and "non-traditional" characteristics (Neshat 1997). Neshat's own verbal explanations of her art contain problematic generalizations about the so-called East and West. But Dabashi contends that her work reproduces binary oppositions (such as West/East; Modernity/Tradition; Man/Woman) at the same time that it challenges them; he says that it is "semantically arrested, in order to be visually liberated" (71). This argument raises interesting questions for the subsequent discussion concerning counter-hegemonic emergence in terms of the vulnerabilities of co-optation of apparent essentialist statements. For Dabashi (2005), "she [Neshat] has hung her picture and rested her case—shown everything, without telling anything" (75).

On a similar note, Naficy's (2000) analysis of *Turbulent*, *Rapture*, and *Soliloquy* posits the complex nuances that underlie these apparent straight-forward binaries. Naficy (2000) states, "[T]he tug of war between self and other, modern and pre-modern, the West and the rest, female and male, desert and fortress, exile and home leads Neshat to create apparently straightforward and polar, but increasingly complex parallel filmic texts" (53). I agree with Dabashi and Naficy's readings of Neshat's work. Indeed, her art regurgitates polarity in order to transcend it. For example, *Turbulent* is built around a double screen installation separating a male section from a female section. While a quick glance at the video shows male and female worlds as separate, the core message of this piece is about a woman's struggle to take voice and her suppressed knowledge – the video depicts how she does not have an audience. What she tries to utter and sing finds

echo only with great difficulty. These polarities and the complexities that underlie them are also apparent in *Women Without Men*.

Overall, *Women Without Men* has received significant praise as an artistic and visually compelling text made of “unforgettable” (Ochoa 2010) images. The film is composed of memorable tableaux—artistic stills in the illusionary shape of paintings. The emphasis is not on verbalising things, but rather on showing them in a type of “quiet” tranquility that is also reinforced by the minimal use of music. Even the scene depicting Munis’ suicide, whom we have come to know as the political activist who terminates her brother’s plan to force her into an arranged marriage by killing herself, is peaceful and not so threatening. After all, Munis is resurrected. Ryuichi Sakamoto, who created the music for the film, incorporated Persian music by Abbas Bakhtiari.<sup>49</sup> He created a sonic atmosphere that minimized the use of music and privileged the sounds of nature (e.g., birds), so that the garden may be suggestive of paradise in the after-life. The idea of the garden, which Neshat had already put to use in *Tooba*, symbolizes, in her own words:

...—a heaven. In the Islamic and Persian tradition, the garden is a very important symbol both in mystical and political terms. As in many other cultures, in our mystical and poetic tradition a garden becomes a space for spiritual transcendence, a paradise. And within our political language the garden is a place for freedom and independence. I found all those subjects very relevant at the time (Neshat, in MacDonald, 2004, 645).

The images and colours of the garden, evocative of a place of well-being and pleasure, contribute to the peacefulness of the film, proposing better possibilities and an alternative space freed from sexual harassment, rape, and foreign interventions. In its calming effect, Neshat’s film resembles Jacir’s *Salt of This Sea* as these texts carry within them a hopeful

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<sup>49</sup> Sakamoto is the winner of an Academy Award and a Grammy Award for scoring *The Last Emperor*. He is also the recipient of a Golden Globe Award and the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* from France’s Ministry of Culture for his music compositions.

sensibility. They offer ideas removed from the horrors of Palestinian and Iranian realities (which are of course also the products of foreign interventionism) in order to push their audiences to imagine transcending injustice.

The film, furthermore, responds to the dialectics of presence/absence via its re-writing of history (Shohat & Stam 1994), similar to the film *Salt of This Sea* discussed in the previous chapter. *Women Without Men* rectifies a particular dominant historical narrative as it responds to the amnesia in Iranian-U.S. relations represented in mainstream media by presenting a view of Iran in 1953, when a British and American-backed coup removed the democratically-elected government. Neshat re-centres this moment as a historical turning point. In the film, she uses desaturated colours to transport viewers into another historical era. Neshat describes her use of colour in the following terms:

I thought it was interesting to have saturated color, mainly to pay tribute to the period that the film takes place; the 1950's (sic). However throughout the film, the scheme of color changes from, let's say, the orchard which is quite colorful, to the scenes of street protests where I purposely drained the color, to give a sort of archival quality to the picture (Electronic Press Kit, 2009).

Her unusual use of colours contributes to making the film so visually appealing. The drained colours readily take viewers into another time-zone, in a clear contrast with many bright and “happy” colours used from the beginning to the end of many Hollywood films. In addition, alternating between this scheme of colour to warmer colours in the scenes in the garden keeps one's attention and interest in the film. Hence, *Women Without Men* makes these difficulties palatable and emphasizes beauty within difficulty.

Neshat kept Farsi as the language of *Women Without Men*. In Chapter One, I describe this tactic of deploying the native language as an intervention. The same emphasis on visuality is apparent in Neshat's use of the Farsi language. She relates how

she did not provide translation and subtitles for *Fervor* (2010), a video installation about seduction and taboos related to sexuality in Muslim contexts, as the general aim was for the public to understand the concept of the film without using words. Similarly, she did not provide translation for the Farsi calligraphy painted on the bodies of the *Women of Allah* photograph series. Sawsan Mahdi (2010) offers a discussion of this in her M.F.A. process paper, arguing that:

... the artist [Neshat] intentionally did not translate the text of Farsi Calligraphy (her native language) that has overwritten the uncovered parts of her body such as her face, hands, feet and eyes. By doing so, she announces the need to confront a cultural conflict and to accentuate the gap that remains unbridgeable between the Eastern and Western cultures. (12)

Neshat painted Farsi calligraphy and the poetry of Iranian women writers Forugh Farrokhzād and Tahereh Saffarzadeh on the women's bodies (Dabashi, 1997).

Certainly, Neshat's work speaks volumes without words. The first time I watched *Turbulent* and *Women Without Men*, it was without any English subtitles. I understood the narrative of both pieces, even though I do not speak Farsi. When I saw *Women Without Men* again, with English subtitles this time, I did not experience any surprise or discover a new meaning for the plot. The film was familiar and I knew that I had already seen it. Even the comments of the characters were not surprising. Neshat has minimized the use of dialogue, which contributes to creating the quiet sensibility of the film and to ensuring that even viewers who are not familiar with the language can appreciate the intended meanings. Although the film covers disquieting events, most notably the coup d'état in Iran, and disturbing issues like rape, forced marriages, suicide, and polygamy, it has a Zen quality.



Finally, the artist draws on Islamic mysticism and on Quranic imagery, which is additionally representative of the tactic of drawing on collective memory and heritage. The film is not only rooted in Islamic metaphors, but it also borrows from Western cinema and art iconography, which reflects the artist's own state of in-between-ness and hybridity.

The first scene of the film starts with an *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer); we can hear “*Allah Akbar*,” or “God is Great.” Islam, from the beginning, is an integral part of the film's narrative. Furthermore, shots of street protests in various scenes place the film in the political arena, as politics appear to be an integral part of everyday life and a significant force that shapes one's existence. This is important in order to situate the film as a text that “talks back” to dominant discourses of Islam. The first scene depicts a female character (whom we will later get to know as Munis) jumping from the roof of a home and committing suicide. Her medium-length dark hair floats in the wind as she falls in slow motion, peacefully, to the pavement. As she jumps, Munis is not frightened; she shows a quiet determination to end her life.

### *Responses to Dominant Representations*

In their re-writing of history, Neshat and her collaborator Azari significantly altered Parsipur's narrative, especially in terms of character development and ending. Whereas the novel includes five female protagonists, the film script limits itself to four, excluding the very magical character of Mahdokkht, who turns into a tree in the novel. In discussing changes that were made in adapting the novel for the screen, Neshat (2009) notes:

I knew that it was going to be a big challenge, mostly because in this particular story one must simultaneously follow five main characters, each character

being totally unique in her nature, aspirations and representation of distinct social and economic class. Some characters were so surrealistic, that it gave a fairy tale quality to the narrative; for example Mahdokht, being the woman who could not cope with her humanity and eventually planted herself to be a tree. So at the end, we eliminated Mahdokht from our script. As you will see in the film, Munis and Zarin are quite magic in their nature while Faezeh and Fakhri remain very realistic. Also, in Parsipur's novel, the political material was only mentioned as a background to the women's lives; but I decided to expand the narrative by emphasizing the historical, political crisis of the time, which was the American organized coup d'état that overthrew Dr. Mossadegh's government. I went as far as shaping Munis, one of the main characters of the film, as a political activist. So through Munis, we follow the political development.

Aiming to depart from victimizing the female characters, Neshat and Azari move them further towards a sort of figurative magical heroism.

Further, the novel contains several allusions to women's complicity and participation in patriarchy. For example, Munis' friend Fayzeh accepts to become her brother's second wife in the novel; this is changed in the film. In addition, the novel heavily emphasizes how Fakhri, the middle-aged housewife of a military officer, grows tired of the women and attempts to evict them from the orchard that she had purchased when she decided to leave her husband.

In the interview I conducted with Neshat, she revealed that although there are many things that she appreciates about the novel, she is also critical of its ending. The novel ends with Fayzeh's wedding to Amir. Munis becomes a "simple" school teacher after returning from a seven year 'existential' trip in the desert (Parsipur 2004, 128). Farrokhlaqa (Fakhri in the film) does not want to return to the garden because "she didn't have the patience to put up with the women" (Parsipur 2004, 130). She marries again so that she can "do some social climbing" (Parsipur 2004, 130). Zarrinkolah (Zarrin in the film) marries the gardener, gives birth to a child, and goes on a trip with her husband,

“they became smoke and rose into the sky” (Parsipur 2004, 131). The way Parsipur writes the ending of the novel does not suggest any extraordinary and happy development in the life trajectories of these women. All of them settle and accept to live lives that are “neither good nor bad” (Parsipur 2004, 126). In Neshat’s vision, she prefers allowing them more agency and courage to transcend their difficulties. She also de-emphasizes tensions between the four female characters. She particularly downplays how Fakhri grows tired of the women. This alteration to the original narrative increases the notion of solidarity between the characters and strengthens the position/location of the garden as a peaceful place for refuge and healing. The film’s ending excludes Fayzeh’s union to Amir. When I interviewed Neshat, she explained that she was keen on depicting how the four female characters undergo a positive transformation (i.e., that they have the courage to do something about their problems in order to transcend them) and, thus, depart from becoming victims.

In addition, in the film, Fakhri does not kill her husband accidentally, in what could be interpreted as an act of self-defense. In the novel, however, the narrator remarks that Farrokhlaqa (Fakhri in the film) feared for her life when her husband started speaking and looking at her kindly, something that he had never done before:

She punched him hard in the stomach. It was like a pillow. He wasn’t ready for the punch. He tripped over one leg and tried to regain his balance with the other, but lost control and fell down the terrace stairs. She stood in front of the chair for a while. She didn’t dare look down the stairs. He didn’t make a sound. (Parsipur, 1989, 68-70)

The narrator follows this episode with a statement about how three months later Farrokhlaqa was sitting on a chair wearing black. In the film, however, she simply leaves her husband. This episode illustrates Neshat’s reticence to display violence, although this

is not as palpable in her earlier work. The *Women of Allah* series displays women carrying guns. Nonetheless, it has been argued that this could also be a portrayal of Iranian female agency or a challenge to their victimization—or perhaps even an oppositional gaze (hooks, 1992) reflective of a model of resistance. As Dabashi (1997) puts it, “[A]fter Shirin Neshat’s photography, we can no longer assume that ‘men’ are to kill and ‘women’ are to love.”

Neshat’s more recent productions take a more obvious stand against violence. Her re-writing of history in *Women Without Men* excludes slogans that called for the killing of the British and Americans during the 1953 protests. Nonetheless, the Farsi expression that the Iranian protesters were chanting could arguably be translated as “down with the British” and not literally as “death to the British.” In the *Walker Art Center* discussion with the filmmaker (Sheryl Monsley, April 16, 2010), Neshat justified her decision by saying that she was anti-violence and could not live with it, and that maybe it was because of the “woman in her.”

Ultimately, gender is at the center of *Women Without Men*’s narrative since it follows the evolution of four female characters and focuses on their life experiences and their stories told from a woman’s point of view. The four women escape their oppressive circumstances and find refuge in a metaphorical garden; they also form a type of utopian society there. Likewise, in Neshat’s *Rapture*, women also leave, as they go to the sea and board a boat, perhaps escaping as refugees. This idea of escape is present in the narratives of other Iranian female filmmakers in their treatments of gender issues, as well.<sup>50</sup>

It is noteworthy that Fakhri, as the upper-class female character, plays a key role in this re-centring of gender by purchasing the orchard which provides a space for escape,

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<sup>50</sup> For example, see *The Day I Became a Woman* by Marzieh Meshkini.

refuge, and healing. Financial independence, from this perspective, is a major component in saving others and being saved, pointing to an interpretation of feminism grounded in the material necessity of financial independence for women in order to be “free.” However, this particular narrative that positions the upper-class female character as providing the space of refuge also carries class assumptions. For example, Fakhri tells Zarin, "I've felt like a mother to you from the moment we found you." One can read here a hierarchal organizing of a scenario of saving and being saved that posits the benevolence of the richer segment of this created utopian society without fully fleshing out tensions emerging precisely because of these class differences and inequalities. In contrast, the novel contains several references to tensions between Farrokhlaga and the other female characters. However, these parts of the narrative are lacking in Neshat's film, leading to the removal of significant nuances related to class privilege that create divisions between the women, although she visually depicts class status. In the film, Fakhri is dressed in lavish dresses and suits. On her way to purchase the orchard, she wears sunglasses with an elegant white headscarf loosely tied on the side, not in a hijab style as we can see the front part of her hair, but rather in the image of a wealthy movie character driving away on vacation. When she reaches her destination, the driver opens the door to her and she steps out of a luxury car. She is holding a clutch purse under her arm as she walks slowly, as if she was on a promenade, towards the gate. Another man (the gardener) opens the door to her. Fakhri is dressed in an A-line blue and white coat with a large skirt or petticoat underneath, which provides a full skirt effect. Whereas we can clearly see here that she is well off financially, the film does not flesh out visually or verbally tensions between the women arising from class differences.

The film plays out notions of female agency and disempowerment. Whereas Munis progressively strengthens her political engagement and activism, the first and last scenes depict her as committing suicide; however, during the film, she magically returns to life, bringing to light a metaphor very close to Spivak's (2005) idea of speaking through death. Spivak uses the figure of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, who killed herself, to illustrate how the only recourse available to her (and to subalterns who cannot speak) was to commit suicide in order to communicate a message. By using her body, she was able to take voice, thereby transcending her subalternity.<sup>51</sup> These scenes speak to whether the subaltern can speak or at the very least find voice through death.

The theme of suicide is also present in *Rapture*, another video installation that Neshat produced in 1999, which depicts women leaving on a boat. As Neshat explains in *Expressing the Inexpressible* (2004), a video recording DVD about her video art, the women getting on the boat and leaving could be interpreted as an "act of bravery." Furthermore, she adds, "Whether it meant that they were committing suicide or they were reaching freedom, it wasn't very clear." Interestingly, this is also a theme in the award-winning Iranian film *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000) as one of the female characters named Hooria (meaning "nymph" or "mythological female spirit" in Farsi and "free" in Arabic) goes to the beach with her new belongings purchased with her recent inheritance and sets sail towards the unknown.

In *Expressing the Inexpressible*, a video recording DVD program about Neshat's photography and video installations, Neshat explicitly states that she was keen on keeping the resurrection of Munis in her version of *Women Without Men*. After Munis kills herself, Amir and Fayzeh bury her corpse in their backyard. Fayzeh comes back to

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<sup>51</sup> See the Introduction for further discussion.

their house on the day of Amir's wedding in a last desperate attempt to stop the marriage from occurring. As she is burying a charm and casting a spell to stop his wedding from happening, Munis' voice rises from beneath the ground. Fayzeh digs her up. Even if one does not read this episode as making a statement through death, it certainly alludes to a precarious situation where there is no other recourse for release than death. The film ends with the first same shot of Munis letting herself fall from a roof. Her voice narrates, in a very peaceful and determined way, "Death isn't so hard. You only think it is...all that we wanted was to find a new form, a new way. Release."

Munis, more so in the film than in the novel, performs particular acts of defiance, such as when she enters a cafe solely occupied by men and sits to watch the news on television. In another scene, Neshat, faithful to her style of playing with gender binaries, frames Munis standing in her full black veil in a sea of men wearing white and light-coloured shirts, in a striking contrast to this lone female figure. Here the viewers are enticed to wonder about her safety; but the camera subsequently moves out and we see that other women are also part of the crowd of activist demonstrators.



**Figure 6:** Scene from *Women without Men*

*Women Without Men* was critiqued for its arguably problematic portrayal of Muslim men as violent misogynists. When I asked the artist about her development of the male characters, she spoke about the inclusion of the gardener as a positive male character to offset the others; yet the film also contains a scene of rape. Two men see Fayzeh peeking from outside at Munis sitting in a café. They follow Fayzeh in the street and rape her. Munis’s brother Amine is also an unpleasant and sexist male character. He pressures his sister to marry because in his mind she is getting too old, to the point that she prefers salvation through death. Patriarchal thinking is so engrained in his head that he “naturally” proposes to Fayzeh to become his second wife while his first wife is expecting his child. But contrary to the novel, she refuses his proposal in the film: “And when you get tired of me, I’ll be a servant to your third wife?” In another scene, Fakhri’s long-lost love arrives to her house party with a blond fiancée at his arm. Some of the female guests comment that Abbas is attracted to certain types of women as evident in



the following narrative: "Look at her! She's beautiful." "No, it's only because she's American. Abbas still goes crazy every time he meets a blond." Abbas' arrival with his American fiancée, Christine—much to Fakhri's surprise and dismay — touches on issues of mental colonization and its derived standards of beauty.

While denouncing sexist thinking within Muslim societies is imperative in order to put an end to discriminatory practices, it must be remembered that negative portrayals of Muslim men in the media have real consequences (Salaita 2006). As Razack (2008) explains, such portrayals serve to “cast out” patriarchal Muslims from the West via, for example, deportations, evictions, and so on. So how does one voice such issues while simultaneously challenging any practice of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1994, 93)?

### **Counter-Hegemonic Emergence**

The *Women of Allah* photographic series constituted Neshat's point of entry as an artist, as this was her first major body of work. The photographic series received considerable attention, leading her to become a “globally celebrated artist” (Dabashi, 2005, 31). Whereas her work has been widely acclaimed, it also stands against a large repertoire of discourses that it opposes, at times in a very confrontational way. Guns, which were part of the photographic series, carry violent connotations. On the other hand, they signify an alternative portrayal of women as being able to defend themselves and possibly even the nation (Homa Hoodfar, personal communication, 2011). Dadi (2008) speaks of a “confrontational modality” in his article on Neshat's photographs, which also includes a shot by an unknown photographer of Iranian women “fighters” in an army display at the occasion of the commemoration of the war with Iraq:

Neshat completed the *Women of Allah* series in 1997, well before September 11, 2001, yet its current relevance in addressing the perceived global threat of Islam is striking in articulating the link between gender and terrorism. While Neshat draws upon the repertoire of classic Orientalist images of the veiled figure, she displaces their charge from being the passive object of the erotic gaze toward a confrontational modality. (146)

Dadi relies on this confrontational modality to debunk the Orientalist charge, referencing previous research by Alloula, (1986) that explored French colonial postcards from a century earlier featuring Algerian women. Although Dadi does not expand on Alloula's research, it is clear that the women in the postcards posed without smiling, or displayed forced smiles, or might have smiled on command, suggesting a reticence to being subjected to the colonial eroticized gaze.

Neshat also uses the veil—another loaded symbol—in her photographs as well as in her film *Soliloquy*, in which she posed dressed in clothing resembling a chador – a large black cloth that conceals the body, typically worn by women in Iran. *Soliloquy* conducts a theatrical performance of identity, as Neshat does not veil in real life. Other artists, like Iranian-American comedienne Tissa Hami and Pakistani-British Muslim comedienne Shazia Mirzahave, just as controversially have incorporated the veil in their performances and have been criticized for going on stage wearing a headscarf since they do not veil in real life.<sup>52</sup> But even women who do not wear the hijab on a daily basis occasionally cover their heads. Several Muslim practices require of women who do not regularly veil to wear the headscarf for particular circumstances (e.g., when entering a mosque or attending a funeral). Neshat claims that veiling is just something women wear and is not necessarily so political:

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<sup>52</sup> For example, see Fakhraie's (2007) blog entry: <http://www.racialicious.com/2007/11/20/funny-business--in-comedy/>

My interest in the veil, or the chador has both aesthetic and metaphoric reasons. The veil has always been a complex subject; some consider it as an ‘exotic’ emblem, some find it a symbol of ‘repression,’ while others find it a symbol of ‘liberation.’ The veil seems to remain a Western controversy, while in fact the veil is what many Muslim women wear in the public domain, so it does not always have to be so politically loaded. In *Women Without Men*, since it takes place in the 1950’s, when the women actually had a ‘choice’ regarding the veil, we have women like Munis and Faezeh who are constantly veiled, then we have Fakhri who is Westernized and fashionable and not at all covered by it (Neshat 2009 Electronic Press Kit).

As much as the veil is feared, there is also an appetite for its display, as when belly dancers enter a stage with faces covered only then to lose their veils to satisfy the desires of a particular gaze.<sup>53</sup> The theme of veiling enables some types of access to the public domain. While it typically fluctuates between commodification (as an object of desire) and threat (as a symbol of difference and resistance), including the veil in a performance does not necessarily preclude an alternative treatment of the subject.

According to Dadi (2008), “the audience of Neshat’s photographs was, and has remained, primarily the Western art world. Her remarkable success is due to her promotion by European and American critics, curators, galleries, and museums” (130). Neshat herself speaks of the insufficient circulation of her work in Iran: “[O]nly *Tooba* has been officially shown in Iran recently at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Teheran. Apparently it had an enthusiastic reception” (MacDonald 2004 639). However, as previously discussed, *Women Without Men* has been available through a pirate distribution network in Iran. When I interviewed the artist about the difficulty of gaining access to her video installations, she explained that in addition to her interest in exploring

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<sup>53</sup> In a previously published article, I addressed the shifting discourses surrounding the veil in both Western and Arab media, paying particular attention to discourses of the veil in Al Jazeera’s English language website (see “Discourses of the Veil in *Al Jazeera English*.” Reconstruction, vol. 10, no. 1, 2010 [Online]. Available: Reconstruction)..

a new medium to expand her repertoire as an artist, part of her motivation for transitioning to making her first feature-length film was so that a larger audience could see her work.

Moreover, Neshat reveals the connections between her previous work as a visual artist and the creation of her moving images, which carry the traces of those influences:

But you have to understand that I came to film as a visual artist, and my audience was the public who knew my photography and installation work. They understood and appreciated how my work slowly evolved from still photography to the moving image, and that although I am making films, essentially my work is about the language of visual art (MacDonald 2004, 648).

Not only does *Women Without Men* capitalize on its visual appeal as an artistic film, but it is also produced in the unique style of magic realism. Similar to the use of humour discussed in the following chapter, it allows a disruptive message to break through and become accessible. Neshat opens her preface to the 2011 edition of *Women Without Men* with a reference to Gabriel Garcia Marquez' definition of magic realism, relating it to Parsipur's ability to make her readers believe the unbelievable. Thus, a viewer has to suspend judgement when "she [Parsipur] unleashes a dead woman and brings her back to life; she plants another woman to grow as a tree; the men in a brothel suddenly become headless; a woman gives birth to a flower and they fly off to the skies" (Neshat 2011, vii-viii). This tradition capitalizes on orality, as in Marquez's reliance on his grandmother's stories that did not make sense to him, but which he did not dare to question. Azari picks up on this note when he tells the audience, in a discussion organized by the *Walker Art Center* (April 16, 2010), "You have to take it for what it is. We are your grandmothers

telling you a story; either you accept it or you don't." In the same discussion, Neshat specified that they were not interested in making a documentary film.

This perspective refers to an issue that is at the core of this thesis—that of stories and voices that do not make sense and that are routinely dismissed as mad speech. Moreover, as mentioned in the author's note to this new edition, Parsipur drew inspiration from what she knew to create her characters—relatives and other Iranians who crossed her path at different points of her life. And here lies another discursive tool - that of circulating messages without providing strict burdens of proof.

Magic realism reflects a sensibility that entertains the possibility of a better "what-if," of an art form that may activate an illusionary kernel of utopian possibility. This approach constitutes a useful tactical alternative to the use of *progressive realism*. According to Stam and Spence (1985), *progressive realism* raises problematic issues in terms of its search for "truth" and "reality," which are not so evident to portray on screen:

Many oppressed groups have used 'progressive realism' to unmask and combat hegemonic images. Women and Third World film-makers have attempted to counter-pose the objectifying discourse of patriarchy and colonialism with a vision of themselves and their reality 'from within.' But this laudable intention is not always unproblematic. 'Reality' is not self-evidently given and 'truth' cannot be immediately captured by the camera. (639)

Stam and Spence do not completely dismiss here the possibilities of progressive realism. Rather, they point to some of the issues of using a realist repertoire. Using a magical repertoire, as in the case of *Women Without Men*, affords the filmmaker more leeway and increased flexibility to stage an intervention. Neshat cannot be subjected (in this case) to the burden of demonstrating that her representations are accurately reflective of "reality." When Fakhri enters the orchard for the first time, it almost seems to be a magical,

mystical paradise, with birds singing while a cloud masks clarity of sight, hovering somewhere between the unreal and the possibility of the real.

While there is not such a stringent burden of proof operating, the burden of representation (Mercer, 1988) is invoked. The DVD booklet opens with the following statement: “Shirin Neshat is an Iranian born artist/filmmaker whose work addresses the complex social and religious forces shaping the identity of Muslim women.” In a TED talk, Neshat (2010) speaks about finding herself in a position of “being” the voice of her people, but that “oddly enough,” she does not live in Iran. So how is one entitled to represent the people of a particular land without living there? What kind of representation is it? And how representative is this representation? This representation, located in exile, occurs through the performance of identity; note the title of Parsipur’s novel: *Women Without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran* (my emphasis).

In this case, the burden of representation involves a portrayal of Muslim men as violent misogynists. Although this type of discourse/image sells, it cannot simply be relegated to a consent to domination, since for Gramsci good sense (as critical and collective) is part of common sense—it contains the seeds of viable alternatives (Keeling 2007). Adamson (1980), quoting Gramsci, explains that:

[d]espite its connotation in English, then, “common sense” is ordinarily very far removed from the real needs and interests of the masses of ordinary people who hold it; thought that satisfies real needs and interests is referred to by Gramsci as “good sense.” Yet, at the same time, common sense is never identical with ruling class ideology; this ideology at best only “limit[s] the original thought of the popular masses in a negative direction.” Common sense is a complex and disjointed amalgam influenced by all previous philosophical currents. “It contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.” Common sense must be understood as a series of “stratified deposits,” an “infinity of traces without...an inventory.” And just as “every religion...is in

reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions,” perceptions of these “deposits” and “traces” will vary along class lines. Finally, common sense “is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life.” (150)

Because patriarchy is a global system, the telling of stories about Muslim women’s oppression should not be reduced to mere consent to hegemony. *Women Without Men* is also interested in re-establishing the “real” in its effort to re-write history and to denounce its co-optation. As Neshat explains, “I happen to believe revisiting history will prove to be helpful so we can put certain facts straight, to comprehend the foundation behind the conflict between the West and Muslims, and to offer new perspectives” (Electronic Press Kit, 2009). This is similar to Jacir’s preoccupation with the real discussed in the previous chapter; this idea also surfaces in Hammad and Nawaz’s conceptions, pointing to their dissatisfaction with their representation in the mainstream.

It is further interesting to note that both Jacir and Neshat speak to the will and perseverance of the filmmaker to make the work materialize; a view also supported by Gertz and Khleifi’s (2011) study of Palestinian cinema. Neshat is presently working as a collaborator in Azari’s feature film on Umm Kulthum. When I interviewed the artist, she mentioned that it was now her turn to take the back seat. They collaboratively wrote the script and are in the process of moving to Egypt to shoot the film.

*Women Without Men* ultimately managed to secure financing (a budget of about 4 million Euros).<sup>54</sup> Neshat describes her budget as “limited,” as *Women Without Men* is a

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<sup>54</sup> Presented by Indiepix Films, which aims to bring the “very best” of independent cinema to film fans and “is home to the broadest online selection of indie films around the world,”<sup>54</sup> and the Coproduction Office, the film is a co-production involving Essential Filmproduktion, Coop99, Parisienne de Production and

period film that was shot in Morocco, necessitating the building of structures and construction of the interior design and landscaping to make Casablanca resemble Tehran in the 1950s.<sup>55</sup> It took the director six years to make the film. Azari comments that they have been really “lucky” and “blessed” to be able to make the film outside of Iran and to show it to an audience.<sup>56</sup> This raises interesting questions about the role of “exceptional” artists who, given their resilience, talent, or level of conversance with hegemonic discourse, manage to establish themselves as artists in the public domain. Their position of relative acceptance can serve to refute how upward mobility is severely restricted for marginalized communities due to structural barriers. On the other hand, their interventions contribute to taking voice and countering harmful images.

## Summary

*Women Without Men* attempts to forge an aesthetic of contestation. The film’s main creative energy is located in its visual appeal, accomplished through memorable tableaux and a quiet tranquility that endows the film with a Zen quality. Indeed, Neshat minimizes the use of music and dialogue and puts the emphasis on showing ideas. The film also re-centres gendered dynamics, in the mystical space of the garden, suggestive of paradise after life. But it overlooks class-related issues that would interfere with the peacefulness of this imagined place of refuge and healing. In contrast, Parsipur’s narrative points to class-related tensions that come to threaten this location of escape. The film furthermore deploys several discursive tactics, including re-writing history (mainly the British-

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support from the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Filmstiftung NordrheinWestfalen, Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Filmförderungsanstalt, Eurimages Council of Europe, Österreichisches Filminstitut, Filmfonds Wien, THECIF (Electronic Press Kit, 2009).

<sup>55</sup> See Bloom’s (2010 ) interview with Neshat, and Roxo’s (2010) conversation with Shirin Neshat.

<sup>56</sup> Expressed during the *Walker Art Center* discussion (April 16, 2010).



American coup against the democratically-elected government of Mossadegh), using the native language, and drawing on collective heritage and memory. In terms of counter-hegemonic emergence, Neshat's point of entry as an artist began with her work on the *Women of Allah* photograph series, which mobilises culturally loaded symbols (the veil, weapons, and calligraphy), thereby providing access for the exploration of the possibilities of circulating alternative messages. This becomes more evident as she transforms herself as an artist and expands her linguistic repertoire from photography to video installations to film. In disseminating her perspective, Neshat has worked with a metaphor of madness (in *Turbulent*) and speaking through death (the suicide of Munis in *Women Without Men*). These examples point to how these types of logic are unwelcome in the public domain. Therefore, I argue that they are constructed as mad speech. And in light of the emergence of voice, Neshat tells the story of her first feature film in the style of magic realism, which enables the circulation of otherwise "suppressed knowledge" (Foucault, 1972). While the burden of proof is loosened, the tightening of the burden of representation increases, even invoking at times a type of theatrical performance of identity.

The already impossible task of representing an entire religion, country, or culture is furthermore problematized by the artist's location of residence and work, some 6,000 miles away from her land of birth. Hence, she is, as an embodied hybridity, contesting these binaries: West/East; modernity/tradition; male/female. Neshat visually transcends polarity by simultaneously recreating and showing the interconnectedness of these binaries, as in for example how the male and female characters of her videos operate in separate worlds but are yet aware of each other. In so doing, she uses contrasts of colour,

double screen installations, and parallel narratives. Whereas her art's circulation in Iran is limited, it has nonetheless gained significant access through pirate distribution networks. In continuation with examining the possibilities of visual mediums to transmit counter-hegemonic messages, the next chapter discusses the films and television productions of Zarqa Nawaz. The forthcoming analysis reveals similarities in terms of discursive tactics deployed. But the next case study is also interesting because it has achieved the greatest level of popularity, thereby shedding light on processes of transitioning to the mainstream.

## CHAPTER 5

### TRANSITIONING TO THE MAINSTREAM IN TELEVISION: ZARQA NAWAZ'S FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTIONS

Zarqa Nawaz inserted her own language and humour into contemporary discourses about Islam. She has, unlike many other Muslim artists, been able to infiltrate the mainstream. Indeed, her television show *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has been broadcasted nationally and internationally, and has been a groundbreaking contribution, categorizing her as a singular Muslim producer and writer in the area of Canadian television. Using comedy as a tool, Nawaz makes it possible to associate Muslims with humour, but this time situating it in their perspectives and realities and using tactics of inversion and reversal. In so doing, she provides an alternative portrayal to all too familiar images of violent Muslim men and oppressed Muslim women. Yet, Nawaz began her career as a filmmaker in the margins. Her earlier work attests to this in terms of its funding, distribution networks, audience and narratives which are derived from within a marginalized and pejoratively stereotyped community.

This chapter focuses on Zarqa Nawaz's show *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, a popular television sit-com. Launched on January 9, 2007 and ending on April 2, 2012, the television comedy, consisting of a total of 91 episodes, aired on CBC for six seasons. It has also aired in more than 90 countries, including France, Finland, the United Arab Emirates and several countries in francophone Africa. My interest in this series is based

on its duration – as a long-term intervention – and its widespread popularity.<sup>57</sup> As well, unlike the other case studies examined, *Little on the Prairie* is a distinctly Canadian sitcom. According to the show’s official press kit (2006), the series attempts to explore “the dynamics of Muslim and non-Muslim relationships with a comedic twist.” Here, I am interested in the use of humour as a potential generator of new modes of expression for the construction of Muslim identity, and as an ensemble of tactics that disrupt hegemonic discourses.

### **9/11 Genre**

Since the events of September 11, 2001, a new genre of representations has emerged, in part as a way of responding to the contemporary climate of anxiety. The demonization of Muslims and their pejorative representations in the mass media fulfils a representational need to portray them as an enemy and thereby reinforce a sense of self. Yet, negative and limited portrayals of Muslims predate the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Said 1978; Shaheen 1984 & 2001; Khan 1998; Todd 1998; Yeğenoğlu 1998; Karim 2000; Vivian 1999). However, contact with Muslim peoples has a relatively recent

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<sup>57</sup> As indicated on *WestWind Pictures* official website, *Little Mosque* won the following awards: “2011 Seoul International Drama Awards Seoul, Korea Nominated (Best Drama Series); 2009 INPUT Poland Official Selection; 2009 Rose D’Or Switzerland Nominated (Best Sitcom); 2009 CFTPA Ottawa, ON Canada Nominated (Best Comedy); 2009 Dawn Breakers International Film Festival Phoenix, Arizona USA; Official Selection 2008 INPUT South Africa Official Selection; 2008 The New York Festival New York, New York USA International TV Broadcasting Situation Comedy Award; 2008 Gemini Awards Toronto, ON Canada Nominated (Best Director in a Comedy Series, Best Wardrobe); 2007 Gemini Awards Regina, SK Canada Canada Award, Nominated (Best Direction, Best Writing); 2007 Cologne Comedy Festival Germany Selected to screen at Best of TV Comedy; 2007 Cinema Tout Ecran Geneva Audience Award for Best Series, Special Jury Mention; 2007 Roma FictionFest Rome, Italy Maximo Award, Teleplay Award, Best Screenplay; 2007 Rose D’Or Switzerland Nominated (Best Sitcom); 2007 Banff Television Awards (Rockies) Banff, AB Canada Nominated (Best Comedy); 2007 Media Awards (The Muslim Public Affairs Council) Los Angeles, CA USA; Voices of Courage & Conscience Award (Zarqa Nawaz); 2007 Chris Awards Columbus, OH, USA Bronze Plaque; 2007 Yorkton Film Festival Yorkton, SK Canada Best Comedy” (retrieved April 22, 2012 from <http://www.westwindpictures.com/site/our-work/scripted/little-mosque-on-the-prairie/>).

history in North America, and discourses inscribed on these bodies have seen a new contemporary turn. In this sense, North America differs from Europe, which has more ancient histories of dealing with Muslims, particularly through the Crusades, colonialism, travel, and migration. Since North America does not have a colonial history in Muslim lands, although it does have a contemporary one of imperialism, its experiences with Muslims are part of recent developments.

Said (1997) contends that in the United States the preoccupation with “Islam,” a term used monolithically in the American media to talk about distinct issues in the MENA region, intensified in 1978 with the Iranian revolution, continuing after the end of the Cold War with the collapse of communism. Writing from Canada, Karim (2000) similarly retraces the genealogy of contemporary representations of Muslims in the West. He finds that during the Cold War, dominant discourses saw communism and the Soviet camp as the major opponent. According to Karim, it was not until the overthrow of the Iranian Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi in 1979 and the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981, by movements that identified as Muslim, that Islam began to occupy the place of the “enemy.” Following the events that displaced the Shah of Iran and Anwar Sadat, who were both considered to be allies of the West, and the new Iranian leadership’s public statement that America was the ‘Great Satan,’ mediated representations of Islam began to be negatively marked in a consistent manner.

On a similar note, Razack (2008) speaks of the intensification of race thinking in Canada. Its contemporary form presents itself in the narrative of the West being under siege and the justification of government measures and policies taken in the name of

preventing the Islamic threat. She notes that “tolerance” of other religions (at least on the surface) began to evaporate post-9/11.

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* is situated in the particular 9/11 context, which has also seen the emergence of a new genre in television shows. Along with and parallel to these new terrorism shows, there has been a renewed interest in the “East” – as exemplified by the existence of such shows as the very recent web documentary *Me, the Muslim Next Door* (a production of Radio Canada International, the CBC International Service which also airs programs produced by CBC/Radio-Canada), and TLC’s new reality show *All-American Muslim*, set in Dearborn, Michigan, home of the highest concentration of Arab Americans in the U.S. In her analysis of the television crime drama *The Border*, which debuted on January 7, 2008 and is also broadcasted by CBC, Jiwani (2010) reveals how the series draws from post-9/11 issues of security and terrorism in demonstrating and legitimizing the workings of the Canadian security state apparatus. As with *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, this show has been sold to more than a dozen of television networks worldwide (mostly European but also to the U.S. and Mexico).

### **Cultural Renaissance and Comedy**

Whereas the policies of 9/11 have severely curtailed individual rights and liberties of Muslim populations, they have also paradoxically been accompanied by a ‘renaissance’ of Arab and Muslim cultural works circulating in the realm of popular culture. Amarasingam attests of the post-9/11 public interest in Islam in regards to comedy as he quotes Muslim comedians’ statements regarding this new turn of events:

As female comedian Tissa Hami stated in an interview with PBS, “I don’t think that I would have ever gone into stand-up comedy if it hadn’t been for

9/11 . . . Living through 9/11 as an Iranian who had lived through the hostage crisis . . . I just wanted to do something this time.” Dean Obeidallah also speaks of 9/11 as a turning point that altered the way he was viewed and changed his comedic performance: “before 9/11, I’m just a White guy living a typical White guy life. All my friends had names like Monica, and Chandler, and Joey, and Ross. I go to bed September 10<sup>th</sup> White, wake up September 11th, I’m an Arab!” Obeidallah, a light-skinned, Palestinian-Italian American, is very honest that he can be a spectator in these discussions if he wishes. He does not “look Muslim.” Other comedians, like Ahmed Ahmed or Azhar Usman, do not have this “luxury.” (2010, 468)

Amarasingam cites initiatives of Muslim comedians such as the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*<sup>58</sup> and the *Allah Made Me Funny Comedy Tour*<sup>59</sup> and mentions in passing television shows like *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Aliens in America* (now cancelled).<sup>60</sup> He incorporates in his study quotes from male Arab and Muslim comedians like Maz Jobrani, Dean Obeidallah, Azhar Usman, and Azeem, as well as Muslim female comedians like Shazia Mirza, Tissa Hami, and Maysoun Zayid.

Amarasingam’s (2010) study of how Muslim comedians in post-9/11 America challenge cultural stereotypes describes them as performing the role of Gramscian organic intellectuals (i.e., educators/leaders who emerge out of the group/class of which they are part), who use comedy to destabilize common sense beliefs about Arab and Muslim identity. In this view, “Muslim comedians, as organic intellectuals, voice the

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<sup>58</sup> The *Axis of Evil Comedy Club* started as an initiative of three Middle-Eastern American male comedians (Palestinian American Aron Kader, Iranian American Maz Jobrani, and Egyptian American Ahmed Ahmed) who joined efforts post-9/11 to use comedy as a form of activism and joked about racial profiling, their inability to fly, and everyday discrimination. They have more recently been able to recruit a North Korean to complete the axis. Their jokes and shows are available on their websites, on Youtube and Google videos, and are sold in DVDs.

<sup>59</sup> This is also the title of the documentary film directed by Andrea Kalin, which stars three Muslim male comedians (Palestinian American Mohammed Amer, African American Preacher Moss, and Indian American Azhar Usman). The film was mostly shot during their performance in Los Angeles in 2007. In this case, it is noteworthy that along with denouncing stereotyping and racial profiling at airports, the comedians attempt to reverse dominant stereotypes through comedy.

<sup>60</sup> Created by David Guarascio and Moses Port, *Aliens in America* is an American sitcom that only aired for one season from 2007-2008 on The CW Television Network. The show tells the story of an (White) American teenager in Wisconsin whose family takes in an exchange student from Pakistan. The so-called novelty of the show consists in its inclusion of a Muslim character in an American comedy.

interests of their communities, defend the perception of them in public and aid the community in its fight for recognition,” further assisting their communities to gain confidence and self-respect (Amarasingam, 2010, 474). His list of Muslim comedians operating in North America is not an exhaustive one. Other female comedians include Eman El-husseini (Canada), Sadiya Durrani (Canada), and Iman Zawahry (US-based comedy filmmaker). These comedians inserted themselves in public spheres in response to the still very contemporary post-9/11 climate. They have, at times, found avenues for expression in the mainstream – as when PBS aired the documentary *Stand-Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age* in May 2008. Dean Obeidallah and Tissa Hami were on ABC’s *The View* to announce the premiere (May 11, 2008) of *America at a Crossroads*. Maysoon Zayid (2008) speaks about how she experienced a sense of being part of a community for the first time when they created the Arab-American Comedy Festival. As she explains in the same documentary, this [pan-Arab] festival allowed comedians to come together and gain increased visibility. In Obeidallah’s (2008) political vision, “it’s like a political campaign. You got to mobilize your base first and our bases are Middle-East Americans and from there, that base will then spill out god willing, Inshaalah, to Americans all over the country.”

Nawaz’s early films are part of this renaissance of self-produced Arab and Muslim cultural works that emerged within and in response to the 9/11 context. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* also relies on humour to convey different messages about Islam, although one cannot locate it as an “indigenous” vernacular production, considering the backgrounds of the majority of the writers and producers of the show (who are not Muslim).





**Figure 7: Zarqa Nawaz**

**Zarqa Nawaz, Videographer, filmmaker and television producer**

Born in Liverpool in 1968 and raised in Toronto, Zarqa Nawaz currently resides in Regina, Saskatchewan. Nawaz switched career plans in the early 1990s from medicine to journalism, after receiving a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Toronto (U of T), and later pursuing a degree in journalism at Ryerson University.<sup>61</sup> This led her to win an award for a short radio documentary, *The Changing Rituals of Death*, which she had produced in a radio broadcast class at Ryerson. The award led to an internship with CBC. Nawaz's radio documentary later won first prize in the Radio Long Documentary category, and the Chairman's Award in Radio Production at the Ontario Telefest Awards.

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<sup>61</sup> Information derived from my interview with the artist.

In the years that followed, Nawaz worked as a freelance writer and broadcaster with CBC radio, CBC *Newsworld*, CTV's *Canada AM* and CBC's *The National*. She was also the associate producer of several CBC radio programs. Sensing that her creativity was not completely fulfilled by journalism, she turned to filmmaking and registered for a short course at the Ontario College of Art. She subsequently wrote and directed *BBQ Muslims*, a short film that premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1996. A series of short films followed: *Death Threat* (1998), *Fred's Burqa* (2005), and *Random Check* (2005). In 2005, Nawaz directed *Me and the Mosque*, a documentary co-produced with the National Film Board and CBC. More recently, Nawaz created the comedy television series *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. Nawaz additionally runs FUNdamentalist Films, a production company aimed at "putting the fun back into fundamentalism." Additionally, "she has been recently named as one of the 'ten young visionaries shaping Islam in America' by *Islamica Magazine* and is a recipient of the Outstanding International Achievement Awards, presented by Women In Film and Television—Toronto" (Zine et al. 2007, 379).

### ***Previous Films***

In reviewing Nawaz's past work, it is clear that these works were the building blocks to her comedic television series *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. For instance, *BBQ Muslims* comically treats issues of racial profiling and detentions of Muslims in North America, a situation also reiterated and replayed in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. The plot in *BBQ Muslims* centers around two Canadian Muslim brothers whose barbeque explodes in their backyard. They quickly become suspected of terrorism, even though one of them

comically states: “we have to pray five times a day, we don’t have time for violence.” When I interviewed the artist, she explained that she simply applied for the festival after completing the film in a three-week summer workshop: “I applied. I was the first person who ever sent their film from that course. It was a three-week summer workshop and most people didn’t finish their film. But I finished it and sent it and got it in. I was the first person who ever did that. It got accepted.”

Nawaz explained that she used *BBQ Muslims* as her “calling-card film” to finance a higher production value new film. The film, entitled *Death Threat*, received financial assistance from Canada Council, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival two years later, in 1998. Produced in association with CBC Television (which would later air *Little Mosque on the Prairie*), *Death Threat* tells the story of a young woman writer (Yasmeen Siddiqui) who sends out her first manuscript (a romantic epic) to many publishing houses but receives 59 rejections. Determined to make a name for herself, Siddiqui fakes a death threat to gain media attention. The film then traces the comical consequences of her actions.

Four of Nawaz’s short films have been bundled together and are distributed as a single work. These include *BBQ Muslims*, *Fred’s Burqa* and *Random Check*. These four titles are distributed by the *Center for Asian American Media*. According to their website, the Center for Asian America Media is: “a non-profit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible.” The Center provides funding for productions and is also involved in the distribution and exhibition of works in film, video, and television.

*Fred's Burqa* (2005) is about a White Canadian man who wears a burqa to rob a convenience store, but his plan falls apart. This 5-minute film uses satire to relate how stealing a burqa can lead to mistaken identity and life changes. In *Random Check* (2005), the plot revolves around the racial profiling of a groom traveling towards his bride, whom he found via an international Muslim matrimonial service. The chief protagonist is detained at the airport for dubious reasons. This short film brings to life the issue of being able to get on camera and convince the media to take interest in the particular misfortunate's or points of view.

By that time, the NFB contacted Nawaz and asked her to submit a proposal for a documentary, as part of a diversity program. The NFB then accepted her proposal for *Me and the Mosque*, which deals with the topic of women in mosques and the issue of gender segregation. *Me and The Mosque* (2005) is a 52-minute documentary that presents a visual study of women's spaces in mosques. More specifically, it deals with the issue of barriers in mosques and gender segregation. The documentary takes on a journey through various mosques in Canada to inspect women's sections. As Nawaz explains, her own experience of moving to the small town of Regina in the Canadian prairies, where she had to attend the only mosque, provided material for the making of this documentary.



Figure 8: The cast of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

### **Background on *Little Mosque on the Prairie***

The very title of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* alludes to the American drama television series *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983), another well-received family show that reinforces the normalization of middle-class life. Although Nawaz relates how she watched *Little House on the Prairie* as a child, she states that her show's title only plays with the words and is not an homage to Michael Landon's series, which was a long-running and famous show.

Whereas *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has received some academic attention (e.g., Cañas 2008; Dakroury 2008; Greifenhagen 2010; Paré 2010; Hirji 2011; Jiwani, 2010; and Matheson 2012), none of the scholarly investigations thus far provide a comprehensive study of the entire series. With this said, this body of work offers valuable insights into the content of the series and its reception by various audiences. According to the website information, the first episode of the show scored over two million viewers, an accomplishment that the CBC had not been able to achieve since airing *Anne of Avonlea* in 1990, according to Greifenhagen (2010). Hence, this show is interesting for its significant level of popularity, particularly as a work that originally emerged from the ethnic margins. Furthermore, the show has also attracted international attention, broadcasting in countries like France and the United Arab Emirates.

In addition, the launch of this show marks an important turning point as it is considered to be the first Muslim comedy in North America. Greifenhagen (2010) describes this originality: “what is groundbreaking about the show is that it is the first Muslim comedy in North America. Most of the main characters are Muslim, but not Muslims of the violent terrorist and/or oppressor-of-women stereotypes common in North

American media representations” (15). Nevertheless, he reports that newspaper reviews marked the show as misleading because of a lack of representation of terrorist, dangerous and extremist Muslims as well as critiques by non-practicing Muslims who denounced the absence of secular Muslim characters in the show. In response to this critique, Greifenhagen emphasizes the fictitious and imaginary character of this comedy.

Greifenhagen (2010) contends that the show participates in the formation of spaces of convivencia between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Canadian context. He defines convivencia as “a living together that extends the circle of trust beyond family and friends; the sharing of activities and daily life across religious and cultural boundaries such that differences are accepted and become positive and productive sources of cross-fertilization and creativity” (9). Nonetheless, he points to how some nuances are missing, as in for example, the show’s lack of treatment of differences between Muslims (Shi’I, Isma’ilis, etc.) as well as the absence of other religions such as Judaism.

Cañas’s (2008) article contends that the show challenges Orientalist discourses. However, she posits that some of its limitations are a lack of representation of the complexity and diversity of Islam, its commitment to a vision of a united multicultural Canadian nation, as well as its form: a television comedy. She notes:

The complexity of Islam is only partially emphasized, with no mention made of cleavages between Sunnis, Sufis, and Shiites. The show emphasizes the forging of national unity through the resolution of conflict; little attention is given to the complexities of the cultural backgrounds of some of the characters: Fatima the Nigerian woman, Baber the Pakistani, and Yasir the Lebanese. This is what *Little Mosque* leaves out. Perhaps this is the political limitation of the professed multiculturalism of the series: the form of the cultural text – a television comedy – can only use satire, parody, and mimicry in comedic ways that, while challenging the orientalist discourse of the Muslim Other, produces its own silences” (Cañas 2008, 209)

In her MA thesis focusing on two features (“I on Mercy” and “Wake Up People! The Fred Tupper Show,” Paré (2010) maintains that the show has a pedagogical function and presents it as “edutainment.” Furthermore, Paré suggests that a reception analysis of the show that would examine the effects of edutainment in changing perceptions is needed. Other studies that look at different parts of show, cited in this analysis, include Hirji (2011) and Matheson (2012). Dakrouy (2008) was one of the earliest (along with Cañas 2008) to write on this show. While her analysis is brief, it presents *Little Mosque on the Prairie* as an important addition to Canadian television. Dakrouy argues that the show has “naturalized the other” (2008, 42). Although this statement can easily be subjected to solid criticism, as the constructivist view of identity precisely challenges the normalization and naturalization of negative portrayals of marginalized groups on screen, Dakrouy’s sense of “normalizing the other” is different from the former perspective. By that, she means that the show contributed to humanizing Muslims. Her view echoes how Nawaz explains her own vision for the show – as aimed at normalizing the Muslim community. However, Jiwani (2010) contextualizes how the show is situated within an economy of representations of Muslims in the Western media that operates through a “doubling discourse.” She addresses the ideological messages of the show, and particularly how the figure of Rayyan represents “the doubled Other – the inverse side of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman” (Jiwani 2010, 73). At the same time that she is assimilated in Western Canadian society, Rayyan also struggles within the patriarchal structure of the Mercy mosque.



### *The Audience*

When I interviewed Nawaz about the audience demographics of the show, she mentioned that the CBC had told her that the audience was mostly urban and multicultural. She also talked about the lack of support of her immediate Muslim community when the show first aired and related incidents of opposition, lobbying against the show, and the circulation of a petition to get her removed as a board member of the Regina branch of the Islamic Association of Saskatchewan. Someone even told her husband that he should divorce her. According to the artist, these community members didn't want other people to know about issues internal to the Muslim community at large. Nawaz's tactical response consisted of saying: "...if you don't want them to know, then don't do these things. Don't have women coming from the back door locked in these cages in the mosque. If you don't want people to think we're oppressed, then don't oppress women." Initially, some segments of the extended Muslim 'community' in Canada thought that she was airing "our" dirty laundry. But after a few episodes, they gradually tempered their attitude as, according to Nawaz, "they couldn't consolidate enough Muslim support to rally against the show."

Two million people tuned in to watch the pilot episode of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, which made it CBC's top-rated premiere in a decade (Matheson 2012; Paré 2010; Scott 2010). However, since then the number has decreased to an average of approximately 500,000 viewers.<sup>62</sup> During the first season, the show had one million

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<sup>62</sup> See MacDonald's (2012) article in the Globe and Mail.

weekly viewers (Paré 2010; Scott 2010).<sup>63</sup> According to a CBC research document dealing with the 2008/09 Fall Season Audience Profile (produced by BBM NMR), “the program differs from the available viewing audience in that it attracts more female viewers, an older audience (50+), and slightly more viewers in the Prairies. Conversely, the show captures fewer viewers among the 2-49 age groups.” These numbers were only divided according to gender, age, and region. A 2009/10 CBC research document indicates that the audience of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* skews slightly female, older, more highly educated, and over indexes in the Ontario/Quebec Anglo region. There is no available breakdown with regards to the ethnic and religious composition of the audience.<sup>64</sup>

In terms of international distribution, already in 2007, *Al Jazeera English* reported that the first season was about to be shown in the Middle East, Turkey, and the UK.<sup>65</sup> WestWind Pictures had then signed an international distribution deal with French broadcasting company *Canal Plus*. The show had started airing in France, Switzerland, and French-speaking African countries. Other countries which were to begin

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<sup>63</sup> I contacted CBC’s audience relations to ask for audience profiles on October 21, 2011 but I was told that they didn’t have any information.

<sup>64</sup> I was not able to retrieve any data from *Nielson Media Research*. However, there is significant data, although not synthesized, located in the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement (BBM) database. I went to the HEC library in Montreal (where the database is located as public information) and conducted an initial search, which revealed that the numbers are displayed separately in weeks, according to region, gender, and age breakdown. Synthesizing all of this information would require much time and effort as it is not comprehensively organized, and is thus beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, it does not include information on international distribution, online viewing, and other factors such as ethnicity/race, political affiliation, or religious background. Finally, even BBM’s audience categories are not synthesized in the database. Selecting each age group separately does not provide a breakdown of all age groups nor does it delineate the results. The Print Measurement Bureau (PMB) database, although it does not list the show in its latest report, has survey data for *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. This information is organized according to the number of times per month for weekly television programs displayed in raw numbers, percentages, and graphs but it does not provide audience demographics. It does not cover who is watching the show. Furthermore, the available surveys are only from 2009-2011 organized in 1-2 yearly databases with sample sizes ranging 11,000-24,000.

<sup>65</sup> See Anderson’s (2007) article on *Al Jazeera English*.

broadcasting soon thereafter included Finland and the United Arab Emirates. Israeli television stations were also about to begin broadcasting. By the time it ended in 2012, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* had screened in more than 90 countries (CBC News 2012). In 2007, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* won two awards (for “best international TV series” and “best screenplay”) at the 2007 Roma Fiction Fest in Rome, Italy. The show would subsequently accumulate, as previously stated in this chapter, a series of awards from various countries.

### **Comedy Television Sit-Coms and the Use of Humour as Counter-Hegemonic Tactic**

In terms of genre, both the artist and related academic studies categorize the show as a sit-com.<sup>66</sup> Nawaz further outlines the nature of the show as not being a satire. Rather, she notes:

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* is a sit-com and not a political satire. I want people to find the hilarity in the show and recognize the similar issues that appear in all our lives. It’s important to normalize the community within the greater community so as not to be seen as the ‘other’ but to recognize that we all have universal themes which exist in all communities. I simply want people to laugh with Muslims like they would laugh at anyone else and feel comfortable doing so” (2006, 6).

Each episode of the series lasts approximately 22 minutes and follows a conventional story-line. The first season starts with the arrival of a new Imam in the fictional town of Mercy (simultaneously signifying compassionate benevolence, being at the mercy of someone, or a divine blessing). The show chronologically depicts the everyday events of designated chief protagonists.

The sit-com, similar to the soap opera, depends upon repetition and a forestalling of closure (Neale & Krutnik 1990). However, the sit-com differs from the soap opera,

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<sup>66</sup> For example, see Paré’s Master’s thesis (2010).

which maintains a sense of temporal development. Some of the key features of the sit-com include organizing relationships between characters along familial and communal lines, as well as the continuing familiarization and return to the original situation, in a circular process type of narrative. Neale and Krutnick further elaborate, stating that:

The term ‘sit-com’ describes a short narrative-series comedy, generally between twenty-four and thirty minutes long, with regular characters and setting. The episodic series – of which the sit-com is a subset – is, with the continuing serial, a mode of repeatable narrative which is particularly suited to the institutional imperative of the broadcast media to draw and maintain a regular audience (Neale & Krutnik 1990, 233).

In order to examine how comedic ways of expression interact with the production of counter-hegemonic content, Neville (2009) analyzes how the specific form of physical comedy –embodied by a character who exhibits a sense of otherness and questions taken-for-granted assumptions in a non-confrontational manner – sheds light on the possibilities of generating counter-hegemonic portrayals. Neville’s object of inquiry here is the main character of the British television series *Mr Bean* whom he compares to other popular representations of masculinity. Neville found that although the show contains some oppositional elements, it ironically reinforces hegemonic masculinity due to the commodification of the main character (e.g., the production of *Mr Bean* mugs, diaries, screensavers, books, etc.) and to some of the limits of physical comedy. This study therefore sheds light onto some of the vulnerabilities of television comedy (due to commodification and the limits of humour as a form) in terms of its potential to stage a counter-hegemonic intervention.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Mr Bean*, who is dropped from the sky and is referred to as a child in an adult man’s body, challenges hegemonic portrayals of masculinity in that “the character exhibits an unsophisticated and sexless body image. His slender, androgynous body contrasts sharply with the robust physical presence perpetuated by the media image of hegemonic masculinity” (Neville, 2009, 239). However, The “alien” character of Mr

## **Analytical Approach**

In this chapter, I examine the content and form of this mediated intervention and identify the various types of tactics included in the television series. My corpus consists of all 91 episodes (each lasting approximately 22 minutes) of the six seasons of the show (from January 9, 2007 to April 2, 2012). Using a textual and visual analysis, I examine the uses of language and imagery in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. For this analysis, I turn to the various tactical interventions (in visual and textual language) identified in Chapter One. Using them as working thematic categories, I endeavour to identify the discursive tactics of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* theory as I am particularly interested in *how* it talks back to Islamophobic discourses. I look at whether, for example, playful tactics of resistance are used. I incorporate these notions as needed for this part of my analysis – a methodological bricolage tactically deployed as required by the various strands of this analysis. I also reflect on the potential of humour and comedy to generate counter-hegemonic emergence. Finally, I integrate comments and observations drawn from an interview with Nawaz (about her impetus for engaging in this work and the various issues or problems she might have encountered in disseminating her perspective).

### ***Uses of Language and Imagery in “Little Mosque on the Prairie”***

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* inevitably speaks to dominant discourses and media stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. The title sequence of the show starts with an image of rolling hills, illustrating the Canadian prairies. It is a very bright sunny day. The upper

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Bean reaffirms “rational” and “objective” rules, which guide gendered behaviour. Neville contends that the form of physical comedy ironically turns hegemonic notions of masculinity “...into something we can laugh at rather than openly challenge” (241).

half of the screen shows a blue sky (the celestial symbolizing religion) that is nonetheless clouded, which points to potential tensions or difficulties that have something to do with the Canadian prairies and the celestial (religion). The title includes drawings of mosques on the words “little,” “mosque,” and “prairie.” With the opening credits, Mercy mosque is visually inserted. Hence, viewers see that Muslims live and are part of the Canadian landscape. By inserting them within a Canadian background, Muslims are visually unothered. The opening song, containing the Arabic words “ya habibi” (Oh my love!), contribute to tactically associate Muslims with the idea of love, in a clear departure from the usual connotations of violence and war.

From the first episode, the show addresses some of the main issues affecting Muslims in North America such as racial profiling, terrorism charges, and suspicious neighbours. The first episode already tackles these issues as one of the main characters Amaar, who quit his career as a lawyer and moved from Toronto to Mercy to become the Mosque’s resident Imam, is suspected of terrorism. The show utilizes various discursive tactics to disrupt dominant representations.

### ***Resignifying –Portrayals of Muslim Women***

Resignification constitutes one of the main discursive tactics operating in the analyzed corpus. Abel (2008) posits resignification as turning signs and symbols around for the purpose of injecting new meanings to them. The figure of Rayyan Hamoudi, who works/acts as a physician, serves to counter dominant notions of Muslim womanhood. From the first episode of season one, Rayyan’s first line is: “maybe while the enemy is in there, he could do the dishes.” The show frames her specifically as veiled, strong, and

outspoken. She is, as one of the main female characters of the show, labelled as a feminist. Amaar Rashid, who plays the imam, states: “I think people would find it surprising that there’s such a thing as a Muslim feminist” (season 1 episode 3). Often the show provides a literal explanation of the rationale and motives for behaviours in a surprisingly direct style of communication. In the same episode, Rayyan says: “they see the headscarf, they think oppression” (season 1 episode 3). The first season contains numerous direct references to Rayyan’s feminism. In the second episode of the first season, Babar Siddiqui, who ‘represents’ the ultra-conservative segment of the mosque, says, “don’t listen to this feminist” while Rayyan is trying to stop him from putting up a barrier in the mosque to separate women from men.

Overall, what is also refreshingly absent in the series is the objectifying gaze towards women. As Mulvey (1985) argues, the cinematic gaze has been typically constructed for male [heterosexual] audiences. The person who gazes at the objectified “other” is the subject while that which is looked at is effectively rendered a ‘thing.’ hooks further explains that “there’s power in looking” (1996, 197). While *Little Mosque on the Prairie* belongs to a new genre of North-American television, it is also sanitized from all matters of the flesh. There are no sex scenes or shots of bodies in revealing clothing. Nor does the camera zoom in on body parts.

It is noteworthy that the show engages in critiques of internal practices of the Muslim community at large. This is a preoccupation that she informs her earlier work. For instance, in *Me and the Mosque* (2005), Nawaz took on the subject of setting up barriers in mosques to explore the topic of gender segregation in Muslim places of worship. Several episodes of the *Little Mosque on the Prairie* series exemplify this

internal communal introspection. For example, in episode 18 of season 3, Babar and Faisal, representing the most conservative members of the Mercy mosque, endeavour to build a separate entrance for women at the mosque. Since there was not a budget for it, they propose using the backdoor, which leads to a dumpster in the alley, as a way for women to enter and leave the mosque. Faisal says: “just because garbage goes out doesn’t mean women can’t come in.” Although this statement is phrased in a comedic way, it also establishes a particular association between women and garbage in one sentence. At this point, Amaar, the Imam of Mercy Mosque, justifies his lack of intervention in the debate to Rayyan by saying: “I can’t tell them segregation is wrong. I have to show them.” The use of word segregation to frame the issue exercises a momentary “spectator positioning” (Stam & Spence, 1985) that reverses the usual male point of view to the Muslim woman’s standpoint.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) explain that the use of close-ups encourages closer relations with represented participants. In this scene, the camera zooms in to highlight Rayyan’s disappointed facial expression. It also follows her and Fatima in a previous scene as they attempt to enter the mosque in the midst of garbage and flies. Thus here, to borrow Hammad’s (2010) words, the camera does not “leave with the men”

This episode continues to display what the back door means for the women of the mosque. Babar’s daughter Layla talks back to her father who was behind this “backward” “innovation:” “It’s the door, Dad. The garbage door. It’s degrading. It’s humiliating. Oh yeah, it’s surrounded by garbage. Who thought this was a good idea anyway?” In an atypical turn of events, the women leave and it is the men who now have to use the back door after Amaar proposes this as an alternative solution. After using the back (garbage)



door, the men change their mind and Mercy mosque returns to having one entrance for all. Therefore, this episode represents discriminatory gendered behaviours within Muslim communities as well as feminist efforts to resist.

However, the show also showcases women's involvement in upholding patriarchy. In season 1, episode 7, Yasir's mother proposes that his cousin Samira becomes his second wife, referencing the issue of polygamy. In another episode, Rayyan challenges White women at an interfaith council (season 2, episode 1). She suggests that she would rather not volunteer to bake and that as women, they should challenge the "status quo." Using *resignification* and *reversal*, this episode portrays a Muslim woman as more feminist than a group of White women. In another episode (episode 9 of season 5), the Muslim women of Mercy ask Rayyan to join the mosque board and she becomes the first woman to be elected. However, Babar finds a clause in the mosque's constitution that he drafted with other men, stating that only men are allowed to be members of the board. Eventually the rule is changed and Rayyan is able to join the board.

To further complicate Rayyan's standpoint as a Muslim woman in Canada, another episode points to her uncomfortable position in a Western context (episode 12 of season 2). Because she plays curling well, Fred (who is the host of a radio talk show and regularly uses the airwaves to promote intolerance towards Mercy's Muslims) feels the need to eject her from the game. In episode 12 of season 2, Fred gets Rayyan off the team by using the veil as justification, a reference to veiled Muslim girls who were prevented from participating in sports in Quebec. Related to this incident, Lakhani (2008) examines the coverage of eleven-year-old Asmahan Mansour's expulsion from a girls' soccer tournament in Laval, Quebec, in February 2007. Her article surveys English-language

newspapers in Quebec and Central Canada in order to examine their construction of the charge, issued by Quebec soccer officials, that Mansour's headscarf presented a safety threat. She found that the Canadian press consolidated notions of Canada's commitment to "multiculturalism" and "tolerance" by constructing Mansour as both threat and promise to the nation (see also Zine 2009). As Nawaz explained when interviewed, "...Rayyan being banned from the curling team because she wears hijab sort of mimics what has been happening with Muslim women in sports in Quebec..." Hence, the constructed randomness and unfairness of this decision parallels real incidents, in a playful attempt to inject new meanings to the discourses of veiled Muslim girls' participation in sports in Quebec.

### ***Resignifying Modernity***

As explained in chapter one, Muslims have been indefinitely located in the era and space of the pre-modern. But the show challenges this constructed disassociation with modernity. For example, episode 4 of season 3 reveals a Muslim online dating site. Layla Siddiqui thinks that her father is lonely and signs him up to an Islamic dating site. Babar, finding his match, says: "my lady match and I are so much alike. I like halal. She likes halal meat. I pray five times a day. She prays five times a day" (episode 4 of season 3). Episode 8 of season 3 also plays on this association between religion and technology. Tellingly entitled *Mercy Dot Com*, it narrates how Layla seeks spiritual guidance online. She logs in to *askyourimam.com* for spiritual advice, effectively and comically challenging the common stereotype of Muslims as pre-modern, "backward," and out of touch with the tools of "progress" and "development." These episodes depict Muslims as

using the tools of modernity, and further demonstrate how the tools themselves are Muslim. They insert a recast of reductionist notions of the Enlightenment discourse of modernity, which have been central to dominant representations of Islam (as explained in chapter one).

### ***Resignifying Surveillance***

Resignification is also conducted in the realm of politics. Illustrating the pedagogical value of the series, situated within the form of edutainment, episode 7 of season 2 centers on the work of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) as targeting Muslims and spying on them. After CSIS agent Nancy Layton walks in to Fatima's cafe and reveals her identity, Fatima asked her if she works for "the spy agency," "the people who target Muslims." She subsequently refuses service to her. The CSIS agent admits that the government engages in such practices: "Well, it's no secret that the government monitors some mosques but they're usually, you know, big professionally-run mosques in major centers. Real mosques."

Amaar originally takes the CSIS agent on a visit to the mosque to prove that they are not up to "anything" but that they *could* be, in a humorous scene that depicts his desire to be considered charismatic enough to represent a potential threat. When the CSIS agent asks Amaar where some of the funds raised by the mosque will be allocated and does not receive a satisfactory answer from him, she finally becomes suspicious of the mosque's activities. The narrative of this episode leads to CSIS conducting a search on the mosque. This episode, through humour, resignifies the work of CSIS as a spy agency

that targets Muslim communities. It highlights issues of surveillance and random searches that particularly affect Muslims.

### ***Resignifying Muslim/Christian Relations***

Another salient characteristic of the series is the resignification of Muslim/Christian relations. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* performs a reversal in its juxtaposition of the two religions, contrary to dominant representations that inject negative attributions to Islam while simultaneously rendering Christianity invisible and/or positively valued. As Said (1978) explains, Orientalism is constructed vis-a-vis an invisible, untouchable West.

Several episodes of the series clearly position the relationality of Muslim/Christian interactions. Rendering Christianity apparent, these episodes highlight the beliefs and assumptions of Mercy's Anglicans. Furthermore, they often perform various forms of reversal. Episode 14 of season 4 depicts Rayyan's friend Holly as a devout born-again Christian who attempts to convert her: "I'm here now to save your soul from hell fire." Reverend Thorne also tries to convert some of the Muslim characters. Hence, these episodes position identity vis-à-vis difference, since they render apparent the beliefs and biases of Christian characters towards Islam. Furthermore, the show also deploys a type of reversal that turns around the dominant *spectator positioning*. For example, episode 6 of season 1 illustrates this when Sarah introduces Mercy's Muslims to Christianity. Curious about the religion, they ask candid questions about communion and Easter. Momentarily viewing religion from Muslim eyes, the typical invisibility of Christianity in North American media is brought to light, and furthermore portrayed as the novelty, the foreign, and the different.

Muslim/Christian relations evolve throughout the seasons of the show. The first season starts with a friendly relationship between Amaar and Reverend McGee, who was the minister of Mercy Anglican before Thorne's arrival. It was McGee's idea to rent out the parish hall to Mercy's Muslims so they could have a place of worship there. While McGee's relationship to the new Imam of the Mosque Amaar is friendly since the first season, the show's narrative also alluded to the Crusades, thereby historically contextualizing the relationship. For example, in episode 5 of season 1, a new White Muslim convert joins Mercy mosque. Whereas the mosque congregants welcome him in the beginning, they quickly become irritated by his excessive enthusiasm and over-zealous commitment to obeying Islamic rules. Yasir tells Babar that they should make the new judgmental convert believe that they are decadent in order to drive him away. When Babar refuses, Yasir tells him: "settle down Salahuddin,<sup>68</sup> the crusades are over" (episode 5 of season 1).

Nonetheless, the arrival of the new reverend William Thorne, who replaces McGee, changes the course of the relationship. In episode 2 of season 4, Amaar acknowledges this tense state of affairs when he tells Thorne: "look, I know we started off on the wrong foot. You, surprised that there was a mosque in a church. Me, worried about the future of that mosque." In the following episode, reverend Thorne steals Amaar's sermon and delivers it in his church (episode 3 of season 4). Several episodes reproduce the theme of the competitiveness of Reverend Thorne towards Amaar – and derivatively, towards Islam. This unfriendly relationship post-Magee is depicted in a

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<sup>68</sup> Considered a significant Muslim and military leader in medieval history, Salahuddin was the Sultan of Egypt and Syria. He led the Muslim opposition against European crusaders. Most notably, he recaptured Jerusalem in 1187 for the Muslims. He gave free pardon to the Christians, for whom Jerusalem had been the Holy City, when he recaptured it.

charity prize fight when Amaar and Thorne engage in a boxing match (episode 3 of season 4). Reverend Thorne pretends that he can't move because of a blow Amaar inflicted on him during the fight in order to obtain sympathy from Mercy's Anglicans. He also asks Amaar to run a number of errands for him. But soon enough, his lies turn against him when a couple of Anglican women become more impressed with Amaar's dedication towards Thorne than being sympathetic to the latter's pseudo pain.

However, the series evolves to include numerous references to the potential for improvement of Muslim/Christian relations. In episode 17 of season 4, reverend Thorne delivers an impromptu 'speech' defending Amaar and Rayyan's decision to move out of Mercy, which Rayyan's parents initially opposed. Thorne says: "regardless, today should be a celebration of these two remarkable people. They've changed all our lives. Well, I know they changed mine. So they're moving on. Wherever they go, they will carry us with them in their hearts, as we should carry them in ours." This speech operates as a concession on Muslim/Christian relations, especially given how strained it had become throughout the show's fourth season up to this point. Although this is a turning point for reverend Thorne who becomes more sympathetic towards Muslims, his change of heart doesn't last for long – similarly to Fred's pattern of alternating from hostility to sympathy towards Mercy's Muslim residents. For example, in episode 20 of season 3, Fred expresses his wish to attend Rayyan's wedding. This episode similarly points to potential peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims, as even an extremist character, like Fred, can express positive feelings. Numerous episodes entertain this potential. The title of episode 5 season 5 is "roomies." Thorne welcomes Amaar, who was evicted from his place, to his home as a quintessential illustration of their changing relationship.

The series, in its entirety, points to ‘burying the hatchet’ in an almost medieval crusade battle allegory. It suggests this notion of ‘coexistence,’ a finding that is consonant with Paré’s thesis (2010) analysis of two episodes of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. In episode 0 of season 5, the Muslim congregants host a Christmas party for Anglicans in their mosque, which is located inside the Anglican Church. Another episode visually depicts this Muslim/Christian potential for peace. Thorne suggests that he might be bonding with Amaar and they both extend their arms as if they are about shake hands but then change their minds (episode 6 of Season 5). In the same episode, Amaar describes the scene as: “Muslims and Anglicans side by side.”

The last season continues to depict the improvement of Muslim/Christian relations via narrative developments like the growing friendship between Thorne and Babar, who play games together and engage in competitive fasting to lose weight (episode 3 of season 6). Amaar sums up this overall trajectory and message of the series, which promotes a notion of peaceful ‘coexistence’ as he says: “we’re all people of the book and our difference are tiny by comparison” (episode 4 of season 6). This last season brings about a notable turn of events as Amaar endeavours to build a new mosque. Although Amaar engages in a publicity campaign to promote the project, Mercy’s Muslims are surprisingly unsupportive of his plans. Suggesting a potential separation of the conservative segment, Babar is interested in keeping his own mosque. But he eventually gives up on his idea when Sarah accidentally burns down the Church building. The finale of the entire series suggests a hopeful ending. First, Amaar refuses to put up a prayer barrier at the new mosque to segregate women from men. Second, he creates a mosque independent from the church. But paradoxically, it also becomes the new

location of the Anglican Church; Thorne declares: “the community room downstairs will be the new home of Mercy Anglican” (episode 11 of season six). This ending performs a reversal of the typical gaze, as the church is now in a mosque. The previous tenant/landlord dynamic had indicated an evident power relation through the depiction of a Muslim (minority) group that strives to secure its own space. While the mosque was first located within a church, it was eventually moved to an independent location that also became the hosting space for the Anglican church. However, there is a potential of this narrative of coexistence, as sweet as it sounds, to effectively mask the marginalization of minority groups.

### *Native Language*

Another tactic that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* uses is to deploy the native language, which Third Worldist filmmakers have used to exercise their right to a differentiated identity (Shohat and Stam 1994). The use of Arabic Muslim words, like Alhamdulillah (Praise to God), successfully incorporates a different identity that becomes part of the Canadian television language. The show inserts Arabic, the language of the Quran, in Canadian ordinary television language. Viewers are exposed to words such as “Astaghfirullah” (God forgive me) or “subhan’Allah” (glorious is God or glory to God)<sup>69</sup>.

The opening and ending songs, “ya habibi” and “Tala‘ al-Badru ‘Alaynā (Arabic: طلع ال بدر علينا),” are performed in the voice of a woman in the Arabic language. While “habibi” means “my love,” “Tala‘ al-Badru ‘Alaynā” symbolically sends viewers, particularly those with a Muslim sensibility, to the Prophet’s

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<sup>69</sup> For example, see episode 3 of season 4.



first entry to Medina, which was then known as the city of Yathrib. Upon his arrival, the citizens of Yathrib sang “Tala‘ al-Badru ‘Alaynā” for the first time:

*ṭala‘a ‘l-badru ‘alaynā*

**Oh the white moon rose over us**

*min thaniyyāti ‘l-wadā*

‘ **From the valley of al-Wadā**

*wajaba ‘l-shukru ‘alaynā*

**And we owe it to show gratefulness**

*mā da‘ā li-l-lāhi dā‘*

**Where the call is to Allah**

*‘ayyuha ‘l-mab‘ūthu fīnā*

**Oh you who were raised among us**

*ji‘ta bi-l-‘amri ‘l-muṭā*

‘ **Coming with a word to be obeyed**

*ji‘ta sharrafta ‘l-madīnah*

**You have brought to this city nobleness**

*marḥaban yā khayra dā‘*

**Welcome best caller to God's way** (Wikipedia, 2012)

They compared the arrival of the prophet to the rising of the full moon (signifying light, celestial knowledge, and beauty) – the moon having a special connotation of beauty in Arabic poetry and in Muslim heritage – is reflective in the Islamic calendar as being a lunar calendar. Some might argue that there is a dangerous invocation of authenticity embedded here, as this song points to an original Islam, and more specifically to an idea that claims an authoritative Muslim identity. Put simply, this return to the beginning (the Prophet’s entry to Medina), claims an idea of origin and of historical authenticity. It symbolically says: this is who “we” were/are, and this is where “we” come from. As well,

the lines “you have brought to this city nobleness” suggests that Muslims coming to Mercy endow the city with an enhanced grace.

Nonetheless, this analysis points to how the show undertakes a pedagogical function that provides explanations of Islamic practices. Starting with a negation of the main image of Islam in the West through recourse to this song that points to an idea of origin, the show continues to explicate religious references. Episode 10 of season 2 narrates how Eid al-Adha is a religious holiday that commemorates the willingness of prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice his son upon God’s request. It relates how when Ibrahim was about to comply, God stopped him and asked him to sacrifice a sheep instead. Hence, the show demonstrates, through such television teach-ins, the rationales and stories of Muslim practices, thereby assuming a pedagogical function.

### ***Positive Images***

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* tends to lean towards the tactic of positive images (Stam & Spence 1985). The characters are constructed in overly-sweet, plastic ways. Even Babar the “radical” has child-like qualities, often displayed by his quick temper. He ‘represents’ the “conservative segment” (to borrow Nawaz’s words) of Mercy’s Muslim residents. Babar is not threatening though he tries to be so in comical ways. In this regard, he is similar to his White extremist counterpart portrayed by Fred, who becomes amiable to Muslims when Layla works for him as an intern, leading him to stop his attacks and generalizations about Muslims. The evolution of these two characters throughout the series illustrates the overall orientation of the show to entertain the possibility of peaceful ‘coexistence.’ What the show refrains from delving into is that while coexistence is a

remarkable idea, it also masks structural sources of tension in environments that continue to deny equality to all.

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* is positioned in an in-between space -- located in a defensive position by default. In terms of tacticality, the show tends to circulate positive images. In light of the thirst for positive images, Hall (1997) underscores, similar to Stam and Spence's (1985) criticism of this impulse, the futility of such a move. In this view, what is needed is a greater diversity of images. Diversity within the community, in the show, problematically rests on the generational gap (and location in the West) as the explanatory framework for behavioural differences. This is most evident in the framing of Babar, who is a recent immigrant to Canada in the show, representing the conservative segment of Mercy's Muslim community, while Canadian-born Rayyan is depicted as a progressive feminist. But there are definitive implications of assuming that second generation Muslim women are more liberated than first generation women and women in Muslim countries. This plays within the colonial narrative of Muslim women being saved by the West. Jiwani (2010) argues that Rayyan:

... is the "hybrid" figure reflective of a mix between whiteness and Arabness (from her father's side). As a hybrid, she is "more like us" and, as I have pointed out in my analysis of Asian heroines, this strategy becomes one way in which to defuse or neutralize the threat of race. She is then the figure "in-between"—mediating the links between the oppressed Muslim woman and her liberated white, Western, and secularized counterpart. As well, she mediates the contrasts between the "good" and "bad" Muslim woman (in the case of this sitcom, these figures are represented by Fatima, the African Muslim woman who tends to be more traditional, and Rayanne's mother, the "bad" Muslim convert). (74)

Nawaz's intention was not only to demonstrate the range of Muslim women in the show but also emphasize a similar diversity with regard to the construction of Muslim masculinity. She notes:

many of the men who were leading the mosques had their cultural upbringing in countries that tended to be very patriarchal and they came to Canada with this cultural baggage and it was affecting our mosques. So while I was making *Me and the Mosque*, I began thinking about what would happen if there was an imam who didn't come with that baggage and who was born and raised here in this country and could relate to the women in a different way and that's what inspired *Little mosque on the Prairie*. I wanted the imam to be born and raised in Canada and who felt he could bring change to a community because he could understand the people. There would still be the basic challenges of conservative immigrant men. . .but this would be balanced with the concerns of first generation Muslim-Canadian men and women... (Zine, Taylor, & Davis 2007, 380-381).

Similar to the impulse to capitalize on positive images, representation of a marginalized culture often requires a performativity of identity. In this case, identity is clearly stated in uncanny and rehearsed ways. Very often the characters of the show directly and literally declare their Muslim identity ("as a Muslim woman" (episode 5 of season 1), with an over-usage of phrases like "it's un-Islamic," as if spectators need to be constantly reminded that the show is about something linked to the "Muslim world." The word "Muslim" is used a countless number of times, but in a sanitized version of Muslim identity secured through phrases like "you're not behaving like a proper Muslim woman," as Amaar says to Rayyan in episode 8 of season 1. These grand statements not only privilege religion over other axes of identity, but they also lead to several reductionisms that do not reflect the different schools and ways of practicing Islam. Hirji (2011) presents this argument in her analysis of the television shows *24*, *Lost*, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. She argues that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* excludes discussions

of different schools within Islam. Amaar's statement that "cosmetic surgery is frowned upon by Islam" (episode 16 of season 2) dilutes complexity in a blanket generalization. Even if one reaches consensus in terms of what the Shariaa (Islamic law) instructs, Muslims do not necessarily follow rules consistently, like the following: "under Islamic dating rules, you can't touch me" (episode 19 of season 2). Many 'Muslim' practices of dating involve sexual relations.

So why is it that the characters have to so often state their connection to Islam? If they were Muslims in predominantly Muslim countries, would there be such a need to utter the word 'Islam' as the explanatory framework for their behaviours or views? The show is clearly targeting a non-Muslim audience that is deficiently knowledgeable of the religion. It moreover constructs Islam differently from mainstream media depictions via the style of edutainment and the form of humour. Paradoxically, this pedagogical function of reframing Islam to a miseducated audience who has been predominantly fed clichéd notions of Islam is particularly vulnerable to other reductionisms. Whereas these portrayals might be 'positive,' the complexity is still diluted – and can't be solely contained in demonstrating that Muslims comprise Indians, Pakistanis, Lebanese, Nigerians, and White Canadians.

### ***Implications of the use of Humour and the Popularity of the Program for Counter-Hegemonic Emergence***

One of the defining elements of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is its use of humour to present alternative representations of Muslims. This playful portrayal is, in and of itself, disruptive. On this note, Matheson similarly remarks in her analysis of the series' first

season that: “by situating Islam in the context of comedy, the series effectively resists the sensational and violent depictions typical of news coverage and found in dramatic action series such as *24 and Sleeper Cell*” (2012, 163). However, Jiwani (2010) demonstrates how these types of representations are organized around a doubling discourse. They work precisely because they are the inverse of the news discourse, but they condense basic tropes that feed into a particular construction of Islam and Muslims. Her analysis focuses on representations of Muslim women in entertainment and news media. It reveals how the economy of representations in the Western media posits the figure of the veiled Muslim woman as an “abject and passive other” against a Muslim woman saved by the West (79). Both figures are needed in order to establish the need for intervention (for example, saving Afghan women) and the possible success of the mission (figure 2: Westernized Muslim women can be saved). In light of these vulnerabilities of cooptation, I endeavour here to investigate the role of humour in *Little Mosque on the Prairie* in creating discursive alternatives.

In episode 1 of season 1, Amaar asks under what charge he is being arrested: “what’s the charge? Flying while Muslim?” Overall, the scenes cover differences between Muslims and Christians in terms of their cultural encounters with a touch of humour. In a playful treatment of cultural ignorance, Fatima and Rayyan tell Fred that it is forbidden for Muslim women to speak on the radio, as they try to protect the community from media attacks (episode 2 of season 1).

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* engages in a very polite ‘ethical’ type of humour. The show does not contain ad hominem attacks that parody any well-known personalities or curse words. Furthermore, several episodes rely on physical comedy as a style of

humour. For example, Reverend Thorne dances around and sings when Muslim tenants move out of the church that: “We are free. Muslim free. At last” as he dances (episode 18 of season 4). With a broom in his hand, Thorne is delighted that they are “no more Muslims” and that it’s “just Christians” now. The length of this song and dance (about one minute and thirty seconds), along with the use of the broom and types of lyrics, plays into this type of humour that relies on using the body in exaggerated ways to generate laughter. This episode also plays on the fantasy of living in a place free of Muslims while it ridicules making such wishes. Another example of physical comedy occurs when Babar and Fatima are fighting over Halloween pumpkins and pulling them towards their bodies (episode 4 of season 1).

While the use of this type of humour dilutes the seriousness of a message, it also circumvents “controversial topics” such as the structural barriers that explain these Muslim/Christian relationships (as for example, the lack of economic opportunities and colonial history). Hence, the show does not delve into significant issues – and part of this is due to its use of comedy and the format of the sitcom. DeChaine (1997) explains how a playful sensibility may be ignored and considered insignificant because it engages the dominant culture playfully through mockery and laughter. Muslims, South Asians, and Arabs making fun of themselves is a desirable commodity nowadays in North America. So it is interesting to keep in mind what the market demands. What are the implications? How can we make sense of performances that present comedic parodies of the self? This points us towards earlier times and is reminiscent of the relationship between slavery in America and entertainment. Historically, African slaves were permitted to entertain the benevolent White audience – not at all in a liberatory type of context. Making fun of the

self or of own's community is not necessarily linked to freeing oneself from the discourses of oppression or from the shackles of slavery.

Nonetheless, because laughter and comedy are not as threatening, they can dilute difficult content and allow it to enter the public sphere because of the form it has been presented in. Humour allows harsh and at times even subversive messages to get through while it alleviates the burden of the critic.

The documentary *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy* (2009) and Donald Bogle's (2001) book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in Films* demonstrate how alternative representations develop slowly, rather than in the sense of a [cultural] revolutionary coup. In his introduction, Bogle states: "... I wanted comments and analysis on what certain black actors accomplished with even demeaning stereotyped roles" (2001, xxi). His study found that:

....the history of blacks in American films is one in which actors have elevated kitsch or trash and brought to it arty qualities if not pure art itself. Indeed, the thesis of my book is that many black actors – from Stepin Fetchit to Louise Beavers to Sidney Poitier to Jim Brown and Whoopi Goldberg – have played – at some time or another – stereotyped roles. But the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype. (Bogle 2001, xxii)

His study not only describes the ways in which the image of African Americans in film has changed, but also brings attention to how some representations have disturbingly remained the same. There is a history of representation to be kept in mind for the very recent emergence of South Asian/Muslim/Arab/Middle Eastern cultural works in North



America. If Ahmed Ahmed wasn't cast to play terrorist number 4, he could not have made a joke about it.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* actor Zaib Shaikh compares the series to *The Cosby Show* in regards to its humanizing potential: "Bill Cosby wasn't trying to make a show that showed African-Americans were normal," Shaikh says. "He was trying to show African-Americans as themselves. As soon as you show a culture that's been ignored or feared as itself, chances are you're humanizing it" (Sonya Bell *The National*, January 9, 2012).<sup>71</sup> Contrary to Shaikh's very enthusiastic take on *The Cosby Show*, Jhally and Lewis' (1992) extensive examination of the show demonstrates it as packaging and disseminating an enlightened racism. They found that it sustained upper-middle class myths of classlessness and the American dream, with the derived conclusion that social inequalities must be the result of African Americans not taking advantage of opportunities.

Whereas the use of humour facilitates the communication of otherwise difficult content, in the case of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, the show also stays at the surface of historical and contemporary conditions that mark Muslim/Christian relations. The show gently challenges media stereotypes about Muslims. But in doing so, historical events, structural barriers, and economic disparities between these groups on a global scale do not receive sufficient treatment in the series. However, keeping in mind how representations of other racialized and ethnic groups have historically shifted (and remained the same in some ways) sheds light into how change in the realm of the

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<sup>70</sup> The video can be accessed here: <http://www.ebaumsworld.com/video/watch/760440/>

<sup>71</sup> Extracted from: <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/television/from-humble-beginnings-to-global-success-for-muslim-sitcom?pageCount=0>

discursive does not always operate in the form of a revolutionary coup, especially when entering the sphere of mainstream media.

## **Vulnerabilities of Cooptation**

### ***Voyeurism***

What kind of risks does a show like *Little Mosque on the Prairie* have of being co-opted?

A potential vulnerability of cooptation is located in the appeal to voyeurism, an exotic commodity for consumption that enables the emergence of ‘atypical’ cultural products.

As Karim (2000) and Yeğenoğlu (1998) among others explain, Orientalist thinking is based upon not only fear and revulsion, but also fascination and desire; in other words, even the positive reactions to *Little Mosque on the Prairie* might not necessarily be free of Orientalist stereotypes. In episode 11 of season 5, Rayyan takes the garbage out without her hijab and gets locked out of her parents’ house. This episode reproduces a well-known colonial fantasy of uncovering the Muslim woman. Left exposed in the street, Rayyan is subjected to the gaze of the camera, similarly to Fatima and other Muslim women whom we see uncovered inside the home. Viewers are afforded exclusive peeks at Muslim women in the inside, a modern analogy to Western women’s colonial accounts of life inside the harem in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Macdonald 2006).

This sexual voyeuristic fantasy is re-enacted in another episode depicting a woman in niqab, whose eyes, the only revealed part of her body, are mesmerizing to two of the male characters. The series finale goes beyond unveiling Rayyan when she comes out of the shower in her towel, in one of the sexiest’ scenes of the show. Colonial voyeurism is not only gendered; it is also racialized. Whereas these depictions satisfy a

particular gaze, one might alternatively interpret this unveiling as edutainment – educating viewers about how women who wear headscarves don't have to cover inside their homes in the absence of unrelated men.

### ***Class Bias***

Although *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is not so invested in promoting a consumerist mentality, it is a family show that displays middle-class values and is unconcerned with working class issues. This is the same bias that Jhally and Lewis (1992) expose in their study of *The Cosby Show*. With this said, while *Little Mosque on the Prairie* privileges middle-class values, it refrains from celebrating frenzied consumerism displayed in shows like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). Rayyan's sense of fashion consists of an everyday wear, without any evident fashion statement except for the veil that stands out and her use of warm colours and patterns. We are far from the glamorous *Sex and the City* representation of the sexually 'free' and 'liberated' woman who stands high-up on her *Manolo Blahnik* stiletto heels as she carries her *Louis Vuitton* clutch bag.

Nonetheless, while I note the show's appeal to voyeurism and its absence of representation of working class issues, I am also wary of the ghettoization of "minority" issues. The representative is often given one opportunity to speak and asked to lump everything in one show, or one course, or one book chapter. Here is your opportunity to speak so why aren't discussing x, y, and z? In brief, I am referring to the practice of imposing the burden of representation on the text and the artist, and the reality that the text will not be capable of accomplishing every possible goal task that is asked of it, and in the end be read quite differently by the audience.

### ***Lack of Self-Representation***

In terms of self-representation, the production staff, the writing staff, and the directors of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* since the launch of the show are not Muslim (with the exception of the creator and of Sadia Duranni, a Muslim stand-up comedian from Winnipeg, who was hired at a later stage). When I asked Nawaz about how she thought this affected the production of the series, which she didn't envision as targeting a Muslim audience but is still about Muslims or at least about Muslim and Christian relations, she spoke about combining universal truths with Muslim specificity. For example, she said: "...raising your daughter when she rebels and didn't want to wear the hijab... So you have non-Muslim men or fathers worrying about how their daughters dress. It's not just a Muslim issue... And how do you deal with teenage rebellion because in his mind [Babar] she should be wearing hijab." But while thinking and writing in terms of universalities might highlight the humanity of all who reside in Canada (including Muslims), the show is also about a mosque and its congregants. The main topic of the show calls for expertise and extensive background knowledge about Islam and its practices. With regards to self-representation, the producers of the series fail to include Muslim voices as the majority of the writers of the show are not Muslims, except for Nawaz and Durrani. It would be interesting to analyze what Nawaz's next project will materialize to be. So far, she has pitched six new series which have all failed. However, Nawaz states that this is regular process for how the industry functions:

I pitched six new series that have all failed so far – six ideas, six scripts. So you have to try for years and years and years and it takes a lot of energy and time and you can't be working on one show while you're doing that because it takes you so long to develop and pitch and take meetings [...] *Little Mosque*

right away it just happened. That's not normal. This is normal. Spending six years trying to get it... So far I've been unsuccessful but you just have to try because that's sort of the nature of the industry. To keep working and trying.

Here, Nawaz rationalizes these rejections in terms of how the industry works. While she describes how many stories are not selling, she also reveals the exceptional welcome of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, and how there has not been the same demand for her current projects. It will be interesting to examine how her future projects compare to *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and how they might be able to disrupt things in different ways.

### **Summary**

The analysis presented here reveals that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is particularly grounded in the discursive tactics of resignification, insertion of native language, and inclusion of positive images. As much as it has been sold as entertainment (read pleasure, seduction), it also aims to “normalize” Muslims in the North American mediated context. Associating Muslims with comedy, laughter, and joy is a new and divergent representation. Other artists and groups have also turned to humour as the form to convey messages that are otherwise inaudible. But making people laugh and providing entertainment from the segregated margins to those who are dominant has a long history, and does not necessarily lend itself to ‘progress’ towards better representation.

In terms of counter-hegemonic emergence, the use of humour as a form and of comedy as a genre has, and continues to, enable the circulation of otherwise suppressed discourses. The television show has gained a monumental degree of access, in comparison to other cultural works from the ethnic margins. With this said, some of the

limitations of humour include its potential to be ignored, dismissed and trivialized, foregrounding how self-derision of particular groups can be rendered a desirable commodity. Although this analysis attempts to depart from imposing the burden of representation on this selected text, one must note how the show reinforces middle-class values.

Because of its particular locality, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* consists of a blatant performativity of Muslim identity, positing identity in difference. Had the show been produced in a predominantly Muslim country, would it have required this heavy and repetitive insistence on statements of difference? *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has undoubtedly succeeded in making comedic history. When considering the weaknesses and limitations of the series, one needs to recognize that the emergence of alternative Muslim stories in the Western media is a recent phenomenon. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* constitutes a remarkable debut for the insertion of different images of Muslims in popular television. With this said, vulnerabilities of cooptation, including when they emanate from commodified exotification manifested in voyeuristic impulses, need to be kept in check. The pedagogical need to see the communal self-consciously 'represented' remains, as does the necessity to reach out for less burdened representation.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have examined the expressions and articulations of mediated counter-hegemonic discourses on the part of Arab, Muslim, South Asian and Middle-Eastern women in the U.S. and Canada, with particular attention to race and gender. I have focused on the media and artistic productions of four marginalized (and racialized) women who create their own texts that respond to dominant media discourses. Drawing from cultural studies, critical race and gender studies, postcolonial theory, research on alternative media dealing with Arab and Muslim representations in the media, my dissertation offers a conceptual framework for understanding how counter-hegemonic discourses and media alter the circulation of culture in the realm of the popular. Here, I have used bell hooks' work on acts of "talking back" as a point of departure to analyze these acts reflecting on their attempts to move from an object position (e.g., from being represented as 'other') to a subject position.

The selected interventions are talking back to a common stock of knowledge – dominant colonial, orientalist, and sexist representations that carry significant implications and material consequences. They also engage in acts of denouncing the responsibility of marginalized communities in maintaining regimes of oppression such as patriarchy. Moreover, they are denouncing oppressive practices in their countries of origin. For example, Shirin Neshat condemns the absence of individual freedoms and the rampant censorship in Iran.

My location as a Moroccan in the U.S. from 1998 until 2007 (and during 9/11) drove my concern with the real implications of dominant discourses as I witnessed how

languages of hatred and intolerance positioned specific bodies and communities in a precarious state. These discourses served to justify war, occupation, interrogations, indefinite detentions, and deportations. Drawing on Agamben, Butler (2004) posits the “derealisation of the other” as beyond discursive dehumanization; it implies that these bodies are neither alive nor dead. In the current historical conjuncture, Arab and Muslim lives become annulled and ungrievable.

Whereas these dominant discourses derive from colonial times, the conjuncture of 9/11 has paradoxically increased interest for the Middle East North Africa South Asia (MENASA) region in North America. I have been interested in this project in what this renaissance of diasporic cultural works has allowed. This analysis demonstrates that the problématique and dilemma of these artists is that they are trying to gain visibility in order to intervene at the same time that they are struggling against stereotypes and trying to extricate themselves from the burden of representation. The selected artists display an obvious engagement with the metaphors of Western hegemony, although they also circulate discourses of contestation against the dictatorial systems in the MENASA region. For example, where is Pakistan in Nawaz’ productions? Pakistani issues certainly do not occupy a central place in her work. Because Neshat has been away from Iran and unable to visit on a regular basis for many years, she speaks of her inability to speak for Iranians. Not only is this a statement against assuming the position of an ambassador of culture, but it is also about being at a distance from the country of origin.<sup>72</sup> In Hammad and Jacir’s works, in contrast, Palestine and issues of landlessness are much more present. But the Zionist narrative is a dominant colonial narrative supported by the North American establishment.

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<sup>72</sup> See Shirin Neshat’s (2010) TED talk: [http://www.ted.com/talks/shirin\\_neshat\\_art\\_in\\_exile.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/shirin_neshat_art_in_exile.html)



My selection of case studies has hence included examinations of contemporary interventions in cinema, television, poetry, and performance. These can be defined as constitutive ‘moments’ of counter-hegemonic emergence and allow me to advance a working definition for the notions of ‘counter-hegemony’ and ‘counter-hegemonic.’ Using an interdisciplinary approach, I also cluster a variety of types of interventions in the dominant media that can be grouped under the umbrella framework of ‘tactical interventions literature.’ As part of this research, I have cited selected examples of alternative self-produced Arab and Muslim media works.

In response to the reductionist and negative representations outlined in postcolonial theory and summarized in the first part of this thesis, the selected identity workers described in my case studies deploy a variety of discursive tactics as interventions. I demonstrate these tactical interventions through an interrogation of (1) the poetry and performances of Suheir Hammad; (2) the cinematic interventions of Annemarie Jacir, focusing particularly on (*Salt of This Sea*), (3) the visual art and films of Shirin Neshat with particular attention to her film, *Women Without Men*; and (4) the short films and the television comedy (*Little Mosque on the Prairie*) created by Zarqa Nawaz.

Most notably, the selected case studies engage in discursive practices of re-writing historical narratives, and revalorizing native languages and activating collective heritages (by inserting words and references in poetry and in visual language, and by making films entirely in Arabic or Farsi). These interventions additionally archive erased stories, as in the films by Jacir and Neshat, and in Hammad’s deployment of the feminist tactics of “naming” and “shaming” (Stillman 2007). Jacir furthermore created an online archive of Palestinian films.

Moreover, these texts creatively respond to issues of in/visibility, which Shohat and Stam (1994) refer to as the “dialectics of presence/absence,” by acknowledging death/erasure/absence while also reaffirming life/presence/difference. This involves negating the dominant tropes of colonial discourse as well as presenting innovative alternate images. *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, along with its notable use of the native language and religious references, significantly builds on resignification, reversal, and positive images, even if the latter tactic carries particular vulnerabilities of cooptation.

These mediated interventions momentarily reverse commonsensical understandings of identities. I have been mostly interested in how they discursively create or sustain a differential understanding of reality. This analysis also reveals a cultural struggle over the real. Jacir and Hammad describe realist impulses of their works. As discussed in Chapter four, Neshat’s video installation *Turbulent* (1998) provides a striking visual metaphor of a woman’s struggle to take voice and to not lose her head. While Jacir situates her first feature film as made in the form of realism (based on real events), Hammad describes in her introduction to *Born Palestinian, Born Black* how, “...none of them are pieces that I could write now, cause I’m no longer living in those spaces. But they’re still real and breathing, cause those spaces are within me. The road I’ve traveled, the land beneath my feet. I make my own way home” (1996, 13). These voices are hence emphasizing the realness of the perspectives they are transmitting. The very fact that they have to state that these issues, events, and ideas are real attests to how they are struggling against a dominant logic that constructs their views as mad speech. Whereas hegemony makes ideas intelligible (by fixating representations and normalizing privileged views and readings), it also constructs a particular type of speech as

unintelligible in order to effectively evacuate it from the public domain. When what has first been contained as mad speech is subjected to appropriation and consumption, it is momentarily rendered intelligible. This metaphor of madness is not as evident in the case of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. Nawaz's productions have reached the greatest level of popularity, significantly because of the nature of the medium (television). But with this case, greater access to the mainstream also dilutes the show's potential for Muslim self-representation. So in the process of mainstreaming, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has become further mediated by non-Muslims.

It is important to recognize that these are very different texts emerging out of distinct contexts, as this thesis' sections on Palestinian and Iranian cinemas make clear. Iranian and Palestinian cinemas, in the homeland and in the diaspora, do not have the same histories, and nor do they benefit from the same type of funding. However, the selected media texts engage in discursive practices of "talking back" to mainstream discourses, as all situate themselves as circulating alternative or oppositional discourses. In addition, the artists are conversant in and work with the English language, although Jacir also writes in Arabic and currently resides in Jordan, while Neshat and Hammad regularly create and perform their works outside of North America.

Nonetheless, in spite of differences in the choices of media and genres within these case studies, this analysis extracts similarities in the deployments of tactics and explains what brings these media texts together. In this light, the films *Salt of this Sea* and *Women Without Men* both position themselves as alternative, counter-current texts that attempt to rectify particular erasures of history, and to strive for taking voice and embracing indigenous feminist agency. Looking at different forms and avenues for

communication sheds light on different practices of “talking back” and uncovers conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence.

Additionally, all of my case studies are technologically mediated, as the artists’ productions appear in a variety of online venues as well as in audiovisual and print formats, thereby increasing their popularity and accessibility. These works are part of the mediasphere by default (because they are contemporary). But the artists have also used media tactically to increase their levels of reach to targeted audiences: by creating, for example, an online archive of Palestinian films (Jacir) or a listserv to message fans and followers about upcoming poetry readings and other related materials (Hammad). In addition, the post-9/11 context has provided opportunities for the mediation of these types of works. This is most obvious with Hammad, who circulated *First Writing Since* immediately after 9/11, leading her to appear on Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam. But more generally, as explained earlier in this thesis, the climate of 9/11 generated war and repressive policies but also a renaissance of Arab, Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern cultural works.

The selected case studies have ruptured, in several ways, the hegemonic discourses concerning Muslim representations, with a particular attention to gender. The identity workers’ particular ‘standpoints’ and performances of identity challenge the dominant view of Muslim women as passive victims in need of saving. The mere fact that these women are creating art (and speaking) presents an alternative image to the infamous figure of the imperilled veiled female in need of rescue. Thus, each of the artists has relied on various tactics as ways of “talking back.” They have further contributed to shaking current evaluations of aesthetic merit.

In regards to the form of these productions, Hammad draws from hip hop culture and everyday language, and inserts Arabic words and cultural/religious metaphors into her poetry. She has thus contributed to redefine canonical forms of poetry by proposing new styles of writing. Since her work has been widely celebrated as groundbreaking poetry, the very form of her craft is increasingly gaining recognition as a valid and compelling way of writing poetry. The woman who never graduated from Hunter College is invited today to perform at Ivy League institutions. Neshat has turned around the dominant binaries of East/West and Man/Woman to offer a new visual language aimed at taking voice by putting to the fore the structures of these divisions. Her visual innovations let her work speak without words. Nawaz's productions infiltrate Canadian television language by inserting Arabic and Quranic references. Jacir's *Salt of This Sea* is the first fiction film made by a Palestinian film director. Moreover, this film is written in Arabic, filmed in the West Bank and in Israel, and stages a strong female character as the chief protagonist.

It is also through the performativity of identity that the selected artists speak. In a Ted Talk presented on December 8, 2010, Neshat spoke of herself as the voice and representative of her "people." Yet she pointed to one of the contradictions embedded in this role when she said that "oddly enough," she doesn't live in Iran. Suheir Hammad's author description in *Born Palestinian, Born Black* also directly articulates this idea of speaking for those who have been denied justice and silenced. Her 2009 Montreal poetry performance disrupted and subverted the scenarios of criminalization and victimization through taking voice, embodied participation, and the reactivation of cultural memory.

The selected artists' performances of identity are characterized by a significant re-centering of gender – by referencing the workings of patriarchy (Hammad and Neshat), positing women heroines at the center of their narratives (*Salt of This Sea & Women Without Men*), portraying a veiled lead character as a feminist (*Little Mosque on the Prairie*), or through the gendered lens of Hammad's poetry ("every woman's body has been broken into") and Neshat's film that takes viewers into a garden inhabited by four women who have escaped oppressive circumstances. But these cases don't just celebrate womanhood with a capital W; they also tell other stories related to how gender interacts with race. In this light, *Salt of This Sea* and *Women Without Men* visually rewrite particular histories – whether they 'document' the presence of Palestinians in the so-called "land without a people," or they re-position the American and British coup d'état against the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mossadegh as an important historical turning point.

### **Conditions of Counter-Hegemonic Emergence**

In this thesis, I was additionally interested in the conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence – the circulation/mediation of alternative discourses, representations, and constructions that momentarily disrupt the flow of dominance in a particular space. With regards to the emergence of these works, they have each mobilized various venues and modes of expression. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has most notably relied on the use of humour to dilute the seriousness of divergent messages. Nonetheless, the form of humour and the genre of comedy have their limits as I have mentioned in the last chapter. The use of magic realism, deployed in *Women Without Men*, aims to transport viewers into

another world of possibilities thereby resisting its reading as a documentary (according to the filmmaker's own framing of the film).

The understanding of culture and hegemony that I utilize in this thesis' theoretical framework is supported by the results of this analysis. That these works are subjected to attempts of containment, appropriation, or neutralization is inevitable considering the movement of culture (as always fluid) and of hegemony ("as a moving equilibrium" (Hall & Jefferson 2006)). This is the direction that Gramsci points us towards (even though he never specifically tackles the terminology of the 'counter-hegemonic') and that others like Adamson (1980), Ives (2004), Hall and Jefferson (2006), Keeling (2007), and Williams (1977) and have elaborated. So even though parts of these works have been coopted, the artists are still playing the game - the clever trick of the weak that de Certeau (1984) talks about.

Notwithstanding the fluidity of the circulation of these cultural works (necessarily open to containment and cooptation), I contend that it is still useful to retain the term "counter-hegemonic" (similarly to the imperative of retaining the concept of the "alternative," widely and fascinatingly debated in alternative media research).<sup>73</sup> The term "counter-hegemony" is still useful to attest for the need to create alternatives. It points to the problematic implications and material effects of dominant discourses. Furthermore, it signals the oppositional nature of these works. However, cultural studies and alternative media research demonstrate that "hegemonic" and 'counter-hegemonic" media and discourses are in constant communication with each other. This is not to say that there is a dialogue between two equal parties, nor is it to replicate the very often misleading

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<sup>73</sup> The following studies particularly highlight discussions about what criteria should be included to define alternative media: Bailey et al. (2008), Carroll and Hackett (2006), Dorothy (1999), Hamilton (2000), Rodriguez (2001)

standard news format of two sides to each issue. My point here is to emphasise the dynamic nature and location of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. Although they interact, I suggest that we still need both terms. The notion of “counter-hegemony” presents a reminder of existing power imbalances and the difficulties for counter-hegemonic voices to emerge.

In this thesis, I included popularity as a criterion for my selection of case studies because I have been interested in creativity that can popularize critical consciousness, gender equality, respect for other ethnicities and cultures, and decolonized thinking. A priori, I have been more interested in the works produced (their emergence, circulation, and potential) than in locating the artist, or in claiming a subaltern position for them. I depart from situating the selected artists as subaltern, in light of Spivak’s denunciation of the academic “relaxing” of the use of the term “subaltern.” In her discussion of subalternity and agency; subalternity and the popular, she argues that one cannot say “I am a subaltern” (Spivak 2005, 476). In her view, subalternity means “to be removed from all lines of mobility” (2005, 475). Now, if this thesis’ selected artists are not subaltern since they have had access to media visibility, then can they be situated as marginal? Naficy (1998) questions whether artists like Neshat are indeed marginal (since they have had the option of mobility). However, this thesis project reveals significant efforts to contain the voices of the selected identity workers. I hence argue that the perspectives they present are marginal, without meaning subaltern – as in the latter case they would not be able to speak.

For this project, I have been interested in the notion of “talking back” (1989) – of moving from an object to a subject position. Do the sounds emitted by the selected



identity workers constitute voices? And if so, are they endangered/unstable voices? While these voices are being heard within particular interpretive communities, they certainly are not institutionalized. Are they the representatives of the subaltern? They take voice via the performativity of identity. What does it mean to ‘represent’ identity, if we understand identity as fluid and constantly changing (the constructionist view)?

I draw from alternative media research to identify discursive tactics but also to conceptualize the counter-hegemonic. This body of work most interestingly engages in defining what constitutes the alternative.<sup>74</sup> Thus, I’m not using the word “alternative” lightly, and have emphasized that it cannot just be reduced to content. My interest has been primarily focused on two things: the content of these responses, and the conditions of counter-hegemonic emergence (taking into account contextual elements, including issues of self-representation, access, and the political/oppositional stance of such works). I hence endeavoured to examine how the selected artists respond to these hegemonic tropes. The aim has been to take content and conditions into account in order to delineate the emergence of discursive counter-hegemonic interventions.

### **Vulnerabilities of Cooptation**

In considering my case studies, I traced their vulnerabilities of cooptation. In effect, the very popularity of these works endow each artist with increased latitude to stage interventions but also dilute their intended oppositional messages through circulation and cooptation within traditional and new media. The works have been subjected to containment and appropriation by the dominant societies. The difficulty of securing

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<sup>74</sup> See for example works by Bailey et al. (2008), Carroll and Hackett (2006), Kidd (1999), Hamilton (2000), Rodriguez (2001)

funding for such works significantly destabilizes their potential to emerge. Having to create their work “on the run” as Hammad notes, and being subjected to appropriations by such bodies as the U.S. Department of State and to harassment, hate speech, and personal attacks (Jacir and Nawaz) raises serious concerns regarding the viability of these interventions.

If upward mobility is severely restricted for the racialized and marginalized, it is non-existent for the subaltern (according to Spivak 2005). The problem with the narrative of the exceptional subject who rises against difficult conditions and “succeeds” is that it celebrates individual ability to achieve upward mobility, in this case to reach for the stars. This is the essence of the American dream. It dismisses structural barriers that deny the masses of the real “subalterns” opportunities to better their lives. This is something that a very young Hammad already sensed when she penned the following:

Torture. The words shame me into writing about real torture. Interrogations of Palestinian youth. How cigarettes and knives are used to drain confessions from scared, landless boys. Real torture, not this watered-down, struggling artist crap. Maybe I am too American, too used to bottled water. (1996, 71)

Thus, in regards to vulnerabilities of cooptation and talk, upward mobility allows certain voices to get co-opted, and others to be further erased. But the figure of the minority/exceptional artist relates to the tactic of infiltration, as in the work of femocrats who facilitate institutional access to other women feminists (Barry et al. 2007). A quick glance at the Arab/Middle Eastern comedy scene in North America reveals such a tactic at work. For example, there is more than one comedian performing. Furthermore, they are coming together to organize shows and festivals like the *Axis of Evil Comedy Club* or the *Arab-American Comedy Festival*. Thus, they are increasing their visibility within the public domain and hence their ability to reach a wider audience.

Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," points to issues related to the circulated metaphors of upward mobility. Her concept of *Diva Citizenship* has been useful for this thesis in terms of situating the potential role of the artist from the margins to create cultural and political change. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant tackles the fantasy and idealism associated with the notion of possible upward mobility (of exceptional divas, for example – although this is not explicitly apparent in this text). Her work reflects on the cruelty of optimism, which is an argument that finds resonance for example in the exiled Libyan poet Hisham Matar's statement that oppression also stifles creativity.<sup>75</sup> Wonderful voices and innovative perspectives will not necessarily emerge out of repressive circumstances. Yet, these case studies attest to the possibilities of such achievements.

### ***Burden of Representation***

This study also found that the selected artists have been surprisingly burdened with representation. This is surprising because the "burden of representation" was documented as reality for filmmakers of colour as early as the 1970s by Mercer (1990). Gagnon explains how identity politics which emerged out of the civil rights movements "... shifted into broader struggles over issues of representation" (2000, 23). It is at the same time obvious and disturbing/unacceptable that these groups continue to be marginalized. In this light, Hammad's poetry and Jacir's contribution to the *Dreams of a Nation* project clearly state their commitment to self-representation – because the groups they belong to and "represent" are still relegated to the side-lines. But when the representatives or performers of identity, if you will, are endowed with such possibilities of speaking, why

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<sup>75</sup> Matar (2011) expressed this view on Riz Khan's show on *AL Jazeera English*: <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/rizkhan/2011/02/201122374815992508.html>

would they then have to carry the responsibility of covering all issues related to their region of origin or to apologize for the faults of an entire ‘community’ (which is of course imaginary)? In compiling my analysis, I was surprised to find that this theme was so recurrent, considering the contemporary nature of these works. Although we are still talking about racialized and marginalized communities, it is very alarming that one of the central tropes of colonial discourse – that of asking the person of colour to speak about and explain the strange and exotic habits of the uncivilized – continues to be imposed on the racialized as if these communities and groups are homogeneous and monolithic. One would hope that after several decades, ethnic and racialized groups would have been able to further assert their difference and to loosen the grip of essentialist thinking. But since these questions of self-representation and of the burden of representation continue to pose problems, then race thinking (Razack, 2008), along with the marginalization of ethnic and religious groups, still thrives in the Americas. The story of race in the Americas, whereas it changes and fluctuates, is built on this exoticization that simultaneously enables a denial of structural discrimination built on race thinking. In Jiwani’s (1996) words, it operates as a “discourse of denial.”

Counter-hegemonic works of arts maintain voices above the surface of the water (to borrow Jacir’s visual metaphor). They can contribute to the creation of a counter-hegemonic language that creates noise; noise that disturbs the tranquility of the status quo as it awaits a potential mass-mobilization that would enable the creation of significant political change. If these media works didn’t have within them the capacity to disturb (create noise), they would not have been subjected to the various types of opposition that their creators encountered in the very making of these works. This thesis highlights the

various ways that they go against the grain of common sense while acknowledging vulnerabilities of cooptation, containment, or appropriation.

### **Future Directions**

Because the ways that these texts are used, interpreted, and received are beyond their creator's control and imagination, the research conducted here points to future directions for research that would further investigate how particular "interpretive communities" (Fish 1980) assess the performers' identity work. The current analysis of these works confirms that audience and reception information has not been comprehensively synthesized as of yet. Although this thesis work has utilized audience responses that have posted in the public domain, including film reviews, blogs, and online videos, empirical audience analysis could highlight the collective experiences of particular communities, in a departure from individual understandings of the issues at hand, thereby bringing to light structural social and political questions, problems, or barriers.

This program for future research could reveal how viewing/reading relates to (1) change in perception and (2) encourages mobilization. It could further explore the theoretical linkages between self-representative artistic expression and collective action, organizing and social movements. A future project would involve creating a feminist archaeology to respond to the urgent task of archiving alternative works since, as this study revealed, a wealth of productions from the cultural margins still demand adequate academic scrutiny.

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## APPENDIX A

### Participant Consent Forms and Ethics Approval

#### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEWS FOR *TALKING BACK: AN ANALYSIS OF COUNTER-HEGEMONIC DISCOURSES***

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Dr. Yasmin Jiwani and Kenza Oumlil of the Communication Department of Concordia University at 7141 Sherbrooke Street West, CJ. 3.230, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Montreal Quebec H4B 1R6. Dr. Jiwani's telephone number is (514) 848-2424 EXT. 2583. Kenza Oumlil's telephone number is (514) 652-2187. Emails: [yasmin.jiwani@gmail.com](mailto:yasmin.jiwani@gmail.com) and [koumlil@gmail.com](mailto:koumlil@gmail.com)

#### **A. PURPOSE**

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to examine how Muslim, Arab, South Asian and Middle-Eastern women talk back (critically respond) to stereotypes in the media, while paying particular attention to race and gender. This doctoral dissertation focuses specifically on the art and media produced and circulated by Muslim, Arab, South Asian and Middle-Eastern women in the U.S. and Canada. The research interviews will be incorporated and analyzed in Kenza Oumlil's PhD thesis.

#### **B. PROCEDURES**

I understand that individual interviews will preferably be conducted face-to-face in a public location such as a café. If not possible, telephone/Skype interviews will be conducted. If I provide my consent, interviews might be audio recorded. If I refuse to be recorded, only written notes will be used. I understand that all audio and transcription files will be destroyed after a period of ten (10) years. Interviews should last for about 30min to one hour. I also understand that ideally 2 interviews will be conducted about my experiences making art and/or media and circulating my works.

#### **C. RISKS AND BENEFITS**

I understand that there is limited risk associated with participating in this project in terms of safety, security, or physical harm. However, I am aware that the researcher will know and will reveal the identity of participants in the results and published material as this research directly refers to and analyzes my already circulated (published or produced) works and/or media texts. I understand that I may choose to not conduct the interview, to not answer a particular question(s) or to discontinue my participation at any point **before**

**March 1, 2012.** I understand that the results of the study will be shared with me upon completion of the project. A copy of the thesis will also be sent to me then. I understand that I will also be informed of each public sharing of the study results (at conferences or if articles or book chapters are published). I understand that the results of this study will be published online in an open repository (Spectrum).

#### **D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION**

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation **before March 1, 2012** without negative consequences.

- I understand that my participation in this study is (*pick appropriate word*):

CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., the researcher will know, but will not disclose my identity)

**OR**

NON-CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., my identity will be revealed in study results)

- I understand that my participation in this study can be (*pick appropriate word*):

AUDIO RECORDED

**OR**

WRITTEN NOTES ONLY

- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

**OR**

I understand that the data from this study will not be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance unit, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x2425 or by email at [kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca) .

understand that the results of this study will be published online in an open repository (Spectrum).

**D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION**

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OR

WRITTEN NOTES ONLY

- I understand that the data from this study may be published.
- OR
- I understand that the data from this study will not be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)

Zarqa Nawaz

SIGNATURE

Zarqa Nawaz

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance unit, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x2425 or by email at [kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca).



understand that the results of this study will be published online in an open repository (Spectrum).

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- I understand that my participation in this study can be (*pick appropriate word*):

AUDIO RECORDED

OR

WRITTEN NOTES ONLY

- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

OR

I understand that the data from this study will not be published.

• It has been agreed that any direct quotes and all quotations and words said by Annemarie Jacir and to be used by the above mentioned researchers will be first pre-checked and approved by Annemarie Jacir to ensure accuracy otherwise this agreement is null and void. *AJ*

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)

Annemarie Jacir

SIGNATURE

Annemarie Jacir

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance unit, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x2425 or by email at [kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca).

CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., the researcher will know, but will not disclose my identity)  
OR  
NON-CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., my identity will be revealed in study results)

- I understand that my participation in this study can be (*pick appropriate word*):

AUDIO RECORDED  
OR  
WRITTEN NOTES ONLY

- I understand that the data from this study may be published.  
OR  
I understand that the data from this study will not be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I  
FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)

SHIRIN NESHAT

SIGNATURE

Shirin Neshat

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance unit, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x2425 or by email at [kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca).

*of permission to use written notes,  
which please forward before  
published. Shirin Neshat*

**D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION**

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation **before March 1, 2012** without negative consequences.

- I understand that my participation in this study is *(pick appropriate word)*:

NON-CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., my identity will be revealed in study results)

- I understand that my participation in this study can be *(pick appropriate word)*:

AUDIO RECORDED

- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)     Suheir Hammad    

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance unit, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x2425 or by email at [kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:kwiscomb@alcor.concordia.ca) .



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY  
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

---

Name of Applicant: Dr Yasmin Jiwani  
Department: Communication Studies  
Agency: Graduate Studies Thesis Completion Award  
Title of Project: 'Talking Back': Counter-Hegemonic Discourses of North American Arab and Muslim Women Artists  
Certification Number: UH2011-089-1

Valid From: March 19, 2012 to: March 18, 2013

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

---

Dr. James Pfaus, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

01/29/2009



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY  
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

---

Name of Applicant: Dr Yasmin Jiwani  
Department: Communication  
Agency: Thesis Completion Awards  
Title of Project: Talking Back: An Analysis of Counter-Hegemonic Discourses  
Certification Number: UH2011-089

Valid From: September 16, 2011 to: September 15, 2012

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Pfaus", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. James Pfaus, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

#### Zarqa Nawaz

1. How did you start making films? Can you talk a bit about your professional life trajectory?
2. How did you approach the National Film Board?
3. What was the launch of *Fundamentalist Films* like?
4. What was the process of contacting the Center for Asian American media which distributed the four titles on one DVD “BBQ Muslims,” “Random Check,” “Fred’s Burqa,” and “Death Threat.” How did the idea of combining these 4 short films in a DVD for distribution come about?
5. Who is the *Little Mosque on the Prairie* audience?
6. What do you think is the potential of using humour to convey messages about Muslim identity? Are there any limitations?
7. Did you have any ideas before making *Me and the Mosque* about how you were going to approach the topic of barriers in the mosque? There's a part in the documentary where you are talking with your brother and he warns you that talking about these barriers will make people in the community react negatively. Did you experience any of this after making the film? What was the reception of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* like?
8. From my understanding, the production staff, the writing staff, and the directors of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* since the launch of the show are not Muslim (except for yourself the creator). Is this correct? And if so, how do you think this affects the production of the series?
9. What are you presently working on and what will you do next?
10. Where can I listen to your radio documentary *The Changing Rituals of Death*? What year was it produced?
11. Is there anything else you would like to say or add?

### **Annemarie Jacir**

1. How did you start making films? Can you talk a bit about your professional life trajectory?
2. You were the chief curator and the co-founder of the *Dreams of a Nation* project. I read your piece on curating the film festival but was there a second Palestinian film festival the following year?
3. *Salt of This Sea* was released in 2008. When did you start thinking about making the film?
4. You talk about the impossibility of making this film – lack of funding, permits to film in particular areas. But for you, what made *Salt of This Sea* happen? Can you trace it to any particular turning point or series of factors?
5. There is a scene in the film where Soraya is having an argument with the Israeli woman who settled in her family home in Yaffa. Soraya wants her to recognize that this is not her home. Why was it important for you to have Soraya say “recognize it”?
6. You talk about your style as “realistic.” Can you talk a bit about this? And given that you studied in the U.S., do you think that your films, and more particularly *Salt*, have some American or Hollywood influences?
7. What is your targeted audience today? Do you know who your actual audience is?
8. I read about how you had to resort to several sources of funding, which mostly consisted of small grants for *Salt of This Sea*. Could you talk about this a bit?
9. How about your new film? Can you talk about the funding process of *When I Saw You*?
10. How did you choose the location of Jordan for your new film? When will it be out? Where does the title mean?
11. How can I get access to your short films?
12. Is there anything else you would like to say or add?

### **Shirin Neshat**

1. Could you say a few words about your artistic journey and how you decided to transition to making films?
2. Was it important for you to include a scene depicting Munis’ act of suicide?

3. I noticed a number of differences between the novel and the film, and especially in terms of character development and ending. I read what you said in terms of not wanting to victimise the women. In the novel Fayzeh accepts to become Amir's second wife. This is changed in the film. Another example includes how in the novel Fakhri wants to evict the women from the orchard. How did you decide to make these changes?
4. How would you describe your development of the male characters in comparison to how they are portrayed in the novel?
5. I read that the making of *Women Without Men* took longer than expected. What was the process of generating funding for the film?
6. Is it possible to access or purchase your video installations online?
7. What are you presently working on and what will you do next?
8. Is there anything else you would like to say or add?

### **Suheir Hammad**

1. What are your motivations for writing and performing poetry?
2. What do you most want to be heard as having said since you've been writing?
3. Is there anything that you are saying that people have difficulty hearing or that does not come out in the process of talking back to mainstream discourses?
4. What are some difficulties in trying to respond to these media images?
5. What would you define as counter-hegemonic discourse or content?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say?