

INTRODUCTION

The desire to make ourselves visible on our own terms drives the creation of this anthology of Arab American creative nonfiction. Within these pages, we have brought together the varied voices of those who live in the Arab diaspora. These voices originate in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, and Lebanon, encompassing North Africa and the Middle East. They stretch across the ocean to the United States to reveal the effect of traversing these geographies.

Many of these authors are well-established writers while others are just beginning their writing careers. There are stories of those who move between homeland and the United States; for those who immigrated, a return to homeland is a return to a remembered place, and for the second generation it is a return to a place instilled through the memories of others. It is also a return to another self, revealing the ways we continue to carry our homelands and the ways we live beyond our own time and place. Together, the stories included in this anthology explore what it means to move back and forth across the political and cultural landscapes of the Arab diaspora and how that movement has been ever more complicated.

As we are all-too-well aware, recent conflicts in the Middle East have made it difficult to stay in touch with the various homelands from which our authors hail. Mobility and interconnection between life here and life there has served as the circulatory system of the Arab American community, allowing it to renew its dual vision of celebration and interrogation of both America and the homeland. Not being able to return, not being able to witness and to adjust the global perspective to events, as Mohja Kahf informs us, renders one nearly voiceless when one most needs to tell her people's story, and helpless when the story is being told by less sensitive—and in many cases opportunistic—voices. The story nonetheless is told, is gathered in fragments, and quilted together against the tide of forgetfulness and erasure.

The difficulty of returning home is compounded by the difficulty of staying put in America. Even prior to 9/11 and the Patriot Act, Arab Americans had been singled out as suspected terrorists. Hayan Charara, in his essay here included, discusses the well-documented persecution of people of Arab descent, which has upset hundreds of thousands of people's lives and created in the community a deep psychic wound that

threatens both its internal solidarity and its greater integration into the wider American culture. The blanket of suspicion that has covered the Arab and Muslim American communities has created a gap in dialogue that is impossible to bridge. It's as if other Americans have no sense of the extent of America's extremely violent engagement in the Middle East. Most confounding is the disconnect between American hegemonic global politics and American racial politics, particularly the racism and Islamophobia directed at Arab and Muslim Americans. Even as our military expands its operations in the Arab lands, the majority of Americans see themselves as victims and are utterly unconcerned about the atrocities caused by our government there. Arab American writers have become anti-imperialist by virtue of the violence committed by their government against their kin abroad. Standing against demagoguery has taught Arab American writers to exhibit a high degree of resilience and has also made them articulate definers of citizenship and belonging.

Although particular to their authors' experiences, Arab American life stories have become emblematic of what it means to have one's identity misconstrued in America and to have to fight to assert one's humanity. For the last half century or so, Arab Americans have been pushed to the margins of society, have had their names and images distorted, their beliefs misrepresented, and their histories denied. Arab American writers, as these essays demonstrate, are well aware that telling their stories has become an act of speaking truth to resist and empower others. Yet, as the essays by Layla Azmi Goushey, Rabih Alameddine, Steven Salaita, and Mathew Shenoda argue, the opportunities to speak one's truth are filtered through many layers of cooptation and exploitation; when one refuses to be coopted and insists on rendering their experience as they understand it, the opportunities to speak can be lost, and the retributions can be devastating. Arab American writers share their stories of struggle and sacrifice as cautionary tales and to strip away illusions regarding the cultural politics of our country.

While the external challenges posed to the Arab American community are a daunting task in themselves, Arab American writers have also undertaken the task of critiquing their community to live up to the standards it has been seeking and advocating. We noted in *Dinarzad's Children*, our anthology of Arab American fiction, that a strong feminist critique has been at the core of Arab American writing. This remains so in the creative nonfiction pieces assembled here. Patriarchy, particularly Arab American patriarchy, is indeed named as a powerful negative force

within our community that induces intolerance and fractures all potential forms of solidarity. The internal critique, as can be seen in the essays by Susan Muaddi Darraj, Kamelya Omayma Youssef, and Safia Elhillo, has also taken on an intersectional approach, addressing racism, homophobia, and anti-intellectualism, as well as misogyny.

Through their critique of the wider American culture, particularly its increasingly fraught tendencies toward racism and intolerance, and the internal critique of their own community, Arab American writers are creating openings for a vision of a different America, and indeed a different world. One way of envisioning an alternative future is to alter our vision of the past. Joseph Geha's and George Abraham's memoir essays interrogate the monolithic story of American assimilation, especially Arab American assimilation, revealing a diversity of American experiences in order to challenge the monolithic and oversimplified narratives of Americanization repeated in our culture. Furthermore, these visitations of the past in part retell the history of the Middle East. Hadil Ghoneim's remembrance of her family's now unimaginable mobility—traveling unimpeded from the Persian Gulf to the Eastern Mediterranean—remind us of a more hopeful time, before America turned the region into an ever-widening theatre of war.

Traumatized by America's most recent history, Arab Americans are well suited to imagine a different future for their nation. Indeed, many Arab American writers have found their voices by attending to the wounds of their elders, victims of colonialism, occupation, and imperialist adventurism. They are aware that memories never disappear but circle back as dreams and hauntings. While Palestine remains the bleeding wound that inspires much meditation among Arab American writers, as it does in the Arab world, the anguish experienced defies all impulse for solipsism and insularity. If anything, Arab American writers are aware of the privileges they have, and as their writings here express, their experiences of racism, suspicion, and persecution have transformed into a deep sensitivity for the travails of struggling populations around the world. To read an Arab American text as evidenced in these essays is to witness selves broadening their horizons—expanding their, and our, potential for empathy and solidarity. Naturally, such outward opening will manifest itself in the broadness of the question raised, as well as the impulse to experiment with the form of the essay itself, compelling it to accommodate explorations that stem from and go beyond one's experiences and memories.

With this anthology, we add to the work of *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* and *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*. These two anthologies have made significant contributions to Arab American literature, making visible the literary and cultural community of Arabs in the United States. *Beyond Memory: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Creative Nonfiction* enhances what has already been accomplished by these anthologies. The true stories in this anthology provide a deeper look into the lives of Arab Americans within the context of identity, culture, language, politics, and history. Together, these anthologies create a complete set of Arab American writing in all three genres, offering readers a full perspective into Arab American literature.