In Response to Narratives of Stereotypes:
Arab American Playwrights Reclaim and Fortify Arab American Representation

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Abstract

In America, the aftermath of 9/11 saw stereotyping against Arabs become a dominant ideological force, inscribing and impacting the relationship between Arab Americans and the US. Along with a tradition of stereotyping always-already framed within an Orientalist discourse, the lack of representational platforms for Arab Americans solidified their negative visibility. This paper examines how Arab American playwrights have used the theatrical space to offer self-representation as an alternative to culturally and institutionally inscribed stereotypes in response to an urgent demand for cultural, social and political survival. Dramatizing the process and effects of social stereotyping, Sam Younis' *Browntown* (2009) reveals the cultural mechanisms of mainstream stereotypes through satirically presenting an Arab American actor, only cast for terrorist roles. Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* (2005) captures institutional legalization of discrimination as the more damaging form of stereotypes presenting the case of an Arab American framed and tried by the "terrorist" stereotype. Younis and El Guindi's plays unsettle stereotypes offering a resisting Althusserian interpellation against anti-Arab/Muslim ("terrorist") state ideology. This paper thus argues that theatre provided a radical platform for Arab Americans to defy state and cultural discourses and reach a multicultural identity that is American in its principles and Arab American in its terminology.

Keywords: Arab-American drama, 9/11, stereotyping

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The tradition of Arab negative stereotyping has been the singular topic that all Arab American playwrights have persistently and systematically addressed in their plays, despite the diversity of their dramatic subjects. In order to respond to a longstanding practice of misrepresentation, Arab American playwrights have re-appropriated the right of self-representation in an attempt to reclaim their stage identity. Within this context, *Browntown* (2004) by Sam Younis examines the social and cultural struggle of living under the burden of negative stereotypes, while *Back of the Throat* (2005) by Yussef El Guindi dramatises the institutional discrimination originating from the endorsement of racial stereotypes and prejudice. Through the examination of these two plays, this article explores the process of formation of Arab stereotypes, their impact on the daily lives of Arab Americans, and their cultural and institutional appropriation in the American context.

Understanding Stereotypes and the Process of their Formation

A classic definition of prejudice is conceived by Gordon Allport, who states that prejudice is "an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalisation. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group or an individual of that group" (10). Once conceived, this erroneous and

reductive generalisation evolves into a narrative relating to a certain group repeatedly retold until established as its representative. Hence, stereotypes enjoy supreme and rarely disputed authority over the targeted group, and systematically affect how people perceive, process information about, and respond to a certain group and its members.

Stereotyping and its consequent prejudice and discrimination function on three respective levels: individual, cultural and institutional. Stereotyping results in "implicit and explicit bias" on the individual level, which manifests itself through a—conscious or unconscious—formulation of opinions and attitudes about the stereotyped group (Dovidio 10). This has the potential of generating reactions such as avoidance, racial slurs, and even violence towards the stereotyped body. Cultural and institutional discrimination, on the other hand, is defined as the investment of prejudice and stereotypes in creating laws and policies that "unfairly restrict the opportunities of a particular group of people" (Dovidio 10). Therefore, what might start as a faulty and generalised opinion or attitude towards a group of people becomes legalised as institutional prejudice, and directly affects people's rights and lives. Arabs represent one of these groups that seem to be a readily accepted target for racial stereotyping.[1]

Through meticulous examination of a variety of writings on matters Arab and Muslim, Edward Said demonstrates in *Orientalism* the persistence of negative Arab stereotypes in Western systems of knowledge and representation. He postulates that Arabs—and Arab Americans—have been subjected to an ideological process of stereotyping which conveys a Western projection of Otherness. That is, the Arab (or Oriental) represents everything that the Western (or Occident) is not (Said 45, 54, 72, 109). Focusing on the Arab male, Said concludes that if the Arab is bestowed with enough attention to be talked about, then he is recollected "from a faintly outlined stereotype as a camel-riding nomad" (285) who is "seen as a disruptor of Israel's and the West's existence" (286). The Orientalist tradition of stereotyping Arabs began long before 9/11, but has been fervently intensified and metamorphosed since the tragic attacks.

Pre and Post-9/11 Stereotypical Representations of the Arab in American Mass Media Culture

Said demonstrates how the system of representing the Orient created a set of stereotypes which, after being historically transmitted through Western academia and literature, has evolved into images circulated via the modern and accessible medium of cinema (278). Jack Shaheen, an authority in exposing the misrepresentations of Arabs in Hollywood and on television, shows how Hollywood has for the past century employed the strategy of repetition "as a teaching tool, tutoring movie audiences repeating over and over, in film after film, insidious images of the Arab people" (*Reel* 7). This strategy serves the purpose of perpetuating Arab negative stereotypes, which began with early Hollywood movies in which the Muslim Arab was represented "as [an] uncivilised character, the outsider in need of a shower and a shave, starkly

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[1] In fact, Edward Said has noted that "[f]or no other ethnic or religious group is it true that virtually anything can be written or said about it, without challenge or demurral"(287).

contrasting in behaviour and appearance with the white Western protagonist ("Hollywood" 25). Shaheen finds that examples of films which depict Arabs unfavourably are abundant, with Arab Muslims being typically typecast as "fanatics who believe in a different god, who don't value human life as much as we do, they are intent on destroying us (the west) with their oil or with their terrorism" (qt. in Harrington). Recurrent negative Arab imagery had thus been widely circulated in different media outlets long before the attacks of September 2001.

9/11, however, brought a new layer to the narratives composed about Arabs, and provoked a collective attribution of blame on Arabs and Muslims. The various stereotypes attributed specifically to the male Arab—dark, bearded, aggressive, lustful and backward, and so on—have been channelled after 9/11 into one magnified archetype or grand narrative of the Arab as terrorist; likely suspect or enemy. Instances of the Arab depicted as terrorist had existed before 9/11 in mass media, but the terrorist stereotype did not achieve its predominance amongst other negative Arab portrayals until after 9/11. In his *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, Shaheen documents the transformation of Arab stereotypes in accordance with American foreign military adventures, noting that "all those reel desert nomads and obese oily sheiks were suddenly dispatched to the dressing rooms to make room for the new head attraction: Arab as crazed Islamic fundamentalist bent on destruction" (Prologue).

In the wake of September 11, Arab American playwrights found themselves, like most Arab Americans, struggling for an identity that transcends stereotypes, and with an artistic responsibility to give voice to the misrepresented Arab. Sam Younis' *Browntown* and Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* reclaim Arab self-representation, and explore this culture of stereotypes in both its individual and institutional manifestation.

The Narrative of the Socially Stereotyped in Sam Younis' *Browntown*

In an introduction to *Browntown* in the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, the following question is posed: "Who are the hijackers and who are the hostages in the entertainment industry?" Giving dramatic form to this question, *Browntown* presents Arab American characters who have become hostages to their own social and cultural stereotypes. *Browntown* was the playwriting debut for Arab American actor/playwright Sam Younis, and won him the 2004 Fringe NYC award for "Overall Excellence in Playwriting."

The play is a comedy about three brown-skinned actors – two Arab Americans, Omar and Malek, and one Indian American, Vijay—who audition for the role of a terrorist in a TV movie. The play satirically presents these actors' personal take on racial profiling in showbiz, and their negotiation with a culture of stereotyping that appears to always encompass them. *Browntown* is somewhat autobiographical, loosely based on anecdotes from the playwright's acting career. Younis explains that the play voiced out the perplexities and questions which roamed his mind while he was auditioning for roles. Some of his questions were: "Why am I routinely a candidate for terrorist roles? Why are these terrorists always named "Mohammed"? Why does that Indian guy keep getting the Arab terrorist parts over me? Why should that upset me? Am I a sellout?" (225).

The Color of Terror, the movie which the characters are auditioning for, is described by Omar "like another scary brown-guy movie" (Younis 235); it is a film about a "Mohammed," who complies with Al Qaeda to launch a terrorist act in America. The movie's title and its essential terrorist, "Mohammed," call to mind all the stereotypes associated with both Arabs and Muslims—since these two identities are to a large extent conflated and confused. In a bitterly comic manner, Omar asks: "But that's the thing, man. Why is his name Mohammed? Why do all terrorists got to be named Mohammed in these movies?"(Younis 235).The question highlights how the film industry enforces a link between the Islamic religion and terrorism, by borrowing Islamic ideological or cultural signifiers and applying them to terrorist representations, thus encouraging an association between the two.

Browntown's characters are trapped within the confines of an image that does not correspond to what they consider their own; Omar complains that the movie he is auditioning for presents an image of the Arab that adheres to every assumed stereotype:

> For chrissake, this Mohammed's got four wives, he hates all Jews, he drives a Mercedes that he bought with his family's oil money, and he's conspiring with a guerrilla group called "Allies for Allah."(Younis 235, 236)

Unfortunately for *Brownstown*'s two Arab American actors, they still have to apply for this role, despite deeming it to be degrading to their culture and identity: "[W]hy do I go to audition after audition and pray that some asshole will give me the opportunity to slander my own culture on network television?" (Younis 242), Malek wonders. The answer to his question lies in the cultural and social setting surrounding Arab American actors, whereby the role of the terrorist in a movie is one of their few available opportunities for work. The mechanism employed to incessantly produce negative stereotypes for Arabs renders any other portrayals in mainstream American films irrelevant and unpopular. Thus, *Brownstown*'s characters, like many Arab American actors, are entrapped within these stereotypes on both an individual and social level. Unless they endorse, enact and internalise these very negative stereotypes, they are refused entry into the entertainment industry, and are ultimately denied economic survival.

Furthermore, *Browntown* examines the significance of race and skin-colour in the creation of negative stereotypes, and the indiscriminate generalisations applied when forming racial stereotypes. The play capitalises on these generalisations as a source of incongruity, confusion, and ultimately bitter laughter. The three actors share anecdotes of how they have occasionally auditioned for each other's roles: that is, the Indian Vijay is auditioning for the role of the Arab, while Malek and Omar had previously auditioned for an Indian role (Younis 236, 237). The interchangeability of the two races and cultures lies solely on the similar skin tone that these Arab and Indian American actors share. As Omar puts it, "well, my guess is they really don't know the difference" (Younis 237). It is, however, their "brownness" which makes them suitable for roles that perpetuate the "brown-man" stereotypes, what Malek terms "Brownsploitation" (Younis 242). Malek disappointedly points out that Arabs are the worst stereotyped minority of all, leading Vijay to ironically award him "the 'most likely to be vilified' trophy" (Younis 243).

The play builds up on the ignorance and confusion created by the incongruity of stereotypes, which is hardly surprising, as the dramatisation of ignorance is one of the main tools employed in the making of a comedy. By introducing the subject of stereotyping through the medium of comedy, Younis whisks away the rigidity and uncompromising nature of the Arab stereotype. This enables him to challenge the authority of stereotypes as a point of reference when the audience first meets the Arab/Arab American characters. Younis familiarises the audience with the Arab in the non-threatening territory of comedy, and cements the disparity between what he identifies as Arab and those culturally-constructed stereotypes recognized and defined as Arab.

According to Sigmund Freud, who analysed the subject of jokes and humour in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, comedy succeeds in disarming the audience and allowing critical statements to pass unopposed. In his examination on the purpose and mechanism of jokes, Freud explains that one of the functions of a joke is to defend the self and protect it from ridicule and hostility. Furthermore, a joke will "bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation" (Freud 833). The bribery intended by this comedy, through which Younis deals with Arab stereotypes, is that it lures the audience to laugh with, rather at, the Arab American characters on stage.

Comedy offers the Arab Americans a voice and a space—albeit limited—that enables them to represent themselves. Dalia Basiouy identifies comedy and the Arab American Comedy Festival, which featured sketches from *Browntown* in 2003, as

> a platform, "a space of their own" for Arab American artists to define themselves and their work, negotiate stereotypes, and joke about their own habits, fears, accents, misunderstandings, and the challenges of living between two cultures. (331)

However, it is still long before Arab Americans can overturn their stereotyped image and replace it with their own self-representation. The play ends with Omar's words: "I think I've had enough of Browntown for one day" (Younis 261), which seems a fitting curtain-call for one day in the lives of those Arab Americans.

Browntown attempts to introduce the narrative of the Arab by the Arab to the American cultural scene. The play dramatises the cultural and social mechanism of stereotypes and the impact it has on the livelihood, sense of identity and belonging of Arab Americans. Yet, there is another far more damaging aspect of the process of stereotyping and prejudice legalised in the form of institutional discrimination. Immediately after 9/11, Arabs became suspected terrorists and laws targeting Arabs and/or Muslims were drafted in the name of the "war on terror," while institutions like the police and the FBI used racial profiling in their investigations and surveillance of potential suspects – who were almost always Arabs or Muslims.

Why is the "Terrorist" Arab?

Days after 9/11, President George W. Bush took the stage addressing a national tragedy stating that "[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" ("Address"), creating an implacable dichotomy that was part of the new political strategy fostered by the US media covering the "war on terror." With Islam becoming a commonly known—but rarely publically identified—suspect, this dichotomy "generally constructed a polarised world in which anyone with the slightest connection with Islam comes under suspicion" (Karim 117). This gave rise to a mythical construction of Islam and Muslims, which was put in sharp contrast to American nationalism and security, leading to the cultivation and popularisation of sensationalised terms like "Islamofascism" (Berman; Hitchens). Terrorism and references to a potential "Islamofascism" awakened an old sense of national threat that lay dormant since the collapse of the communist Soviet Union and the end of the Red Scare. With the attacks of 9/11, the threat, which was latent in the American collective consciousness, was evoked and assigned to Muslims and Arabs, with labels like "Islamofascism" substituting "communism:"

> Just as cold war foes are being transformed into new-found partners in important Western organisations like NATO, militants Islamists are helping sketch out a portrait of the new collective enemy of America; the overall idea about Muslims is that they are the Other against whom collective Self should be on guard. (Karim 117)

The Other, represented by the terrorist Islamofascist (Muslim and/or Arab), becomes a potential national threat and, in defending the national Self, infringing on the civil rights of that Other becomes justified. Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* contextualises this atmosphere of suspicion that has engulfed Arab American Muslims after 9/11 and has led to many "unfriendly" visits in their homes by FBI agents.

Institutionalising Stereotypes in *Back of the Throat*

Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* offers a dramatisation of the institutional discrimination which results from and accompanies a public discourse that fosters stereotypes. The play was first stage-read in Chicago's Silk Road Theatre Project on January 30, 2005 and, after touring the US, returned to have its Midwest premiere on the same Chicago stage in 2006. In September 2008, it was performed in the Old Red Lion in London, and was subsequently translated into Arabic and staged in Cairo, Egypt.

Back of the Throat begins with the ominous knock of Carl and Bartlett – two FBI agents – on Khaled's—an Arab American's—apartment door; they have come to interrogate him suspecting ties with an Arab who is an alleged terrorist. During the interrogation, Carl and Bartlett call characters from Khaled's past through flashbacks. As their narration unfolds, the reader and audience become aware that Khaled is already framed as a terrorist by the FBI agents, who manipulate the other characters' recollections of Khaled and create the context for their memories. By the end of the play, Khaled himself appears lost in their narratives, confused and defeated, with an injured and insecure sense of identity.

The play reflects a sense of autobiographical resonance, as El Guindi explains that *Back of the Throat*

> began as a paranoid thought game. In those first few months after 9/11 as an Arab/Muslim American one wasn't quite sure where one stood. What laws were still in place to protect one from government inquisitiveness or from a government, rightly or wrongly, deciding to throw aside civil liberty concerns in the need to protect the country from an amorphous enemy whose potential for another strike was very real. In this climate […] I personally, on a visceral level, found myself fearing a knock on the door. For no logical reason, I should add. (25)

That feared knock on the door is dramatised in the play as an act of "hailing" or "interpellation" of the Arab as the terrorist suspect. Louis Althusser introduced the idea of all individuals (subjects) being hailed by ideology in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses:"

> "I"deology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'(162)

To draw parallels, the knock on the door introduces the FBI agents as unmistakable representatives of authority and the Repressive State Apparatus. It symbolises the act of "hailing" Khaled as a suspect who immediately internalises a consciousness of guilt even though he appears to be innocent.[2] Upon answering the door and complying with the FBI's interrogation, Khaled has unconsciously accepted an ideological power-relation whereby he is the suspect and Carl and Bartlett are the rightful enforcers of law.

There is a fabricated discourse (Orientalism) about the Arab, followed later by a fabricated language or ideology (war on terror), which has encompassed Arabs and Muslims since 9/11. This discourse has constructed the Arab without consulting the Arab; and then, it has "hailed" him as a suspect of terrorism. Khaled's life is turned into a nightmarish reality upon the arrival of the FBI agents at his door. Their supposed civil visit quickly turns into a menacing interrogation, and Khaled feels the need to defend whatever objects of his Arabic or Islamic culture are evident in his apartment. Among the evidence collected by the agents are books with titles like *A Manual for the Oppressed, Theatre of the Oppressed, Covering Islam, Militant Islam, Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung* (El Guindi12). Khaled asserts that he was a literature major and was

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[2] This ties in with Althusser's further explanation of the process of "hailing:"
Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognised that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else). (162)

introduced to most of these books during his studies. Still, the titles alone present Khaled as an increasingly alarming suspect to the agents, as the link between communism and Islam resurfaces. To Carl and Bartlett, Khaled, an Arab and a Muslim who appreciates communist books, is automatically categorised as an enemy to national security, thus proclaiming any act of violence against him as totally justifiable:

> CARL. (Carl kicks Khaled in the groin. Khaled gasps, grabs his testicles, and collapses onto his knees) First off: that has been coming since we got here, because of repeated references to an innocence that is not yours to claim. If you were innocent, why would I have kicked you? ...The responsibility for that kick lies with your unwillingness to assume responsibility for the part we know you played. We need to know what that was. It might have been a bit part, but never think that makes you a bit player. (El Guindi 54)

In his calm justification of physical abuse, Carl reflects the institutional discrimination in the treatment of many Arabs and/or Muslims after 9/11. The report of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) in September 2002 documents 24 government actions and suggestions which have targeted immigrants and refugees. Particularly Arabs and Muslims have been "targets of undemocratic and counterproductive government policies that have been ineffective in improving national security" (Tsao 6). The enforcement of these laws led, in effect, to a legitimised racism operating through reliance on physical and cultural stereotypes: "The roundup of suspects has focused on Arab and Arab-American individuals, raising issues of racial profiling and group suspicion" (Tsao 10). It is this background which led to the need for underlining what is fictional and what is real in the rehearsals of *Back of the Throat* in its Chicago production. During workshops organised pre-production, real FBI agents, lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Arab American individuals who had been subjected to FBI interviews and visits were all invited to reinforce the aspect of realism which inspired the play (Goddu).

Khaled's experience echoes that of many Arab Americans who find themselves perceived as a threat, as belonging to an alternate reality in which the American self is constructed in stark opposition to the Other. In one of the conversations between Bartlett and Khaled, the FBI agent states, "But in the meantime there's no avoiding the fact that that's who I am. Engaged in trying to find out who *you* are" (El Guindi 15). The identity of the American government official is ascertained, but that of the Arab American remains subject of inquiry. In his analysis of the "imperative patriotism" which flourished in the aftermath of 9/11, Steven Salaita explains how it "tends to inform xenophobia, a fact that is expressed in statements such as, "If you don't like America, go back to where you came from; If you don't agree with the United States, why don't you just leave?" (155). Salaita argues that:

> [t]hese statements insinuate that "American" is a stable, fixed identity rooted in a physical and cultural Whiteness for which many immigrants do not qualify. They also indicate that in xenophobia narrow political suppositions often govern social behavior: To dissent against the

imagined mores of America is to forfeit identification as American. Leaving the United States
then becomes the only logical option." (155)

In this context, Khaled's "Americanism" is highly questionable because of his unproven
connection to an alleged terrorist and his adherence to disruptive views evident from the books
found in his apartment. With his identity under suspicion and his civil rights violated, Khaled
asks for a lawyer:

KHALED. I have the right.
BARTLETT. Not necessarily.
KHALED. Yes, I believe I do.
BARTLETT. I'd have to disagree.
KHALET. I know my rights[…]
BARTLETT. Er, Khaled, you can't have a lawyer. (El Guindi 8)

Khaled is stupefied, as he feels robbed of his basic constitutional rights. He knows himself to be
an American citizen, yet his civil rights are infringed upon simply because he is an Other. Khaled
asserts his national identity loudly: "This is – this is way over the line. Acting like some – cut-
out pair of thugs playing tag to try and intimidate me. This is my country too, you know. This is
my country! It's my fucking country!" (El Guindi 26).

However, with a name as alien as the Arabic Khaled and an Arab ethnic profile, he has been
"stamped" as a terrorist the minute he is visited by the two FBI agents. From the outset of the
play, Khaled's name has been marked as problematic; in its specific Arabic phonetics, it stands
as a signifier of Otherness. His Arabic name is turned into a confirmation of his Otherness when
Bartlett repeatedly fails to pronounce it correctly, attributing his failure to "that back of the throat
thing" (El Guindi 5), which is particular to Arabic, and necessary in pronouncing the first letter
of Khaled's name. The difficulty of its pronunciation becomes a powerful metaphor for the
cultural impasse between the FBI agents and Khaled underlining Khaled's national alienation as
an Other citizen with an Other language and culture. Ironically enough, Khaled himself cannot
speak that Other language; he doesn't even know Arabic.

In conclusion, cultural and institutional stereotyping became the dominant ideology which
engulfed Arabs and inscribed the relationship between the US and Arab Americans, especially
after 9/11. *Browntown* and *Back of the Throat* invite audiences to consider what it means to be an
Arab American within a socio-political context that promulgates negative stereotypes.
Browntown presents an actor who has had enough of auditioning for the same terrorist role,
while *Back of the Throat* introduces a confused suspect who is visited by the FBI for crimes he is
innocent of. The two plays introduce their Arab American characters as vulnerable, perplexed
and in search of an identity that appears to always summon two dichotomies: the American Self
and its Other in a post 9/11 suspicious America. Both playwrights attempt to give voice to the
Arab Americans so they could represent themselves and subvert an ideology of stereotyping
which has continually "Othered" their identity. By reclaiming self-representation, these
playwrights work towards transcending Arab Americans' negative portrayals in the media. Their

aim is to erase suspicion as a dominant component of their identity, and fortify the multicultural essence of their Arab Americanism.

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