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Imagining Postnationalism: Arts, Citizenship Education, and Arab American Youth

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This article explores an Arab American community arts organization as a site for promoting youth civic participation and social activism. Studying a citizenship education project outside the school walls, and focusing on the arts as a medium for this work, foregrounds the role of the symbolic for engaging youth as active participants in democratic society. The article also examines the symbolic political argument for postnational citizenship that the young participants articulated through a film they produced. [Arab American youth, citizenship education, arts, immigration]

My grandmother wears a headdress, and we went to Wal-Mart one day, and this lady refused to help her. This associate, the Wal-Mart associate. And it just made me so mad. And so I got really, really mad, and I went to the manager. And I was like, "This lady won't help my grandmother, and she's just racist, and it makes me so mad." And he's like, "Well, then just leave." And we just had to leave because no one would help her. And now, whenever I can, I go to all these places with her because people just look at her funny, and they just, like, they say stuff about her. It just makes me so mad. I don't think it'll ever stop, like the racism. I think it will just keep going from family member to family member, from family to friends, and it's just like this big, giant, never-ending circle. [Samia, Arab American, age 14]

Samia's story reflects the precarious position occupied by Arab and Muslim communities in the United States today.¹ Similar to the experiences of other communities of color, Arabs and Muslims sometimes find that not belonging to the imagined national community (Anderson 1991)—being framed as threatening outsiders—limits their right to be treated equally and fairly in public settings. Samia's narrative also resonates with both the hopefulness and the hopelessness of youth. Resigned to the inevitability of a perpetual "circle" of racism, she nevertheless refuses apathy and instead, speaks out for her grandmother's right to be treated fairly. This article explores how one group of mostly Arab American youth, including Samia, engaged questions of belonging, rights, and citizenship in these uncertain times. These youth participated in a video workshop at Al-Bustan, a local Arab American community arts organization, in which I am a researcher and teacher. As a space driven by an explicit mission to provide young people with venues for self-expression and exploration of their identities, and with opportunities for social analysis and critique, Al-Bustan serves as an alternate site for citizenship education that Levinson has aptly defined as "efforts to educate members of social groups to imagine their social belonging and exercise their participation as democratic citizens" (2005:336). Through a description of this workshop and an analysis of the young people's emergent narratives about belonging, citizenship, and rights, this article has two primary aims.

The first goal of this article is a descriptive one: to offer a portrait of Al-Bustan's community arts program as an alternative site for citizenship education that provides youth with opportunities to critically examine and respond to public discourses that

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frame Arabs (and Muslims) as alien outsiders. Taking the study of citizenship education outside the school walls, and focusing on the arts as a medium for this work, foregrounds the symbolic realm as a key site for engaging youth as active participants in the social and political spheres. In defining this work as democratic citizenship education I draw on Young's (2000) argument that rhetoric and narrative can expand the practices of deliberative democracy to be more inclusive of marginalized communities. Understanding citizenship to be constructed in part through membership in the imagined national community suggests the significance of the symbolic realm for resisting exclusion and reframing political discourse about citizenship.

The second purpose of this article is to analyze the particular narratives about belonging, citizenship, and rights that the youth developed over the course of the video workshop. These young people explored the theme of U.S. immigration, through historical, personal, and community perspectives; developed their own narratives about the topic; and produced a film that seeded alternative images and discourses about their communities. In doing so, they contributed to broader public political debates about immigration and border politics. Importantly, the youth narratives contested the nation-state as an organizing boundary for citizenship and the rights it entails. Drawing connections between the United States' long history of exclusionary, nationalist politics, its current involvement in the "war on terror," and the transnational experiences of their families and communities, these young people began to articulate a symbolic argument for postnational citizenship—one in which political and human rights are not limited by belonging to nation-states (Soysal 1998). Through this symbolic argument, they asked others to imagine an inclusive democratic politics that bridges across myriad boundaries of human identity.

Constructing Citizenship in an Era of Global Migration: Situating the Concerns

Contemporary global migration patterns raise critical questions for the study of citizenship and citizenship education. Transnational communities, along with the modern technologies that facilitate the flow of goods, people, and information across borders, limit the salience of nation-states as organizing boundaries for peoples' personal and political sense of belonging (Castles and Davidson 2000; Suarez-Orozco 2001; Yuval-Davis et al. 2005). Paradoxically, nation-states continue to hold significant power materially, by regulating people's access to a range of rights, and ideologically, by continually forging a connection between these rights and the imagined national community (Castles and Davidson 2000; Hall 2004; Lowe 1996; Soysal 1998). This article aims to deepen our understanding of how young people from transnational communities grapple with these processes of globalization, fashioning a sense of belonging and citizenship in relation to multiple imagined communities (Abu El-Haj 2007; Hall 2002; Maira and Soep 2005). Arab American youths' perspectives on citizenship and belonging are of particular salience at this historic moment. In the wake of September 11, 2001, Arab and Muslim youth from immigrant communities in the United States face particular challenges in forging a sense of belonging to this society (Abu El-Haj 2006, 2007; Maira 2004). Positioned as outsiders to the imagined national community, and threatened by government policies and practices that compromise the civil and human rights of their communities (Akram and Johnson 2004; Murray 2004), young people from Arab and Muslim immigrant communities often find neither the sense of belonging nor the conditions for substantive inclusion into

society that enable them to exercise fully their rights and responsibilities as citizens (Castles and Davidson 2000; Yuval-Davis et al. 2005). Arab American youth develop their sense of belonging and citizenship identities in relation to political discourses and policies that position them precariously within the United States.

To date, our knowledge of how Arab American (as well as Muslim) youth from immigrant communities are navigating this unstable territory is limited (see, e.g., Abu El-Haj 2006, 2007; Ajrouch 2004; Maira 2004; Sirin and Fine 2008). Despite the stream of media chatter suggesting that commitments to Muslim religious and cultural identities are incompatible with a sense of belonging to the United States, many young Muslims appear to be navigating successfully this putative divide (Sirin and Fine 2008). Whereas much of the work to date focuses on how Arab and Muslim youth from immigrant communities negotiate their religious, cultural, and national identities, I am most interested here in how young people articulate their political understandings of citizenship and belonging. Although they are not unrelated, I am shifting from an emphasis on youth identities to a focus on the youths' political discourses about rights, citizenship, and belonging in the post-September 11, 2001, context (see also Maira 2004). For young people who generally feel alienated from traditional forms of politics, these political discourses are often articulated through popular cultural forms (Maira and Soep 2005). In this article, then, I look to a film produced by a group of (mostly) Arab American youth as a form of symbolic political dialogue.

This article also offers a descriptive account of the alternative citizenship education project in which these young people's political narratives were constructed. In contemporary contexts of transnational migration and global politics, citizenship education for youth from immigrant communities is a crucial, if ever more complicated, task (Abu El-Haj 2007; Levinson 2005). Unfortunately, in U.S. schools, citizenship education has taken a backseat in the renewed press for economic productivity. Moreover, dominant models of citizenship education rarely address the challenges that structural inequalities pose to some groups' capacities for full participation in democratic societies. The dominant liberal and republican assimilationist frameworks for citizenship education tend to focus on civic literacy (teaching facts about U.S. history, government, and geography), patriotic identity, and teaching the liberal virtue of tolerance through learning the skills and dispositions necessary for deliberation, cooperation, and decision making (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Banks 2008). These frameworks have been critiqued for failing to engage questions of identity and belonging or to consider how these influence individuals' capacity for substantive inclusion into society (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Banks 2004, 2008; Ladson-Billings 2004; Rubin 2007). Dominant models of citizenship education ignore the ways that people are differentially positioned to exercise a range of rights that facilitate their capacities to participate fully and on an equal basis in the social, political, cultural, and economic spheres (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Ladson-Billings 2004). These models reify, rather than problematize, the nation-state as an organizing boundary for assigning rights and fail to address how globalization and transnational migration challenge this boundary (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Abu El-Haj 2007; Banks 2008).

We need to study alternate approaches that address directly questions of identity, inequality, and the limitations of national belonging. Three aspects of citizenship education that are not addressed in traditional approaches are key to constructing new approaches: looking to local communities as sites for developing alternate citizenship discourses and for engaging youth as full participants in their communities

(see, e.g., Flores-Gonzalez et al. 2006; Guajardo and Guajardo 2008; Kwon 2008), focusing attention on historical and contemporary practices of exclusion and inequality within and beyond the borders of the nation-state (Banks 2008; Ladson-Billings 2004; Rubin 2007), and cultivating active citizenship (see, e.g., Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Abu El-Haj 2007; Cammarota 2008; Guajardo and Guajardo 2008; Kwon 2008; Levinson 2005; Rubin 2007). This article offers a descriptive account of one alternative approach to citizenship education that engages these three issues, and focuses on the narratives about citizenship that youth produce in this context. In what follows, I describe the research context in detail before turning my attention to an analysis of the young people's narratives about belonging, citizenship, and rights.

Community Arts: Research and Action

Since 2002, I have been conducting a multisite, qualitative study of Arab youth from immigrant communities living in and around a major U.S. city.² In this work, I position myself as a researcher, educator, and activist. The post–September 11, 2001 context led me, as a member of the Arab American community, to interweave these multiple roles as integral to my research. As I interviewed Arab American youth, I responded to the need they expressed for spaces in which, in collaboration with Arab American adults, they could collectively dialogue, study, and respond to the political and cultural discourses and policies that were framing their communities. Thus, I became active in cocreating, with youth and other Arab American adults, what Fine et al. (2000), following Boyte and Evans, define as “free spaces”—community spaces through which people might collectively reimagine political possibilities.

I am particularly interested in how creative expression and the arts can deepen knowledge and understanding of the processes through which inequality is produced and generate actions for change. In 2004 and 2005, I was a member of the creative team that developed the Storytelling Project, a curriculum that addresses race and racism through storytelling and the arts (Roberts et al. 2008). The curriculum mobilizes storytelling, developed through various arts-based activities, to examine how race and racism work with the aim of unpacking the stories that bolster racial inequality and generating new stories that support the quest for racial justice. The arts offer a powerful means to connect young people's local experiences with broader historic and sociopolitical processes (Maira and Soep 2005; Roberts et al. 2008). In today's “global war on terror,” exclusionary political discourses and practices have turned on the symbolic construction of Arab–Muslim as alien Other. The arts provide one language for responding to this exclusion.

Because of my commitment to the arts, I developed a collaborative research relationship with Al-Bustan, an Arab American community arts organization founded after September 11, 2001. Initially the goals of the organization were twofold: to create a space for Arab and Arab American children to develop a strong, positive relationship with their Arab identities and to teach people from other communities about the Arabic language and Arab cultures. From the start, Al-Bustan rejected a static and essential definition of culture, viewing it as dynamic and hybrid. Over time, through our work with young people, Al-Bustan's aims expanded to explicitly include youth leadership and civic engagement as central to its mission.

The focus of this article is my work with one of Al-Bustan's programs: a summer camp initiated in 2002. The camp draws a range of Arab immigrant and U.S.-born

families (Lebanese, Iraqis, Moroccans, Palestinians, Tunisians, and Egyptians), including many transnational migrants who maintain ongoing connections with the Arab world. Although a large majority of campers are of Arab origin, participants also include non-Arab children. The camp serves families that identify as Muslim, Christian, and Jewish. Participants tend to represent middle- to upper-middle-class families; however, the camp also provides scholarships to children from working-class and low-income families. Importantly, a majority of families sought out the camp experience to counter isolation in their neighborhood communities.

The camp's newest program is a month-long video workshop for teenagers and young adults that was initiated in 2005 by Dahna Abourahme, a Palestinian documentary filmmaker and media literacy educator. In the summer of 2006, I began coteaching the workshop with Dahna. I concurrently documented our work in line with the growing tradition of activist ethnography (for examples, see Cammarota 2008; Dyrness 2008; Guajardo and Guajardo 2008; Kwon 2008; Nygreen 2006). I used ethnographic methods to document our work, audiotaping group sessions, taking daily field notes, collecting participants' writing and other documents, and conducting focus group interviews with the participants at the end of our workshop. In analyzing this work, I do not seek to evaluate the program or make claims for how people changed through the process. Instead, my aims are to describe the process and to analyze the youth narratives that emerged in the context of this workshop. In actively embracing the dual role of teacher and researcher, I assume that the young people's perspectives emerged through the dialogic relationships between teachers and participants, as well as between participants and participants. During the process of data analysis, I shared data and emerging understandings with members of the Al-Bustan community as well as with colleagues elsewhere as a means to consider other possible interpretations to those I was developing.

Each summer the workshop focuses on a theme for study from which youth develop film projects. In the summer of 2006, our theme was migration and immigration. Nine participants, aged 13 to 25, took part in the workshop. The group represented a diverse set of immigration experiences, including 1.5-, second-, and third-generation immigrants. Four participants had two Arab immigrant parents, three had one Arab immigrant parent and one European parent, and two participants were siblings of European Jewish ancestry. Participants represented diverse Arab nationalities (Iraqi, Palestinian, Lebanese, and Egyptian), and they or their parents had also lived in a number of other Arab countries (Kuwait, United Arab Emirates). Christian and Muslim Arabs were represented. Two participants did not reside in this country, and one was not a U.S. citizen. Of the seven participants who lived in the United States permanently, five spent extensive periods of time with relatives in the Middle East and North Africa on a regular basis.

The Video Workshop Curriculum

In the spring of 2006 before the start of the summer camp, public attention in the United States was focused on immigration. As the Congress debated legislation and demonstrators took to the streets, debates raged about how this nation should address the increasing flow of people across borders. Dahna and I were interested in how the inclusion of Arab American experiences and perspectives might contribute fruitfully to this broader public debate about immigration—a debate in which images of Arabs

and Muslims had been deployed primarily as an argument for further fortifying the U.S. borders and the voices of Arab Americans were virtually inaudible.

We began the workshop with a week of intensive teaching about the history of U.S. migration and immigration, connecting this history to the personal migration stories of the participants and their families. We explored key issues, including the American Dream, the social construction of race, citizenship policies, and the contemporaneous congressional legislative proposal on immigration (H.R. 4437, passed December 16, 2005). Drawing on the Storytelling Project (see especially, Roberts et al. 2008) and on the work of Augusto Boal (1992), we utilized the arts, particularly theater exercises, storytelling, and freewriting, as the primary medium through which we examined the issues. For example, following a dramatic reading by the participants of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's address to the 2004 Republican National Convention, we discussed the embedded narrative about the American Dream and then asked a volunteer to sculpt the bodies of other participants into an image of the American Dream. We then showed a section of the film *Race, the Power of an Illusion* (California Newsreel 2003) that narrates the early-20th-century history of immigration to the United States and explores the creation of a racial classificatory system. We asked participants to discuss how the evidence presented in the movie spoke back to the notions of the American Dream represented in Schwarzenegger's speech. In subsequent activities, participants brought in newspaper stories that problematized the narrative of the American Dream, and they dramatized these stories through different formats (e.g., a puppet show or a talk show).

If one of our foci was to examine experiences of migration, another was to explore possibilities for social and political action. To that end, we focused on historical and contemporary examples of resistance to unjust policies, while also asking participants to consider times when they took a stance for justice in their everyday lives. In these discussions, Dahna and I encouraged the young people to think in terms of small actions, such as standing up to unfair school rules, as well as more traditional modes of protest, such as demonstrations.

After the first week of study the group was divided in two. We worked with each group for half a day during the following three weeks of camp. Each group chose a topic around which to develop its film. Each group conducted further research on the topic, interviewed community members, brainstormed how to represent the developing narrative, and learned the skills needed to independently shoot, edit, and produce a film. The two topics the groups chose were assimilation and borders. In this article, I have chosen to limit my analysis to the film made by the borders group to look at this work in greater depth. I focus this analysis on the final film product, but I also draw on the transcripts of our four weeks of conversations and activities (in both the large and the small groups) to show how ideas emerged and were contested within our discussions. Because the film these youth made will be available to the public through a curriculum supplement that Al-Bustan hopes to distribute, I use a second set of pseudonyms when referencing our workshop discussions to preserve confidentiality. These names that I use in reporting group discussions are not attached to any identifying characteristics that would allow a reader to connect speakers with the women who appear in the film.

There were five young women in the borders group. Mona, a 24-year-old movement therapist, was a second-generation Canadian of Lebanese descent. Amal, a second-generation Egyptian American, had just graduated from college with a degree

in political science. Zena was a 13-year-old Palestinian American who was proud of the fact that she was born in Jerusalem. Her grandparents and parents had immigrated to the United States from Jerusalem, but her mother had returned there for her birth. Yasmin was a 1.5-generation Iraqi immigrant, now a U.S. citizen. She had spent her early life in Dubai where her parents were working. Thirteen-year-old Sara's great grandparents were European Jews from Poland who had fled persecution in the early 20th century. As these young women explored the workshop's theme, they became interested in drawing connections between personal stories of encountering borders (both physical and imagined ones) and historical and contemporary state policies and practices that are exclusionary and divisive, particularly along racial-ethnic and national lines.

The Film: An Exploration of Borders

The film is a collage of personal stories and short interviews set against a list of key historical moments and U.S. policies that have regulated citizenship. It is difficult to convey in writing the rich juxtapositions and affective tenor of this work. The film weaves together brief interviews with Arab Americans about their experiences crossing national borders with a more extended narrative from each of the participants about different kinds of borders (language, socioeconomic, racial-ethnic, national) that they have faced. The young women discuss physical and imaginary borders and tell their stories through narrative and dramatization. Text and images draw a relationship between these individual stories and larger historical and political events. Yasmin stands against a U.S. flag, looking directly at the audience, and her voice quavers as she portrays her young cousin's daily life in Baghdad. Zena narrates her poem about Israel's designation of her grandfather as an "enemy of the state." The movie connects these individual stories and interviews with historical and contemporary state policies that have regulated the boundaries of inclusion in the United States and that have restricted citizenship rights.

Personal Borders: Navigating Insider-Outsider Status

In our group sessions, a majority of the youth described acts of cultural straddling as they continually navigated the interstices of language, religion, and culture—of belonging and not belonging (Andalzúa 1987; Hall 2002). The youth introduced this theme during our first activity in which they drew a time line highlighting key experiences in their lives, and it reverberated through subsequent discussions. Many struggled with feelings of never fully belonging to the linguistic and cultural community of their immigrant parents. Even one of the participants of Jewish heritage related to this feeling of not quite belonging because of her limited knowledge of religious traditions. The Arab American youth often felt on uneasy footing in relation to their identities as Arabs, due to imperfect Arabic or their adoption of cultural styles that they and their families viewed as decidedly "American." Some described the shame of not speaking Arabic fluently, and a majority of the Arab participants spoke of being admonished by family members for having become "American." As they wrestled with this precarious positioning as not quite "authentically" Arab, many described their identities as an evolving and dynamic process of self-construction, and they viewed the camp as a place for this exploration. Nada expressed this shared sentiment as follows:³

I still sort of flirt with the idea that I'm an Arab. And it's this ongoing flirting relationship. I'm not completely ready to commit to that. So I still have a lot of sort of getting to know. I act like it's a—and it *is* a relationship. It's a relationship with myself, and it's sort of in the getting-to-know-you process of learning the language and learning more about the whole area, and not just culturally but politically too.

Viewing identity as a relationship in the making, Nada and a majority of her peers often reimagined the static notions of "Arabness" that they encountered from some of their parents and relatives. While they were sympathetic to their families' desires that they maintain a sense of themselves as Arabs, the majority navigated their identities by, as Leila put it, avoiding "the extremes" and "finding a balance to everything."

Although a majority recognized both the discomfort and the necessity of living in the in-between, not all participants felt or desired this ambiguous positioning. During our first activity, Hani was struck by the difference between his sense of grounding in his Lebanese identity and his peers' expressions of not fully belonging anywhere: "It's so different. Like you guys all feel left out, and I feel so connected to my cousins and my family [in Lebanon]. . . . I feel like I'm home there, more than I am in America sometimes, because everyone understands the—our customs, I guess." Hani expressed here and elsewhere his comfort with an undivided, "authentic" sense of identity as a Lebanese Muslim, despite his residency and citizenship in the United States. Samia also expressed a view of identity as authentic or essential, given by one's birthright, but for her this led to confusion when she visited her relatives in the Middle East: "My cousins, when they talked among themselves, they'd be like, 'That's because she's American.' I was like, 'I was born here.' Everything I did that was like strange to them, they'd say, like, 'Oh, it's because I was American.' And I was like, 'I don't really get that because I was born there.'" In discussions, participants sometimes expressed this desire for the comfort of belonging.

More often the youth recognized this cultural straddling as a place they must live. Acknowledging "in-betweenness" as a condition shared by all people, Amina suggested, "There's no one place where everyone belongs." Thus, the youth often expressed the possibility that our identities are myriad—the uneven terrain upon which we all navigate our lives. As Lena put it, "There's no one idea of home. That everywhere, that the people that you meet and the connections you have with certain places are your home."

These youth also recognized that their navigational acts were not only due to their tenuous relationship to their Arab families' constructions of cultural authenticity; rather, being Arab and being Muslim, in the United States, often created a sharp line of separation from "Americans." Some of this separation reflected benign differences in cultural practices and values, particularly gender-inflected ones. The Arab young women, for example, related feeling left out by the ritual of sleepovers, which were universally forbidden by their parents. Dating boys and late nights out with friends were often sources of tension in high school and college. However, the impassable chasms were related to the politicized positioning of Arabs and Muslims as perpetual foreigners and dangerous outsiders. Almost to a person, they recollected painful encounters with anti-Arab racism. Rula's recollection of hearing the parent of a close friend referring to Arabs as "camel jockeys" and "towel heads" echoed many similar stories told over the course of the camp.

In the film, the experience of cultural straddling is represented by Amal's narrative. In the beginning shot, which is filmed in black and white, Amal, who is wearing a

hijab, faces the camera directly, while behind her and off to the side, three young women soon appear, whispering and giggling together with their backs to her. Amal is speaking: "An Egyptian American, the long division in my life. I travel to my homeland, yet there is a border. An outsider looking in. With my weak Arabic skills, the way I walk, my American blue jeans, and my inability to bargain at the souk, I am different." As her narrative shifts to her experiences in the United States, we see her family at dinner. Her father brings food to the table. The family sits talking and sharing tea. Amal continues: "In America, English is my native tongue, yet there is still a difference. An outsider looking in. The way my mother dusts the powdered sugar on the *ca'k*, when we light the *fanoos* at Ramadan, my early curfew when all my friends are going out, and our strong support for the Palestinian people."⁴ The final frame focuses on Amal speaking again directly to the audience. Her narrative ends, "I am an Egyptian American. Will I ever belong? Will this boundary ever be broken?" Amal's story points to the richness and complexity of forging identities in transnational contexts. She is oriented to a sense of "homeland" in Egypt even as she speaks of English as her "native tongue." She navigates everyday practices in each society with a sense of separation marked by differences in clothing, religious traditions, and social customs. She references political schisms that create ongoing division in the United States, represented here by the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Over the course of the film, it is these political divisions that become most salient.

Amal's film narrative, in conjunction with those stories told in our group sessions, reflected the processes by which youth from immigrant communities develop their identities in relation to multiple national and cultural identities. Similar to many youth from immigrant communities, at times these young people described a dichotomous relationship between their "American" and "Arab" (Palestinian, Egyptian, Lebanese, or Iraqi) identities. However, they also enacted lives in multiple registers, forging new cultural forms that are better described as hybrid and fluid (Abu El-Haj 2007; Hall 2002); and, if they did not always embrace the tensions of living on the borders and sometimes desired the feeling of belonging fully to one place or another, the majority of the youth also recognized ambiguity and complexity to be the territory from which they fashioned their lives.

From the Personal to the Structural

As the young women explored the border struggles involved in constructing their identities, they built on their stories and those of their communities to examine exclusionary practices and injustices that live at the junctures of race and nation. Framing each end of their movie with text that references a long history of exclusionary policies and practices, they visually and thematically embedded individual stories within the broader structural relations of power that have shaped race and citizenship in the United States. Immediately preceding the film's first personal narrative are a series of seven text frames that reference these key events, beginning with "1619: The first shipload of enslaved Africans arrive in the American colonies" and ending with "2001: Congress passes PATRIOT Act. Over 1200 Muslims and Arabs are detained in secret." With a quick series of text frames, the film draws a line from the enslavement of Africans, the colonization of indigenous peoples, and the conquest of Mexico and the exclusion of Chinese immigrants to the contemporary state policies that threaten the civil and human rights of immigrant Latino and Muslim communities.

The women began to articulate these connections following an activity in which we created a time line that displayed the histories of different racial-ethnic groups in the United States, alongside their families' migration histories. Following the Story-telling Project framework, this time line activity was designed as a way to examine "concealed stories": those often-hidden stories that challenge the "stock" or mainstream stories about the United States. In the film, the women drew upon this time line activity directly, choosing to reference particular historical events in a series of text frames. In a discussion following the time line activity, participants grappled with how this history contradicted a picture of the United States as a land of opportunity for all. Leila observed, "It's ironic because the U.S. is always like freedom, freedom, freedom, but then you see the legislation that passed"; and Rula responded, "America has been terrorizing its own population since 1492 and [as a result they're] teaching fear and teaching people that they're not in the right place. How is a community supposed to feel secure? And then September 11 comes along and, 'Oh my god, there's acts of terrorism.'" At moments, such as this one, introducing these critical perspectives on U.S. history risked leading the youth to paint an equally monochromatic narrative as the one that they are often taught, especially in U.S. schools. However, participants also repeatedly rejected one-dimensional interpretations and introduced more nuanced perspectives of the United States. As the discussion cited above continued, Leila argued, "I'm not saying the U.S. isn't good. It's one of the best places to be; education, yes, and there are lots of opportunities. But if you look back, like the Native Americans. We massacred them, and it's like we don't talk about it now." Leila, like others, often wrestled with these seemingly contradictory narratives about the United States as a land of opportunity or oppression. In one of our earliest discussions about the "American Dream," Sammy tempered the general tone of criticism being leveraged against the United States, saying, "I don't say our country's the best. I just think, sometimes, me, as a person, I'm very lucky to be here because I'm not on the outside. And I'm not saying, 'Oh, forget people on the outside.' I'm saying, 'You've got to remember that you are here, and you are lucky.'" Sammy's words implicitly acknowledged the privileges of U.S. citizenship and invoked the idea of the United States as a haven in which people should feel "lucky" to reside. It is, however, Sammy's notion that we should not "forget people on the outside" that, in the end, drives the political logic of the film, asserting the rights of citizenship for everyone.

As a group of majority Arab Americans, the women focused attention in their film on the ways that Arabs and Muslims are racialized subjects, referencing numerous evidence that Arabs and Muslims are constructed as racialized Others by current state policies. This focus is first signaled by the choice to end the initial set of text frames of historical events with the 2001 passage of the USA PATRIOT Act. Subsequently, at intervals throughout the film, brief interviews with Arab American members of the Al-Bustan community narrate numerous experiences crossing national borders. An Egyptian American recounts her first entry to the United States after her family was granted green cards; the border clerk looked up and said, "Oh, not another one of you." A Lebanese American teenager, gesturing with quotation marks, speaks of a "random search" of his father at a U.S. airport, accompanied by threats to have him removed from a plane to the Middle East. A Moroccan American talks about the ways that she and her Lebanese Canadian husband are subject to these "random" searches every time they attempt to cross the U.S.-Canadian border. The film interweaves these

stories throughout, highlighting the symbolic and material significance of national borders as key sites of exclusionary politics.

Importantly, the film connects the politics of the physical border to the exclusion of Arab people from the boundaries of ethical concern. Yasmin's story is temporally positioned in the middle of the film. Her narrative begins by quoting the words of an American neighbor, "I know what's going on in Iraq. I watch CNN." Yasmin, her voice cracking, recounts the stories that do not regularly make it on the news:

The people in Iraq today, when they leave their house, they say good-bye like they're not going to see each other again, and this isn't a way of life. There's no security with the people. And when you talk to your cousin and she can't go outside because she's scared, it breaks your heart. When people go without water, and you can't get in touch with them, and there's no electricity.

As she shifts between the general ("the people in Iraq") and specific individuals ("your cousin"), Yasmin performs a humanizing act that creates a searing narrative about the everyday life of ordinary Iraqis today—one that disrupts the blinding media images that focus on insurgents and suicide bombers. In doing so, Yasmin takes a position against the war—"this isn't a way of life." And in an interesting, if unintentional, turn of words, Yasmin blurs the distinction between self and audience: "When you talk to *your* cousin and she can't go outside because she's scared, it breaks *your* heart." The audience is, in a sense, called upon to consider Iraqi civilians as one of their own—as people whose life stories could, if heard, "break your heart." Yasmin laments the refusal of American supporters of the war to listen to these stories. She ends her piece saying, "People don't want to cross this line, and they don't want to hear any information coming in because people, they're very closed-minded. They don't want to learn, and if you don't want to learn yourself, nothing is going to change." Yasmin rejects the line that puts some people, particularly those who are not nationals, on the other side of ethical concern. She calls upon viewers to "cross this line" and break down the borders that render others' lives invisible.

In the film, Yasmin's story is the one that focuses explicitly on a critique of the U.S. war policy and its impact on Iraqi civilians. The young women first voiced this critique following the immigration time line activity. Rula connected the World War II internment of Japanese Americans to the current detention of Arabs and Muslims. This led directly to a discussion about the war in Iraq. Puzzling through its rationale, the young women argued:

LEILA: It's all in the best interest of the U.S., their decision. I mean with the war it's all like, "We're restoring freedom." And the execution of it now is terrible. And you look back and you're like, Why didn't the U.S. help Rwanda and other countries? Because they can't benefit out of it. It's crazy because the U.S. all of a sudden cares about the freedom of the Iraqi people? But why? Like they say it's all freedom, but they wouldn't have cared if there was no oil that they could get something out of.

NADA: They made money off the war. Where do they get the artillery? Who makes the artillery? It's the U.S. And who buys it? Iraq.

L: But at the same time, it doesn't make sense to me either because the U.S. is going into war. U.S. citizens are being killed. They say, "Support your troops." Yeah, support your troops. It's your country. But you look at the ratio between Iraqi and the U.S. and people brush over—This is kind of contradictory but people brush over how many Iraqis die versus how many Americans die.

N (sarcastically): Well, that's because the Iraqis deserve to die, right?

Critical of the U.S. claims that the war was intended to create a democracy, these women cut through the political rhetoric to argue that U.S. self-interest, coupled with a disregard for Iraqi lives, serves as a better explanation for the war. Leila and Nada highlighted the differential valuing of Iraqis and Americans and implicitly argued for the equality of all human lives.

Importantly, these young women also articulated empathy for the U.S. troops, viewing them as unfairly caught up in the United States' global political ambitions. Leila pointedly questioned the war as not making sense because it resulted in the deaths of U.S. citizens. The conversation above continued:

DINA: All the troops over there are being used.

LEILA: You can't blame the troops going in. There are a lot of troops that just follow orders.

D: Another way that they're being used. When we were talking about high schools [referencing the application process for the high school admissions policy of the public school district in which she was a student,] the lady who knew about schools mentioned that the military schools don't really look at grades and they don't even look at behavior. They don't look at anything. Pretty much they take the kids who can't go anywhere. And I felt bad because all the kids who don't get very good grades are going there. So I felt they are using people.

Dina argued that U.S. soldiers were also victims of an indifferent state that was "using" them for its own ends. Importantly, she referenced unequal educational opportunities that serve as a hidden economic draft for those young people who have no other choice. This discussion marks a moment in which these young women began to develop collectively an argument for postnational citizenship that extends the quest for rights and justice across national lines. This discourse enveloped soldier and civilian, American and Iraqi, in one larger circle of concern for all peoples who face oppressions perpetrated by state policies. In this discussion and others, the women criticized the ways that Iraqi lives are valued less than those of American soldiers; yet they refused to simply invert the value scale, reaching instead for common ground that makes visible the ways that U.S. policies often treat as expendable citizens and noncitizens alike.

Making Connections beyond the United States

The film expands its scope beyond the United States by drawing a connection between the border politics of the United States and those of Israel in relation to Palestinians. Zena narrates a poem about her grandfather that is voiced over alternating images of her walking under a tree and pictures of the wall Israel has built around the occupied West Bank:

How could they define him as an enemy of the state?

I was so confused.

How could my grandfather not be allowed back to his home in Jerusalem?

Picking figs from the trees:

Is that an enemy of the state?

Smoking an *arghile* and sitting with his brothers:

Is that an enemy of the state?

Milking the goats in the backyard:

Is that an enemy of the state?

They divided our land and built this monster of a wall.

How could the world have let it gone this far?²⁵

Zena's poem challenges Israel's decision to deny her grandfather a right of return to his home in Jerusalem. Through words and images, she connects this specific story about the exclusion of one person to broader political questions about the partition of Palestine and the contemporary construction of a physical wall around the occupied territories. Zena's narrative centers on reframing the images of her grandfather (and, more broadly, Palestinians) as "enemies of the state" (or "terrorists"). Instead, the poem portrays his life as one of a gentle peasant and family man: one who picks figs and milks goats and shares a relaxing moment with his brothers.⁶

Working in conjunction with each other, Yasmin's and Zena's narratives re-present Palestinians and Iraqis (and other Arabs) as particular people with stories that hope to invoke empathy and a sense of connection. Against the dominant images in politics and the media that render Arabs, and more generally Muslims, in monolithic tones as "terrorists," "enemies of freedom," "oppressors of (and oppressed) women," and so forth, in this film, the young women use personal stories as a kind of political act that makes visible experiences that are rarely shown in public debates about immigration, border politics, and U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, drawing on experiences of their transnational communities, they expand the discourse about rights and citizenship beyond the local context, to global contexts of injustice.

In fact, throughout our workshop discussions, the participants repeatedly referenced race and class inequalities found in the United States in relation to similar processes found across the globe. During a conversation in which several people shared their experiences with anti-Arab racism in the United States, Rula discussed racism in Egypt. Speaking of studying abroad in Cairo, she noted:

There were a lot of African Americans who came to study abroad too, and it was just so strange the way they were treated just because they were African American and just the Sudanese immigrants too, how the Egyptians were towards them. We would go to a restaurant, and we wouldn't get any service if there were African Americans with us, and there were protests in the streets with the Sudanese immigrants because they didn't want to help them. They were racist toward them. [Racism] repeats itself.

The idea that inequality "repeats itself" across the globe echoed through many of our discussions. For example, when Dina spoke about the undocumented Mexican construction workers in her gentrifying neighborhood who were not given protective headgear, Maya talked about the similar exploitation of South Asian construction workers in the United Arab Emirates. In a sense, these young people refused to simply divide the world of nations into the good and the bad, the righteous and the evil, opting instead to speak against processes of exclusion and exploitation across the globe.

In doing so, they often drew on a shared discourse about universal human rights. In one activity, we asked the participants to write a response to the Reverend Niemoller's poem "First They Came," in which the narrator describes standing by as the Nazis persecuted different groups of people because he did not identify with those groups. Nada read aloud her response to this poem:

[He had] no real attachment to the basic human need and desire and right for freedom and respect. It's sad how we can be so detached—how we can let ourselves be so attached to our communities as if the wrongdoings and misfortunes of others have no effect on our own states. . . . [Niemoller] said, "I didn't speak up" because he wasn't any of those things, of those people. He didn't identify with the Jews, the communists or Catholics? But *did he identify as a human being?*

Critical of people who ignore injustices because those affected are not part of a group with which those people identify, Nada's and her peers' responses to Niemoller's poem constructed an argument for justice that echoes the discourse of universal human rights. Speaking of the poem, the women connected the silence that enabled the Holocaust to contemporary silences around the injustices in the Middle East. For Leila, the poem invoked the way that "[the silence] is so happening around us every day. Not just Americans but people in the whole world can turn their back on the whole Iraq situation." Rula wondered if the indifference of many Americans to the situation of Palestinians under occupation could be because "a lot of people don't do anything because they don't really know what it feels like to be discriminated against or be, just, you know, treated harshly." Intuiting that people often ignore the suffering of others because of a failure of empathic connection with others as fellow "human beings," these young women mobilize the symbolic language of their film to suggest that others must "cross the line."

Redefining Borders

The first and last narratives in the film work together to reframe borders as markers of separation that must be breached. Sara, who was the only woman in this group without Arab roots, explored the barrier of socioeconomic class. Her narrative begins: "An imaginary border: This is a border that people create themselves. A border specifically made to say, 'I'm better than you. I have something you don't,' when really they go to the same crappy public schools that I do." The story continues to dramatize an incident in which two high school boys competitively compare the expense of their designer clothes and then tease a fellow classmate about her Payless shoes. Sara's story addresses the processes through which youth internalize class oppression, turning criticism on each other rather than on the systemic effects of class inequality that abandon Sara and her classmates to underfunded and inequitable schools. Introducing the idea of imaginary borders as those that people construct to create a hierarchy, the film then extends its analysis of the fictional nature of these boundaries to those most physical of all: national borders.

The final story in the film features a young Canadian trying to cross the U.S. border. Shot in black and white, a woman waits in the custom's line, nervously tapping her shoe. Rejected for having only a one-way ticket, she watches others attempt the passage: a man is refused because he does not understand the guard's question; and a woman and her son are turned away for seeking to join her undocumented husband. The tone of the voice-over conveys a critique of border policies. For example, in describing the woman seeking to join her husband, the narrator pauses deliberately over the words *illegal* and *immigrant* to describe the rejected woman's husband. The word *rejected* becomes a rhythmic refrain and the final punctuation of this story.

Following this story, three text frames conclude the film. They read as follows:

On December 16, 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passes HR 4437. This bill proposes to build a 700-mile wall along the U.S.–Mexico border. It would make being undocumented a federal crime.

Border: An imaginary line separating one country from another

Is this Liberty and Justice for all?

In this final story and the following frames, the film interweaves the intimate and the abstract—suturing particular individual stories of border politics with those legislative policies that regulate entry into the nation-state. The film's opening and ending juxtapose definitions of borders. A dictionary definition of a border is set at the beginning of the film: "The frontier that separates political divisions, geographic regions and people." The last definition, written by the women, declares borders to be illusory, "an imaginary line" separating countries from each other, and it echoes back to Sara's narrative about the imaginary borders we impose on ourselves. With the final question, the film interrogates the ethics of confining *liberty* and *justice* to the (physical and imagined) boundaries of the nation. In this question, the women draw on the stated ideals of the United States but push past the boundaries of the nation-state to encompass *all* people as deserving of the most fundamental rights to liberty and justice. Thus, implicitly, they draw upon a discourse of global human rights and call for postnational citizenship, one that accords rights to all people regardless of national citizenship status (Soysal 1998).

Community Arts: An Alternate Space for Citizenship Education

For Arab American young people, belonging and citizenship can be challenging in the contemporary political climate in which, as President Bush admonished, "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" (2001). One response to this contentious climate has been to cloak oneself figuratively and literally in the U.S. flag, demonstrating loyalty to the nation-state by lining up behind its ideals and policies. Another stance has been to draw on and deepen commitments to cultural and religious identities as Arabs and Muslims. The youth who participated in Al-Bustan's workshop suggest another path—one that opens up the possibility of building a politics of inclusion that implicitly recognizes the unstable and illusory nature of all identities. Through narrative and image, the women created a symbolic political argument for postnational citizenship, troubling national belonging as the primary basis for affording inclusion and citizenship rights: All persons, they suggest, are deserving of freedom and justice.

Perhaps paradoxically, given Al-Bustan's position as a cultural arts organization, these women articulated a politics of inclusion that did not start from reinventing themselves as Arabs first and foremost. Rather than draw on cultural citizenship (Ong 1996; Rosaldo 1994) as the starting point for demanding citizenship and rights, they mobilized "not belonging" and border crossing as a site for political action. Antonio Viegó (2007) has cautioned that too often the response to the damaging effects of racial-ethnic oppression has been to imagine a whole and complete racial-ethnic identity, one that rejects the distorted, damaging images generated by racial regimes. He argues that this is dangerous precisely because "we fail to see how the repeated themes of wholeness, completeness and transparency with respect to ethnic-racialized subjectivity are what provide racist discourse with precisely the notion of subjectivity that it needs in order to function most effectively" (2007:4). In the post-September 11, 2001 environment, it has been tempting to generate just such alternate images of authentic Arabness that speak back to dominant oppressive images of Arabs. However, in their symbolic argument for postnational citizenship, the young women responded to exclusionary discourses and practices from a different position, one that, while drawing on the experiences of people in their communities, offers a

crosscutting political vision that reaches out to a broader human rights discourse to make the case for inclusion and justice.

As the United States and other modern societies struggle to reengage youth in the processes of democratic citizenship, we have much to learn from the knowledge and arguments *generated by youth*, particularly those from transnational communities. Their perspectives challenge us to think about rights and justice across borders in ways that help us engage issues of conflict, diversity, and inequality that know no national boundaries. Postnationalism has been critiqued for failing to explain how rights might be guaranteed in a world in which the nation-state remains the primary agent for insuring those rights (see, e.g., Calhoun 2007). This is a political question with no easy answer. However, the first step toward realizing postnational citizenship may depend on precisely the kind of action that these young women engaged in their film: creating a *symbolic language* that helps us see all others as subjects of concern—subjects with particular stories and histories. In the recognition that all borders are “imaginary line[s] that [separate] one country from another,” they imply that shared humanity, not identity, offers the basis for according rights.

Al-Bustan’s workshop highlights the important role the arts can play in democratic citizenship education. This has relevance not only in community settings but also in public school contexts where symbolic spaces in which people might tell their stories have been gutted by neoliberal educational policies (Taylor 2005). Rather than focusing, as most school-based programs do, primarily on teaching civic literacy and developing the skills and dispositions necessary for deliberation and decision making (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Banks 2008), the workshop was designed to support youth to participate in public discourse about an issue affecting their community, through symbolic action. For immigrant (and other) communities of color, the ongoing struggle to realize substantive inclusion into democratic societies is played out, in part, in the symbolic realm (Hall 2002; Lowe 1996; Yuval-Davis et al. 2005).

In the struggle to realize a more inclusive democratic polity, then, cultural forms offer people important means to generate alternate political discourses that challenge exclusionary discourses, policies, and practices (Fine et al. 2000; Lowe 1996; Roberts et al. 2008; Young 2000). Through Al-Bustan’s workshop, young people created symbolic images and narratives that resisted the outcasting of Arab communities. As the youth listened to each other, interviewed their family and community members, and related these stories to what they were learning about U.S. history and contemporary immigration policies, they developed social and political critiques that linked deeply entrenched structural inequalities to their local experiences. These are experiences and perspectives rarely heard in contemporary public discourse about immigration or the U.S. government’s “global war on terror.” Using the symbolic language of film, these youth gave voice to various Arab experiences, interrupting the blanketing images of terrorism that often render real Arab lives—both here and elsewhere—invisible. Significantly, they connected these stories to other stories about class inequality, immigration policies, and U.S. ambitions in the Middle East, and in doing so they constructed a political narrative that expanded the scope of their argument about borders.

Al-Bustan’s workshop illustrates the ways that narrative and visual storytelling expand possibilities for democratic engagement. Young (2000) argues that storytelling serves several important functions in deliberative democracies. This includes the opportunity for people to share experiences and collectively forge a basis for

advocating for social action. There is, of course, a powerful tradition in educative settings that links collective storytelling with political activism for social justice (see, e.g., Cammarota 2008; Freire 1995; Guajardo and Guajardo 2008; Roberts et al. 2008). Moreover, as Young argues, in deliberative democracy storytelling opens up possibilities for engaging our differences, allowing us to hear narratives not ordinarily audible and to see ourselves as we are viewed by others. Storytelling may help build what Couldry (2004) calls “community without closure.” He writes of this as

a space that sustains practices of mutual openness to the uncertain accounts we are able to give of ourselves. But the name matters much less than the way we conceive of the purpose of that space, which, while falling short of the achievement of politics, should enact one of its essential preconditions: that is citizens’ mutual respect for each other’s inalienable capacity to contribute as agents to the public sphere. [2004:17]

Democratic citizenship education, both in and out of schools, might be powerfully reinvigorated by listening to and joining our diverse stories, supporting us to reach across those differences and imagine justice beyond borders.

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Notes

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3. Here I use the second set of pseudonyms.

4. *Ca’k* is a kind of pastry, and *fanoos* is the lantern people carry in festivities during Ramadan.

5. *Arghile* is a colloquial Arabic word for a water pipe, also referred to as a *narghila* or *shisha*.

6. The image of the Palestinian peasant (*fellah*) is representative of the actual lives of the majority of Palestinians in 1948, but it also holds symbolic valence as a nationalist image of a time of innocence and the good life.

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