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'We're Just Like the Irish': Narratives of Assimilation, Belonging, and Citizenship Among Arab American Activists

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**“WE’RE JUST LIKE THE IRISH”:
NARRATIVES OF ASSIMILATION, BELONGING AND CITIZENSHIP
AMONGST ARAB-AMERICAN ACTIVISTS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the narratives of assimilation and belonging as activists attempt to position Arab-Americans as citizens and full members of the American polity. In interviews with activists, the experience of the Irish as immigrants and citizens was often invoked as the paradigmatic example of how immigrants are incorporated as citizens—an example that activists promoted as one that Arabs would follow. By invoking the Irish experience, activists hope to remind Americans that immigration history is not one of effortless assimilation, but is rather characterized by systematic exclusion and marginalization. In so doing, they articulate narratives of assimilation and belonging that draw attention to 1) a shared history of immigration, marginalization, and acceptance, 2) the importance of civil rights movements that may seem to distinguish immigrants from a mythic mainstream whose race and ethnicity seem unmarked, and 3) the ways in which the American experience is based on the acceptance of cultural differences predicated on shared political values of community. We argue that the strands of the narrative draw on themes in the national myth of immigration, belonging and citizenship, but that they are braided in ways that challenge many Americans’ views of their history.

Keywords: citizenship, assimilation, Arab-Americans

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“We’re just like the Irish,” said a 21 year-old-woman in Washington, DC. “African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans came over in boats. We just came in planes,” continued her mother.

“We’re just like the Irish, the Italians, and even the Jews. It will just take time for us to be accepted,” said a realtor in his 50’s in Los Angeles.

“We have the historic knowledge that each community had such a beginning, and it had an end of such racist practices...So the reaction is always this total repulsion, then resistance, then acceptance,” said a civil rights activist in Los Angeles.

“We’re Americans,” said a civil rights activist in Washington, DC.

Over and over as we conducted research amongst Arab-American activists in 2003 and 2004, we heard the refrain, “We’re just like the Irish.” It was not a comparison we were prepared for. In this period when public concern over immigration is surging, when commentators publicly question the loyalty of Arab-Americans, and when multiculturalism seems to have “won” over assimilation in public school curricula, we were taken aback by the ease and assurance with which activists invoked ideas of assimilation in their responses to our questions about belonging, assimilation, and citizenship. Like other immigrants who were initially viewed as incapable of assuming the rights, responsibilities, and values of American citizenship, these activists argued that Arab-Americans would be seen as belonging, as American, and as full members of the polity. It was a matter of time, educating the public, and hard work.

Activists, of course, are optimists, believing it is possible to effect change. From the perspective of the activists with whom we spoke, changing the positioning of Arabs with respect to the mythic mainstream of American society was a primary

goal, but how this goal was to be achieved was a matter of strategy. Among the discursive strategies were attempts to draw parallels with other subordinate groups to argue both for the assimilability of Arabs into the American citizenry and for the historical basis for struggles to maintain cultural difference. In this sense, the invocation of the Irish experience in the United States was an attempt to normalize Arabs, who are otherwise marked by ethnic, cultural, and sometimes religious¹ difference from the American mainstream. They anticipated that, like the Irish, they would become “white” (Ignatiev, 1995; Salins, 1997).

This paper examines the narratives of assimilation and belonging as activists attempt to position Arab-Americans as citizens and full members of the American polity; the paper thus addresses substantive aspects of citizenship, rather than formal, legal definitions. We base our empirical argument on interviews with 40 Arab-American activists in Washington, DC and Los Angeles². In this examination, we first provide a brief overview over American debates over immigration and citizenship, examining the role that assimilation plays in the national narrative of citizenship. In the second section, we describe the context in which activists try to narrate the Arab-American experience, highlighting the uneasy position in which many Arabs operate. The third and final substantive section presents our assessment of the narratives of belonging invoked by activists. We argue that these narratives mirror much of the debate over historical patterns of assimilation and of race in the United States, thereby serving to normalize a group that many commentators believe poses an unprecedented threat to Americanness. Their comments represent an attempt to situate Arab immigrants with respect to American society and citizenship, even as they attempt to broaden and challenge mainstream understandings of what it means to be an American as an immigrant. Their voices and arguments, therefore, are

an important addition to normative debates about citizenship, belonging, and assimilation.

Citizenship, Immigration, and Assimilation

An important theme in the history of American citizenship is that of an interplay between ideals of universal, abstract citizenship and a citizenship that is rooted in place (Jacobson, 2002). The founders of the republic deliberated long and hard about what the new citizenry should be like and how it should act. In that deliberation, a consensus of sorts emerged that a new kind of citizen could be nurtured in the United States, a citizen who shed his ties to Europe, who was independent, who could be educated to approach public issues rationally, who was capable of informed decisions, and who could act on those decisions. People such as Jefferson argued there was something about the places and countryside in the US that could foster such characteristics, including the much lower density of settlement that would both reduce conflict and enhance self-reliance. To the extent that there were limits to the ability of these new citizens to behave responsibly, structures were written into the Constitution to limit the direct involvement of the citizenry, including a bicameral legislature, appointment of Senators, and limitations on who could vote. In this context, it was believed that a new American citizen could emerge and be educated in the ways of democracy such that this citizen would take on many of the characteristics associated with the abstract, unencumbered citizen of liberal theory (Shklar, 1998). Thus from the beginning, American citizenship was paradoxical, as a specifically American political subject was seen as capable of acting as the idealized, abstract citizen.

In this context, immigrants were expected to shed their old identities as European and to take on the mantle of American citizenship and adopt American values (Huntington, 2004). It was not until the late 1800s, however, that the procedures for doing so became formalized, and to some degree regulated. In acts such as the Naturalization Law of 1870, nativist and racist beliefs that some nationalities are fundamentally incapable of achieving the qualities of American citizenship were codified (Hing, 1993; Samhan, 1999). As immigration expanded in the late 1800s and early 1900s, concerns mounted that new immigrants were not learning American ways and values that were necessary for responsible citizenship. Many people—nativists and social workers alike—worried that the massive numbers of migrants in the early 20th century and the squalid conditions in which they lived would lead to physical, moral, and social disease that would threaten the body politic. Machine politics were routinely pointed to as evidence of the moral illness that was infecting American cities and degrading citizenship (Fogelson, 1986).

At least two trends developed in response to these ills. The first was the Americanization movement, which attempted to train immigrants to behave and think like “good” Americans. This movement was centered on educational efforts to teach immigrants that there was an American way to do almost everything and that their old customs were inappropriate in this new land. Language training was key, but so were classes in cooking (e.g., no boiled cabbage for Americans), hygiene (e.g., the proper use of soap and toothbrushes would presumably lead to physical and moral health), public behavior, childrearing, housekeeping, and so forth. When these behaviors were mastered, immigrants would be ready to for more traditional civics courses that would train them in the proper behaviors for political participation and democratic decision-making (Dewey, 1954; Mitchell, 2001).

At about the same time, a variety of immigrant institutions were established—often by immigrants themselves—to help ease the transition into American life. The effect of these institutions was often to assist assimilation, but they did not insist on shedding ethnic identifiers or connections with homeland as the Americanization movement wished. These institutions included ethnic newspapers (Park, 1922), mutual assistance organizations (Cohen, 1990), and cultural clubs (Marston, 1989). The organizations were significant not only for the work they did, but also for the model they provided of a new politics of American citizenship in which ethnic difference acceptable, even as they promoted identities and senses of belonging as Americans. So even in the 1920s—when the national narrative of immigration was of individuals transforming themselves through migration—these institutions introduced a new narrative of immigrants transforming American society through the normalization of (at least some) ethnic differences.

Debates about assimilation, the maintenance of ethnic signifiers, and their meaning for American citizenship continue. Commentators still worry about language acquisition, arguing that large numbers of people speaking “foreign” languages mean there is no need to learn English, and therefore no ability to participate in debate over public issues; they hold this position despite evidence of competence in English that is increasing and that is nearly 100% for the second generation (Portes and Schauffler, 1996). Arguments that immigrants are irresponsible in taking services without paying taxes continue, again despite evidence that immigrants probably pay more than their fair share of taxes (Smith and Edmonston, 1997). The belief that new immigrants are incapable of assimilation is widespread, as, it should be noted, is the countercharge that this claim is simply a cover for racist attitudes, for unease with the growing numbers of racialized

immigrants, and for an unwillingness to accept them in the American polity (Jacobson M. F., 2001; Joseph, 1999; Young, 2000).

The political debates about assimilation and its meaning are continued in academic research and theory. Some researchers have argued that changes in the structure of the American economy mean that immigrants will remain clustered in low-paying occupations and that opportunities for economic mobility—and by extension for becoming less dependent on public services—are blocked (Borjas, 1999). Others argue that residential patterns concentrate immigrants in scattered clusters, leading to heterolocalism without integration (Zelinsky and Lee, 1998). Some scholars point to the maintenance of ties with homeland as evidence of lessened attachment to the United States (D'Alisera, 2004). And others point to multiculturalism and the maintenance of cultures from the homeland as a sign of reduced willingness to assimilate or to take a specifically American identity (Glazer, 1993; Huntington, 2004). These arguments, it should be noted, are generally about the possibilities for assimilation, with other people then carrying the ideas into political debates over citizenship.

Against these arguments, however, some scholars attempt to reconceptualize assimilation, either by relying solely on economic and demographic indicators or by arguing for the need to separate cultural assimilation from the possibility of acting as a citizen. There has been a great deal of empirical research, for example, suggesting that assimilation is in fact still occurring as demonstrated by a narrowing gap between immigrant and native-born Americans on key economic and social indicators. William Clark is one such researcher; he has argued that in a materialist sense, immigrants are firmly entrenched in the American mainstream based on measures of income, homeownership, professional status and political representation (Clark,

2003). Other researchers take this as evidence of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993), suggesting that immigrants continue to assimilate on some arenas of life, but not in others. In both cases, however, assimilation is indicated by the decline of ethnic differences in key socio-economic indicators.

But the debates about assimilation have been about more than demographic indicators; they have also been about cultural assimilation and the extent to which immigrants take on an identity as American (e.g., Huntington, 2004). This debate remains contentious, with some scholars arguing that it is possible to separate cultural and political assimilation (Brubaker, 2001) and with some arguing that post-national forms of citizenship reduce the significance of national citizenship (Soysal, 1994). A third strand of debate argues that immigrants use their rights as citizens to promote group difference, such as in cases involving religious dress and practice (Joppke, 1999; Soysal, 2000).

To a large degree, discussions about assimilation conceptualize it as something that immigrants do (or do not do); in other words, assimilation means that immigrants change as individuals, with the implication that responsibility for assimilation rests primarily on immigrants changing their behaviors and characteristics. Yet other authors contest this assumption, arguing that assimilation is better understood as a socio-political process in which difference is made, reinforced, and given ideological significance; it is a process through which distinctions between “us” and “them” are made (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). To the extent this is true, it is hard to imagine that citizenship—as signified by acceptance into the American polity—could ever be complete for immigrants; it would be particularly difficult for immigrants who in some way challenge elements of national myths about who “we” are as a nation.

One reason for this seeming impossibility may lie in the fusion in public debate between particular understandings of assimilation and citizenship as all-or-nothing conditions. One is assimilated or not. One is a citizen or not. Yet immigrants and other marginalized groups often move between sameness and difference in ways that challenge those constructions. Nagel (2002) has demonstrated that while immigrants often do assert a politics of identity—a politics in which the rights to maintain markers of culture and to assert an identity as different than the host society are reserved—they also enact a politics of sameness—of blending with the host society in some ways or in some circumstances. These two politics are not contradictory or orthogonally positioned, but rather form the basis of an identity politics that is fluid rather than fixed and that is multiple rather than singular. In the case of Arab immigrants to the United States, identities might be expressed at different times—or even at the same time—as Arab, as American, as Muslim, as Christian, as woman, or even as being like the Irish. It is to these identities and the ways they are narrated in terms of citizenship that we now turn.

Arab-Americans and the context of assimilation

It is hard to imagine a more difficult climate in which to promote an Arab-American identity as citizen than that of post-9/11 America. Arab-Americans have long been viewed with suspicion, however. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 originally barred the entry of Chinese and other Asians for 10 years, but subsequent acts and regulatory practices effectively extended the ban longitudinally and in terms of the nationalities to be excluded. Over the years, the classification of Arabs as Asians was debated and enforcement fluctuated (Samhan, 1999). Almost from the beginning, however, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants—most of whom were Christian—were viewed with suspicion once they entered the US. Later waves of immigrants included people from more parts of the Arab world and increasing numbers of Muslims, who were viewed with even greater suspicion. Many immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s came for educational opportunities and stayed, while others fled political oppression and wars in the Middle East. Considerable national, ethnic, class, and religious diversity characterized these later groups of immigrants; while many immigrants are well-educated professionals and merchants, many others are poor and concentrated in low-paying occupations (AAI, 2001).

Despite the diversity in the Arab population, common stereotypes of Arab men label them as Muslim, untrustworthy, venal, violent, and even terrorist. Stereotypes of women include being secluded, uneducated, oppressed, and yet exotic. To counteract these stereotypes, many organizations attempt to educate the American public about Arab culture, to present Arabs as “normal” Americans, and to respond to negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the media. The Arab American Institute, for example, has gone to great lengths to show the American public “Who We Are,” by highlighting the contributions of Arab-Americans such as George Mitchell and

Donna Shalala to politics, Danny Thomas and Salma Hayek to the entertainment industry, and Doug Flutie to sports. The AAI's website is a red-white-and-blue affair, with flags and other markers of Americanness throughout. The Council on American-Islamic Relations has initiated several campaigns in this regard, including "Islam in America³." This campaign includes short vignettes of ordinary American Muslims that are printed in newspapers around the country; these vignettes highlight individuals whose daily work (in jobs, in schools, and in community organizations such as the Girl Scouts) link American and Islamic values related to religiosity, service, justice, and commitment. Yet a 2004 poll found that over 25% of Americans continue to hold negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims (CAIR, 2004).

While these efforts are on-going, Arab-American activists have faced new challenges since 9/11 in their attempts to position Arabs squarely within the American mainstream. In 2003, the US government required all men between the ages of 18 and 45 from Middle Eastern countries except Israel to register, and many were arrested and deported following those registrations. Many Arabs believe they are the subject of racial profiling, and over one-third have changed their travel plans in responses to fears about what will happen to them if they attempt to board a plane. It is increasingly difficult to send remittances to families in the Middle East, particularly in Palestine and Lebanon, as some banks refuse to handle the transfers, apparently fearing they will become targets in investigations of the funding networks supporting terrorist organizations. And during the 2004 presidential election campaign, rumors circulated about Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (BICE) is plans to arrest large numbers of Arab immigrants and Muslims in the month leading to the presidential elections (ADC, 2004)⁴. So despite the considerable progress that may have been made over the years to position Arab-Americans within the mainstream,

their status as Arabs in America remains unclear. As Suad Joseph (1999) argues, they are more likely to be thought of as “Arab-?” than as “Arab-American.”

Arab-Irish-Americans?

The comparison with the Irish made by many of our respondents invokes a long and complicated history of immigration to the United States—a history that is as much about the racialization of all immigrants as it is about either Irish or Arab immigrants. The Irish migration to the US began in a large scale in the 1850s, and it posed the first real challenge to the American immigration narrative⁵. The Irish who came during that period were poor, Catholic, and many were physically ill, as the overcrowding on ships led to outbreaks of various diseases. Their poverty and relative lack of education meant that a new class of free immigrants lacking the human, cultural, and monetary capital to establish themselves immediately had to be accommodated. That the Irish were also Catholic led to their being seen as a different race. It was only after several decades and several new waves of immigration that the Irish were begrudgingly seen as being “white” (Ignatiev, 1995). The transformation of the Irish is really quite astonishing, as they are one of the most favorably viewed ethnic groups in the US, and perhaps the only group for whom the US Congress has been willing to encourage and facilitate immigration in recent years (Hing, 1993).

It is no wonder, therefore, that activists invoke the Irish when talking about assimilation and incorporation as American citizens. The history of the Irish is one of almost complete acceptance in the US, despite their initial marginalization and racialization. In saying that Arabs are like the Irish, however, activists draw on different interpretations of assimilation, racialization, and America’s immigration history than one might first assume. As we demonstrate in the following pages,

activists enrich those narratives by reminding Americans that immigration history is not one of effortless assimilation, but is rather characterized by systematic exclusion and marginalization. In this section, we delve beyond the statement “We’re just like the Irish” to explore the ways in which activists think Arab-Americans are like the Irish (or the ways in which activists wish to present Arabs as being like the Irish), and what this means for the incorporation of Arab immigrants as American citizens. In so doing, we highlight narratives revolving around the meaning of assimilation, civil rights, and the play between similarity and difference. In particular, we highlight three strands of the narrative that draw attention to 1) a shared history of immigration, marginalization, and acceptance, 2) the importance of civil rights movements that may seem to distinguish immigrants from a mythic mainstream whose race and ethnicity seem unmarked, and 3) the ways in which the American experience is based on the acceptance of cultural differences predicated on shared political values of community. While we discuss these strands of the narrative individually, we conclude by demonstrating the ways in which they are intertwined. We argue that the strands of the narrative draw on themes in the national myth of immigration, belonging and citizenship, but that they are braided in ways that challenge many Americans’ views of their history.

“We’re just like the Irish”

The first strand of the narrative provided by our respondents was one that linked Arab-Americans with other immigrant groups in the US. Many of our respondents drew on American history as a context for their stories, and their knowledge of that history could easily put native-born Americans to shame. Many respondents argued that assimilation of Arab-Americans would almost inevitably

occur within about three generations. They pointed to the professional occupations of many Arabs, high rates of naturalization and dispersed settlement patterns⁶ as evidence that Arabs were succeeding economically and socially. Many in the second and third generation had married non-Arabs, the classic signal of assimilation (Gordon, 1964; Lieberman, 1961), and even many of those who have not “married out” have either anglicized their last names or given their children American first names. The expectation and reality of assimilation was so common that many organizations had to teach Arab language and culture to the second and third generations, and indeed, teaching those generations about their own culture was an important goal for many groups. To some degree this was necessary to counteract the negative images of Arab and Islamic cultures the children would face, but to foreshadow an argument that will be developed later, many activists were also worried about being swallowed into an American culture. Some second generation activists worried that unfamiliarity with their own culture would mean they would never be fully American, even as being raised in the US meant they would never be fully Arab.

In arguing that Arabs were just like other Americans, activists often pointed to the shared values that characterize Arab and American cultures, including emphases on family, religion, and justice. Over and over, we heard about the similarities between the cultures on fundamental values. To the extent there was conflict between them, activists often argued that Americans did not act on their values to the same extent that Arabs did. For example, our respondents spoke of the loose attachment of American families and contrasted that with the tight bonds in Arab families. While the second generation sometimes rebelled at those tight bonds and argued that the closeness of Arab families was looked at strangely by their friends, they also noted

the comfort and safety those bonds represented. Quite often, respondents puzzled over why Arab and Muslim cultures were seen as being strange to Americans. One woman, for example, commented, “If you look at the American Constitution and everything that’s in it, it seems like they had studied the Islamic religion in its purest form.”

Yet there were concerns that it was difficult for Arabs to fit into the United States and that some Arabs faced an easier time than did others; these comments often revolved around Islam and the ways in which Islam has often been constructed as incompatible with the West. Some activists argued that it was easier for Christian Arabs to be accepted, often because they were not so obviously marked by difference. Christian Arabs are also argued to be more likely to anglicize their last names or to take on a Christian first name. One man, for example, noted that it was easier to be accepted as a Christian:

“Christian Arabs have historically been able to melt in, to assimilate, to be part of the establishment. That is because their names are easier. It is easier when you have a name like Darrell and Nick and John, and Mary Rose Oakar—these are all former Congress people. And also the fact that you can go to church...so people see more things in common with them than a Muslim person. So Arab Muslims or Muslim Arabs have it the harder way, because their names are similar to the names of the people we hate most—Osama and Mohammed and Khalid and Abdul Rahman—so it is not so easy for them to assimilate.”

Not all Christian Arabs, however, anglicize their names, and some argue that it is a denial of their heritage to do so. One man, for instance, argued that Americans will learn to say those difficult names, but Arab-Americans need to develop some patience. He continued: “If everybody’s name becomes Mike Smith, we will not know who we are. We will lose our identity.” But when names of “the people we hate” are combined with other markers of ethnic or cultural difference—such as wearing hijab—then assimilation may be more difficult for Muslim Arabs.

Respondents noted, however, that this difficulty is largely created and maintained by non-Arabs, rather than reflecting an unwillingness on the part of Arabs to assimilate.

Thus, while holding firm to the belief that Arab-Americans would ultimately be assimilated into the American mainstream, activists were under no illusions that the path would be easy, and the definition of assimilation was still open to differing meanings. As such, braided into the immigrant assimilation strand of the narrative were arguments about the importance of civil rights and the maintenance of cultural identity as consistent with ideas of assimilation.

Civil Rights

The activists with whom we spoke were also aware of the growing threat to their communities posed by the PATRIOT Act, the surveillance by BICE, and other efforts undertaken in the name of “homeland security.” As a result, civil rights were mentioned by almost everyone in response to our questions about issues facing Arab-Americans. But long before 9/11, civil rights organizations in the Arab and Muslim communities had been formed and were active. As examples, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) were established to provide legal defense in the case of discriminatory actions and to counter-act negative stereotypes that founders believed were at the root of such discrimination. The Arab American Institute was founded to encourage Arab-Americans to become active in political campaigns, to influence policy, and to participate as citizens.

The profiling and harassment of Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans can be seen as an indication that American society—or at least some segments of it—refuses to accept Arabs as members of the country; these kinds of actions remind us

of Waldinger and Fitzgerald's (2004) comments that assimilation is a discourse that differentiates "us" from "them." Civil rights activists often seemed wary of speaking so directly, and they noted the warm and meaningful support for their communities after 9/11. They frequently attributed discrimination to a lack of awareness that was compounded by pervasive stereotypes in the media. In response, these civil rights organizations seem to spend as much or more time engaging in education and public outreach as they spend representing clients and lobbying government. Yet one civil rights activist was frustrated, asking "How many times do we have to condemn terrorism before anyone listens? It is as though they just do not want to hear it."

Rightly or wrongly, the American civil rights movement is often portrayed as promoting either special protections for marginalized groups or even further, for promoting special rights. The idea of trying to obtain something "special" or extraordinary, however, rests uneasily with the normalizing discourse of many activists. When asked about this, activists often responded that they were seeking basic rights as *Americans*, not special rights as Arabs or Muslims and not basic human rights. They noted, for example, that religious observance is protected in the Constitution and in federal and state laws, so there was nothing "special" in their efforts to combat restrictions on religious dress⁷. And in working to protect the rights of Arabs who were detained during the special registrations of immigrant men from "states that support terrorism" in 2003, civil rights attorneys argued they were protecting the rights of residents of the US and that it was the US government that was treating these men in a "special" and demeaning fashion. There was no denying, however, that immigrant men from the Middle East were being singled out, and so the civil rights work was necessary in the face of new restrictions and profiling.

While downplaying the special rights accusations, some activists did think it would be helpful for Arabs to work for “protected class” status, meaning that they would be included in affirmative action policies. The racial classification issue has been fraught for Arabs, having been variously classified as Asian, African, and “other” (cf. Joseph, 1999; Samhan, 1999). In light of this ambiguity and since discrimination does occur, one activist argued:

“I think we are considered a minority by how we are treated, but we don’t get the minority privileges that others get. So we are treated as a minority from a disadvantaged point of view, but when it comes to equal employment opportunity and affirmative action, we are not considered a minority.... We are kind of lost in between.”

In this context—when Arab-Americans were being denied opportunities because of their background—he felt Arab-Americans should avail themselves of the opportunities to compensate for their marginalization. More frequently, however, activists focused their efforts on building coalitions with groups that had suffered from extreme acts of state-sponsored discrimination (such as Native Americans and Japanese-Americans), rather than on attempting to achieve protected class status.

Assimilation and Identification: the same, but different

In an interview with a 29 year-old-woman, we commented that we never heard Arabs talking about multiculturalism, which is probably the most dominant discourse amongst racialized groups in the US. In response, this woman commented, “I guess [multiculturalism] is just assumed. We will always be seen as different.” Yet we introduced this paper with comments from her mother and sister, who likened Arabs with the Irish and who situated the experience of Arabs firmly within the assimilation narrative of American history. Is this just a sign of a disagreement within a family? Or is it a sign of a different conceptualization of assimilation than that represented in

the metaphor of the melting pot? Most of our respondents probably would argue that they take a definition of assimilation that locates Arabs in the mainstream of American society, even as they struggle to maintain a positive identification as Arab. In other words, respondents argue that they are the same as Americans, but different; their political work is aimed at creating the possibility to enact both sameness and difference.

When we asked questions about “assimilation,” respondents often turned the question back on us, asking what *we* meant. We responded that the reason we asked about assimilation was that we wanted to see how *they* defined it. This strategy was effective in sparking a conversation about assimilation in which respondents became both theorists and pundits. Their theories of assimilation generally consisted of several related arguments that drew on American history to demonstrate that sameness and difference were intertwined in the creation of the American society into which they were assimilating. Generally, the first argument was that Americanness did not—or perhaps *should* not—mean a denial of Arabness. This is where the comparison with the Irish and other immigrant groups became significant. For example, one man involved in a media organization that spread information in both English and Arabic commented:

“I see the examples from the United States of people who came from Ireland and may still talk Irish, or Italian, or Swedish or whatever. They can build one nation and they can build one country—a superpower—just by putting the two things together.”

This man’s arguments pointed to the continued importance of identities associated with the places from which immigrants came; maintaining both identities was part of what made the US a great nation. He further argued for the importance of ethnic and Arabic institutions and media in the US as facilitating both assimilation into the US

and the maintenance of Arab culture. This is significant, because the foreign language media is often pointed to as a sign that immigrants have no need to assimilate (e.g., Huntington, 2004). Yet our respondents drew on American history to demonstrate the vital role the immigrant press played in integrating immigrants into American society—a role noted in the 1920s by sociologist Robert Park (1922). Bilingual papers were identified by one respondent as particularly significant in this regard. In reaching a broad swath of the Arab community, these papers fostered communication in ways that promoted both Arabness and Americanness, and importantly, bridged the two identities in the context of American society.

Almost all of our respondents mentioned the importance of maintaining identities and of the enduring importance of immigrant origins in the narrative of American history. Few wanted to see Arabness diminished, although they recognized it would inevitably change. Some people talked about the need to find ways to make both identities meaningful for their children and grandchildren, and others noted that their sense of what it meant to be Arab had changed by virtue of living in the United States. Still others were shocked when they returned to their places they were born after a long absence to realize how much both they and their hometowns had changed. Arab identities, therefore, were not fixed, but they nevertheless remained important to our respondents⁸.

Activists recognized, however, that acceptance and a sense of belonging would not be easily or inevitably achieved, which was why they engaged in activities intended to promote civil rights, education, and cultural awareness; this notion that assimilation required work and attention was the second strand of their argument. If some people or institutions within American society marked Arabs as different—or more ominously, as dangerous—then they argued it was important to change those

attitudes and practices. To this end, many of the organizations these activists represented encouraged members to participate in American society and politics and to proclaim themselves both Arab and American. Other activists became involved in—even founded—media watch organizations that attempt to consult with television and film productions to reduce anti-Arab stereotypes and with news organizations to reduce what they perceive as bias in the ways issues in the Middle East are presented.

In these and other efforts, many of our respondents promoted views of assimilation, belonging and citizenship that often draws on American history, but that is at odds with the all-or-nothing approach of some theorists and commentators. The theory advanced by our respondents was of citizenship as being rooted in the assimilation of political values, rather than in a common, unhyphenated identity as American. Many of the organizations debated whether to hyphenate their names, but as individuals, most of the activists identified as both Arab and American. They argued that what unites the country is not a label of “American,” so much as acceptance of a moral value placed on accepting people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who are committed to a political community based on equality, responsibility, and justice. Lebanese and Palestinian respondents, in particular, pointed to the danger of marginalizing particular segments of a population, and they often used Middle Eastern histories to illustrate what happens when these differences spill into politics and into questions of who can live as a citizen in a country. They also drew on US history to argue that acceptance and persistence of different cultural heritages was an integral part of Americanness. As one man argued, “This is the history of America. It is our vision of America. And it is why we are part of this community.” As another commented, “You need to make identity work for the benefit of the people. Arab-American identity is a great identity of people who serve

a combination of identities, not one or the other.” It was in this sense that the experiences of Arab-Americans would—or perhaps *should*—be just like the Irish.

Conclusions

Not all activists were as confident as the man we just quoted, and not all felt entirely comfortable in the US. The responses of the US government after 9/11, the war in Iraq, and American policy toward Palestine destabilized the sense of belonging in America for some respondents. In spite of those worries and feelings of alienation, there was a remarkable sense of optimism and determination in the comments made by the activists with whom we spoke. Through their work and through their narratives, they attempted to secure the position of Arab immigrants and their children in the American polity. In their theories and understanding of American citizenship, they made several important points.

First, they argued that Arabs *have* assimilated in political, economic, and social terms to a remarkable degree. To the extent that many Arab-Americans stand out as “different” or as group that is not-quite-American, religion and cultural differences, these activists argue for the compatibility between Islam, Arabness, and Americanness; the extent to which Arabs are differentiated, they argue, is a reflection of a lack of awareness on the part of many Americans and the perpetuation (and sometimes manipulation) of negative stereotypes in the media and by political figures.

Second, these activists argue that in “actually existing” American history, it has not been necessary to shed markers of difference to gain standing or recognition as American citizens, despite what the founders may have intended. They draw attention to the ways in which the negotiation of similarity and difference has been a key element of an American identity and society. The negative associations and

seeming incompatibility of some ethnic and cultural identifiers can be overcome and acceptance can be gained without stripping oneself of identities associated with heritage, culture, and places of birth. But in demonstrating the enduring attachment to identities as Arabs, activists are not claiming special rights that differentiate Arabs from other Americans. Rather, they are claiming rights to maintain their Arab identity *as Americans*.

Third, there was no discussion of using international human rights regimes to promote their cause or to claim particular rights or to claim status as internationalized citizens, as some theorists have suggested might happen, and there is no evidence of such attempts in the published materials or websites of the organizations the activists represented. Instead, the nation-state continues to play a central role in the efforts of these activists to cement the standing of Arabs as Americans. Our respondents may be transnational *migrants*, but they did not present themselves as transnational political subjects or citizens (see also Schulz, 2003).

Emerging from the narratives is a conceptualization of citizenship in which political and social assimilation as Americans does not imply the denial of other identities. These respondents do not eschew an identity as American or as members of the American polity. Yet they complicate the meaning of belonging and its implications for citizenship through their expanded understanding of what it means to be American, even as Arab. In this effort, they draw on the narratives of American history. They may, indeed, be just like the Irish.

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¹ Although many recent Arab immigrants to the United States are Muslim, it is estimated that most Arab-Americans are Christian, reflecting the long history of Syrian/Lebanese migration beginning in the late 1800s (AAI, 2001).

² The interviews were conducted in 2003 and 2004 as part of a larger study of community and citizenship amongst Arab immigrants to the United States and United Kingdom. Respondents were identified through their membership in Arab-identified groups. This strategy ensures that respondents have already identified themselves with political work addressing community formation and citizenship as Arabs, thus avoiding problems of profiling in a political climate that is at best uncertain, and in some cases dangerous for activists. Respondents were promised confidentiality for themselves and for their organization. Interviews were conducted at times and places of the respondents' choosing, were taped, and then transcribed. Interviews passages were coded on the basis of the descriptions of assimilation, belonging, and constructions of citizenship.

³ While not all Muslims are Arab, most Muslims in the US are immigrants. The CAIR ad campaign typically features people who appear to be Arab. And while focusing on Islam, CAIR has been involved in efforts to address civil rights issues regarding all Arabs.

⁴ Numbers of actual detentions are not available.

⁵ Slavery and the treatment of Native Americans *should* have posed such a challenge, but did not, given beliefs that neither would ever be capable of American citizenship (Shklar 1998). As suffrage

was extended to landless white men and to women, the argument was often made that without the vote, these groups were effectively treated no better than slaves and Indians, with the clear implication that they most certainly deserved better treatment (Shklar, 1991).

⁶ The relatively small numbers of Arabs in any metropolitan area means that enclaves or ethnic ghettos have not developed to any degree. The exception is in Dearborn, Michigan, but it should also be noted that Arabs are scattered throughout the Detroit area, including many of its wealthier suburbs. There has been an attempt to build “Arab City” in Anaheim (Twair, 2003) but only about 600 families are settled in this area.

⁷ Lawsuits have been filed in several states over restrictions on headscarves in driver’s license photos.

⁸ We recognize this is a pre-determined finding, as we have interviewed people associated with Arab-identified organizations.