

# “Whiteness” and the Arab Immigrant Experience

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MOST OF THE LITERATURE ON Arab Americans weaves a relatively consistent narrative—one that celebrates the “assimilation” of an early wave of immigrants and bemoans the current “racialization” of the group. This narrative recounts that, while Arabic-speaking immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century faced prejudice, they overcame hardship and eventually joined the “American mainstream.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, they became incorporated into the United States’ system of racial categorization as white. However, a number of political forces and events taking place over the past few decades brought this process to a halt. The Arab world and Islam presently embody the marked “Other” against which an American identity is constructed. By virtue of their historical, cultural, and transnational connections to a perceived foreign enemy, Arab Americans are pushed outside the national consensus and marked as the “enemy within.”<sup>2</sup> As nation and race in the United States have historically entwined,<sup>3</sup> it has been argued that members of the group feel the white racial designation no longer reflects their experience (Samhan 1999; Majaj 2000; Naber 2000).

1. The term “Arabic-speaking” has been used in other writings in reference to immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century because, while they spoke Arabic, not all necessarily identified as Arab.

2. For writings on the impact of September 11 on this process, see Cainkar (2004b) and Agopian (2004).

3. See Omi and Winant (1994).

Although the narrative sketched above has become dominant in Arab American writings, its assumptions and omissions remain largely unexamined.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, the narrative on the early experience, in its focus on assimilation, overlooks the highly racialized process through which some immigrant groups in the United States "became white." On the other hand, many of the recent writings on the racialization of Arab Americans, especially in a post-September 11 environment, operate from the presumption that racialization occurs only through moving away from "whiteness," in a predictable trajectory, and through engaging in nonwhite racial formation.<sup>5</sup> In most of this literature, white racial formation is rarely critically examined. Instead, matters pertaining to "whiteness," and its relationship to power, remain obscured in favor of advocating for what is believed to be a slightly more comfortable position for Arab Americans vis-à-vis an unexamined "white center."

The current essay utilizes a "critical whiteness" framework to examine this white center looking in from the discursive and marginal position Arab Americans occupy on the racial hierarchy. This discursive position, often associated in Arab American writings with invisibility and erasure,<sup>6</sup> can serve as a location for the marking and critical evaluation of "whiteness." Given that the main objective is to place "whiteness" at the forefront of the analysis, the essay does not address the question of whether Arab Americans are, or should be categorized as, white or nonwhite. Instead, it asks the following question: In what ways can an examination of Arab immigrants' interactions with race in the United States describe and shed a new light on "whiteness?" In other words, when Arab Americans identify as nonwhite, why do they do so? *And*, when they assert a white identity, in what sense do they do so, for what benefits, and at what costs?<sup>7</sup>

This chapter starts with a review of "whiteness" and Arab American literatures. It explores how—presently and in the local contexts of Detroit and Dearborn—Arab immigrants describe, relate to, reinforce, or undermine "whiteness" through narratives of their own identities. This examination re-

quires both abandoning race-neutralization and resisting the tendency to view victims. The arguments put forth examine how Arab immigrants represent themselves within the context. The study examines Arab immigrants in context, not only in relationship to what Toni Morrison refers to as "black presence" but also explores how immigrants relate to the process of organizing their relationships. This chapter focuses on deconstructing and express divergent views of their

#### WHITENESS AND IMMIGRATION

Most writings on race in the United States view the white racial category as an essential and fixed, however, there has been a proliferation of critically concerned with white racialization. In "whiteness studies" or "critical whiteness studies," "whiteness" is conceptualized as negotiated by individuals and communities (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003). Whiteness is a structuring system that operates through subjects.<sup>8</sup> In return, it offers subjects a way to negotiate. Historically in the United States, Arab immigrant groups were included in or excluded from given new meanings by those already

An integral component of the history of historical processes through which

4. Exceptions to this are writings by Sarah Gualtieri (2001), Lisa Suhair Majaj (2000), and Helen Samhan (1999).

5. Omi and Winant define racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (1994, 55).

6. On Arab American invisibility, see Nadine Naber (2000) and Lisa Suhair Majaj (2000).

7. These questions are adapted from the afterword to *Are Italians White?* by Roediger (2003).

8. The analysis presented in this chapter is based on research conducted at the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan.

9. The term "black presence" is used here to refer to the presence of black people in a space.

10. In addition to Rasmussen et al. (2003), see also Rasmussen et al. (2004).

11. See Frankenberg (2001).

quires both abandoning race-neutral language of assimilation and Americanization and resisting the tendency to situate Arab Americans solely as racialized victims. The arguments put forth derive from a qualitative study that set out to examine how Arab immigrants interact with the census race question and represent themselves within the confines of that official system of categorization.<sup>8</sup> The study examines Arab immigrants’ racial formation in a highly segregated context, not only in relationship to the white racial category, but also in relationship to what Toni Morrison refers to as a “black presence.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, it explores how immigrants relate to “blackness”—“whiteness’s Other”—in the process of organizing their relationship to “whiteness.” The discussion in this chapter focuses on deconstructing the narratives of two Arab immigrants who express divergent views of their racial identity.

WHITENESS AND IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Most writings on race in the United States have focused on nonwhites treating the white racial category as invisible, normative, and natural. In recent years, however, there has been a proliferation of a new genre of race writings specifically concerned with white racial identity formation. This work, referred to as “whiteness studies” or “critical studies of whiteness,” argues that, like other racial categories, “whiteness” is constructed, dynamic, and context-specific; it is negotiated by individuals and collectives as both an identity and a social position (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003; Rasmussen et al. 2001). “Whiteness” is a structuring system that operates through “unknowing” and “unseeing” racial subjects.<sup>10</sup> In return, it offers its subjects a location of structural advantage.<sup>11</sup> Historically in the United States, “whiteness” has been a category that immigrant groups were included in or excluded from, and an ideology embraced and given new meanings by those allowed entry into it (Roediger 2002).

An integral component of “whiteness” studies has been to document the historical processes through which different European immigrant groups at the

8. The analysis presented in the essay is part of the author’s dissertation research in the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

9. The term “black presence” is adapted from Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1993).

10. In addition to Rasmussen et al. (2001), see Ware (2002).

11. See Frankenberg (2001).

turn of the twentieth century gained white racial status.<sup>12</sup> This work demonstrates that white racial consciousness was constructed through a highly contested process with the participation of immigrants who were deemed to be "in-between" or "not-yet-white." In an era when fitness for citizenship was being hotly debated, immigrants allied themselves with African Americans at times, while at other times they sought to assert their claims to citizenship and upward social mobility by distancing themselves from them.<sup>13</sup> They fought against nativism not for the promise of a more equal society but for one divided by a reformulated "whiteness" that has come to incorporate them (Jacobson 1998; Ignatiev 1995). In his study on how the Irish became white, Ignatiev argues that, through seeking white racial status, immigrants contributed to the consolidation of an unreachable color line.

In their efforts to deconstruct "whiteness," scholars in the field have turned many of their critiques inward. Almost every collection of essays on "whiteness" starts with an acknowledgment that the earliest—and most articulate—writings on "whiteness" are by black authors who wrote on how white ideologies operate to maintain inequality and oppression.<sup>14</sup> As such, "whiteness" studies existed long before the term itself came into common usage, even though contributions of nonwhite subjects to the field have only recently begun to be acknowledged as valid. Relatedly, the dominant view that "whiteness is invisible" has come under critique.<sup>15</sup> As writings by authors of color indicate, while "whiteness" may be invisible to those who benefit from it, it is certainly visible to those who suffer its consequences.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, an important critique of "whiteness" studies addresses the risk that, in the process of deconstructing the category, one can easily fall back into conceptualizations that reify race as opposed to challenging it (Ware 2002). While one of the goals of "whiteness" studies is to extend critical race theory by destabilizing socially constructed racial categories, the field continues to operate from a black-white dualism model and pays little attention to identities that are neither white nor black.

12. See Roediger (1991, 2002), Brodtkin (1998), Jacobson (1998), Haney-López (1996), and Ignatiev (1995).

13. Roediger (2002) demonstrates how this process unfolded in *Colored White*.

14. The most frequently cited black authors on "whiteness" are Du Bois (1903), Fanon (1967), and Morrison (1993).

15. On "whiteness as invisible," see Peggy MacIntosh (1990).

16. For a critique of "whiteness as invisible," see Ruth Frankenberg (2001).

Two important questions remain from a "whiteness" perspective. The first inquires about those who are "white" but who did not profit from the formation of why groups or individuals who are "quite white" continue to assert a "whiteness" perspective. If whiteness and nonwhiteness are interrelated, the former has changed over time while the latter remains almost constant. The second question concerns those who are "white" but who currently do not fit the criteria. It is never made that there is a consensus on the increasing emphasis on their invisibility. How has nonwhite racial formation has prevented the members of the group have engaged in white nationalism? How may continue to do so in the present?

The main narrative on Arab Americans focuses on the early immigrants faced, and how they overcame adversity and perseverance. The economic success of Arab Americans is often explained by the cultural values of hard work, strong family ties, and independence. After World War II, Arabic-speaking immigrants began to climb the economic and social ladder. "From the tenements of the city . . . into the suburbs" (Aswad 1999). Beyond mere assimilation ("Arabs-as-white" was a common term used by migrants responded to the racism of the time. Many were employed to gain citizenship rights. Instead, the story of the Arab Americans is one of a central language—the language of assimilation).

A few writings, however, have examined how Arab immigrants interacted with a racialized system of whiteness which they "became white." In looking at the

17. This question was posed in the introduction.

18. This question permeates the history of Arab Americans (2002).

19. On a review of citizenship court cases.

Two important questions remain ripe for exploration from a critical “whiteness” perspective. The first inquires into what happened to those who “became white” but who did not profit from their “whiteness.”<sup>17</sup> The second invites exploration of why groups or individuals who are subordinated and racialized as “not quite white” continue to assert a white identity.<sup>18</sup> Although these two questions are interrelated, the former has come to dominate in Arab American writings while the latter remains almost completely overlooked. One of the most prevailing themes in Arab American writings is that they are a group who “became white” but who currently do not reap the benefits of “whiteness.” While a claim is never made that there is a consensus on how Arab Americans identify, the increasing emphasis on their invisibility in the white category and engagement in nonwhite racial formation has preempted a critical exploration of how members of the group have engaged in white racial formation in the past and how they may continue to do so in the present.

The main narrative on Arab Americans describes the racism and exclusion early immigrants faced, and how they overcame the odds through hard work and perseverance. The economic achievements of members of the group are often explained by the cultural values they brought with them such as dedication, strong family ties, and independence. This narrative recounts that, by World War II, Arabic-speaking immigrants had “followed the middle-class path up the economic and social ladder” (Naff 1994, 31), and “moved from the central city . . . into the suburbs” (Aswad 1974, 10). In other words, they have “assimilated” (Suleiman 1999). Beyond mention of a few court cases in which the racial position of “Arabs-as-white” was questioned in the U.S. legal system,<sup>19</sup> how immigrants responded to the racism they encountered and the arguments they employed to gain citizenship rights remain largely absent in these accounts. Instead, the story of the Arab American early wave is often narrated in race-neutral language—the language of assimilation.

A few writings, however, have critically explored how Arabic-speaking immigrants interacted with a racialized structure through a process at the end of which they “became white.” In looking at some historical documents, authors

17. This question was posed in the introduction in Rasmussen et al. (2001).

18. This question permeates the historical analysis of “whiteness” presented by Roediger (2002).

19. On a review of citizenship court cases, see Massad (1993) and Suleiman (1999).

Lisa Suhair Majaj (2000) and Helen Samhan (1999) argue that when Arabic-speaking immigrants were faced with the threat of losing citizenship rights, they battled for white racial status within the context of white supremacy. In courts and in the media, immigrants asserted that they were not "Asiatic" or "Negro" but "civilized whites." Relying on similar documents, Sarah Gualtieri (2001) further suggests that immigrants' active and organized participation played an important role in their inclusion in the racial hierarchy as whites, *and*, more important, in the shaping of the meanings of "whiteness" at that time.

#### WHITENESS AND ARAB IMMIGRANTS IN DETROIT AND DEARBORN

An examination of how Arab immigrants in Detroit and Dearborn, Michigan, presently engage in discourses on race and "whiteness" rests on two premises. The first is that, even in a post-September 11 political climate, Arab Americans continue to exercise individual and collective agency in organizing their relationship to "whiteness." They are active subjects and not merely objects of a hostile political discourse that sees them as terrorists and foreign, or a sympathetic discourse that sees them solely as racialized victims. The second premise is that Arab Americans' current interactions with race and "whiteness" are neither monolithic nor homogeneous, but are varied and contingent. Arab immigrants in Detroit and Dearborn engage in different, even contradictory, racial identity formations; there are those who identify as white and those who identify as non-white, and each identity choice is driven by its own set of arguments. It is exactly this divergence and tension that makes the study of "whiteness" from the point of view of the Arab immigrant experience both provocative and pressing.

The discussion presented in this section draws on qualitative research carried out among Arab immigrant owners of small businesses in Detroit and Dearborn. The business owners occupy a distinct location in the local economic structure and constitute a social class whose members share economic interests. As previously indicated, the discussion will focus on the narratives of two Arab immigrants who position themselves differently in relation to "whiteness" and "blackness." Moreover, while I do not negate the value of research and writings on Arab Americans that address the effects of national- or global-level forces, I argue that it is important to pay close attention to the effects of the local context. Specifically, making overarching generalizations about Arab Americans may

obscure local historical and economic conditions. This is especially important for scholars and insiders and outsiders alike as a way to understand a suburb whose history is intertwined with the city (Georgakas and Surkin 1998; Sugrue 2005).

Because of Detroit's racial history, Dearborn is an ideal location for a study of "whiteness." The metropolitan area is home to the oldest Arab American community in the United States. Dearborn offers a unique opportunity to examine the racial position of Arab Americans. In other words, other, they constitute two spaces that have continued to have very little in common. The city of Detroit *only* and Dearborn and other suburbs. A study of Detroit and Dearborn may shed light on the racialized experience in context how Arab Americans have been positioned in the economic structure in the two cities.

Detroit is one of the most diverse cities in the United States (Massey and Denton 1992). What has been termed the "urban core" of Detroit's history has been one of racial segregation and racial conflict. The city's population is 67.3 percent African American and 12.3 percent Arab American. Detroit's west side—was 86.9 percent African American in the year 2000.<sup>20</sup>

Although employment with the city was a major pull factor originally, a large number of Arab immigrants arrived in the Detroit metropolitan area after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 and after the city's economic restructuring had been set in motion.

20. On the racial history of Detroit, see Sugrue (2005).

21. These data are obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau (2000).

22. See Shryock and Abraham (1975).

obscure local historical and economic factors that shape racial identity formation. This is especially important in Detroit, a place that has come to be seen by insiders and outsiders alike as a “black space” (Hartigan 1999), and Dearborn, a suburb whose history is entwined with the maintenance of racial segregation (Georgakas and Surkin 1998; Sugrue 1996; Good 1989).

Because of Detroit’s racial history and current racial context, it constitutes an ideal location for a study of “whiteness.” Moreover, because the city’s metropolitan area is home to the oldest and most highly concentrated Arab American community in the United States (Shryock and Abraham 2000), it offers a unique opportunity to examine “whiteness” from the discursive and marginal racial position of Arab Americans. Although Detroit and Dearborn border each other, they constitute two spaces that have had conflicting histories and continue to have very little in common today. Therefore, in this chapter, Detroit refers to the city of Detroit *only* and not to the metropolitan area that encompasses Dearborn and other suburbs. A quick summary of the recent history of Detroit and Dearborn may shed light on the rationale behind this distinction and place in context how Arab Americans became integrated into the racial hierarchy and the economic structure in the two spaces the way they are today.

Detroit is one of the most racially and economically segregated cities in the United States (Massey and Denton 1993), a quintessential representation of what has been termed the “urban crisis.”<sup>20</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, Detroit’s history has been one of institutionalized forms of racial segregation and racial conflict. The city’s population in the year 2000 was 81.6 percent African American and 12.3 percent white. In contrast, Dearborn—which borders Detroit’s west side—was 86.9 percent white and less than 1.3 percent African American in the year 2000.<sup>21</sup>

Although employment with the automobile industry was one of the main pull factors originally, a large number of immigrants from Arab countries arrived in the Detroit metropolitan area following the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 and after the forces of deindustrialization and economic restructuring had been set in motion.<sup>22</sup> A convergence of factors opened the

20. On the racial history of Detroit, see Sugrue (1996).

21. These data are obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau Web site: <http://www.census.gov>.

22. See Shryock and Abraham (2000).

door for Arab immigrants to buy businesses in Detroit that had been previously owned by members of European immigrant groups.<sup>23</sup> Currently, Arab Americans in the metropolitan area engage in a multitude of economic spheres, one of which is small business enterprise. As entrepreneurs, they are represented as a "middleman minority" in the predominantly African American city of Detroit,<sup>24</sup> and as business owners in a thriving ethnic enclave in Dearborn, where a large number of Arab immigrants live and work.<sup>25</sup>

Based on the 2000 census, almost 30 percent of Dearborn's residents claim an Arab ancestry, while less than 1 percent of Detroit's do so.<sup>26</sup> These estimates are obtained from the census ancestry question, which is included only on the long census form. Because the census defines people who trace their origins to the Middle East and North Africa as white, information on how persons of Arab ancestry respond to the race question are nonexistent. Persons who check the "some other race" category and write Arab are automatically entered as white; their agency to identify as nonwhite is undermined by the census. Moreover, though the census flags certain situations that involve reassignment during the data-entry phase, this situation—reassigning an "other race—Arab" to "white"—does not receive an allocation flag.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, data on the percentages of Arab Americans who identify as "white" and those who identify as "other race—Arab" are lost. More important, differences between the two groups—on socioeconomic and a host of other variables available through the census—remain masked.

The census race categories are highly problematic, as they reflect the history of how race was manufactured in the United States to justify colonialism and slavery (Shohat 1998; Wright 1994). Nonetheless, race continues to play a fundamental role in structuring social relations, and data obtained from the census race question, albeit imperfect, provides a means of exploring the racial structure. How Arab immigrants interact with the census race question and

choose to locate themselves with respect to race is an important area of research that sheds light on how racial ideologies become and are reproduced by new agents. The question as to how Arab immigrants answer the question and, more important, how they answer it the way they do, prompts a reexamination of the burgeoning field of "whiteness" studies.

There is a range of responses to the census race question.<sup>28</sup> Naturally, some Arab immigrants check their race on official forms when someone asks about their race, but others do not. Others say that they find the census response categories do not make sense and do not respond by projecting what Mary Kay Vaughan (2000) calls "white" when they don't know what they are, or "black" or "American Indian."

The two Arab immigrants in the case studies in the order of this section did provide answers to the census race question. The participant checked the "other race" category, and the other participant was selected from the "other race" category. Their divergent views of their own race and identity are explored for examining how "whiteness" is constructed for racial subjects. The comparison of the two participants share many backgrounds: they both immigrated to the United States at a young age and have been living in Dearborn, Michigan, since they arrived with less than a high school education. They both have social networks that provided them with support when they entered the secondary labor market upon their arrival.<sup>29</sup> With support from extended family, they were able to move out of the secondary labor market and into businesses they currently own.

23. On the 1967 Detroit racial uprising and white flight, see Sugrue (1996).

24. On the "middleman minority" theory, see Bonacich (1973, 1980).

25. On the ethnic enclave economy, see Portes (1987).

26. See de la Cruz and Brittingham (2003).

27. This information is based on a phone conversation with Angela Brittingham of the U.S. Census Bureau and coauthor of *The Arab Population Report: 2000*, as well as on feedback provided by staff at the Government Publications Office at the University of Michigan's Graduate Library.

28. The information presented here is based on interviews conducted with Arab immigrant business owners in Dearborn, Michigan.

29. For a discussion on the primary labor market, see



choose to locate themselves within historically constructed categories can shed light on how racial ideologies become embodied and given meaning through new agents. The question as to how Arab immigrants answer the census race question and, more important from a “critical whiteness” perspective, why they answer it the way they do, promises to contribute to critical race theory and to the burgeoning field of “whiteness studies.”

There is a range of responses Arab immigrants offer to the census race question.<sup>28</sup> Naturally, some Arab immigrants indicate that they avoid identifying their race on official forms whenever possible. They express concern that when someone asks about their race, it is with the intention to discriminate against them. Others say that they find it difficult to answer the question because the response categories do not make sense to them. They avoid answering the question by projecting what Mary Waters terms a “raceless persona” (1999); while they don’t know what they are, they at least know that they are neither white, nor black, nor American Indian.

The two Arab immigrants whose narratives are analyzed in the remainder of this section did provide answers to the race question. The first participant checked the “other race” category; the second checked “white.” These two participants were selected from a larger qualitative sample *specifically* because their divergent views of their own racial identities offer a unique opportunity for examining how “whiteness” can be constructed, or undermined, through racial subjects. The comparison is made more relevant by the fact that the two participants share many background characteristics. They are both males who immigrated to the United States from the same Arab country at about the same age and have been living in Dearborn for almost the same number of years. Both arrived with less than a high school education but quickly became embedded in social networks that provided them with referrals to job opportunities. They entered the secondary labor market in unskilled low-wage jobs shortly after their arrival.<sup>29</sup> With support from extended family members, they were both able to move out of the secondary labor market and to purchase the businesses they currently own.

28. The information presented in this section is based on an analysis of forty-six interviews with Arab immigrant business owners in Detroit and Dearborn.

29. For a discussion on the primary and secondary labor markets, see Portes (1983).

The first participant owns a business in Detroit whose customer base is 80–90 percent African American. He indicated that he always checks the "other race" category on the census and other official forms and writes in "Arab." While he knows that some Arab Americans check "white," he himself insists on writing in the word "Arab." For this participant, September 11 was by no means a wake-up call. When asked about whether and how his life was affected by the event, he replied that it just proved what he has always thought: "I always thought that we are not liked here. I always thought we are hated. I always thought that we are looked down on, because of the movies mainly. And it [September 11] just proved it." But September 11 is not the only factor affecting how this immigrant views his position in the United States. He was asked about what he likes and dislikes about the neighborhood where his business is located in Detroit:

*Participant 1:* Things I like . . . we've been here for a while, the neighbors know us, they like us. And things I don't like . . . when somebody comes from outside the neighborhood, and they don't know us, they have pre-set notions about Arabs.

*Interviewer:* What pre-set notions do they have about Arabs?

*Participant 1:* Like we are trying to steal from them, trying to cheat them of their money, trying to think that they are thieves, this kind of mentality.

This participant's racial identity forms not only in relation to the rhetoric of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, but also in relation to a localized image of the Arab as an "outsider" in Detroit—a merchant making money in a disenfranchised, predominantly African American neighborhood. He, however, subverts this image by identifying himself as an "insider" and those who level criticism against his existence in Detroit as "from outside the neighborhood." In identifying as an "other race," he is asserting a nonwhite racial identity and disassociating himself from "whiteness." He further expresses ambivalence about a hyphenated Arab American identity, which he believes assumes a relationship between "becoming American" and "becoming white":

*Interviewer:* What does the term Arab American mean to you?

*Participant 1:* Arab American!

*Interviewer:* . . . for example, who do you think is an Arab American?

*Participant 1:* I don't believe . . .

*Interviewer:* You don't believe . . .

*Participant 1:* The term . . . it is? [No one is a] pure American. . . . Naturally, normally . . . the term . . .

*Interviewer:* White?

*Participant 1:* Which is . . .

This immigrant's insistence on writing "Arab" on the census agrees with his ambivalence about his position in the United States. "America" is not a race, and as white, it follows that he cannot identify himself as such. His inability to identify as an "other race" is a rejection of "whiteness" in a system where the term American is used for the dominant race.

The second participant also identifies as an Arab American, but he expresses pride in his hyphenated identity. He identifies as an Arab American, not as Arab American. . . . I am . . . I always say that *I am Arab* . . . I have affections for the United States. . . . I love this country" or "I would love to have my business in the heart of the city . . . on providing excellent service . . . In the aftermath of September 11, his business were protected from being harassed after the event.

Unlike the first participant, the second participant checks "white" on the census race question, the second participant checks "white." He was asked about

*Participant 2:* See, first of all, it does not belong to, say, being . . .

*Interviewer:* You think . . .

*Participant 2:* Whites . . .

*Participant 1:* I don't believe in the phrase itself, Arab American . . .

*Interviewer:* You don't think that the term captures . . .

*Participant 1:* The term! No. Is it like I am not pure American! Is that what it is? [No one is a] pure American except the American Indians. And, unfortunately, normally . . . the term American is used for the White race.

*Interviewer:* White!

*Participant 1:* Which is not fair either.

This immigrant's insistence on representing himself racially as “nonwhite” agrees with his ambivalence about identifying as an ethnic American in the United States. “America” is for the “white race,” and because he does not identify as white, it follows that he cannot identify as an American. On the other hand, his inability to identify as an ethnic American may be the price he has to pay for rejecting “whiteness” in a system that is structured around white privilege, “the term American is used for the White race.”

The second participant, on the other hand, identifies as an Arab American and expresses pride in his hyphenated identity. When asked whether he identifies as an Arab American, he replied: “I am Arab American, I am . . . I want to be Arab American. . . . I am not saying I am Arabic and I want to be American. I always say that *I am* Arab American.” Throughout the interview, he expressed affections for the United States, his “second home,” in statements such as “I love this country” or “I [would] die for this country.” This participant owns a business in the heart of the ethnic enclave in Dearborn and his success depends on providing excellent service to Arab customers in the face of stiff competition. In the aftermath of September 11, he expressed appreciation that he and his business were protected in the ethnic enclave, as he heard numerous stories about other Arabs who owned businesses “among American people” who were harassed after the event.

Unlike the first participant, who insisted on answering “other race” to the census race question, the second participant quickly answered that he always checks “white.” He was asked why:

*Participant 2:* See, first of all, this country belongs to White Americans . . . it does not belong to, say, Black Africans, or Indians, or let's say . . .

*Interviewer:* You think the U.S. belongs to Whites?

*Participant 2:* Whites, yes.

*Interviewer:* Not to African Americans?

*Participant 2:* No.

*Interviewer:* Yes, so you think [America] belongs to Whites?

*Participant 2:* Yes.

On the surface, this participant's identification with the white racial category may seem counterintuitive, given his statements about feeling protected in the ethnic enclave at a time when Arabs living and working outside the enclave were being harassed. Placing his statements in historical perspective, however, it may seem "logical" for him to want to "be white" given his belief that "whiteness" in the United States is a prerequisite for "becoming American." He is subjectively identifying with "whiteness" for "rational" reasons: America belongs to whites and one has to become white in order to become American. Eager to become American and have access to all the opportunities America offers, this immigrant is required to interact with a structure that rewards "whiteness." And he does. He internalizes "whiteness" in his quest for being accepted as an American. This participant's narrative recalls Roediger's view that the United States continues to be a place where new immigrants are attracted to "whiteness" and to all its material and psychological benefits (2002). Arab immigrants are not immune to this attraction.

Although the two immigrants provide ostensibly divergent answers to the census race question—one embraces the white category and one rejects it—both expose the "hidden" racial character of the assimilation discourse. That is to say, they challenge the notion that Arab immigrants' interactions with "America" take place along a line between "Americanization" and "resistance to Americanization" (Shryock and Abraham 2000). Issues of race and "whiteness" permeate the American immigrant experience, and the Arab immigrant case should not be seen as an exception. While some may engage in nonwhite racial formation, others may seek to rectify their precarious sense of belonging in America by embracing "whiteness." Historical evidence suggests that exclusion from "whiteness" may at times lead to stronger attachment to it (Roediger 2002; Haney-López 1996).

Even though the question of how Arab Americans identify on the census in relation to the white category is particularly salient, "whiteness" is not the only, and may not be the most important, frame of reference for immigrants' racial formation. In the United States, new immigrants develop racialized identities in

a context shaped by what has been a relation of domination and oppression are formed not only through interactions with members of a group, but also through interaction with the dominant culture. It is important to explore how Arab immigrants identify with their object others, but as its subjects in the racialized context of Detroit and Dearborn, and the "blackness" of Detroit.

Therefore, in addition to exploring how Arab immigrants interact with the census race question, I ask them to position themselves to both "whiteness" and "blackness." I presented them with a series of linear scales on opposite ends of a line: Arab and American. They were asked to mark on each scale their position themselves in relation to the two categories. I focus on how the two Arab immigrants position themselves, but in the presence of "blackness."

Not surprisingly, when the two Arab immigrants were asked to position themselves as close as possible to "white" and "black." However, when the two Arab immigrants were asked to position themselves on one end of the line and "white" and "black" on the other, they positioned themselves differently. The first Arab immigrant, when asked to position himself on the census race question, positioned himself as close as possible to "black." Conversely, the second Arab immigrant, when asked to position himself on the census race question, positioned himself as close as possible to "white."

The first immigrant, who positioned himself as close as possible to "black" and "black," explained why:

*Participant 1:* Because I see no difference between the two.

30. See Said (1978), Morrison (1992).

a context shaped by what has been termed the historical burden of a white-black relation of domination and oppression (Alba and Nee 2003). Moreover, identities are formed not only through imagining shared characteristics with other members of a group, but also through the fabrication of an “Other.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, it is pertinent to explore how Arab immigrants themselves relate to “whiteness” not only as its object others, but as its subjects. This is particularly salient in the highly racialized context of Detroit and Dearborn—namely, the “whiteness” of Dearborn and the “blackness” of Detroit.

Therefore, in addition to how the two aforementioned Arab immigrants interact with the census race question, how they position themselves in relation to both “whiteness” and “blackness” was examined. The two participants were presented with a series of linear diagrams, each with two constituted categories on opposite ends of a line: Arab and white, Arab and black, and white and black. They were asked to mark on each linear diagram where they would position themselves in relation to the two categories and then asked to explain why they chose to position themselves the way they did. The remainder of this section focuses on how the two Arab immigrants interact with “whiteness,” not in isolation, but in the presence of “blackness.”

Not surprisingly, when the diagram included a category for Arab opposite one of the two other constituted categories, both participants positioned themselves as close as possible to Arab and as far away as possible from both white and black. However, when the diagram showed the constituted category “black” on one end of the line and “white” on the other, the two immigrants positioned themselves differently. The first participant, who identified as “other race” on the census race question, positioned himself in the middle between “white” and “black.” Conversely, the second participant, who identified as “white” on the census race question, positioned himself as far away as possible from “black” and as close as possible to “white” on the line.

The first immigrant, who positioned himself in the middle between “white” and “black,” explained why:

*Participant 1:* Because I see no difference between Black and White. There is no difference between the two.

30. See Said (1978), Morrison (1993), and Hall (1996).

*Interviewer:* There is no difference?

*Participant 1:* In my evaluation,

The participant is well aware that, in Detroit, there *is* a difference between black and white. In fact, the structural position he occupies—an Arab business owner in a segregated African American neighborhood—is a constant reminder of this reality. In spite of this contradiction, he distances himself from “whiteness” and disturbs the process through which it comes to be embodied by immigrants as an unexamined center of American life. His unwillingness to adopt white identity de-centers “whiteness” and allows him to articulate a position that is not necessarily constituted through a distancing from “blackness.” He carves out a new location that renounces “whiteness,” not only on the census form, but, more important, as an ideology created and given life through a fabricated and distant “black Other.” While this participant may continue to be “invisible,” as far as not being counted in the census is concerned, his invisibility has the potential of disrupting the process through which “whiteness” is made.

The second immigrant, who positions himself as “white” and as far away as possible from “blackness,” argues for a different location. Rarely interacting with blacks given the location of his business, an ethnic enclave surrounded by a white space, he makes the following statement about blacks:

*Participant 2:* . . . a lot of times, they rob a gas station, they kill the guy, they take the money, they rob the liquor store. You hear and see what is going on, people get killed for the money. And, then, they find out, they get the guy, they catch him, and he is Black.

Clearly, the notion that “whiteness” in the United States is constructed through distancing from “blackness” is neither a historical phenomenon nor one that members of a racialized and beleaguered group shy away from. While racism is by no means an American invention, the negative stereotypes voiced by this immigrant resonate with racial ideologies that are pervasive in American culture, those of “blacks as criminal.” This process of articulating one’s “whiteness” through the fabrication of a racialized, distant “black presence” is intriguing for its reflexive character.<sup>31</sup> The black in the eyes of the “white” Arab *is* the Arab in

31. On the reflexive nature of the “black presence,” see Toni Morrison (1993).

the eyes of “white” America. In a white racial space—Dearborn—to a secondary “Other.”

The old models of assimilation grant identity to an American under scrutiny. Even the most eager suggest that the process has been mainly to African Americans and others. Thus, the assimilation narrative is a migration history that takes its place in the United States. The process was constructed and shaped by the Arab American experience. The writings have contextualized the “whiteness” in the United States.

In this chapter, I argue that the form racial identities is highly visible to Arabs and Muslims in a post-September 11 and complete disillusionment. The process continues to be molded against the backdrop of a precarious position of Arab Americans may not be the same, even in the current political climate.

The objective of this experiment is to understand where Arab Americans fit in the current standpoint that they are not the same. The presence is naturally that of racialization. Thus, it is neither intentional nor accidental. Attracting Arabs from the “white” space to the precarious location Arab Americans

32. This is in reference to the process of racialization to the escalating demonization of the Arab American

the eyes of “white” America. In order for a racialized Arab to become “white” in a white racial space—Dearborn—he would need to project his “Otherness” on to a secondary “Other.”

#### CONCLUSION

The old models of assimilation—which posit a linear evolution from an immigrant identity to an American ethnic identity—have increasingly come under scrutiny. Even the most eager supporters of the assimilation model acknowledge that the process has been made possible to European immigrants and denied to African Americans and other immigrant groups (Alba and Nee 1997, 2003). Thus, the assimilation narrative has contributed to producing a biased immigration history that takes into account neither the effects of racism and racialization in the United States nor the dynamic process through which “whiteness” was constructed and shaped (Roediger 2002). Although some writings on the Arab American experience adopt a race-neutral assimilation paradigm, other writings have contextualized that experience within the history of race and “whiteness” in the United States.

In this chapter, I argued that the process through which Arab immigrants form racial identities is highly subjective and that even the racial marking of Arabs and Muslims in a post-September 11 environment may not lead to a uniform and complete disillusionment with “whiteness.” “Whiteness” is an ideology that continues to be molded against a black “other,” often by members of groups who hold a precarious position on the racial hierarchy. Therefore, the possibility that Arab Americans may not be naturally transforming to nonwhite racial subjects, even in the current political climate, should be left open for exploration.

The objective of this exploration was not to argue for a position in terms of where Arab Americans fit on the racial hierarchy, supporting or opposing the standpoint that they are not treated the way whites are treated so their experience is naturally that of racial minorities and they need to be categorized as such. Thus, it is neither intended to back nor counter lobbying efforts for extracting Arabs from the “white” race category.<sup>32</sup> I propose that any resolution to the precarious location Arab Americans occupy in the racial hierarchy ought to

32. This is in reference to some efforts by Arab American national organizations in response to the escalating demonization of Arabs and Muslims in the United States; see Samhan (1999).

be engaged through a framework that is intended to challenge racial hierarchies, not reinforce them. Nonetheless, the demonizing of Arabs and Muslims, which began well before September 11, 2001, is part of a dynamic process of racialization that ought to be understood in the context of the race history of the United States and, what is more important, challenged.

## Str

*Syrian Immigrants  
and Racialization*

SARAH

MOB IN FLORIDA LYNCHING  
bold-type headline of the *New York Times*.  
The accompanying article described  
killing of "N. G. Romey, white  
chief of police. Other reports  
United States revealed that the  
Fannie, and their children was  
Lake City, Florida.<sup>2</sup> Early in the

An earlier version of this article was  
85. It was first presented at the conference  
organized by Paul Tabar. This text  
Maria Elena Martínez, Theresa M.  
on how to improve the argument.

1. The article appears in *The New York Times*,  
1912–1955, series A, "Anti-Lynching Commissions  
of America, 1987. See also *The New York Times*,  
25, 1929, 1.

2. Although the *Lake City Times* reported the  
May 24, 1929, 1; *Miami Herald*, *Miami News*,  
*Times*, May 18, 1929, 18; *Mentac*,  
persons originating from the lake  
This area included the present sta

