

## Becoming Arab in London



# Becoming Arab in London

Performativity and the  
Undoing of Identity

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# Introduction

In this book I explore the lives of young people born or raised in London to migrants from Arab states and some of the ways in which they ‘do’ or achieve Arabness in London. I argue that Arabness, like all other categorical labels is best understood not as a form of authentic ‘being’ but as repertoires of ‘doing’, achieved through the imperfect repetition of culture over time and space. One is not born an Arab in London, instead Arabness is a process of becoming through acts, enunciations, objects, spaces, bodies and settings like *Shisha* cafes, ‘Arabic nights’, through ‘ethnic self-portraits’, dance and narratives that re-order and re-collect growing up in London.

I consciously choose to think about ‘doing’ and not ‘being’. To look at acts one must accept their implication in both individual agency and determining structures, their instrumentality, temporality and the contingent and indeterminate meanings they generate. Asking what something ‘means’ involves assuming a position of deconstructive *différance*, while asking what something ‘is’ involves authoritative and willing construction. Deconstructive gestures are not, as some tend to assume, a sign of reticence or exasperating postmodern indeterminacy, they are perilous because they question and intrude upon the integrity of ideas that we consider normative, common-sense and sometime sacred.

Treading upon the tenuous space between formal ethnography of the ‘other’ and auto-ethnography, I begin with the personal, not simply as ritual ethnographic reflexivity, but because it provides an opportunity to lay bare the motivations behind this journey and introduce the notion of ‘performativity’ which is central to the analysis I present. My sister, who like myself, was born in London to Egyptian immigrant parents in the late 1970s had run away from home at the age of 24. Her departure was deeply painful for the whole family. There was an overwhelming sense of failure, borne largely by my parents who in my opinion had worked tirelessly and selflessly to raise us. In truth her departure had been a long time coming. She had a difficult journey through childhood and adolescence. The poor decisions and choices she had made were her own, the result of idiosyncratic dispositions and coping strategies; but on other occasions I

watched as she failed to live up to the ideals and expectations of others, which could only have added to her spiralling self-destructiveness. To my discomfort now, I must admit to having taken part in the disapproving glances and remarks. I suppose what that disapproval referred to was a rather common and boring question 'Why couldn't she just be normal like everyone else?' Yet now I find myself wondering why we take such comfort and security from the anonymity that conformity provides? It is after all a wretched reflection of a social and psychological fear that stunts and circumscribes personhood.

A recurring theme throughout our childhood was my sister's failure to master and embody the female, middle-class, Egyptian, Arab and Muslim 'identities' (not necessarily in that order) that she was expected to grow into, or as Butler (1990) following de Beauvoir (1997 [1949]) would described it, she failed 'to do' or 'to become' those things. She was neither passive, feminine or studious enough, nor had she mastered the art of living two lives, one in and one beyond the home and family. She was unable to make those desires, aspirations and behavioural norms her own, ultimately casting her as an anomaly and unintelligible, drawing her into constant conflict with those around her. She had 'gone native' with what, at the time, seemed an incomprehensible and unhealthy appreciation of urban English working-class and Afro-Caribbean cultures, both equally unacceptable and horrifying within the family and the wider 'Egyptian community' in which we lived. The pressure not to make 'mistakes', the feeling of being constantly watched, evaluated, moulded and judged, were exacerbated by her role as a daughter, the symbol of honour, the ultimate measure of whether our parents had successfully raised us despite and in spite of the 'England' that surrounded us. She was of course not alone in her predicament; many others, sometimes quietly and at other times dramatically suffered the same fate.

The preconceived ways of being that had been chosen for my sister consistently eluded her both as performances and perhaps more importantly as aspirations. I recall how she always resisted, with the help of her stubbornly Afro-Semitic hair, my mother's weekly attempts to tame and straighten her wiry locks, to make her appropriately white and presentable in that subconsciously colonised notion of Egyptian femininity. Adding to her failure to perform and embody these roles in a bounded sense was the rejection of her own imperfect performative renditions. My sister's 'failure' to demonstrate convincingly that she was 'playing the same game' had serious implications that led to her estrangement and rejection by members of her family and her peers, giving weight to the argument that

while ethnic boundaries may exist between so-called 'groups', there is 'no axiomatic rule which stipulates that the boundaries of selfhood and self-consciousness are less significant ... than those of the collectivity' (Cohen 1994: 74). Therefore in part what follows in this ethnography is an attempt to draw attention to the nuances and relationships between 'ethnic boundaries' and cultural content in the process of becoming a subject.

After an anguishing few months my sister made contact with my parents. Their relationship had changed irreversibly and for me the rupture in my family life brought questions, I had long asked myself but avoided answering, sharply into focus. I was living in Dubai when she left home; I had left the UK in an attempt to 'return' to an Arab world that I had never left to begin with. Nonetheless I always seemed to see it in those terms. Being born and growing up in London somehow seemed circumstantial, an accident of fate, as if being brought into this world in Hammersmith Hospital was some kind of cosmological mistake which I should spend my life correcting by following my roots deep into the ground to emerge in a redemptive space somewhere hot and dusty like Cairo. While my sister and I were both sent off into London to become Egyptian in all ways, our paths diverged early on. I was more of a conformist than she was. I had my own problems making sense of myself and feeling comfortable in my own skin. I couldn't help feeling that 'we, Arabs' and particularly females born or raised in Britain, were torn between competing ways of life: between the demands of our families and communities on the one hand and the wider society on the other, not being able to live a full life in either one or the other realms or indeed between them. The challenges we faced as the children of immigrants were described to me in books and newspaper articles as 'identity crisis' and 'culture clash', which for a while I was content with as explanations for my sister's plight and to a large extent my own (see Erikson 1968; Thompson 1974; Anwar 1976, 2002; Taylor 1976; Ballard 1979). But it was not long before it became clear how much these explanations took for granted and how little they offered in terms of 'identity' or 'culture'.

In the initial weeks of fieldwork I conducted interviews and informal meetings with 'Arab community representatives'. I attended meetings in Parliament and City Hall ranging from a meet-and-greet with the first 'second-generation British Arab' borough councillor to the meetings of parliamentary lobbying groups like the Council for Arab-British Understanding. These encounters all seemed to be framed within a highly formalised lexicon of local, national and international politics. Community 'leaders' were keen to emphasise the size of the respective national

minority they represented, the strength of their relationships with local councillors or ministers, and the importance of the funding which they had received or were seeking to ensure the continuation of ‘services to the community’. Local councillors stressed the need for more ‘Arabs to get involved in politics’ so that, on the one hand, they would be represented in British politics and, on the other hand, to ensure that Arabs were seen as an integrated and successful migrant community. It seemed that there were many people hailing the ‘Arab community’, calling upon it to play a more active part in the public sphere and to ‘act’ like a community. At the time at least, the ‘Arab community’ itself seemed largely absent, a fact that was often explained as being a cultural problem, a legacy of the repressive political cultures of the Arab states from which these different groups had come. There seemed to be consequences to the absence of the ‘Arab community’ as an active agent on the multicultural playing field. While some of these consequences were economic and political, they were overshadowed by a similar kind of failing as that experienced by my sister, a performative failure. In other words, a failure to *recite* the norm of the ‘ethnic community’ as it is understood in multicultural Britain. Failures in the performative sense, those that fall short of normative ideals through imperfect recitation, play a deeper role in the story of Arabness beyond London and multiculturalism. For generations now, ‘Arabs’ have carried the burden of failing to be themselves somehow, of betraying their glorious civilisational past, of becoming a vassal, occupied, impoverished and enfeebled nation.

Like many others I believed that the problems of the ‘Arab community’ and its constituent ‘communities’ were down to the fact that Arabs were an ‘unrecognised’ and ‘hidden’ ethnic group and, consequently, unsure of their status in Britain. In 2010 the Office of National Statistics (ONS) announced that the categories ‘Arab’ and ‘Gypsy or Irish Travellers’ would be included in the 2011 census. The news was met with ‘full support’ by the Muslim Council of Britain<sup>1</sup> but with consternation by the Sikh Federation which argued, among other things that ‘the Prioritisation Tool’<sup>2</sup> did not indicate any policy or service specific demand or need for including an ‘Arab’ category in the census and that ‘Arab’ had been favoured over ‘Sikh,’ an ‘officially recognised ethnic category,’ as a result of ‘predetermined conclusions’.<sup>3</sup>

Gerd Baumann lucidly argues that Britain’s political culture:

encourages so-called minorities to strive for emancipation as if they were sports teams: They are approached as so-called ‘communities,’

and politicians, the media and almost everybody else thinks of them as tightly knit ‘cultural groups’ held together by the same traditions, value systems, and history. It is perfectly clear that this is not true; but this is the misperception under which they must hope to achieve civil emancipation, as well as the misperception under which British state elites try to ‘help’ them. (1999: 76)

As George Yúdice argues ‘there is no point in blaming the victims who wield identitarian politics; instead our attention must be focused on the politics and structures that feed its reproduction’ (2003: 49). ‘Foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and subsequently, political action to be taken’ (Butler 1990: 181).

I cannot recall or identify a time where I had decided that ‘ethnic identity’ or ‘ethnic community’ were important; they seem to have been notions that had always been there. It could be that I gradually acquired this high regard for ethnicity by virtue of living in London, a city that is aggressively promoted as multicultural but which is silently fixated with ethnicity which is always ‘under erasure’<sup>4</sup> (Derrida 1988, 2001; see also Kramvig 2005). It was perhaps the initial acceptance of the self-evident nature of ethnic categories and ethnic groups which entangled me in an all too simplistic routine of labelling, reducing and reifying differentiated experiences under convenient ethnic labels and the formal frameworks of state population management (Foucault 2000). The state is not alone in believing that social conviviality is achieved through what I understand as ‘ethnonormative’ nomenclature, which sits just as comfortably with the delusions of those who continue to believe, as a Sudanese parent in his early 40s put it to me, that he had raised his children in London ‘100 per cent Sudanese’.

While people consistently demonstrate an ability to overcome the illusions of nationality, race and cultural incommensurability by loving, living, eating, dressing, reading and listening across these false boundaries, structures of subjection and institutional power demand that the multifarious identifications that people enact be distilled into discrete labels. The logic of the international nation-state system has sought to subject people to its restrictive terms of reference, like the pervasive image of a world political atlas depicting ‘yellow, green, pink, orange and blue countries composing a truly global map with no vague or “fuzzy spaces” and no bleeding boundaries’ (Tambiah 1985: 4; Trinh 1989: 94, in Malikki 1992).

I aim to make deconstructive gestures towards the discourses that produce the problematic ‘Arab [and/in/of] London’. At the heart of these binaries are nationalism and the sedentary logic of the state which proclaim that the dweller is positively assessed in relation to the migrant wanderer, who is seen at best as a distortion and at worst a threat (Clifford, 1997). ‘Sedentarist assumptions about attachment to place lead some to define displacement not as a fact of socio-political and economic contexts, but rather as an inherent pathological characteristic of the displaced’ (Malikki 1992: 33). Migrants carry with them the cultural and psychic paraphernalia of ‘arboreal origin’ to new contexts, ripe with the logic of boundedness.<sup>5</sup> The favouring of fixity over mobility, of ‘roots over routes’, relies upon conventional modes of subjectivity that constrain the possibilities of subjecthood within rigid and exclusionary boundaries (Gilroy 2000a; D’Andréa 2006).

The persistence of these foundationalist discourses is not simply the result of the messy world outside rational and empirical academia. As Baumann argues, the study of ethnicity routinely acknowledges the complexity of ‘identities’: yet when it comes to empirical studies of ethnicity, most students are given (or chose) topics such as ‘The Turks in Berlin’, ‘The Berbers in Paris’, ‘The Sikhs in New York’, or, in my case, ‘The Arabs in London’. ‘The focus is on national, ethnic, or religious minorities as if anyone could know in advance how this minority is bounded and which processes proceed inside and which outside that assumed community’ (1999: 145).

It is here that I would like to distance myself from the notion of *identity*, a term which today ‘now either stands for too much or too little’ bearing an awkward theoretical burden (Brubaker 2006: 37–40). Judith Butler (1993, 2004) replaces the notion of ‘gender identity’ with the notion of ‘gender performativity’, arguing that gender is not an essence but always ‘a doing’ that produces the gendered subject. I will attempt to argue that Butler’s approach to gender and performativity are an appropriate basis on which to think about the ways in which ethnicities are conceived and played out in settings like London. Like gender, the structures and social consequences of ‘race’, ethnicity, culture and identity are inherently discursive and performative, being the result of the ‘stylized repetition of acts through time’ (Butler 1990: 140). Butler’s description of the ways in which ‘the performance of gender produces the effect of an organising principle – an identity – that appears to cause [the] behaviour’ (1990: 140) can, I believe, be used to understand ethnicity, culture and identity (and their progenitor ‘race’) in contemporary Britain.

My central argument is that there is theoretical proximity in the processes of being ‘raced’ and ‘gendered’ as I present them in this ethnography. I do not seek to subordinate or understate other intersecting processes of subjection like class, which I incorporate in my reading but which may require far more consideration than I am able to give it here. My task is to counter-expose the hegemonic norms of ‘being raced’ (making and being made an ‘Arab’) and ‘being gendered’ (making and being made into, an ‘Arab wo/man’) and how these are informed by class in London. Looking at what it means ‘to do’ Arabness in London provides opportunities to look at the underlying normative and psychical structures that inform the doing of ‘ethnicity’ in a particular setting.

To my knowledge, this book is the first detailed ethnography of the cultural practices of Arab Londoners. Rather than filling me with confidence this claim fills me with foreboding. How will the subjects of this book, ‘Arab Londoners’, take to the fact that my approach is unconcerned with showing them to be a ‘successful minority’ or a legitimate ‘ethnic group’ with a project of cultural preservation? How will readers in the Arab world react to the way I question the existence of any *a priori* essence which might constitute ‘Arab womanhood’ or ‘Arab manhood’? Or my reliance and advocacy of the work of Judith Butler, whose scholarship will no doubt be eclipsed by the labels which precede her – ‘American’, ‘Jewish’, ‘Lesbian’. Abu-Lughod describes this as the multiple binds when one writes for other, mostly ‘western’ anthropologists, but at the same time is identified with and accountable to an ‘Arab’ audience both in the diaspora and the ‘Arab world’. Writing with these considerations in mind involves a ‘complex awareness of and investment in reception ... [to which] there are no easy solutions’ (1991: 142). I expect that some will see fit to cast me as a heretic, one of those Arabs from the diaspora who has been tainted by western thought, whose being has been ruptured by dislocation from the cosmological certainties of my ‘culture of origin’. It is only the open space of double-critique and *tajawwuz* (transcendence), introduced to me so lucidly by Tarik Sabry (2010, 2011), that provides me with the thinking space or identification to make the claims in this book. It is in this marginal intellectual movement within Arab Cultural Studies that I place this work, and to which I address it.

Anthropology and ethnography cause me to assume an instinctively defensive posture, the former for reasons of postcolonial suspicion, the latter for postmodern concerns over representation. In response I adopt auto-ethnography as ‘both a method and a text’ (Reed-Danahay 1997: 5). While I assert here that I am doing auto-ethnography, sometimes

described as ‘anthropology at home’, I am inconveniently neither western nor native and remain uncommitted about what or where ‘home’ is. I find the most useful description of this textual movement to be that offered by Marilyn Strathern, who sees auto-anthropology as ‘anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it’ (1987: 17).

Fieldwork quickly confronted me with the folly of assuming that my belonging to the ‘Arabs of London’ was uncontested or unproblematic; there are few assurances based on a shared urban geography, ‘ethnicity’, language or religion. The presumption of familiarity, of being with ‘my people’ or in ‘my city’ was supported by some interactions and shattered by others. We are always only ever members of a group in passing. The streets, settings, people and practices that I considered familiar were often given new and unanticipated meaning through the discourses and practices of others. The idea that a person has grown up discretely ‘inside’ an ‘ethnic community’ or even in ‘London’ overlooks the fragmentation of the city and the way in which people’s perceptions and identifications shift over a life course, to say nothing of the effects of class, politics, language, education, religion and nationality on the construction of insider and outsidersness.

The adoption of auto-ethnography as a methodological stance allows me to make sense of the entangled voices of self and others that produce ethnography. Because auto-ethnography has come to represent so many approaches, some of them very autobiographical, it is important to be clear on how auto-ethnography is used and understood in this book (see Heider 1975; Hayano 1979; Brandes 1982; Strathern 1987; Denzin 1989; Lejeune 1989; Deck 1990; Pratt 1992; Van Maanen 1995; Reed-Danahay 1997). Saying that I use auto-ethnography does not mean that the ‘data’ lies between my ears, but that I acknowledge that as a participant and an observer I am visible, interacting, affecting and being affected. I consider auto-ethnography to be a co-production, where participants make themselves and their personal experiences available to a researcher who is affected and affects the nature of the narratives and experiences shared with her/him, and attempts to represent these and orientate them to address theory.

The most progressive aspect of auto-ethnography is its attitude towards affect and emotion. My early attempts to hide my emotional investment and interest in this research were challenged primarily by participants themselves, who often turned the tables on me and asked searching and personal questions. Auto-ethnography, as a broad reflexive textual movement, encourages researchers to treat the feelings of participants



as of equal importance and relevance to their own, and to include their own emotions and experiences in the overall ethnographic representation. 'Applying anthropological research to selves and others ... problematises the essentialising of both' (Aull-Davies 1999: 34), and the task of producing a truly reflexive ethnography that accounts for the dynamics of interaction, apply to all anthropologists, regardless of their presumed or assumed position.

I set out to find people aged between 18 and 40 living in London with an 'Arab' background. Initially I had considered focusing exclusively on those born in Britain. However, I found that many of the people I met had been born or partly raised in the Middle East or North Africa. In many families there were siblings born in Britain while others were born abroad. Although the idea of being British-born and notions of 'second generation' had been important to the way that I had thought about the research in its early stages, I quickly put this concern to one side. This does not suggest that country of birth should be entirely discounted in terms of its potential meanings to some. Indeed, for many people with little actual experience of the countries their parents had migrated from, being born in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo or Kuwait represented a key connection to their Arabness. However, in terms of how people socialised within this age range I could find no guarantees in the sociological typology of 'first' and 'second' generations, or the idea that being born in Britain might make you more British or Arab than someone who was born abroad.

When I went looking for young Arabs at the beginning of my fieldwork I found them almost exclusively in social settings like restaurants, *Shisha* cafes, parties and gatherings in particular locales. '*Shisha* cafes' seemed to act as nodal points in the city's landscape, providing day-to-day spaces where people could socialise. Cafe sociability (which I discuss in chapter 3) gave an everyday dimension to my fieldwork interactions. *Shisha* cafes were settings where I could hear different dialects in interaction, where different customs, mores and sensibilities were played out, and where weekends and holidays were planned, job interviews and exams discussed, football matches and wars watched, and the monotony of daily routines eased by smoking *Shisha*, playing card games and exchanging gossip. I soon found myself moving from interviewing people or hanging out in cafes to joining in with different social activities. According to who I was with this could range from a university Arabic Society dinner or evenings out at restaurants, bars and nightclubs. These settings offered remarkably

rich insights on the ways in which people expressed their ethnicity, class and gender (discussed in chapter 4). I also consider some of the ways in which young Arabs in London choose to represent themselves visually in ethnic self-portraits, the subject of chapter 5.

Even though I followed participants to the venues and settings that they socialised in, for many there was a disconnect between what happened in these places and the idea that it reflected 'Arabness' or indeed the material of social research. At the heart of this unease was the notion that I was researching 'Arab identity in London', which seems automatically to have the politics of multiculturalism as its vector, so that the task of 'representing' Arabs appropriately should only involve research on formal community structures and the political projects of integration or ethnogenesis. In contrast, I argue that what we should ask ourselves is 'How is Arabness done in London?' However unserious these settings may appear to some, my fieldwork was not determined by idealised notions of studying an 'ethnic community', a notion I was quite attached to at the outset, but by following the way that people embellish day-to-day settings, activities, objects and identifications with meanings which allude to their fantasies of a 'centre point' or 'identity' (Abu-Lughod 1991; Baudrillard 1996; Clifford 1997; Dürrschmidt 1997; Hastrup and Fog Olwig 1997).

Interviews were naturally an important part of my fieldwork; I found that repeat in-depth and largely unstructured interviews were the richest. I was often struck by the emotional potential that interviews and relationships with 'participants' could generate. Recollections of discrimination at school, difficult family relationships, or multiple dislocations and migrations were often deeply moving and emotional for the narrator and of course reminded me of my own reasons for undertaking the research. Listening to the narratives of growing up in London (chapter 2) and sharing in the lives of others over an extended period of time was a deeply personal privilege, generating fragments of meaning and relationships far beyond a strictly scientific framing of fieldwork.

Since the early 1990s a small body of British research on different 'Arab' migrant groups and 'Arab migrations' as a whole has emerged (see Searle and Shaif 1991; Karmi 1991, 1994, 1997, 2005; Halliday 1992; Al-Rasheed 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996; Lawless, 1995; Nagel 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Singer 2002; Al-Ali 2007; Nagel and Staeheli 2008a, 2008b).<sup>6</sup> While this literature is extremely valuable we are still left knowing very little about Arab migration to Britain or how and why London became popularly described as *Asimat al-Arab* (the capital city of the Arabs). I therefore