

## **Identity and Art: A Reflection on “The Arabs: An American Story”**

By Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah

We had been talking a bit when Ghada, a mid-50 year-old Syrian-American woman asked me “What are you?” I smiled. This was not the first time during my research with the Syrian-Lebanese community in Atlanta, Georgia that someone had inquired about my own ethnic heritage. I learned early on that “American” was not a sufficient answer to satisfy most and usually the person would inquire further. I explained to Ghada, as I had explained to numerous others before her, that I identified as “Italian” and that it was my mother’s family that had “come over”. She nodded her head slowly but still didn’t quite seem completely satisfied with my answer. She asked more specifically about where in Italy my family was from. I replied that they had come from Sicily, Palermo to be exact. At this, her face warmed, “Ah!” She smiled, “You know, the Arabs have a long history in the Mediterranean, you may even have an Arab in your history!” She had found our tenuous connection. This bit of information seemed to mean a great deal more to Ghada than to myself. It was like she knew something that I did not. What was even more interesting though, is that most of time I encountered a situation like the one with my friend Ghada, the other person seemed to identify and approve of my ethnic heritage. It was a small but important thread that connected me, an outsider to a community that was actively in the process of preserving and promoting their ethnic heritage.

“The Arabs: An American Story”,<sup>1</sup> symposium and exhibit, was a project born out of work done investigating constructions of identity, particularly constructions of Arab-American identity, utilizing arts-based perspectives. The project was supported by the Applied Cultural Research Project in the Department of Anthropology and Geography and the Middle East Center for Peace, Culture and Development (now the Middle East Institute) at Georgia State University, the Georgia Humanities Council and the Atlanta International Museum. Presented over a six-month period from April 2001 until September 2001, the project was founded on the belief that there is conflict amongst representations of Arabs and Arabic identity in mainstream American society. The goal of this project was twofold: first, to offer an opportunity to those identifying as “Arab-American” to present their culture and community in a manner directed from within the community itself and second, in presenting this cultural project, to strengthen the ethical and civic ties between Arab-Americans and mainstream American culture by encouraging dialogue. In this way, the public was engaged in learning and discussion about people of Arabic heritage by highlighting the history and culture of Arab-Americans through a symposium and museum exhibition created by Arab-Americans. The symposium featured several speakers, discussions and demonstrations focusing on the history and popular culture of the Arab American community in Atlanta, Georgia. Lecture and demonstration topics, along with speakers, were provided by the local community. The second part of this project, the exhibit, was unique in that the items for display as well as the subject matter covered in the exhibit were chosen by members of the community. “Heritage items” such as clothing, crafts and photos were donated and on loan from the local Arab American community. Both the symposium and exhibit successfully met their goals of highlighting the rich cultural heritage of the Arab-American community. Appearing in numerous local publications including the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, Atlanta Now Magazine, Creative Loafing, Where Atlanta Magazine and Museums and Galleries Atlanta to include Saudi ARAMCO World Magazine, the events also heightened audience awareness and engaged the public in discussion about social and political issues surrounding this community.

Sixteen years later, in 2017, this may not seem like a new or novel project, particularly post-9/11 and in light of current conversations about the influx of Syrian refugees to the United State and the efforts of humanitarian organizations to inform and encourage the acculturation of these “new Americans”. However, the unique feature of this project was the direct involvement of members of the Arab-American community in Atlanta, Georgia, USA utilizing arts-based perspectives. The scholarly literature on art,

conflict resolution and peace-building invite us to delve deeper into the artistic products found within any given culture as they can help us understand negotiated identities as they manifest themselves in shared consciousness and as collective action (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 7).<sup>2</sup> The literature demonstrates that art is a unique place to gain insight into the emotions, ideas and histories that inform and influence. “The interpretation of history, art and culture is different,” notes Anne D’Alleva, “they express such a wide range of human ideas and experiences that there is no one result to seek. Each person, each generation, each culture reinterprets artworks, finding in them new significance... But when we’re talking about interpreting the past, or interpreting cultural practice, it’s not a question of right and wrong but of looking for insight” (D’Alleva 2012: 11).<sup>3</sup> With the direct involvement from the community, the project hoped to create space for education as well as exchange, but in a manner directed by the Arab-American community itself. More interestingly, this project revealed a definition of Arab-American that presents some interesting places to consider the role of culture within conflict and designations of ethnic identity. The project began with a very inclusive definition of “Arab-American” that simply designated any migrant who was now living and working in the United States with the intention of setting up permanent residence as well as those who self-identified as “Arab-American”. Drawing also from a shared linguistic and cultural basis, “Arab American” broadly referred to those from an Arabic speaking homeland as well as American-born descendants of such a person. Predominantly of Syrian and Lebanese heritage, the community included local groups who participated in the project like the Alif Institute, the Arab American Women’s Society of Georgia, Arab American Fund of Georgia, and the Georgia Chapter of the Arab Anti Discrimination Committee.

Anthropologist, Kevin Avruch’s work on culture, ethnic conflict, and identity further advises that any work should take time to clearly distinguish differences between the concepts of culture and ethnicity, insofar as they both socially constructed categories (Avruch 2008: 172).<sup>4</sup> Avruch points out, “The key point here is that social categories such as ethnicity, race, or nationality have a peculiar relationship to culture. They are culture ‘objectified’, projected publicly, and resourcefully deployed by actors for political purposes” (Avruch 2008: 172). Understanding this, “The Arabs: An American Story” was founded on the supposition that meaning making on the part of the actors within any given conflict scenario, in this case, the negotiation of an ethnic, sub-culture identity, is the site for those socially and situationally formulated set of interpretive frameworks to intersect and to, potentially, conflict. The museum setting and pieces of material culture presented there, then, became a way of tapping in to and revealing the unconscious “stuff” of culture. In this manner, this community of Arab-Americans were able to utilize the museum setting for the promotion of a particular definition of “Arab-American” and exert some control over how that representation was formed.

In 2001, this project found that a select group of predominately educated, middle to upper middle class Syrian and Lebanese immigrants from predominately Christian backgrounds and who had immigrated to the United States in the mid-to later portion of the twentieth century. They were uniquely situated within their groups to direct and mold a particular image of Arab-Americanness. This image reflected their own demographic, placed special importance on the role of women, and highlighted the relative affluence of the overall group. At the time, that representation often underrepresented refugees, Muslims, and lower socio-economic groups. It also seemed to speak directly to the proliferation of negative stereotypes of the Arab Middle East and the perception by “Americans” about Arabs.

Identity politics or the stuff of culture? “Understanding the concept of *culture* is a crucial prerequisite for effective conflict analysis and resolution”, states Kevin Avruch (2008: 167). Of course, immediately following a discussion on the place of museums and material culture in “The Arabs: An American Story”, one might suspect that a discussion of the place of culture in the analysis of identity and conflict may be a conversation about, as Raymond Williams put it, “culcha” or “high” art, superior knowledge refinement, or “taste” (1983: 92).<sup>5</sup> Indeed not. However, “culture” as a concept is rather complex. For this discussion, we will define “culture” in the way that cultural anthropologists have defined the concept, as “a system of knowledge, beliefs and patterns of behaviors that are created, learned, and shared by a group of people”

(Guest 2014: 35-36).<sup>6</sup> Culture then includes shared norms, values, and symbols, as well as mental maps of reality and structures of power. Our understanding of the world is shaped, reinforced, and challenged through culture (Guest 2014). In utilizing such a definition of “culture”, it must be pointed out that this research views “culture” as being both socially learned and inherited. However, as Avruch further points out, “definitions of culture tend to proliferate and contend with one another” (2008: 168). Avruch finds that definitions of “culture” such as the anthropologically derived one that is being used for this research does not address notions of cultural homogeneity (culture as all one thing), cultural stability (culture is timeless) or cultural singularity (culture is characterized by a single trait) (2008: 168-169). Our definition of “culture” must then, be supplemented to include four other important observations, namely that: culture is plural and an individual may possess several “cultures” at any given point in their lives; individuals in societies are distributed across many sorts of social groupings and any complex society is very likely “multicultural”; culture is psychologically distributed within individuals across a population and members of the same social grouping do not internalize cultural representations equally; culture is derivative and is to some extent always situational, flexible and responsive to the demands of the worlds that individuals confront (Avruch 2008: 168-169). In short, “culture” is socially learned and shared, plural, distributed across social groupings and derivative.

How then, does the utilization of an arts-based perspective, such as a museum exhibition help us to understand identity and those intersections of race, gender and class that create the potential for conflict? Because of their elicitive nature, arts-based perspectives allow for the sharing of cultural knowledge that both describes and aids the understanding of the process of conflict. Much of the literature demonstrates the effectiveness of arts-based perspectives for the mediation and understanding of conflict in a manner that is elicitive and also culturally appropriate. Though the arts do indeed offer unique tools for understanding conflict, arts-based perspectives remain underutilized in peace-building. The question remains, why bring art to the study of identity and conflict? Considering the literature on art and conflict, it seems that there is an implicit understanding among these authors that it is critical to the peace-building process for peace-builders to work within the culture, thereby eliciting cultural knowledge from participants that will impact and shape the peace-building work to come. However, what is less articulated is the fact that peace-builders working with arts-based perspectives regularly trade in the currency of culture itself. While this may seem to be self-evident, it is an important fact that is not often made explicit. Art is both created and received (Guest 2014:659). Art, as an expressive cultural outlet, is both created and perceived within a system of power relationships that intersect at points of race, class, sexuality and economics. Herein lies the unique value of arts-based perspectives for understanding conflict. Art is a dynamic engagement with the very building blocks of culture, making that which is unconscious, conscious (Guest 2014: 675). Arts-based perspectives deal in those particular aspects of a culture where human beings express themselves creatively and interact meaningfully through the visual, written, movement and aural arts (Guest 2014: 658). Put differently, peace-builders working in and with the arts understand the importance of meaning making within a culture and how that meaning translates into ideas and behaviors, and how all of those things combine to, potentially, produce moments of conflict such as misrepresentations of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Cockrell, Autumn. 2002. "The Arabs: An American Story", Master's Thesis, Georgia State University.

<sup>2</sup> Brubaker, Rogers & Cooper, Fredrick. (2000). Beyond "Identity" in *Theory and Society*, 29: 1-47.

<sup>3</sup> D'Alleva, Anne. (2012). *Methods and Theories of Art History* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd.

<sup>4</sup> Avruch, Kevin. (2008). Culture. In Cheldelin, Sandra, Daniel Duckman and Larissa Fast (Eds.) *Conflict*. New York Continuum.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, Raymond. (1983). *Keywords*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Guest, Kenneth J. (2014). *Cultural Anthropology: A Toolkit for a Global Age*. New York Norton.