

Conclusion

Alix Naff and the Parenthetical Syrian American Lesbian

The research and legacy of Alix Naff is threaded throughout this book, providing invaluable source material, as well as bearing the brunt of some of my critique of Arab American scholars who recuperated the peddler as a respectable figure. Eulogized as the “mother” and “grande dame” of Arab American studies, Naff had an incalculable impact on the field.¹ Her archival collection remains a centerpiece of early Arab American primary source materials. This collection, which Naff donated to the Smithsonian in 1984, contains 500 artifacts, 450 oral history interviews, and more than 2,000 photographs, as well as the personal papers of individuals and organizations, magazine and newsletter clippings, and a wealth of other manuscripts and publications on Arab Americans. Naff procured the bulk of its contents in the course of conducting oral history interviews with first- and second-generation Syrian Americans from this early history.

These oral histories are most prominently featured in Naff’s book, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, which also provides the most comprehensive social history of the Syrian American peddling experience. *Becoming American* is at once Naff’s scholarly intervention and a community narrative. The tensions between these narrative pulls are evident throughout her book, as well as in the primary source materials that inform it. Some of those tensions—particularly between presenting a respectable story of the Arab immigrant as modern and probing the more complex, disconcerting, and even violent dimensions of existing as an Arab in the United States—I have explored here in *Possible Histories*. The queer ecology of Syrian American peddling is one site through which those tensions are abundantly visible.

Throughout the journey to produce this book, I “found” an Arab American queer subject in only one instance. More concrete than a rumor, archivally

speaking, the evidence, as provided by Naff and examined here by me, nonetheless feels like a whisper.

By the summer of 1962, Naff had a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, and took off to travel the United States and Canada in her blue Volkswagen Beetle.² She was "armed with a history degree . . . , a tape recorder, and a grant from the university's Folklore Department."³ During that summer, Naff interviewed eighty-seven first- and second-generation Syrian Americans and Syrian Canadians in sixteen communities about their life histories. Almost two decades later, after she completed a PhD in history, a National Endowment for the Humanities grant allowed Naff to expand this endeavor into a major project, which formed the basis for her book.

In one of these 1962 interviews, Naff sat down with her half sister, Wedad Frenn, who had come to the United States from Rachaya Al-Wadi in 1921, when she was six years old. Wedad's father was a peddler, and Wedad and her mother learned to embroider pillowcases and make dust caps for him to sell. Around 1930, the family moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana, and opened a grocery store. Fort Wayne was a peddling hub where her father had many friends who were, like him, also from Rachaya. Thus, although most of the family was unhappy in Fort Wayne, Wedad's father enjoyed this place with its familiar faces. Naff's interview notes from this session contain (to my knowledge) the single instance of an Arab American lesbian from this history. Naff wrote that Wedad's father—who was also Naff's father—often gathered in the store with his old peddling friends and retold old stories—and she says that "especially one woman (a Lesbian) kept the group together—like a leader—she was very respected."⁴ Given that the anxieties regarding peddler sexuality, and queerness specifically, were most visible in discussions of Syrian peddling men, the mention of a lesbian who was hanging out with her old, male peddling buddies—and was their "leader" to boot—is striking.

Because these were Naff's notes and not transcripts, I cross-referenced them with audio from Naff's interview with her half sister. Both the interview notes and the interview were in English. I wanted to see if the recording gave any indication of how Naff gleaned this parenthetical knowledge. In the recording, Naff and Wedad indeed discussed how Wedad's father liked to gather with this group of people. Wedad said that there was "one particular woman that used to really keep them going. She [clears throat] was everybody's friend. She was in their clique. [Naff speaking; audio unclear] Hmm? Of course, Dad enjoyed the association there, but not the rest of us."⁵ From there, the interview continued with no further mention of this woman or any clue as to how Naff might have determined that she was a lesbian.

Both promise and excitement lie in this bit of archival material, as do confusion and doubt. Was this information gossip, or was it something that the person in question embraced and shared with others? Given the half-sibling relationship

between Naff and Wedad, and given Naff's intimate knowledge of Syrian American communities, it is plausible that Naff had other knowledge of this woman, beyond what was shared in this interview. Naff was raised in the same family as Wedad; and Faris Naff, Wedad's father, who spent time with this person, was also Naff's father. Alixa Naff had lived in Fort Wayne for a few months during this time, so she may have known this woman directly. Perhaps in the indecipherable moment where Naff speaks, she is confirming the identity of the woman in question. I am also intrigued by the capitalization of "Lesbian" here and—given her propensity to use both Arabic and English in her notes—by Naff's use of the English word rather than attempting any equivalent in Arabic. In this pre-Stonewall moment in 1962 in the United States, was Naff signaling (or revealing) here her knowledge of the burgeoning gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements? Was Naff naming "Lesbian" as an identity in its own right and purposely avoiding Arabic or English terms that were derogatory? Without further evidentiary recourse, we are, of course, left only to imagine these things.

Throughout *Possible Histories*, I show how gossip, as a form of community self-policing, disciplined Syrian immigrants and their descendants to uphold norms of white heteropatriarchy as evidence of their modernity. In contrast to this power of gossip and to the rumor about my great-grandfather with which I open this book, Naff's parenthetical Lesbian can serve as a refutation and resignification of community self-policing. As a woman who remained unmarried all her life, pursuing a social and professional path that contrasted with those of many of her peers, Naff herself surely experienced the disciplinary mechanisms of *kalam al-nas* (what will the people say?). Even though this anecdote is minimized within the archival collection, Naff offers here the promise of a place for queer Arab Americans and others whose desires and intimate lives did not accord with the disciplinary mechanisms of white heteronormativity. This place lives on within the community record, rather than through the internalized shame of rumor.

A queer affective method of historical-grounded imagining is vital to the work that we need to do for historical knowledge production. This imaginative practice pushes the limitations of how historical records have been produced and curated and how historical evidence has been defined. It helps us recognize those limitations, because imagining beyond these boundaries enables us to see what the historical records do not tell us. To imagine critically and historically, however, does not fully redress these archival limitations. I hope I have shown through this book that such knowledge is fundamentally partial and incomplete. But, even so, in this case, it is no longer formed through heteronormativity and its imbrication with white supremacy and Eurocentric discourses of modernity. Rather than attempting to complete that knowledge or be satisfied with filling in the gaps, we must think expansively; we must go beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and the separations between the imaginative and the scholarly. Such thinking depends on

shrinking the facile boundaries between truth and fiction, particularly through the identification and uses of narrative in historical knowledge production.

I also hope to have shown that this queer affective method of historical-grounded imagining is both situated and embodied. To imagine beyond the evidence of archives forces an acknowledgment of a relationship between the researcher and the historical past and its actors. To be sure, this relationship is always present, but historical-grounded imagining brings it to the surface. When I engage in historicist scholarship, I bring my own desires and body into the research project, and that has to be negotiated. For scholars who understand themselves as disconnected personally from their research or from the communities they study, that negotiation is often suppressed—but it is present nonetheless, even as those scholars present themselves and their research as objective. A situated and embodied imagining is produced through one's own presence in the world. How else do we conceive of these possibilities but through our own imagination, grounded in our mediated experiences of the world and our limited knowledge of the past?

Dina Georgis identifies the story as a method of social inquiry in which “we narrate the past, seek and transmit knowledge, and imagine our future.”⁶ I argue that, whereas Georgis focuses on works of fiction, these elements are always present in scholarly narratives of history as well. Georgis is interested in “the invisible matter of history” that is “unspeakable, hard to name, and queer because [it is] dangerous and disruptive.”⁷ We can see efforts to articulate the “unspeakable matter” of these early Syrian American imbrications with white supremacy and the discourses of modernity through several recent works of fiction, including Ismail Khalidi's unpublished play “Dead Are My People,” Cheryl Reid's novel *As Good as True* (2018), and Zeyn Joukhader's novel *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020). Joukhader's novel is especially significant for its explorations of the many ways migration and the queer ecology of peddling opened new possibilities for queer sexual encounters and living beyond the gender binary. These works of fiction remind me of Georgis's provocation that “in fiction, history is granted the space to mourn.”⁸ Rather than taking this remark as a call to abandon the work of history for fiction, I draw on this provocation as a way to push at the boundaries of historical knowledge making. *Possible Histories* meditates broadly on the queer possibilities of Arab American history. It serves as an incomplete and partial invitation to ask what further possibilities of our history exist.