Internalized Arab diasporic identity: revisiting the Duboisian double-consciousness

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This article explores how the notion of double-consciousness peculiar to the African dispersion is not distant from the condition of most Arabs in diaspora. Arguably, it is similarly creolized as a syncretic product of continuous historical, cultural and linguistic processes, and is correspondingly an immediate consequence of the advent of the colonized world. Although connections with the Arab ties, whether emotional or cultural, vary largely, the politicized aspect of double-consciousness remains salient. This article examines internalized personality formation and the process of forming ethno-cultural identity within the Arab diasporic community through the Duboisian narrative of double-consciousness.

Keywords: double-consciousness; Arab diaspora; ethnicity; Du Bois; second generation

Introduction

Drawing on Hatem Bazian’s conceptualization of Du Bois’ notion of ‘double-consciousness’ as a way to examine Islam today (Bazian 2004, 2013), this paper explores how double-consciousness represents the way Arabs tend to perceive self-identification and negotiate identity in diaspora. Bazian argues that ‘double-consciousness’ becomes an enforced mindset, which ‘creates a Muslim identity that is constantly at odds with the “true” self that has to be suppressed because the world it belonged to no longer exists, and only traces of negations are allowed to persist’ (Bazian 2013). In this context, Arab identities in diaspora, subject to racial profiling (Abraham, Howell, and Shryock 2011), are constructed to be similar to those of the colonized subjects. In effect, Arabs in diaspora are subjected to a process of internalization in which their ethnic diasporic identity becomes informed by animosity, resentment and insurmountable difference.

The Arabs and their diasporic history

According to Maxime Rodinson, there are certain conditions that constitute who is an Arab and what is an Arab country. These conditions are geographical, ethnic and linguistic in nature: ‘The countries that fulfill all these conditions constitute a coherent group extending across the whole of North Africa, the Arabian peninsula, and the western part of Asia’, incorporating ‘some 150 million citizens and cover[ing] an
area of about 13 million square kilometers’ (Rodinson 1981, 4–5). Defining who Arabs are in terms of negation might also be useful:

Iranians, Afghans, Turks, and Pakistanis are not Arabs. Although these groups are predominantly Muslim, a commonality they share with Arabs, each of them is culturally and linguistically distinct, with its own artistic traditions. Even within the geographical Arab world, there are non-Arab ethnic communities: Berbers, Kurds, Armenians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Circassians. (Salaita 2011, 9)

The Arabic language, on the other hand, ‘is an independent language within the Semitic language group’ (Rodinson 1981, 5). In his The Arabs: Journey Beyond the Mirage (1987), David Lamb speaks of how the definition of Arab is hard to pinpoint and defines an Arab as a person ‘who speaks Arabic’, and yet the problem of definition persists: ‘The real Arab comes from one of the thirteen tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, but what about the millions who don’t? Most Arabs are Muslim, but what of the six million Egyptians Coptic Christians?’ (Lamb 1987, 12). In this debatable perspective, the Arabic language itself becomes a deciding factor:

The Arabic language itself, by contrast, has a single word, arabi, an attributive adjective derived from what must be one of the earliest words in the history of language, arab, a collective noun that was originally used to describe the nomadic peoples of the central regions of what is now the Arabian Peninsula. Quite how far back the existence of the arab can be traced is difficult to say, but a group called the ‘ar-ba-a’ are cited as components of an army in cuneiform inscriptions dating from as early as 853 BC. (Allen 2000, 11)

In this context, language, ‘Arabi’, becomes a defining force that describes the geographical and ethnic origin of Arabs in general.

The Arabs became known to the world as they enjoyed a golden age with the rise of Islam:

In the early years of the seventh century of the Common Era, the road opened wide to Islam for world conquest […] the Arabs accomplished the greatest revolution in power, religion, culture, and wealth in history – all of which made Europe Europe. (Lewis 2008, 3)

However, Samir Kassir argues that apart from the glory of the golden age of Arab-Muslim civilizations, ‘there was a time, not so very long ago, when Arabs could look to the future with optimism’ (Kassir 2006, xii). Kassir refers to the ‘cultural renaissance of the nineteenth century, the famous nahda, [which] illuminated many Arab societies with modernity’ (xii). And yet, Kassir wonders, ‘what checked this momentum? […] How did we become so stagnant?’ He argues that this state ‘still makes us believe that we have no future other than that proposed by a morbid fundamentalism. How has a living culture become discredited and its members united in a cult of misery and death?’ (xiii). Although most of Kassir’s concerns are about Arabs in the Arab world, his concerns resonate with the Arabs in the diaspora who have been often disassociated from their living culture and were linked to that of fundamentalism and death.

The history of Arabs in diaspora can be viewed in terms of historical waves of immigrants. The first wave (1880–1924) consisted of Arabs who emigrated from Syria and Palestine, which were then part of the Ottoman Empire. They were
‘predominantly Christian’ with ‘a few Druze […] and fewer Muslim’ (Boosahda 2003, xii). This early phase is characterized by a strong urge for assimilation. The dire need to become American was an inevitable sentiment to secure social acceptance. The second wave of Arab immigrants began arriving after the Second World War: ‘Unlike the first wave, which was predominantly Christian, the new wave contained a significant number of Muslims. This second wave of immigrants consisted of educated, skilled professionals, who […] staunchly identified themselves as Arabs’ (Ludescher 2006, 94). Unlike most Arab-American newcomers, who were, to a large extent, part of an immigration wave, Arab immigrants in Britain were graduate students on scholarships (Al Maleh 2009, 14). Wail Hussan observes differences between the history of Arabs in the United States and that in Britain, in terms of the colonial British heritage, in contrast to the American immigration laws that regulated and facilitated the arrival of waves of Arab immigrants (Hassan 2011, 14). Generally, the second wave of Arab immigrants is marked less by religious flair than by ideological temperament.

A cluster of political upheavals started the spark for the third wave of immigration. The Lebanese civil war of the 1970s and 1980s increased the number of immigrants heading west. The third wave was much more politically oriented. It was charged with the spirit of defending Arab identity against malicious representations. However, the nostalgic stream that ties the diasporic experience to the home of origin continued to be a defining aspect in America and Britain alike. The fourth phase is not strongly linked to a wave of immigrants and asylum seekers. It is a religio-political surge rather than an immigration wave. It is intensely rooted in social justice, human rights and nationalism. It is characterized by a negotiation of Islamic identity with a feminist twist. In this sense, the fourth-generation wave of Arab immigrants has been more disposed to declare independence from their Arab motherlands, without severing ties, by seeking to confirm their rights as Arab-American citizens. I do not consider the fourth wave as a departure from the three previous historic waves, but as a continuation with a distinctive marked reality of the Islamic faith. The crisis of 9/11, therefore, positioned Arab-Americans ‘under an interrogative and suspicious light’, which further concealed ‘the complex makeup of this diverse group from the public eye by reducing it to a handful of negative stereotypes’ (Fadda-Conrey 2006, 190). In response, Arabs in diaspora experienced an awakening that resulted in a rigorous attempt to ‘resurrect a forgotten or suppressed cultural essence, identify precursors, and celebrate traditions’ (Majaj 1996, 268). This urge to reconstruct identity necessitates a collective effort towards self-assertion and the decolonization of enforced Western representations.

**The Duboisian double-consciousness**

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois described the condition of African-Americans in terms of double-consciousness, which is ‘distinct because it explicitly embodies multiple identities instead of crossing identity group boundaries’ (Smith 2008, 7). According to Du Bois, individuals who have this kind of awareness experience a kind of ‘two-ness’, as two identities struggle to occupy one space:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the type of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two
souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 1903, 12)

This duality that constitutes identity formation, Du Bois explained, is the result of the hostile surroundings that the black community has been subjected to over the years by mainstream white society. Du Bois argues that because African-Americans are forced to accept their mistakenly assumed inferiority, they internalize a dual understanding of their identity as both American citizens and yet largely subordinated people. In this sense, double-consciousness, for Du Bois, is the result of a position in which the locus of someone’s identity becomes exterior. In other words, Du Bois describes the African-American experience as that of being trapped in an already framed discourse in which one’s value of oneself is defined by others – in this instance, white racial hierarchy. In effect, self-consciousness becomes predicated on approval from others. By stressing the presence of ‘this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals’ (Du Bois 1903, 13), Du Bois suggests that there is this assumption of a shared delusion that dictates a dysfunctional perception of identity among African-Americans, which they must transcend. This exteriority of identity formation, as it registers in double-consciousness, for Bazian, objectifies Islam and Muslims today.

In an op-ed for al-Jazeera English, Bazian (2013) argues that colonialism constructs Muslim identity the way slavery and racial denigration once informed the consciousness of the black folk: ‘Muslim’s double consciousness was formed in the colonial period and continues in the post-colonial state.’ Bazian explains that ‘what colonisation has done was to construct an external objectified Islam and Muslim, an ideal inferior and a static pre-modern Other through which the Eurocentric colonial “modernisation” project can be rationalised in the Muslim world’. Both slavery and colonialism are Eurocentric enterprises that frame the Other as frozen in time and, therefore, pre-modern and peripheral: ‘The Muslim subject in colonial discourse is ahistorical, static and rationally incapacitated so as to legitimise intervention and disruption of the supposed “normal” and persistent “backwardness”’ (Bazian 2013). As a result, Muslims have internalized that rhetoric of subjugation, as constructed by the colonial discourse, which, in particular, mirrors how Du Bois perceives ‘double-consciousness’, as ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ (Du Bois 1903, 12). Arabs in diaspora, thus, often find themselves in a position where they have to subvert the colonial gaze that constantly views and defines them in an interrogative mode that lacks positive assertion.

The Arab diasporic double-consciousness

Drawing largely on Du Bois’ understanding of double-consciousness, Paul Gilroy brings Du Bois’ notion of ‘double-consciousness’ to the modern scene and explores the diasporic implications (Gilroy 1993). Gilroy argues that ‘double-consciousness’ persists as a marker of the African-American diasporic experience: ‘Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness.’ This urgency suggests two outcomes. First, it does not negate the presence of a sound and congenial subjectivity: ‘I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual’ (Gilroy 1993, 1). The presence of this double awareness, at least in Gilroy’s mind, does not entail any disintegrated or fragmented identity formation. Secondly, the political dimension is inevitable, since racist discourse projects

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these identities as exclusive and independent. To project these two identities as assimilated is, therefore, to subvert the oppressor’s gaze. It is an act of resistance, which is essentially the result of an orchestrated agenda. Consequently, the politics of race is an overriding concern for Gilroy as the product of colonial history. Gilroy stresses the impact of slavery and colonization and its hegemonic implications in diaspora.

Following the works of Du Bois (1903) and Frantz Fanon (Fanon 1963), Gilroy wants to ‘purge and redeem Enlightenment humanism of its dark side (imperialism and racism), and to renovate the idea of a species-level solidarity that transcends racial divisions’ (Blake 2007, 123). In fact, Gilroy’s argument of the African-American history in diaspora can be extended to include the diasporic experience of other races or ethnic communities:

The demonization of Arabs as ‘towel-heads’ is clear enough as an example of the way in which this legacy is taken up once again in popular culture; on the other hand the acts of those prepared to serve as ‘human shields’ in places like Gaza is a sign that a different emphasis, a humanist cosmopolitanism worlds away from the dogmas of ‘identity politics’ and state power, is possible. (Blake 2007, 124)

The political overtones resonate in Arab diaspora because they generate a differentiated form of migration community. The result is a dual consciousness, a state that describes a person who is ‘neither being fully assimilated to the new culture nor able to fully preserve the culture of origin. Because of this, diasporic people so often transform the cultures they have been made to enter’ (122). To a great extent, double-consciousness, therefore, continues to be the product of the imperial legacy that has afflicted certain ethnic communities.

The Duboisian ‘double-consciousness’ implies the presence of an irreconcilably divided self; thus it differs from Gilroy’s conception, which attempts synthetically to embrace the subjective self and the cultural other. In effect, to be positioned within the paradigm of double-consciousness is to ‘stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages’ (Gilroy 1993, 1). Du Bois’ notion is a representation of those individuals who cannot subscribe to mainstream society due to an impeding, cultural or ethnic difference and, therefore, internalize a subordinating self-identification. As a result, the Duboisian ‘twoness’ ‘can be a hindrance’ (Smith 2008, 7). The situation that generates this kind of split is born out of the condition of xenophobia that some Arabs confront in diaspora.

Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa, editors of *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2003), point out how Arab-American identity faces new challenges in the wake of 9/11, as the Arab community itself has become visible ‘for the larger American public’s awareness […] Arab Americans could not try to engage the world and remain anonymous’ (xiii). In *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11* (2009), Louis A. Cainkar refers to the ‘loss of personal privacy’ as one manifestation of Arab double-consciousness, pointing out that ‘Arab Muslims described conducting routine activities, such as loading their car trunks or checking their mail, with the sense that they might be watched’ (144). Nadine Naber refers to Du Bois’ notion of double-consciousness as ‘internment of the psyche’, which is self-inflicted because ‘the disciplinary effects of the state penetrate everyday actions’ (Naber 2006, cited in Cainkar 2009, 144). The constant awareness that one is being watched and monitored intensifies the Duboisian sense of exterior identity where ‘looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’
Du Bois (1903, 12) is now enacted by state regulations. The personal now becomes politicized, and the private sphere is transformed into a site of public surveillance. In this context, Bazian (2004) introduces the notion of ‘Virtual Internment’ to Arab collective consciousness, which he defines as ‘a quasi-visible but repressive, intimidating, and confining structure employed by the US administration and its allies, on a global scale, against individuals, communities, and organizations deemed unsupportive, and possibly hostile, in their worldview towards American and “global” interests’ (5–6). Bazian argues that his notion of Virtual Internment ‘is based on guilt by association and is very much supported by existing xenophobic tendencies in our society directed presently at Arabs and Muslims but at times inclusive of everyone possessing a darker complexion’ (6). Enforcing this panoptic apparatus produces ‘a mental condition, [which] begins to internalize the process and acts according to what is expected […] collectively. They become prisoners of their own minds’ (22). In this sense, double-consciousness constructs what Cainkar (2009, 145) calls ‘a psychological jail’ as it locks up that ethnic community within an already framed discourse.

In retrospect, double-consciousness

brings about its own particular type of damage, often articulated as a loss of self-confidence [as it refers] to connections and disconnections – being connected to terrorism and disconnected from the community around them, and being forced to take the role of the vigilant ‘other’ when looking at themselves. (Cainkar 2009, 144)

To cite a case in point, one Arab-American woman, a study participant, makes a direct connection to a shared burden between the African-Americans and Arabs:

I feel like there’s this big burden that I’m carrying around. You know that book Black Man’s Burden? I don’t know who wrote it, but it’s kind of like this big burden that you carry around with you wherever you go – that you are an Arab. (145)

Likewise, interviewed by Judith Gabriel, Edward Said expresses a similar sense of estrangement:

I don’t know a single Arab or Muslim American who does not now feel he or she belongs to the enemy camp and that being in the United States at this moment provides us with an especially unpleasant experience of alienation and widespread, quite specifically targeted hostility. (Gabriel 2002, 23)

Said’s sense of psychological alienation resonates with Du Bois’ notion of ‘double-consciousness’ (Abraham, Howell, and Shryock 2011, 82). In fact, Abraham et al. argue that

the transnational and multicultural pluralism that became available to minority populations in the United States in the final decade of the twentieth century […] has never been fully extended to the Arabs and Muslims in America […] for reasons deeply embedded in popular religious sentiment and the logic of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. (82)

Du Bois’ description of the condition of African-Americans as torn by ‘twoness’, which inflicts ‘a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment’, reverberates with the sense of displacement and anxiety expressed by Arab Muslims in diaspora considering the upheavals of the recent political scene.
This sense of ‘double life’ has not dissipated over the last few years, mainly because of the increasing tension between the West and some Arab countries, and the rise of the Arab Spring (Hudson 2012, 238). That kind of tension that Arab immigrants experienced in diaspora found its permanent echoes and accentuation in Anglophone Arab literature. In ‘From Romantic Mystics to Hyphenated Ethnics: Arab-American Writers Negotiating/Shifting Identity’, Layla Al Maleh (Al Maleh 2009) draws attention to that increasing urgency for Arabs in diaspora to write back with an assertive tone:

The title of the very recent anthology of Arab-American poets by Hayan Charara, *Inclined to Speak* (2008) […] suggests a desire to break the silence, establish connections, and speak out on behalf of three million people living in the USA who are at once Arab and American. […] In a way, this simply reflects the sense of double consciousness and inbetweenness that characterize the present age. (Al Maleh 2009, 437)

Likewise, Somaya Sami Sabry argues that in ‘Arab American women’s writing and performance, this double consciousness is configured through its subversion of the binary paradigms shaping the post-9/11 political climate’ (Sabry 2011, 4). In fiction, Arab protagonists experience this sense of double-consciousness in novels that examine the contact between East and West such as Tayeb Salih’s (1966/1969) *Season of Migration to the North*: ‘The binary opposition, throughout the novel, is not necessarily asserted but rather complicated by the introduction of Mustafa’s character who is neither like the other nor like the English’ (Abdul-Jabbar 2012, 113). Moreover, Al Maleh (2009) argues that Anglophone Arab literature resonates with issues about the ‘psychological and social alienation (at home and abroad) and the “return of the exile” theme, the experience of hybridity and double-consciousness’ (8). For instance, in the short story ‘Jumping in Air’, Arab Canadian writer Youssef El-Malh (1989) captures the character’s recognition of doubleness, that is his knowledge of himself as ‘subjects and objects’ (Kamboureli 2009, 143) through a short lived romantic encounter:

Licking her upper lip with the tip of her tongue, she said indifferently:

‘You have a strange accent. Where do you come from?’

Without giving me the chance to answer, she resumed, looking fixedly into my eyes:

‘India?’

‘I am an Arab.’

‘Here is one of you.’

‘What do you mean one of us?’

‘Indian!’

I followed the movement of her eyes and saw a dark girl walking shyly on the beach. There was a brief period of silence, while my eyes wandered between the two bodies, the dark and the white. Then I started in an awkward manner to explain the difference in origin between Indians and Arabs, but she seemed absentminded and distracted, as if she had lost interest. My whole being was overwhelmed by the disturbing feeling that I was nothing […] nothing at all, that I lacked so many things to become a human being like her.

Smaro Kamboureli argues that ‘what is played out here is the structural politics between the private and the public. […] Their desire for each other dies away once they have to function as members of a larger group that includes one but excludes the other’ (Kamboureli 1994, 24). In effect, double-consciousness here is exemplified
by the character’s thwarted attempt to transcend his private image, of being an Arab, as he aspires to social acceptance.

Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American poetess, argues that the antagonized image of the Arab-American needs to be counterbalanced:

There is a real sense among Arab-American writers of a need for balance, with 9/11 and the demonization of people in that part of the world. All the bad headlines are just very sad fragments of the true story. We feel a larger need than we did 20 years ago to create positive cultural stories, forces and linkages. (Smith 2003)

Nye’s call to create and find balance in order to negate internalized feelings of subordination resonates with Du Bois’ notion of identity as a struggle for an African-American ‘to merge his double self into a better and truer self’ (Du Bois 1903, 38). And only in so doing can African-Americans, according to Du Bois, transcend the current unfair, discriminatory reality: ‘Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism’ (Du Bois 1903, 202). Additionally, drawing on that Duboisian notion to define the current diasporic reality, Sana Saeed points to the doubleness created by the white American gaze. It is a gaze that creates a second type of citizenship, one of social and popular acceptance, letting us know what is the ‘right’ way to be an American Muslim, what is the ‘right’ way to practice Islam. (Saeed 2014)

In this sense, double-consciousness betrays an internalized notion of citizenship enforced by the hegemonizing gaze in which the citizen is a constructed image that should mirror what is believed to be socially accepted and echoes whatever is populated by the state.

The Arab community, to a great extent, objectifies this sense of the diasporic condition in which ‘particular communities and individuals resist being subsumed into a single narrative; instead, they demand that we address their cultural, historical, and ideological specificities’ (Kamboureli 2000, vii). In his article ‘Lebanese Identities: Between Cities, Nations and Trans-nations’, Michael Humphrey argues that diaspora implies a very conventional anthropological perspective on social life, the persistence of tradition (identity) despite its displacement from place of origin. […] It is even used as a metaphor for the existential condition of post modernity to refer to uncertainty, displacement and fragmented identity. (Humphrey 2004, 1–2)

Humphrey associates diaspora with ‘cultural survival across generations’ in the sense that diaspora signifies ‘resilience of tradition’ (2) and does not necessarily exercise a homogenizing impact, especially since the term invokes notions of exile, hybridity and identity loss across and among generations. Humphrey argues that diasporic feelings are not peculiar only to first-generation immigrants since the introduction of modern, global technologies, which ‘create the possibility of projecting local diaspora realities – exile politics, cultural hybridity or national nostalgia – as an integral part of a transnational cultural identity’ (3). The result of this linguistic, cultural and familial exposure to the homeland is a diasporic feeling that is often captured and internalized even by second-generation youth.
In *Diaspora by Design: Muslim Immigrants in Canada and Beyond* (2009), Moghissi, Rahnema, and Goodman speak of the challenges that youths face as they live between two cultures: ‘Muslim youths […] are facing many of the structural barriers that were not expected to impede their progress, as they had that of their parents, towards a productive and dignified life as equal citizens’ (111). This argument can be fairly extended to include Arab youth who face similar challenges because of either being Arab or mistaken to be Muslim. Accordingly, although it seems that the life of doubleness is peculiar only to Arab Muslims, some studies show that double-consciousness does not exclusively fall within an ethno-religious paradigm. Studying how ‘second-generation participants take up new belongings in transcultural modes’, Yvonne Herbert et al. (Herbert et al. 2008) explain how one of the participants – Lue Rue, a Christian Arab and second-generation female of Lebanese/Syrian origin – asserts that she is a proud Canadian because ‘it accepts me in its country, especially because I am not from here. It accepted me for being Lebanese’ (Herbert et al. 2008, 75). Acceptance could be the only antidote for a life of diasporic doubleness. Yet, however legitimate Lue Rue’s feelings about Canada’s hospitality might be, her story might not necessarily reflect a broader experience of the country’s inclusivity. In her article ‘Being Arab: Growing Up Canadian’, Rula Sharakawi explains how being a second-generation Arab-Canadian forced her to question her identity and look at the way in which society questioned her identity: ‘It was this fact: that I was an Arab living in Canada, which led me to have to explain over and over again my identity and what it was to be an Arab’ (Herbert et al. 2008, 211). She explains how she ‘dreaded the horrid question, “Where are you from?”’ and how she hated the frequent response: ‘Oh […] you don’t look Arab’ (211). When one student in high school once told her that ‘you don’t look Arab’, she asked the inquisitor what he meant by that. Shockingly, he said, ‘it was because I seemed “normal” and was pretty, didn’t have an accent, and didn’t wear a scarf’ (211). In response, Rula had to explain that she grew up in Canada and she is a Christian Arab. This case is exemplary of how almost any attempt to define one’s Arab identity is bound to an act of unlocking stereotypes.

**Conclusions**

‘It’s not pleasant being Arab these days,’ wrote the Lebanese journalist Samir Kassir in 2004, who was assassinated just a year later. Kassir explains how ‘feelings of persecution for some, self-hatred for others; a deep disquiet pervades the Arab world’; he remarks that no Arab seems to ‘be immune to the enveloping sense of malaise since a certain September 11’ (Kassir 2006, xi). Kassir argues that the word ‘Arab’ itself is so impoverished a word that it’s reduced in places to a mere ethnic label with overtones of censure, or, at best, a culture that denies everything modernity stands for’ (xi). Kassir’s concerns about the presence of a ‘malaise’ that menaces Arab identity are quite legitimate. It is a ‘malaise’ that renders the ethnic identity of Arabs as ‘impoverished’ and always destitute. An ethnic identity that is plagued with a ‘doubleness’ that is ‘less a “both/and” and more a “neither just this/nor just that’ (Dayal 1996, 47). In a post-9/11 world, double-consciousness for Arabs in diaspora moves beyond the sense of duality experienced by other immigrants: ‘Like all immigrant groups, Arab-Americans have a sense of doubleness, feeling torn between their parents’ traditions and their new culture’ (Smith 2003). Doubleness for Arabs in diaspora has political and ethnic implications that translate beyond the sheer notion of nostalgia and displaced homes. Samir Dayal argues that ‘diasporic double consciousness’ has become a defining aspect as ‘it affords an interstitial perspective […] that allows for the emergence of excessive
and differential meanings of belonging” (Dayal 1996, 47). I reiterate that I have used ‘double-consciousness’ here in the restricted sense in which Du Bois defines it as ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’ (Du Bois 1903, 16–17). It is a doubleness that negates the true self of the individual and dictates a certain exterior locus of identity that the individual is expected to emulate as enforced by the hegemonic gaze. Arabs in diaspora seem to dwell in that uncomfortable space of the antagonized ethnic minority, which objectifies doubleness as a seemingly self-imposed condition that effaces any attempt to capture the authentic self, forcing the internalization of foreignness.

References


