Uncovering the Local in Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*: Lived Religious Practice and Inclusive Politics

Adam A.H. Yaghi

NYU Shanghai

Leila Ahmed's 1999 transnational memoir *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* has attracted rich scholarly interpretations that examine it through the lens of hyphenated identities, Arab feminist subjectivity, immigrant Arab writing on East-West relations, and self-reflective revisionism. Regardless of the used approaches, place—or more precisely, being in and out of place—seems a recurrent theme in the scholarship. Focusing on exile; split identity; and being caught between different cultures, nationalities, and imaginative geographies, some scholars, like Abdullah Shehabat, suggest that Ahmed and others "represent themselves and their responses to being caught in two different cultures [and places], not knowing whether they belong 'here' or 'there,' and making it difficult for them to find a true home" (1).

Being caught between two places, and in particular, themes of exile, travel, and immigration—the experience of being *out* of place or creating new hybrid spaces—has drawn special attention in this memoir. John Barbour, for example, draws our attention to Ahmed's exilic experiences, which shape her "religious and ethical perspective" (717), while Wäel S. Hassan focuses on the exilic experience of "Arab American identity in the U.S." ("Arab American Autobiography" 8). Such exilic structures often rethink what Hassan astutely calls the "East/West opposition" and "deliberately … conjure up Orientalist themes … in order to refute the assumptions on which they are based" (*Immigrant Narratives* 147). Similarly, Andrea Bernadette investigates *A Border Passage* as travel writing that both "participate[s] in opportunities and alienation [which Edward] Said documents for male intellectuals from the periphery who ventured into the West and exposed its heart of darkness," and mounts a "'double critique' of local and colonial patriarchies" (3). For some scholars, the imagined tension between East and West, and the exilic journey of the protagonist of *A Border Passage*, can similarly be read through "a diasporic lens," in which Ahmed can "write back to … her masculinist, fundamentalist, and authoritarian Islamic nation-states where the peripheralization of women's roles, experiences, and subjectivity …. caused upper-class, liberal, and secular Muslim women to dislocate and escape the repressive socio-political and religious turns of their homeland" (Pillai 277).

Like these scholars, I am interested in the role of place in Ahmed's memoir and the resulting critiques it allows Ahmed to perform. However, rather than focus on the tension and overlap between categories of Eastern and Western space, or how the exilic subject navigates these categories, my article highlights the tension between local and lived traditions on the one hand and institutional or formal structures that try to contain or erase them. *A Border Passage*, I therefore argue, reveals, and criticizes, repeated patterns of devaluing local culture and lived religious traditions; by doing so, it allows Ahmed to draw attention to marginalized communities through documenting their lived traditions of practice. It especially enables Ahmed to uncover a local Muslim woman's oral-aural tradition of practice and reveal a lived religion. In *A Border Passage,* local and lived traditions constitute an indispensable part of an interconnected, pluralistic world. On the one hand, in embracing locality as a defining component of her irreducible multiple selves, Ahmed rejects the contemporary obsession with identitarian difference, or what Walter Benn Michaels in *The Shape of the Signifier* calls a concern with "who you are" rather than "what you believe" (66). In this sense, my reading aligns with Hassan's idea that Ahmed's memoir ultimately "presents itself as a narrative of connectedness rather than polarity" (*Immigrant Narratives* 147). Similarly, lived practices, or what Dorothy Bass in *Practicing Our Faith* defines as "those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life" (Bass xiii) are equally irreducible to one thing and one thing only because lived religion, according to Daniéle Hervieu-Léger, is "fluid, mobile, and incompletely structured" (22). Practice, David Hall reminds us, "always bears the marks of both regulation and what, for want of a better word, we may term resistance. It is not wholly one or the other" (xi). Hall's definition is closer to what I take *A Border Passage* imagines "practice" to mean.

Beginnings: Unpacking Inferiorization in Egypt's British Colonial Past

Ahmed's intellectual process of recovering local cultures and lived traditions in *A Border Passage* begins with revisiting her personal past in British-administered Egypt and follows with a sharp critique of colonial mechanisms of domination that sought to separate the colonized Egyptian bourgeoisie class from their local-lived cultural, linguistic, and religious identities. Ahmed arguably extends an obvious criticism of the colonizers to further include Egyptian and Arab elite classes for failing to understand how the British methodically targeted local culture and its lived tradition, or the *baladi* (24).[1] Tracing the roots of her self-hatred back to her teenage years, adult Ahmed reflects on how her colonial education contributed to this self-devaluation, as she and classmates learned to dismiss all things Arabic as unworthy. Adult Ahmed acknowledges that elite social circles—

the "intellectual, professional, and governing classes of Egypt"—did the same. They did not reject the imperial British culture or language, nor did they question colonial structures of knowledge production even when Egyptians were "locked in struggle with the British for Egypt's political independence" (*A Border Passage* 5-6). This trend among elite classes in colonial Egypt was not unusual. After all, in most colonized spaces, westernization manifests itself in inferiorization—or dismissive attitudes directed towards the native language, colonized people, and local cultural productions. Members of the native bourgeoisie often communicated in the colonialist tongue while looking down upon their native language(s). For example, Frantz Fanon observes that "to speak French" was the norm among the "Antilles Negro," a "problem of language" also relevant to other colonized populations (27). Fanon "broaden[s] the field of this description and through the Negro of the Antilles include[s] every colonized" person (9). *A Border Passage* registers almost identical currents, though this time English, not French, is the preferred tongue.

As a result, trained in colonial schools and growing up speaking English in British-ruled Egypt, Ahmed recalls marking everything local as inferior. This devaluation included the Arabic language, Egyptian music, and even her Turkish-Egyptian mother, who used Arabic and tended to listen to folk Arabic music. Arguably, cultural components, like the folk tongue/dialect or folk Arabic music, constitute what Ahmed calls *baladi* or local cultural color. This internalized inferiority that Ahmed attached to local color created a barrier between her and the acquisition of written classical Arabic. Her inability to use the language further disconnected her from Egyptian local culture. In *A Border Passage*, Ahmed recalls that "English was valued above Arabic in ways that would have marked it, in a child's mind at least, as being somehow innately a 'superior' language" (23). Arabic music, too, was devalued. Ahmed explains: "It was common, this show of looking down on Arabic music, among English Schoolers. Arabic music was the music of the streets, the music one heard blaring from radios in the *baladi*, the unsophisticated folk regions of town" (24). Ahmed's statement suggests the active presence of local hierarchical structures in the social stratum—meaning a somewhat clear distinction, at least in the mind of British-trained Ahmed and her bourgeois classmates, that privileges English-speaking upper-class culture over Arabic-speaking *baladi* or folk culture. Her British education and the subsequent devaluation of the Arabic idiom and Egyptian music, orally and aurally produced especially in "folk regions of town," uncover a systematic colonialist inferiorization of everything local, related to folk culture, or remotely concerned with lived traditions.

Most dangerously, the colonized consciousness shaped Ahmed's earlier perception of her upper-class mother, who became an inferior other in the eyes of her own children, because she celebrated the local color and lived traditions. Our mother, as adult Ahmed writes in *A Border Passage*, "was not, in our eyes, *baladi* [meaning in this context, an unsophisticated member of the Egyptian folks]. She quite distinctly and also quite self-

consciously belonged to a culture and background quite different from the folk culture around us" (24). Ahmed remembers her mother, a cultured woman and disciplined literate of Turkish-Egyptian descent, "[l]ighting cigarette after cigarette and reading" in the evenings (73). Yet, speaking in Arabic and enjoying Arabic folk music and Arabic classics marked her, in the eyes of her own children, as an inferior other (24-25). This negative attitude towards the local and lived Egyptian elements of her Egyptian-Turkish heritage registered in teenage Ahmed an early desire to separate herself from her mother as she did from the Arabic idiom. "I was fifteen," Ahmed writes, and "I did not want to be like my mother. I was sure I wasn't like her and would never grow up to be like her." Ahmed immediately adds, "I didn't want to think we were alike in anything, let alone in our deepest hearts' desires, and I didn't at all want to think that I might indeed be her daughter" (74). The desire to disassociate from her Arabic-speaking mother has more to do with equating the local and lived culture with inferiority than with generational difference, a practice Ahmed in retrospect realizes was "there, too, in my own childhood and in the very roots of my consciousness" (25). In other words, not only does *A Border Passage* explore the complexities of identity when it comes to the colonized/colonizer paradigm and the hierarchy of such identities, but even within this hierarchy exists a lower stratum of "folk" or "baladi" (lived experiences). The baladi and its lived experiences rank below the "elite" upper class of locals, who therefore reject not just Arabic and Arabic music, but also the lived practices associated with the baladi.

Unothering the Harem: A Muslim Feminist Scholar Writes Back

Ahmed's investigation into her earlier rejection of locality and lived traditions in her relationship with her mother is shortly extended into a revisionist account of her foremothers, their local harem spaces, and their lived experiences. In *A Border Passage*, Ahmed writes that

> [l]ooking back now with the assumptions of my own time, I could well conclude that the ethos of the world whose attitudes survived into my own childhood must have been an ethos in which women were regarded as inferior creatures, essentially sex objects and breeders, to be bought and disposed of for a man's pleasure. (100)

Such an ethos evokes the orientalist perception of the Muslim woman, and the harem space, as a "male power-fantasy" (Said, *Orientalism* 207). Imagined by male orientalists as a prison-like site of sexual exploitation, the harem has become the site of a "rich production of visual … and textual narratives that imagined … the forbidden mysteries of the harem" according to Thisaranie Herath (32).[2] But adult Ahmed later remarks that

these assumptions of her foremothers or the "Women of Zatoun" were fictional: "my memories do not fit with such a picture. I simply do not think that the message I got from the women of Zatoun was that we, the girls, and they, the women, were inferior" (*A Border Passage* 100). Simply put, the way young Ahmed, her women relatives, and their matriarchs thought of themselves was never as negative or inferior as the way colonialist and racist feminist structures portrayed them. So, if this was not the message she received through her interaction with her matriarchs, what was? And what does Ahmed exactly do in the "Harem" chapter in conjunction with this new inquiry?

A homage to her foremothers and in defense of Muslim women, Ahmed's "Harem" chapter uses the personal to interrogate Western feminist discourse that reduces Muslim women to oppressed or silenced harems who can be liberated by abandoning lived religious and local cultural traditions. Tracing the "culture vs. women binary" back to nineteenth-century European colonial efforts in "Third World" countries, Ahmed says in *Women and Gender in Islam*: "[A]s the history of Western women makes clear, there is no validity to the notion that progress for women can be achieved only by abandoning the ways of a native androcentric culture in favor of those of another culture" (244). Ahmed dismisses this expectation of nonwhite women as "absurd, and yet this is routinely how the matter of improving the status of women is posed with respect to women in Arab and other non-Western societies" (244). Skeptic feminists demand that Arab and Muslim women discard their local and lived cultural and religious markers if they wish to be recognized. The double standard, however, Ahmed notes, is that the same requirement is not expected from Western women because they "may pursue feminist goals by engaging critically with challenging and redefining their cultural heritage," a right unavailable to Muslim women. Indeed, the general argument goes like this: "Muslim women can pursue such goals only by setting aside the ways of their [Islamic] culture for the nonandrocentric, nonmisogynist ways (such is the implication) of the West" (Ahmed, *Women and Gender* 244-45). Those who reject Islamic feminism as a viable option, writes Miriam Cooke, fail to understand that "Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning." Islamic feminists, Cooke elaborates, "*create a new, contingent subject position.* This location confirms belonging in a religious community while allowing for activism on behalf of and with other women. This linking of apparently mutually exclusive identities can become a radical act of subversion" (59).

Embracing Islamic feminism and "moving between places, spaces, and temporalities" (Englund 93), *A Border Passage* allows Ahmed to reflect on white feminist orientalist double standards and racism towards her matriarchs, which she encountered while studying in England (*A Border Passage* 193) and later teaching in the U.S.A (292-93). Recalling in the memoir her past experiences at Girton College, Ahmed describes how her teachers stereotyped and "looked down on" her Egyptian foremothers.

They "had held them in contempt" (193). Such disdain mimicked earlier European women artists and travel writers like Henriette Brown and Julie Pardoe, who had depicted the harem as both "a space of domesticity and family" and "emphasize[d] the continuing 'Otherness' of Oriental women" (Herath 35). Often characterizing Ottoman and Muslim women as uneducated, "quiet, careless," and easily taken by "trifles, careless of all save the passing hour," these women writers contrast with male orientalists who presented harems as prison-like spaces or women as sex objects; instead, they repackage the harem space as a familial space for "wom[e]n in person, but a child at heart" (Pardoe 71). They thought of Muslim women as silly, gossipy, and intellectually shallow. Ahmed's British female teachers "adopted the same attitudes towards these [Muslim women] subjects—as to what was idle gossip and what was worthy, important thought—as their own men had, and they now combined these attitudes with the feelings of superiority that Europeans and white people, men and women, felt towards the cultures of the 'inferior' non-European peoples generally" (Ahmed, *A Border Passage* 193).

Arguably, what these western feminists considered "idle gossip" is simply a kind of lived, local, and aural-oral form of practice that they place in an absolute contrast to their cultural makeup and ways of intellectualizing and theorizing about the world—something they see as a "worthy, important thought" (Ahmed, *A Border Passage* 193). For these teachers, "worthy, important thought" is rooted in a long tradition of Western textuality and patriarchal colonial culture. Disparaging imagined Muslim and Arab women as intellectually simple, voiceless, and oppressed "harems," they imply that such women must forsake their local and lived traditions and adopt Western cultural values if they wish to end so-called cultural/religion-induced oppression. In *A Border Passage,* Ahmed directly targets this ingrained racism. Referring to Harriet Martineau, who traveled to the Ottoman East in the 19th century and had access to Ottoman women in their harem spaces, Ahmed mentions that in one of her visits to the women's quarters of a Muslim household, Martineau "wrote of how ignorant these Muslim women were and how worthless and mindless their harem talk" (193). In this typically racist encounter, Ahmed adds, Martineau "is just one of a steady stream of Europeans who looked down on and thought of Muslim harem women as mindless" (193). Recognizing her own culpability as a colonized Egyptian woman trained in all things British, adult Ahmed arrives at a new realization in retrospect: "I too saw those women, and above all my mother, as people who 'did' nothing, and I too took their 'endless' talk as idleness, gossip, and 'doing' nothing" (193). Ahmed internalized these racist Western feminist attitudes towards her own Muslim matriarchs: "In the fabric of my own consciousness the women among whom I lived and most of all my mother were everything that I didn't want to be. The only escape from this … would be for me to grow up to become either a man or a Westerner" (*A Border Passage* 194). This Western feminist misrepresentation of the harem as a mindless aural-oral collective without

distinguishable character traits or thinking faculties also erases locality and derides any manifestations of cultural specificity or lived practices as "idle gossip" or mindlessness (Ahmed, *A Border Passage* 193). Ahmed's memoir challenges this reductionist white feminist worldview and exposes its racist expectations; in so doing, it traces the roots of this imperialist worldview to deliberate nineteenth-century misrepresentations of Muslim women and their harems.

The Harem: A Site of Local Culture and Lived Religion

By contrast, in her representation of the harem space, Ahmed actively excavates specific, local, aural-oral, and lived elements of Islamic culture. Young Ahmed's above-mentioned encounter with Western feminists and their racist misrepresentations of Muslim women, Geoffrey Nash rightly argues, stimulated Ahmed "to reformulate her judgments of her mother and female forebears through reconstructing Arab/Muslim women's histories" (366). "Objecting to the fact that women have been excluded from the physical and discursive spaces of Islam," writes Cooke, "Ahmed goes so far as to posit the evolution of two Islams, one for women and another for men" (xii).[3] *A Border Passage* recovers and defends Ahmed's matrilineal harem; while her harem is not always a perfect space, its occupants are neither childish, uneducated, nor silent sex objects. Instead, as a social site, Ahmed's harem space produces local cultures and lived religious traditions.

In Ahmed's own article, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," she defiantly re-interprets the "harem" as "a system whereby the female relatives of a man—wives, sisters, mothers, aunts, daughters—share much of their time and their living space" (524). Rather than a physical site of wild sexual desires, a space where women are kept behind closed doors to satisfy the sexual needs of a tyrant, as male orientalists imagined it to be, the harem system is more about everyday life. This space offers Muslim women privacy, freedom, agency, and power, and in *A Border Passage*, Ahmed emphasizes that neither the Zatoun harem space where her female relatives dwelled and taught their lived religious practices, nor the popular women's Islam Ahmed later identifies, was oppressive of women. Above all, for Ahmed, the harem was a learning environment to pass onto younger generations an oral-aural version of Islam, foregrounding non-textual ways of imparting religious and cultural knowledge, emphasizing the importance of inter-generational relations, and instilling in its members the interconnectedness of all forms of being. Rethinking her earlier condescension towards her mother, Ahmed regretfully wishes she could reset time and acquire such wisdom from her mother and the local harem society. Lamenting the decline of their local culture and the near-loss of traditional knowledge that she herself failed to

inherit, she writes, "What wouldn't I give now for the gift of my mother's passing on to me, in her own voice, her own and her people's story" (*A Border Passage* 75). Probing into everyday Muslim life in the harem of Zatoun,[4] Ahmed thus attempts to reclaim what she sees as "diminished" lived Muslim practices and unearth a Muslim woman's tradition of practice that privileges and protects local lived traditions and inclusive politics. Lived practices, according to Bass, allow members of the religious group to lead "a faithful way of life, one that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom" (xiii).

Through remembering her matrilineal past in harem spaces, Ahmed indeed uncovers a local Muslim woman's oral-aural tradition of practice and reveals a lived religion. By emphasizing the local and the lived, as evident in the case of the Zatoun harem society, Ahmed consciously and cautiously neither seeks nor wishes to reclaim a "universal Islam." She is one of those public intellectuals "who have written Islamic feminist texts" and "are drawing on their transnational political, religious, and gender identities in order to speak effectively to, with, and against several audiences," according to Cooke who adds that such writers "are tracing the ways in which … various communities have constructed and erased them as subjects of history and hermeneutics" (81). And although Ahmed is interested in local and oral-aural manifestations of Islam, she does not position them as the singular alternative to official, textual Islam. "[I]t would be unfortunate [indeed] if the turn to lived religion meant simply changing the valence of the familiar dualities while preserving them," writes Robert Orsi, "just substituting religious practices in the streets and workplaces for what goes on" in formal places of worship (9). Ahmed, whose interest materializes in recovering marginalized local Muslim traditions of practice, arguably takes a middle position between theologians and social theorists of practice. More of a social theorist of religious practice than a theologian, Ahmed shares some of the aspirations of practical Christian theologians Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, and Stephanie Paulsell, who "have evinced a keen interest in revitalizing the Christian life through a sustained recovery of practices" (Maffly-Kipp *et al.* 2). These three theologians "have drawn on wider philosophical and ethical reconstructions of the virtuous life and its practices" (2). Yet, also like the social theorists of practice Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Catherine Bell, and Talal Asad, Ahmed critiques what Christian theologians call the "hegemonic, regulatory, and structuring character of practice" (Maffly-Kipp *et al.* 2). Nonetheless, the celebration of a lived Islam is a quest *A Border Passage* seems to consciously pursue, at least through historical recovery. I also take Ahmed to be suggesting that for Islam to be a constructive force in contemporary life and politics, it must reach back to its historical oral-aural practices, philosophy of interconnectedness, and ethics of justice. Qualities such as orality, local variations of religion, and emphasis on modeling by example predate Islam and were arguably behind early local Islam's vitality. Some of them were lost as authoritarian textual Islam has gained unchallenged power,

especially in the modern era. As Ahmed suggests, lived or local manifestations of Islam are gradually yet systematically diminishing.

During the process of recalling and rethinking her past, Ahmed remembers what was passed on to her, and as she unearths this history, she revives her matrilineal heritage. Partly homage to her mother, partly an attempt to liberate Islam from "other people's inventions, imputations, false constructions" (Ahmed, *A Border Passage* 225), the memoir encapsulates her mother's understanding, a woman's view, of what Islam in practice and everyday life was and should be: one must refrain from inflicting harm on any creature, her mother said to her, and "even if your choice is between harming yourself and harming someone else, choose to harm yourself." Her mother explained that the former route is better "because if you harm someone else, you will have to live all your life with the knowledge that you have done that, and nothing that happens to oneself is worse than that" (75-76). This philosophical and ethical objection to harming any being became a practice in the life of Ahmed's mother and the lives of her sons and daughter. Ahmed's mother raised her sons to guard against violating the same principle. She made them swear not to ever hurt any man or woman or, for that matter, operate "in any field that contributed in any way to weaponry" (76). She also objected to them "participating in any war as combatants." Ahmed adds the following prophetic statement to enforce this proper conduct: "She could not live, she said, with the thought that she had been responsible, through giving birth to them, for the death of another mother's son. It would make her, she said, as well as them, a murderer" (76).

In the eyes of Ahmed, as it was the case with her mother, this philosophical principle of preserving human life is a foundational ethical code shared by most, if not all, religions. As such, one expects that living and dying by this lived code of religious practice should interconnect followers of world faiths rather than divide them. More than religious textual practices, lived oral-aural and local religio-ethical practices generate this sought-after interconnectedness. In *A Border Passage*, Ahmed speaks of her mother as someone who "did not as a rule pray or fast or observe what in our household were thought of as the outer trappings of religion—its formalities and rituals. But she talked of herself as a religious person" (75). If this claimed religious identity is neither determined nor defined by religious formalities and rituals, the backbones of formal textual Islam, then what is it? Refraining from inflicting harm, from the mother's perspective, is the core of Muslim self-identification, and is "all one needs of religion" (75). The essence of what it means to be a practicing Muslim hinges on a single Qur'anic verse (5:32), according to Ahmed's mother. In the memoir, Ahmed translates the verse her mother quotes: "'He who kills one being kills all of humanity, and he who revives, or gives life to, one being revives all of humanity.' That, she said, is all one needs of religion" (75). This profound lived Islamic wisdom is passed on orally from grandmothers, to mothers, to sons and daughters in the harem space. This matriarchal Islam relies on local oral-aural transmission

of religio-ethical lived practices. These women's local Islam, "gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical—just as they themselves were" (121), Ahmed adds, concentrates on the inner side of one's self, purifying the heart, clearing the mind, and living by what one would be preaching. In it, private signs of religiosity receive more attention than the public ones. To understand this local and lived Islam, one must understand the harem or the women's space that gave rise to it.

Evident in Ahmed's memoir, the harem space of Zatoun allowed generations of Muslim women to pass a lived tradition onto their offspring, both men and women, who were taught Islam as a "way of being in the world" (Ahmed, *A Border Passage* 121). Their teachers and mentors acted as role models who were out there "in the world, conveying their beliefs, ways, thoughts, and how" Muslims "should be in the world by a touch, a glance, a word—prohibiting, for instance, or approving;" instead of relying on written sources to educate their offspring, the harem matriarchs used "mere responses in this or that situation—a word, a shrug, even just their postures" (121). In their communal space, these matriarchs passed on lived knowledge through orality and private practice. These women were not an isolated case. As an adult, Ahmed rethinks her maternal heritage; she, indeed, thinks of broader local communities of Muslim women, currently present and active in and outside of Egypt, whose methods of socialization de-center knowledge production and circulation, and create democratic socio-cultural cells, inclusive and nonviolent. The Muslim matriarchs she observes "profoundly shape the next generation, but they do not leave a record in the way that someone writing a text about how to live or what to believe leaves a record. Nevertheless, they leave a far more important and, literally, more vital, living record" (122). Ahmed elaborates: "Beliefs, morals, attitudes, passed on to and impressed on us through those fleeting words and gestures are written into our very lives, our bodies, our selves, even into our physical cells and into how we live out the script of our lives" (122). Whatever teachings, practices, or values are passed on almost become a memory in the flesh, minds, hearts, and souls of the receivers. In addition, the absence of a written tradition guards against the possible malignant growth of dogmas and prevents the imposition of a fixed single worldview as the normative way of seeing and being. Such methods of teaching religion and socialization also ensure the proliferation of a diversity of local teachings, narratives, and styles of passing lived knowledge from one generation to the next. These women and men, who were not systematically exposed to "orthodox interpretations of religion that men (or some men) got every Friday," Ahmed argues, understood what Islam meant through dialogue, discussions, and application among themselves, with their men, and among the larger body of women, including their offspring (123-24). Theirs is a lived Islam and a local tradition of private practice and, as such, inherently popular, pluralistic, and non-homogeneous.

"Popular religion," Hall reminds us in the context of Christianity, is a "space that emerged between official or learned" religion "and profane (or

'pagan') culture. In this space lay men and women enjoyed a certain measure of autonomy; here they became actors in their own right, fashioning (or refashioning) religious practices in accordance with local circumstances" (viii). "Where lived religion goes its own way," Hall elaborates, "is in breaking with the distinction between high and low that seems inevitably to recur in studies of popular religion" (ix), for "religion," according to Orsi, "is not *in* or *of* the world, nor simply *against* but *through* the world" (8). This is exactly what Ahmed does in *A Border Passage*: she rejects oppositional relations—between masculine and feminine Islams, for example—and she does not position lived Islam as a replacement for official Islam. She rather seeks to open more space for a heterogeneous lived Islam to exist and therefore challenge the hegemony and homogeneity of official Islam. The latter is still the normative version of the faith, exclusively taught in academic programs and university courses in the West and elsewhere. Indeed, *A Border Passage* sometimes critiques formal textual Islam because it dictates, imposes, and normalizes hegemonic practices. Authoritarian political regimes often use it to abuse their opponents, impose unnatural reengineering of the nation, and crush so-called fringe communities and erase their (sub)cultures. Its fixed practices are regulated over a lengthy period and transmitted, through textual rules and observable behaviors, from one generation to another with little consideration for the socio-cultural, economic, geographic, or political conditions under which individuals and communities live. Like Bourdieu and theoreticians of practice, Ahmed's "exploration of practice is, at bottom, an examination of the intricate exercises of power, the procedures of enforcement, the spaces of negotiation, as well as the subtle tactics of resistance" (Maffly-Kipp et al. 3). Ahmed looks at hegemonic power structures that try to contain or erase religious plurality, cultural diversity, and multiethnic difference. In exploring the issue of everyday oral-aural and local lived practices of women's communities, Ahmed both describes and interprets everyday experiences and socio-political actions prevalent in the different communities she belonged to at some point in her past life. Her important discoveries happen through her recovery of the past.

When Ahmed distinguishes between an oral women's Islam and a written men's Islam, she therefore does not intend to polarize the worlds she examines. In "Arab-American Autobiography," however, Hassan contends that "the greater problematic here [in *A Border Passage*] lies in Ahmed's polarization of literacy and orality, and further the conflation of this polarity with another, that of male/female, which in turn is conflated with yet a third, fundamentalist/moderate Islam" (29). Disapproving of Ahmed's so-called acts of polarization, Hassan points out that "[h]ardly does one encounter such slippage in the work of the Arab scholars, critics, philosophers, and theologians who have in recent decades been actively challenging patriarchy, traditional interpretations of Islam, and fundamentalism" (29). But, in defense of Ahmed, I think *A Border Passage* consciously addresses this polarity it is accused of. Ahmed

reminds her readers, especially Western readers, of how wrong one would be to reduce Islam to only the two types she mentions earlier. Ahmed considers the Zatoun harem women's Islam "part of" the women's "subculture"; consequently, she arrives at a profound, though often neglected, truth: "there are not just two or three different kinds of Islam but many, more different ways of understanding and of being Muslim" (125). Ahmed also realizes that the Islam she witnessed being shared and circulated among the harem circle of women is

> nothing only of women but of ordinary folk generally, as opposed to the Islam of sheikhs, ayatollahs, mullahs, and clerics… [I]t is an Islam that stresses moral conduct and emphasizes Islam as a broad ethos and ethical code and as a way of understanding and reflecting on the meaning of one's life and of human life more generally. (*A Border Passage* 125)

The Islam of sheikhs is the product of a minority of men who canonize one version of Islam and regularly attempt to impose their sanctified version on every space with little to no regard for the existing local diversities, contextual particularities, dynamic modern populations, and their unfixed lived experiences or realities. For the sake of her discussion, Ahmed cannot escape the terminology that we use to discuss religion or politics; nonetheless, she attempts to complicate the binary Hassan has identified.

Ahmed's pronouncement and the delineation of Islams is not an arbitrary move. Her reflection on different Islams while criticizing orthodox Islam could be taken as an acknowledgement of the fears many Westerners might have about Islam. Ahmed also redirects their attention to the existing plurality of Islams, a plurality hijacked by particular brands of official Islam and other socio-political hegemonies, including reductionist nationalisms. Through distinguishing between one organic and another imposed type of Islam, while simultaneously acknowledging the presence of other Islams, Ahmed seeks to liberate through reclaiming lived, local, oral-aural manifestations of the faith. Ahmed argues that the oral-aural traditions she speaks of in *A Border Passage* are neither exclusively modern nor contemporary phenomena. They rather have their roots in the very beginning of a foundationally local Islam. "Leaving no written legacy, written only on the body and into the scripts of our lives," Ahmed writes, "this oral and aural tradition of Islam [embodied in her matriarchs and their practices] no doubt stretches back through generations and is as ancient as any written tradition." Ahmed adds that she "could even argue that an emphasis on an oral and aural Islam is intrinsic to Islam and to the Quran itself, and intrinsic even to the Arabic language" (127). Ahmed seems to implicitly suggest that stopping fundamentalism must begin with ending the "erasure of oral and ethical traditions of lived Islam," an erasure that goes hand in hand with overwhelming "dissemination of written Islam, textual, men's Islam (an Islam essentially not of the book but of the Texts, the medieval texts)"

(128). This erasure enables fundamentalism to position written medieval interpretive texts as "*the* authoritative Islam." The problem then is not with Islam as a whole, from Ahmed's perspective, but it is rather "today's fundamentalists, literate but often having read just a single text, [who] take it to be definitive and the one and only 'truth'" (128). Not only have orthodox Muslims been privileged and their textual version of Islam imposed and studied as the norm even in Western academia, but also to make room for their Islam, all alternative oral and local variations are unremorsefully sacrificed. The official textual "variant of Islam has wielded absolute power and has not hesitated to eradicate—often with the same brutality as fundamentalism today—all dissent, all differing views, all opposition" (130-31)—and in doing so, Ahmed echoes the same troublesome tendencies she identifies in racist Western feminism and British colonialism. These forces—i.e. Western imperialism, racist feminism, and radical versions of Islam—often collaboratively fracture diverse Muslim nations and reduce their rich lived and local forms of religious practice into a singularity of suppressive official Islam (Taliban in Afghanistan, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and Wahabism in Saudi Arabia) and use women and their bodies as a pretext to oppress, invade, and plunder (the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq). Equally troubling for Ahmed is the "literal destruction and annihilation of the Muslims who are the bearers of those traditions" in Muslim-and-Arab majority lands (*A Border Passage* 130).

Towards a Conclusion: Mounting Multiple Interventionist Critiques

As one considers the critiques Ahmed exercises in *A Border Passage*, it becomes obvious that she does not absolve any essentialist, reductionist, or hegemonic structures from accountability. Not interested in putting forward simplistic claims, Ahmed acknowledges that each Islam is of a complex nature and cannot, nor should, be reduced to either utterly good or irredeemably evil (133). She further recognizes that all grand and overarching political or intellectual theories have blind spots in their fabrics. As such, Nash rightly argues, "Ahmed's intuition, while not discounting the divisive realities of colonial education or the flawed 'project of Western civilization', is to reject the binary, confrontational, monolithic entities encoded in the signs of 'colonialism', 'imperialism', 'anti-imperialism', and 'liberation'" (358). Ahmed's position, Nash elaborates, "is also revisionist with respect to postcolonial strictures, not in contradicting criticism of the actions of the colonizer (which she partially endorses) but as a riposte to both pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism" (359). While Ahmed is critical of the dynamics of British colonial Egypt, in which locality and lived traditions were suppressed, she is equally critical of post-independence Egypt for similarly subsuming locality and diversity to an imagined "Arab" national identity. According to Ahmed in

A Border Passage, Nasser "ruled openly as dictator and his government became more and more overtly repressive" (33). This view of Nasser does not shield his misguided politics, nor does it dismiss how the Suez Canal incident and Nasser's nationalization decision inspired many nations in their struggles for independence during the 1950s and the 1960s. But Nasser was not faultless. He ended the plurality the country enjoyed the moment citizens started to identify primarily as Arabs and not as Egyptians. Indeed, Ahmed reveals how Nasser's reengineering of the country to reposition Egypt as an "Arab" nation and changing its name to the "United Arab Republic" took a heavy toll on its pre-existing diversity and local differences. Amal Abdelrazek writes that Ahmed opposes Nasser's imposed national conformity and the postcolonial uniformity of Arab nationalism because this unnatural homogenization endangered the multitude of cultures and localities that were in Egypt before Arabism became the defining identity of the nation—thus rendering them invisible or undesirable (32). Some of the excluded include the indigenous Copts whose presence in Egypt, Ahmed reminds her readers, in *A Border Passage*, predates the arrival of Islam. The renaming of the country as Arab and related policies imposed an unnatural homogeneity; therefore, Ahmed's criticism of Nasser is best understood as part and parcel of her revolt against all fixed, narrow, and reductionist notions of identification on transnational, national, communal, and personal levels. In many ways, *A Border Passage* intervenes to reclaim complex realities, realities that several essentialist theoretical and political frameworks come up short in faithfully representing. *A Border Passage* is indeed Ahmed's interventionist critique of Western colonialism, particularly Western feminism, Arab nationalism, and orthodox Islam.

These and other grand structures, Ahmed emphasizes in *A Border Passage*, fail to "recognize the complexity" of the "world and experiences—with which we all struggle in our ongoing endeavor to speak and write of the realities that make up our lives and our world" (241-42). At best, they might succeed at offering reductionist understandings. Her memoir provides balanced interpretations of complex realities, and it reclaims lived traditions of practice and invokes locality, orality, and matrilineal ancestral histories. Reclaiming locality as one of her multiple selves challenges Walter Benn Michaels's argument in *The Shape of the Signifier*; Benn Michaels proposes that the contemporary concern with identity and difference, in literary production and political debate, is basically a concern with identitarianism—"who you are" rather than "what you believe" (66). Ahmed reclaims the local as part of an interconnected pluralistic world; she calls for the collapse of narrowly defined and reductionist identities. Consequently, Ahmed defies identitarian difference when she reconciles her Egyptian-Turkish heritage with her colonial and Western education and inscribes her life story in an expansive fabric of world histories. This final acceptance of her multiplicity embodies her preference for cultural and religious plurality. Similar to her non-

reductionist understanding of identity, Ahmed exhibits a nonconformist perception of history and historiography.

One of Ahmed's realizations forms a central thesis in *A Border Passage*: the truth about past events is too complex to be compartmentalized in one universal, authoritative interpretation—just like any notion of identity. One example is the story of Western colonialism in the minds of Arab nationalists who blame it for all the evil that has befallen their nations. Ahmed complicates the matter: if one shifts focus from what is being disclosed, in this case the past itself, to the process of deciphering and composing it, s/he will arrive at a multiplicity of sequential interpretations which will most likely bring her or him closer to comprehending what actually happened. Ahmed's personal history testifies to the truth of her point. Ahmed revisits her love-hate relation to written classical Arabic to demonstrate the impossibility of fully understanding the past or the historical knowledge passed down from the past. Early in the memoir, Ahmed solely attributes her lack of exposure, and eventually her negative attitude towards written classical Arabic to the colonized consciousness she and her father had, but she later discovers new information which complicates what she already knows. Colonized consciousness offers a partial explanation. Indeed, the adult Ahmed reveals that she was unable to learn classical Arabic because of the complex traumatic experiences she and her father had. In *A Border Passage,* Ahmed recalls her Arabic language private tutor constantly "groping at" her "under the table." Preoccupied more with staying out of his sinful hand's reach, the adolescent Ahmed "learned very little" Arabic (26). Many years later, the adult Ahmed sought a friend to help her decipher her father's letters to her, which were written in cursive handwriting. Ahmed discovered that her father did not send her to the "*Kuttab*, the traditional Quranic school, for a few hours each week, as some of … [her] schoolmates had been" because he was still traumatized by his own experience in the *Kuttab.* Sent to learn classical Arabic and the Qur'an, her father, a boy then, was scarred by the harsh physical punishment methods the teacher used to instill learning in the students. Her father "could recite the entire Quran by the time he was eight," readers are told; however, he "vowed never to subject his own children to such an experience" (26). Here, arguably, Ahmed also extends her critique of a traditional way of teaching Islam by rote—a teaching rooted in textuality instead of aural-oral local lived practices.

Here, Ahmed implies that there is no simple black or white truth. The truths behind her life circumstances, colonial encounters, or her experiences—whether good or bad—are interpretations and reinterpretations, the outcome of a plurality of factors. It seems that from Ahmed's point of view, self-identification on individual and collective levels itself, just like her shifting consciousnesses and fragmentary understanding, is by default an always incomplete project. What Ahmed identifies is more of a constantly evolving and dynamic individual, national, and transnational self-identification that must embrace lived

difference, locality, and pluralism in order for it to break free from grand, overarching structures. In the same vein, to better understand how major forces, such as colonialism, inform one's understanding of the notion of selfhood, one must treat the self as a complex, yet constantly evolving, pluralistic entity and must think of self-identification as a process that has a beginning but no virtual end. In *A Border Passage*, Ahmed "think[s] that we are always plural. Not either this *or* that, but this *and* that. And we always embody in our multiple shifting consciousnesses a convergence of traditions, cultures, histories coming together in this time and this place and moving like rivers through us" (25). Whether one rethinks individual or collective identity, the same applies. "There is no history except as it is composed," as E. L. Doctorow proclaims, and "the act of composition [therefore] can never end" (24). Every generation interprets the past differently in light of the circumstances available to it. Notions of the self, the other, nation, the past, tradition, religion, history, and consciousness are never fixed. And instead of erasing unpopular past identities in favor of fashionable present formulations of self-identification, Ahmed suggests including or at least looking back with a nonjudgmental eye on unpopular formations of past self-identification because one, whether singular or collective, is always in a state of becoming. One must "look back with insight and without judgment" because "there will always be new ways to understand what we are living through, and that" we "will never come to a point of rest or of finality in" our "understanding" (Ahmed, *A Border Passage* 25-26).

Notes

1. In Arabic, "baladi" means local, of the country, traditional, native, or related to folk culture and social manners. The identity marker baladi is also associated with a style of Egyptian folk music and dance. If used by the upper classes, it can signal looking down upon the described person, group, or cultural or geographical element.

2. Similarly, "the prevalence and popularity of this perspective of the harem," Aimillia Ramli writes, "is largely owing to a general tendency in the 18th and 19th century Europe to emphasize the enslavement, especially in the sexual sense, of women within Middle Eastern and North African societies" (265).

3. Interpretations of Islam in Ahmed's memoir are nonetheless complex. On the one hand, Ahmed seems to follow in the footsteps of women of color and postcolonial feminists who challenge hegemonic European notions of feminism. Postcolonial feminism, writes Karma R. Chavez, critiques "Western nation-centered perspectives on gender, race, class, and sexuality," questions "the colonial legacies that still impact

relationships between first-and third-world peoples," challenges "hegemonic Western feminism" and advances "culturally, geographically, and historically grounded feminist theories and politics in relation to broader transnational processes" (767). On the other hand, Ahmed contributes to the building of a specifically Muslim feminist tradition by critiquing Western female orientalist cultural misrepresentations and reclaiming the harem space. As Cooke rightly reminds us, "Islam is not gender specific," but Ahmed's text seems to argue for a "faith system and a way of life open equally to women and men" (xiii), therefore suggesting compatibility between Islam and feminism.

4. Zatoun is the estate of Ahmed's mother's family and the location where her female relatives used to gather. Ahmed presents the space as a sanctuary for women and the site of sharing what Ahmed calls a woman's Islam.

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