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Sami Atassi

### **Diaspora and Transnational Identities: Table talk Construction of Syrian-American Identities in Times of Civil War**

#### **Introduction**

As a second-generation Syrian-American, I have become preoccupied with the turmoil shaking Syria and much of the Middle East. During my primary and secondary education, my mother emphasized the importance of my native language, worrying that I would lose the linguistic essence of my cultural background by loosening my grasp on Arabic; and since March 2011, I have received dozens of emails and watched countless videos echoing my mother's concern. As I struggle to make sense of the situation in Syria, I have come to realize that the Syrian-Americans who fled Syria, fleeing from past and present oppression, are the most capable individuals for clarifying the contradictions and nuances between Western and Eastern sources of information gathering and sharing to more accurately depict the situation in Syria.

This research focuses on the chaotic violence plaguing Syria, which has culminated from past violence and oppression. This research also specifically focuses on the war's effect on the transnational identities of married, first-generation, Syrian-Americans who are currently living in America. Furthermore, as this study applies, the discourse-historical approach is necessary in applying the participants' respective memories and histories to their table-talk conversations. As discussed in this article, understanding transnational identity is important when considering the experiences of Syrian-Americans.

As Bradatan et al. notes, transnational identity is germane when considering the postmodern idea of fluid identity, which negates the assumption that belonging to one group implies compulsory exclusion from other groups. As a result of a fluid identity, the transnational individual "embodies the split between state-imposed identity and personal identity," the split caused by political upheavals and propagates migration (Bradatan et al. 169) (Ong 2). Facilitated by different forms of media, "a machine for altering minds," Syrian-Americans and other transnational identities have been conditioned, in a sense, to live in a

“permanent state of conflict” and liminality, both externally and internally (Foucault 125, 286). Thus, the transnational identity is faced with a flexible, split subjectivity, in which an opposing ideology gains strength by setting itself off against the other competing identity (Said 3). This implies that identity is not the cause but the effect following this binary interaction (Butler 201).

By interviewing first-generation-Syrian-American spouses, I gained insight on the liminality between Western media coverage and Syrian legendry, which will be revealed through the participants’ dynamic and multimodal acculturation of English and Western media, alongside Arabic and Syrian legendry. For the purposes of this study, the objective is for the participants to frame discourse with their spouses, so that instances of acculturation and code-switching come about naturally within their kitchen-table conversation. Similar to Lindahl’s objective, in the *Surviving Rita in Houston* project, this approach is intended to give support to the affected Syrians by giving them the agency to frame and develop discourse with one another within their homes (139-140). I will follow a discourse-historical approach in analyzing the data provided by the participants, and this data will shape the historical background summarized in the following sections. For ethical reasons, I want to highlight the histories and lives of the participants in context of their experiences. I will then move on to an in-depth discussion of the research method, analysis, and findings of this study.

### **Syrian background: rise of Ba’ath regime, demographics, and religion.**

Following World War I, the modern Syrian state was established as a French mandate, eventually gaining independence in April, 1946. The independence of Syria led to numerous military coups, coup attempts, as well as a subsequent union with Egypt between 1958 and 1961, which was later severed by a military coup. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad planned a momentous *coup d’état*, ousting the President of the Republic, Nureddin al-Atassi, and the Deputy General Secretary, Salah Jadid. “Election” after “election,” Hafez al-Assad, under the Arab Socialist Ba’ath party, acted as president of Syria from 1970 until his death in 2000, and then was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, who is still acting as the Syrian president and leader of the Ba’ath party. Since Hafez al-Assad’s presidency, Alawites, a religious minority in Syria (one eighth of the country’s population), have dominated the military, intelligence, security, and political institutions of Syria.

Today, while hundreds continue to perish and thousands continue to flee, the demographics of Syria are rapidly changing. According to the July 2012 report from the CIA World Factbook, the estimated population of Syria is 22,530,746 (“The World Factbook”). It is important to consider the fact that the statistics provided entail registered data, while excluding unregistered births, deaths, migrations, immigrations, etc. According to the World Population Review, the estimated population of Syria as of November 2013 was 21,960,358, and the United Nation reports an estimated 5,000 Syrians flee Syria every day (“World Population Review”). Furthermore, Arabic is the official language, and is predominantly used throughout Syria; Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, and Circassian are widely understood in certain areas; French and English are also understood by a number of educated Syrians. With Islam as the official religion of Syria, roughly 74% of the population is Sunni Muslim,

16% Shia Muslim (includes Alawite, Ismaili, and Druze), 10% Christian (various denominations), including tiny Jewish communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo.

Although religious difference did not trigger the revolution in Syria, lingering differences between Sunni and Shite Muslims have facilitated and exacerbated the turmoil, as pointed out by the participants of this study. The Assad family belongs to the Alawite minority in Syria, which is a sect of Shia Islam. The major division between the Sunni and Shia sects is that the Shia rejected the first three caliphs between the seventh and eighth centuries and regards Ali, the fourth caliph, as Muhammad's first true successor.

Today, Shia is predominantly practiced in Iran, but there are minority groups practicing in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Syria, to name a few. Since 1970, Assad's Alawite family has politically and militarily controlled the Syrian government. While the conflict in Syria has been partially fueled by religious differences (Shias have been sent to fight in Syria from Iran, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, and more), the causes of the uprising are largely related to issues of freedom, equality, and the recognition of human rights. The Syrian's plight is similar to what led to the Hama Massacre in 1982, except in 1982 no religious justifiers were exploited, and social media did not exist to spread awareness of the demonstrators and the innocent civilians being killed.

### **“Syrian civil war”; or, “Syrian uprising”.**

Since the Arab Spring began on 18, December 2010, waves of protests have shaken and continue to shake numerous Middle Eastern countries (Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, to name a few); Egypt (presidents were forced out of power twice), Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen; civil uprisings have erupted in Bahrain and Syria as well. The Syrian uprising began on 15 March 2011. To briefly note, the reason I denominate the war as an “uprising” and not a “civil war” is because the spouses in this study, as well as my family and relatives, have only referred to the war as a revolution. As one of the participants, Khaled, said: “All what they [the Syrian public] want is freedom... and dignity... and equality. It's a revolution for better life.” Furthermore, when I asked Khaled to clarify who were involved in the two sides fighting, he said it was between “[t]he people and the government.” Khaled added, “The government because the government is minority, so there is about seven percent of Syrian population belong to the minority of the Assad regime.”

Therefore, as the Arab Spring created a democratic domino effect across the Middle East (and some would say the Western world), the majority of the population of Syria, not given the same rights as the privileged Assad family, was swept into the revolutionary storm, fighting against corruption, demanding equality and the protection of human rights. In short, since the Assad regime is almost entirely Alawite, a Shite sect, Assad has gained abundant support from Shite leaders in other countries.

Specifically, much of Assad's financial and military support comes from China, Iran, and Russia. Meanwhile, Syrians flee into neighboring lands, where they are not welcome, or they choose to stay in Syria and endure unrelenting gunfire and shelling inside and outside their homes. However, the Syrian Uprising is not a matter of sectarian divisions—nor is it a linguistic one, since almost all Muslims and Christians in Syria understand Arabic—instead,

it is a manipulation forged by international interests reacting to the demonstrations and protests, which are springing from the long-fertilized grass roots of Syria.

### **Research Method**

Similar to the approach taken in Shamdudin and Ghazali's study "A Discursive Construction of Homosexual Males in a Muslim-dominant Community", in which they employ the discourse-historical approach, first proposed by Wodak (2001), de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart (1999), and Reisigl & Wodak (2009) (283). As context is the biggest challenge in sociolinguistic theories, and discourse is based on context and vice versa, the discourse-historical approach is an interdisciplinary, sociolinguistic methodology, which applies history, theory, religion, politics, and culture to discourse analysis. This is why I have provided background information on Syria's history, government, and culture in the previous sections. My analyses and findings concerning the participants' language ideologies and discursive strategies will incorporate historical, social, political, and theoretical backgrounds.

In order to add a layer to the analytical methodology taken from the historical-discourse approach, while maintaining a strong ethical standing, I asked for the participants to frame each segment of the table talks around the past, present, and future, respectively. Therefore, the participants framed the scope of the historical, social, religious, and political contexts in their discussions. Over the period of the conversation, each segment is temporally framed so that the participants can construct their understanding of their developing identities, in times of Syrian crisis.

In addition, conducting kitchen-table talks in the presence of the participant's spouses is intended to provoke a sense of security, authority, and wholesomeness when discussing such a macabre topic. E.R. Miller considers the "agency of spaces," in her study of agency and multilingual spaces. Likewise, the linguistic acts of the participants are not only deemed legitimate and desirable but also natural and unrestricted within the space of the home (Miller 441). In short, by capturing the participants inside their homes alongside their spouses during the discussions, my intention was to "[de-]organize [the] regimes of language," as Blommaert et al. interrogate in "Spaces of Multilingualism" (198). I felt I accomplished this task when during a pause in the conversation between Ahmed and Lina, Lina told me, "You have to ask question[...] we don't know what your, like, way... what we can help with you." Hence, Lina and Ahmed came to realize I had no particular agenda outside of gaining insight into their discursive framework, which forms the framework of this study.

### **Participants.**

The four participants included two married couples, who migrated from Syria and then eventually settled in America. Both married couples have homes in a middle-class suburb of Houston, Texas. The following chart provides demographic information of each participant:

Name (pseudonyms)	Year Born	Gender	Religion	Languages Spoken (in order of acquisition)	Year Left Syria
Khaled (A)	1948	Male	Muslim	Arabic, Czech, English	1968
Fariha (A)	1960	Female	Muslim	Arabic, English	1985
Ahmed (B)	1962	Male	Muslim	Arabic, French, German (very little), English	1986
Lina (B)	1974	Female	Muslim	Arabic, English	1991

Aside from being friends with the participants, I have also tutored their children for the past year or so. Khaled and Fariha both have a background in medicine, while Ahmed and Lina are business and accounting practitioners. Khaled and Fariha have two sons, while Ahmed and Lina have a daughter and a younger son. Before the revolution, Khaled, Fariha, and their children visited Syria once every four summers, while Ahmed, Lina, and their children visited every summer. All four participants have Syrian-American accents, where the wives articulated stronger accents than their husbands. To protect the participants' identities, the pseudonyms I provided—which were the first that came to mind—are, in fact, names of my family members who have fled or are still in Syria.

### Discussion and space.

In order to de-frame the interview as effectively as possible, the interviews took place at the kitchen tables in their two-story, middle-class homes. Moreover, an awareness of space, scale, and linguistic landscape of the homes offer a connection between macro-conditions and micro-processes, which provide a clearer opportunity for analysis of the participants' discursive strategies and transnational identities in a globalized context (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouk 203-204; Weber & Horner 179-192). The interiors of both homes were embellished with Muslim, Middle-Eastern décor (Syrian flags, glass-blown ornaments, souvenirs, etc.), family photos, paintings (calligraphies of verses from the Quran, scenes of Middle Eastern streets and markets, etc.), Persian rugs, and Mediterranean furniture. During the interview, Spouses (A) were preparing dough to spread with thyme; in addition, Spouses (B) had Al Jazeera News on the television, which was reporting on the situation in Syria.

Spouses (A)'s recorded discussion (conducted 11/02/13) lasted 1:08:54, while Spouses (B)'s (conducted 11/18/13) lasted 1:29:26. For recording, I used a Sony ICD-UX5 12 Silver 2GB Stereo Digital Voice Recorder, and the table talk was divided into three temporally thematic sections:

1. Past: *"In your experience, what was Syria like in the past?"* This section stimulated historical information on Syria, as well as background information of the participants.

2. Present: “*What is happening in Syria now?*” This question provided the clearest and concise answers that apply to a transnational analysis. This is because the most politically and emotionally charged responses were made in this section.
3. Future: “*What needs to happen? How do you see the future?*” The answers to this question all expressed a strong sense of complexity and uncertainty.

It is important to note, however, that “[a]sking is indeed very often the worst possible way of trying to find out;” I have taken Blommaert and Jie’s caveat to heart (3). Weeks before as well as immediately before the interview, I informed the participants that I would be asking these three questions and that I did not want to do any of the talking, but, rather, they would share and build their history and knowledge together. By allowing the spouses to construct their stories together, my intention was to uncover valuable information, as well as—considering Seidman’s question on what they get out of participating—give them the opportunity to work together in discursively constructing one another’s understandings of their transnational identities in the context of the Syrian past, the Syrian-American present, and the ambiguous future (27).

For the purposes of transcription, I chose a naturalized transcription, rather than a denaturalized transcription. With a naturalized transcription—attempting to maintain the (relative) imperfections of speech—my objective is to reach a deeper understanding of the “global meaning of statements,” derived from the interrelationship between the words or signifiers (Foster 119). The transcribed interview data has a total of 16,866 words.

Though I am most concerned with the substance of the conversation, the pauses and involuntary vocalizations add to content when considering the nature of the participants’ speech patterns. Ellipses are used to signify pauses and extended fillers (e.g. “I went to medical school... in Prague”); dashes and parentheses are used to denote speech utterances attributed to problems with fluency and well as simultaneous exchange of dialogue (e.g. “To continue my education in this country after graduate from Syria— eh, Czechoslovakia, then I saw Syria situation how bad it is everything... from the previous, you know... eh, what I have said”); italics are used for words in Arabic and names with Arabic inflections (e.g. “*Shukrahn, Khali*. [Thank you, Auntie.]”).

### **Questionnaire.**

A week following the interview, I asked the husband of each couple for the following information: their date of birth, the year they left Syria (not the day they arrived in America), as well as the languages they are fluent in. I typed the information in a Word document on my laptop and inserted a table, which is provided above. This questionnaire was not written but exchanged verbally. I decided to ask these questions later in order to save time and further naturalize the conversation as much as possible.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of this study will follow a discourse-historical approach applied accordingly based on the development of the kitchen-table talks. Points of congruence and incongruence between the sets of spouses,’ based on their discussions, are analyzed



using a discourse-historical approach. Theoretical references come from a wide range of sources.

### **Discursive strategies and forms of realization.**

Since the narrative is a means by which an individual can construct his or her identity, before and during the interview, I told the spouses that I had no agenda planned, so that the spouses would frame and share their narratives together (Holmes 317). The only discursive concern facing the spouses was their articulation of English. Before, during, and after the table talks, the spouses reiterated this concern and apologized if their accents were too heavy. I asked them why they did not speak more Arabic, and they all said so that I could understand them better. For this reason, pauses, fillers, tag questions, intensifiers, and emphatic stresses were highly common in the narratives, which expressed the intricacy of politics, the intimacy of personal experience, the application of the past, and the horrors of the present. Although these features of speech may seem insignificant, I must side with Sedgwick's realization that the silent and unsaid are as performative as the "active," especially for these spouses' determination to be heard accurately (3).

### **Syrian past as simple life.**

When asked what Syria was like before the uprising, both sets of spouses answered that in the past, life in Syria was marked by simplicity— that is, as long as the Assad regime was not in the picture. When I asked the initial question, Khaled initiated the conversation between Fariha and himself. Khaled reflected:

It was simple, easy life. Population was at that time, I think about seven million people, and I'm talking about in the sixties, sometime in the sixties. After Arabic Union with Egypt, was Nasr thrown out from Syria and Syria separated Arabic Republic, we started to have all kind of-a... dictators, and military people got into power, and took over. Until... the Assad regime, or *al-Ba'ath* party took over Syria political arena.

Before the dissolution of the Arabic Republic and the rise of the Ba'ath regime, Khaled viewed Syria as "simple, very easy, everybody happy it seems to be." Therefore, it was before the rise of dictatorships that Khaled viewed Syrian life as easy and simple. Lexically and syntactically, Khaled's speech gained complexity and the rate of pausing increased as he contemplated what terminology was the most appropriate for the context, in and out of discussion. Similarly, Khaled's spouse, Fariha, lived a simple life in the past. She offered, "The first fifteen years old I have very good childhood." After around 15-years-old, Fariha began to notice troubling complexities: friends and family being arrested, "They took two of my cousin... to prison. And they took my brother too," Fariha explained. Her father was also harassed by the Assad government: "He get him and by his shoe, by his shoe he slap him on his face. And he's old man," she said.

Conversely, when I asked Ahmed and Lina what life was like in the past during our table talk conversation, Ahmed started the conversation, stating:

Oh ok, you asking about, eh, yea, it started 1963 when he became in power this guy [Hafez al-Assad]. Of course, when, I was born, I went to, uh, special school. Special school has all people from the government—from the president's son to whoever, you name it.

Unlike Khaled's introductory response about his past, Ahmed's reflection did not include a sense of simplicity, but, rather, a sense of conflict and divergence, which stemmed from the fact that Ahmed was educated in a school where the children of government officials were also educated. In other words, Ahmed's early years were not marked by simplicity but inequality and alienation. However, Lina's introduction to her story juxtaposed her husband's memories of a politically turbulent atmosphere of the past. Lina answered, "Uh... I grew in... like simple life for me, not like Uncle [Ahmed]." Although Lina initially struggled to describe her sense of her past life, she was able to articulate herself by comparing her past life with her husband's.

### **Secrecy, media, and technology.**

Media and developing technologies play a critical role in the spouses' understandings of their transnational identities and the socio-political nature of the globalized world. By comparing the incidents of the 1982 Hama massacre to the current crisis in Syria, the advancement of micro-processes of information gathering and sharing (essentially, the networks of social media) in Syria and America will expose the macro-conditions affected by and affecting these micro-processes.

Khaled reflected on the Hama massacre, which, at the time in the narrative, he was studying medicine in Czechoslovakia:

So there are reported, eh... data, almost forty thousand people of the city of Hama were killed. Children, women, all and their houses were all demolished and the news media at that time didn't pay attention too much to what's going on. The last ten years it's, it's, it's unbelievable.

As he transitioned from a discussion of his past experience to the Hama massacre, Khaled rationalized his re-envisioning of the Hama massacre by arguing that information technology was lacking as the massacre took place in secrecy. Lexically, Khaled initially struggled to incorporate an understanding of the past with modern signifiers (preceding "data" is a filler and pause).

Khaled's repetitious use of "it's" acts as an intensifier for what is "unbelievable": (1) the massacre itself, (2) the rapidity of technological development to reveal past data, and (3) the irony of history repeating itself. Later, Khaled emphasized that the Hama protests started as a civil protest, contrary to today's popular opinion that it was triggered by the Muslim Brotherhood. While Khaled received information about the Hama massacre from his friends and family in Homs, Fariha was studying in Aleppo, and had first-hand experience of what Hafez al-Assad attempted to keep in secrecy. Fariha explained:

And after that they let us for a while not to pass Hama, because the bus used to go through Hama, but for a while because after the massacre in Hama, they



let for more than half year nobody can go through it. We will go on the border only. We didn't know what happen in Hama. Nobody can go there. And, it looks like the people after what happen in Hama... they was... all of the afraid.

During and following the massacre, students commuting from around Syria were forced to travel around the borders of Hama, so that no further evidence and subsequent dissidence would grow against the regime. Since there were no forms of mass communication, Assad was able to create restricted borders in order to instill ignorance and fear within the citizens. In the discussion of the present situation, Fariha compared today's media with the past forms of media: "Right now, we know what going on because of... immediately you get the news. At that time everything is secret," she said.

Because of the uncertainty of the situation and the power of the regime, all the Syrians could sense was fear, as Fariha's pauses denoted. Hence the development of mass communication has helped solidify the understanding of events and, therefore, a sense of personal agency.

When I asked Ahmed and Lina about what was happening in Syria that day, Lina listed her means and sources of information:

From the... TV, media, *Jazeera*... *Arabi'i* [Arabic news], the media, TV. From family too— Family they don't talk about it. They scared. My family it's like, nothing! And then here on the phone *tuhtuhtuhtuh*. Yes, this is what it is. When I call my brother, uh... her wife is like, ugh, his wife is like don't talk about this, but I hear wen he talk to me, you hear all the shooting, and you hear all the bombing, really. Yes. Yesterday, yesterday [11/17/13] it was bombing in A[—]. And there is ten people killed, eh, Christian. My friend send me, and there is a name. Ten people from Christian is die. Yesterday. A lot of something happen that you, like, don't hear it in the media. I hear it by... there is Syria now... news, the pop on the application on the... iPhone. And they send we like what's up right now. Every other day you have bombing, and every other day you have other stuff.

Here, Lina made no distinction between real and imagined communities in the use of mass communication technologies (Barker). It is important to clarify that the form of televised media Lina resorted to was not the popularized Al Jazeera, but the Arabic news (*Jazeera Arabi'i*); Lina's code-switching marked this differentiation. Once again, fear of harm caused Syrians in trouble to keep silent; their fear this time was that the government might be tapping their phones and listening to conversations. Regardless of her brother's and his wife's silence, Lina was able to hear gunfire and shelling in the background, which she animated with the onomatopoeia, *tuhtuhtuhtuh*. Lina then transitioned to information she gathered from a text message sent from a friend: "ten Christians (Lina's niece's friends from school) dying the previous day in a town near Damascus."

The forms of technological mass communication Lina used are strictly catering to a Middle Eastern audience, unlike Western media, which covered "the Middle East as the part of the main issue, because everyone wants piece of this puzzle," as Ahmed later added. Both

couples shared the belief that Western media was “the worse one [form of mass communication]” as Fariha expressed in her talk with Khaled. Khaled supported her sentiment:

The media are-a mixed. They are some media telling the truth, and some media is all lie, they support the regime and support the Iranian and everything. And some are bought by money to be on their side. And there are some truthful and honest, they bring events exactly... objectively. And you have to some times not confuse which one is true, because you never know the hundred percent which one is the real story is. And a lot of contradiction. And just it's very unique situation. Syria revolution it's unlike any other. Very bizarre, weird situation going on. Difficult to analyze, difficult to predict. Difficult to understand. It's really not civil war, it's really a-people against the government. The people against the government. All what they want is freedom... and dignity... and equality. It's revolution for better life. To stop the corruption. And to stop these tyrants.

Through the development of this dialogue, Khaled showed how the macro-conditions of the globalized world, embodied by the media machine, which convoluted and disembodied the initial intention of the Syrian revolution: Khaled recounted, “freedom... and dignity... and equality. [...] To stop the corruption. And to stop these tyrants.” Demonstrating language's ability to cope with all kinds of ambiguities, Khaled's diction, structure, progression, and conclusion on the topic of the media's role in the Syrian crisis reflected this very fact: the macro-processes of the media and global politics complicated the situation in Syria to the point where the micro-conditions of revolution were faintly mentioned, if at all (Lippi-Green 13). Khaled later mentioned that the “Western interest in Middle East don't pay attention to what's going on in Syria,” hence, the micro-conditions were blurred and reconfigured according to the interest of global powers—this is why Khaled spoke of tyrants in the plural, not singular form. Nevertheless, Khaled added that being a Syrian-American in America was crucial to understanding the situation and explaining it to friends and strangers. Khaled explained:

Yea, because then you can compare. And you have in-depth understanding for the American life and culture, and compare with what you background as a Syrian Arab from Syria. I think this is advantage, and especially if you know the two languages and you compare your life here with what you're hearing from your parents and from your visit when you were younger to Syria and all put together I think you will have a benefit, advantage over just the American that never have this background. And you will have advantage over the only Syrian who did not live in this country either. So I think it's important that, yea, that you help a little bit with your everyday life to explain to the Americans what's going on really. Anyway.

Here, Khaled was suggesting the notion that language ideology is the link between social structures and forms of talk (Woolard & Schieffelin 55). Khaled argued that it is necessary to understand the Arabic language in order to understand and translate the

Syrians' side of the story, which became convoluted across different forms of social media: youtube, twitter, facebook, to name a few. Today, most videos and posts are spoken and written in Arabic, so the only words that may be understood by the Western ear is the stigmatized *Allah hu akhbar*, which is equivalent to the American exclamation of "Oh my God!" Ironically, both have been drained of their sensuous force (Nietzsche "On Truth and Lies"). What Fariha added will be mentioned next, as it pertains to the following section.

### **The home.**

Supporting her husband's claim on multilingualism and transnational identities, Fariha shifted to a discussion of the significance of the home by contrasting her experience in America with the experiences of Syrians, who have lost their homes. Fariha explained:

I will be very disappointed if they don't understand what is going on. I am lucky to be here. I use to think I'm not happy person, but, right now, I cannot complain about anything. I am in much better situation than the people in Syria. I am so lucky to be here. I am glad I am not there, because I don't know what to do. And it's hard for you to lose your house. And in Syria, it's very expensive the house there. They... all their life they spend it until they have that house. And after that to see some people who come to the house and destroy everything in the house, they steal everything in the house, they leave the house mess. Or some people because they do not have houses or anything, they see the house empty and they will come in, and if you try to get back your house they will get the weapon, and you cannot let us be outside your house. That is hard. It's hard really. If you... everything built in your life is gone away... what, what is left? What is left? They told me it's life is very important. But what life if you don't have anything to enjoy it with? You don't have money! You are on the street living.

Despite the Western concern with "presenting the other as a timeless, unchanging culture," Syrian and most "Eastern" cultures are driven by capitalist desires: money, modernity, personal property, security, etc. (Ong 111). Of particular importance in Syrian culture is the ownership of a home. Fariha verbally reflected and juxtaposed her present condition with the way people are suffering in Syria, realizing that losing a home is the ultimate end, leaving "No *amal* [hope]." The only instance where Fariha code-switched during the table talk was to say that after one loses his or her home, there is no hope. Furthermore, Fariha strongly expressed a capitalist ideology by rebutting the claim that life is beyond materiality. For Fariha, she cannot imagine life without the material she has labored for, and emphatically stressed "money," which implied her realization of the necessity of money to enjoy life, let alone, live. Fariha's tag questions intensified the importance of the home in Syrian culture.

While the destruction of homes played more of a symbolic role in Khaled and Fariha's (Spouses A) conception of themselves in times of Syrian crisis, Ahmed and Lina (Spouses B) had been deeply concerned about their \$500,000 home in Damascus. Although Ahmed and Lina's concern for their home was far more immediate and material than Khaled and Fariha's, Lina referred to Islamic ideology to defend her stance and envision an optimistic future:

Even if it's just like stones on the house, I don't like to sell anything. Over there. I am not regretting what I bought before. Because like he saying we buying five

thousand, you know. Over there it's what's called, uh... *shu bi'uloh bi Sham?* [What do they say of Damascus?] *shu bi'uloh?* [What do they say?] It's a, it's a holy place. Yes. It is. Because the prophet *salallaho alaihi wa sallam* [peace be onto him] said in his hadiths... there is hadiths about *Sham* [Damascus]. *Kharu nas fi Sham* [Saved are the people in Sham] it mean, you know, the most pure, uh... in the end person who will be staying in the Sham at the end. So... we'll see.

Lina referred to a hadith, describing Damascus as the holy place, where the pure and the saved will reside on the Day of Judgment. Contrary to Fariha's sentiments, Lina's were more spiritual than material: Lina's frequent code-switching was a formal, religious Arabic echoed in the Quran and hadiths. In addition, rather than having a morbid sense of the present and future, Lina found hope in the will of God, as predestination is a primary belief in Islam. Nevertheless, the future is a hazy mystery according to Lina, as she paused, said "we'll see," and then flashed a warm, soft smile.

### Findings and Conclusion

While all four participants showed strong signs of acculturating the American language, culture, and ideology, they have also developed a heightened sense of Syrian identity in reaction to the Eastern and Western outlets, as well as personal memories and sources of information. Past memories and present stories, though conflicting, are the factors from which these Syrian-American spouses have come to realize their transnational identities. As Hegel noted, the self-consciousness of the individual must "manifest itself in light of rational Idea"—the *Idea* being the collective nature of the nation-state(s) in the historical moment (*Reason in History* 12). In the cases of Khaled, Fariha, Ahmed, and Lina, they were able to actualize their transnational identities in light of multifarious national identities through their use of language, action, and dress in their everyday interactions.

In times of war, manipulated by international geopolitical interests, these Syrian-Americans have maintained a strong sense of identity. However, unlike the women of the house, the men felt more of a disparity between what they were born into and what they are going to become, and this is catalyzed by the turmoil plaguing Syria (Ahmed hopes to move to Switzerland, Khaled views America as his home and Syria as his native home) (Moraga 43). But, their wives said they had always and will always identify themselves as Syrian, despite the fact that they do not plan to move back to their homeland: they are Syrians who will live in America as American citizens for the rest of their lives.

Though little in their memories actually remains in Syria, their language, custom, and dress allows them to preserve their Syrian identities. This troubled consciousness requires a terrific spectacle to actualize an assumed ideology; as Spinoza averred, fear "engenders, preserves and fosters superstition;" in other words, terror is the price to pay in order to concretize an ideology, which Kant also realized (*Treatise* 2; Lyotard 81). The objective of these Syrian-Americans, like other individuals, was to implant an ideological "foothold in the world of perpetual change," even if the foothold was momentary, in the period of a talk at a kitchen table (Iqbal 147). Hence, the participants described the future as inconceivable, and claimed that their support for Syria and their sense of Syrian nationalism had heightened. As Fariha explained,

Heart. My heart is in Syria. From my language is in Syria. Everything is about Syria. And still my mentality is Arabic. I can speak it fluently. I can speak it better than English. Hundred percent!

Certainly, language is a homeland, but, nonetheless, we must further question what other social factors and contexts—especially in times of crisis—transnational identities are faced with that impede and facilitate acquisition and acculturation, while maintaining the culture of the homeland (Ahearn 57) (Anzaldúa 81).

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