

“It’s Easier to Serve Bagels than Baba Ganoush:” Iraqi Jewish Women Articulate an Arab  
Jewish Subjectivity

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

“It’s Easier to Serve Bagels than Baba Ganoush”: Iraqi Jewish Women Articulate an Arab Jewish Subjectivity

A Thesis Presented to the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
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By Chelsie May

The term Arab Jew is not singularly defined in America’s discourse on Arab Jewish and Mizrahi studies. As a cursory summary, the Arab Jew is sometimes politically, culturally, or legally constituted depending on the predilections of academics who concern themselves with it. This inherent multiplicity in academic discussions of the term Arab Jew is not necessarily an impetus for critique. Rather, it can be an impetus for further inquiry. Those intrigued enough with the term to ask, “What is a possible Arab Jewish subjectivity?” must bear in mind the term’s multiplicity as well as its position within academia. Given these preliminaries and as a way to complicate the term further, the answer to the previously posed question might begin by locating primary source material outside of the academy. This thesis does just that, by delineating efforts to discuss the term Arab Jew with Middle Eastern or Southeast Asian born, Iraqi Jewish immigrants to America. For purposes of feasibility and precision the interviews that form the crux of this thesis take place at America’s largest Iraqi synagogue: The Sephardic Synagogue Kahal Joseph. Because a great deal of the primary source literature from Iraqi Jews is authored by those who perform male, these interviews seek to amplify the voices

of those who perform as female. When the female performing subjects of these interviews answer the question, “Do you call yourself an Arab Jew?” a possible Arab Jewish subjectivity is discernible. Such a subjectivity is informed by Israel’s discourse of scholarship on Mizrahim, constituted through three facets of culture--education, material, and an ephemeral sense of history--and characterized by various types of cognitive dissonance. Once the Arab Jewish subjectivity discerned at Kahal Joseph is dialogued with conceptions of the term already proliferating in international academia, consciousness raising can occur and the term can be proven worthy of further study.

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## Introduction

Commencing the essay “Reflections by an Arab Jew,” Ella Shohat affirmatively declares, “I am an Arab Jew.”<sup>1</sup> However, such a declaration wanders into immediate suspension as captivating auxiliaries continue the essay. Shohat buttresses her initial statement with clarifications, “Specifically, I am an Iraqi Israeli woman,” contextualizations, “Most members of my family were born and raised in Baghdad, and now live in Iraq, Israel, the U.S., England, and Holland,” historical truisms, “For Middle Easterners, the operating distinction had always been “Muslim,” “Jew,” and “Christian,” not Arab versus Jew,” and present frustrations, “I recall a well-established colleague who despite my elaborate lessons on the history of Arab Jews, still had trouble understanding that I was not a tragic anomaly.” I pedantically highlight these auxiliaries not to confuse or enervate, but to illustrate that the very content, methodology, thesis and frustrations of this succinct article essentially constitute a microcosm of Arab Jewish studies. Furthermore, pointing out that Shohat’s facade of essentialized identity, present in the article’s first sentence, is only weakened by subsequent qualifications is not a caustic critique, rather, it is a demonstration of just how precarious subjectivities can be.

Mindful of these caveats, this thesis seeks to engage with an Arab Jewish subjectivity informed by interviews that I conducted with Iraqi Jewish women from the

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<sup>1</sup> Shohat, Ella. *Reflections by an Arab Jew. The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage*. Seal Press. 2003.

Sephardic synagogue Kahal Joseph, in which discussions and recognition of European affinity, specifically a British affinity, figured prominently. I endeavored in the name of asking, “What is a possible Arab Jewish subjectivity?” The subjectivity I located among the cohort I interviewed is an iteration in the vein of the scholarship on Mizrahim discourse in Arab Jewish studies insofar as it is arrived at through in particular, three facets of culture: education, material, and an ephemeral sense of history, and characterized by several types of cognitive dissonance specifically those engendered from research on human effectiveness and emotion, self-discrepancy theory, neuroscience and affect, and mood congruency. The idea is that the diverse backgrounds of the Iraqi Jewish women who comprise my interview sample, along with how these women came to be characterized by European, and specifically British influence, reveal that the more that Europeanness reverberates in their everyday lives, the more their inherited and accumulated Arabness is a cognition that facilitates dissonance. My hope is that such a critically examined subjectivity will be of benefit to Arab Jewish and Mizrahi studies as it will highlight the multiplicity of subjectivities possible for the Arab Jew and demonstrate that these subjectivities are viable enough to elicit further study. The particular assumptions of cognitive dissonance under which I operate will be delineated in greater detail later in this introduction, but in the interest of some clarification, “The theory of cognitive dissonance is based on the idea that inconsistency between elements of knowledge (cognitions) leads to a negative affective state that can motivate changes in elements of knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Because a description of Arab Jewish subjectivity is the crux of

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<sup>2</sup> Harmon-Jones, Eddie. *The Role of Affect in Cognitive Dissonance Processes*. *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*. 2001. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. 238.



my present endeavor I will explain my understanding of subjectivity rather didactically after justifying my use of cognitive dissonance theory through an example of the theory's application and its explanation. This introduction will also include a discussion of Scholarship in Jewish Studies on non-Ashkenazim and a detailing of my Methodology and Interview Procedures.

### Introduction: Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Theories of cognitive dissonance, when applied contextually, allowed me to productively process some of my interviewees' more candid but abstruse statements. For example, consider a sentiment expressed in Victoria's interview, a woman who was born in Iraq and left in 1970

V: "Iraqi Jews I am Iraqi Jew"

C: "Okay you think so"

V: "That's for sure yeah"

C: "Um why"

V: "Because born in Iraq grew up in Iraq but um I don't have the Arab mentality that's what I mean although Iraq is part of the Arab world I should belong to the Arab if not directly indirectly through Iraq but I mean I don't I don't have such a feeling"<sup>3</sup>

Victoria's last statement suggests the presence of a certain amount of cognitive dissonance insofar as she, 'knows [she] should belong to the Arab if not directly indirectly through Iraq', but does not. Certain studies of cognitive dissonance, concerned with human effectiveness vis-a-vis the presence of cognitive dissonance, say this about emotion, "This view of dissonance fits with views of emotion that posit that emotional states serve adaptive functions. Following Darwin (1872), emotion scientists (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Izard 1977) suggest that emotions serve the function of increasing chances of

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<sup>3</sup> After familiarizing myself with a fair amount of oral history literature and studies that explicitly employed interview dialogues as evidence, I came to feel most comfortable with transcribing the women's responses in keeping with their natural cadence. Fillers, pauses, and non-linear thought processes are left as un-retouched as possible and little punctuation is used because I feel that it imparts the most agency possible for interviewees who are already sacrificing so much self-control by allowing me access to their articulations.

individual survival by organizing, motivating, and sustaining behavior in response to significant events.”<sup>4</sup> Emotional states appear to be one of the sites where knowledge (cognitions) congregates and operates in order to generate survivable or less survivable effects. In the above quote, Victoria’s ‘mentality’, and ‘feeling’, are essentially knowledge and emotion respectively. Per the terms of cognitive dissonance theory, her inability to identify as Arab is legitimate, despite her admitted awareness that such an identification is not out of the question. This legitimacy is predicated on the fact that this exact response increases Victoria’s chances of individual survival.

The articulation of cognitive dissonance that has been initially offered for clarification, coming from a book titled The Handbook of Social Cognition, and operating as part of psychological research, appeals to desires for logic and consistency. I might reject positivist notions that privilege scientific studies as inherently

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<sup>4</sup> Harmon-Jones, Eddie. The Role of Affect in Cognitive Dissonance Processes. *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*. 2001. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. Ibid. 241. I am aware that the mere presence of any Darwinian substantiation can be of some cause for concern for scholars of Jewish history. Expressing this concern in one of her short stories, Egyptian born, Levantine Jew Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff has written, “Yes, Darwin worried me. If Darwin were right, then the Nazis were right. There was a master race, and when it had destroyed all of mankind it could only destroy itself.” Because I am sensitive to such concerns I must clarify my use of the quote this footnote is responsible for. I am most interested in exactly two words from the quote: individual survival. Discerning how subjectivities influence a person’s ability to live is my goal with this particular example. Thus, I employ the above quote because it discusses individual survival, which is the best substantive and cognitive dissonance related approximation of the the iteration of individual survival I am most intrigued by, this being survivability. I read the above quote as a possible way to explain how individuals increase their survivability and not some sort of immutable, Darwinian, condemning individual survival per se. When I say survivability I mean something along the lines of the amalgamated and created toolbox of techniques individuals and communities harness in the name of perpetuating themselves in historical memory rather than in physical space as bodies which is what I take survival to be. A survival tactic might be that certain bodies acclimate to warmer climates over time, while a survivability technique might be, as Victoria demonstrates, the defense mechanism of emotional stability she employs in the name of perpetuating herself as an Iraqi Jew rather than an Arab Jew. I understand both my distinction between survival and survivability and use of the Darwinian influenced quote as sound because they are facets to bolster larger claims and not the crux of claims. The researchers cited in the above study were not necessarily Darwinian enthusiasts in an unequivocal way; his work was likely a catalyst at best. Similarly, “individual survival” and what the quote suggests about emotions were catalysts for me.

Kahanoff, Shohet Jacqueline. “Europe From Afar.” Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff. Stanford University Press. Stanford. 2011. 102.

epistemologically dependable and sound. Furthermore, insofar as the word knowledge is ambiguous and problematized enough to garner endless amounts of poststructural criticism, it is difficult to employ it without qualification.<sup>5</sup> However, as far as an explanation of Victoria's musings, the theory validates itself and can likely be employed even more responsibly within discussions of subjectivity. While there are several different versions of dissonance theory and different paradigms in dissonance research, I find it useful to be familiar with a generally agreed upon conception of cognitive dissonance theory, "As presented by Festinger in 1957, dissonance theory began by postulating that pairs of cognitions (elements of knowledge) can be relevant or irrelevant to one another. If two cognitions are relevant to each other, they are either consonant or dissonant."<sup>6</sup> When individuals become overwhelmed with dissonant cognitions, there is cause for concern because, "The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, motivates the person to reduce the dissonance and leads to avoidance of information likely to increase the dissonance."<sup>7</sup> Per this diagnosis, I will demonstrate how a subjectivity informed by cognitive dissonance is a possibility for my sample population given that their interviews were revealing of both a psychological discomfort and a discerning relationship with information acquisition vis-a-vis Arab Jewishness.

To the extent that an Arab Jewish cognitive dissonance subjectivity has been articulated in previous literature concerning Arab Jews, it has not been expounded upon

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<sup>5</sup> "Knowledge refers not only to ideas but to institutions and structures, everyday practices as well as specialized rituals, all of which constitute social relationships." Scott Wallach, Joan. Gender and the Politics of History. Columbia University Press. New York. 1988. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Harmon-Jones, Eddie. Mills, Judson. Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology. American Psychological Association. 1993. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

at length or contextualized to a great extent. The mention of this lack is not a criticism at all, rather it is a justification for further discussion. For instance, Lital Levy has suggested the possibility for something like cognitive dissonance to inform an Arab Jewish subjectivity. Referring to the Arab Jewish intellectuals of her study, she writes, "...they sought to inscribe themselves into what they saw as the modern world as modern people, making themselves both objects and subjects of modernity--but implicit in this inscription was always a "double consciousness" of themselves as Jews in a predominantly Muslim and Christian Arab world."<sup>8</sup> Of course I understand that cognitive dissonance and double consciousness are not one and the same and I am not insinuating that Levy herself purports this. I do however think there is a productivity in discerning how both the overlap and mismatches between the two theories, can offer something to an Arab Jewish subjectivity. Levy is informed by W.E.B Du Bois' conceptualization of double consciousness, when he wrote in the nineteenth-century, "One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings [...]."<sup>9</sup> With his articulations of double consciousness, Du Bois was trying to define a particular African American phenomenon informed by a theory whose past iterations he may or may not have been significantly informed of.<sup>10</sup> These past iterations include something close to a medicalized version of double consciousness where those afflicted, suffered from a split

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<sup>8</sup> Levy, Lital. Jewish Writers in the Arab East in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863--1914. University of California, Berkeley Dissertation. 2007. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Footnote 5.

<sup>10</sup> Dickerson, D. Bruce Jr. W.E.B Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness. *American Literature*, Vol. 64, No. 2. 1992. 299

personality and is an iteration close to what I have purported as cognitive dissonance.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that the insistences from Kahal Joseph's are not exactly indicative of Du Bois' double consciousness because their two unreconciled parts do not exactly have a relationship of parity, nor are they both explicitly strivings. It is clear that the European part of their double consciousness is a striving and is highly held, but the Middle Eastern aspect is akin to an inheritance. Rather than rebuff this inheritance entirely, they reconcile themselves to it by exalting the Iraqi rather than the Arab. This particular double consciousness still grapples with a twoness, but the utopian or symbiotic conclusion Du Bois might be hoping for, if it exists for Kahal Joseph's women, is in a much more nascent stage.

While both cognitive dissonance and double consciousness offer a diagnosis, what I find useful about Du Bois' double consciousness is that it also offers a defense for the afflicted. About Du Bois' double consciousness it has been written, "Because the idea of double consciousness explicitly emphasized the integrity of distinctive states in the individual who was its subject, it helped Du Bois to get around the dilemma his idea of distinctiveness so long had posed. Double consciousness allowed for a sense of distinctiveness that really did entail equality, a sense of distinctiveness that did not imply inferiority."<sup>12</sup> Such a defense is important because for both cognitive dissonance and double consciousness, reconciling oneself to the reality of constantly feeling split is an aspect of living with the dissonance or doubleness, whether or not one chooses to mitigate it. Furthermore, Du Bois' discussion is helpful as it purports the possibility that

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 300.

<sup>12</sup> 305.

those informed by double consciousness are stymied from ever fully actualizing, from ever genuinely ascertaining a subject position beyond the doubleness.<sup>13</sup> As I will soon discuss, the interviewees of my study had difficulty relating to an Arab Jewish conception, and their double consciousness is likely partly responsible for this.

The cognitive dissonance afflicting the Arab Jewish women I interviewed is a product of a perceived discrepancy between their Arab heritage and European influences. Establishing how British colonialism and mandatory presence complicated Arabness for Iraqi Jews, facilitates a discussion of how the more these women continue to be informed by a European ethos, the more their Arabness is a cognition that facilitates dissonance. Their cognitive dissonance arises out of their displacement from their native Iraqi Jewish communities to America where Jewishness, Arabness and Iraqiness might not be considered synonymous with American. Furthermore, in revealing this dissonance, the women of Kahal Joseph are harking back to an already canonized discourse within the realm of Arab Jewish studies. As I will better explain in the body of this thesis, such a discourse stipulates that the Arab Jew is created through language in culture. Such a private creation then comes up against, depending on the environment, either Ashkenazi or European public expectation. The women I interviewed transported and exacerbated such feelings with them upon immigration to America. To be sure, I understand that no two women and even no cohort of women with the same heritage and same religious institutional affiliation, are the same. The women's responses did not entirely corroborate one another and some responses were aberrations as far as the cognitive dissonant

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 306.

subjectivity goes. However, I hope it is realized that by using experience as evidence critically in order to assert a possible subjectivity I am not trying to generalize or obfuscate particularities. The particular female Arab Jewish subjectivity of this study can be proven to be available for these women for overarching reasons but also in more minute specificities. This is a female subjectivity only in so far as it is female articulated and informed by a feminist consciousness. It would be worthwhile to discern to what extent such a subjectivity is available to other Arab Jewish women and in a broader sense to Arab Jewish men.

#### Introduction: A Poststructural Subjectivity

While it is often more productive to think beyond binaries, because identity and subjectivity are perceived as intimately related, it is beneficial to discuss their departure from each other in order to come to an understanding of both. Comprehending the difference between identity and subjectivity is not intuitive. I offer my own conceptualization because one of the most deliberate aspects of this thesis is its fixation with subjectivity rather than identity. According to Chris Weedon, “Identity is perhaps best understood as a limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity as apparently what one *is*.”<sup>14</sup> Utilizing a poststructuralist prism to read this sentence, the operative word is fixing. Given poststructuralism’s preoccupation with reconstitution, cause for concern arises from the perceptively militant and unyielding implications of this term “fixing”. Weedon’s definition bolsters a particularly dominant understanding of identity as intrinsic and inherited, stable and capable of being taken for

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<sup>14</sup> Weedon, Chris. Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging. McGraw-Hill. 2004. 19.

granted.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a reasonable issue one might have with identity is its propensity to assert a single subjectivity as a person's crux. In fact, subjectivities are explicitly multiple and should not be reduced.

Subjectivity may be less familiar and more intellectually exhausting given that it is multiply constituted, but for those concerned with the immutable insinuations of identity, subjectivity as an alternative is a relief. The relief of subjectivity comes from what the term can mean and facilitate. As I have just established a partiality for poststructuralism, as an endeavoring towards a definition of subjectivity it is useful to understand that, "...poststructural theories assert that one's subjectivity, one's sense of self, is constituted in the same process through which one learns language, and it is reconstituted each time one thinks, speaks, or acts."<sup>16</sup> This informationally saturated sentence requires unpacking. First, there is the forgivingly lucid alleging that subjectivity is, "one's sense of self." The functionality of a subjectivity is its ability to provide an individual with a sense of self, similar to the way that the functionality of identity says, "what one *is*." In this case, partiality for subjectivity arises from the semblance of agency it offers and the multiplicity it implies. Second, this definition states that subjectivities are constituted. Constitution is useful because it suggests fluidity and volition while also drawing attention to processes. Conversely, identity suggests something that is static, something saddled upon a human being. Finally, subjectivity is notable because it is newly bolstered each time someone thinks, speaks or acts. Bolstering is necessary

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<sup>15</sup> Spector, Scott. Forget Assimilation: Introducing Subjectivity to German-Jewish History. *Jewish History*, Vol. 20, No. 3/4. 2006. 356.

<sup>16</sup> Kim, Seung-kyung. Mccann, Carole. Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives. Routledge. 2009. 308.



because it lends disparate acts throughout time, coherence. This bolstering is different from the “limited and temporary fixing” in the definition of identity above because its end goal is not a single, unyielding core.

Frameworks for understanding and utilizing subjectivity proliferate. While the poststructuralist framework upon which the above definition locates its genesis, helps us to contextualize this term subjectivity and makes the term more intelligible, it also demands from us certain other facets of knowledge. As I am not a linguist or behaviorist, I cannot say with certainty that I would be able to define a female Arab Jewish informed only by the above definition. I offer the poststructuralist definition because I am partial to its insistence upon reiteration and its possibility for facilitating agency. However, I am also working with another definition of subjectivity. Along similar lines, but not so paradigmatically rigid, subjectivity is, “... the intricate, complex, and self-contradictory ways in which historical actors experience their place in the world, *in contrast to* how they are perceived by others, or how they are ordered within relatively rigid external systems.”<sup>17</sup> In short, it follows from this articulation that subjectivity is an ongoing dialectic. I find favor with this definition’s assertion that subjectivity is predicated on a recognition of consciousness and attention to experience. Yoking these two definitions, I will say that this thesis takes subjectivity as one’s sense of self that is experientially and dialectically actualized. Given what this thesis’ working assertion of subjectivity is predicated on, we have the disparate material with which to begin a discussion of methodology and background.

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<sup>17</sup> Spector, Scott. Forget Assimilation: Introducing Subjectivity to German-Jewish History. *Jewish History*, Vol. 20, No. 3/4. 2006. 358.

## Introduction: Scholarship in Jewish Studies on non-Ashkenazim

Much of the current literature concerning non-Ashkenazi Jews, no matter its orientation, contains pleas regarding the necessity and imperativeness of studying non-Ashkenazim. Such pleas, asserting that Jewish studies' Ashkenazic preoccupation must be corrected despite the fact that Arab, Sephardi, Mizrahi and Oriental Jews in modern times are numerically marginal compared to their Ashkenazi coreligionists, are both accurate in their diagnosis and provoking in their suggestion.<sup>18</sup> These pleas are not polemics; rather they are intellectually and historically sensitive catalysts. While studying modern Arab Jewish intellectuals, Lital Levy has diagnosed this dearth quite accurately, describing how, within the last ten years, scholars of Sephardi and Middle Eastern/ North African Jewry have attempted an engagement with Jewish studies scholars outside of their own subfield. What these engagements in the form of a recent proliferation of Sephardi and Middle Eastern/ North African Jewish centered writing lack is the inclusion of conceptual frameworks that can facilitate their integration into general historical studies.<sup>19</sup> To the extent that this description is accurate, my current endeavor of discussing subjectivities utilizing oral history methodology and informed by alternative epistemologies and the necessity to use experience critically, is a remedy of sorts.

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<sup>18</sup> "By the early nineteenth century, the previous situation had been completely reversed, with Ashkenazi Jewry estimated at about eighty percent of Jewish population; this figure reached as high as ninety percent prior to World War Two." "Nevertheless, their modern historical experience, part of the global experience of Jewish modernity, has not been downplayed due to their relatively small numbers, but effaced from the story of Jewish modernity altogether." Levy, Lital. Jewish Writers in the Arab East in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863--1914. University of California, Berkeley Dissertation. 2007. 41

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 42

To further illustrate this contention and concern with non-Ashkenazi Jewish history's marginalization, a more narrowed example can be offered. Writing about Sephardim in America Aviva Ben-Ur is direct in diagnosing the aforementioned dearth, persevering toward a correction and hoping for continued engagement.<sup>20</sup> By questioning the very existence of Ashkenazi Jewish hegemony of Jewish history, she uncovers the absurdities it is predicated upon. While the Sephardim have never risen above four percent of United States Jewry, their very marginality is in fact part of what makes them noteworthy for Jewish society at large.<sup>21</sup> Sephardim deserve academic engagement because it is intellectually intriguing and meritorious to do so, and also quite practically because, "The acknowledged portrait of American Jewish history and society remains incomplete without the integration of non-Ashkenazi Jews."<sup>22</sup> Ben-Ur's discussion of co-ethnic recognition failure among Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews along with a delineation of Sephardi-American activity is an attempt to challenge established Jewish studies paradigms and also inspire further scholarship given that hers is a study of Spanish speaking Sephardim and not for instance, Arabic speaking other non-Ashkenazim such as Middle Eastern Jews. She points out that hers is the first significant scholarly endeavor concerning Iberian originated Jews and that there is only one study dedicated to Arabic speaking American Jews. These lacuna coupled with demographic numbers and general curiosity shifting in favor of non-Ashkenazim, inform her assertion that there is certainly work to be done in this vein.

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<sup>20</sup> Ben-Ur, Aviva. Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History. New York University Press. 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

While I am not familiar enough with American Jewish history to stake my claim to it deliberately, American Arab Jewish women figure prominently in my work, providing this current endeavor with greater practical purpose, given its ability to indirectly respond to Ben-Ur's plea. My work is inspired by an Arab Jewish history heavily imbued with modern Middle Eastern history and is an attempt to examine critically the term "Arab Jew" in a discursive manner as it relates to said Arab Jewish history. Still, the cabal of catalysts for this work are grounded in genuine recognitions of dearth manifesting themselves in various loci and fields of study. Suggestively, these pleas and diagnoses oriented me toward particular methodologies, research choices and epistemologies, to which I will now turn.

#### Introduction: Methodology and Interview Procedures

As my discussion of research choices and epistemologies will quickly become diffuse, I will articulate my partiality for oral history methodology before actually detailing my interview process. As the pleas I have just expounded upon attuned me to, by choosing to study Arab Jews, I was engaging with the numerically and academically marginalized. If general Arab Jewish history is marginalized, then not surprisingly Arab Jewish women are marginalized even more so. While female academics are highly represented in the field of Arab Jewish history, women as subjects of history in this field are not.<sup>23</sup> However, aspects of Orit Bashkin's New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq,<sup>24</sup> demonstrate that women are not only viable subjects of Arab Jewish history in and of themselves, they are indeed agents in this history and crucial to this

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<sup>23</sup> Bashkin, Orit. Phone conversation. November 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Bashkin, Orit. New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq. Stanford University Press. 2012.

history's conceptualization. While presenting Iraqi Jewish women's place in education, print media and Zionism Bashkin also contextualizes their presence in these spheres as an aspect of the larger women's question in Iraqi society.<sup>25</sup> Bashkin proves that there are not only primary sources pertaining to women but also that discussing them does not remove scholars from dealing with the most captivating phenomena of Arab Jewish history.

Furthermore, she is not reinscribing male centered paradigms where woman is the eternal other because her work is not only concerned with women's mere existence as writers and social commentators, but also how this existence figured within the conundrum of women in Iraqi society.<sup>26</sup> Readers are offered an understanding of this conundrum and women's operation in it and not just a reiteration of female musings or concerns. As the literature of this history has amassed nowhere near to the extent of Ashkenazi historical literature, and thus is still being written, why take the path etched by many histories throughout time and erase or stymie women's voices? Why wait until an extensive and immutably male canonical Arab Jewish history exists, in order to then revisit primary sources in order to write women's Arab Jewish history? Bashkin was informed by the

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<sup>25</sup> "Thus when Iraqi-Jewish intellectuals articulated positions on women of their community and their relationship to men, their children and the nation state, these intellectuals were also participating in a very Iraqi and Arab discourse in which one's positions on the women question signified one's political and social affiliations." Ibid. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Scott Wallach, Joan. Gender and the Politics of History. Columbia University Press. New York. 1988. "New facts might document the existence of women in the past, but they did not necessarily change the importance (or lack of it) attributed to women's activities. Indeed, the separate treatment of women could serve to confirm their marginal and particularized relationship to those (male) subjects already established as dominant and universal." In the introduction to this book and at various times in the book's essays, Scott undertakes the worthy task of conveying the imperativeness of reflecting upon the historiography of women's history, or the incorporation of women, as subjects into history as we currently know it. She discusses why a foregrounding of female authored or centered sources is not the most beneficent or assiduous of processes. In effect, she writes that female source material is put to better use when it is first acknowledged, but second and importantly, used to disabuse notions of processes. Thus, it is much more rigorous and beneficial to discuss women as subjects alongside their marginalization in the first place and potentially also alongside larger discriminating phenomena. With Scott's work in mind and considering that I am highlighting Bashkin's scholarship I felt it necessary to explain how her work heeds to Scott's call.

correct sentiments when she chose to dedicate sections of her book to women's place in print media, even if this place is overshadowed by men, just as she was correct to discuss the aspect of Iraq's nationalism question concerning women and their rights, no matter how prominently or not it figured in the scheme of things.

Inspired by such correct sentiments, interviewing Arab Jewish women and using these legitimate primary sources to engage with Arab Jewish subjectivity and Arab Jewish history at large was an attempt to foreground women during Arab Jewish history's period of growth rather than after its canonization. Interviews are a good way to gather primary sources, given their potential to engage with populations whose ability to contribute their experience is often stymied. When informed by an astute methodology, interviews offer conditions conducive to positioning women as subjects. After my initial introduction to oral history methodology, I was genuinely inspired by its possibilities. Donald A. Ritchie's book Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide<sup>27</sup> attempts to convince the reader of the imperative of oral history use stating, "As a result of such blind spots, oral history can develop information that might not have appeared in print."<sup>28</sup> The blind spots Ritchie refers to are the archival and public documents that, due to the context in which they arose, missed or ignored voices with no less of a story to tell and no less knowledge to share. Oral history of Ritchie's kind encouraged me to believe that interviews, especially those informed by oral history tenets might be a productive undertaking considering my goal to establish as subjects the previously overlooked, both the Arab Jew and the Arab Jewish woman.

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<sup>27</sup> Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. Oxford. 2003.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

I chose to interview women from the Sephardic synagogue Kahal Joseph in Los Angeles, California after learning about the congregation's significant Iraqi membership. I focused on Iraq's Jews as a particular reflection of Arab Jewish subjectivity because I find the crucible Iraqi Jews were entrenched in while still in the region as offering a particularly lucid conception of what it means to be an Arab Jew in the twentieth century and beyond. I understand that Jewish presence in Mesopotamia since the Babylonian Exile and the protected dhimmi status of minorities such as Jews in Arab lands is significant in terms of constituting Arab Jews, however as I am concerned with modern subjectivity, what I believe most supports a choice to interview only Iraqi women and engage with Arab Jewish history sources themselves primarily informed by Iraqi history, is the particular amalgam of Arab, Jewish, Iraqi and British nationalism that imbues modern Iraqi Jews and their descendants. I contacted the synagogue by phone and explained that I was a Master's student interested in interviewing Iraqi Jewish women for my thesis about Arab Jewish women in America. With the guidance of one of the synagogues most prominent female members, I secured interviews with a number of Iraqi Jewish women. Most of the interviews were conducted in person in Los Angeles and two were conducted over the phone. I attended a morning Shabbat service to talk with women informally about my research, transcribing my recollections and findings after leaving the synagogue. One of my interviews was an informal group interview the audio from which is nearly useless given the number of participants. For this reason, when considering this particular interview, I rely more on notes I took immediately following my departure and my memory of the event.

The interviews adhered to the following structure: life narrative, thoughts about terms such as Arab Jew, Mizrahi Jew and Sephardi and finally relationship to Kahal Joseph and reasons for attending. I encouraged the women to reflect most critically on their childhoods, immigration and conceptions of the term Arab Jew. By encouraging both a discussion of life narratives and theoretical grappling with terms, my hope was that I could parse out conscious and subconscious understandings of and relationship to the term Arab Jew. My interviewees were Iraqi either by birth or ancestry. Apart from Israeli born Yael, all of the women are part of a generation who came of age during the 1970s. All had immigrated to America and all had attended Kahal Joseph for at least a decade. Several of the women hailed from Iraqi Jewish satellite communities such as Burma, Singapore, and India. Their participation was voluntary and accepted based on their ancestry, membership at Kahal Joseph and relationship with the synagogue's Sisterhood. Participation in Kahal Joseph's Sisterhood, was posited as an initial requirement because the Sisterhood as an organized body within the synagogue provides a center of attention. Focus on Sisterhood members was merely a way to further contextualize and narrow the subject of my work, however artificial this contextualizing may be. This focus achieved more or less, the desired effect. While the Sisterhood was no longer as much of an operative body in the scheme of the Synagogue, focusing on its cohort narrowed my sample to women with certain common characteristics. This cohort contained women of at least middle age, who spoke excellent English with me and with each other, but were also familiar with Arabic and at least one other language they had learned in their country of origin. However my findings might be influenced by the



representativeness, or lack there of, of this cohort I consider such contextualization to be ultimately beneficial. More in-depth demographic data will be provided later in this thesis, when I discuss their interviews in relation to subjectivity.

The interviews I conducted with women at Kahal Joseph constitute the greatest share of my primary source evidence. Having internalized Patricia Hill Collins' critiques of Eurocentric masculinist knowledge and articulations about "concrete experience as a criterion of meaning," I was determined to include non-academic voices in my discussion of female Arab Jewish subjectivity. In Black Feminist Thought, Hill Collins writes, "An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth," the coda to her discussion of an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology.<sup>29</sup> As Hill Collins states in the body of this discussion, insofar as elite white men control knowledge validations in their most influential instances, certain thoughts by extension are suppressed and it follows that there is an imperative to disrupt this cohort by discerning dissenting ways to legitimate truth claims. Such an imperative can be undertaken when scholars accept articulations of experience as viable evidence. Experience as evidence is one facet of Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology, the alternative epistemology Hill Collins proffers and it is only this aspect I am deliberately employing in this thesis. The imperative to problematize the knowledge production process as it applies to Arab Jewish history, has been recognized by those contributing to this field, "...much of the scholarship addressing Sephardi and Eastern experiences of modernity more broadly, as

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<sup>29</sup> Hill Collins, Patricia. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment. Routledge. 200. 271.

we shall see momentarily, is indebted to conceptually limiting Eurocentric assumptions.”<sup>30</sup> Cognizant of how productive alternative epistemologies can be and partial to articulations that locate experience as evidence as a facet of some of these alternative epistemologies, I wanted to use the experience of the Arab Jewish women I interviewed as evidence along with an alternative epistemology in order to employ such evidence most effectively.

Joan Wallach Scott has persuasively delineated the necessity to use experience as evidence effectively. Examining the rise to prominence of “the histories of others” and “histories of visibility/ transparency” as opposed to and at the expense of conventional history, she articulates how experience as evidence can be used as an alternative epistemology given its ability to disabuse the assumed naturalness of historical foundations and identities.<sup>31</sup> This alternative epistemology is not as succinctly named as Hill Collins’ Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology, but attempting an understanding it is: discursive, analytical and literary, but anti-empiricist, anti-relativist and anti-essentialist. In general, the evidence of experience as an alternative epistemology is an attempt to use experience critically, not merely constitutively. About this endeavor Scott writes,

It ought to be possible for historians...to, “make visible the assignment of subject-positions,” not in the sense of capturing the reality of the objects seen, but of trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and which processes themselves are unremarked and indeed achieve their effect because they are not noticed. To do this a change of object seems to be required, one that takes the emergence of concepts and identities as historical events in need of explanation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Levy, Lital. Jewish Writers in the Arab East in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863--1914. University of California, Berkeley Dissertation. 2007. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Scott Wallach, Joan. *The Evidence of Experience*. Critical Inquiry, Vol. 17, No. 4. The University of Chicago Press. 1991.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 792.

So, the experience articulated by the interviewees of this study may constitute a particular Arab Jewish subjectivity, but such a subjectivity is self-consciously a construct, a product of time and place and useful only insofar as it can be explained as such. A manifestation of female Arab Jewish subjectivity as articulated by Arab Jewish women of Iraqi origin from Kahal Joseph depends not only on a nexus of discourses but also on a nexus of circumstances. My positing of a female Arab Jewish subjectivity is an attempt to shed light on a possibility while historicizing the engendering of this possibility. Furthermore, as this subjectivity stands for a process, while individuals may find solace in its articulated existence or some of its facets, it is mostly of use to those concerned with the term Arab Jew. Other articulations of this term exist, thus other possible Arab Jewish subjectivities exist, all of which are constructed. Dialoguing the sentiments expressed by women at Kahal Joseph with articulations of the Arab Jew in memoirs is meritorious for its consciousness raising possibilities and a space for doing so has been reserved in this thesis following the unpacking of the interviews themselves.

With certain preliminaries established, the rest of my current endeavor will proceed as follows. There will be a chapter providing useful background information and a more contextualized demographic description. This description will explain how although my sample population is dominated by a number of women from Iraq's satellite communities, including Burma and India as well as one Iranian Iraqi Jew, it is nevertheless representative of an Arab Jewish subjectivity. This chapter will include a delineation of Britain's historical relations with Iraq's Jews in Iraq and in the Iraqi satellite communities. In the following chapter, I will proceed to a discussion of female

Arab Jewish subjectivity informed by cognitive dissonance. This is the section where the women's narratives will figure most prominently and where I will try to use evidence as experience most deliberately and most effectively. In the final chapter, I will contextualize the discussion of my discerned female Arab Jewish subjectivity by dialoguing it with two canonized memoirs within the realm of Arab Jewish studies Violette Shamash's Memories of Eden: A Journey Through Jewish Baghdad and Sasson Somekh's Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew. While my source material for these purported subjectivities do not always admit explicitly to attempting to articulate an Arab Jewish subjectivity, such a dialoguing is nevertheless informative. The argument of this last section will center around how the consciousness raising act of comparing the articulations of many Arab Jews of Iraqi extraction can bolster an understanding of the term Arab Jew as a possible subject, no matter its potential problems and multiplicity.

## Chapter 1: Background

### 1.1 Iraqi Jewish Identity From Iraq to Southeast Asia

My interview sample of Iraqi Jewish women, with all of its geographic and linguistic diversity, is a metaphor of multiplicity for the Iraqi Jewish community itself. This is to say that while a great deal of Iraqi Jews have at least some familiarity with Arabic, Hebrew, the Iraqi minhag and Iraqi Jewish social operations, they are all simultaneously citizens of a Jewish social context that cannot be geographically reduced. Informed by this fact, my interview sample which included women from Baghdad, Basra, Burma, Calcutta, Eilat, London, Rangoon, Singapore and Tehran is defensible in terms of its 'Iraqiness' on both practical and esoteric grounds.

Practically, my geographically varied interview sample is an accurate reflection of the synagogue Kahal Joseph. The synagogue's website notes, "We pride ourselves on being the only one following the Baghdadi minhag in the Western United States. Yet, it also represents one of the most diverse groups, as members come from no less than twelve different countries. However, they all share a common denominator: their faith and their heritage, the same Hebrew pronunciation, and common customs."<sup>33</sup> This note is initially exemplary as it contextualizes Kahal Joseph in terms of its American surroundings. As the only synagogue to follow the Baghdadi minhag in the West, any study of Iraqi Jews in

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<sup>33</sup> Kahal Joseph Congregation A Sephardic Synagogue. "Kahal's History." <http://www.kahaljoseph.org/history.php>

America must by extension have its credibility bolstered when it locates its subject matter in this particular synagogue. Furthermore, this note situates Kahal Joseph as significantly diverse yet unequivocally Iraqi as it defines Kahal Joseph as the religious home of a demographic wide ranging in its origins but connected by particular religious facets. Those who regard Baghdad as their religious and social epicenter, no matter their location of birth possess access to the term Iraqi Jew or its more specific counterpart, Baghdadi Jew. After all, the women of my study who cannot call Iraq their country of origin, only do so because, according to their insistence, their parents had a fluid relationship with Iraqi borders. These borders were not yet subject to later concerns of policing, an openness that encouraged some Jews to depart and return to Iraq as they saw fit. All of the non-Iraqi born interviewees stipulated commerce as the reason their parents chose to settle in Southeast Asian British colonies. Even Tehran born Julia stated that her parents started their family there for business concerns and because there were already established Jewish communities in the provinces of Kermanshah and Hamadan. Furthermore, to placate the discerning among us, it should be noted that Julia and the other women not born in Iraq stipulated their origins as uncontroversial facts. This is to say, that their Iraqi Jewish parents desire to put down roots in trading centers outside Iraq was a product of time specific concerns and not because a successful Iraqi life was an impossibility.

In terms of the esoteric, as those who have written about Iraqi Jews in their Southeast Asian context stipulate, to be an Iraqi Jew is to be a part of a quintessentially

diverse community. Narrativizing the lives of several generations of Iraqi Indian women from her own family, Jael Silliman writes,

Baghdadi Jews lived and traded in small Jewish communities across the Middle East for many centuries. In the eighteenth century British imperial policies opened up economic opportunities in India and the Far East and Jews of the Middle East took advantage of them. By the nineteenth century they forged Jewish communities in the area stretching from Basra to Shanghai.<sup>34</sup>

The historical context provided by Silliman is important because it clarifies the impetus for Iraqi Jewish multiplicity as well as this multiplicity's geographical boundaries.

Furthermore, in regions such as India, Bene Israel and Cochin Jews had located themselves since ancient times. Silliman also renders the term Iraqi Jew applicable to individuals further still, by mentioning that Iraqi or Baghdadi Jews also possess the commonality of participating in extensive and trans-regional trade. Kahal Joseph's and Silliman's description of the term Iraqi Jew take specific locations as something to transgress mentally and physically, while highlighting spiritual and economic origins of Iraqi Jewishness. Silliman writes elsewhere,

It is more accurate to view the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora as a multi-centered circuit, rather than conceptualizing Baghdad as being at the core and Calcutta or Shanghai on the periphery of this complex circuit. For instance, while these communities looked to Baghdad for religious inspiration and leadership, the community's vigor and economic muscle was flexed in places like Bombay, Calcutta, and Shanghai.<sup>35</sup>

Most connected by their Jewish religious practice for the greatest amount of time, Iraqi Jews understandably take Baghdad for all of its religious prestige, as their crucible.

However, as Silliman demonstrates, this crucible cannot necessarily be upheld at the expense of the Iraqi Jewish nexus of economic relations. Ruth Fredman Cernea,

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<sup>34</sup> Silliman, Jael. *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope*. University Press of New England. Hanover. 2001. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Silliman, Jael. *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope*. University Press of New England. Hanover. 2001. 15.

discussing Burmese Jews, articulates substantive reasons as to how this nexus further defines the term Iraqi Jew,

Along these lines flowed trade, information, religious emissaries from Baghdad or Jerusalem, and marriage partners, all enabled by a common language, a common world view, and adherence to a proud traditional religious belief and structure. Intricate social relationships and common daily practices negated space; ritual adherence negated time by introducing the eternal into transitory days.<sup>36</sup>

According to how Kahal Joseph, Silliman, and Cernea discuss the Iraqi Jew, all of the women I interviewed are representative. For instance, Mariam was born in Calcutta to a mother and father whose own parents came to the region for economic reasons and is married to a fellow Iraqi Jew from Singapore. Rachel, born in Singapore is married to an Iraqi Jew from Baghdad. Yael, born in Eilat to Dalia, an Iraqi Jew from Burma and an Ashkenazi father from Germany takes solace in the fact that she has felt comfortable in any Sephardic synagogue operating under the Iraqi minhag she has entered, due to her knowledge of Iraqi Jewish prayers and songs. In a sense, my interview sample's very multiplicity of origins is the strongest rejoinder to those who may question its 'Iraqiness', because as Silliman succinctly articulates, "The Baghdadi Jewish diaspora is best conceived as an interconnected web of relationships sustained over spaces but not contained by any one place."<sup>37</sup> As it has been noted, these sustained relationships were spiritual and economic derivatives. Connected to the economic derivative source, and worthy of further explanation is the fact that Iraqi Jews also coalesce because of their connections to the British Empire and a British ethos. This British derivative source bound Iraqi Jews geographically within its Empire and congealed them subconsciously in

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<sup>36</sup> Cernea, Fredman Ruth. Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma. Lexington Books. Lanham. 2007. xv.

<sup>37</sup> Silliman, Jael. Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope. University Press of New England. Hanover. 2001. 13.



the wake of its ethos. As I have stipulated, beyond allowing Iraqi Jews to derive a sense of commonality, the British Empire and its ethos encourage in the Iraqi Jews I have personally connected with, a cognitive dissonance. Thus, considering how prominently the British figure for the Iraqi Jewish community and my own purposes, their presence must be explained historically and culturally.

## 1.2 Jews in the Early Twentieth Century British Empire

The possibility for British themes to permeate the lives of women at Kahal Joseph is predicated on the relationship fostered between the two entities during Britain's colonial and mandate endeavors. Considering how ubiquitous is the ominous conception of British expansion, negotiating just exactly how the Jews' interaction with the phenomenon could foster a relationship of reciprocity and eventual infatuation and mimicry is worthwhile. Despite the opposing forces he employs in his summary, Bernard Porter admits that considering the Empire in one's mind eye, is often productive of conceiving the British as ruthlessly committed to bolstering its own largess, "It conjures up pictures of dedicated (or arrogant) proconsuls in plumed helmets, and brave (or bullying) redcoats forming in squares, supported by enterprising (or greedy) traders and self-sacrificing (or fanatical) missionaries, to exert a dominion over palm and pine (Kipling's phrase) which was unprecedented in the annals of mankind."<sup>38</sup> Postcolonial studies as well as the critical and reproachful eye academics have turned on themselves in the wake of the canonization of essentializing and discriminatory Orientalist scholarship, are partly responsible for a reading of the British Empire and its mandates in the vain of

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<sup>38</sup> Porter, Bernard. *Absent-Minded Imperialists : Empire, Society and Culture in Britain*. Oxford University Press. 1.

Porter's conclusion: as an entity that attempted to "exert a dominion", above all else. Certainly, a reading that is ruthless and domineering is substantiated by the facts on the ground, even in less staunchly controlled land masses such as mandatory Iraq, "When Iraqis began to hear that Britain had decided to award itself a "mandate"--which they took to mean colonial status for them--they began to gather in the only public places they knew, the mosques, to hear sermons against the British."<sup>39</sup> However, to summarize the Empire so broadly is to gaze upon its history broadly as well. Any summary or gaze of this range is dangerous for its possibility to subsume other summarizations and overlook particularities. For a phenomenon which lasted one hundred years just in what some would call its heyday (1850-1950), it is difficult to understand why those interested would cling so steadfast to a single conception.<sup>40</sup> Employing a less presumptuously ominous and more problematized conception of British expansionism does not have to negate British action that was sometimes foolhardy and even simply discriminatorily atrocious. Rather, to question the framework's constricting us is an exercise in allowing for the proliferation of knowledge and the possibility to realize more rather than merely reiterate.

The more that I would like to articulate, is how exactly Iraqi Jews both in mandatory Iraq and throughout the British empire, could develop an affinity for the British that was not ephemeral or shallow, despite the Empire's more lurid action and intent. For this I will employ an understanding of the Empire articulated by, among others, David Cannadine as, "...having been the vehicle for the extension of British

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<sup>39</sup> Polk, William. Understanding Iraq. New York. Harper Collins. 2005. 74.

<sup>40</sup> Cannadine, David. Ornamentalism. Oxford University Press. New York. 2001. xix.

social structures, and the setting for the projection of British social perceptions, to the ends of the world--and back again.”<sup>41</sup> Operating with this understanding, Jews in the Empire as not only minorities, but also colonial/ mandatory subjects, are not automatically wounded by British encroachment, potentially just like no subject automatically was. In order to fully employ this understanding I will need to operate straightforwardly, describing history, and more esoterically, articulating a British ethos that imbued the Empire--an ethos that is the very quality of Britishness most informative in Iraqi Jewish lives today. Given that recounting the history of even just the British presence in the lands from which my interviewees came from is a nearly insurmountable undertaking, I will detail only the necessary aspects of Iraq’s mandatory status. This is not to say that the experience felt by the British Empire’s disparate parts can be conflated, or that historical episodes from these parts will not be used for elucidation. Rather, it is a realization that the intricacies of experience particular to each subject population are not necessary to detail extensively in part because British determinism, informed by the imperative to extend social structures was so pervasive. This social structure conscious agenda is the commonality between all British subjects insofar as it is at least one of the paradigms under which the British operated and thus one of the paradigms by which all subjects could have been potentially affected.

### 1.3 The Historical Component of Iraqi Jewish-British Reciprocity

Apart from, but of course inextricably tied to its agenda, British imperial practice became ever streamlined and monolithic throughout its unfolding, and certainly by 1914

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. xix.

when it began to secure parts of Iraq such as Basra and lands near Iraq such as Kuwait.

Specifically in terms of this initial involvement William Polk summarizes,

The British took these steps ostensibly to protect the oil field in nearby Iran whose production they needed for their navy, but from the first days, their occupation was marked by a very different objective. They immediately began to introduce British-Indian laws, police, bureaucracy, and government in the area of their control. That is, they began to treat their piece of Iraq as a part of the Indian empire.<sup>42</sup>

Less important than the fact that Britain had strategic concerns in mind as she extended

her Empire in both India and Iraq, one should note that British imperialist practice had

become so streamlined that its application unfolded as a grafting of codified precedent.

The British likely treated Iraq similarly to India not merely because their Indian colony

was secured or because they were apathetic in practice, but because their impetus for

expansion was a harp on the same theme throughout its existence. This theme, as

previously mentioned, was a preoccupation with social structures, which found its origins

in the minds of certain imperialists concerned with preserving the social structures of

Britain by replicating them throughout the world. Cannadine articulates this theme

exactly when he writes,

For insofar as they regarded their empire as 'one vast interconnected world,' they did not necessarily do so in disadvantaged or critical contrast to the way they perceived their own metropolitan society. Rather, they were at least as likely to envisage the social structure of their empire--as their predecessors had done before them--by analogy to what they knew of 'home,' or in replication of it, or in parallel to it, or in extension of it, or (sometimes) in idealization of it, or (even, and increasingly) in nostalgia for it.<sup>43</sup>

Models of hierarchy and regimentation dominated British social structure, holding sway

with influential groups of people who were conservative in their mindset and unhappy

with this hierarchy disintegrating. Those most literally and figuratively moved by an

ideology dependent on bolstering social structures, the gentlemen emigrants, were more

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<sup>42</sup> Polk, William. Understanding Iraq. New York. Harper Collins. 2005. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Cannadine, David. Ornamentalism. Oxford University Press. New York. 2001. 4-5.

or less part of the ruling class that had secured itself in part by harnessing and exploiting British agriculture, a way of life whose precarity was making itself more and more known throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>44</sup> As this agricultural way of life was jeopardized enough to become untenable as a means of existence for its previous beneficiaries, the least lucky among the ruling class undertook relocation to British colonies in the hopes of reestablishing themselves and supplanting familiar and untainted British social structures. Other ruling class imperialists attuned to social structures were informed by what they understood as their right to rule others, an understanding involving “both arrogance and altruism.”<sup>45</sup> Those considering themselves to pose a right to rule were operating in a society whose social structures had normalized the existence of lord-peasant relationships and it was this relationship they hoped to replicate in the colonies with those of lower social classes. Still, as Porter clarifies, they were not necessarily inclined to subjugate others based on class or race for its sheer wont, “Racism of this kind is by no means incompatible with racial tolerance in one’s personal relations: you can like, cultivate as friends, be protective of, even envy beings that are considered inferior to yourself. This sort of imperialist felt exactly the same way towards the ‘lower’ classes back home.”<sup>46</sup> Everything about this operating assumption might be naive, myopic, and wrongheaded, but the presence of such qualities does not immediately foreclose possibilities for reciprocity, that for instance, were crucial to Iraqi Jewish-British relations in the colonies and mandates. The gentlemen emigrants and the ruling

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Porter, Bernard. *Absent-Minded Imperialists : Empire, Society and Culture in Britain*. Oxford University Press. 2006. 228.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 230.

imperialists concerned with social structure did not possess completely benign imperialist ideals and aspirations. Their prejudice and self-consumption is potentially indisputable, but not necessarily capable of dwelling on at least in terms of its sheer ignorance for our current purposes, given the possibilities this sensibility facilitated. What the particular understanding of colonial impetus and cadence concerned with social structures opens for discussion is the possibility that Jews in British colonies and mandates were not immediately dejected in essence, upon British encroachment. Essentially, it is possible to assert that Iraqi Jewish-British interaction in these circumstances depended on where Jews located themselves socially. As previously mentioned, with history and an ethos as its foundation, Jews could have a reciprocal relationship with the British Empire. This potentially ominous Empire, was not entirely so for the Jews.

Jewish reaction to British presence in Iraq was precedented. This precedent was per Jewish tendencies throughout history, as Abbas Shiblak writes, “It is reasonable to assume that the Jews, like other minorities, tended to keep on the right side of authority, be it Turkish or British.”<sup>47</sup> Fully comprehending their own precarity based partly on the fact that their protected habitation in any given land often depended on benevolence from authorities, Jews were historically labeled as proxies for rulers, or were at least loyal to them. As World War I ended Turkish control of Mesopotamia, the British endeavored to fill this power vacuum by receiving a mandate from the League of Nations in 1920. The Jews implicitly understood the value in both ingratiating themselves towards the British and in allowing themselves to be exploited for their commercial success as well as ability

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<sup>47</sup> Shiblak, Abbas. Iraqi Jews: A History. Saqi Books. 2005. 55.

to act as citizens accepting of mandatory rule. Explicitly speaking, Jews were recruited by the British in large numbers to form their commercial and administrative leadership. Of course, it would be inaccurate to conceptualize British presence in Iraq monolithically. At least one potential consistency was that the British were more interested in engendering pro-British sympathies and a pro-British government in Iraq, than being an actual physical presence. Preoccupied with nuanced matters such as Palestine and commercialism, it is logical that Britain would strive to provoke affinity rather than mere compliance from their subjects.

#### 1.4 The British Ethos Component of Iraqi Jewish-British Reciprocity

While the British may have attempted to operate externally and decisively in order to fulfill their political desires and implement their imperial practice, their actions nevertheless fomented a British character in society. While the manifestation of this British ethos and what it elicited from Jews varied from Iraq to places like Burma and India, its existence once again unites the communities across space and resonates into the present. The women of Kahal Joseph are physically displaced from their countries of origin, but this ethos, for the way it imbedded itself in their hearts and minds, has proven inescapable. Thus, it is worth dwelling on its trajectory in both Iraq and two Southeast Asian communities, India and Burma. The trajectory of this ethos begins, for both locations, in roughly the dawn of the twentieth century. While offering an end date for the ethos itself would be inaccurate insofar as continues to manifest, for the sake of clarity, an end of the ethos' growth in the two physical places of Iraq and Southeast is roughly the late 1970s.

This ethos, at its crux, is one of codependence. Experiencing it was an act similar for all Jews across the Empire, even if its coming into being and dissemination wrought different effects. The biggest difference between the Iraqi British ethos and the Southeast Asian British ethos is that the former facilitated a degree of integration into the larger Iraqi state while the latter further cemented Iraqi Jewish communities as societally separate in Southeast Asia no matter how peaceable was this separation's quality. As a result, one should not expect their characters or present day manifestations to be carbon copies. Furthermore, insofar as the mandatory system faced greater problematization since its conception, Iraqi British ethos appears less emphatic and more pragmatic. As specific examples will show, to the extent that the Jews of Iraq accepted the British, they did so actively and initially using physical gestures, for example, by filling British cabinet positions. These initial gestures would ultimately imprint a Britishness predicated in most cases on a sentiment that ranged from indebtedness to ambivalence. Polk gets at the particular quality of Britishness engendered in Iraqi Jews as they tried to integrate themselves into the evolving Iraqi state while simultaneously ingratiating themselves to the British,

It would be centuries before the converts became full members of the dominant society. Christians and Jews took even longer. In Iraq, it was more or less accomplished in the 1920s, as symbolized by the membership of an Iraqi Jew in the first cabinet in the government of "British Iraq" and the rise to prominence of both Christians and Jews in commerce, education, and administration.<sup>48</sup>

Aware of their unwelcome presence in the region on the one hand and their internationally sanctioned mandate on the other and informed by monetary concerns, the British reasoned to govern in a proxy fashion devising, "... a government with an 'Arab facade' containing all of the external trappings and institutions of a constitutional

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<sup>48</sup> Polk, William. Understanding Iraq. New York. Harper Collins. 2005. 105.



monarchy, complete with cabinet, political parties, and parliament on the British model.”<sup>49</sup> In order to actualize all that they had reasoned, the British resulted to appealing to elite minorities like the Jews and unscrupulously instigating what might previously had been shallow ethnic and religious tensions.<sup>50</sup> Elaborating on this act of instigation as well as British pragmatism in general, Shiblak writes, “...Britain...was the first to appreciate the role of the Jewish communities.”<sup>51</sup> This interest in Jewish communities was probably motivated by the commercial role of the Jews. Moreover, London was beginning to show interest in finding an extra-European solution to the Jewish question. It was thought that a European Jewish presence in the Arab east might support British interests in the area and simultaneously solve the problem of Jewish immigration to Britain.

Parallel to these purely pragmatic acts, by the time the British were winding down their official mandate in Iraq, they had also become cemented in the minds of Iraqi Jews as necessary bedfellows for two reasons, both dealing with the increasing amount of social upheaval that the 1930s set off. First, before having their mandate terminated in 1932, the British had established treaties with the Iraqi government, ensuring their continued political and socioeconomic presence in the region.<sup>52</sup> Those Iraqis hoping to terminate ties with Britain completely were not few, and societal unrest ensued. It seems that Iraq’s Jews had to come down on one side or the other of this continued British presence and although not all can be spoken for, it logically follows that the binds of Iraqi

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<sup>49</sup> Simon, Reeva S. *Iraq between the two world wars : the creation and implementation of a nationalist ideology.* Columbia University Press. 1986. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Shiblak, Abbas. *Iraqi Jews: A History.* Saqi Books. 2005. 64.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 56-7.

<sup>52</sup> Bashkin, Orit. *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq.* Stanford University Press. 2012. 18.

Jewish-British relations could not be severed abruptly. Some form of Iraqi Jewish-British codependence was likely to remain and despite that this went against the grain of the British antipathy expressed by Iraqi society in general, the British were reflected in a more benevolent light for the Jews. Second, by the 1940s, due to changing political ideologies among the Muslim and Christian Iraqi elites along with these elites' response to troubles in Palestine, the Jews of Iraq sensed themselves as ever more precariously situated. About these changes among the non-Jewish elite, the burgeoning Jewish feelings, and their effects, Orit Bashkin writes, "Living under a pro-German regime during the days of Rashid Ali al-Kaylani's coup and the subsequent Farhud profoundly altered their perceptions of Iraqi Arab nationalism."<sup>53</sup> British protection did not come to fruition in the 1941 pogrom known as the Farhud. Furthermore, confusion on the part of those Iraqis defeated in the war ensuing with the British after the Rashid Ali coup, where the defeated thought that Iraq's Jews were celebrating misfortune and welcoming back the British when they were in fact celebrating Shavuot, was partly responsible for the violence. Iraq's Jews may have welcomed the British Regent Abdallah as an alternative to Rashid Ali, but they were not explicitly indulging in anyone's defeat. Moreover, the Jews may have theoretically cleaved to the British upon recognizing fomenting fascism in Iraq, such a response being pragmatic and inspired by their growing disenchantment with the Iraqi government they once knew. This is all to say that Iraqi Jewish conception of Britain was likely never grandiose; it was realistic, but this realism does not temper the general viewpoint Iraqi Jews hold about Britain. Iraqi Jewish conception of the British

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 22.

was graduated and multi-faceted from its conception. Still, British aspirations, whether they were informed by issues relating to Palestine or the need to placate a Middle East changed by WWI, of actualizing in the region through the Jews a feeling of undeniable codependence, were successful. While Nazism largely only existed as a facet of fascism and the burgeoning relationship between Iraqi's Muslim Arab nationalists and Germany on the eve of WWII was likely antagonized by British presence in the first place, it was nevertheless reasonably disheartening for the Jews of Iraq to witness. By acting as the presumed guarantor of Iraqi presence and protection the British created the possibility for an affinity. The continued presence of this realistic British ethos has become indelible, in the ways Iraqi Jews reiterate a history that reveals the relationship of Iraqi Jewish-British codependence, even when the British are not explicitly named. Part of my interview with Noa born in Baghdad in 1948 exemplifies this reiteration of codependence,

N: "It didn't matter if the neighbor was Jewish or Muslim or the other way around so they existed side by side they were you know its just after when Nazi Germany and that Nazi influence came in that's when things started to to you know like to go like uhhh the anti-Semitism and all of that probably there would have been in some but not as much as after actually that's when they had like first pogrom was in 1941 and that was really created by Nazi Germany"

C: "You think so"

N: "Oh yeah definitely cuz um Haj Amin al-Husseini was from Israel he was in Germany and Germany wanted to get the oil of the Arab world and so they negotiated he told them he'll deliver uhhhh like a swap like will kill the Jews and he'll deliver the oil something like that and they started to to do propaganda anti-Semitic propaganda from that point on"

Noa may not go as far as to articulate the less straight forward role of the British in all of this history, but what she says is in fact an echo of this history of Iraqi Jewish-British codependence as it highlights events that encouraged this codependency to exist. Her specific iteration harks back to the amalgamation of this history that I have presented. This amalgamated history and the way it manifests itself in Noa are the theoretical on the

one hand and the literal or manifested on the other, aspects of the British ethos in Iraq I have been trying to elucidate.

A British ethos in Southeast Asia, even with all of its nuance, is more easily recognizable along traditional lines of affinity. While it is the trend to discuss Iraqi Jews in Iraq with much equivocation, such a trend is not as pervasive in discussions of Southeast Asian Iraqi Jews in their respective contexts. This is not to say that the lives of these Jews are not conveyed as complex (they certainly are) but it seems that Jews chose and were expected to exist largely in hermetic communities and were not as pressed to discern an uncompromising Indian or Burmese Jewish identity in such a combative way as Iraqi situated Jews were. Thus, discussing Burmese Jews Cernea can straightforwardly suggest, “For the Baghdadis, the British and Jewish dimensions of identity were all that mattered; the Burmese context was irrelevant to the realization of who they were and who they could be.”<sup>54</sup> Two pieces of Cernea’s evidence for such a worldview, similarly do not insist on radical conceptualizations, “Jewish law and the Hebrew language reinforce the realization of Jewish identity as inherently international and eternal,” and “The English, as well as the Jews, were aliens in Burma, and interacted with the local population only when necessary for the transactions of business and daily life.”<sup>55</sup> Trade would bring both the Jews and the British to places like Burma and India and British trade companies would provide the infrastructure to disseminate British culture. The foundation for a British ethos among Southeast Asian Jews is thus a triangulation among hermetic Jewish

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<sup>54</sup> Cernea, Fredman Ruth. Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma. Lexington Books. Lanham. 2007. 39.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 39.

existence, the tendencies of minority communities to coalesce, and British wont. Alongside this foundation occurred easily recognizable manifestations of this British ethos taking root. In addition to endeavoring to learn English rather than Hindustani or Burmese, Burmese Jews also reveal other manifestations, “As time went on, their dress, manners and culture increasingly approximated that of the English.”<sup>56</sup> This is then, the beginning of a British ethos that was still codependent but arguably romantically so and that has continued reverberations such as the lunch at Burmese born Jacqueline’s house, which I will detail later in this thesis. This was a lunch with so much blatantly British food--all strong tea with milk, fruit pastries, and small sandwiches with no crusts--that it was personally, movingly nostalgic and thought provoking. Frankly, a reverberation so blatant must have formative origins and must hark back to something very real.

In, albeit, a less explicit manner Silliman details her family’s experience with a British ethos in Calcutta writing, “Narrating the history and experiences of this diaspora community from the vantage point of Calcutta, the nerve center of the British Empire, contextualizes this diaspora in relation to processes of empire and nation building.”<sup>57</sup> Because, as I have previously stated, one way to conceptualize the British Empire’s expansionist policy is to say that it was concerned with extending social structures, the Jews Silliman speaks of, were not necessarily wounded at all by being drawn into the British orbit through empire and nation building. By and large many Jews were

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. xxiii.

<sup>57</sup> Silliman, Jael. *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women’s Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope*. University Press of New England. Hanover. 2001. 15.

monetarily secure and thus well positioned socially to experience the British

benevolently, as my exchange with Mariam, born in Calcutta in 1947, begins to establish:

C: "Um I just want to ask you what was your what was your neighborhood like in Calcutta?"

M: "Uh it was an upper uh uh it was a higher end neighborhood as far as uh there were educated who went to work and um of course well respected so um it was good it was a good neighborhood it was a safe neighborhood um"

C: "Oh okay"

M: "My mother's family um were very well known also and very well respected both sides of the family were well respected..."

Mariam's description of her family proves that there were certainly Jews, who given all

that I have said about British imperialism and Iraqi Jewish-British relations, were

positioned to allow a British ethos to imbue them. As Silliman succinctly explains, the

possibility of this imbuing is encapsulated in Mary Louise Pratt's articulation of the

'contact zone,' "In the eighteenth century Calcutta became an important 'contact zone', in

which imperial and local cultures sometimes clashed and sometimes merged to produce

new cultural and social forms."<sup>58</sup> These cultural and social forms were, for Iraqi Jews in

the contact zones of Iraq and throughout South East Asia, contained in part under the

umbrella of a British ethos which itself was characterized by codependence. Such an

ethos might not be intuitive, but as it has been shown, it can be substantiated. Such

substantiation reveals how informative this ethos might then be and why it might still

exhibit itself. I can definitively point to some of these exhibitions in my interview

process, but in doing so, the complications of it become explicit. These complications

were most clearly presented in Iraq, where Iraqi Jewish-British codependence came up

against an Iraqi nationalism taking an increasingly pan-Arab and explicitly anti-British

turn. However, the complications were not exclusive to Iraq and those Iraqi Jews not

exposed extensively to them in their countries of origin come to ultimately bear the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 13.

burden as well. These Jews likely felt torn between their ties to Iraq and their dependence on the British and it is this feeling of being torn that can be called cognitive dissonance. For Arab Jews of Iraqi heritage, their subjectivities are informed by codependency vis-a-vis the British because the process of British encroachment on these Jews can be mapped and pointed to--people are cognizant of it. Cognitive dissonance becomes part of this Iraqi Arab Jewish subjectivity because very early on in Iraqi Jewish-British codependency, cognitive dissonance became an unavoidable side effect. In sum, my further articulation of Iraqi Arab Jewish subjectivity must explicitly detail the manifestations of this British ethos and its cognitive dissonance side effects.

## Chapter 2: Interview Findings

### 2.1 The Plausibility and Beneficence of Considering Arab Jewish Subjectivity

C: “Now that the three cultural topographies that compose my ruptured and dislocated history Iraq, Israel and the United States have been involved in a war it is crucial to say that Arab Jews exist some of us refuse to dissolve so as to facilitate neat national and ethnic divisions.”

C: “How do you feel about that?”

V: “Well uh it is possible some people can feel it like Arab Jews I don’t I mean it’s a personal thing it exists but um I don’t want even to be associated as an Arab you know it”

C: “Oh okay can you say why”

V: “Why because we got hurt I mean it wasn’t the right way the way to treat us uh it was very bad of course and uh”

Victoria did not mince her words. Interviewing her was like trial by fire, which is

to say that it forced me to consider the plausibility of my research. Mainly, what can be parsed out as constituting an Arab Jewish subjectivity at Kahal Joseph is paralleled by what has taken place in Israel as part of the discourse of scholarship on Mizrahim and it includes a desire to disabuse notions of Arab Jews as a monolith by highlighting particular aspects of culture such as education, an emphasis on the material, and a



conception of Arab Jewish history's ephemeralness characterized by deep concern.<sup>59</sup> Lital Levy describes this discourse as, "...a body of work that draws from theories of nationalism and postcolonialism to critique the Israeli suppression of Arab (and other Middle Eastern) Jewish identity and culture."<sup>60</sup> Being led by the example of this scholarship on Mizrahim discourse, I will employ an amorphous understanding of culture as such an understanding proliferates within the discourse itself.<sup>61</sup> Generally, culture as I understand it, is an amalgam of material and non-material signifiers, harnessed in the name of belonging.

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<sup>59</sup> Upon declaring the Arab Jewish subjectivity I noticed at Kahal Joseph as consciously and unconsciously informed by facets of culture particularly noticeable in Israeli's discourse on Mizrahim, I have mulled over the question of why America is not verbalized as informative to a greater extent. Such a verbalized absence is particularly pertinent to consider given America's relationship with Iraq in particular and the Islamic world in general in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. To attempt an answer to this conundrum, one must take note of the fact that all of the women I interviewed have lived in the same Los Angeles community for over 30 years. Factoring in their history of migration--where they became uniquely familiar with emigrating in the name of seeking belonging--the choice to settle and remain in Los Angeles was likely not flippant or forced. On practical grounds, many of their family members already resided in the region upon their arrival. On more speculative grounds, America offered these women the opportunity to belong and prosper. This fact might not be true for all immigrants and it certainly comes with a price, but it was very true for the women I interviewed. All of the women had undeniably strong familial ties, were socio-economically well off, and could boast of children who were societally situated in a similar fashion. I do not think the women I interviewed avoid noticing America's faults, but I do think that in the scheme of their life stories, these faults become subsumed. It is not mine or the readers place to judge this act of subsuming. Stemming from all of this, the women's articulations about America are cast in endearing and grateful lights. I understand America's relatively benign influence as conducive to a less complicated conception of the Arab Jewish subjectivity I noticed, because the influence is not substantive enough in the positive or negative to earn it intensive attention. More work could be done in contextualizing the women in America and forcing a greater discussion of their current place of residence. However, as things now stand with this particular interview group, such an act would need to be deliberately undertaken and its aims would need to be reconciled with the women's desire to not naturally present it themselves.

<sup>60</sup> Levy, Lital. Jewish Writers in the Arab East in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863--1914. University of California, Berkeley Dissertation. 2007. 25.

<sup>61</sup> While employed profusely, not often is culture defined didactically in studies of Arab Jews. Perhaps because so much of the arduous theoretical work of these endeavors goes towards defining the Arab Jew, culture as something monolithic, defined, and understood, is taken for granted. Lital Levy has written, "... "Arab" is a matter neither of religion nor nationality, but of cultural and linguistic affiliation and identity," exemplifying the tendency to which I am referring. Still, her sentiment is helpful for conveying that culture goes beyond at least religion and nationality, to facilitate affiliation in more inclusive ways. So, as I will demonstrate, I take a cultural signifier to be anything as non-material as spoken Arabic, to material as a specific educational institution.

Levy, Lital. "How the Camel Found its Wings." The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Heritage. Seal Press. New York, 2003. 185

Despite my own comfort with the term Arab Jew as constituted by culture, I quickly became unsure of how to discuss Arab Jewish subjectivity when Victoria rejected it for herself. Complicating matters was that if Victoria forced me to consider the plausibility of studying Arab Jewish subjectivity, her sister Noa, my first interview, forced me to consider whether or not it was beneficent. Describing her memories of Iraq at the beginning of the interview Noa mentioned,

N: "...the Baath party came and uh started a little bit of difficult times in Iraq and uh they were ousted, came back in 68 and at that point you it was they took a lot of Jews into prisons and um among them was my cousin who was tortured and killed and then they said he ran away ahhh"

C: "What is his name?"

N: "Ahh uh Naim"

With the insistences of oral history impartiality bellowing in my head, I panicked at the first sign of human discomfort in my interview process. In the least, I wanted to express my apologies to Noa for her loss, but my only feeble attempt at connectivity was asking her murdered cousin's name, thinking that this was impartial and thus correct. I hoped that somehow my face contorted in such a way as to physically convey empathy, but judging by the fact that she rebuffed any further discussion of Naim, I am assuming that it did not. After just my first two interviews, I was left altered by the realization that when the self is questioned it is by extension perceived as suspended. Furthermore, it follows that the stakes of any situation are raised and an emotionally charged environment ensues. By asking Victoria, Noa, and all of the women I interviewed to detail their lives and explicitly confront an Arab Jewish subjectivity I was inadvertently destabilizing any coherence or stability they had formerly assured for their self. This is because in some sense, the questionable is perceived as precarious and the act of questioning implies skepticism. The desire to know is perceived as threatening. This questioning along with

the anxiety and skepticism it elicits are important because they--as a perception with affect and without invitation--fashioned the textures of all of my interviews. A conversation between academics Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich concerning their understanding of questioning clearly gets at what I mean by questioning as perception,

Adrienne: There are times when I simply cannot assume that I know what you know, unless you show me what you mean.

Audre: But I'm used to associating a request for documentation as a questioning of my perceptions, an attempt to devalue what I'm in the process of discovering.

Adrienne: It's not. Help me to perceive what you perceive. That's what I'm trying to say to you.

Audre: But documentation does not help one perceive. At best it only analyzes the perception. At worst, it provides a screen by which to avoid concentrating on the core revelation, following it down to how it feels. Again, knowledge and understanding. They can function in concert, but they don't replace each other.<sup>62</sup>

As this conversation demonstrates, the act of questioning becomes a perception when enacted in particular environments and is subject to opposing internalizations. Lorde and Rich express two different perceptions of the act of questioning, perceptions each has cultivated per her own reality. Based on my experience interviewing women at Kahal Joseph, I would say that no individual perceives questioning singularly. Rather, we employ or occupy particular perceptions depending on our positions in different interlocutory incidents. If Lorde's and Rich's discussion can be used as a model, than during my interview process I operated under the perception of questioning articulated by Rich, while the women I interviewed, to the extent that they shared the same perception, were more closely aligned with Lorde's articulation. Certainly, matters are not as simple as this binary grafting purports, but in merely the above mentioned quotes from Victoria and Noa, these perception positions begin to reveal themselves. The fact that people will perceive the request for documentation differently needs to be stated, in part because it demystifies my assertion that the female Arab Jewish subjectivity I encountered, is one

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<sup>62</sup> Lorde, Audre. "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich." *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches*. Trumansbrug, N.Y. Crossing Press. 1984. 104.

informed by cognitive dissonance. As Lorde asserted, a question for documentation can be perceived as stymieing, even momentarily, the way we explain ourselves to ourselves and it ultimately never reveals the heart of the matter. Dissenting from Lorde, I would say that over and above its possible negative connotation, this moment of stymieing has the potential to lay bare something valuable because it forces the person to offer a response outside of the prepared. In so doing, the goal is not to catch people off guard and uncover some sort of lack. The goal is rather to foreground peripheral conceptions of the self, defined as those conceptions one holds with less certainty.<sup>63</sup> When a person has to explain themselves, central self-conceptions are likely more immediate, but they do not halt the arrival of peripheral conceptions in perpetuity. Such a foregrounding is crucial, because the women's responses demonstrate that they have been at least subconsciously imbued with scholarship on Mizrahim, as peripheral conceptions, even if they have not consciously consumed the literature. Perhaps then, questioning should not be perceived as Lorde describes. Maybe questioning doesn't devalue what someone is in the process of discovering, but helps make the entire milieu of the discovery, and not just its end goal more palpable and resonant. Lorde is correct, there is a difference between understanding and knowledge. It might even be productive to privilege understanding the way she does. If this is the case, it is productive to grasp the milieu of the discovery before the understanding can be had.

In asking these questions and making these visits I was not trying to disrupt a regularity or uncover any lacuna in self knowledge. I was interjecting myself to

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<sup>63</sup> Green D., Jeffrey. Sedikides, Constantine. "Affective Influences on the Self-Concept: Qualifying the Mood-Congruency Principle." Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001.150.

encourage explanation and visibility in the name of uncovering peripheral self-conceptions so that I could eventually come to an understanding of Arab Jewish subjectivity. It is because noticing the relationship between central and peripheral self-conceptions is so thoroughly revealing that I develop a relationship between Arab Jewish subjectivity and cognitive dissonance. Regarding the questions of plausibility and beneficence that Victoria and Noa confronted me with, I think that proceeding in the name of revealing peripheral self-conceptions offers some conciliation. By proceeding in this way during the interviews, what emerged and reemerged were the above mentioned cultural themes of education, material culture, and an ephemeral sense of history. Their reemergence and thus prominence dictate a certain importance vis-a-vis Arab Jewish subjectivity. It reasonably follows that these themes reemerging in the process of explaining the Arab Jew should constitute the crux of what I have extracted as a subjectivity from my primary source evidence. For clarity's sake the three facets of culture will be interrogated by beginning with three particular episodes from my interview process including an interview at one woman's home, a group interview at another woman's residence, and a phone conversation. All of which will be further contextualized by what other interview participants had to say.

## 2.2 The Difference of Education: Education Signifying Culture Part I

J: "...the thing that is nice about the Iraqi culture is that because they lived so long with under British rule they became very cosmopolitan in their taste for instance my uh my sister's mother in law would always ask for a cup of tea which is British and she would and us we are not cultured it's finjan which is"

C: "Cup, glass"

J: "Yeah glass but she had to have a cup of tea and she had to have milk with it"

C: "That's not Iraqi right"

J: "Well if you lived under the British in Basra it was (*laughs*) but we got a world view"

Born in Tehran, Iran in 1944 to Baghdadi born Iraqi Jews, Julia emigrated to America with her husband and autistic son in 1977, with the Iranian Revolution dawning and in the name of seeking medical treatment for her child. I have no doubt that her incredibly articulate anecdotes and descriptions were genuine, but they were nevertheless surreal in their perfection. Despite the perfection of their execution and astuteness, their exact thrust didn't always chord with reality. In mentioning the Iraqi Jewish need for a cup of tea, she highlights the Britishness of Iraqi Jews while mystifyingly separating herself by mentioning that her use of the Arabic word for cup (finjan) suggests, "and us we are not cultured." Because Julia herself conflates the cosmopolitan with the British ("Because they lived so long with under British rule they became very cosmopolitan") stipulating in this exchange that the cosmopolitan confers culture, she demonstrates that the synonymy of culture as cosmopolitan is situational. The very surroundings in which Julia and I found ourselves during the interview proved her attempt at exiling herself from the cultured, inexplicable. Our interview took place in her sprawling Los Angeles home over cups of earl grey tea served by her maid, where I was urged more than once to partake in the tea biscuits, "This one is plain, this one is filled with dates and this one cheese," she attempted to persuade. Thus, it is useful to contemplate Julia's interview in its entirety--both its verbalized aspects and setting. In so doing, it is the coda of her consideration about Iraqi culture's depth that accurately encapsulates her situation: "...we got a world view." This consideration was part of Julia's lengthy and thoughtful but also disjointed attempt to define for me an Iraqi Jew. Even without any context, it is possible

to read this particular consideration as an attempt to define something because her subject is clearly a “we” and more specifically a “we” comprised of Iraqi Jews.

“The nice thing about Iraqi culture,” is doing something very specific here. It is defining the Iraqi Jew, or to draw from subjectivity’s language repertoire it is signifying. Delving further into this repertoire, a succinct summary of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is clarifying, “To Saussure, language is a system of signs, each of which connects a material form, the *signifier* (written marks on a page or spoken sounds in the mouth) with an abstract concept, its *signified*.”<sup>64</sup> Yoking Julia and Saussure’s language one might say that culture can signify because it is enacted in language. This particular paradigm of signifying is plausible because Julia’s inclination to mention culture as a signifier of the Iraqi Jew reveals that she is situated in an established discourse in Arab Jewish studies that is indebted to this particular signifier. Per this discourse, logic dictates the propensity to use culture as a signifier because culture can be proven portable. What constitutes culture exactly is context based. For Julia in this particular instance culture is a cosmopolitan world view. Many scholars who participate in this “culture as signifier discourse” highlight the Arabic language as particularly omnipresent for Iraqi Jews, thus an especially potent cultural signifier. Discussing his coreligionists, Iraqi Jew Naim Kattan reinforces language as a signifier, “Hence today the citizen of Alexandria is an Egyptian Muslim, Arab by culture and language, even if the present configuration of the Arab culture is not yet established...A Jew can certainly keep the Arab culture as part of

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<sup>64</sup> Mansfield, Nick. “Lacan: The Subject is Language.” Subjectivity: Theories of the Self From Freud to Haraway. New York University Press. New York. 2000. 39.

his inheritance. He can express himself in that language.”<sup>65</sup> For Kattan, if performances of culture proliferate, than culture can be kept. Once kept, culture also signifies. Culture then, must be pedantically considered given that defining an Arab Jewish subjectivity is our goal. Arabic as a cultural signifier does not resonate in a uniform way for all Arab Jews because for instance, depending on time or place, it was not every Arab Jewish community’s primary language. Such was the case for the majority of women I interviewed, whose Jewish communities were characterized by a multitude of possible primary languages. Because our stipulated primary source material is women from Kahal Joseph, what Julia offers about culture is of the highest importance. What Julia means by culture and thus how she conceives of the Iraqi Jew helps define an Arab Jewish subjectivity characterized by cognitive dissonance because following her line of reasoning an Iraqi Jew signified by culture is different from being an Arab Jew due to the fact that Iraqi Jewish culture is of a higher order. For some time during our interview Julia tends toward a more esoteric employment of culture; keeping culture synonymous with cosmopolitan. Noting more of Julia’s response proves this:

C: “Okay what do you know about Arab Jew the term Arab Jew what do you think about it”

J: “Well I think if you go to Israel and how they were treating the Jews from the uh Near East and Middle East all these people they were lumping them all together as Arab Jews so that they could treat them all the same but when you start to tear away uh tear away at different segments of that that make up the term Arab Jew uh I think that the Iraqi Jews were separate because a lot of them were very highly educated and they uh were different I think than lumping them and and this is uh I don’t know than the other Jews from all these other countries that really needed a helping hand and really needed to be uh you know helped with all that for the Iraqi Jew going to Israel was mostly a step down from the life that they had known before all this stuff happened for I think the other Arab Jews Jews from Arabic countries coming to Israel was mostly a salvation...the Iraqi Jews were pioneers in Iran for starting a lot of the businesses and a lot of the big uh you know uh concerns there for them they did not go to Israel so I think the term Arab Jew is not descriptive of where people are coming from but rather derogatory to me to use that yeah”

C: “Okay can you explain more what you mean by derogatory”

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<sup>65</sup> Kattan, Naim. “Jewish of Arab Origin and Culture.” *Covenant Global Jewish Magazine*. Volume 1. Issue 1 (November 2006, Cheshvan 5767). 2.



J: "Because it became a term and I don't know whether this is politically correct or not but and I don't think it's something that's happening in Israel now I think it became to so say hey um these people are not so cultural you know refined as we are..."

For the scholarship on Mizrahim discourse from which Julia is borrowing, culture is sometimes the cosmopolitan, but it is also sometimes the facts on the ground and more palpable signifiers. Julia vacillates between these two meanings of culture as well, but it is the latter understanding that literally begins to define the Arab Jew. Clearly, for Julia, the Arab Jew has something to do with Israel in a very inextricable and indebted way. Rather than the Israeli Arab Jewish experience simply looming large for all Arab Jews elsewhere, Kahal Joseph's women demonstrate any Israeli influence is proportional to one's intimacy with the country and its history. Julia occupies one end of the spectrum with others who have experienced the country rather thoroughly given that she undertook visits there when she was a teenager. These visits occurred in the name of seeing family who immigrated there and lived in maabarot, Israel's transit camps of the mid-twentieth century which were the country's answer to specifically the unanticipated influx of Jews from non-European countries. Such a predisposal affects not only the memories that will comprise Julia's life experience repertoire but also the discourses she can adequately use to express herself. Thus, it is not without reason that she articulates herself through a relatively commonplace Israeli Arab Jewish discourse. This Arab Jewish discourse, informed by postcolonial studies, says that what transpired between the Zionist elite of Israel's conception, and the country's first Arab Jewish immigrants, was discriminatory in tone and predicated on anxiety arising from a Eurocentric worldview. Ella Shohat, a scholar who has helped construct this discourse has described the postcolonial as, "...a new designation for critical discourses that thematize issues emerging from colonial

relations and their aftermath and covering a long historical span (including the present.)”<sup>66</sup> Informed by this understanding of the postcolonial, Shohat has discussed how Eurocentric Zionist thought thoroughly saturated Israel’s conception and thus whatever trajectory the nation took and is ultimately why Arab Jews were by extension dealt with discriminatorily.<sup>67</sup> For further contextualization, Aziza Khazzoom has explicitly detailed how early Zionism relied on the West to come to fruition and was thus indebted to it, a reality that allowed discrimination to transpire.<sup>68</sup> Fear had been implanted into the minds of non-Arab Jews, a fear that was exacerbated when they encountered their Jewish coreligionists from Arab lands. As the Jews of Arab lands were orientalized by the Jews of Europe and as the Jewish state became more concerned with obtaining a Western persona, an Ashkenazi-Mizrahi dichotomy fomented.<sup>69</sup> Those directly responsible for perpetuating this dichotomization were those who Khazzoom refers to as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers were the bureaucratic institutions that new immigrants first encountered upon arriving in Israel. These gatekeepers regulated the new immigrants and to a large degree determined the character of life the new immigrants would come to obtain. Thus, when Julia discerns, “...the Jews from the uh Near East and Middle East all these people they were lumping them all together as Arab Jews,” she is reiterating substantive observations. She is also quick to problematize the act of

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<sup>66</sup> Shohat, Ella. “Notes on the “Post-Colonial””. Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices. Durham. Duke University Press. 2006. 235.

<sup>67</sup> Shohat, Ella. “Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab-Jews.”. Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices. Durham. Duke University Press. 2006.

<sup>68</sup> Khazzoom, Aziza. Shifting Ethnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel: Or, How the Polish Peddle Became a German Intellectual. Stanford University Press. 2008.122.

<sup>69</sup> Khazzoom, Aziza. Shifting Ethnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel: Or, How the Polish Peddle Became a German Intellectual. Stanford University Press. 2008.5.

considering Arab Jews monolithically, which harks back to previous substantive critiques. Beyond the fact that the experience of Jews from each individual Arab country was differentiated, thus making the literal facts on the ground varied--Israel's Arab Jews, while as Julia puts were "lumped together" conceptually--were also not dealt with monolithically in practice. With great tact, Khazzoom has uncovered the way that culture was employed to track some Arab Jews, specifically Iraqi Jews, out of their menial destiny. Mainly, because many Iraqi Jews expressed aspects of European culture, they were able to be read as European and thus entitled to greater parity with those from European countries. One of the aspects of cultural capital Khazzoom sites is the generally higher standards of education Iraqi Jews possessed due in part to the fact that their community had close ties to British mandatory power and thus their schools as well as the French Alliance Israelite Universelle schools. Those who attended these schools not only entered the physical Western realm of the school itself, but also a realm of Western ideals and expectations through their attainment of Western languages, burgeoning predilections for Western literature, and a Western version of their county's history. In a less qualified way, when Julia mentions that the higher education of Iraqis positioned them as "separate," she corroborates sentiments previously expressed. Previous work also confirms that Julia taps into a certain amount of accuracy when discussing what a relocation to Israel genuinely meant for Iraqi Jews. Iraqi Jews had harnessed the opportunities of the Middle East for themselves effectively and can generally be categorized by their highly efficient and successful communities. A summary from Rachel Shabi's We Look Like the Enemy, offers substantiation,

...this Jewish community dominated trade in Iraq, mainly because it was mobile--many Iraqi Jews migrated to India or England--and were fluent in foreign languages. It also dominated the spheres of banking and money lending. These successes fed into and were inspired by an education spurt around the same time, with the establishment of independent Jewish schools running alongside those operated by Alliance Israelite Universelle, the system of French- inspired education in the Jewish Middle East.<sup>70</sup>

While Julia's statement, "The other Jews from all these other countries that really needed a helping hand and really needed to be uh you know helped with all that for the Iraqi Jew going to Israel was mostly a step down from the life that they had known before all this stuff happened for I think the other Arab Jews Jews from Arabic countries coming to Israel was mostly a salvation," might lack nuance it is not entirely removed from reality nor is it an unreasonable or unconfirmed sentiment. After all, there is something to be said for the fact that Iraqi Jews, no matter their socioeconomic status, did not emigrate flippantly as Shabi proves, "Despite the restrictions of the war period, Jewish community leaders thought their difficulties in Iraq would dissipate, especially since they expected that there'd be a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. Even during the worst of it, some Iraqi Jews remained reluctant to pry their two identities apart."<sup>71</sup> Furthermore Julia's mentioning that, "The Iraqi Jews were pioneers in Iran for starting a lot of the businesses and a lot of the big uh you know uh concerns," might be an example from her personal repertoire of Iraqi Jewish success, but there are certainly other examples of success, such as an anecdote another interviewee Noa, recalled,

N: "Now after 40 years I mean the majority right now there is maybe four or five people there that's all okay but but just so you know in 19 in the mid 20's 30's 20's 30's half of the population of Baghdad was Jewish I mean that's and they had a big influence on everything I mean they were"

C: "Can you explain some of that?"

N: "Okay half the cabinet let's say were Jewish the person who did the deal for the oil insisted at that point insisted that it should be linked to uh solid gold and not to any currency like who negotiated the deal for Iraq with with Britain at the time."

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<sup>70</sup> Shabi, Rachel. *We Look Like the Enemy*. New York. Walker and Co. 2008. 83.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 98.

While the experience of all Jews from Arab countries is too entirely richly textured to determine, as unequivocally as Julia does, exactly whether or not Jews from say Yemen, were more likely to find Israel a salvation than Iraqi Jews, a wealth of examples demonstrate that a significant portion of Iraqi Jews at least had the raw material to be portrayed as “separate” vis-a-vis this issue. What this corroboration among Julia’s statements and those scholars in the realm of Arab Jewish studies demonstrates is the extent to which Julia is harnessing a relatively canonical discourse in Arab Jewish studies known as scholarship on Mizrahim. While the term Mizrahim is first and foremost an Israeli creation and refers to more than just non-European Jews of Arab descent, Julia’s use of scholarship on Mizrahim discourse is not necessarily enacted incorrectly simply because it engages solely with Jews from Arab lands. She is after all proffering a rejoinder to a question about only Arab Jews and because these Jews are included in the term Mizrahim, a discussion of them allows for at least the possibility that the discourse might be employed. Julia’s particular harnessing shows that this discourse in Arab Jewish studies demonstrates that an Arab Jewish subjectivity can be heavily dependent on visible culture at its most refracted, examined, and theorized. This culture’s perceived mutual exclusivity to Western culture is a source of tension that elicits constant explanation or denial as well as an impetus to, as Julia puts it, “tear away” at a perceived facade. While this tearing away might have different manifestations, I am most interested in a tearing away that is perpetuated to reveal difference or as Julia suggests, “They were lumping them all together as Arab Jews so that they could treat them all the same but when you start to tear away uh tear away at different segments of that that make up the term Arab

Jew uh I think that the Iraqi Jews were separate.” While this discourse and what it enacts is thoroughly situated in the context of Israel Julia’s ability to utilize it for her own purposes in answering the question, “What do you think about the term Arab Jew,” is suggestive of ubiquity. Mizrahi scholarship discourse certainly arose in a particular time and place, but it is not confined there. Julia used this discourse to articulate the term Arab Jew for me and the process of what she did can be interrogated to gain a more lucid understanding of what is Arab Jewish subjectivity. Demonstrating the presence of cognitive dissonance in the Mizrahi scholarship discourse, which has already begun with the mentioning of the desire to “tear away,” and discussing what exactly Julia sees as separating Iraqi Jews will allow us to see how Julia appropriates the discourse’s language, bolstering her claims given what they hark back to, and revealing the subjectivity arising from all of this.

### 2.3 The Primacy of Education: Education Signifying Culture Part II

C: “Do you think being a member of Kahal Joseph makes it easier to call yourself an Iraqi Jew”

J: “I don’t know how to answer this one really I think it’s something really that’s ingrained in you and we had I had an interesting conversation with my middle son who’s married to a sweet lady she’s Ashkenazi and he comes to synagogue once a year maybe twice a year and we were discussing the choosing of a rabbi and we were saying well maybe it’s time to cater to the young people and uh get an Ashkenazi rabbi who would be more culturally open to everything and he says well then what how does that differentiate us from all the Ashkenazi synagogues and I said boy this kid you know he still has that thing that he needs to feel the Iraqi so”

C: “Where do you think that came from”

J: “I think from the love and the comfort that he has gotten as and the sense of values that he has gotten and he has seen how for us as Iraqi Jews we really nurture our children we place a big big value on education I remember my mother sending five of us to a private American school even when times were hard for her economically and she had to sacrifice she really had to sacrifice but her kids were gonna get the best education that was available by golly they were and that’s what she did and a lot of the Iraqi Jews that you’ll see they went through periods of time where finances were not so good but their kids got the best education that they could and you could see that we tried hardest and place a great deal of value on family you know we don’t our children we nurture our grandchildren we nurture and uh there’s this love that there’s where he finds his comfort”

When Julia posits education as what separates Iraqis from other Arab Jews, she is

engaging in an act that is precedented among Arab Jews that includes revealing and

disabusing the notions of discrimination they have faced. What culturally constitutes an Iraqi Jew and simultaneously distinguishes one from the monolith of Arab Jews, is the inheritance of the primacy of education. What an attention to the process of Julia's revelation shows is that she is replicating the Arab Jewish desire to separate her own Iraqi cohort from the Arab Jewish construct by relying on the cultural element of education. Immediately, Julia's story attempts to bolster the Iraqi Jew by characterizing it as ingrained. Julia might have understood my questioning of naming oneself an Iraqi Jew in relation to belonging to Kahal Joseph, as an attempt to say that this naming is contingent on time and place and that by extension I was interrogating its substance and legitimacy. Asserting that the name is ingrained is a rebuff of my implied suggestion. She only furthers her argument by explicitly detailing who desires this name and how. The fact that her son who "comes to synagogue once a year maybe twice a year," and "who's married to a sweet lady she's Ashkenazi," is nevertheless desiring of his ingrained Iraqiness, speaks to this name's significance. Most crucially, this Iraqiness is set apart from the Ashkenazi or the construct Arab Jew due to its relationship to education. As Julia puts it, "...a lot of the Iraqi Jews that you'll see they went through periods of time where finances were not so good but their kids got the best education that they could...". The fact that sentiment has gravitas for Julia is noticeable not only from its present articulation, but because in the scheme of the interview it was one of her reliable explanatory tropes. As has already been noted, Julia considers the "high education" of Iraqi Jews to be offsetting and she is self-conscious about her reflexively perceived lack

of British culture. Other supporting evidence for her conceptualizing of education includes,

C: "Mmhmm um but you knew growing up that your family was from Iraq and that your grandmother was Iraqi"

J: "Yeah yeah"

C: "Okay what did you think about that"

J: "Good"

C: "Good"

J: "Yeah it was what I was yeah good in fact we thought you know I think this trying to separate yourself from other people and then trying to assign a value to it it's with all people we felt as Iraqi Jews we were superior yeah"

C: "Why did you feel superior"

J: "I think because Irania-Iraqi Jews were more educated"

C: "More educated than whom"

J: "Than the Iranians and they really most of them really were"

Julia is not alone in considering education as something tangible to appropriate in the name of confirming distinctions. Scholars of Arab Jews have also demonstrated how certain types or durations of education were used by different group of Arab Jews to highlight their difference in order to save themselves from abjectness in Israel and were also discerned for by Israeli gatekeepers in order to determine immigrant primacy. In this sense, a "tearing away" or "separating" is a variation on an initially non-Arab Jewish theme. It became necessary for Arab Jews to perpetuate differences among themselves in order to best arm themselves in the face of Israel's ethnic problem which I have referred to as the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi dichotomy and that a preoccupation with Orientalism engendered.<sup>72</sup> According to Khazoom, what this dichotomy encouraged as necessary for

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<sup>72</sup> Yaron Tsur contextualizes this ethnic problem well when he writes, "While Israeli researches may dispute its causes, they all nevertheless agree that in religious and national terms it is an internal, Jewish problem involving two ethnic groups from different parts of the world: broadly speaking, Europe on the one hand and Asia and Africa on the other." Tsur, Yaron. "Israeli Historiography and the Ethnic Problem." Making Israel. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press. 2007. 231.

However to actually understand the problematic aspect of this ethnic divide, I believe a knowledge of works in the vein of Aziza Khazoom's is necessary, "It has been argued that one of the ways Ashkenazim acquired their domination of Jewish Israeli society was to "orientalize" Mizrahim. That is, Ashkenazim used the previously-existing east/west dichotomy to advance a binary construction of ethnicity in Israel in which the heterogeneity of the arriving cultures was simplified into two, homogenous categories: Ashkenazim, who were fully "western," and Mizrahim, who were fully "eastern" (Shohat 1988, 1989.)" Khazoom, Aziza. The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel. American Sociological Review. Aug 2003; 68, 4.482.



survival was the rejection of easternness in oneself and its projection onto others.

Discussing this process explicitly she writes,

The nature of the Jewish stigma, and list of characteristics that had to be changed were disseminated among individuals through face-to-face interaction and through the print media. For most Jewish groups, the orientalizing of others was simultaneously a way of westernizing the self and stimulating change among the orientalized group. The representations could be produced for at least three groups: the western other, the eastern other, and the self.<sup>73</sup>

So while such a rejection and projection finds its impetus in western wont, it is possibly partially defining of an Arab Jewish subjectivity given the multitudes of Arab Jews who have paid heed to its call or experienced it passively from others. What bestows the ability to define Arab Jewish subjectivity upon the reaction to dichotomization rather than acceptance of the term itself and an enactment of its facets, is that an active acceptance of the construct Arab Jew is difficult to do, given the homogeneity the term implies. It is possible to reason that such a sentiment has disseminated itself so thoroughly as to affect Julia deeply. One specific instance where Julia demonstrated her familiarity with this dichotomy was in this anecdote,

C: "Um but when you heard about Iraqis being described in the way that you stated earlier knowing that you were an Iraqi how did that make you feel?"

J: "You know when a person is that young I don't think that we have a cousin her name is Ella very fair blue eyes blonde hair and they would my aunt would describe how when they first went to Israel everybody was living in these tents and they would line up and get food handed out to them and I said well did you get was it enough and she said oh we always had enough I said how so she says Ella being blonde and fair would wait in line and they would always give her bigger portions so Ella would go back in line and wait again and get so Ella little Ella which she must have been around 8 or 10 at that time little Ella was supplying the whole family with bigger portions of food"

C: "Wow"

E: "Because she was perceived to be I don't know what it's uh so uh it made me feel yucky inside but uh I could uh I could tell that somehow I thought that was the fate of being in Iran there was a layer of discrimination that you didn't want to really talk about it or you felt it so I said okay so what's the difference Iran discrimination Israel kind of a little bit of discrimination so um you know you kind of get used to being in a certain amount of underclass but I don't think that that is the case right now in Israel in fact you know when I talk with uncles, nieces, nephews that live in Israel they have none of that feeling"

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<sup>73</sup> Khazzoom, Aziza. The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel. American Sociological Review. Aug 2003; 68, 4. Footnote 4. 484.

When prompted, Julia went on to qualify the conclusion of this anecdote, "...but I don't think that is the case right now in Israel," the case obviously being discrimination of non-Ashkenazim. Her qualifications reveal that this statement is more of a hope of hers, rather than something grounded firmly in reality and in fact, literature still suggests that parity has not come to fruition. Issues of a resolution aside, Julia's anecdote reveals that she possesses the evidence to have internalized the negativity of Israel's ethnic divide to at least some extent. Delving into her desire to exonerate Iraqi Jews by way of education, one easily sees it is a desire with precedence. As Khazzoom has analyzed, based on interviews with female Iraqi Jews who emigrated to Israel in the 1950s, ascertaining and conveying education was a deliberate practice,

Finally, about half of the respondents believe there was ethnic discrimination at the time, and most reported that Jews who live in Israel before statehood in 1948 were surprised to find out they had forks, tables, or chairs in Iraq. However, when I asked what they did to disabuse people of these notions, all replied that there was no need to do anything because they quickly realized that Iraqis were "different." This is important because lack of ethnic discrimination in the labor market does not mean that ethnicity was not operative. If gatekeepers were concerned with marginalizing only those whose cultural characteristics appeared too Eastern, Alliance graduates would not have been candidates for exclusion. But this would be because of the salience of identity projects based on Orientalism, not because ethnicity did not matter.<sup>74</sup>

Julia's, Iraqis are "separate" is paralleled by Khazzoom's cohort's Iraqis were "different."

Khazzoom's mentioning that among her cohort were Alliance (Alliance Israelite Universelle) graduates, provides the same substance that does Julia's mentioning that Iraqi children "got the best education," despite all obstacles. Given these parallels, logic dictates that Julia might be enacting the process of establishing difference, for similar reasons that Iraqis facing discrimination in Israel did. While it has hopefully been shown that Julia is appropriating a precedented tendency of Arab Jews per the example of Israeli Arab Jews, her understanding of an Iraqi Jewish subjectivity is not entirely complete

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<sup>74</sup> Khazzoom, Aziza. Orientalism at the Gates: Immigration, the East/West Divide, and Elite Iraqi Jewish Women in Israel in the 1950s. Signs, Vol. 32, No.1 (Autumn 2006). 14.

without a greater contextualization as to why individuals need to engage in such difference establishing practices. While in general, Arab Jews of disparate country origins establish difference because they have internalized Orientalist desire so thoroughly, in order to fully understand subjectivity, we need to operate on an individual level and explain the impetus there. This is the level at which cognitive dissonance theory in relation to these Arab Jewish practices can provide good explanatory information.

#### 2.4 The Cognitive Dissonance of Education: Education Signifying Culture Part III

J: "I call myself an Iraqi Jew"

C: "Okay why do you choose that term"

J: "Because that's what I am an Iraqi Jew"

C: "What do you what do you mean by that"

J: "Well I think if you put a Jewish person from Iraq together with a Jewish person from Yemen you'd see that we have a lot of differences maybe a little bit we would be closer to the Jews from let's say Lebanon or Jordan or even Egypt but once you get to the whole of the Middle East no because we came our Iraqi tradition is very different it's very rich..."

In the article Arabs of the Mosaic Faith: Chronicle of a Cultural Extinction

Foretold, Reuven Snir pedantically interrogates how the term Arab Jew has entered and evolved in discourse. He demonstrates how the term has been approached from various angles including politically, semantically, and culturally. In so doing, he reveals his personal difficulties of grappling with the term as the son of a Baghdadi born mother and father. Snir writes,

As a Sabra (a native-born Israeli Jew) I had been taught that Arabness and Jewishness are mutually exclusive. Trying to conform to the dominant *Ashkenazi*-Zionist norm, as a child I felt ashamed of the Arabness of my parents. For them, I was an agent of repression sent by the Establishment, after excellent training, into the territory of the enemy--my family--and I completed the mission in a way that only children can do with their loving parents: I forbade them to speak Arabic in public or to listen to Arabic music.<sup>75</sup>

A meta-reading of this admittance would consider that Snir came of age when Israel's singular narrative about Arab culture was pejorative. Negotiating between a demanding

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<sup>75</sup> Snir, Reuven. "Arabs of the Mosaic Faith": Chronicle of a Cultural Extinction Foretold. *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, Vol. 46, Issue 1. 2006. 47.

public life, rendering even the utterance of Arabic taboo, and a private life shaped by parents unable or unwilling to obfuscate their Arab culture affinities, likely conjured in Snir a cognitive dissonance. The type of cognitive dissonance perhaps most apparent in Snir is that which is informed by self-discrepancy theory. In other words, the type of cognitive dissonance that comes to fruition when the self is threatened, an occurrence that for Snir took place when the Arabness of his private life did not reflect his public expectations of Ashkenaziness. Research dealing with this type of cognitive dissonance has found,

Indeed, research derived from self-discrepancy theory has demonstrated that individuals' perceived discrepancies between actual self-beliefs ("Who am I?") and two different self-guides evoke qualitatively distinct affective reactions. When persons experience a discrepancy between their actual self and their ought self-guide, which concerns their duties and obligations, they evidence agitation-related affects, such as anxiety. In contrast, when persons experience a discrepancy between their actual self and their ideal-self guide, which concerns their aspirations, they evidence dejection-related affects, such as depression (Higgins, 1989). According to the theory of cognitive dissonance, individuals are motivated to reduce discrepancies because of the psychological discomfort discrepancies produce.<sup>76</sup>

The provocation to reduce discomfort explains Snir's attempt to silence his parents, an attempt whose catalyst was likely the discrepancy noticed between his actual (Arabized) self and his ought (Ashkeanzic) self. Snir's personal account conveys that he is without a doubt, deeply familiar with the Mizrahi scholarship discourse as it relates to Arab Jews. His works, such as the Hebrew language Arabness, Jewishness, and Zionism: A Struggle of Identities in the Literature of Iraqi Jews, allude to the authoritativeness of his voice in the realm of Arab Jewish Studies. Using Snir as an archetype, Julia's relationship to the term Arab Jew might be more easily understood given what it is an iteration of. Doing so is also important because it facilitates operating in the name of positioning women as historical subjects who have and are contributing to an understanding of what it means to

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<sup>76</sup> Harmon-Jones, Eddie. "Role of Affect in Cognitive-Dissonance Processes." Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001.244, 245.

be an Arab Jew with symptoms of cognitive dissonance. As detailed in the introduction, highlighting women as subjects in this way facilitates not only their mere mention but also the opportunity to write history in a way that does not encourage silences or anomalous portrayals. As Joan Wallach Scott has explained, using as her example the historicizing of the English class formation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

Women remain a particularized subject; their history has neither attained the canonical status [...], nor has it accounted in new ways for the making of the entire working class. Such an incorporation or revision will not be achieved until the troubling question raised by women's history is confronted: if women did work and engage in politics, how explain their invisibility, the lack of attention to them in theories of class formation and in the historical record. Part of the answer lies in how the meanings of class itself were constructed; another part lies in how the history of class has been written.<sup>77</sup>

The point of incorporating women beyond the reality that facts on the ground prove that they exist and are operative in the first place, is to establish parity before Arab Jewish history has been canonized completely definitively. Scott insists that the history of class formation must face a reckoning for the voices it has ignored or not incorporated properly. Arab Jewish history should not have to do this because material exists to prove just how inextricably tied, in response to Arab Jewishness, are women like Julia to men like Snir. In fact, in terms of the subjectivity constituted by culture and informed by cognitive dissonance that is currently at hand, women are crucially applicable due to the gendered roles that Iraqi Jewish men and women have had conferred upon them by the facts on the ground in their lives as well as historiography. Partly responsible for such a claiming, is that by and large, Iraqi Jewish men bore the brunt of any violence they faced, physically, while the women bore this brunt emotionally. For instance, Julia was careful and adamant to convey to me the fact that many Iraqi Jewish women are long suffering

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<sup>77</sup> Scott Wallach, Joan. *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Duke University Press. Durham and London. 2011. 84.

with husbands who exhibit signs of post traumatic stress disorder. Specifically, she recalled that for many years of her marriage, she did not understand why her husband sometimes whimpered in his sleep. It was not until an event held at Kahal Joseph, where men were encouraged to share memories from their lives in Iraq, that Julia learned that while her husband was under arrest by Iraqi authorities he was often subject to forced detention on the police station's roof, particularly in the cold of winter's night, while attempting sleep.<sup>78</sup> Implication dictates that he developed his whimper to cope with these circumstances and by its sheer indelibility, it reasserts itself in the present. Julia, was dismayed by her husband's revelation, having for the first time been given the evidence by which theories about his eccentricities could be constructed. The imprisonment of Julia's husband is not an aberration. According to the film The Last Jews of Baghdad, the husband of another woman I interviewed, was arrested three times before his departure.<sup>79</sup> This is all to say that based on my interviews, Iraqi Jewish women are predisposed to internalize discourse and theorize in the name of placating the physical trauma experienced by the men in their lives. Examining the Kahal Joseph event I noted above, the men are knowledge disseminators and the women are repositories for such knowledge. As Julia demonstrates, these roles are not facilitated arbitrarily. Her husband cannot necessarily know he is whimpering in his sleep and to the extent that he has grown

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<sup>78</sup> I am, here, discussing arrests made by Iraqi authorities of Jewish community members which occurred, in general, under the guise of Communist and Zionist accusations. Zionism was declared a crime in 1948 and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was inherently in opposition to the hegemonic Iraqi government's relationship with Fascist Germany. Women were not exempt from arrests because of their gender, but men faced this threat more often and more violently. Particularly in the Iraq after the exodus of 1950-1, these arrests were rather foreboding and are much too dense and intricate to try and do justice to now. This website <http://iraqijews.awardspace.com/testimonies.html> contains several arrest testimonies and nearly all of the Iraqi Jewish memoirs I am familiar with mention arrests in some capacity.

<sup>79</sup> Basri, Carole. The Last Jews of Baghdad: End of an Exile; Beginning of a Journey. D-Squared Media. NYC. 2005.

cognizant of this behavior over the years, he has not endeavored toward a solution. In the scene as painted by Julia, manifestations of post traumatic stress disorder are for her husband to disseminate and her to notice and mull over. Everyday life has unfolded for these Iraqis in such a way as to facilitate a paradigm where women think deeply in the hopes of nurturing their husbands who must share and reiterate the physical violence they faced. So, what Iraqi Jewish women do with the knowledge they acquire must be particularly elucidating, as Julia demonstrates while revealing her cognitive dissonance in the examples that follow.

C: "So in this paper she writes "Living in North America makes it even more difficult to say that we are Jews and yet entitled to our Middle Eastern difference and that we are Arabs and yet entitled to our religious difference like Arab Christians and Arab Muslims" and she callsherself an Arab-Jew what do you think about that"

J: "Well she says that she is living in North America now if you were an Arab Jew from Morocco living in Israel that label would have a different connotation"

C: "Okay I understand"

J: "Yeah for us we if I had as a Nor--as she said a North American of Middle Eastern extraction living in and Jewish Middle Eastern we uh we don't want to be called Ashkenazi Jews or Lithuanian Jews we want to be Arab Jews that's different I think once you get to Israel in the beginning it was a lump term because this was a government that suddenly have to face all types of people and how do you handle them break them down into larger categories"

C: "Um so do you call yourself and Arab Jew"

J: "I call myself and Iraqi Jew"

C: "Okay why do you choose that term"

J: "Because that's what I am an Iraqi Jew"

Julia's reaction to a line from Ella Shohat's Reflection by an Arab Jew, is initially revealing for its choice to utilize a specifically Israeli example, rather than a North American. Given that the perimeters of the discussion are Arab Jews in North America, expectation might dictate that Julia utilize an example from her own life, having resided in America for over 30 years. However, it is possible to say that she is conflating the experiences because she does not think solely North American examples bring enough to bear on her personal rejection of the term Arab Jew. In denying the term with material that is slightly removed, she is likely using not only what she may consider the most lucid

examples, but also the most genuine. Consider both, her first response “Well she says that she is living in North America,” as well as the phrase “North American of Middle Eastern extraction.” These are perhaps a reaction to what she perceives as the speaker of the quote’s privilege and misunderstanding. As the interviewer, I had not properly contextualized Ella Shohat as Israeli born. It might be that Julia assumes unless it is explicitly taught, one does not genuinely understand the gravity of the term Arab Jew if they are North American born and have not deliberately been made aware of Arab Jewish history in its entirety. It seems that using Israeli examples is not deliberate obfuscation, but an attempt to make the most cogent argument possible. How indebted she is to her historical knowledge is revealed further when she says,

J: “You know I think that the plight of the Iraqi Jew and also the plight of many who are displaced from the countries where they originally were or for many years were is exactly like something like the plight of Jews before Israel was formed you are from a place but you are also from a culture and you carry the culture with you wherever you go you’re Polish Jewish you are going to have Polish Jewish whether you are in the states whether you are in Israel and it’s beginning to be a melting pot for Iraqi Jews”

Again, it is conveyed, that culture figures very prominently for Julia. Because Julia invests so much authority and survivability in culture, it is sensible that she finds it so constituting. Empowered by such a constituting force, Julia can unequivocally state “Because that’s what I am an Iraqi Jew,” which is a statement that arrived in much the same tone throughout all of the Kahal Joseph interviews. Such definitiveness in Julia’s statement along with, I can assure, its noticeable reoccurrence in the rest of the interviews suggests that there is something essential and immutable here, possibly because of culture, which when coupled with the term Arab Jew generates cognitive dissonance. Where for Snir, public Ashkenazi expectations coupled with private Arab affinities threatened his sense of self and generated cognitive dissonance, Julia’s Iraqi



Jewish subjectivity derived from her affinity for history and culture, when it comes up against Arab Jewish expectations that might not be aware of particularities, provokes in her a similarly threatened self. Whereas Snir copes with his dissonance through a reduction of the discrepancy between his internalized and externalized self by way of explaining that the Arab and Jew are not mutually exclusive, Julia copes with hers by being informed by her limited, albeit thorough and personal information sources: Arab Jews in Israel, Iraqi Jews in Iran, and Iraqi Jewish culture in Iran, Israel and America. Julia's necessity to adhere to particular sources of information is a researched response in cognitive dissonance theory,

When the maintenance of clear and certain knowledge and thus the potential for effective action is threatened, negative affect results, which prompts attempts at the restoration of cognitions supportive of the action (i.e., cognitive discrepancy reduction). Therefore, the process of reducing dissonance is a motivated processing strategy that is guided by two goals--the need to reduce negative affect and the need to behave effectively. The motivation can lead persons to engage in information processing that may accomplish the goal of reducing negative affect and/ or behaving effectively.<sup>80</sup>

If negative affect is the cognitive dissonance Julia feels when confronted by Iraqi Jewish affinity in the face of Arab Jewish expectation and the effective action of being able to explain herself to herself ensues, she likely attempts reduction by adhering ever more strongly to the Arab Jewish in general and Iraqi Jewish in particular, examples she has always been most familiar with. Most of these examples attempt to highlight Iraqi Jewish difference through education. Julia's and Snir's individual examples, coupled with a familiarity of the scholarship on Mizrahim discourse sheds light on a reasoning about subjectivity. This reasoning stipulates that to feel cognitive dissonance as a result of ones self explanation not aligning with external expectations and then undertaking a concerted

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<sup>80</sup> Harmon-Jones, Eddie. "Role of Affect in Cognitive-Dissonance Processes." Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001. 241.

attempt to expunge the cognitive dissonance by reacting to the constructed Ashkenazi-Mizrahi dichotomy, is to be informed by an Arab Jewish subjectivity. While Julia's use of education as culture and difference establishment gets at the subjectivity she is enacting, the discourse she is informed by is multifaceted enough to elicit further explanation. By way of a description of another episode from my interviews, the material culture of Iraqi Arab Jewish women can be used to reveal something more about subjectivity.

### 2.5 Defining Material Culture: The Impact of Material Culture Part I

While awaiting the arrival of several other Iraqi Jewish women of Southeast Asian extraction from Kahal Joseph, I converse with Jacqueline, a Burmese born Jew who shares her North Hollywood home with her Iraqi born mother Eve. Eve will later confide in me that the last thing she did before departing Iraq in perpetuity was sit in a cafe for tea, but for now she is asleep in a back room. I am partaking in a roughly fifteen year tradition, facilitated by these women, comprised of a weekly gathering for tea drinking and bridge card playing. I arrived prepared to fill my recorder to its maximum capacity and take copious notes of each woman's exact utterances, assuming that what they could articulate about their lives was of premium importance. However, departing from the house after nearly two hours, how the women exactly verbalized their memories did not take precedence in what I first relayed to my mother who was waiting for me as I arrived at my hotel. The notes I actually took and the summaries that felt most crucial to provide first, were of what I saw and felt, not of what I heard. Through this experience, I discovered the indispensability of material culture. According to Leora Auslander, the methodology of material culture involves locating evidence to form historical narratives

by pinning for it in the material. Material can be defined and limited in two ways: "...first, to goods "of style" or objects whose design involves aesthetic considerations; and second, to three-dimensional objects with which people are in bodily contact."<sup>81</sup> To confine considerations of canonical historical evidence to only the linguistic is to generate an incomplete picture because, as it can be shown, material objects matter,

Their makers and users understand them to have special attributes not only because of their contact with the human body, but because they themselves mirror two crucial characteristics of human existence. They, like the people who use them, are embodied. That embodiedness means that objects occupy space and cannot be in two places at once, and they are mortal, although their life-spans may be much longer or shorter than those of the people using them.<sup>82</sup>

It might be that material culture, if always accessible, always matters. Even still, perhaps its consideration matters more depending on the incident under examination. Such a reiteratively stylized incident as a weekly tea drinking tradition among friends with a common heritage, occurring in the deliberately stylized setting of someone's home, is likely one of these incidents. Thus, in the name of developing a complete picture of Arab Jewish subjectivity, I will utilize what material culture purports as the material in order to draw conclusions from the physical objects I encountered in various interview settings as well as from the physical images I formulated from the women's life descriptions. These materials reveal an Arab Jewish subjectivity in the vein that I have been describing--constituted by culture and as a rejoinder to Arab Jewish studies discourse and thus displaying cognitive dissonance--mostly because they demonstrate European affinities and appear most cogently during instances of great upheaval and thus solidified memory.

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<sup>81</sup> Auslander, Leora. *Beyond Words*. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 4. Oxford University Press. 2005. 1016.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

My time spent with Jacqueline and seven other women from Kahal Joseph began to crystalize as materially important when I first narrated the tea time, conversation, and setting for my mother. My and my mother's conversation was characterized by an enthusiasm stemming in part from our recognition of blatantly British material culture in a place that was, by our initial understanding, unexpected. "It was so bizarre to find myself in the house of this Burmese born Iraqi Jewish woman, surrounded by her immaculately kept decorative tea sets, pictures of the queen, and food that I always considered British," I noted with excitement to my mom. This excitement was returned in kind by my mom who had spent some of her childhood in England and whose own mom is British, "Did they have the Earl Grey tea, finger sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and fruit filled pastries," she asked. "Yeah, it reminded me of the Christmases we spent at Grandma's house when I was a kid, where we all devoured her British cooking," I confirmed. My mom laughed as I told her that Jacqueline displayed several pictures of the queen as well as of the Prince and Princess of England, "Even Grandma isn't British enough to do that," I joked. With a tacit understanding that she didn't necessarily comprehend my interest in the Middle East, my mother always supported my research simply for what it meant to me, but I believe that not until this moment, when she was able to sync a crucial part of it with an aspect of herself, did she genuinely understand how worthwhile such an undertaking could be. Her arrival to this understanding conveys two things: first, how emotive culture can be and second, how indelible was a European imprint on Iraq's Jews. The time I spent accepting tea and fruit cake while engaging in conversation women for who this meal and its following bridge playing was a normalized

occurrence, and the constructive conversation I would have with my mom directly after, solidified the need to consider how the European and the material would figure in my eventual explanation of Arab Jewish subjectivity. My position on such a line of reasoning as constitutive of subjectivity is perfectly encapsulated by the following assertion, “The kinds of subjectivity we have developed and lived within are intimately connected to the societies we live in: we draw our models of selfhood from the models that our culture makes available to us.”<sup>83</sup>

## 2.6 The Decorative and Aesthetic of Material Culture: The Impact of Material Culture

### Part II

When the women of Kahal Joseph speak of material objects from their past that are located in the realm of the aesthetic such as furniture, art, and clothing, they often do so in order to reveal and reinforce an emotionally saturated pain. In certain situations, cataclysmic events such as the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 were the major impetus for these pains, with the women’s Iraqi heritage acting as something that exacerbated an already volatile situation. Objects taking the forms listed above, are important to examine when mentioned, because their appearance is indicative of an attempt to cope with and regulate this greater pain. To the extent that such a regulation continuously reasserts itself in the interviews, it must also influence the women’s subjectivity. Dalia’s recounting of the Japanese invasion of her birth city Rangoon, Burma during WWII speaks to this process and pain,

“Bombs were falling we had to leave our houses and go down and take shelter in one of the Jewish people’s garages where he was and so that we can be away from the bombs we had to leave our homes and live outside with some friends our house was all open people came and took everything

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<sup>83</sup> Robbins, Ruth. *Subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmillan. New York. 1998. 13.

took whatever they wanted uh the best of whatever we had we tried to get back we couldn't and then we had to stay in a racecourse that was all open..."

Dalia's pain in this incident is likely a product of--beyond the immediate threat of violence--the multiple levels of separation she faced. The separation from her home has occurred, she is presently experiencing a separation from comfort and shelter, and her separation from Burma is imminent. In addition to these separations, Dalia's mention that, "Our house was all open people came and took everything took whatever they wanted uh the best of whatever we had," suggests that she is experiencing a separation from her Iraqi heritage. In order to fully understand this latter assertion of separation it is necessary to know how she mentions possessions elsewhere in the interview,

"She managed to come away with a lot of things and when she came to Burma to marry my dad she brought along side with her or she sent for it the most beautiful Persian carpet you have ever seen it's a big size carpet which we have and that was the first thing at the head of the street when we lived in Rangoon they robbed us of that I can still picture it it was our pride and joy of that time it was wonderful so that's from Iraq and then you know they do very good work with carpets in Iraq."

Dalia is specifically detailing her parent's betrothal and marriage, which included her mother's relocation from Iraq to Burma where Dalia's Iraqi born father already resided. She likely felt provoked to mention the significance of the Iraqi carpet because I prompted her to recall any stories or memories of Iraq her mother had passed along. Her immediate recollection of something so tangible in the name of establishing connection indicates how prominent the material is for her. She might have in fact, inherited this dependency on the material from her mother given that one of the tools she herself employed to hold her Iraqi past close was to require the keeping of these material things. The determination on the part of Dalia's mother to fashion her Burmese life in the vein of her Iraqi, is conveyed persuasively when the nature of her marriage is understood. It was a marriage designed in order to maintain and fortify wealth between two families, as

Dalia's mother was the second bride of Dalia's father, called upon to take the place of her niece who had passed away and in addition to being married to Dalia's father, also bore him children. This type of marriage was not an aberration in terms of its economic impetus and familial character given that such marriages were common among Iraqi Jews in the early twentieth century. What might have proven disruptive for Dalia's mother is the suddenness of the imminent union's notification, the fact that the marriage process was expedited to ensure the bride would begin fulfilling her role as wife and mother as soon as possible, and the fact that it required her to leave behind her life in Iraq. It is understandable that given such a rupture, Dalia's mother might have clung to the aesthetic in order to memorialize her Iraqi life and lend order to her Burmese life.

Similarly, given the rupture Dalia faced and the life experience she had at her disposal, it is understandable that she would verbalize her worry by longing to cling to the anchors of her workaday life. Per the example of her mother these anchors include not only, "The best of whatever we had," and the Persian carpets from Iraq, but also rootedness in Iraq offered technically through both parent's but most immediately through her maternal lineage. Other utterances underscore that Dalia very clearly pines for the security and comforts of home in the face of the Japanese invasion, "Because the war came when the Japanese started bombing it was in the 1940s in 41 and we had to it was kind of an explosion of feeling in our hearts because we knew of no other place but Rangoon we were sheltered we were happy and content whatever you want to say then suddenly we found that we had to get dispersed." What is significant here is Dalia's tendency to express the difficulty of being an Iraqi Jew and living in a volatile time by verbalizing her

feelings through a description of and longing for material goods, in potentially the same way her mother did. Furthermore, her propensity to view things through the lens of the material was increased by the British character her literal path of departure took. At this point of departure, having lost all of her worldly possessions and experiencing a growing forced estrangement from her country, Dalia became separated from much of her Burmese life, but further inextricably indebted to one aspect of it: the protection provided from the British mandatory powers. Part of her description of the Japanese invasion and the loss of her possessions included, “We managed to get a passage to get on the ship it was a second mass boat and that carried the treasury of the British away from Burma it took everything away from Burma and I remember they came upon the ship the moment we went on the ship bombs were falling.” In this instance, Dalia’s preferred way of conveying her experience--through descriptions of the material--becomes interwoven with facts on the ground. The exact character of this departure transformed Dalia to be part of the “treasury” and “everything” that the British were taking away from Burma. There is reason to believe that only select groups of people, among them the Jews, were subject to British departure as Dalia notes that her family’s Burmese servants had helped care for the family up until this point, but would not follow them to India. In a situation where all inanimate and human material faced displacement and violence, per Dalia’s consciousness, only the material of the British was subject to obtain salvation. Here, Dalia is enacting her own version of a common Iraqi Jewish response to disruption which includes cleaving to European countries and power sources in order to try and reclaim what has been lost. Like Dalia, many woman at Kahal Joseph tried settling in European



countries including Holland and Britain before finding their way to America. Even those Iraqi Jews who settled in Israel had their departure characterized by European involvement in the sense that British allowance was necessary for many Jews to, at least initially, enter the country due to the quotas they had set on immigration. Noticing that British favored material was exempted from the eternal displacement that volatile situations threatened, Iraq's Jews had to cleave to British alignment.<sup>84</sup> Such a stark realization, considering the potentials it suggested, not only informs an Arab Jewish subjectivity but must also be assumed as part of the reason why those who have access to this subjectivity locate their ability to express in the realm of material culture. It seems that this exact verbalization further imparts the Arab Jewish subjectivity expressed by Kahal Joseph's women with cognitive dissonance because it uncovers the practice of selective memory in order to cope with life's sensitivity to alteration. This type of cognitive dissonance is informed by studies that reveal how moods in the present affect individual recall of specifically emotional episodes or those memories that are not in line with the everyday. Cognitive dissonance theory classifies such a response as mood congruency, which when elaborated, "... refers to the notion that people selectively attend to, interpret, and remember information that is similar in emotional tone to their current

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<sup>84</sup> "We can thus conclude that because immigration from Europe was blocked and the Jewish Agency possessed immigration certificates for which there was no demand, the Zionist movement was able to be generous toward the Jews of Iraq following the traumatic events of the Farhud." Meir-Glitzstein, Esther. "The Baghdad Pogrom and Zionist Policy." *Al-Farhud: The 1941 Pogrom in Iraq*. The Hebrew University Press. 2010. 202. As readers can probably discern, the Farhud and the 1950-1 exodus of Iraqi Jews to which Meir-Glitzstein refers, took place years before many of the women I interviewed begin narrating their lives. I rely on this evidence because I think it further demonstrates Iraqi Jewish-British inextricableness. Both the position Jews filled during the British mandate and how a British presence reverberated for this community despite Israel's conception and their departure from Iraq, convey the depths of indebtedness.

mood state.”<sup>85</sup> I interpret this to say that, when remembering their lives for me in general and the cataclysmic events in particular, the women of Kahal Joseph were experiencing equilibrium that was at least in greater abundance in proportion to when the particularly emotional events were unfolding. Given this, research involving the mood congruency hypothesis suggests that they are likely to endeavor towards an affirmation of this current equilibrium by describing the events in a particular way. An elaboration on such a tactic reveals,

Mood congruence appears to be a reliable phenomenon when people recall and evaluate their possessions, their career, their marriage, their health status, their satisfaction with their lives, their prospects for the future, the likelihood of good or bad things happening in the near future, the acceptance of positive versus negative feedback about their personality, their manner of explaining their successes and failures, and estimates of their personal skills in social and nonsocial areas (for a review, see Eich et al., in press).<sup>86</sup>

This assertion permits the deduction that Dalia’s speaking to the negative emotional state of her displacement by way of a referral to the material might be revealing of cognitive dissonance as it relates to the the mood congruency hypothesis due to the nature of the event upon which she is ruminating and recalling. The prompt to speak to her quality of life while in a Burmese Jewish community during the interview, was ambiguous enough to facilitate free association or imaginative fantasy responses which are the types of responses most inclined to mood congruency. By mentioning the Persian carpet inherited from Iraq, general aesthetic of her Burmese life, and her mother’s insistence on clinging to something material in the face of displacement, Dalia is expressing cognitive dissonance that is engendered when past events disrupt current moods and such a discrepancy is dealt with through selective memory. Dalia is further exemplary as a

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<sup>85</sup> Rusting L. Cheryl. “Personality as a Moderator of Affective Influences on Cognition.” Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001. 372.

<sup>86</sup> Bower H. Gordon. Forgas P. Joseph. “Mood and Social Memory.” Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001. 109.

candidate for cognitive dissonance as she fits into the gendered paradigm I delineated previously in which Iraqi Jewish men enact knowledge and women keep it, because as she detailed for me at length, a particular inclination for knowledge acquisition and critical thinking skills was noticed and cultivated in her from a young age. According to her memory, she was so particularly apt at internalizing Torah and liturgy that her teacher wished she was a boy so that she could have her bar mitzvah. Then, after arriving in Calcutta, she also displayed the aptitude for hungrily acquiring more secular subjects so thoroughly she was encouraged to become an educator by her non-Jewish teachers. I stress that these encouragements came from non-Jews because it was Dalia's Jewish community that nearly stymied her teaching ambitions stemming from the fact that, her parent's in specific, did not find her teaching as a woman appropriate. Only now, in her mature age and living in America, is she able to unrestrictedly pass on her knowledge of Judaism as she trains her grandchildren for their bar and bat mitzvahs. Such information is important to know about Dalia because it substantiates that her agency is found in her thoughts and ability to acquire rather than explicit action. She remembers the material being lost with the Japanese invasion of 1942 more so because her role in the invasion was to be imbued by the material and affected by the invasion's unfolding. Such a role is discernible to a greater extent when positioned alongside Dalia's description of her father whose job it was to ensure his family's safe passage through pointed action.

## 2.7 Clothing and Furnishings as Material Culture: The Impact of Material Culture Part III

Dalia's demonstration of cognitive dissonance in this vein involves material that is obviously evocative because it is lost and culturally laden. Another possible

relationship to material arose in the interviews, when Julia conveyed her response to the burgeoning tumultuousness of Tehran as the Iranian Revolution mobilized. This particular relationship to material is different in character, but still suggestive of distraction and thus cognitive dissonance by way of mood congruency.

J: "My husband's uh employee said...the Six-Day War "you won it but the second we won it" so uh you felt that if you said anything that would not be right and then towards the end of our stay in Iran you my husband would ask me to wear even in the heat of the summer he would say why don't you put something on with sleeves or you know go find yourself a longer skirt which I didn't have anything everything was mini skirts and what about putting just a silk scarf on your head and then I decided I am not staying here anymore"

C: "Yeah how did that make you feel knowing that you were born in Iran um then you also you were Jewish and that was becoming more difficult to express"

J: "Uh I was very single minded in that I felt that if a woman couldn't be free to do what she had to do I came back from this experience with my husband telling me to go put a silk scarf on it's not that warm and I started packing and I would take everyday I would remove something from that house we had layers of carpets and I would remove one carpet and I would shuffle the others so where you know and I had these big iron metal cases my brother was in the transportation business with my father and they had these brought up and uh we were uh I was putting stuff in them"

Whether or not Julia's primary responses to her changing life were actually previously expressed as thoroughly through the material is not as important as recognizing that she utilizes material objects such as clothes and carpets in order to remember. This is an iteration of selective memory, particularly intriguing for its ability to convey how selective memory is cultivated. While Julia defined the parameters of her early Iranian life for me she stated, "... especially for the girls we were very sheltered from all that stuff not much was told to us," the stuff being anti-Semitism and her parent's life in Iraq. By way of Julia's insistence then, there is reason to believe that the seeds for selective memory are laid in young Iraqi Jewish women and cultivated throughout their lives. Yet again, women in this context appear particularly prone to have regulated and enforced relationships to knowledge. Like Dalia, Julia was reacting to the type of ambiguous question that encourages free association responses. Julia might have expressed her dissent to how life altering the fomenting Iranian Revolution was suggesting itself to be

in a multitude of ways, but in remembering during this instance such dissent appears most staunch in the realm of the material. What matters, per the insistence of the mood congruency hypothesis is that the material is Julia's vehicle for conveying the changing character of her life as a Jew in late 1960s Iran. Rather than delving into the reasons why her husband might think it necessary to suggest that she wear more modest clothing or cover her head with a silk scarf Julia concedes to the material in and of itself, to convey what is imperative. Similarly, she does not have to explicitly state that she and her husband were intending to leave the country and what this might have entailed because her intent is clear when she discusses deconstructing her home by removing its carpets and decor. Julia's remembering parallels Dalia's in so far as it uncovers selective memory through the material. By relying on more cognitive dissonance research, an exact delineation of Julia's and Dalia's thought processes is elucidated,

When emotions are strongly aroused, concepts, words, themes, and rules of inference that are associated with that emotion will become primed and highly available for use by the emotional subject. We can thus expect the emotional person to use top-down or expectation driven processing of his social environment. That is, his emotional state will bring into readiness certain perceptual categories, certain themes, certain ways of interpreting the world that are congruent with his emotional state; these mental sets then act as interpretive filters of reality and as biases in his judgements.<sup>87</sup>

As previously stated, one of my worries as a researcher during the interview process was that my inquires would disrupt the serenity these women had actualized for themselves following their displacement and potential trauma. Julia was relatively placid for the duration of our interview and at the outset it was exactly this sort of cadence that I feared disrupting. Realizing the role that cognitive dissonance by way of mood congruency factored into our encounter I have had my worries placated. Julia interpreted what might

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 108.

be called her penultimate disengagement with Iran as being lucidly explained through the material. Per the above cognitive dissonance research, this material focus was likely a filter that when harnessed allowed Julia to maintain the reconciliation she had with the past and peacefulness that now stood where any potentially crippling feelings could. If believing that suggestions to wear more modest clothing implied a curtailment in women's rights and was thus a catalyst for departure Julia might not have to make reasons saturated with greater emotion the crux of her departure decision and thus a permanent part of her psyche. Rather than perhaps anti-semitism which, although she states, "There was a tremendous effort at least in my family on the part of my parents to shield us from all that was evil or anti-semitic or hurtful for instance I grew up as a child thinking Nazi Germany just happened maybe happened to somebody you know nobody delved into these things too much we were in Iran we were free," alleges at several other points something in this vein, "...but there was an underlying anti-Semitism if you just if you were to scratch the surface um we would see it and then we wouldn't see it." None of this is to say that a curtailment of women's freedom was not a substantive reason to leave. Rather, what is intriguing in and of itself for our current purposes is that an appeal made by Julia to the material and tangible is often used in place of making appeals to more esoteric concerns such as freedom and parity. Moreover, when detailing the secret consolidation of her material life in preparation for a departure that was still not confirmed, she is likely subscribing to herself greater agency than what might have actually been the case. Such an assertion about agency is legitimately proffered when Julia mentions how her departure genuinely came to fruition, "...in fact when we were

leaving and sometimes misfortune is there's fortunate things in misfortune I have an autistic son and we were one of the first two families who were allowed out of flights in Iran because we had a doctor's appointment in the States," uncovering the genuine degree to which individual endeavor could figure, which was by her own account rather scant. Thus, what Julia's mentioning of clothing as an impetus for departure and deconstruction of her Iranian aesthetic as what, at least partially facilitated such a departure says is that filtering her situation through the material is a tactic to convey the imperativeness of her situation in a lucid way but also one that leaves unsaid the too potentially emotionally affecting. What Dalia and Julia filter out of their psyche's in order to mitigate the possibility for cognitive dissonance as their past turmoil collides with their present peace of mind is possible to overlook because the material stands in its place.

## 2.8 Food as Material Culture: The Impact of Material Culture Part IV

Julia: "...it's easier to serve bagels than Baba you know"

Baba-Ghanoush or as Julia renders it, just Baba, is a Levantine eggplant dish that involves at least some exertion in the name of properly mashing the cooked eggplant, adding the proper seasoning or regional specification, and perhaps trying to find something to consume it with. Thus, it likely is more difficult to serve than the bagel. Julia issued this musing as a coda for why Arab Jewish history in general and Iraqi Jewish history in specific is ultimately ephemeral, at least in the American context. Because the entirety of the quote in which the above sentence is contained, includes mention of Polish Jews as one binary to Iraqi Jews and the implication that bagels are a

Polish cultural product and Baba-Ganoush an Iraqi, Julia is implicitly eluding to an Ashkenazi-Sephardi dichotomy and determining who among this dichotomy will be remembered in perpetuity. Beyond its sheer wit and evocativeness Julia's musing imparts food with a great deal of constituting power, and rightly so according to scholars of food as material culture, "...food provides a fluid symbolic medium for making statements about identity. Through the invocation of sets of inflexible cultural stereotypes, particular foodstuffs are linked to particular localized as well as nationalized or, indeed, globalized identities (James 1996). What I eat may reveal that I am English or Cornish, Hindu or a Jew, a child or an adult or an international traveller or trendsetter."<sup>88</sup> About the relationship between food and material culture, it has been said, "In some ways food consumption is a part of material culture. Like other objects, food can carry shared meanings that are particular to a specific culture. In fact, food's ability to engage more senses, and hence trigger a greater range of responses, makes it an especially powerful material object."<sup>89</sup> Julia reasons that to be an Iraqi Jew is to eat or be familiar with Baba-Ganoush and by extension subject to erasure per the intricacies your culinary inheritance or predilection requires. Explicitly following the lines of reasoning from the above quote, what Baba-Ganoush implies in America is difficulty in the face of the more privileged ease. Julia is cognizant of the fact that if her own Arab Jewish subjectivity was partly constituted through Baba-Ganoush consumption it might be at risk for erasure. Perhaps this is why she served tea and pastry during our meeting and not Baba. Baba-Ganoush

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<sup>88</sup> James, Alison. "How British is British Food." *Health, Food and Identity*. Routledge. London. 1997. 74

<sup>89</sup> Bikham, Troy. *Eating the Empire: Intersections of Food, Cookery and Imperialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Past and Present Society. Oxford. 2008. 78.



evokes Levantine history and thus personifies the Iraqi Jew. However the dish also evokes difficulty and thus provokes a cognitive dissonance in Arab Jewish subjectivity. It is this difficulty in and of itself that will be presently discussed, with the possible negative side effects of this difficulty subject to deconstruction in the final section of this culturally tri-constituted Arab Jewish subjectivity. Arab Jewish food as material culture will include contextualizing the difficulty of this food, followed by a discussion of how the difficulty manifests itself.

## 2.9 The Difficulty of Food and Material Culture: The Impact of Material Culture Part V

C: "...when you were learning about Iraqi food did that make you proud to know that you were Iraqi?"

D: "Oh yes and how and how because that was the basic of everything which it is right now too and we explain it to them that's the way it was and it's all healthy and its from Baghdad"

Throughout our interview, Dalia did a great deal to separate herself as a Jew, from any Arab affiliation. She was less hostile to Iraqi affiliation, but also not as articulate. Somewhat paradoxically then, as the above quote shows, she has only the fondest memories of Iraqi food. She delineated in intricate detail the process of pickling mangos in Iraq and admitted that she did not learn how to cook until she left Burma because while there, her mother and the Burmese cooks prepared all of the Iraqi dishes. Considering Dalia's affinity, is food from Arabs Jews really that "difficult" at all and if so what explains its shift along a trajectory from fondness to derision? In a somewhat rudimentary way, Julia is exactly astute when she issues that ease must factor into the calculus of how food is considered. A great deal of the women I interviewed mentioned to me that they did not acquire cooking skills until the task was thrust upon them due in part to their emigration and marriage. Noting the reliance on servants for Iraqi food

preparation during a good portion of the women's formative years coupled with the fact that changing circumstances forced them to take on time-consuming employment after emigration, logic follows that some anxiety would arise around the task of food preparation. This fomenting difficulty with food was a difficulty paralleled by Dalia's admission that a great deal of the traditions she kept while in Burma, India, England, and Israel were not so simply kept in America. For instance, while she considers herself nearly Orthodox in her practices of Judaism and was a very bright student of the religion as a kid, she relinquished the fact that the demands of American life were detrimental to her religious being. Her Israeli born daughter Yael had to force her to see beyond this difficulty she admits, "I remember Mom why don't you come to synagogue remember I had two children I went to work I'm talking about America here and it was very difficult to get up after a long shabbat erev shabbat and because of her she more or less she used to go to the Ashkenazi synagogue but it was her that really made me feel to get back to my Iraqi way and come back and go to synagogue." While this detail obviously does not speak of food I think it does speak to the general difficulty imparted upon a life lived after upheaval. Thus, to say that food associated with Arab Jewishness might have been found simply rather difficult and thus dismissible is not to be flippant. It is to be practical about the facts on the ground.

While difficulty ensued in the culinary attempts of these women as they tried to recreate dishes from their childhood in Europe and America, it did not stymie such undertakings. Sometimes, as these Middle Eastern and Indian dishes crossed borders, they offered themselves for further pejorative consideration. Yael, describes how some of

her Ashkenazi American classmates reacted upon noticing how different was the food her mother prepared for her,

Y: "...I have to be honest with you growing up in um uh predominantly Ashkenazi elementary school as a child I did feel an interesting way I mean that the kids didn't I kind of felt that they didn't get the Sephardic I was the minority in an Ashkenazi school and I kind of felt it"

C: "How did you feel it do you have any examples"

Y: "You know kids would look at my food and say why is your food that color and what are you eating so it was that kind of a thing you know just kids I guess being kids but I do remember you know some of those memories"

In some sense, Yael's memory suggests that once the food was regarded derisively by others and in this case, even coreligionists, the shift from conceiving it fondly and constitutively to conceiving it pejoratively, is complete. The cognitive dissonance research that explains such a pejorative conception of Arab Jewish food is that which deals with a neuroscience approach to affect. Affect can be described as the summary one internalizes about what they feel and experience.<sup>90</sup> Taking a neuroscience approach to affect allows for research to suggest how genetic markers in the brain influence what happens in society.<sup>91</sup> In the research study I am referring to, such an endeavor is not undertaken in the name of saying all affect is biologically determined. Rather, the research suggests that genetic markers prime us to summarize information in regularized ways that are directly related to the experience, its quality and duration, and its simultaneity. Researchers defining this line of reasoning Tiffany A. Ito, John T. Cacioppo, feel,

Any comprehensive theory of affect should be able to account for the large body of research showing that subjective affective experience and the language we use to describe our affective reactions can often be described by a single bipolar valence continuum, with high positive affect

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<sup>90</sup> Cacioppo T. John. Ito A. Tiffany. "Affect and Attitudes: A Social Neuroscience Approach." Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001. 52.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

on one end and high negative affect on the other (e.g., Russell, 1979; Russell & Carroll, 1999; Russell & Feldman Barrett, 1999).<sup>92</sup>

Again, this is not an appeal to biological determinism which might reason that the women I interviewed are somehow genetically predisposed to eventually consider Arab Jewish food pejoratively. Rather, I think the meaning is that our brains want to distribute our affect responses along “a single bipolar valence continuum,” which suggests that while Arab Jewish food might have been exalted for its authenticity or simply its savoriness in Iraq or Southeast Asia, social circumstances in America and Europe eventually forced it to the opposite end of the bipolar valence continuum. Explicit cognitive dissonance arises then, when the woman are confronted with their own or their family’s desire for Arab Jewish food despite where it is by and large determined to now reside on the bipolar valence continuum. This cognitive dissonance was likely provoked in Yael upon having her minority Sephardic status exacerbated through her Ashkenazi school peers, “Not getting it.” When her mother’s home cooked Iraqi food was chided for its difference, Yael had to deal with the after effects of an Arab Jewish inheritance and public Ashkenazi expectation confronting one another. Victoria also gets at this dissonance when discussing her and her family’s relationship to Iraqi food,

C: “Okay interesting how do you think they feel about um knowing that they have parents who are born who were born in Iraq”

V: “Oh okay that’s a very nice question for example food they resist eating any Iraqi food”

C: “Oh”

V: “They said we are not born there we don’t know uh we don’t want to know anything about it there so uh they are just like they eat the steak and all this kind of stuff the European way of eating and then here it’s almost the same”

C: “How does that make you feel”

V: “Uh I personally like I don’t like the Iraqi food although my husband loves it”

C: “Oh”

V: “He will have to have it everyday as the way his mother the way she used to cook it and I do cook it for him the way he wants it but mainly for him”

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 53.

As noted earlier, Victoria rejects an Arab Jewish subjectivity in part because of her complex relations with non-Jewish Arabs in her past. In order to continually justify such a subject position to herself, it makes sense that she would harness a dichotomous way of thinking. Resisting Iraqi food and having children who resist as well is congruent with such a dichotomous way of thinking, but having a husband who is a reminder of Iraqi food's culinary and symbolic value, is complicating. Utilizing a single bipolar valence continuum, facilitates a reading of Victoria's relationship to Arab Jewish food from Iraq, as a personification of rather fundamental cognitive dissonance in the sense that feelings of unease are provoked in Victoria as her European food sensibilities come up against her husband's Iraqi food inclinations. She mitigates her unease through compartmentalization; Iraqi food is cooked for her husband and her children are relished as European food lovers. The ability to compartmentalize and rely on dichotomous ways of thinking are particularly female in the realm of food as material culture because Iraqi Jewish women are the food preparers for their family. Being able to perform in this realm with such control but still subject to the their husband's predilections, suggests that the type of cognitive dissonance these Arab Jewish women are characterized by does not come arbitrarily.

Also rather fundamentally, the European and the Iraqi are presumed binaries with the former invoked to delegitimize the latter. As with many of the invocations of the European among Kahal Joseph's women there is historical precedence. Food, whether it was being traded or consumed was crucial to the British imperialist endeavor, "At the end of the eighteenth century eating connected the British to their empire, as foods became

not only the most abundant products of imperial trade, but also the empire's most prevalent symbols."<sup>93</sup> Both as part of the privileged social system and as indispensable members of British trade networks, the Jews were positioned to be imbued with British food norms and expectations. Mariam demonstrates these possibilities when discussing her grandparents choice to migrate from Iraq to Calcutta, "No they were not refugees at all they were not thrown out of Baghdad they were not thrown out it was a choice they went to trade they went to work to trade the spices the fabrics the colors this is what they were famous for over there and the far Eastern market wasn't tapped for that so they went." So then, beyond the fact that Victoria lived in European countries after departing Iraq in the 1970s, she is also heir to British food affinities that had been established in the eighteenth century. Victoria and Yael are exemplary for how indicative are their experiences with Iraqi Arab Jewish food of the cognitive dissonance that is possible for all of Kahal Joseph's women. The Arab Jewish subjectivity of these women is not only informed by the fact that they are expected to feel ambivalent or dismissive towards Iraqi food but also because becoming cognizant of this expectation is productive of a cognitive dissonance informed by dichotomous thinking. In general, food is exemplary vis-a-vis subjectivity construction because it is a tangible example of how one's inheritance primes them for cognitive dissonance. As has begun to assert itself here, and the next section of this thesis will demonstrate, inheritance of Arab Jewishness is a paradox given that its very existence and perpetuation are its undoing.

## 2.10 Noticing Ephemeralness: Having an Ephemeral History and a Subjectivity Part I

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<sup>93</sup> Bikham, Troy. Eating the Empire: Intersections of Food, Cookery and Imperialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain. Past and Present Society. Oxford. 2008. 107.

N: "And I think now there is uh more you know being heard and see and done and seen because they are afraid that this will you know will go away it will go away probably eventually but they're trying to preserve as much as possible of the culture and of that identity"

C: "Do you think even with everything that's being done to try and preserve it it will still fade away"

N: "Probably over the years I would say yes"

C: "Why do you think so"

N: "Well I mean how much can you preserve over the generations it will fade away over the generations it will fade away which is I don't know if its good or bad but uh its reality right"

I was not properly prepared for the women I interviewed to express the demise of

their culture and identity in such a forthright manner. Noa possessed no qualms about calling herself an Arab Jew. Being the only woman among my sample to do so, made her assertion that Arab Jewish culture and identity, "will go away probably eventually," all the more perplexing. I proceeded with trepidation when asking future interviewees about Noa's sentiment because I did not want to reveal her as some sort of infidel. Such trepidation was unwarranted. Noa was not an infidel, the secret was out and there was a consensus; all future interviewees were matter of fact in confirming the demise. The insistence that much of what one inherits as an Arab Jew is ultimately ephemeral suggests that there is in an Arab Jewish subjectivity a resolve characterized by disillusionment. I resist calling these women ambivalent in their resolve because the stoicism of their tone was never without concern. Because of this concern, I persevere in demonstrating that their utterances constitute an Arab Jewish subjectivity in the face of both this resolve and the fact that many of the women rejected the term itself. Situated vis-a-vis Arab Jewish literature, such a resolve of ephemerality is not an aberration but a corroboration. Of standard mention in much of the more self-conscious literature in this field is typically a variation of what Naim Kattan has summarized rather well, "A Jew can certainly keep the Arab culture as part of his inheritance. It all depends on if he can find interlocutors."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Kattan, Naim. *Jewish of Arab Origin and Culture*. *Covenant Global Jewish Magazine*. Vol. 1. Issue 1. Herzliya. 2006. 2.

This is ultimately less of a coda and more of a plea. The fact that the women from Kahal Joseph were willing to share their life and considerations with me prove this contention. In sum, the last facet of an Arab Jewish subjectivity constituted through culture appears to be a concern for the ephemeral and the bearing of a cognitive dissonance arising from this ephemeral being in part, who you are.

### 2.11 Justifying Ephemeralness: Ephemeral History and a Subjectivity Part II

M: "I can understand why the Ashkenazi Jews have much stronger um it's more out there it's because of the war and because of Germany and because of all that happened there and the terrible uh Holocaust so because of all that the Ashkenazi Jews have become uh quite a subject of discussion and history huge history"

C: "But do you think that's fair given that Jews in Arab countries also faced a certain kind of discrimination"

M: "No it wasn't like the War it wasn't like the Holocaust and because of the Holocaust uh Israel became a state as well so the Ashke so the Middle Eastern Jews didn't have that they didn't have that discrimination to that extent they didn't have um all that horrible horrible torture and murder and awful stuff that they had to go through and because of them Israel became a state actually because of what happened in Germany"

Mariam's sentiments are significant because they both reflect and exacerbate

certain facts on the ground when it comes to the study of Arab Jews. For instance, Lital Levy has written about the literal absence of Mizrahim in the Jewish history textbooks of Israeli schools and Aviva Ben-Ur stated that her 2009 book about Sephardic Jews in America was, "...the first full-length, academic study of non-Ashkenazi Jews in the United States."<sup>95</sup> These two particular examples speak to what I detailed earlier in this thesis concerning Jewish Studies and non-Ashkenazim and the sum total of all of this corroborates Mariam's assertion, "I can understand why the Ashkenazi Jews have much stronger um it's more out there it's because of the war and because of Germany and because of all that happened there and the terrible uh Holocaust." It is this specific

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<sup>95</sup> Ben-Ur, Aviva. *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*. New York University Press. 2009. Levy, Lital. "The "Whirling Dervish" vs. "The Universal": Discourses of Culture and Power in Israeli." *The Arab Studies Journal*. Vol. 9/10 No. 2/1. 2002.



insistence of the Ashkenazim being the bearers of plight that holds a great deal of clout in both Jewish studies and perception of Jews. Reasoning along these lines goes that the catastrophe that was European Jewish persecution imparts an imperative to have such a history discussed at the likely inadvertent expense of Jews from non-European lands. Complicating this contention further is that discussions of Jews from Arab lands--those non-European Jews who hail from Muslim rule--vacillate between exaggerated portrayals of persecution on the one hand and portrayals of confluence on the other. Considering the definitiveness of European Jews' conception and the mercurialness of Arab Jews' conception, ideas like those that Mariam holds are perpetuated. This perpetuation was rampant in my interview process with several women expressing their affirming understanding regarding Arab Jewish history's muted status in the face of European Jewish history's shadow. Questions of which Jewish communities suffered more are deeply personal and to ask such questions during this current endeavor would be to miss this thesis' point. The fact is, that among women at Kahal Joseph, this line of reasoning is prevalent to the extent that it appears as a very noticeable way they explain their history as Jews to themselves, and is thusly constitutive of their subjectivity. What this manifests as is the women accepting their personal history being ignored for those more well known (such as the Ashkenazi) in the name of speaking only of those who are perceived to have suffered more and are presumably more well known. To the extent that this methodology genuinely informs their psyche, it might further explain aspects of the gender dichotomy paradigm I have referred to elsewhere in this thesis. By this I mean privileging certain histories over others might not cease with the Ashkenazi and

Sephardic dichotomy. It might extend to how the women understand the aspects of their history that are separate from men. If such a reasoning can hold water then the women are likely particularly attuned to historical ephemeralness and how precarious one feels to be characterized in this way.

2.12 Facets of Ephemeralness: Having an Ephemeral History and a Subjectivity Part III  
Dalia married her German born Ashkenazi husband after meeting him at a kibbutz in Israel where he was a paratrooper in the Israeli army. When I asked her daughter Yael about her parents immigration to Israel, the Ashkenazi-Arab Jewish dichotomy began to crystallize, “My mother’s immigration was more by choice my father’s was more by necessity.” By lending more agency and less urgency to her mother’s immigration, Yael had already begun to obfuscate, eliding the fact that her mother lacked agency as well. Although Dalia had left England for Israel facilitated by the Jewish Agency, her life until that point had not necessarily endowed her with an immigration of choice. As noted earlier, Dalia was forced from Burma to Calcutta in 1942 and was only able to return to her country of origin in 1951. However, as she relays it, the country’s natives were not as enthusiastic about her return as was she, and she was forced to flee to England because of this discrimination. Dalia found the terse and hermetic life of England difficult and simultaneously felt drawn towards Israel after visiting the country as part of the Jewish Agency. It should not be denied that Yael’s father was facing very imminent and inconceivable danger in Germany when he was able to flee, but her mother too faced danger even if it was of a more convoluted, distant, and covert order. Binaries of choice and necessity are part of the infrastructure that recognizes Ashkenazi history at the expense of Arab Jewish. Dalia reinforces this binary by portraying her husband’s story as

more exceptional than her own, "...I thank God for that for keeping us alive and keeping my husband alive for the wars he had to go through we are very thankful so I think it is in my luck to be united with such a wonderful person and my kids and grandkids they adore him they put him up on a pedestal whenever they have a school project they ask him like anything it's wonderful." Despite the fact that it is entirely rational for Dalia to feel reverence for her husband and gratitude for their continued unity, the binary of Ashkenazim versus Arab Jews is expressed through such feelings and the exceptionalism of the former part of the binary is driven home even more so. This is important because it affects how Dalia conceives of herself and her coreligionists as Arab Jews. After definitively dismissing the term Arab Jew as a title for herself, when I asked Dalia if her parents ever referred to themselves as such, she had this to say,

D: "...an Arab Jew you can't do that because they wouldn't want to no...they have their own way of thinking uh very strict in all the ways and you know more like the Baghdadis but I don't know I mean I wouldn't want to marry one from them...the women are wonderful but I don't know the men...no no I wouldn't want the name Arab to be associated with me for sure than they would think I am Muslim the very word Arab is not Jewish unless a Jew marries an Arab than he's an Arab Jew but that is a different thing you do find it in Israel many of them marry the Arabs because they want to come and live in Israel that was the idea so that they are happy or not do they follow traditions or not we don't know"

Dalia's bluntness might come up against people's politically correct sensibilities, but before allowing judgement to siphon her statements into obscurity, it is important to realize the discourse she is a part of. The way that Arab Jews like Dalia conceive of themselves in the face of Ashkenazi Jews, is likely an amalgam of their entire life experience. Even still, living in America has certainly reinforced these perceptions and has encouraged women to concede at least in some sense, that something about the Ashkenazim is more legitimate at least in terms of recognition. These women may eschew this line of thinking in practice or in certain compartments of their life--after all

they belong to an Iraqi synagogue. However, having come up against such a line of thinking, even just in America, it still must be informative at least in the abstract. In sharing an anecdote with me, Noa revealed how one might be confronted with this binary way of thinking I am referring to,

C: “Um what about American Jews and the need for them to hear this identity Arab Jew what do you think of that”

N: “Well um its its its its I think that they are aware now more than before but I would tend to say yeah they were not aware because when we first came here they would say do you Yiddish I says no and she’ll say well what kind of a Jew are you and I’ll say do you speak Judaeo-Arabic she says uh no and I say what kind of a Jew are you so they were not aware”

Having been a part of Jewish communities all of her life, it is reasonable to assume that Noa wanted to continue such an existence, especially given such a life changing event as immigration to America. While communities in general and Jewish communities in specific might lend themselves to amorphous conception in the present, this likely would not have been the conception of community Noa inherited. Thus, a request to speak Yiddish by what was perceived as a fellow community member, could have been reasonably alienating. It seems, that it is in disperse and perhaps even anecdotal instances, such as this, where Arab Jews get a sense that their culture and identity are ephemeral. Yael’s father, Dalia’s husband, also reinforced this exact language requirement, when he overheard Yael’s interview,

Y: “Well I don’t know for me it was kind of I would say when it comes to food we tend to be more Sephardic I’m really an Ashkephard because I’ve been exposed to hearing Yiddish I’ve been exposed to hearing Hindi and um not much Arabic because my mother speaks more Hindi being raised in India and Burma”

C: “Oh okay”

Y: “So I’m a little bit of both”

*dad interjects*

“Oh (*laughs*) my dad is complaining that I am not Ashkenazi because I don’t speak Yiddish but um as far as culture and lifestyle and the feelings I have to say I am right down the middle but when it comes to food I lean more towards the Sephardic food my brother on the other hand is more towards Ashkenazi so he has got the Ashkenazi palate and I’ve got the Sephardic palate although after many years I’m witnessing my dad leaning over”

Yael being “right down the middle” as far as culture and lifestyle, and her father “leaning over” in terms of Sephardic food preferences, speak to the tone of concern in the

women's voices that I noted earlier and which gives me reason to persevere in the name of discussing the Arab Jew, but for now it is crucial to recognize how, in one's home life, even in a fun loving manner, Arab Jews such as Yael develop an understanding of the Ashkenazi versus Arab Jew binary. This is of course because markers of culture, like language, have meaning. In fact, in a very direct way, Yael was denied access to some of her Arab Jewish past, because she does not speak Arabic. When I asked Yael about her relationship with her maternal grandmother and whether or not she passed on any stories about her life in Iraq, Yael admitted that although the two were close and she has fond memories, the fact that she did not speak Arabic and her grandmother did not speak English, meant that exchanges between them were difficult. While non-verbal forms of communication should not be dismissed, for instance Yael does have fond memories of drinking tea with her grandmother and simply being in her presence, what cannot be discounted is that she obtained little in the way of communicative and conveying stories, due to a language barrier. Such a paradigm is further replicated in many of the families to which the women I spoke with belonged. Eliding the Arabic language was a process that began in their own girlhood, for those who were raised outside of Iraq. The Arabic language was the secret language of the adults, many of the women stressed. While these women nevertheless learned the language and the two women I interviewed who were born in Iraq speak the language to each other, its overall use is diluted in America. This means that during the events which the Sisterhood of Kahal Joseph sponsors, English is the only language spoken. Such a choice facilitates those with less Arabic familiarity.

Furthermore, the women are not generally determined in passing the language on to their children.

With all of this being said, as I have alluded to previously, the ephemerality of Arab Jewish history, culture, and tradition that is implied by the facts on the ground, while undeniably informative, is not without nuance. The women may be resolved to a certain fate, but that doesn't mean such a diagnosis does not concern them. While it is impossible for me to force readers to believe my descriptions of the interviews using just my writing, I must riskily attempt something along these lines in order to discuss how Noa's discussion of her daughters and Arab Jewishness conveys the concern I am trying to get at. Noa is incredibly thoughtful and well informed about matters of Iraqi Jewry. For whatever reason, she has not let the discrimination she faced while in Iraq--her being fired from her job because she is Jewish and having to escape incognito from the country--to corrode into a general hostility. Perhaps because all of this, she was very articulate and unflappable during our interview. Until that is, I asked her a question about if she believes her twenty something year old daughters would call themselves Arab Jews. At this instance Noa said,

N: "Maybe maybe now maybe a little bit but I mean in in in reality uhh I identify myself as an Arab Jew"

C: "Yeah"

C: "Your daughters"

N: "Probably no"

C: "No"

N: "They would probably I'm gonna guess they would say American"

C: "Oh okay that's interesting how does that make you feel"

N: "(laughs) Yeah I mean it is what it is I mean what can you do"

C: "No I understand"

This is where I would ask the reader to lend believability to something they cannot themselves see. Noa's noted laughter does not reveal the tears filling her eyes as she

spoke and my insistence of understanding does not reveal potential for greater emotion as it stymies the emotion I assumed did not belong in the interview setting. So in fact, what happens to this term Arab Jew even for those astute enough to critique it, matters a great deal. Noa's "It is what it is what can you do," said through unavoidable tears, is the exact embodiment of resolve and concern that I am hopefully conveying. Such feelings are also the exact moment when cognitive dissonance rears itself. When the women experience affinity for something they perceive as fleeting they experience a type of cognitive dissonance which I have referred to previously that is explained using the mood congruency hypothesis. The mood congruency hypothesis, as previously stated, "... refers to the notion that people selectively attend to, interpret, and remember information that is similar in emotional tone to their current mood state."<sup>96</sup> The propensity towards selectivity, highlighted in this definition, is what reveals cognitive dissonance. The women I interviewed experience cognitive dissonance when their affinity for, or at least the undeniability of their Arab Jewish past is confronted with lines of reasoning that decrease its survivability. The selectivity enacted in the name of informing one's subjectivity is proportional to whether or not one is dealing with a central or peripheral self-conception. Since central self-conceptions contain for example, "higher amounts of autobiographic knowledge," and come to be held with, "greater certainty," and per what has previously been delineated--how the women of Kahal Joseph perceive Arab Jewish

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<sup>96</sup> Rusting L. Cheryl. "Personality as a Moderator of Affective Influences on Cognition." Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001. 372.

history is likely a central self-conception.<sup>97</sup> With this established and following the line of reasoning set forth by the mood congruency hypothesis, “It is no surprise, then, that central self-conceptions are affirmed more strongly than peripheral ones (Markus, 1977; Pelham, 1991; Sedikides, 1993) through such mechanisms as selective attention to feedback, biased interpretation or explanation of feedback, reconstructive memory, and selective exposure to confirming social environments (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Swann, 1990).”<sup>98</sup> This evidence not only demonstrates how the women come to bolster their central self-conceptions but also how these formative experiences impact, but not congruously, more peripheral self-conceptions. I would say that the concern felt by these women is an example of a peripheral self-conception because it is more of a derivative from the same circumstances the women come up against when constructing their narrative of Arab Jewish history. Because this peripheral self-conception is not subject to as much scrutiny as the central, its presence still lurks but it is not as well articulated. Having to proceed with such an unarticulated peripheral self-conception, that is this concern, is still informative to these women’s Arab Jewish subjectivity as is the cognitive dissonance that arises from the more central self-conception, that is their understanding of Arab Jewish history being ephemeral. This concern, which is arguably also a hope is part of what constitutes the term Arab Jew and the studies surrounding it, as so necessary. As my final chapter will discuss, Arab Jewish studies and discourse might have a way of mitigating the cognitive dissonance that is a part of Arab Jewish subjectivity, without

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<sup>97</sup> Green D., Jeffrey. Sedikides, Constantine. “Affective Influences on the Self-Concept: Qualifying the Mood-Congruency Principle.” *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*. Mahwah, N.J. Erlbaum Associates. 2001. 147.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 147, 8.



deconstructing the subjectivity itself. Oddly enough, it is someone like Dalia, who denies the term for herself and privileges the Ashkenazi experience so much, who was the one among the Kahal Joseph cohort who inadvertently discussed contributing to Arab Jewish studies in her own way. Prompted by one of her previous statements we had the following discussion at the close of our interview,

C: "You mentioned that you want to write your memoirs one day why do you think that is important"

D: "I just got out of a sick bed on the hospital I have to write his memoir and mine I hope you enjoyed it"

C: "Why do you think it is important to write them"

D: "As soon as I am able to get my hands on everything my computer is off today I had to reset restore my computer so I want to get on there and I would like the words to kind of flow into me but I want my head to be clear so that I will be able to go back to the past there is a lot a lot lots more that it's hard to you know but I'm so thankful I'm thankful to God that he kept us alive thankful for everything you have to be you know this is a small world and whatever you do you have to be thankful"

If Dalia one day does have the strength to commence her memoirs, she certainly has a story to tell. Her desire to write her memoirs further demonstrates the concern about Arab Jewish history's ephemeralness, I have previously spoken of. Memoirs and self-reflexive writing in general, comprise a great deal of Arab Jewish studies literature. Because of their directly conveyed articulations about the self and inclusion of how we explain our selves to ourselves, they are probably among the best resources for maintaining Arab Jewish subjectivity.

### Chapter 3: Dialoguing and Consciousness Raising

About Iraqi Jewish memoirs, Mark Cohen has written,

Following their departure en masse from their homeland in the middle years of the twentieth century, Jews from Iraq produced a small library of memoirs, in English, French, Hebrew, and Arabic. These works reveal much about the place of Arab Jews in that Muslim society, their role in public life, their relations with Muslims, their involvement in Arab culture, the crises that led to their departure from a country in which they had lived for centuries and, finally, their life in the lands of their dispersion.<sup>99</sup>

Cohen details a relatively exhaustive list of memoirs in his essay “Historical Memory and History in the Memoirs of Iraqi Jews,” and includes a short description of each along with a contextualization as to which milieu they belong. Presently replicating such a detailing would thus be unoriginal and not an entirely inspiring task. What has more credence, in the name of demonstrating what my research brings to bear on the field of Arab Jewish studies is to dialogue with some of my own findings, two canonized Iraqi Jewish authored memoirs Violette Shamash’s Memories of Eden: A Journey Through Jewish Baghdad and Sasson Somekh’s Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew. Such an action is a form of consciousness raising. Many of the women I encountered at Kahal Joseph explicitly stated their desire to discuss their lives as immigrants with Middle Eastern roots, with more people. For instance, while waiting in Kahal Joseph’s lobby one morning I spoke to Nina, a Libyan Jew. After hearing about my interest in Arab Jews and informing me of her website dedicated to Libyan Jewry she stated, “It’s so nice to find someone who cares.” Julia mentioned that she thought I was doing good work and

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<sup>99</sup> Cohen R., Mark. Historical Memory and History in the Memoirs of Iraqi Jews. *Otletova Journal for Hebrew and Israeli Literature and Culture Studies*. Vol. 11. 2012. 110.

Dalia seemed particularly happy to speak with me given the possibilities that could ensue, after having an experience where she told her life story to a woman in Israel, only to never hear from her again. If Naim Kattan's plea that Arab Jews must have interlocutors to exist is as true as the sentiments just listed seem to suggest, perhaps by dialoging the statements from women I interviewed with two prominent Iraqi Jewish memoirs, there can begin to exist some sort of interlocutory relationship that comes to full fruition.<sup>100</sup> In the end, such a dialoguing contributes to the richness of Arab Jewish studies as it speaks to the possibilities for subjectivities and self articulation.

Shamash does not call herself an Arab Jew in the two hundred and ten pages of her memoir. Speculating the reasons for such an inaction might yield little in the way of definitiveness, but perhaps it has something to do with the aims of her work. These aims are, quite explicitly a delineation of a fleeting history for posterity. Born in 1912, Shamash hails from a Baghdad much more informed by the turn of the century than any of Kahal Joseph's women are directly familiar with. Where the British were a formally departed mandatory power with remnants of culture and protection for the Iraqi born women I interviewed and a long established and passively accepted colonial power for the Southeast Asian born women, they were something more immediate for Shamash. The British for her were a tangible experience; commandeering her family's large house or *qasr*; their physical presence could not be denied. Shamash speaks as an active participant in direct British rule when she recalls British attempts to conquer Mesopotamia, their eventual success and rise to "supreme power in the Middle East," and

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<sup>100</sup> Kattan, Naim. Jewish of Arab Origin and Culture. *Covenant Global Jewish Magazine*. Vol. 1. Issue 1. Herzliya. 2006. 2.

the fact that forging Iraq through an amalgam of Turkish vilayets rather opposed to one another was a source of instability.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps most interesting, she articulates first hand what it was like to be denied British citizenship and adopt Iraqi in order to avoid a foreign status in her homeland.<sup>102</sup> The difference in intensity of British experience duly noted, Shamash's claims about the British eventually unfold in the same vein as I have previously delineated as characterizing all Iraqi Jews, she writes, "Within our community, the majority believed that they had much to gain from the coming of the British. And for their part, the British saw that there was much to gain from befriending us, with whom they had already had contact during a century of trade under colonial rule in India."<sup>103</sup> Rather than rehashing what I previously said about British encroachment and ethos here, I offer Mariam's musing about her citizenship status as an Iraqi Jew in Calcutta, for what it encapsulates nicely,

C: "Okay yeah I've never heard have you heard anyone who calls themselves an Indian Jew because I haven't"

M: "Um yes some some people do just because they were born there but it doesn't in essence make them an Indian Jew and when we term Indian means that that you were born there and that you were a native we were not native...transported there because of our heritage but we kept within the community so we never became Indian in essence the British rule India at the time so we were British Indian on the passport if that makes a difference into your understanding of it"

These expressions convey just how inextricably connected Iraqi Jews came to be with Britain, due in part, to issues of citizenship, and they are likely expressions that Shamash understood in her own context. Thus, the women I interviewed may come to the British or the West in general, in different ways than Shamash, but they all end up touched by a similar British ethos. Such an example proves once again, how Iraqi Jews are connected

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<sup>101</sup> Shamash, Violette. *Memories of Eden: A Journey Through Jewish Baghdad*. Evanston. Northwestern University Press. 2010. 49, 50.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 52.

across time and space. Similar lines of reasoning can be utilized to understand Shamash experiencing the 1941 pogrom or Farhud, that for the women I interviewed was a formative but nevertheless firmly historical event. Shamash posits the word Farhud as too horrible for English translation and again with first hand knowledge in her minds eye states, “The brutality and terror of those two days of Shavuot would be forever seared on our collective consciousness, and I shudder even now as I write these lines. For the victims who survived, nothing was ever recovered.”<sup>104</sup> Kahal Joseph’s women may have been shielded from such a violent and explicitly anti-Jewish attack but they certainly share in the burden of discrimination and upheaval. For instance, Carole Basri has detailed the list of restrictions imposed upon Jews after Israel’s war of 1967 in Iraqi Law number 64. Among these restrictions included, “All Jews were put out of employment. Firms who have employed Jews received a visitor or telephone call from authorities saying that they must dismiss any Jews in their employ.”<sup>105</sup> This restriction was particularly punishing for the two Iraqi Jewish women I interviewed who were born in Baghdad and Basra. Noa stated, “I had 1968 I just graduated university I worked for a little bit but then we couldn’t work anymore because we were Jewish my um employer said that um we like your work but unfortunately we can’t keep you.” Corroborating this, Victoria offered,

C: “Um and when did you leave Iraq”

V: “1970”

C: “Okay um why”

V: “Because I had a diploma and I couldn’t find a job”

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 181, 189.

<sup>105</sup> Basri, Carole. The Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries: An Examination of Legal Rights--A Case Study of the Ethnic Cleansing of Iraqi Jews. *Fordham International Law Review.* 41. 2003.

Sanctioned restrictions such as these, coupled with the social upheavals in places like Burma and Iran, as well as the covert discrimination several of the interviewees mentioned facing in Europe, lent Kahal Joseph's women a feeling of anxiety regarding their own precarity. Such a feeling is paralleled by Shamash's statements about the Farhud. While the women came to the anxiety from slightly different avenues, it was imbuing and catalyzing for all of them. Although Shamash's noted catalyst for departure is perhaps drenched with more violence and despair than several of the interviews I have cited, many provide the culmination of discrimination as a reason for departure. This citing does not lend itself to entirely polemic reasoning in the sense that they do not portray their Iraqi lives as endlessly persecutory. Still, it is again, interesting to note how similar these women's experiences are. The similarities in British experience and discrimination, that can be noted through the consciousness raising act of dialoguing Kahal Joseph's women with Shamash, are beneficent not because they banish the various forms of cognitive dissonance Kahal Joseph's women have accumulated over the years, but because they demonstrate how universal among all Arab Jews are the disparate experiences to trigger the dissonance. As with many forums in which consciousness raising takes place, individuals are often astonished and comforted to learn that others have felt their anxiety or pain in similar ways. I can reasonably assume that the women I interviewed have not discussed their experiences in such a way that would raise awareness about the shared cognitive dissonance that characterizes their Arab Jewish subjectivity. Such an assertion is possible, in part because two of the interviews most intimately connected subjects, Iraqi born sisters Noa and Victoria, were largely unaware

of how dissimilar were their relationships to the term Arab Jew. Discussing the cohort of women I was interviewing in general Noa offered,

N: “You will see how they identify themselves I don’t think they identify themselves as being Arab”

C: “Oh okay”

N: “I think I don’t I mean you’ll you’ll find out”

While she extrapolates that many of the other women will not call themselves Arab Jews, she is ultimately unsure of this position, suggesting an absence of thorough dialogue.

Recalling that Noa took on the title Arab Jew while Victoria rejected it, Victoria was somewhat more in the dark when she stated at the commencement of our interview, “You know Noa and I are sisters, so I don’t think there will be a difference in the way we feel.”

As Victoria solidifies the lack of dialogue I am suggesting, she further conveys the imperative of fostering such a consciousness raising activity. Even the sheer determination and stamina it took Shamash to complete her memoir before her death in 2006 might be an example because it demonstrates how one could experience the feelings of Iraqi Jewish history’s ephemerality, but channel the resulting concern effectively. In the 2006 postscript to her memoir Shamash writes, “I have sought to tell you, my children and my grandchildren, who you really are, what your background is, because I realize that, like the Gardenia Club, all will soon be forgotten, My mission has been to inform, to enlighten, and not to pass judgement.”<sup>106</sup> The Gardenia Club to which Shamash refers was formerly a beacon for Iraqi Jewish immigrants to England. As younger generations of Iraqi Jews actualized themselves outside of the club and the Iraqi Jewish incubation it offered, the club itself fell by the wayside. Many of Kahal Joseph’s

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<sup>106</sup> Shamash, Violette. *Memories of Eden: A Journey Through Jewish Baghdad*. Evanston. Northwestern University Press. 2010. 205.

women expressed similar sentiments about the synagogue. They noted that many younger Iraqi Jews prefer to spend time with the immediate families they have forged in adulthood and are even departing the heavily Jewish concentrated communities of Los Angeles due to monetary concerns. In the face of all of this and per Shamash's example, perhaps the best thing to do for those who find value in Arab Jewish subjectivity and its Iraqi facet, is to not slouch towards the resolve suggesting that the light of their history is perpetually dimming.

I do not definitively know why Sasson Somekh's Bagdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew, is called such in English while its Hebrew equivalent is just Baghdad, Yesterday. I once thought the matter anecdotal but I do not still, and offer without significant rumination that it has something to do with Somekh understanding an imperative not immediately intuitive, or at least easy to forget. This imperative is likely informed by the reasoning that something must exist in language first in order to be ascertainable for a subjectivity. Somekh would likely not assert that Israel has made complete peace with the term Arab Jew, but would concede that at least it exists in discourse. If the term Arab Jew is on individual Israelis' lips, this facilitates possibility. Somekh would be just the person to calibrate such an existence as he has spent a great deal of time in Israel since his emigration and helped found the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Tel Aviv University. If Somekh feels that such an existence is not as fully realized in English, perhaps he felt he had to make it so. Such an intention is certainly not without merit. While interviewing lawyer and filmmaker Carole Basri, herself an Iraqi Jew who would not rebuff the term Arab Jew, she noted, "I think it is



about semantics,” suggesting exactly what Somekh might feel: if you haven’t heard the term enough it cannot be informative. My guess at Somekh’s intention is not without support. Referring to the Iraqi Jews who settled in Israel, he writes, “However the Iraqi background they brought with them became blurred in their conscious, and most of them eventually assimilated into Israeli society at large. This is why Arab Jewish identity, which has receded with the passing of that generation, is particularly significant, and it is also why I (along with these others mentioned above) started writing memoirs of life in Iraq.”<sup>107</sup> He then goes on to inform that the episodes composing his memoir have previously appeared in various English, Hebrew, and Arabic newspapers and were previously amalgamated under the above mentioned Hebrew title. Here then, I think he is enacting an imperative to make known, particularly in English, the term Arab Jew. While Somekh might have just wanted to encourage familiarity and possibility, English readers could consume his memoir as if each disparate episode directly constitutes the Arab Jew who by the end of the book, we are supposed to know exactly. I think this is more readership inclination than authorial intention, but it may nevertheless be a reality. With this in mind, I would not dialogue Kahal Joseph’s women with Somekh’s work in the hope that they see it as a blueprint. Rather, as I keep reiterating, I think the work might be more useful for the women and the Arab Jewish subjectivity they articulate, because of the disparate similarities between their life and Somekh’s that it offers.

Somekh was born in Baghdad in 1933 and he left the country for Israel in 1951. He is years removed from the Iraqi born women I interviewed and also more familiar

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<sup>107</sup> Somekh, Sasson. Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew. Ibis Editions. 2007. 8.

with how to negotiate being an Arab Jew in Israel, than most of those I interviewed. Still, he offers a great deal in the way of actualizing beneficent dialogue. Like Shamash, Somekh provides further evidence for why cognitive dissonance as a subjectivity informer is possible. For example, as he ponders the importance of changing naming predilections among Iraq's Jews in his childhood he notes, "It must be noted that though these Jews favored European names, this did not weaken their Jewish or Iraqi identity, and the tendency wasn't accompanied by assimilation as was the case in Europe. On the contrary. In Iraq, the European names became an identifying marker of belonging to the community."<sup>108</sup> Although it might not be immediately obvious because I have had to provide pseudonyms, the legitimate names of the women I interviewed reflect Somekh's reasoning. This can be proven by the fact that in this thesis many of the names are altered but still European, testifying to their origins. If developing a predilection for European names can allude to something larger, it would likely suggest that the British had certainly made inroads in Iraqi Jewish hearts and minds.

On the other hand, since Somekh does more towards normalizing the term Arab Jew, he also does more for altering its relationship to cognitive dissonance. Considering the significant presence of non-Iraqi born Iraqi Jews among my sample population, it is worthwhile to note that Somekh comfortably and lucidly weaves their particular context into the Iraqi general fold. After establishing the awareness with Iraqi Jewish satellite communities he has had since childhood, Somekh states,

But the "Baghdadi" Jews of India were not linked to Iraq only in matters of faith and language. For the large communities of Baghdad and Basra, the satellite communities were a source of refuge and support in times of trouble. Moreover, contact with these outside

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 115.

communities broadened the horizons of the Iraqi Jews and opened their eyes to the modern world.<sup>109</sup> Beyond encouraging inclusion, Somekh's knowledge is also factually significant. For instance, he provides support to clarifications I made previously about Southeast Asian Iraqi Jewish tendency to use the term Baghdadi Jew, writing, "In India and China, the term applies not only to Iraqi Jews, but also to Jews of Middle Eastern descent, be they Syrian, Iranian, or Yemenite."<sup>110</sup> It proves crucial for Somekh to bolster the connection between Iraqi born and non-Iraqi born Jews, particularly considering his ability to speak to the term Arab Jew. He demonstrates that Iraqi Jews, no matter their country of origin, have access to the term Arab Jew and considering the sentiments expressed by some of the interviewees disabusing notions to the contrary is necessary. For instance, before Noa suggested that she didn't know if many of the women I interviewed would be inclined to the term Arab Jew she stated, "We don't have as many people who really left Iraq and I me and Victoria (*sister*) but Anat (*receptionist*) is already like born in India and grew up in India and then grew up in England." It would follow then, according to Noa's reasoning, that the term Arab Jew becomes more and more foreclosed across time and space. Somekh's ease vis-a-vis discussing Iraqi Jewish satellite communities in a book about Arab Jews demonstrates that if it could be conceived by someone who has grappled with it thoughtfully, then the term Arab Jew can be harnessed by any Iraqi Jew. This is ultimately a contribution towards demystifying the term. In this instance, dialoguing the women of Kahal Joseph's responses with Somekh's is useful for the assurance one can possess while calling themselves an Arab Jew. While I think it would be extending the

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 103.

argument too far to say that Somekh's particular life and understanding of the term Arab Jew is an antidote to the presence of cognitive dissonance, I don't think Somekh would be wanton with his use of the term. This is to say that he would not employ it so prominently if he considered it impractical as a subjectivity. If Kahal Joseph's women understood Arab Jew through Somekh's eyes, perhaps they would begin to perceive it differently in their own lives. Somekh's variation on the term demonstrates that an Arab Jewish subjectivity is all the more everlasting because it can be arrived to by many and characterized by deliberateness in the face of a fleeting history facilitating its erasure.

## Conclusion

Noa: “I consider myself also as an Arab Jew”

Victoria: “Well uh it is possible some people can feel it like Arab Jews I don’t”

Mariam: “I’d never heard it before I’ve never been called an Arab Jew it has never been assumed that I am an Arab Jew”

Julia: “I call myself an Iraqi Jew”

Yael: “Probably probably I guess I guess its pretty fluid because some people consider themselves Arab Jew”

Dalia: “No no I wouldn’t say that because when you put the word Arab it is not Jewish anymore”

When asked, “Are you an Arab Jew?” these were the immediate responses from each of my one on one interviews, in the order they took place. Considering these responses in this particular aggregate, lends this thesis a rather cyclical structure. This is to say that similar to Ella Shohat’s staunchly stated and then qualified, “I am an Arab Jew,” the trajectory of my interviews reflects Arab Jewish studies unceasing tension: the fact that its central concern, the Arab Jew, is always multiple, sometimes ambiguous, but certainly striving for recognition.

After interviewing Arab Jewish women at Kahal Joseph, immersing myself in Arab Jewish literature, and mulling over my findings alongside cognitive dissonance theories and poststructuralist frameworks, I determined that a possible Arab Jewish subjectivity is one informed by facets of culture and characterized by cognitive dissonance. In particular, informative facets of culture are education, material, and a sense of ephemeral history. The most present types of cognitive dissonance include those

informed by research concerned with human effectiveness and emotion, self-discrepancy theory, neuroscience and affect, and mood congruency. Restricting my sample size to only Arab Jewish women was an attempt to constitute women as subjects and female voices as informative before Arab Jewish studies has actualized in its entirety. Due to the wealth of memoirs from self defined or possible Arab Jews that saturate this field of study, it was reasonable to assume that the question, “What is an Arab Jew?” was meritorious to try and get at. Considering its possibility for multiplicity, attention to process, and openness to alteration, defining an Arab Jewish subjectivity figured as the most responsible way to attempt an answer to the above question. What establishes the subjectivity I located as most viable for further study is that it is a variation on a theme already found in canonical discourses in the field of Arab Jewish studies. Asserting that consciousness raising through a dialoguing of voices established through literature and voices that must still be sought out is worthwhile for what it offers all involved.

Noa, Victoria, Mariam, Julia, Yael, Dalia, and the group of Southeast Asian women I interviewed at Jacqueline's house, establish that there are people willing to talk about the Arab Jew. Their participation suggests that there is indeed, something to be said about Arab Jews of Iraqi heritage who might be born in the far corners of the world, often live through remarkable circumstances, and sometimes make themselves further intriguing through immigration. Given this encouragement, let no academic of Arab Jews doubt that her or his research is speaking to someone and for someone and is thus necessary but should be undertaken responsibly. And let no Arab Jew doubt that they are part of a recognized community with a great number of interlocutors.

## Appendix

### Informed Consent and Interviewee Release Form

This study titled *Voices of Iraqi Jewish Women*, is research that concerns the lives of Iraqi Jewish women. This research is being undertaken to partially fulfill requirements for a Master's thesis in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies. The participants of this research should anticipate donating between one hour and one hour and a half of their time. This research will include individual and group interviews, as well as participant observation. All interviews will begin with broad questions about the interviewees lives and proceed in a natural manner similar to a conversation but guided by particular questions. These particular questions are designed to obtain information relevant to a Master's thesis concerned with the topic of Arab-Jewish identity, but the interviewee is only expected to provide answers to the questions they are comfortable with. Interviewees can decline to answer any or all questions, generating a situation with little to no discomfort. Hopefully, interviewees will gain a sense of personal validation from these interviews and feel flattered that academics are interested in the contours of their lives. The names and all other identifiable information of interviewees will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used. These interviews will be stored in the possession of the researcher and interviewer Chelsie May. The interviews will be made directly available to only Chelsie May and this study's PI Jonathan Decter.

I \_\_\_\_\_ do hereby give to Brandeis University all right, title or interest in the tape recorded interviews conducted by Chelsie May. I understand that these interviews will be protected by the copyright and used in the Master's thesis of Chelsie May. I also understand that the tapes and transcripts may be used in public presentations including but not limited to audio and visual documentaries, slide-tape presentations, exhibits or articles. This gift does not preclude any use that I myself want to make of the information in these recordings.

If, at any time, interviewees have questions, comments or concerns they can feel free to contact the study's interviewer Chelsie May at [cmay@brandeis.edu](mailto:cmay@brandeis.edu), or the study's PI Jonathan Decter, at [decter@brandeis.edu](mailto:decter@brandeis.edu). Furthermore, If you have questions about your rights as a research subject please contact the Brandeis Institutional Review Board at [irb@brandeis.edu](mailto:irb@brandeis.edu) or (781) 736-8133. Lastly, in accordance with IRB standards, keep in mind: "Participation in this study is voluntary and subjects may stop the interview at any time; refusal to participate or discontinuing participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled."

Check one:

Tapes and transcripts may be used without restriction

Tapes and transcripts are subject to the attached restriction

Write yes/no next to each of the statements below:

Consent to be audio recorded

Consent to be video recorded (image and voice)

Consent to be video recorded (voice only)

I understand that a pseudonym will be used (required)

Signature of interviewee

Date

Address

Telephone Number