‘If Not Now, When?’: The Arab American National Museum During the Post-9/11 Era and Afterward

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Abstract

The Arab American National Museum (AANM) opened in 2005 to represent and serve the Arab American community following the surge in anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia after the September 11, 2001 attacks (9/11). With its opening the AANM challenged predominant narratives concerning the Arab American community during the post-9/11 era, offering a multicultural vision for American society amid a landscape where Arab and Muslim inclusion in Western civilization was up for debate. The AANM remains an example for how hybrid museums can platform ethnic minorities and enable them to assert their perspectives. However, since the end of the post-9/11 era the AANM’s core galleries have fallen out of sync with the community and its own programming. They should be updated to reflect the community’s changed needs and interests.

Keywords: post-9/11 era; Arab Americans; American identity; racial violence

Introduction

On 5 May 2005 the city of Dearborn, Michigan, was in a jubilant mood. Across the street from City Hall, a crowd gathered to witness the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the first and only museum of its kind in the United States: the Arab American National Museum (AANM).[1] Not only was the opening of national importance, but the attendance of the Arab League’s Secretary General, Amre Moussa, underlined the international significance of the Arab diaspora building a museum to, in their own words, ‘document, preserve and present the history, culture and contributions of Arab Americans.’[2]

The red ribbon was cut that day to cheerful applause, and the AANM’s sparkling white-domed building has since continued to serve the national Arab American community. Rooftop gardens, artist residency programs, film festivals, annual galas, and other programming allow for Arab Americans to gather and celebrate their heritage. Beyond the community, it provides cultural competency training to adult professionals across the nation and functions as a popular field trip destination for primary and secondary education students in the local area.

Despite the gravity of the AANM’s opening and enduring existence, there is scarce scholarly literature concerning it either within museum studies or discussions of Arab Americans following the attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11) that sparked a sharp surge in anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia. With this article I rectify this gap while also broadening museum-centric definitions of the post-9/11 era to consider the presence of non-memorial museums during this time period. Using information gathered from site visits, newspapers, and other speech or text attributed to those involved with the museum, I advance three core arguments: the AANM should be recognized as an early challenge to dominant post-9/11 era narratives concerning Arab Americans; the AANM should be considered within then-contemporary popular discourses of multiculturalism, especially vis-a-vis Arab communities and Islam in the Western world; and the AANM should update its core galleries, which have not been updated since 2005, to reflect the ever-evolving needs and interests of the community it serves and represents.[3]

Museums and the Post-9/11 Era

Within the realm of scholarship concerning American museums and their response to 9/11, there is significant focus on memorials. In her 2022 monograph *Terrorism in American Memory: Memorials, Museums, and Architecture in the Post-9/11 Era*, Marita Sturken defines the post-9/11 era around memorials and memorial museums. To her, this era began the afternoon of 9/11, when, through the haze of grief and confusion, public memorials for the victims were organized across the nation. By 2011, with the opening of the official 9/11 Memorial & Museum in New York City, the grief remained even as the confusion was replaced with a firm narrative: 9/11 was an exceptional event 'without parallel in the history of violence in the United States if not the world. [...] [This] narrative affirms the nation's innocence and sees any attack on it as unprovoked' (Sturken 2022: 8). Erika Doss (2011: 27-29) and Sarah Senk (2018: 257-259) uphold this argument and additionally comment that memorial museums' intense documentation and exhibition of 9/11 reinforced this narrative and constantly reminded Americans of this deeply traumatic episode.

By the late 2010s and early 2020s, however, Sturken uses new museums that memorialize Black victims domestic racial terrorism as evidence for the post-9/11 era's end, writing:

> If the post-9/11 era began with the obsessive proliferation of 9/11 memorials and the construction of the 9/11 museum, almost all of which deployed memory as a form of national unity, that era ends with a memorial and museum that demand a rewriting of the national narrative to demonstrate how racism and terrorism has been integral to the national fabric (Sturken 2022: 223).

Museums and memorials such as Montgomery, Alabama's National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ), which opened in 2018 to remember lynching victims, directly reject the post-9/11 era narratives of innocence and exceptionalism. The grief and horror of 9/11's memory is no longer enough to keep the nation united against threats of foreign terrorism. In memorializing historic and contemporary victims of anti-Blackness, memorial museums move from presenting narratives of American innocence to those of American complicity (Sturken 2022: 223-225).

Since the crux of Sturken's argument is that American museums shifted from emphasizing foreign terrorism to racial terrorism, Sturken does not devote significant attention to how that foreign terrorism, too, was defined chiefly in racial terms. Within scholarship for 9/11 it is noted that, following the attacks, Arabs and Muslims were conflated into a singular group that was fully to blame for 9/11. Sturken (2022: 111-120) does acknowledge how the 9/11 Memorial & Museum fed into this perception of Arabs and Muslims, noting how Arabic phrases stated by the hijackers during 9/11 are presented without context or explanation, leading to potential conclusions that terrorism is inherent to Islam.

While Sturken, along with Doss and Senk, note how 9/11 memorialization induces unity through grief, they do not dwell upon how these same memories also induced unity through anger and retaliatory violence toward Arabs and Muslims (Spanos 2013: 292, 299-300, 312; Roza 2009: 105-106; Salaita 2005: 146-147, 151). Apart from the War on Terror that was launched directly after 9/11 and led to the severe destabilization of the Middle East, at home, Arab and Muslim Americans - and anyone perceived as a member of either group - experienced a surge in hate crimes toward them (Cainkar 2009: 68, 73, 110). Racialized as an 'other' even if they had citizenship or generations of family history within American society, the loyalty of Arab and Muslim Americans was questioned, with Nadine Naber (2012: 252) writing that within this 'endlessly elastic racial category,' these people faced an ultimatum: 'Either you stood with the United States, and everything it stood for in our increasingly ugly age, or you stood with the terrorists'.

This leads me to my first argument that, in the scope of the American post-9/11 era, the AANM is distinguished as an early challenger to these narratives that Sturken notes were standard to memorial museums at this time. A creation of the Dearborn-based Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), plans for AANM long predated 9/11 but were accelerated following 9/11. Faced with an uptick in negative stereotyping of the community as well as hate crimes, Ismael Ahmed, executive director of ACCESS, commented, 'If not now,

when? Now, more than ever, an Arab-American museum is important to defining ourselves' (Shepardson 2002). This quote underlines how the AANM emerged in the context of the post-9/11 era, during which the American people seemed united around 'justified' racial violence and American memorial museums only bolstered that justification through narratives that, as Sturken noted, emphasized American innocence above all. In spotlighting the AANM as a museum that offered a different narrative of the United States by centering Arab Americans, I have broadened Sturken's argument - which already acknowledged this violence in brief - to consider anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia in greater detail. Doing so further enables a neater chronological transition, with the post-9/11 era beginning with a justification of racial violence and ending with a sober reckoning of it.[4]

I also use the AANM to expand Sturken's argument to consider the non-memorial museum and to tie observations about the post-post-9/11 era memorial museum to established scholarship about ethnic or racial minorities in the United States using museums as a venue to represent themselves and repudiate historical narratives. Both the AANM and the NMPJ are similar in this regard that both are a direct response to historical scholarship and popular discourse that either ignored, minimized, or justified the racial violence faced by Arab American and Black American communities, respectively.[5] However, the NMPJ is, again, a memorial museum, and the AANM is a hybrid museum, meaning it cannot be described within the confines of a singular museum genre (e.g. memorial museums). Similar to the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) or the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), the AANM has a different engagement to, and relationship with, memory. Instead of memorializing a specific people or tragedy, the AANM employs oral histories, archival material, and memories of the national Arab American community to create a museum that invites the visitor to learn how this community defines themselves. The AANM, the JANM, and the MOCA each emerged in response to historic attacks against their respective communities. These museums aimed to not just create national definitions of their communities, but also to advocate for these communities and represent their histories (Han 2013: 161-163; Nishime 2004: 41-43).

Lastly, to underline its significance within museum studies and the landscape of American museums, it is notable that the AANM is an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution: the only nationally funded museum(s) in the United States. As William Walker (2013: 7, 226, 229-31) noted, the Smithsonian - as a museum complex - struggled to aspire toward universal or culturally specific museums, with the Anacostia Community Museum being its first experimentation toward the latter in 1967. Both the JANM and the AANM are culturally specific museums affiliated with the Smithsonian, tilting this museum complex toward this genre of museums even further. This affiliation is relevant within the Smithsonian's history, which, as further discussed by Katy Bunning (2018: 571; 2020: 82-89), was noted in the 1990s to be concerned that favoring culturally specific museums would lead to the justification of excluding these same cultures from broader narratives or exhibits on the grounds that they had their own museum. Commenting on the culturally specific museum as a distinctly American phenomenon, Bunning further notes that this genre of museum presented a troubling challenge to long-held historical narratives:

> Ethnic museums at this time were generally opposed because they represented a kind of group empowerment that would unsettle existing truths and histories [...] Providing for the significant inclusion of racially defined groups was seen, more than ever, to be caving in to political bias, threatening the status of museums as sites for the documentation and interpretation of the broader, seemingly race-neutral 'American' experience (Bunning 2020: 88).

The AANM opened in 2005, during the thick of the post-9/11 era when the American experience was not as 'race-neutral' as it appeared in the 1990s. However, this historical context is relevant for understanding the original landscape within which the AANM was first conceived, when ethnic museums were controversial for threatening American narratives about race, as well as the landscape within which the AANM was actually built, when Arabs and Muslims as a community were construed as a threat to the American people.

The First Museum of Its Kind: The AANM During the Post-9/11 Era

Having established that the post-9/11 era narrative emphasized American innocence in the face of foreign threat (i.e. Arabs and Muslims), I now turn to dissecting the AANM itself. Using four core galleries, the AANM constructs a narrative that is at odds with that of other museums during the post-9/11 era. Built in Dearborn, Michigan (a city affectionately referred to as 'Little Lebanon' by its locals due its high concentration of Arab Americans), the AANM experience begins as soon as the visitor steps past reception and into the first gallery: Contributions From the Arab World. As seen in Figure 1, the floor is tiled with reflective, cream-colored marble, and the walls are embellished with a glittering blue and green mosaic. In a virtual tour video posted by AANM in January 2021, Dave Serio, the museum's current curator of education, states that the room is meant to resemble a courtyard that 'you might find overseas in the Arab world [...] [it's] a place for folks to gather, maybe discuss politics, have coffee and tea, but it's a community space, and it's a place for people to engage and enjoy each other's company.'[6] Figure 2 captures a glimpse of the inside of the museum's iconic dome, which is decorated from the inside with similar mosaics that decorate the walls below.

Figure 1: Exhibit within the Contributions From the Arab World *gallery.*

The Contributions gallery is composed of various exhibits that, as the title suggests, highlight different contributions from the Arab world, including, amongst others, music, medicine, and mathematics. Figure 3, for example, captures the inside of the exhibit dedicated to the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), all of which emerged from the Arab world. Speaking mere months after the museum's opening in 2005, Anan Ameri, AANM's first director, commented that the concept of Contributions was inspired after ACCESS surveyed Arab Americans across the nation and found that the community had one consistent concern: after 9/11, there was the widespread perception that Arabs, as a whole, had 'no culture, no civilization,' that the Arab world was filled with gun-toting Muslims who had no relation to the Judeo-Christian tradition of the United States (Ameri 2005). Tied with Serio's 2021 explanation for the courtyard as a welcoming community space, Ameri's 2005 explanation for Contributions demonstrates how the AANM directly strove to dismantle the perception of Arabs - and especially Arab Americans - as a threat. From the visitor's first step inside, the museum instead emphasizes Arab civilization not as a dead, extinct thing, but as alive, deeply accomplished, and (importantly) friendly.

Figure 2: Domed roof, seen from inside of the AANM.

Figure 3: Closeup of the 'Religions' exhibit within the Contributions From the Arab World *gallery.*

Before the visitor proceeds to the second gallery, they pass by a large, interactive map positioned on the stairwell between the first and second floor. This map, made interactive by a 2024 update, showcases all twenty two countries of the Arab world. The AANM defines

member countries of this world as those who predominantly speak Arabic, have a shared history and cultural tradition, and are members of the Arab League. In conjunction with Contributions, the map highlights Arab culture, as a whole, to be richly diverse and varied dialectically, nationally, and religiously. While both the gallery and this standalone exhibit are not reflective of the American aspect of the Arab American experience, they - as Ameri explains - demonstrate the community's origins and heritage. Both elements reflect a desire by ACCESS to use the AANM to counter the post-9/11 era narrative of Arabs as a foreign, uncultured threat to the deeply cultured Western world (Ameri 2005).

Up the stairs the visitor enters the second gallery, Coming to America, which offers a chronological overview of Arab migration to the United States during various stages of history. Figure 4 captures the entrance of this gallery, which is lined with suitcases of various wear and tear, with a prayer mat and some clothing hanging at the side of these suitcases to represent some of the items that immigrants took with them as they left home. Figure 5 offers a glimpse inside one of the suitcases and of another such item: a dazzling pair of colorfully beaded shoes, with the caption stating it was donated by Sara Abdallah, a woman who left Syria in 1923 and now considered Detroit to be home. In his 2006 review of the museum, Raymond Silverman (2006: 821-822) commends the AANM for 'not [existing] as a repository for things [but instead as] a repository for stories; artifacts are used as props for telling stories'. Nearly every item on display or in the archives at the AANM was donated by the national Arab American community, and each item, such as Abdallah's shoes, is used to tell a story about Arab Americans as a people whose culture, community, and history is not so different from other Americans.

Figure 4: Closeup of the suitcases in the Coming To America *gallery.*

It is notable that Coming, from the start and then throughout the gallery, engages with the popular mythos of Ellis Island. As the busiest immigration center during the first half of the twentieth century, most Americans can identify and relate to pictures and stories of immigrants huddling in Ellis Island. They may, for example, have inherited stories of their family members coming to the United States via that center. Or, they may trust the widespread myth that this is a nation composed through waves of immigration that began with the Mayflower's docking at

Cape Cod in the 1600s and continued with ships to Ellis Island in the early 1900s. Joachim Baur (2017: 341-345) notes that the United States, seen through the prism of this specific narrative of Ellis Island, is rendered a safe haven for any immigrant, overlooking the darker histories of who was excluded from immigrating here. Since the 1970s, American museums - such as the National Museum of Immigration located at Ellis Island itself - have constructed immigration as a common, shared experience between the bulk of the American population, contributing to this vision of the United States as a national imagined community (Baur 2017: 343-344).

Coming begins with these suitcases, shoes, and images of huddled immigrants on the walls to prompt the American visitor to consider Ellis Island, and this gallery continues by then directly including the Island itself: there is a life-size diorama of this immigration station, complete with an audio track playing from the processing room and individual stories on the walls of Arab immigrants who went through the Island. The visitor is meant to realize Arab Americans as part of this infamous era of great migration and to recognize the Arab American migration experience as similar to, if not the same as, other Americans of European heritage, contrary to the post-9/11 era narrative of them as 'foreign.' As commented by Warren David, an Arab American resident of Northville, Michigan (and future president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee), in 2005, this process of realization and recognition was intentionally designed. '[This is] an immigrant's story,' David explained, 'We can all identify with that. You can take "Arab-American museum" and you can easily substitute Polish, or Italian, or Irish or Jewish. It's all a part of being American' (Krupa 2005). Later, in 2005, these sentiments were echoed by Ahmed as well, who commented that, 'there is a story here. It's the American story. We think that everyone will look at it and see their story, whether they be Italian or Irish. It's the immigrant's story' (Fowler 2005).

These quotes, both from the average Arab American (David) and an ACCESS member (Ahmed), reveal a striking desire from at least some members of the Arab American community to be included within the white American community. Coming parallels tales of white immigration to the United States. It does not draw connections to the histories of non-white Americans, including Black Americans and other people of color, who lacked agency during their journey to the United States or faced instances of racism similar to how Arab Americans did upon their arrival. With regard to the latter, Coming does not dwell upon anti-Arab racism toward Arab Americans, whether before or after 9/11. It is mentioned in brief but not in great detail. During another virtual tour video posted in 2020, Serio narrates an exhibit in Coming that details the story of a Palestinian refugee, Ahmed Ibrahim, who fled to the United States shortly after the creation of Israel in 1948. Almost immediately upon his arrival to American soil, an American recognized Ibrahim as a non-American with a poor grasp on English, and robbed him. Ibrahim's story, however, is not discussed as an incident of racism. Serio describes it only as 'a scary thing.'[7] In this retelling of Ibrahim's story, misfortune is tied more so to poor English than explicitly racial discrimination.

Ultimately, the Coming gallery enables the AANM to demonstrate that, despite post-9/11 era assumptions, Arab Americans were far more likely to uphold the status quo than threaten it. Status quo refers here to the racial hierarchies that prioritize white Americans and the versions of history that dismiss Black and Native American experiences to frame the United States as a glorious nation of immigrants. Coming showcases an affirmation of this status quo and an attempt for Arab inclusion among white Americans.

Moving forward, the visitor enters the Living in America gallery. Designed as a walkthrough of different rooms typical of an Arab American home, the visitor begins in the kitchen (seen in Figure 6) which captures different cooking utensils. In a virtual tour video posted in 2020, Serio states the utensils displayed are usually the best of the household's, 'because we wanted to show hospitality [...] [and] basically [give] guests [...] the red carpet treatment.'[8] Figure 7 offers a look inside the fridge, which, as Serio notes during the same virtual tour, contains:

> Some things that are a little bit more unique, khubz, or bread, we see hummus, we see falafel, we see rosewater [...] [which] is something a little bit more specific to Arab culture. But you also see other things, you see typical eggs and butter.[9]

Serio emphasizes the fridge as a blend of American and Arab culture, producing a highly

literal Arab American version of a fridge. The remainder of Living proceeds in a similar fashion, with the visitor walking through bedrooms, living rooms, and backyards that highlight Arab items coexisting in harmony alongside American items - just as they did in the fridge. Mark Helmsing, commenting on the AANM's pedagogies in 2014, noted:

> By sitting in a recreation of a typical Arab American family living room, or noticing the intricate utensils subtly on display in a typical Arab American kitchen, I am invited to become Arab American as I wish to think of becoming Arab American. "Yes, even we have couches, televisions, and dish washers" the exhibit pieces seem to be insisting to me. [...] [These are] spatial markers of a typical American family home. As a visitor in this exhibit, I recognize these objects. (Helmsing 2014: 83-84).

Through this gallery, the AANM makes a subtle but concise argument that Americans and Arabs already coexist peacefully because, ultimately, their ways of life are more similar than different. Contrary to how post-9/11 anxiety exaggerated differences and sowed disunity amid fear, this gallery illustrates how national unity through embracing diversity is not just possible but has a precedent.

Figure 5: Closeup of suitcase contents in the Coming To America *gallery.*

The fourth core gallery is titled Making an Impact and it contains (as seen in Figures 8 and 9) examples of Arab Americans who have contributed to the United States through politics, academia, music, arts, journalism, food, or other ventures. Ahmed, in 2005, commented, 'I dare you to go through there and not say, "I didn't know he's an Arab-American"' (Tanber 2005). Almost two decades later, in a virtual tour posted in 2020, Serio stated, to the same effect: 'There are many famous people in here that people recognize, but they may not have assumed they were Arab American.'[10] This too reflects the AANM's interest in countering that post-9/11 era perception that Ameri noted, where Arabs were nothing more than uncultured, gun-toting Muslims. Ralph Nader, Edward Said, Kathy Najimy, Sadam Ali…: all of them are Arab Americans. With Living, the AANM made its thesis explicit: Arabs have always been in

the United States and are no different from other Americans. With Making, the AANM goes further to demonstrate that Arab Americans are Americans who have positively and majorly influenced the cultural and political landscape of the nation.

Figure 6: Closeup of the kitchen exhibit within the Living In America *gallery.*

Figure 7: Closeup of fridge contents in the Living In America *gallery.*

The AANM concludes its core gallery experience and the narrative itself with a small room within which the visitor encounters Orientalist depictions of Arabs and Americans in Western media, with images of them as highly sexualized, violent, or otherwise undesirable. As discussed in regards to the gallery, there are other points throughout the museum that acknowledge anti-Arab racism and specifically the surge of it after 9/11, but this room is the most explicit in acknowledging the scale and intensity of such racism and that the potentially non-Arab visitor may have entered the museum with this stereotyping in mind. By placing this at the end of the museum experience, the AANM asks the visitor: now that they have gone through each gallery and seen how Arab Americans eat, live, and contribute to the United States in manners no different to any other American - do these stereotypes of Arab Americans not seem deeply offensive?

Multiculturalism During the Post-9/11 Era

On that note and with this textual tour of the AANM concluded, I now turn to my second argument that the AANM should be considered within then-contemporary public discourses of multiculturalism. Within the specific confines of the post-9/11 era, Arab Americans were members of the previously discussed foreign threat, but during the 1990s and especially during the 2000s and 2010s, Western discussions of multiculturalism were already deeply concerned with the supposed problems posed by Islam and Arabs. Operating through Orientalist understandings of the faith and people, respectively, popular discourse debated: should this religion and population be tolerated - let alone accepted - when its values and traditions went directly against everything the West believed in? As noted by Sally Howell (2000: 68-72), even before 9/11, due to American involvement in conflicts such as the Gulf War, ACCESS was deeply concerned and committed to changing this perception of Arabs and Muslims as existing outside of Western civilization.

Critically, in their engagement with multiculturalism discourses, the AANM took great strides to draw distinctions between Arabs and Muslims by emphasizing the religious diversity among Arab Americans. Again, anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia are frequently conflated and often overlap, a reality that the AANM does acknowledge in its exhibits. For example, the religions exhibit within the Contributions gallery, presents Islam, Judaism, and Christianity as Arab religions, and a wall in the Living gallery highlights Christian and Muslim Arab Americans who live in Metro Detroit and each have different relationships to their faith. With regards to Coming, Helmsing comments on the display of an Arab American's Bible:

> His Bible, written in Arabic, is a hybrid product that, all at once, pins me against dominant interpretations of Islam, American missionary politics, the citational practices of translation, and the signifying power of Bibles. [...] But the Bible both becomes Arab and retains a sense that Arabic teaches visitors against and through a potent enunciation of the righteous Christian subject in America that violently denies a space for Arab Americans (Muslim or otherwise) in the fold. (Helmsing 2014: 80).

As I discussed above, the AANM was conceived during a specific era when ethnic museums were seen as a challenge to a race-neutral United States. The 1990s tendency to frown upon ethnic museums for challenging the notion of the United States as a post-racial society had not yet died in the early 2000s. The post-9/11 era narrative then drew a further racial distinction between the West and Arabs. With the AANM, ACCESS considers the 1990s attitude toward ethnic museums, the negative and violent view of Arabs during the post-9/11 era, and Orientalist framings of Islam and the Arab world that have dominated Western perspectives and media since the eighteenth century. In this context, the AANM's unwillingness to hold Americans directly accountable for their racial violence (despite many Arab migrants leaving home because of American foreign policy decisions) emphasizes how their chief aim is to make an ethnic museum about Arab Americans that soothes anxieties. The museum goes to great lengths to be welcoming and safe, to position Arab Americans as good American citizens, because it anticipates and knows that their humanity and history may be dismissed amid racial discourse. The AANM is working to insert and emphasize Arab American presence

within American history, rather than offering a wholly new narrative, which is exemplified by the Ellis Island mythology that Coming highlights. Every choice taken by the AANM to slot Arab Americans into the existing mold of the typical immigrants to the United States - white, resilient, hardworking - is done to stress to the visitor that Arab Americans strengthen the existing racial status quo.

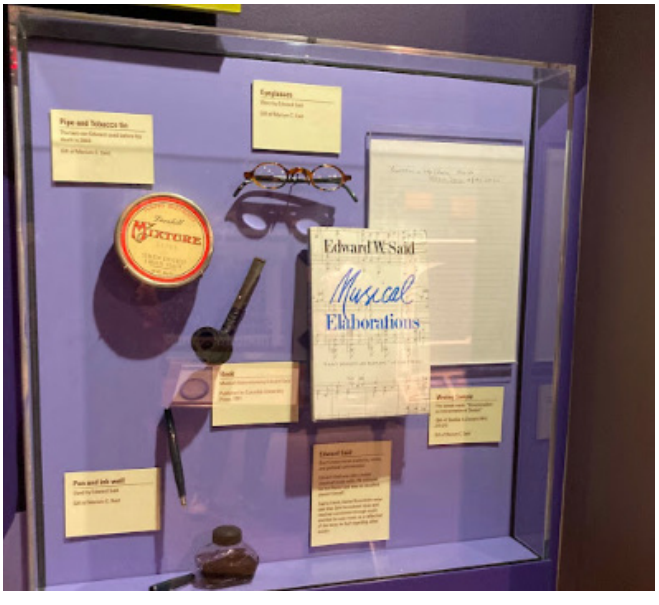

Figure 8: Exhibit about Edward Said within the Making An Impact *gallery.*

Figure 9: Exhibit about Arab American contributions to the culinary world and dining industry located within the Making An Impact *gallery.*

Within the post-9/11 era climate, the AANM proved itself to be a valuable educational tool. As noted by Janice Freij (2011: 19-20), 'cultural competency trainings have become some of the most popular museum offerings [...] Senior groups, law enforcement officials, doctors, lawyers, high school and college students, military officials, and educators from Michigan and surrounding states have attended trainings and workshops at the AANM'. I conclude this section with a reiteration that the AANM challenged the post-9/11 era narrative and that it engaged with then-contemporary discourses of multiculturalism. However, as I have highlighted during my dissection of the galleries (and will continue to discuss in the next section) this context does not excuse how AANM's narrative is now problematic in consideration of the Arab American community's evolution since the post-9/11 era.

The Only Museum of Its Kind: The AANM After the Post-9/11 Era

My third and final argument in this article is that the AANM should update its four permanent galleries, for three key reasons. Firstly, the museum offers a definition of 'Arab America' that, due its ambitious designs, does not fully succeed. As noted by Bunning (2018: 577), during the 2010s the concerns surrounding ethnic museums have evolved so that the chief objection is no longer that they challenge race-neutral narratives, but that these museums may essentialize the ethnic community to a degree that 'unhelpfully accent[s] rather than challenge[s] racial ideas'. This concern that a museum such as AANM would essentialize the Arab American experience and identity was, according to Ameri, something that deeply troubled ACCESS during the post-9/11 era. It led them to extensively survey the national community and develop the Contributions gallery, as well as the map, to nod towards the community's diversity (Ameri 2005). In my conversations with Arab Americans in Dearborn, however, I was told that the museum seemed to predominantly reflect not just the Dearborn experience, but specifically experiences of Dearborn's Lebanese American community. Although the AANM contains and represents Arab Americans from across the United States and of various nationalities or religions, the museum does not successfully represent each community within them in full. As noted by Silverman:

> [T]he big question about the AANM is why it was conceived of as the Arab American *National* Museum, and not simply as the Arab American Museum? The AANM presents a remarkable array of stories, but what stories have not been told? One of the museum's messages is that Arab Americans are not all the same: they come from twenty-two countries, from different parts of the world, and from different cultures. As with all large diverse ethnic groups, internal political, social, and religious issues have challenged Arab Americans. That part of the Arab American story is not addressed in the exhibits. (Silverman 2006: 824-825).

The second reason the AANM should update its gallery spaces is due to a curious lack of Arabic. The museum only uses Arabic for demonstrative (e.g. in Contributions to show the roots of modern Abrahamic religions in the Arab world) or aesthetic purposes (e.g. in Living where scanned letters written in Arabic are placed next to a telephone with English translations). There are no Arabic captions in the AANM, either for Arab guests who may not understand English or for visually signaling the language's importance to the community. Within most community ethnic museums such as the MOCA or JANM, different languages are included to demonstrate the community's linguistic heritage. Despite the AANM's community-focused approach wherein much of the museum's content is built upon the contributions of Dearborn's Arab residents, it emerged in a context where anti-Arab violence was rampant. As I discussed in relation to Coming, the museum - and some (but not all) members of the community - had an explicit and vested interest in paralleling Arab Americans to white Americans. For the white American who may have a history of family immigration from Europe, foreign languages may occasionally be used, but generally, English is the primary language of communication and is a key marker of total assimilation into the United States. With the exclusion of Arabic captioning, the AANM subtly suggests a similar level of assimilation among Arab Americans that would run counter to post-9/11 era stereotypes.

During conversations with members of the community in Dearborn, I noted that they

perceived the lack of Arabic-language captions or exhibits as a sign of hostility toward the less-assimilated members of the community who primarily spoke Arabic, not English. This is a community concern that dates back to 2005, with Ameri noting that although feedback of the museum was largely positive, the community had two central complaints: the lack of Arabic and how the museum seemed to favor some nationalities more than others. The explanation Ameri gave for the lack of Arabic then was that it would have resulted in 'too much text,' but it leads to the perception that - as voiced by community members - the museum was not for them but for the non-Arab, and it was key to the non-Arab that they see Arabic as a language that ornamented but did not define their lives (Ameri 2005).

Finally, the third reason the AANM should update its galleries and specifically revise its narrative is due to how its post-9/11 era narrative, which minimizes racial violence in favor of highlighting Arab Americans as Americans, does not reflect contemporary concerns of the community. Sturken's (2022: 265-268) primary reasoning for her claim that the post-9/11 era is now over in the 2020s is because Americans have new attitudes and conversations about racial violence, and this much is true of Arab Americans as well as other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. There is less interest in narratives of conformity, as promoted by the AANM, and more interest in narratives of complicity, such as those that serve as the bedrock for NMPJ.

I point to the recent success of Arab Americans in reclassifying how they are counted on the American census as evidence for how the community's concerns have changed. In 2005 Arab Americans were counted as white on the census. However, in 2024 Arab Americans are now classified as Middle Eastern or North African, and, most critically, as non-white. This movement to change how Arab Americans were counted on the census predates 9/11, but much like the AANM's origins, it was during the post-9/11 era and the ensuing spike in anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia that this movement to change the census classification gained further momentum. The violence of that era led to widespread recognition that, despite being classified as white, Arab Americans did not live or experience the United States as white Americans did. While this reorientation of the community has been recognized by the American census, the AANM continues to have a narrative that positions Arab Americans as similar in history to white Americans (Cainkar 2006: 243-248; Office of Management and Budget 2024).[11]

Many of the problems concerning the current narrative again relate to how the AANM defines the Arab American and represents the diversity within the community. Not only are the differences between Arab Americans and white Americans rendered inconsequential, but differences amongst Arab Americans themselves are also minimally discussed. In representing different nationalities, the AANM adopts a soft form of pan-Arabism, presenting a version of the Arab American life and identity through the Coming and Living galleries that, just as Bunning noted, essentializes the community to a singular hegemonic narrative that subsumes minorities.

This is a dangerous narrative to maintain into the 2020s, where the notion that Arabs have a universal culture leads to arguments against Palestinian statehood: if the culture of Palestine is no different than that of any other Arab nation, it can easily be subsumed into a neighboring Arab nation. This is further concerning given that the AANM has, in concert with the contemporary Arab American community, mobilized to advocate for Palestinian statehood through social media activity and event programming. Its core galleries and exhibits, such as the one in Coming that showcases Ibrahim's story, do not reflect this ideological and political stance, with mentions of Palestine and its connection to Israel left vague and non-accusatory. This, again, reflects concerns and interests of the community during the post-9/11 era but does not reflect how the community, in the 2020s, is less interested in emphasizing its similarities to white Americans and more interested in asserting the Arab American experience as unique and diverse.

These reasons I bring up have been acknowledged in whole or in part by the current director, Diana Abouali, who noted in 2023 that the AANM is working to update its galleries to resolve these concerns. Since 2005, aside from the stairwell map, the galleries have not undergone major updates or remodeling. That I could still use academic and journalistic commentary published just days after the AANM's initial opening to accurately develop my

argument in the 2020s points to how the museum has fundamentally not changed.

However, this is not without lack of trying: while funding concerns hamper permanent remodeling efforts, Abouali notes that the AANM has successfully supplemented its galleries with temporary art exhibitions, artist residency programs, other community and cultural programming, as well as a rooftop garden for the local Arab American community (Abouali 2023). The AANM and ACCESS remain committed to serving the community. I suggest that, in lieu of a complete overhaul of the galleries that would be time-consuming as well as expensive, Arabic captioning should be included where feasible, and that gallery and exhibition text should be updated to reflect the AANM's contemporary social activism.

Conclusion

Shortly before the museum's opening, Ahmed explained why the AANM was necessary:

> This is a story that has been untold in America and often told with malice. We have an opportunity to change all of that. We have launched the beginning of something that will grow and touch the lives of people all across America (Tanber 2005).

I use this quote to conclude this article and round off my critique of the AANM's dated core galleries because it underlines the significance of the AANM. It remains the first and only museum of its kind, and it emerged during a historical moment of intense hostility and suspicion toward Arab Americans to tell the community's story on their own terms. Not only did ACCESS manage to physically materialize their ambitions for the museum during this time, but the AANM has further evolved into a safe space and a critical tool of soft power for the local and national Arab American community.

I first visited this museum in 2007, during a field trip organized by my elementary school teachers. My classmates, who were nearly all Arab American, were delighted to visit. As we walked through Living, they eagerly pointed out to me - the non-Arab - which of the exhibit's objects they, too, had in their home. In turn, I commented on which objects were similar to what I had in my home. My former elementary school, which remains an institution that predominantly serves Arab American families, still organizes field trips to the museum so that the children can learn about and connect to their heritage. One of my former classmates, now a local artist, tells me that she visits the museum regularly to attend the fine arts club meetings hosted there. These anecdotes exemplify how the AANM has, since its 2005 opening, cemented itself as a stable pillar and resource for the local community.

Twenty-three years after 9/11 and with the intensification of violent conflict across the Middle East (especially in Palestine), Arab Americans remain the subject of popular discourse. Their culture, religion, and identity are still regarded with distrust. We remain within a climate where the AANM is needed, especially in consideration of the post-post-9/11 era that Sturken described as being one where Americans reconcile with domestic racial terrorism. In writing this article, I hope to encourage increased scholarly and public interest and engagement with the AANM. This is a museum that deserves time - and funding - to continue evolving.

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Notes

1 There are other museums in the Western world dedicated to the Arab diaspora, including Melbourne's Arab Museum. As this article is chiefly concerned with the American diaspora, non-American museums were not considered.

2 AANM, 'About the Arab American National Museum', AANM 2022. https://arabamericanmuseum.org/about/, accessed 20 October, 2024.

[3] I am a non-Arab American who was born in Dearborn and raised in the neighboring city of Dearborn Heights. I attended an elementary school that serviced the Arab American community of the greater Detroit area and, as a Muslim, built friendships with Muslims from the community. My discussion and critique of the AANM was developed with respect for the community.

[4] ACCESS built the AANM through donations from American companies (e.g. Chrysler) and Arab companies (e.g. Saudi Aramco). In this article, I dissect the AANM as a post-9/11 diasporic invention and do not consider how domestic and foreign politics may have influenced its content.

[5] Although both of these non-white American communities are subject to racist violence and rhetoric that denies them humanity and dignity, the oppression faced by each community is different. The two communities have distinct histories and paths in the United States toward securing racial justice. In connecting the AANM to the NMPJ, I do not minimize the significance of the NMPJ as a museum that spotlights anti-Blackness, a violence that continues to be dismissed within scholarship and popular American discourse to an unparalleled degree.

[6] AANM, 'AANM Virtual Tour - Courtyard Overview', 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeJnRfJQtGY, accessed 20 October, 2024.

[7] AANM, 'Coming To America - Ahmed Ibrahim' Story', 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_XLbt6wo8M, accessed 20 October, 2024.

[8] AANM, 'Living in America - Part 1', 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyLuBRRE-eM, accessed 20 October, 2024.

[9] AANM, 'Living in America'.

[10] AANM, 'AANM Virtual Tour - Making an Impact,' 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO3pc2N6BV0, accessed 20 October, 2024.

[11] Seph Rodney, 'The Arab American National Museum Tells a Story of Diversity', Hyperallergic 2025. https://hyperallergic.com/1002421/arab-american-national-museum-story-of-diversity/, accessed 10 May 2025.

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