Counter-narratives and Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s play Invasion!: storytelling that fractures the orientalist narrative

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COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND JONAS HASSEN KHEMIRI’S PLAY INVASION!
STORYTELLING THAT FRACTURES THE ORIENTALIST NARRATIVE

A Thesis
Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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Introduction

*Attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of fiction.*

I was first introduced to Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s play *INVASION!* by Tony Award-winning American playwright David Henry Hwang¹. Mr. Hwang was working on the world premiere of his play *Chinglish* at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2011. At that time, I was a Michael Maggio Directing Fellow at the Goodman. I requested the script from the New York producers, The Play Company. As I read the script of *INVASION!* it spoke to me about identity, perspective, and the power of story and language. These themes resonated with my locus of study in the Master of Liberal Studies at DePaul University where I had been researching identity and societal construction. These themes also paralleled my work and passion as a theatre director.

I brought *INVASION!* to Silk Road Rising theatre after having first done a public reading of the play for the International Voices Project at the Swedish American Museum in Chicago. Silk Road Rising is a theatre dedicated to works by and about Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern voices. I found that the play meshed well with Silk Road Rising’s mission, and its Artistic Director Jamil Khoury and Executive Director Malik Gillani were as excited by the play as I was. Working with a talented team of artists, I directed the Midwest premiere of *INVASION!* for Silk Road Rising in 2013.² The production became a locus of conversation about racial profiling in our post-show

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¹ David Henry Hwang often explores the borders, boundaries and “the fluidity of identity,” exemplified by his one of his best-known plays, *M. Butterfly*. He says of his 2012 work *Chinglish*, which chronicles the relationship between an American man and a Chinese woman, “There are cultural differences and predispositions and assumptions” and continues, “There are misunderstandings even if you speak the same language” (Jasen). Hwang, in addition to his playwriting, is a librettist, screenwriter and professor of playwriting at Columbia University in New York. He also serves as Artistic Ambassador for Silk Road Rising in Chicago.

² Kerry Reid listed *INVASION!* as one of her top shows in the *Chicago Tribune* article, “A few more theatre highlights from 2013.”
discussions. Over 1,200 people saw the production in its two-month run. It also created a conversation outside the theatre, in the press, and online.

In preparation for my production, I researched previous productions of the play, read published interviews with Khemiri, and corresponded with him. Khemiri’s translator served as consultant during production. I delved deeply into the play with the designers, cast, and also the audience. Dr. David Gitomer, Director of the Master’s in Liberal Studies program at DePaul University, saw the production and suggested that it might be a rich source for my Master’s Thesis. Later, in a class at DePaul in 2016 with Dr. Heidi Nast (MLS 490 on Race, Gender and Difference), I had the opportunity to contextualize the play by expanding my knowledge about a changing Sweden. The play had appealed to me ever since my first reading of it, because of its similarities to the racism and Orientalism that I had observed in the United States. It was due to an assignment in Dr. Nast’s class that I started reading what Swedes and Scandinavian scholars had to say about race, Whiteness, Swedishness, and those who are seen as Other. Interactions with both my Swedish and Middle Eastern relatives also raised my awareness of these issues: One side of my family has been viewed as exceptional, and the other as potential terrorists - two very different stories.

Storytelling is the way that I understand the world. My grandmother, a first-generation Swedish-American, was a professional storyteller. She shared stories from around the world with not only my sisters and me, but also with children in schools, library patrons, and older people in nursing homes. She also taught English as a Second Language to newly arrived immigrants in the Washington, D. C. area. As a world traveler, she embraced diversity. My mother, a psychologist, has a love of story too. Her work with underserved populations and her openness to their stories has made a difference in many lives. This tradition of story also extends to other members of my family. My grandmother’s first cousin, Eleanor Dorothy Lovegren, whose stage name was Jean Rogers, became a
blonde American film star3. It is not without irony that she too is part of this story. She played Dale Arden in the first two 1930s *Flash Gordon* science-fiction movie serials, where her character was menaced by the Orientalized Ming the Merciless—a lustful villain with a long mustache, winged eyebrows, silken robes, and evil intent. In contrast to the good, blonde Dale Arden, Ming’s brunette daughter was portrayed as an evil and sly seductress. It seems that in the *Flash Gordon* movies, racism extended not only into the future but also invaded different planets!

The stories that my grandmother created for us, and the stories that she told others, opened a window to other people, other worlds, and our own imaginations. Stories (whether inclusive, divisive, enlightened or distorted) are how we learn about the world. Having a more inclusive narrative requires being aware of positionality (who is telling the story) and making sure that as listeners we seek out a diversity of stories. More inclusive narratives also require an understanding of how and why less inclusive and distorted narratives have been perpetuated.

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3 Jean Rogers was born Eleanor Dorothy Lovegren. Like my grandmother, she was the daughter of Swedish immigrants. The changing of her name seems to indicate that Lovegren was too “ethnic.” Different immigrant groups have been discriminated against at various time periods in the United States. My grandmother recounted dancing with a young man in her youth who told her that, “There’s nothing dumber than a dumb Swede.”
CHAPTER ONE – Identity and Belonging

The strange thing about Abulkasem was that the word stuck around, it changed it grew, it lived on ...  
Jonas Hassen Khemiri, INVASION!

When is a Swede Not a Swede

In the winter of 2013, The New York Times (NYT) reprinted an Op-Ed that the author Khemiri had written, retitling it “Sweden’s Closet Racists.” In this Op-Ed, Khemiri invited the reader to experience the world as a person of color or as someone seen as Other/alien in Sweden:

WELCOME to my body. Make yourself at home. From now on, we share skin, spine and nervous system. Here are our legs, which always want to run when we see a police car. Here are our hands, which always clench into fists when we hear politicians talk about the need for stronger borders, more internal ID checks, faster deportation of people without papers.

(Khemiri, “Sweden’s Closet Racists”)

In choosing to retitle the piece, “Sweden’s Closet Racists,” The New York Times implied that White Sweden had been hiding its true nature under a cloak of egalitarianism. I posit that this is also true for The United States. The column in the NYT predated the Black Lives Matter movement and the current Trump administration. But hate crimes, anti-immigrant speech, and racism have become even more prevalent now as President Trump moves to impose further immigration restrictions and to construct walls. What can our observations of Sweden tell us about our own embedded racism as Americans? How can progressive Americans counter a Muslim ban, the rhetoric of “bad hombres,”

4 An earlier translation and original title, “An Open Letter to Beatrice Ask,” can be found in English, Swedish and several other languages in the online journal Asymptote. It can also be found in English in New Dimensions Of Diversity In Nordic Culture And Society (104-110).

5 According to the Center for American Progress, “Under the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump, America has witnessed a rise in hate crimes, anti-Semitic incidents, anti-Muslim violence, and a resurgence of white supremacy like never before” (Volsky et al).
and racism against African-Americans? Stories and words have been used to marginalize the Other, both non-majority groups and women. When the common narrative, popular media, and our leaders create stories about Mexican rapists, violent, poverty-stricken African-American inner-city dwellers, Middle Eastern terrorists, and nasty women, how can we reshape the narrative and create stories that give face and voice to those who are Othered? Societal harmony requires the honoring of all voices, not just those in power whose agenda may not respect inclusivity. As in the Op-Ed quoted above, playwright Khemiri asks us to step into the world of his characters and to experience stories from their different perspectives. Khemiri is among those writers from Othered groups who are reframing and reshaping understanding and giving a voice to those who are marginalized. It is the process of reframing narratives that this thesis investigates. How can we use counter-narratives to decenter White and the West’s hegemonic control of narratives, recognizing White and the West as a part but not the whole story?

Methodology

In this thesis I use the interdisciplinary lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explore and analyze systemic racism and the counter-narratives that Khemiri constructs to illuminate the marginalized Other in his play INVASION! In Chapter One I examine the context of Swedishness from which Khemiri’s work grows by exploring ideas of exceptionalism and Whiteness. In Chapter Two, I analyze Khemiri’s play, INVASION!, contrasting the lens of Critical Race Theory with the distorting lens of Orientalism. In Chapter Three, I look at Khemiri’s use of disidentification and how he places theory and resistance into the public sphere through story and performance. In Chapter Four, I analyze the critical responses to the Chicago production I directed and the subsequent conversations about racial profiling it generated. I then conclude with the implications of Khemiri’s

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6 White is capitalized and not written in lower case in this paper. This is in order to avoid using “white” as a default in a paper that strives be more inclusive and to point out the ideas of racism of Othered groups.
work that can be applied to a larger, more global reality and offer opportunities for insight, empathy, and change. Khemiri’s approach to confronting racism and to embracing the humanity of those who have been Othered are a demand for inclusivity. His work creates a stage, both literally and figuratively, to address racism in Sweden and in the United States.

Khemiri’s play creates alternative stories that move the marginalized into the center. Critical Race Theory is one of the theoretical tools that I use to analyze INVASION! I also employ the concept of Middle Eastern Other that is developed in Edward Said’s seminal book, Orientalism. I engage with Judith Butler’s works, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence and Bodies that Matter utilizing her discussions of power and positionality in shaping dominant narratives to look at the construction of Othering. Sara Ahmed’s book, The Cultural Politics of Emotion, serves as a tool for discussing fear and how it distances and marginalizes different groups. I then use José Esteban Muñoz’s work, Disidentifications, to demonstrate how Khemiri repurposes the dominant narrative and deconstructs its rhetoric, while at the same time creating both deep moments of humanity and opportunities for empathy for those Othered. I also discuss the play in actual performance and how the theories took shape within the Chicago production that I directed. Critical Race Theory, Khemiri’s writing, and my own theatre work draw from an interdisciplinary approach. I use theory, literature analysis, discussion of popular media, and the arts to home in on how Khemiri’s work fits within CRT as an oppositional narrative.

Khemiri Shifts the Story

Stories and the words that comprise them—whether in film, theatre, on the page, or in the legal system—have been a means for constructing identity. Khemiri states, “I’ve always been fascinated by the link between language and identity—how we can use our words to create new versions of ourselves” (Lucas). Born in Sweden in 1978, Khemiri studied economics and literature and interned with the United Nations before publishing his first novel, Ott Ett Rott (One Red Eye), in
2003. His work is critically acclaimed, including his latest novel, *Everything I Don't Remember*, which was the 2016 winner of the August Prize, Sweden’s highest literary honor. Khemiri’s work has been translated into twenty languages, and his plays have been performed in over 100 theatres around the world (Khemiri “Life”).

As a young teenager, Khemiri was inspired by American hip-hop which intrigued him with the possibilities of language’s mutability. In a lecture for the time Life Summit in 2014, entitled “Nationalisms,” Khemiri described his attraction to hip-hop:

What my idols were writing about, their realities which were very far from mine, we didn’t share the same background, ethnicity; on a superficial level we were not the same person, but something strange happened. Their words through some kind of magic came into my brain and changed me. I saw the world through new eyes thanks to their lyrics. (0:00-3:12)

Hip-hop taught him that words could be made up, nouns could become verbs—the options and ramifications could be limitless! Khemiri admired their “linguistic courage” (“Nationalisms” 3:25-3:30) and felt a kinship with the artists who recreated form and who challenged a power structure from which they felt excluded (Khemiri, “Nationalisms”). He saw the power of words and language to connect and transform individuals. He also saw how language could delimit and create barriers. In an article in *The New York Times*, Khemiri related how his father, who was originally from Tunisia and who became a teacher of high-school French and Arabic in Sweden, showed his son the difference in the way he was treated by people depending upon whether he spoke Swedish with a French accent versus Swedish with an Arabic accent. “I think all of this was a reason to why I started writing,” Jonas Khemiri said. He added that the premise of his work is, “Never believing that one’s language is an X-ray of a character's soul, but rather trying to show the manipulative potential of language” (Grode).
In December of 2012, Khemiri wrote an open letter to Beatrice Ask, Swedish Minister for Justice, in response to her comments justifying REVA\(^7\) (“An Open Letter”). REVA consisted of a crackdown on undocumented immigrants in Sweden, which put more police on the street for the purpose of identifying, detaining, and deporting them. Khemiri’s letter challenged the logic of the Minister of Justice. She characterized the complaints about increased police presence as comparable to the “paranoia” experienced by felons (i.e. that the feeling of being watched by everyone was characteristic of lawbreakers). Ask’s remarks seemed to provide a justification for racial profiling and seemed to equate Swedes of color with felons. Khemiri’s open letter challenged Ask to step into his shoes, to switch bodies for a day with him, a Swede of color, and to live the everyday racism to which he and fellow Swedes of color are subjected. His letter invites the reader to viscerally experience the racism inherent in being pulled aside and screened in an airport, being followed in a record store, put into a police van for no apparent reason, and discriminated against in job interviews. This important piece of writing calls upon the reader to experience the indignities visited on a person of color as a child, as an adolescent, and as a man. Khemiri lays the groundwork for the reader to share his journey empathically. By writing an open letter, he includes us all in the conversation (“Open Letter Gone Viral”). This is what Khemiri does as well in choosing to write for theatre. He creates a forum that actively engages and uses empathy to challenge prejudices that may have been invisible to the majority. Theatre requires you to be present. It places ideas into the public sphere in a very literal way.

Khemiri’s letter became a nexus for conversation and was the one of the most tweeted documents in Swedish history. The letter was translated into over a dozen languages and reprinted around the world ([Khemiri, website, life](Khemiri, website, life)). Khemiri stated that the public response to his open letter made him feel “less alone with [his] experiences” (“REVA Debate”; “Open Letter Gone Viral”).

\(^7\) REVA stands for Rättssäkert och effektivt verkställighetsarbete or ‘Legal and effective execution of policy.’
year and a half after the letter was first printed, he highlighted the power of writing to create connection, and voiced his hope that his letter had created a more “nuanced” conversation. He stated, “There are so many countries where globalization forces people to revisit their self-images. So many countries have to realize that their nationalistic myth is a construction” (“REVA Debate”; “Open Letter Gone Viral”). As in his other writing, Khemiri’s letter raises the issue of perception versus reality, and proposes that there may be a multiplicity of realities and not a monolithic or stable reality. Words can have multiple meanings. Perception of self and the identity of others are shaped by the context around them. Both in his message and in his approach to storytelling, Khemiri confronts us with a postmodernist understanding that decentralizes meaning. In *The Novelist’s Lexicon*, Khemiri was asked to pick one word that would describe his work. He selected the prefix “un-.” These two letters, “un,” can alter meaning and turn it on its head (Khemiri, “Un-,” 106-107). Khemiri works to “un” prejudice and “un” alien. He “un”ravels constructs of racism.

Khemiri is one of many writers, artists, and musicians in contemporary Sweden who are challenging the White hegemonic paradigm. As Sweden continues to struggle with its own identity, Khemiri and other Swedes of color offer us an opportunity to envision a broader understanding of diversity and belonging, and the possibilities of implementing this new understanding in people’s daily lives. The disruption of stereotypes and the deconstruction of language give voice to a new concept of Swedishness and new words to address the growing mosaic of identity both in Sweden and beyond.

In the early 2000s, Swedes of color and Swedes with immigrant backgrounds began connecting White Sweden with Swedes of non-Swedish ancestry via music, art, and literature. The Swedish hip-hop group *The Latin King* uses Rinkeby Swedish in their popular music, and the literature of Khemiri (among others) uses a hybridity of language that recognizes the plurality of.....

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8 See *New Dimensions of Diversity in Nordic Culture and Society*, Björklund, and Lindqvist.
new Swedishness, mixing in words from other languages as well as newly created words.\(^9\) The symbolic capital in the use of language in this way reflects the changing face of Sweden and signifies a deliberate attempt to acknowledge and give voice to a multicultural and diverse Sweden (Grodin).

*Stories and Words Are How We Understand the World*

We are told stories by our grandmothers and others. Stories are conveyed to us on screens, in the movies, and on television sets. We get our stories from corporate and independent news media, on our computers, newspapers, smartphones, and social media and its algorithms. In school, we are told stories about what is important by what is prioritized. The government tells stories through laws, legislation, and presidential tweets. Stories from neighbors, coworkers and even the stories we tell ourselves shape and reinforce how we perceive and treat others. Stories are how we understand the world.

People’s brains and hearts are wired for narrative. A sentence is a mini-narrative, with an actor as the noun and an action as the verb. It is not a sentence if it does not include these two elements. Actually, words themselves are also narratives; they are constructs that have been created to contain ideas. When looking in a dictionary for the meaning of a word, we learn its story. Whenever and wherever they appear, stories and words are agreed-upon signifiers for communicating ideas. Whether spoken or written, the words, “Swedish,” “Middle Eastern,” and “American” all evoke stories and contexts. When the President of the United States talks about immigration and refers to “shithole countries” like “Haiti,” in contrast to places like “Norway,” it is clear that “shithole

\(^9\) Economically and spatially segregated youth in Sweden have created new linguistic systems that disrupt relationships of power, the dominant signifiers. Use of words is pivotal in how we view ourselves and others and even more so when the mainstream views one’s identity as inferior. In using “multiethnic youth language” (often referred to as Rinkeby Swedish after a Million Programme housing project), diverse youth use a slang that disrupts grammatical form, creates new words and pulls from multiple languages. The youth are not using “good Swedish” but are creating a linguistic community outside the mainstream. This new linguistic form is a mix of Swedish, Spanish, Arabic, English and slang and plays with grammatical form and structure (Godin,133-135; Lacatus 23-34).
countries” denotes people of color, unlike “Norway” and white people (qtd. in Davis et al). In his work, INVASION! Khemiri calls attention to words and the deliberate manufacturing of meaning. He creates contexts that also convey meaning, and he tells the stories of individuals within those contexts. In doing so, Khemiri shifts the narrative; he dramatically alters the perceptions and assumptions of his audience by redefining words and challenging perceptions.

**Arab, Middle Eastern: How the “West” Has Defined Itself and Has Named the Other**

Race is reified by language. The construct of race is propped up with words to define the idea of Other. Language codifies lines between those who are privileged and those who are not. “Arab,” “Middle Eastern,” and the “Orient” are words that conjure an exotic people for those in the northern hemisphere. This definition has been created and reified by Orientalists. Orientalists were Western scholars whose specialty was the study of the Middle East and Asia; the modern era of Orientalism came into being with Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt (Said 87). Edward Said called into question the Orientalists’ definition of “East” and “West,” viewing these terms as having been invented to differentiate these geographic and cultural groups, and to highlight and reinforce the perspective that the West is essentially different from the East. Said decried Orientalism as being rooted in the belief and the naming of “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on” (2-3). The “East” was exoticized and fetishized in art and literature through the use of imagery such as the Arab sheik and the harem girl, genies, magic carpets, and camels. The behavior and customs of the Middle Eastern Other were denigrated as primitive, childlike, and backward. The “East” was used to highlight the presumed superiority of the “West.” East was Other. Said, in contrast, advocates for our listening to authentic voices, stripped of prejudices and distortions. Khemiri in his play INVASION! exposes the distortion of the “Western”
lens by examining in detail the assumptions that create the Orientalist frame.

**Critical Race Theory: Acknowledging the Systemic and a Call for Action**

Key to my work is Critical Race Theory’s call for activism through story and language. Specifically, I examine how these tools can be employed to dispel Orientalism. Critical Race Theory was originally developed to address systemic racism in the United States. A number of academics and legal scholars came together in the 1980s out of their concern for the lack of forward momentum in civil rights and even the chipping away at some of the progress that had been made in the legal system.

CRT examines the distorting lens of racism and serves to call out, address, and challenge the structures that perpetuate it. In their paper, *Critical Race Theory: An Annotated Bibliography* (1993), and in their book *Critical Race Theory* (2017), Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic list the following among the major themes of CRT: a critique of liberalism (the idea of equal opportunity rather than equal results); color blindness (an attempt to disregard race and to aim for neutrality when in fact the playing field is not equal); narratives (stories) and counter-narratives (stories that challenge the dominant ideology); and institutional racism (racism embedded in laws and practices) *(CRT 3rd ed. 8-9).* They maintain that racism is pervasive and systemic, and that it is endemic in existing power structures. Individuals need not be racist to benefit from a racist system. If you are White and the law favors Whiteness, even though you are not actively racist, you benefit from the law or system (e.g., a decreased likelihood of being stopped by police, versus the experiences of people of color). Power structures set up by Whites tend to benefit Whites and marginalize those of color. Liberalism and colorblindness do not typically acknowledge the institutionalized systems that hinder the advancement of those of color *(CRT 3rd ed. 8-9).* In their 3rd edition of *Critical Race Theory*, Delgado and Stefancic also discuss

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differentiated racism—the idea that racism may change its focus from one group to another or present itself in different ways based on the political and social climate of the time (9-10). CRT also acknowledges that intersectionality is important in understanding that there is a complex array of factors that affect an individual, including race, gender, economics, sexuality, and nation of origin (CRT 3rd ed. 58-63).

Storytelling is an essential component of CRT for deconstructing the complexities of racism. Richard Delgado’s article in the *Michigan Law Review*, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” calls for the use of multilayered storytelling to create a window that decenters the lens that offers a more nuanced and complex view of racism and offers a way to counter it. Angela Harris states that CRT uses “the telling of personal anecdotes or fables . . . to convey ideas that [can] not be expressed in traditional scholarly language” (9). Theatre does just this. Although words are how we understand the world, understanding is not just an intellectual pursuit. Storytelling has the ability to move people, to affect and elicit emotion. Theatre embodies storytelling and can create a fuller picture of lived experience in the actors’ portrayals that the audience witnesses. Theatre can create a fiction that expresses deep truths. Khemiri uses this form of storytelling to push against embedded ideas and to offer a platform for different ways of seeing.

CRT scholars embrace the idea of storytelling. Derrick Bell, an early CRT theorist, in addition to his more traditional scholarly and legal writings, created the *Civil Rights Chronicle*—stories of a time-traveling female lawyer who goes back to historical moments in time to confront the United States’ racist past. In her commentaries in “Radical Realism,” Tracey Higgins states that “the vehicle of fiction permits Bell to draw on experience and imagination to illuminate the complexities of racial issues in a way that transcends their legal context” (684). Another CRT scholar who uses personal anecdotes to create layered meanings and context is Patricia Williams. In her work, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* and in her other writings, she employs personal stories and metaphor to question society’s
constructs about race and gender. Similarly, in his article, "When a story is just a story: Does voice really matter?" Richard Delgado emphasizes the importance of inclusive perspectives in storytelling. He states that we in Othered groups have the right to insist on “naming ‘our own reality,’” and our lived experience offers a rich, nuanced, and valuable perspective (Delgado, “Voice” 95).

Critical Race Theory has expanded beyond legal theory and traditional civil rights advocacy to become an interdisciplinary field. Latinx Americans, Asian Americans, and more recently Arab/Middle Eastern Americans have started to use Critical Race Theory and its tools to deal with each group’s unique experiences of being Othered. A small but growing body of literature that focuses on Middle Eastern/Arab American Othering includes John Tehranian’s *Whitewashed: America’s Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*, which examines the Middle Eastern/Arab American experience.11 Tehranian, an intellectual property lawyer and academic, felt compelled to write his book as a result of his own experiences of being in a liminal space where he is seen as both White and as Other (1-3). Key to his analysis is the shifting racism that has changed the Arab-American via “selective racialization” (72-76)12. He describes the evolution of the Arab/Middle Eastern American “from friendly foreigner to enemy alien and from enemy alien to enemy race” (184). Tehranian reviews United States history and case law to examine how Whiteness and the performance of Whiteness have actually been a bar to acceptance of Arab/Middle Easterners in the United States. He explores the contradictory law in the United States that declares Arab-Americans White by law and therefore not protected as a minority group, despite policies that are in place that specifically profile and discriminate against those seen as Muslim, Arab, or Middle Eastern American.

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11 I use the terms “Middle Eastern” and “Arab” in this paper recognizing that both are colonial constructs, but these terms are widely used and readily understood. I take this lead from the “Middle Eastern Theatre Maker Artists Bill of Rights” (see Appendix C). The term “Middle Eastern” is used to locate and acknowledge region or heritage, and “Arab” is a word that is used to indicate an ethnicity.

12 At various points in United States history, different groups have been marginalized. For example, during World War II the United States interred Japanese Americans.
Muneer I. Ahmad addresses these discriminatory policies as well. In his article, “A Rage Shared by Law: Post-September 11 Racial Violence as Crimes of Passion,” he explores how post-9/11 governmental and legal racial profiling seemed to legitimize violence toward those viewed as Muslim or Middle Eastern Other. Ahmad maintains that Muslim or Middle Eastern individuals seen as Other become stand-ins for the perpetrators of 9/11 violence and therefore de facto terrorists, the Oriental Other, in these situations (1278-1282).

Bodies in Question

Theatre is an especially effective way of storytelling. Actors embody stories. The audience is physically in the same room as the actors. The story unfolds right before the audiences’ eyes; the story is not mediated by a screen. The audience and actors breathe the same air; their ears are attuned to the same wavelengths. In discussing the role of the Othered body, I employ the texts of three authors: Judith Butler’s Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence and other works, Sara Ahmed’s The Cultural Politics of Emotion, and Muneer I. Ahmad’s law review article, "A Rage Shared by Law: Post-September 11 Racial Violence as Crimes of Passion." All three of these works address the aftermath of 9/11 and how this tragedy has served to further marginalize those seen as Other. When seen as symbols and not as individuals, minority groups become further stigmatized. Storytelling and theatre can be used to play with symbols and upend rote narratives. Storytelling can foreground the marginalized Other shifting the lens to a more inclusive reality.

Disidentification: Reframing the Story and Putting it on Stage

Identity too is a story. Identity is shaped in part by the roles - mother, father, daughter, son, sister, brother, male, female, intersexed, Swede, Middle Easterner, American - that people claim, or have thrust upon them. When the context changes or the audience changes, a different role comes to the fore (i.e., a family of Middle Eastern Americans may be seen as nice neighbors to the family next
door, but in a security line at an airport, as a possible threat). In the theatre, actors take on the roles of the characters and their signifiers, the assumed qualities of their roles. In *Invasion!,* the playing of roles and the assumptions about identity become highly visible and subject to question. Questioning the codes of identity becomes part of the story. In the structure of his play, Khemiri reveals the limits of codification not only on stage but in the everyday. Khemiri draws attention to the assumptions made about Middle Eastern Other. Khemiri challenges the construct of Orientalism; he creates a more nuanced and complex reading of identity and ethnicity.

In his book, *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics,* Jose Esteban Muñoz examines Queer performance and how it can be used to confront stereotypes by expanding, critiquing, reframing, and reclaiming them. Similarly, in taking institutionalized stereotypes of Othered identities and then playing with them by employing nuance and hyperbole, Khemiri’s use of disidentification breaks the “rules” and creates complex identities that exist but are not acknowledged by White normativity.

The conventional structures that exist to talk about race and ethnicity—words, concepts, assumptions, presumptions—are insufficient. They have been developed by those in power to serve those in power. To change the system, we must work from outside the system; that is what stories, art, and theatre can do best. Stories and art have the freedom to exist outside the conventional box; they can reframe the narrative and provide a locus for discussion and new ideas. Theatre brings people under one roof for a shared experience. In this thesis I follow the story of how a play was developed in Sweden, was brought to America, was produced in Chicago, and was reviewed by the critics and received by the public.
A Swedish Context

An examination of Khemiri’s work must consider the context from which it arises. Sweden, because of its seemingly historically homogenous population, has seen itself as White, “white constitutes the central core and master signifier of Swedishness” (Hübinette and Lundström 426). This perception became problematic when the population grew more ethnically diverse. The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century both saw a significant rise in non-European immigrants in Sweden, including refugees and asylum-seekers from Africa and the Middle East. This influx challenges traditional ideas about Swedishness. It calls into question Swedish identity. In this section, I examine the demographics of this shift. I then examine the long-held idea of Swedish “exceptionalism” as an identity for individuals and for the nation-state.

For a short period in the 1970s, Sweden limited immigration. Once this policy ended, there was a rapid rise in the number of immigrants and asylum-seekers from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Chile as they escaped war and repressive regimes (“Sweden and Migration”). In the 1990s, immigrants from the former Yugoslavia fled to Sweden to escape war. When Sweden joined the Schengen Agreement in 2001, it allowed passport-free movement between European countries and into Sweden. Thus, Sweden continued to see a growth in immigration with the now-open European Union borders. The Iraq War in the first decade of the 2000s led to a steep rise in the immigration of refugees to Sweden, which continued to escalate, with a huge influx of refugees arriving in Sweden because of the Syrian Civil War. In 2014, one out of every four refugees who arrived in Sweden was from Syria. As of 2014, in this country of 9.5 million, one out of every 16 Swedes had been born outside the country. In 2015, 160,000 people sought asylum in Sweden, double the number from the previous year. 2015 saw

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1Sweden became a nation-state in 1905 when it ended its reign as the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway. This involved separating from Norway, having previously given up its overseas colonies in the 1800s and losing Finland to Russia in 1809 (Hübinette and Lundström 427). At that time, the population was predominantly ethnically Swedish but included minority groups of Roma, European Jews, Finns and the indigenous Sami.
the peak of immigration numbers. The number of immigrants has since dropped with the change in immigration laws as Sweden has tightened its borders (“Sweden and Migration”). An awareness of these demographics is vital to understanding a changing Sweden.

**Swedish Exceptionalism**

Nordic exceptionalism creates a brand, model, and identity that embraces a vision of self and country “equated with being ‘different’, ‘exceptional’ and ‘better than others’” (Browning 45). Sweden is part of this exceptionalism. It is important to understand exceptionalism as Sweden’s having embraced the vision of itself as good, exceptional and egalitarian. Sweden’s good citizenship includes some of the most comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in the world (Hübinette and Lundström 424). In addition, Sweden embraces egalitarian policies, offers the benefits of a social welfare state, promotes bridge-building and peacemaking between countries, and seeks solidarity with Third World countries (Browning 33-34). Swedish exceptionalism also subsumes being White, which I will address in a later section of the paper.\(^\text{14}\)

The changing geopolitical landscape of the past 35 years calls into question the reality of this magnanimous ideology. Sweden’s increase in non-European refugees and immigrants has been followed by a rise in racism and an anti-immigrant movement. Sweden’s anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats, were elected to parliament with close to six percent of the votes and 20 seats in 2010. (Hübinette and Lundström 423-424). This caused a crisis of identity; Sweden could no longer

\(^\text{14}\) Branding, the marketing of identity and model, comes from the Nordic region’s deliberate attempt to promote itself during the Cold War as a safe and neutral place removed from any kind of antagonism (Browning 32-33). Scandinavian governments intended for this peaceful picture to serve as a stark contrast to Cold War conflict. Nordic exceptionalism stands as a model for other nations to strive for peaceful and harmonious relations between neighboring countries and to become “bridge builders” by negotiating peace between other countries (Browning 32-36). Sweden also embraces its own exceptionalism by serving as the “world’s conscience,” taking on an active solidarity with the Third World by generously contributing to UNICEF and UNESCO (Browning 34). Free from a history of slavery and no acknowledged colonialism, Sweden sees itself as unencumbered by the burden of colonialism, unlike the rest of Europe and the United States. With Sweden being the largest contributor per capita UNICEF and UNESCO and Sweden taking in the largest percentages of refugees, per capita of any county in the EU, it is as Browning states about the Nordic Brand, uniquely situated as “better,” and “different” (Browning 36, 27-50).
perceive and promote itself as exemplifying the “good state” (Browning 44). It could no longer hold up a banner of anti-racism and egalitarianism.

What does it mean to shift the brand? What if Sweden can no longer pride itself in being tolerant and generously egalitarian? What is the challenge to Swedish subjectivity if it is no longer exceptional (Hübinette and Lundström 423-437; Browning 27-50)? Sweden’s anti-immigrant and racist stance is even deeper and wider than recent elections reflect, as I show in exploring the concept of Whiteness in the next section.

*Whiteness*

The signifier of being Swedish has been Whiteness. It is part of Swedish exceptionalism. Implicit in Whiteness is an exclusive belonging and a regarding of everyone else as “Other.” In 2001, Sweden’s parliament “decided to abolish the word ‘race’ on a government level and public level” (Hübinette and Mählck 66). It was the first country to do so, as a way to honor a commitment to do away with racism. Yet the effect of this policy is to create barriers to the discussion of biases against those who are nonwhite. The word “race” became replaced with the word “ethnic”(Hübinette and Mählck 66-67). So rather than just being a Swede of color, one is referred to as a different ethnicity or an immigrant or as a Swede of immigrant background. The use of the word “immigrant” excludes one from having a “true” Swedish identity. In effect, not only are you not White, you are not truly Swedish (Hübinette and Mählck 66; Lacatus 9).

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15 It is important to note that the indigenous Sami population while “White” has been discriminated against by other Swedes as backwards in their customs and lifestyle.

16 Hübinette and Lundström (2014) find hegemonic Whiteness as a consistent thread throughout three periods of Swedish history: “White purity” old Sweden (1905–1968); “White solidarity” good Sweden, anti-racist but still White (1968–2001) and “White melancholy,” a longing for a fictionalized idealized homogeneous past (2001 onwards). “White purity” refers to a period in which Sweden embraced an identity as the Whitest of the White. Like many countries at that time, Sweden had a eugenics movement that “Othered” those not seen as fitting the standard of exceptionalism. Its goals of purity extended to the sterilization of those who were disabled or seen lacking in intelligence or were otherwise marginalized. Sweden had anti-immigration laws restricting Jews and Roma as it strived to create itself as “best.” Sweden,
Defense of Whiteness

Sweden boasts an identity as an exceptional and egalitarian nation regarding both gender and racial equality. However, for Swedes of color and for immigrants living in Sweden, their experience has not been in keeping with this belief. Despite Sweden’s espousal of an inclusionary vision, racism exists in the form of a largely segregated society. Hübinette and Lundström cite a government report that “80 percent of all Swedes rarely or never socialize with people of non-European origin outside of working life” (424). These factors have many ramifications for the daily life of an immigrant, both in terms of socioeconomic status and identity construction. The state, marketplace, media, and White voters have all had agency in creating a segregated Sweden. The investment in the idea of exceptionalism has allowed Sweden to create a colorblind discourse that only superficially embraces the idea of inclusion. However, this presumed egalitarianism does not operate in the everyday life for Swedes of color and for the growing immigrant population in Sweden (Ålund). The Swedish population is in effect divided into ethnic, or ‘heritage Swedes,’ and those seen as Other, “the immigrant Swedes” or “Swedes of color” (Lacatus 2).

As indicated above, Sweden, due to its generous immigration policies in place since the late 1970s, has experienced a rising influx of immigrants and asylum seekers. Writing in the late 1990s, Pred described the schism between the Swedish image of itself as the “real” White Sweden versus the realities of its increasingly diverse population. Non-White Swedes are seen as a threat to its exceptionalism. Furthermore, immigrants of color are seen as patriarchal and not invested in gender equality. Non-assimilation is experienced as an implied threat to Swedish traditions, which have been
a treasured way of life. Many White Swedes have responded to this “invasion” in a racist manner that has manifested itself in both overt acts of violence and by discrimination in housing and employment (Pred).

Hübinette and Lundström cite the research of Socialstyrelsen, stating that Sweden’s housing is one of the most racially segregated in Europe (424). Part of this is due to how cities and suburbs have been set up. Post-war immigration led to a housing shortage in Sweden during the 1950s. As a consequence, the Swedish government implemented a project designed to build 100,000 flats per year between 1965 and 1974, which was called Million Programme (“Sweden and Migration”). These flats served as affordable housing for working native Swedes and for immigrant labor alike. However, the multicultural suburbs became less White with the arrival of new non-European immigrants in the 1980s, because the “Heritage Swedes” in an act of White flight, moved to the center of the cities (Lacatus 49-50). Their departure left the Million Programme homes to a new and contained immigrant population (Lacatus 49-50).

Swedes are also separated in the realm of work. Rates of employment and opportunities for employment differ greatly for those of White Swedish heritage versus those seen as Other. Sweden has the highest ratio of unemployment among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries when employment levels for native versus foreign-born populations are compared (Hübinette and Lundström 424). While doing research for The Stockholm University Linnaeus Center for Integration Studies, Bursell found discriminatory hiring practices based on whether an applicant’s name sounded traditionally Swedish or instead sounded African or Arabic (22). In his study, similar resumes were created that stated that the applicants had attended high school in Sweden. This indication was to imply that all applicants had Swedish literacy. Applications were then sent to over 3,000 job listings in fifteen different job categories. Only the identifying names on the resumes were changed. Responses varied by job type (Bursell 9-15). In the most extreme case,
when Swedish-sounding names were used, employers responded to one in 10 resumes, but for non-Swedish-sounding names (Arabic and African), the ratio was only one response for every 21 resumes sent in (Bursell 14-15).

Not only are Swedes of different backgrounds, be it heritage or ethnicity, distanced from one another at home and at work, but the media also build upon and reinforce negative perceptions of the unknown Other. When reporting on crime, the media use the words “immigrant” and “patriarchal” to refer to Swedes of color (Bredström 80). The use of these terms by mainstream Swedish media serves as a flashpoint to reinforce stereotypes associated with the Other as “non-Swedish.” The word “patriarchal” is used to refer to crimes against women, with the implication being that non-European immigrants are more likely to have biases against women and to commit crimes against women. Media outlets do not report White-on-White, male/female crime by using the same terminology, e.g., they avoid the use of “patriarchal” when domestic crime among Whites occurs (Bredström 82). This use of language also distances both Swedes of color and immigrants from heritage Swedes when the former see themselves being portrayed as the violent Other (Bredström 84). This distancing occurs reciprocally for White Swedes.

**Liberalism: Anti-Racism Makes a Place for Racism**

Sweden’s abolishment of the word “race” was born from an attempt to treat a troubling reality, but it only addressed a symptom. The elimination of a word cannot in itself tackle the core issues of discrimination (Lentin 159-168). The word “race” may have been taken away, but other discriminatory words took its place in the lexicon, such as “immigrant” and “ethnic” (Hübinette and Mählck 66; Lacatus 9). Sweden is paradoxically divided between its legal system, which strives for egalitarianism, versus its mass media and public discourse that employ everyday racism. Racist words and signifiers remain part of Swedish culture. The anti-racist banner has not stood in the way of embedded racism. If someone declares that they are “not racist” and then tells, or laughs at a racist
joke, they are reinforcing racist tropes. This makes the action racist. Hübinette and Lundström cite several studies that show that the number of Swedes who openly acknowledge having “a strongly negative attitude toward diversity and migration” is at a worldwide low of 4.9 percent (424). But is this indicative of true inclusiveness? The answer lies in the casual use of racist terms in everyday conversation, in the names of products, and in how other ethnicities are performed and portrayed. The word “negro” remains in the Swedish vernacular to refer to people of African descent, as do even more divisive words (Hübinette, “Words” 43-57). When challenged on the use of discriminatory nomenclature, many Swedes have protested that these terms are part of Swedish tradition despite objections by people of color (Hübinette, “Words” 50-51). A Swedish candy consisting of balls of chocolate is referred to as “Negro balls” (Hübinette, “Words” 50-51). In a televised interview with Khemiri in 2008, a talk-show host had placed a bowl of chocolate balls on the table. She said that she “felt sorry for all the children who could not understand why they could not call them ‘Negro balls’” (The interview spawned a Facebook page in solidarity with the talk show host which stated, “The name is Negro balls and it has always been called that.” The page had over 60,000 Swedish members (one of the largest Facebook groups in Swedish history) before Facebook took it down (Hübinette, “Words” 50-51). Performance fulfills this task as well. In 2011, an international scandal erupted when White Swedish students dressed up in “black face” and held a slave auction. Many White Swedes protested the international outcry that resulted, claiming that it was “apolitical” humor (Hübinette and Räterlinck 501-502).

Many Swedes, while disavowing racism, have tended to have a tin ear to the voices of those who protest the use of racist language. Swedish society, in seeing itself as anti-racist, does not grasp how the use of certain words or the derisive performance of Other are ways of containing, controlling, and marginalizing. It has been the tendency for Whites, as the dominant voice in Swedish
anti-racism, to take it upon themselves to “decide” what is racist. This leaves little room for the minority to voice its objections (Hübinette, “Racial Stereotypes” 3-4).

*Creating a Counter-Narrative*

Khemiri challenges Swedish exceptionalism and its White hegemony in his creation of the play *INVASION!* In this play, as well as in his other work, he emphasizes the imperative of greater inclusiveness. Like Critical Race Theory, these counter-narratives challenge and disrupt the dominant narrative. Khemiri explores ideas about authenticity by using multiple perspectives in his storytelling. He does this by disrupting traditional writing forms and by playing with language. In pulling from the multilingual, multicultural reality of the current demographics of Sweden, Khemiri develops ideas of what it means to be Swedish that are inclusive, in contrast to hegemonic Whiteness. Sweden’s identity has been tied to exceptionalism with a vision of itself as a non-racist, progressive country. By declaring itself post-racial, Sweden avoids challenges to a racist narrative. Khemiri’s work contests post-racial ideology by calling into question the constructs of race and ethnicity in the face of neoliberalism and globalization.

Khemiri’s work about race, language, and identity is not just about Sweden—it also has application to Chicago and to the United States. Critical Race Theorist Richard Delgado calls for more oppositionist narratives (i.e. counter-storytelling). Khemiri’s work, and in turn this thesis, answer that call. My aim is to expand the scope and application of the principles of CRT. I demonstrate how theatrical storytelling can create counter-narratives that address Othering. I specifically look at Orientalism and extend the application of CRT to Arab/Middle Eastern Americans.
CHAPTER TWO – Orientalism, Othering, and Opposition

There is a war between stories. They contend for, tug at our minds
- Richard Delgado, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others; A Plea for Narrative”

Chicago, not Sweden: Racism on my TV and Elsewhere—A Discussion of Stereotypes

Here I am in Chicago, not Sweden. It is the Fall of 2017 and I have decided to watch the premiere episode of The Brave, a new series on NBC about an elite squad of American soldiers who take on tough assignments. The title of the show in the opening credits was written as: “THE BRAVE.” “BRAVE” is in all capital letters and in a larger font than “THE” (“Pilot”). “When there is no way out, they go in,” reads the tag line on the show’s web page (“Pilot”). Not my usual cup of tea, but I justified watching it as research. I tend not to watch mainstream television with Middle Eastern characters; there is no one in these portrayals similar to anyone that I know. As Jack Shaheen has chronicled in his book, “Reel Bad Arabs,” the stereotypes of Middle Easterners and Arabs tend be of a rather limited range that primarily consists of villain (2). I had met one of the actors in The Brave at the Middle Eastern Theatre Makers’ Theatre Convening at the Lark Theatre in New York in 2016, and a playwright whom I know from Chicago is serving as one of the writers/producers. I was curious to see if The Brave would be veer from the usual stereotypes.

The opening scene in “Pilot” starts with a caption, “North of Damascus Syria / Doctors without Borders,” and features a blonde (code for Western, not Arab, not Middle Eastern) American eye surgeon helping heal the wounded who are wrapped in dusty garments. She touches them gently. After her ministrations, one character proclaims in Arabic, “I can see!” which is translated by subtitles into English. The patient and his family are grateful. After the doctor is done with her day of good works, the screen cuts to her seated in the backseat of a jeep. Her Arab driver makes a detour and the
car is ambushed. The good blonde doctor is being kidnapped! The driver was duplicitous. The doctor fights the scarf-wearing, machine gun-toting Arabs, but they are too strong. All the while, she has been on the phone with her loving husband in the United States; he hears what is happening. He contacts the United States government. The Deputy D.I.A. of the Special Ops team comprehends her grave danger. The elite “BRAVE” team is sent in to rescue her. The gruff, handsome leading man (we know he is nice because he has been playing with a stray dog) has a crew consisting of an African-American man called “Preach,” a nondescript white guy, and an Arab-American man (Amir) who we see praying at a mosque when his cell phone begins to vibrate. Amir is being called into a meeting with the elite American team along with a fellow team member, an Arab American woman named “Jaz,” (short for Jasmine). (I cannot help but harken back to Disney’s Princess Jasmine in Aladdin—except this Jasmine is a sniper.) When she is asked by Amir, who is new to the team, if she was raised Muslim, she replies with snarled scorn, “I was raised a New Yorker.” This seems to imply that being Muslim and a New Yorker (American) are mutually exclusive. It also implies that it is better to be a New Yorker than as a Muslim.

In a following scene, an Arab assassin enters the duplicitous driver’s home and kills the driver, his wife, and young child before the American team can get to him and acquire information needed to save the doctor. Meanwhile, the good doctor has been taken to a hospital to operate on the leader of a terrorist group. The good guys (the Americans) “go in” to take out the bad guy (the Arab terrorist—Baghdadi) who gets blown up. The Americans who are at the HQ in the United States cheer; the doctor is happily reunited with her husband. The closing scene shows the American team in Karatas, Turkey, playing soccer on the beach with a bunch of children, when suddenly a truck is

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17 The stereotyping of another character of color must be noted. “Preach” wears a large cross around his neck. He is not White, but he is not Muslim, which makes him seem more acceptable in mainstream media.

18 This femme fatal persona harkens back to the stereotype of the Middle Eastern women exemplified by Theda Bara, a silent screen movie star famed for her role as Cleopatra in the silent film era. The stage name Theda Bara was marketed as an anagram for “Arab death” (Bodeen 13).
seen careening toward them\textsuperscript{19}. The team rushes the children away as the truck explodes. The bad guys are still out there—we must be ever vigilant.

The television show, \textit{The Brave}, is one of several new programs that feature elite American teams going after the “bad guys” (in this episode, the Arab Other). \textit{The Brave} may be unique in that it has two Arab-American characters on the team of the “good guys,” but the majority of images on this episode showed Middle Eastern characters as the enemy, as duplicitous, as child-killers, and therefore as so many bad guys to annihilate. There is a lack of representation of Arab/Middle Eastern characters as complex human beings, or even as real human beings at all. These images perpetuate the dominant narrative of East versus West, and reinforce stereotypes of Arab Other, not only on screen but in day-to-day life outside the television screen and stage.

In Sweden, as I have shown in Chapter One, the construct of a “raceless society” is believed to ameliorate racism merely by the elimination of racial categories in government and institutional life. If race is acknowledged as a construct by eliminating the word “race,” but without addressing the underlying issues, the problems of Othering remain.\textsuperscript{20} Those seen as Not-White become Other, not members of the dominant group. The United States government and press have not eliminated the word “race,” yet, like Sweden, it seems that they aspire to racelessness without wanting to address the profound effects of history and current practice, both within and outside of this country’s borders. The United States struggles with the persistent institutionalized racism that subordinates African-Americans. Likewise, the rise of anti-Latino, anti-Muslim, and anti-Middle Eastern rhetoric has infiltrated the highest echelons of our political discourse. The real-life consequences for the daily lives

\textsuperscript{19} The American team’s playing soccer with refugee children also serves as a sign of the American’s goodness and America’s beneficence, much like the earlier scene of the team leader playing with the dog.

\textsuperscript{20} In the United States we have been debating the taking down of Civil War statues of Confederate soldiers. The removal of the statues removes the symbol but does not eliminate racism against African Americans.
of individuals within these populations who are considered Other are overlooked, or purposefully ignored or negated by the dominant white majority.

In his book, *WhiteWashed: America’s Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*, John Tehranian observes that Middle Eastern Americans are White by law. “According to Uncle Sam, a Middle Easterner is as white as a blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian,” but they are still seen as Other (37). Tehranian’s quote is doubly salient to this thesis in that he acknowledges the perceived identity of “blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian” as an iconic symbol of whiteness and the currency of acceptance in both Scandinavia and the United States, but also observes that this acceptance is not readily available in these countries to those who are Othered—including those of Arab/Middle Eastern descent.

The dominant narrative in the United States has been that Arabs/Middle Easterners/Muslims are the bad guys, whether that is through the immigration laws that our government has enacted, media portrayals, or individual perceptions that have been perpetuated by government and media. In *Rage by Law: Post-September 11 Racial Violence as Crimes of Passion*, Muteer I. Ahmad focuses on the repercussions of laws that discriminate by the racial profiling of Middle Easterners or Muslims and lead to detention, deportation, and increased surveillance. He maintains that such laws in effect legitimize the hate crimes that are perpetrated on those seen as Other (1261-1298).

*Orientalism: The Construct of the Middle Eastern Other*

**Enculturation and Resistance**

Delgado and Stefancic write in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* that one of the main ideas of Critical Race Theory is that racism is pervasive; “it is the usual way society does business,” the norm that is set up within our institutions, and the fabric of ordinary individual live (CRT 3rd ed. 8). Another pillar of this theory is that racism benefits those in power. Furthermore, race is a construct,
and “differential racialization” can occur with different groups being more stigmatized at different
times in accordance with the dominant group’s needs (Delgado and Stefancic, CRT 3rd ed. 9-11).

In Chapter One, I have shown how racism in Sweden is systemic and reinforces the
dominant group’s ideology with deleterious effects on individuals in Othered groups. The racism
within Sweden can be seen within a larger context. Edward Said, in his introduction to the 25th
anniversary edition of his book Orientalism, explores the construct of naming. The positionality and
power of naming reifies the regional construct of “East and “West.” Divisive perceptions and
prejudices are built into these terms. Said argues that:

history is made by men and women, just as it can be unmade and rewritten with various
silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that ‘our’
East, ‘our’ Orient, becomes ‘ours’ to direct.” (xviii)

Throughout this history, men and women have created the constructs of the East and the West, and
within that the Middle Eastern Other. Both the East and West are fictions; these terms have been
reified, used to create a fictional “us” and “them.” Said’s seminal book asserts that Orientalism is the
way the “West” has done “business” in sculpting and defining what the “Orient” is and who those
Middle Easterners/Arabs are. The dominant Western world power has shaped the narrative. The
“West” says to the “East,” “you are different from us.” This stance serves not only to Other the East,
but it also serves to define the West. The West names itself as civilized, normal and rational, implying
that the East is not. In contrast, the East is by default declared uncivilized, abnormal and irrational21.
The increased racialization of the Middle East has been fueled by a rise in political and economic
interests in the region and in reaction to the 9/11 tragedy.

21 The terms “East” and “West” are constructs. The words “East” and “West” are used in this paper for ease of
understanding, but these terms are misleading in that they center England as the nexus of the world.
Said’s updated preface, quoted above, was written for the 25th anniversary edition of his book, two years after 9/11, and during the early years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the script of who and what the Middle East is continues to be written today. It shapes policy, with the current United States administration actively trying to bar Muslim and Middle Eastern refugees, thereby closing the door to a perceived invasion of unwanted bodies that are not like “us,”—“us” being the White Western dominant group in power.

The enculturation of stories about the Other creates, according to George Gerber, a “common symbolic environment” (qtd. in Tehranian 105). As Americans, we have encoded what Middle Eastern/Arab is. The Middle Eastern characters in The Brave, as in other popular media, the ones not on our side, the “bad guys,” speak in Arabic. They have beards, they are Muslim, and they are terrorists. Tehranian states that media exposure cultivates “viewers’ perceptions of reality” (105). The reality for the viewers of The Brave and other media is that Arab/Middle Eastern has become synonymous with terrorism. These “patterns of perception become habitual” and, in the case of the perceived Middle Eastern Other, have ignited negative sentiment in the wake of 9/11, the wars in the Middle East, and anti-immigrant policies in our government (Delgado, “Storytelling” 2416).

Said names these patterns of perception in the construct of Orientalism by stating, “I think it incumbent upon us to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formula” (xxiii). This contention parallels Critical Race Theory by naming and showing the continually distorting lens of racism. Delgado and Stefancic write that, “If race is not real or objective but constructed, racism and prejudice should be capable of deconstruction; the pernicious beliefs and categories are, after all, our own” (CRT, 3rd ed. 51). CRT dismantles racism using “personal anecdotes or fables” that expose the false perception of an existing, non-biased neutrality within the United States’ legal systems and within other institutions (Harris 9). CRT challenges and reframes how race is discussed and legislated. By offering counter-narratives, CRT gives the dominant group an opportunity to see things from a
different perspective and provides members of the Othered groups with support and validation that they are not alone in their experiences.

In “Critical Race Theory,” Harris calls CRT a mix of “reformist zeal and critical pessimism” (7). Khemiri also offers this perspective in his play *INVASION!* The play exposes and excoriates the ugliness of racism and passionately champions a nuanced and humanistic understanding of those Othered. Through his writing, Khemiri gives the audience multiple lenses that reveal the distorted nature of Othering. He enables us to see the hyperbole of faulty fear-mongering, the human toll that results when a person is named and treated as Other, and the imbedded racism that permeates the popular narrative of Other.

In the following section, I look at how Khemiri expands narrative viewpoints by showing the limitations and shortcomings of the dominant narrative, and how he goes about building an in-depth exploration of what it means to be Othered. I use Richard Delgado’s writings, Tehranian’s *WhiteWashed*, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, and Sarah Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* to elucidate how Khemiri’s work puts theoretical ideas into practice and onto the stage. My goal is to show that a Swedish writer has something important to say about Othering that is applicable beyond Sweden, and that CRT, which started in American academic legal discourse, has expanded beyond the legal field and this country’s borders. Khemiri brings to the stage the complexity and multifaceted nature of difference via a fleshed-out narrative. The audience sees the embodiment of racist rhetoric and counter-narratives through his words and the bodies of actors on stage. Khemiri provides an in-depth narrative about the mutability of words— to constrain and limit and to expand and alter perception.
Naming and Renaming

All the letters in the title of Khemiri's play *INVASION!* are in capitals\(^\text{22}\) with an exclamation point at the end. The question is, who is invading and why? The title is an indication of a clear and present danger, but of what? Said would answer that the title reflects the West's fear of the East. Khemiri takes the idea of the invading Other and shapes it into the spectral and elusive Abulkasem. Throughout the seven scenes of the play, we search for Abulkasem. Who is he? What has he done? And what does it mean for the West? What does it mean for those whom the West Others? In naming Orientalism and in showing the hyperbole of the rhetoric used to create a wall of sound that shouts down those seen as Others and masks their voices, Khemiri creates a way to challenge and dampen the impact of that noisy rhetoric and to give voice to diverse individuals who are Othered.

Reframing the Argument: There's More Than One Side to a Story

*INVASION!*'s structure is built around a dialogue between a false perception of the Middle Eastern Other and a contrasting portrayal of the complex lives of those who are Othered. Exposed is the “double consciousness” of those Othered\(^\text{23}\). In seven scenes with four actors who play multiple roles, Khemiri creates interlocking narratives that are a back-and-forth exchange between rhetoric which Orientalizes and characters who speak directly to the audience as they enact their experiences with prejudice. Khemiri uses humor, pathos, and theatrical tools to engage, shock and challenge the audience. The audience is confronted both by the fear and anger of those in power and by the contrasting personal stories that defy dehumanizing.

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\(^{22}\) This capitalization is similar to *THE BRAVE*. In capitalizing the title, Khemiri keys into the hysteria of the foreign invader.

\(^{23}\) Du Bois wrote in 1903’s *The Souls of Black Folks* “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (8).
Khemiri’s lens is a prism that refracts “white light,” splintering the dominant narrative to reveal a complex array of narratives that exist beyond a monochromatic good/bad dichotomy. A multifaceted reality of stories is allowed to come to the fore, including high school students interrupting a play, an uncle visiting from Lebanon, an asylum-seeking apple picker, a misunderstood graduate student, a lovelorn telemarketer, and a young boy on a summer trip. Portrayals of these individuals are interspersed with three scenes of political pundits on a talk show who are “experts” on Abulkasem, the Middle Eastern/Arab Other. The prism-like lens in the play centers on the word/name “Abulkasem,” which becomes a signifier for what the West has exoticized and reviled. It also functions as a way for the Middle Eastern/Arab characters to reclaim a multiplicity of stories; the characters in the play have unique, complex, and distinct identities. They will not succumb to essentializing or being put back like genies into a bottle.

*INVASION! Creating an Oppositionist Narrative*

**Structure: A Path Through a Maze of Meaning**

Throughout the play, the audience is challenged to keep up while one-story shifts to another and points of view alter from scene to scene. The audience is asked to question what is real and whose story should be believed. In the first scene, depicting a seemingly traditional play in period costumes, two characters discuss Abulkasem—a dashing, dangerous, Arab pirate and a ravisher of women. The scene is suddenly disrupted when two incognito actors playing high school students leap from their seats in the audience to commandeer the stage. They want to tell their own stories that do not conform to the Orientalist tale which they have witnessed and interrupted. With bravado, the students describe their lives to the audience. They play with the word “Abulkasem”; it becomes a way to talk smack and a way to compliment.
One student, Arvind, acts as an intermediator and narrator for the audience as he and Youssef demonstrate how the word can be used:

[Arvind to the audience.]

B/ ARVIND. Abulkasem could mean absolutely anything. It could be an adjective…

D/YOUSEF. (yawning) Shit, I'm mad Abulkasem. I was up watching movies all night…

B/ARVIND. Verb...

D/YOUSEF. (irritated) Come on, Mr. Anderson, Abulkasem someone else, I didn’t have time to study…

B/ARVIND. It could be an insult…

D/YOUSEF. (threatening) Don’t play Abulkasem, man, no cuts, it was my turn.

B/ARVIND. It could be a compliment…

D/YOUSEF. Hey, check out the chica, Look! She’s nice yo, she’s slim fit, she’s flo-jo, she’s crazy Abulkasem, admit it!

B/ARVIND. It became the perfect word. But of course, sometimes there were misunderstandings…

D/YOUSEF. (angrily) What the fuck you mean, Abulkasem? Oh, okay, you mean Abulkasem. (apologetically) Okay, my bad.

B/ARVIND. But most of the time you understood the context. Lots of things were like that then…words changed and evolved. (Khemiri, INVASION! 16-17)

Youssef then tells the story of his dance-loving Uncle Abulkasem from Lebanon who had unknowingly been subjected to racism from his new “friends.” Following this, Arvind explains that time has passed and that he and his classmates have grown up and drifted apart but that the name Abulkasem still resonates with him. Now a telemarketer, Arvind tells the story of meeting a woman named Lara in a bar and how he assumed the name Abulkasem when trying to pick her up, to impress her with his manliness via the macho-ness he bequeathed to the name Abulkasem. In Scene
Two, we meet a talk show host and three “experts” who purport to examine and expose the threat of Abulkasem, who is proclaimed by them to be a Middle Eastern terrorist. In Scene Three, we are reintroduced to Lara, a graduate student. She recounts going to a bar to meet her classmates when she encounters Arvind. She dismisses his approach to her as a feeble pick-up attempt from “a flirt-happy Turk in a leather vest” (Khemiri, INVASION! 24). She goes on to join her colleagues. Her classmates are well meaning but her presence has them tripping over each other with platitudes that seek to demonstrate their liberalism but end up showing their shortcomings. To counter their racism, Lara takes control of the conversation and tells them the story of the world famous, Middle Eastern avant-garde female director who Lara calls “Abulkasem.” In Scene Four, the talk show “experts” continue their diatribe against Abulkasem, the “terrorist.” Scene Five introduces an apple picker and his deliberately misrepresenting translator. The Apple Picker keeps getting phone calls from someone who gives their name as Abulkasem. (It’s Arvind, trying to call Lara, mistakenly believing that this is her phone number.) In Scene Six, the talk show pundits ramp up their vitriol and, in their frenzy, blame Abulkasem for all the world’s ills, from the rise in the price of sesame seeds to global warming. In Scene Seven we meet an actor assuming the role of the playwright’s Little Brother. Little Brother shares the story of his summer vacation and the act of self-abnegation he witnesses that depicts the horrors of racism.

The scenes that alternate with the talk show scenes are personal. The audience learns who Abulkasem/Middle Eastern/Arab Other is, or could be—a noun a, verb, a character in a play, a gay uncle from Lebanon, a stuttering telemarketer, or an asylum-seeking apple-picker. Abulkasem is elusive. Abulkasem will not be essentialized. One Arab Middle Easterner is not all Arab Middle Easterners.

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24 Tehranian points out the number of languages, religions and ethnicities in the region that are too often compressed into a monolithic Other (66). Too often, it is forgotten that the “Middle East” is a construct. The “Middle East” is made up of many countries, many histories, many religions, and many languages (Tehranian, 66).
**Orientalism Disrupted: The First Scene**

In the beginning of *INVASION!*, the audience is presented with two characters who are enacting what seems to be a 19th century play, entitled *Senor Luna*. The characters talk excitedly about Abulkasem, a pirate, a seducer of virgins. Abulkasem stands for all that is exotic, all that is Abulkasem is described as emotional, hypersexual, disregarding of the laws of other countries. He takes what he wants. What has changed between the 19th century and the present day in the perception of the Middle Eastern Other? The Middle East is still “exotic.” The Middle Easterner is still to be feared.

In directing the Chicago production of *INVASION!*, I worked with my designers to highlight Orientalism by hanging an “Oriental” rug as a backdrop, by the draping of colorful fabrics, by choosing “ottomans” for seating, and by decorating the set with potted palms—to create the perfect environment for the *exotic* Abulkasem. In contrast to these scenic elements, the two characters on stage at the beginning of the play are dressed in 19th century Western costume. The woman is clothed in an empire-waisted long gown; her hair is tamed and up in a bun. The man wears breeches, a frock coat, a high collar and a beautifully tied cravat. In the Chicago production the actors who played the roles were South Asian-American and Middle Eastern American. While they are not White, they performed Whiteness. The characters are decorous, well behaved, the antithesis of the perceived Other. They speak of Abulkasem but are not Abulkasem. He is not on stage, but described – in verse:

**ACTOR 2.** He captivated his lady’s bright happy heart  
Without consent on her mother’s or father’s part  
Italy’s soil must remember the Arab’s name  
He was from Northwest Africa, of Maghreb tribe  
He, Abulkasem . . .

**ACTOR 1.** The famous pillager?  
The torcher of Italy’s islands, him/

**ACTOR 2.** ABULKASEM ALI MOHARREM. (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 8-9)
The audience is told of his attributes but do not see him. The audience is told he is a pirate, a lover, a dangerous man come to sweep the young virgin away. He is both a threat to “our” women and “our” country. He meets the criteria for Middle Eastern/Arab: exotic, a threat, lurking but not quite visible. Their decorous costumes highlight that the two characters on stage are not like the Orientalized Other. They, in contrast, are restrained, civilized. But hark, the arrival of the Other is imminent! Abulkasem embodies all that is Other; he is alien, savage, and a despot. He will not be civilized like they are. He will not speak in verse.

Orientalism Interrupted: Students Take the Stage

In the performance of the Senor Luna, the play with in the play, the pirate Abulkasem never materializes. Senor Luna is invaded not by the Arab brigand, but by two unruly audience members. As described above, two youths (two incognito actors) have been sitting in the audience. They disparage the staidness of the play while heckling the on-stage actors, much to the resulting discomfort of the surrounding audience members. These youths run onto the stage full of swagger and bravado, tear down the hanging fabrics, pull down the “flying” carpet hanging on the wall, chase off the stage the actors/characters with the Orientalist words emanating from their poetic mouths and then announce that they, the youth, are taking over. They will redefine what Abulkasem is. The old tropes of Orientalism shall be destroyed. Who or what is Abulkasem? They will define it! Call it out! Explore it and turn it on its head!

What might Abulkasem be? A noun, verb, or adjective? Or might he be as varied as the characters that populate the play, or as the members of the audience? Rather than adhering to the rules that the West has written, these youths will create a new vocabulary, a new frame, a new perspective. So too does Khemiri.

25 This threat of the dangerous, misogynistic Arab Other has become a well-worn narrative in United States television and film, as chronicled in Jack Shaheen’s Reel Bad Arabs.
Butler similarly considers the following question: What happens when “we” have “the ability to narrate ourselves from not the first person alone” (Precarious Life, 8)? She proposes the idea of using something beyond the sole narrator, “Say from the position of the third or to receive an account delivered from the second” (8). Doing so “can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken” (8). Khemiri accomplishes this by shifting how the audience understands the story, changing narrators, challenging what is first perceived, playing with the idea of what “we” as an audience, people, nation are as an entity and how “we” as audience, people, nation, entity understand language, individuals, and groups seen as Other. The students interrupting the play have seized the narrative. The students have a different story to tell; they convey the mutability of the word Abulkasem, of the Middle Eastern/Arab Other. Both the words “Abulkasem” and “Middle Eastern” can be used to Orientalize, or, in contrast, they can be multifaceted and rich in meaning. Abulkasem and Arab/Middle Eastern identity can be reclaimed. Abulkasem need not be a terrorist; it can simply be the name of someone’s uncle.

Rhetoric and Its Power: The Talk Show

To contrast with the youth who disrupt the play and challenge the narrow confines of Other, Khemiri gives us a talk show host and three experts who tout and reinforce Orientalized rhetoric. In a Meet the Press news format, the host questions the pundits, and they answer with ever-increasing hyperbole as they voice their concerns about the dangerous Abulkasem. This echoes Tehranian’s observation that, “News coverage of the Middle Eastern and fictional portraits of the Middle Easterner in films combine to cultivate a fear of terrorism anytime anyone boards the same flight as we do” (106). The pundits offer their speculation, supposition, and gossip which they present in the form of their allegedly superior insight and knowledge about Abulkasem. These “experts” on the Arab mind define and name the “terrorist” Abulkasem. They exploit stereotypes and propagate their fears of what and who this Middle Eastern/Arab is and what he might do. He is demonized, made
spectral, and larger than life. This demonization by the “experts” parallels Said’s critique of real life “experts” when he writes:

Today, bookstores in the United States are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat, and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted to them and other experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange Oriental people over there who have been such a terrible thorn in ‘our’ flesh . . . Recycling the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations so as to stir up “America” against the foreign devil. (xx)

Khemiri’s pundits embrace faulty rhetoric, reveling in their own expertise and puffed-up bombast. They declare this elusive Middle Eastern Abulkasem to be “a master of flip-flops” and “a collaborator among his countrymen.” They assert that, “Everyone agrees Abulkasem is the greatest threat to our common future” (Khemiri, INVASION! 18). The screed of the pundits does not contextualize, nor does it acknowledge the West’s own flip-flops, changes in policy, or acts of aggression in relation to the Middle East.

In all three scenes with the pundits, Abulkasem is never given his own voice. He is not present. But the audience is told by the “experts” in the news-style program all about him. He is both everywhere and nowhere. Abulkasem is named as the enemy, but as his alleged crimes shift, his described persona shifts:

EXPERT 2. He soon becomes a collaborator among his countrymen

EXPERT 3. And as a member of the resistance camps.

EXPERT 1. The western world sees him as potential terrorist . . .

EXPERT 2. The Arab world as a traitor.

EXPERT 3. Everyone reads him as an opponent

EXPERT 1. And soon everyone agrees that Abulkasem is the greatest threat to our common future. (Khemiri, INVASION! 23)
These “experts” claim that Abulkasem “starts using disguises” such as “monocles and eye patches, veils and fake mustaches” (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 32). They claim that:

**EXPERT 3.** He disguises his voice. He mixes up all imaginable languages, Urdu with Zemblan, Persian with Arabic.

**EXPERT 1.** He pretends to stutter, he pretends to be mute, he pretends to be a Spaniard in Chinatown and a Frenchman in Little Italy. (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 33)

They go on to describe the changing appearance of Abulkasem; he has a mole that seems to move from chin to cheek and back again (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 33). Khemiri asks the audience to think about what “evidence” is. Can a mole be a sign of criminality? Can the wearing of cologne be a sign of sinister intent? Does being Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim make you a terrorist? If so, Abulkasem could be any one or all of “them.” We see the Othering by the “experts” as though in funhouse mirrors of grotesquery as Abulkasem becomes more and more distorted. He is vilified, “The PLO has labeled him a collaborator. The Mossad – a terrorist. The CIA – an enemy combatant” (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 27). Abulkasem is named as Oriental—undependable, shifty; not like “us,” a threat; not like “us,” foreign; not like “us.” He is spectral—changing forms, elusive; he could be anywhere. In a whirling dervish of hyperbolic fear and Othering, Abulkasem is blamed for everything from “earthquakes and hurricanes,” to the “Kardashians,” to the “price of sesame seeds and sales of garlic shooting sky high” (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 40-41). Khemiri uses humor and sarcasm to point out the absurdity of blame that is thrust upon the Middle Eastern/Arab/Other.

In *INVASION!,* the rhetoric of the pundits’ Orientalism fans the flames of fear. Abulkasem is a signifier: Abulkasem equals Middle Easterner; Middle Easterner is a signifier for Muslim; Muslim is a signifier for terrorist. Individual lives are shaped and damaged by such suspicions, such perceived associations, be they micro-aggressions, racial profiling, or hate crimes. CRT acknowledges that prejudice and Othering exist, are systemic, and that we live in a
society that is trapped in a cycle of Othering, fear, pain, and anger. Orientalism can be seen as a way of Othering, a way the Middle East has been literally named by the West. Said points out that:

The Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, part affirmation, and part identification of Other. That these supreme fictions lend themselves to easy manipulations and organization of collective passions has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilization of fear and hatred, disgust and resurgent self-pride and arrogance - much having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, “we” on the other. (xviii)

INVASION! exposes the language that perpetuates and amplifies fear. Said’s “supreme fictions” are named by, played with, and exposed in Khemiri’s work. Khemiri challenges the myth of “ontological stability” (Said xvii). He then goes on to show the consequences of fear in the lives of the individuals within discriminated groups.

**Controlling the Narrative: The Apple Picker**

In Scene Five, Khemiri shows how language can be used to negate the Other when a translator redefines a humble apple-picker as a terrorist. A man enters and stands on stage; he is dressed simply in a white shirt and khaki pants. A non-native speaker, he asks in broken English for an Interpreter. The Interpreter appears. In my Chicago production, I chose to have the Interpreter wear a business-appropriate black dress with a tasteful scarf around her neck, not on her head. Her hair is neat and tied back. She is calm, rational, succinct; she is one of “us.” Tehranian would say that she is “white washed” and plays whiteness in a way that makes her *one of the good ones*. And, of course, she is intelligent in that she is bilingual, unlike the Apple Picker. It all starts out very simply with the Interpreter voicing what the audience assumes are the words of the Apple Picker: “First all I want to

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26 “White performance is still a condition of white privilege” (Tehranian 63).
say that it is a huge honor for me to tell my story to all of you” (Khemiri, INVASION! 37). As the Interpreter continues, supposedly translating his words, the audience hears the Apple Picker’s apparent endorsement of female circumcision, the hatred of Jews, his loathing of America, and his desire to commit terrorist acts. However, are these the actual words of the Apple Picker? While she purports to translate him, he has begun humming and singing loudly and emphatically. The Apple Picker has started singing bits of ABBA tunes in English.27 Yet his enthusiasm for the music seems very incongruent with the Interpreter’s malicious “translations.” The Interpreter appears calm and measured. Whom should we believe? Who is more like “us” in the West? At one point we hear the Apple Picker sing in English “Mamma mia, here I go again, my my, how can I resist you . . . Mama mia, does it show again, my my, just how much I’ve missed you,” and the Interpreter translates this as “Pretty soon after that, just like Abulkasem, I started to dream of blowing myself to pieces” (Khemiri, INVASION! 42). The Apple Picker, along with the audience, begins to suspect that the Interpreter is not truthfully translating his words. The Apple Picker becomes silent, but the Interpreter continues speaking as though she is still translating his words:

INTERPRETER: I ended by saying that the attacks on the World Trade Center was just one big coup by Jewish conspirators, all to force the US into a war against the Arab World.

She pauses as though waiting for the APPLE PICKER to finish speaking. [He is silent.]

INTERPRETER: When the videotape was ready I put on the dynamite belt and left my home.

She pauses as though waiting for the APPLE PICKER to finish speaking. [He is silent.]

She continues as if she is interpreting, and then leaves the stage. (Khemiri, INVASION! 36-44)

27 ABBA is a multi-platinum white Swedish band from the 70s that sang in English—two men, two women singing in close harmony, danceable and hummable and not at all threatening.
In my Chicago production, as the Interpreter walks off, she picks up the American flag which has been displayed on a stand, and she bears it proudly off the stage. If the audience had been unclear as to what was being translated when the Apple Picker was speaking and singing, it subsequently becomes chillingly clear that she has not been interpreting his words at all. In the last several minutes, he has not spoken a word. The Interpreter has in effect rendered him mute. She can then create his story. The Interpreter controls the narrative. She has been putting words into Apple Picker’s unwilling mouth. She names him misogynist, anti-Semite, and terrorist. These are not words that he uses to define himself or to tell his story. His story is quite different. Only when the Interpreter has left the stage does the Apple Picker in broken English tell the audience that the Interpreter’s translation was “not good,” that he wishes to make himself understood. Desperate to connect with the audience, he pleads for understanding:

“No more wars. Not good . . . many wars, many violence . . . Interpreter not good.

War not good . . . Abulkasem [the voice on the phone] not good . . . I wait four years . . .

. I stop waiting. Maybe asylum, maybe torture . . . maybe prison . . . No one know.”

(Khemiri, INVASION! 43)

The audience, in varying levels of unwitting complicity, may or may not have believed the Interpreter until it became glaringly clear that her story did not mesh with the reality of what the audience has seen and heard with their own eyes and ears.

In an email correspondence via the dramaturg and translator, Khemiri stressed that the scene must be played in another language and that the Apple Picker must be translated. In my Chicago production, the actor, while being “translated,” shifted from Arabic to Urdu to Hindi along with broken English and ABBA lyrics. Silk Road Rising has a diverse audience, so my assumption was that at least several people at each show would have one of these as a first or second language. By switching the languages, no one in the audience could be completely sure of what the Apple Picker
had been saying. This added a layer of who is “us.” Most everyone in the audience was reliant on the translator.

**Negating - I Can’t Hear You and I Don’t Want to See You: The Apple Picker Continued**

Khemiri, in Scene Five posits, *how much more likely are we to distrust what we do not understand?* Khemiri, building on this fear and distrust, played into the stereotype of the Middle Easterner as terrorist, anti-women, and anti-Semitic. Of course, this was contrary to what the Apple Picker was saying, which was that he loved music, especially ABBA. The Apple Picker is disoriented, fearful, frustrated, and angry that he has not been represented truthfully, that he has been negated and demonized. After all, we are dependent on those who translate for us. The agenda of those who are translating may be different than the speaker's intent. By choosing what is translated and what stories are told, the power group negates. Those who are untranslated or mistranslated become unreal. By being silenced or mistranslated, they are erased. If the Other is demonized or invisible, they need not be deemed as human. If they are not human, they are not worthy of care or respect. There is a responsibility of the listener to not succumb to stereotypes and to question the agenda of those who are delivering the messages. Unquestioning acceptance of the message can be an easy, lazy shorthand perpetuating the tropes that have long been in place. There needs to be an awareness that beneath the stereotyping there may be a more sinister agenda that reinforces prejudices, to the advantage of those in power.

Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life,* explicates how 9/11 served to further silence Muslims, Arabs and groups seen as Other. A schism that already existed before 9/11 became more pronounced with, as Butler states, a polarizing “who is with us, who is against us” mentality (*Precarious Life,* 7). These groups and individuals who are perceived as, or are of, Middle Eastern background have become increasingly vilified. Butler points out that, “Anxiety-Rage [creates] a radical desire for security, a
shoring up of the borders on what is perceived as alien” (Precarious Life, 39). This fear and rage, she goes on to state, makes these individuals unreal:

If violence is done against those that who are unreal, then from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). (Butler, Precarious Life, 33)

In rendering the Apple Picker as a foreign language speaker who does not speak the dominant group’s language, he becomes unreal. The group in power can translate “apple picker refugee” into “terrorist.” CRT asks us to shift this perspective, to make the unreal real. In listening directly to the Apple Picker refugee, we give his own personal story legitimacy. He is not a contemporary stand-in for the neglected huddled masses, nor the terrorist he is named to be by those in power. When narrating a story (be it a legal argument, or a newspaper article, or a play) from a center that is not solely White (i.e. not solely Western and male), the stage is opened to a panoply of perspectives that makes room for Other. The Apple Picker refugee becomes identifiable as human when it is clear that he has been mistranslated. Khemiri’s Apple Picker pushes back against being defined as a terrorist. This refugee seeks our understanding, not once but four times: first by asking for a translator, then by trying to tell his story through the translator, then by becoming silent during her mistranslation, and finally by challenging the Interpreter’s false words.

When those who are speaking Arabic are depicted only as violent and aggressive on television, film, and video games, the audience then experiences those sounds, words and languages only as violent and suspicious. Khemiri demonstrates how an individual who is speaking another language can become negated as Other. When a stereotype takes precedence, it makes no room for the individual. The individual no longer exists; the non-familiar is not only unheard, but invisible. We are dependent on those who translate. We are willing to believe someone who speaks our language
because it is “our” own language, while sounds from another language can be disturbing or threatening.\(^{28}\)

**Liberalism and its Failings: The Graduate Student and Her Seminar Group**

It is not only those who are speaking another language who are Othered. Scene Three depicts Lara’s seminar class whose members meet at a local bar. A trio of classmates, with the best of intentions, engage in Orientalizing her, their fellow student. They show a lack of knowledge of the region, of gender roles and customs, of food and religion. This scene conveys not only how they are erroneously defining the Other, but also how they perceive themselves as enlightened and egalitarian. Lara is questioned by a fellow student, who is a journalist, on “sabbatical”:

The JOURNALIST: Hey. Something I was thinking about . . . Where are you from anyway? Oh, your parents are Kurds? (English pronunciation) “Kurdland.” I live in a pretty diverse neighborhood myself. There is an interesting mix of people there. One of my neighbors for example . . . from Pakistan. But really lovely. Super nice, really nice. (Khemiri, \textit{INVASION}/28)

The journalist in the space of a few sentences has Othered Lara, his fellow student, even while trying to impress her. The subtext of his question, “Where are you from anyway?” implies it obviously is not here. Presenting himself as open and accepting, he declares, “I live in a pretty diverse neighborhood” and points out the “diversity” of his Pakistani neighbor. The journalist then implicitly boasts about his worldliness and liberalness in his embracing of the diverse neighbor when he adds, “But really lovely. Super nice, really nice.” Someone who meets his criteria of acceptability is “super nice.”

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\(^{28}\) My mother said she grew up discomfited when hearing German spoken because the frightening Nazis that she had seen depicted in movies and on television immediately came to mind.
Lara is used to both the cross-examination about who and “what” she is and being the object of her fellow students’ Orientalizing. In an aside to the audience, she quotes her father, “When people want to talk origins they are like volcanoes, impossible to stop” (Khemiri, INVASION! 28). She knows in advance where the conversation will lead.

Once Lara’s ethnicity is on the table along with the beer, her fellow classmates delve into a discussion of suicide bombers, female circumcision, the veil, and daily prayer (Khemiri, INVASION! 28-29). All their talk occurs over and around Lara. They have placed her in a story of their own making that contradicts and negates the reality of Lara as their colleague. She is drinking along with them in a bar, wearing fashionable boots, and demonstrating her ability to swear a blue streak. She is not meek; she is not overtly sexualized or “exotic.” She refuses the role of victim and defines herself on her own terms. She is, however, misinterpreted and stuck in an Orientalist box. She counters her classmates Orientalist jag by recounting to them the story of a female avant-garde theatre director who has worked all over the world. Lara can’t recall the director’s name, so she substitutes the name Abulkasem, the same name used by Arvind, the telemarketer who was trying to get her phone number earlier (Khemiri, INVASION! 29-31). Both Lara and Arvind claim Abulkasem. Abulkasem can be anything or anyone and cannot be confined to a mold as prescribed by Lara’s fellow students.

Shame as a Tool of Negation: Defacing Uncle

In Scene One, the high school students are playing with the word Abulkasem when one of them, a “little Christian Lebanese guy with this awesome lumberjack ’stache,” reveals that he has an Uncle Abulkasem (Khemiri, INVASION! 11). Yousef tells the story of his uncle who came to visit from Lebanon; Uncle Abulkasem uses the name Lance on his visits to family in the West. He is open-hearted and loves to dance. During one of his visits, he goes on an overnight outing. On his solo train trip in this country, he is befriended by several passengers, including young soldiers. Upon his return from his sojourn, he happily relates the story of his travel to his nephew, sister and
brother-in-law. As he begins to describe his adventures in his happy chatter, they stare at him in horror. They see that “GO HOME” has been written on his forehead in black marker, apparently by his new “friends” while he slept (Khemiri, INVASION! 14). The nephew feels shame; the brother-in-law becomes stoic and silent; the sister tries to frame it as a sign of welcome in an attempt to deflect and cushion the violation of both the uncle’s physical and psychological space. The audience sees the uncle deflate, become small. In fact, the whole family experiences shame and the embarrassment of being identified and discounted as not worthy, as alien and undesirable. The soldiers in their “joke” have asserted their white power and dehumanized the uncle, making him a figure of ridicule and derision. The uncle is doubly Othered because he is both a gay male and Middle Eastern. There is damage to the psyche with the recognition that one is Other, does not belong, and is “foreign.” Sarah Ahmed, in her book The Cultural Politics of Emotion, explores how both individual bodies and the “body” of a group or nation can be affected by feelings (1-17). She argues that fear can shape policy, law, and opinion as well as the lives of individuals (Ahmed 62-81). The fear, anger, and pain experienced by those in power in turn generate fear, anger, and pain in those who are Othered (Ahmed 62-68).

**Erasure: Little Brother**

In a monologue in the last scene of the play, Little Brother who is in 8th grade and of Middle Eastern descent describes a vacation trip with his friend Peter and his family. He and Peter spy the Apple Picker purposely burning off his own fingerprints. We see the horror of this act through Little Brother’s eyes:

> Everything around was super sunny mood and bumblebees and butterflies and flowers I didn’t know the names of were shining the path in the woods. On the way

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29 In creating the Uncle who is stigmatized for being both gay and Middle Eastern, Khemiri acknowledges an intersectionality of prejudice that can occur when someone belongs to two marginalized groups.
to the river we saw big red houses with rotten wood, where before there were cows and cow babies but now there were just piles of hay and dry old wasps’ nests and I remember Peter said we should hit the wasps’ nests with sticks because that was summer tradition too and the sound was crispy and we got away without bites. (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 51)

After experiencing the beauty of the setting and the newness of this rural place, Peter and Little Brother come across a cabin. Peering in through a window they could see that:

a man was standing, he maybe was fifty, and I remember he had chinos that were beige and a white rolled up shirt and a little brown vest. On one cheek there was a birthmark, a little it was like the shape of a moon. I thought he was a Turk but also he could be Iranian, maybe Arab. He stood there by the stove with two white bowls and in one he poured oil and in the other he put water and the burner was on and I remember it was redder than regular burners and I remember the man rubbed his hands and I remember he seemed nervous and I remember he seemed like waiting for someone and I remember he took a huge breath and I remember then he pressed his hand’s fingers right down on the burner and I remember the sizzling sound. (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 52-53)

In this monologue the audience learns through Little Brother about the destruction and self-harm that the Apple Picker refugee enacts upon himself. The audience also sees the loss of innocence of Little Brother as he bears witness to someone who looks like him committing this horrible act of self-mutilation. The Apple Picker’s erasure of his fingerprints is a way to negate his own identity. Without fingerprints the Apple Picker becomes no one; he is not traceable as someone undesirable. If he cannot be identified, he thinks he cannot be deported. In the erasure of his identity, the Apple Picker
is inadvertently revealing to Little Brother the valuelessness of his own identity. The Apple Picker’s deed is a symbolic act that teaches Little Brother the dangers of being Arab/Middle Eastern. It is something to be ashamed of, to hide, to delete and to erase.

**Making Visible: A Kaleidoscope of Seeing**

Again, and again in *INV/ASION!*, Khemiri creates a story different than the one that Orientalists have propounded. He challenges the long-standing, spoon-fed rhetoric of Orientalism and pushes against prejudice, nationalism, and fear of difference. He demonstrates the toll taken on individual lives. In deconstructing the rhetoric of Orientalist racism and in depicting individuals affected by this racism, Khemiri uses story to shift the audiences’ perspectives and to render what has been deemed “unreal” real. In embodying individuals who are not given a voice, a face, a body, a story and therefore invisible and “unreal,” Khemiri challenges this invisibility, this unreality and demands a place on the stage and in the world for the marginalized Other. When the audience witnesses the hate crime of Uncle Abulkasem’s being literally “defaced” by graffiti written on him, sees Lara being an object of curiosity and pity for her foreignness, or observes Little Brother witnessing the self-harm that the Apple Picker willingly commits, Khemiri is making visible the stories that are usually unseen. These stories do not appear on my television in Chicago. Through Khemiri’s lenses, the audience is given the opportunity to experience a kaleidoscope of shifting views and to recognize the bits and pieces that make up the whole of the lives of others who experience the sharp edges of prejudice and the rhetoric that perpetuates it.

In the next chapter we will look at disidentification and the theatrical tools Khemiri uses to accomplish this. We will see how story and performance work together to shift and widen the lens beyond the dominant hegemony.
CHAPTER THREE - Performing, Reframing, and Reclaiming Identity

*Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?*

-William Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*

*Embodying the Arab Middle Eastern Other*

In 1917, Theda Bara starred in the silent film sensation, *Cleopatra*. Marketing for the film claimed Theda was the daughter of an Arab princess and an Italian father (Bodeen 13). In promoting *Cleopatra*, her stage name, Theda Bara, was touted as an anagram for “Arab Death” (Bodeen 13). She was the original “vamp” (short for “vampire”), a sexy, dangerous siren who used men up, and then threw them away (Bodeen 15). Four years later, Rudolf Valentino caused women to swoon when he starred in 1921s *The Sheik*, as a desert prince who absconds with the Englishwoman, Diane.

Promotions for the film blared “Shriek-- For the Sheik Will Seek You Too!” (Shaheen 456-457). A print-ad in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* read, “A flaming romance of desert love! Flinging away the trappings of civilization! Leaving the ‘lady’ only a woman, the ‘gentleman’ only a man” (“The Sheik”). Both these silent film stars performed “Arabness”—dangerousness, sexual desirability, and the forbidden. Theda Bara’s real name was Theodosia Burr Goodman. She was from Cincinnati, Ohio, the daughter of a Swiss-American mother and a Jewish, Polish-American Father. Valentino’s character in *The Sheik*, Ahmed Ben Hassan, ends up not being Arab at all (Shaheen 454-457). He actually is of English nobility, which made it acceptable for him to get the girl. Valentino himself was Italian (Arnold 19).

In these films, the role of “Arab” had been codified. It was easily packaged and sold to an eager public. This commodification builds on existing narratives. In *The (Il)legible Arab Body and the Fantasy of National Democracy*, Keith Feldman writes:

The dominant Orientalist stereotype that had circulated for centuries in the West’s literary, anthropological social scientific and travel narratives . . . defined whiteness as privileged over
so called “Arabness”; religious practice as dangerously non-Christian; uncivilized men as feminized, weak, and hypersexualized; women as oppressed, immobile, lacking agency needing to be freed by the ideals of liberal democracy; and dark skin as a sign of danger. (35) Starting in 1914, during the same time that Theda Bara was making films, the Syrian George Dow began fighting for naturalization in the United States court system, based on his claim that he was white. His three cases passed through the courts before Dow was granted citizenship (Tehranian 55-57). These cases point not only to whiteness as a construct, but also to the privilege that one is given by enacting or achieving whiteness.

However, the “whiteness” (the gatekeeper of assimilation and a continuing issue of Du Bois colorline30) of Middle Easterners and Arab-Americans continues to be territory for dispute (32). Feldman writes in 2006 about the proposed rules for the 2010 census:

Advocates for a revision of the US census claimed that Arab bodies had become politically invisible when classified as white, yet all too visible in the national imaginary; Arab Americans should therefore be re-categorized (as “Middle Eastern,” “Near Eastern,” or “Arab”) in order to more securely access the rights and protections guaranteed by national citizenship. (33-34) This remains a contentious point for the 2020 census. Should the Middle Eastern Arab-American diverse population give up the privileged status of “white”? Doing so might be a detriment for those who are assimilated and benefit from its privilege. Should there be recognition and special status for those who are more readily the recipients of discrimination because they are visibly seen as Other by their status as an immigrant, being of color, having names that sound “foreign,” or because of religious affiliation? If being “White” gives you the status of acceptence, there is an inherent danger

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30 Du Bois in his seminal book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, states, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the colorline” (32). He writes, “Before the courts, both in law and in custom they [African-Americans] stand on a different and peculiar basis” (32). Du Bois’ prescience about the colorline continues to be a deeply rooted issue into the 21st century in the United States. The issues of discrimination extend to other groups who are not considered White and who are denied the rights of law, custom, and privilege of their White brethren.
in becoming visible as Other. There is the possibility of drawing down harm by drawing attention to one’s difference. Khaled A. Beydoun, in the 2015 *Michigan Law Review*, argues that the establishment of a stand-alone MENA [Middle East and North Africa] American box on the next U.S. Census may “erode Arab American civil liberties” by focusing government surveillance and monitoring programs (8). If Middle-Eastern Arab communities and individuals are routinely discriminated against, does special status protect, or further marginalize? Reframing how the Middle Eastern Arab Other is seen in the common zeitgeist does not answer this perplexing question, but it calls attention to the dilemma of perception for those who are blatantly marginalized, those in privileged positions of accepted assimilation, and those in majority power groups.

The previous chapter examined how Khemiri acknowledges Orientalist tropes and counters them with individual stories in his play *INVASION!*. In this chapter, Orientalism is explored on the theatrical stage, with a focus on how ingrained Orientalist narratives can be reshaped and repurposed. Using Critical Race Theory and performance theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz’s ideas on disidentification, I will show how Khemiri’s work pushes back against Orientalist stereotypes and opens a more complex, nuanced portrayal of the Orientalized Other—how he reframes and makes human what has been caricatured. I will also discuss the Chicago performance of *INVASION!*, and how my directing and design choices for the production served as tools to further expose existing Orientalist tropes. The actors and I focused on creating detailed nuanced performances that showed a multiplicity of identities embodied by Arab-American Middle Eastern Other.

**Orientalism on Stage**

Said begins his book *Orientalism* with an epigraph quoting Karl Marx’s “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” stating that, “They cannot represent themselves: They must be represented” (xiii). Said writes that the “Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe” (71). In using the postcolonial lens with which Said critiques
literature, he observes that, “The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness” and an “illustration of a particular form of eccentricity” (103). In the public and political spheres, the Orientalists define the East as something different than what was deemed civilized and acceptable.

Said employs the term “Orientalist stage” to refer to the naming of the role-playing and casting of the East as Other to the West (67). The use of the word “stage,” as well as the concept of making and constructing the “stage” and the players, emphasizes that these identities and regions are constructs. Nation, ethnicity, and race are ideas; they exist and persist because the groups in power have named them and fought to maintain them. These terms become a shorthand for encapsulating the dynamics and place-making of those in power, and a way for those in power to determine who has access to resources and privilege.

Theatre has been one of the many forms of narrative that have been used to perpetuate the fantasy of the Orientalized Other and to solidify Western identity. In Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts, John M. MacKenzie devotes a chapter to theatre which chronicles the way that theatre uses music, art, spectacle, and text to create an Orientalist definition of the East. MacKenzie writes, “Throughout its modern history (Tudor times), the theatre has been much concerned with empire, the extension of European power, and the discovery of and the relationship with other cultures . . . grappling with issues of race and power” (177). He goes on to state that, “[Theatre creates] a fantasy world which introduces ‘Other’ through which they [the West] can more clearly know themselves” (178). Western theatre has dramatized its image of the East for its own purposes—selling the exotic of the Other, selling the buffoonery of the Other, selling the villainy of the Other. Such imagery fills the box office coffers and lets the audience go home with a “little bit of the other” in their fantasies, and a comfortable certainty that they themselves are superior. Jack Shaheen has chronicled in his work, Reel Bad Arabs, the portrayal of Middle Easterners/Arabs in film and television and the industry’s proclivity to “routinely elevate the humanity of the Westerners and trample the humanity
of Arabs” (2). If the story exoticizes, fetishizes and dehumanizes a group of people, then violence against those seen as Other becomes more acceptable. The danger of these ‘stereotypical depictions,’ as Tehranian states, is to:

reinforce clichéd perceptions that, in turn, produce discriminatory conduct. Middle Easterners are portrayed as the perpetual foreigner, the enemy, the Other, the terrorist, the uncivilized heathens who threaten the American way of life with their inhumane thirst for violence. The impact of such prevalent prejudice is grave. (112)

The common narrative of Middle Eastern Other makes it easier to dismiss and deny the rights of those seen as Other. If they are indeed a threat, it makes sense to keep Middle Eastern refugees out of the United States. It makes sense to deny them their civil rights. Civil rights would give Middle Eastern/Arab people a voice whereas those in power would rather have them be silent or vilified. From this stance, it makes sense to continue the United States’ current policies in the Middle East and toward Middle Eastern Americans. Perpetuating the fantasy of Middle Eastern Other makes them less-than—less worthy and less human.

**The Stage as a Tool to Counter Hegemony**

It is here where CRT counter-narratives work to decenter the hegemonic lens. By taking on the courtroom, classroom, or stage and offering counter-narratives, Othered voices and bodies command space for a different reality that demands to be heard and seen. In his advocacy for Othered voices, for the self-representation of minority groups, and for opportunities for different perspectives, Delgado writes:

Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation. Members of out-groups can use stories in two basic ways: first, as a means of psychic self-preservation and, second as a means of lessening their own subordination. (“Storytelling” 2436)
Survival and self-preservation happen when Othered groups tell their stories both to one another and to those in power. Having one’s story told is a way for Othered groups to be acknowledged, validated, and seen. If the majority culture has rendered you invisible, seeing oneself represented fully and truthfully is an important step in becoming visible. The stage is one such platform for these counter-narratives. Liberation and lessening of subordination result from challenging the groups in power. Stories are a way of creating other realities for those who have been looking in only one direction, and either intentionally or inadvertently have been seeing the world in a monochromatic palette. Stories that challenge the majoritarians make room for other shades and colors on the canvas.

Disidentification serves as a way for Othered groups to reclaim identity and to make room on that canvas. It consists of recognizing oneself when being named as Other and then claiming and resisting the limits of that classification. As theory and performance, it serves to address and challenge the boot of subordination. In his book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz shows how the reclaiming of identity can happen through performance. Muñoz defines disidentification as “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning;” it subverts the narrative (31). In recycling and repurposing the dominant narrative, disidentification creates a counter-narrative that challenges the prepackaged cultural identity of Other that is so easily digested by the power group and so often chokes those being represented. In seizing control of the narrative, a more palatable way of seeing is constructed that acknowledges the contrasting duality of how one has been seen and what one knows oneself to be. This “double consciousness” can result in a confluence that is a more fully realized way of being and being seen (Du Bois 8). Muñoz writes:

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded messages of cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the
code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a
disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant
culture. (31)

In acknowledging the encoded message as the *lingua franca* of the power group and the cultural capital
by which power groups and Othered groups are enculturated, disidentification takes the familiar as a
building block and then reconfigures it. Disidentification takes the raw materials of stereotypes and
pushes them into a new shape. Rather than looking at something in two dimensions, disidentification
reconstructs the two dimensions and adds a third, fourth, fifth dimension, etc. that resists the
flattening into only one layer. In the beginning of *INVASION!*, Abulkasem (as described by the two
Westernized actors) is like Valentino in *The Sheik*, all exotic machismo; “with heart so warm three
days at the breast of the coast, Never had his flag not waved in delight so long”—a reference to his
sexual prowess, a prurient delight to be giggled at and lusted after (Khemiri, *INVASION!* 8).

Khemiri says, *well yes Abulkasem can be sexual*: Yusef admiring a girl, “Hey check out that chica, Look!
She’s nice yo, she’s slim fit, she’s flo-jo, she’s crazy Abulkasem;” Uncle Abulkasem’s dance club
adventures; and Arvind’s would be machismo, but Abulkasem also has many other identities
(Khemiri, *INVASION!* 16). Abulkasem is not just a “bit of the other” but a lot of different others,
some of them not sexual at all31.

Khemiri employs disidentification by cracking open the code of enculturated Orientalism, and
by inflating and then destroying the histrionics of racist rhetoric. He scrambles and reconstructs,
thereby inviting the audience to question what is real. He gives voice to the positionality of
individuals that have been rendered Middle Eastern/Arab Other. In using traditional theatrical tools
(and then breaking them), he creates a space for counter-narratives and a way for the voices of

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31 bell hooks in Chapter Two of *Black looks: Race and representations* points to how those with power and privileged
status exotify and eroticize those in non-status groups.
individuals to be heard above the stereotypical racist screed. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler writes, “What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?” (219). Said points to the signposts of East and West and the labels of Middle Eastern and Arab that have been assigned as a way for the West to define itself and those that are not like the West. Middle Eastern Arab becomes the sign post that signals the exotic, dangerous Other. With disidentification, Muñoz creates a vocabulary for political resistance and activism. Theory and performance subvert the common narrative and create counter-stories that empower, call out the hierarchy of othering, and allow a psychic space for those Othered.

The performance of *INVASION!* shines a light on racist rhetoric through parody of the power group and by portrayal of the creativity, wit, fallibility and pathos of the Middle Eastern/Arab Other. This is a political act of resistance.

*Scrambling and Reconstructing Encoded Messages*

**Subverting Institutional Logic**

In a theatrical space and in storytelling there are rules; there is a logic undergirding how stories are told and prescribing how the audience and performers are to behave. Theatregoers have heard about a show in the news, or they are season subscribers, or they go with a friend who is somehow connected to the theatre. They arrive at the theatre, pick up or purchase their tickets, go through the doors, get handed a program, and take their seats. The lights go down on the audience, the lights go up on the actors, and the play begins. But this is not what happens in *INVASION!* As the student hooligans (actors) in the audience attack and overtake the stage and the narrative, the comfortable space between audience and actors is upended and erased. The stage has been transgressed as well as has the audience’s sensibility. This rule-breaking is discomforting. Delgado
writes that, “Stories attack and subvert the very ‘institutional logic’ of the system” (“Storytelling” 2429). From the very beginning of the play, Khemiri upsets and scrambles that institutional logic. Khemiri subverts expectations by the breaking of the fourth wall, the space between actors and audience. He disrupts the rules of who is to be watched and who is to do the watching. Audience and actors are in a space/world together. The public sphere is made manifest, and not merely with the spoken ideas that are presented.

Khemiri’s characters continue their direct address to the audience at various times throughout the play. This is not a play to be watched passively; the audience is asked to question both what they see on stage and in their world outside of it. Throughout the play, the talk show host asks, “Who is Abulkasem?” At another point, the Apple Picker looks directly at the audience and asks “Who is Abulkasem? You? Maybe you are” (Khemiri, INVASION/44). Khemiri places suspicion out into the audience. Is the person sitting next to us suspect? Or are we? He asks what can make a person marginal: a mustache, another language, a mole on a cheek? How do we racially profile and what makes one person more suspect than the next? He forces us to confront our own criteria and rationalizations for Othering. In a similar vein, Delgado writes:

[Stories] can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. They enrich imagination and teach that by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone. Counterstories can quicken and engage conscience. Their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways that more conventional discourse cannot. (“Storytelling” 2414-2415)

By shifting stories and narrators within the play, Khemiri creates possibilities for life other than our own preconceptions. He jolts audience members out of their seats. The audience is moved by laughter, squirming discomfort, and empathy—all of which cause them to invest in the play, its stories, and its characters. By telling these stories in a theatrical form, a “graphic quality” is produced
that engages the audience by embodying these stories with actors. The audience is hearing a counter-narrative generated by the sounds and bodies of Othered persons right there before them in the theatre.

Throughout the play, the audience is called to doubt what their eyes see, and ears hear. They are told that an actor has his eyes open when they can clearly see that his eyes are closed. They are told that the lights will go out slowly, when they actually abruptly go to black. They are told in the Apple Picker/Interpreter scene that the worker is a terrorist and yet they hear him singing ABBA lyrics in contradiction to the Interpreter’s falsities. Khemiri employs false narrators, or rather narrators with conflicting perspectives on events; in doing so he shows the audience the power of perspective. The speaker may be truthful or have an agenda. Arvind, a telemarketer, reenacts his meeting of Lara, the graduate student in a bar, to showcase the suave moves that he used to chat her up and to get her phone number. Then, Rashamon-like Khemiri has Lara describing her version of this meeting with Arvind as being an awkward encounter with a guy she says she blew off when he tried to pick her up. Which story is to be believed? At different times during the play, the audience hears that Abulkasem is a character in a 19th century play by Carl Love Almqquist, someone's uncle from Lebanon, a telemarketer, a female theatre director, an apple picker, and the world's most wanted terrorist. Which is true? Abulkasem becomes alternately a noun, a verb, and an adjective in the lexicon of a group of high school students. Khemiri scrambles expectations and changes the rules. The audience is challenged to not passively accept what they are seeing nor to willingly accept glib labels. The audience is asked to not just receive information but to examine it, to hold it up to the light.

32Rashamon is a 1950 Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa which tells a story from different and contradictory viewpoints.


**Positionality/Mutability**

All the roles in the play are performed by four actors. Actor “A” plays the Arabic, Farsi, and Hindi-speaking Apple Picker. Actor “A” also plays the slick talk show host, the gay Lebanese uncle, the clueless journalist who has returned to graduate school, and an actor in the first scene’s 19th century play. Actor “B” plays Arvind the lovelorn telemarketer, an expert on the talk show, and a Fanon-loving graduate student. 33 Actor “C” plays the second actor in the 19th century Almquist play *Senor Luna*, Lara the graduate student, one of the experts on the talk show, and the Interpreter. Actor “D” plays the youth Yousef, Alexandra, Eric, Expert 3, the anti-nuclear Lady at the graduate seminar, and Little Brother. In the Chicago production, I cast a South-Asian American actor as “A,” a multi-ethnic actor of color as “B,” a Lebanese American actor as “C,” and a multi-ethnic actor of color as “D. The play is structured such that actors play different ethnicities no matter what their own ethnicity. Thus, the audience experiences a “short-circuiting” of their expectations.

In our production, actors of color played the experts, representing the dominant group, which in this country is White. Actor “A” played someone who is heteronormative in the role of the talk show host but also played the gay uncle form Lebanon. Actor “C” played both an on-the-make high school student and a White, middle-aged anti-nuclear lady. Lines are blurred, expectations subverted. Identity and normativity are called into question. Through these tactics of performativity and disidentification, the dominant groups’ “ideological fixing” is disrupted. Muñoz writes that:

Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minorititarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of the

33 Franz Fanon was an intellectual and a psychiatrist whose work and life challenged colonialism and the subjugation of blacks. See his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Khemiri satirizes the Fanon-loving character as someone who touts the philosophy (by name-dropping Fanon at every opportunity) but does not recognize the extent of their own imbedded racism.
dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating [sic]call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. (97)

Disidentification performances demand the recognition that groups in power habitually withhold. In having this group of actors change gender, race, and sexual orientation, Khemiri queers the lens. He challenges the idea of the fixed binary way of seeing. He expands and enhances the possibilities beyond the hegemonic. Khemiri decenters and challenges the “code of the majority,” making room for other voices, experiences, and identities (Muñoz 31).

In the course of ten lines, Khemiri exposes how we label. He plays with a range of stereotypes. In the first scene Arvind imagines how other ethnicities, with more confidence than he has might, try to pick up Lara:

B/ARVIND. Look…look over there…

LARA. enters the stage.

[ . . . ]

B/ARVIND. Can’t you see her? Shit, she’s fine. (to the audience) She’s just come in from the street and she’s alone and…I don’t know…How can you describe someone like her? Maybe if you were black you would just slide right up and just…

D/BLACK. Yo baby yo baby yo baby YO! You must be tired cause you’ve been running around my brain all day.

B/ARVIND. And maybe if you were Mexican you’d just sneak up and whisper…

D/MEXICAN. I tink you are veeery pretty, I want you come home with me.

B/ARVIND. And maybe if you were white boy you’d chug twelve or fourteen beers and just…

D/WHITE BOY. (Unintelligible slurring). (Khemiri, INV/ASION! 17-18)

Actor D embodies all of these ethnic stereotypes. In doing so, Khemiri challenges what it is to perform ethnicity. Black and Mexican ethnicities are performed, but so too is Whiteness. In calling
out Whiteness, Khemiri clarifies that it too is an identity that is performed, and not the *de facto* Whiteness from which those of color are excluded.

Disidentification challenges the labels and boundaries imposed on Othered groups. In reclaiming and reshaping the appellations that are imposed on them by power groups, marginalized groups claim their own agency. “Abulkasem” becomes not a moniker for a dreaded terrorist but the macho name of a suave pick-up artist that Arvind claims upon meeting Lara. But for Lara, “Abulkasem” becomes not a line from a pick-up artist but a way for her to demonstrate her own power in her description of “Abulkasem,” which she uses as a stand in for Aewatif, the female director whose name she can’t remember momentarily. For the students who disrupt the beginning of the play, it is a way to challenge the Orientalism that they have been seeing on stage by claiming “Abulkasem” as their own word.

**Creating Counter-Narratives with Visual Storytelling**

In our Chicago production, I employed the idea of mutability as a key design concept. Silk Road Rising’s market department used a Rubik's Cube\(^\text{34}\) on the front of the program and promotional materials. Each square had portrayed different faces of “Abulkasem.” Abulkasem was a puzzle, not fixed, not two-dimensional. For our lobby, I suggested a display entitled, “This Is What an Arab/Middle Eastern American Looks Like.” The display utilized images of well-known public figures in politics, education, the media, art, and sports, thus revealing a diversity that is not often shown in typical monolithic descriptors of Middle Eastern/Arab-Americans. The graphic highlighted the contributions and positive images of Middle Eastern/Arab-Americans, and rendered them visible and remarkable, unlike Western society’s panorama of negative imaging.

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\(^{34}\) The 3-dimensional puzzle that has nine movable tiles on each of its six sides.
In working with Set Designer Dan Stratton, I talked with him about my interest in transformation. We wanted to depict Orientalized motifs and then reject them (as discussed in Chapter Two). We hung sari fabric, placed an “oriental” rug on the wall, and scattered damask pillows around. Ottomans and potted palms abounded. This Orientalist motif becomes transformed when the actors in the audience take the stage to rename and reclaim the space as their own and to remove the vestiges of Orientalism. In the rest of the play, the scenes move from high school, to bar, to television studio, and to a myriad of other locations. The characters of Middle Eastern/Arab descent do not live in a fantasy souk but in a contemporary world that reflects their day-to-day lives and their individualism. To serve the quick pace of the show and this morphing of locations, I wanted set pieces that could be transformed as the actors took on different roles. A table became a chair; a chair became an ottoman, just as mutable as the actors who changed roles, portraying different occupations, ethnicities, genders and, sexual orientations. For the set, Dan came up with four identical sculptural shapes. These pieces could be tilted, turned, and flipped to morph into a table at a bar, benches for experts to pontificate, a car going to pick up a relative from the airport who is visiting Chicago from Lebanon, and a large, friendly dog. They could become whatever we wanted, whatever we perceived or imagined, much like “Abulkasem.”

The ideas of “all is not what it seems” and things that are “half-seen” led to the creation of a screen at the back of the stage that the actors could cross behind but still remain partially visible. My intention was to reflect that, when it comes to ethnicity and race, the majoritarian culture only half-sees, or obscures, complex ideas about minoritarian groups. My goal was to evoke an image of a screen in a mosque, a synagogue, or a Catholic confessional - a visual that both obscured and revealed. This image reflects symbols of the three major religions that originated in the Middle East. Dan came up with a geometric pattern from an image that he found online of military tire tracks in
the sand. He created a grid-like pattern for the screen that lent metaphorical significance to the design, an imprint of the West upon the East.

In the last scene, the screen opens with a clang like the sound of a prison gate. Three actors bring a blindfolded and barefoot Little Brother on stage. I wanted to evoke Abu Ghraib images of Arab prisoners to reveal the ugliness of Othering and the violence that can occur in the dehumanizing of Other. Earlier the audience had heard the cant on the dangers of Abulkasem by the “experts” on the talk show, and now the audience sees this vulnerable figure on stage, blindfolded and at the mercy of others.

In his monologue, the audience grasps the impact of the brutality of Othering through the voice and body of the actor playing Little Brother. It is the act of simple storytelling, of words creating a picture, that becomes the final moments of the play. Delgado and Stefancic in Critical Race Theory head a section, “Opening a Window onto Ignored or Alternate Realities,” where they acknowledge the difficulty of “bridge[ing] the gap in thinking between persons of good will whose experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds are radically different” (CRT 2nd ed. 46). In this physical manifestation of the play, we bridged the gap by erasing the distance between the actor, “Other” and the audience. There is a visceral impact in Little Brother’s recounting of the Apple Picker burning off his fingerprints in a horrible act of self-abnegation. Little Brother not only sees someone erasing his identity, but also grasps the legacy of this act in the devaluing of people like him who are seen as Other. The Apple Picker is trying to make himself invisible, not identifiable. Little Brother, in witnessing this act of self-mutilation, understands in a new way the shame of being Other. This also has an impact on Peter; he too learns about Othering. He becomes aware of difference: Little Brother is part of a group that is not the same as Peter’s group. It is made manifest to Peter that there is something shameful in being Other.
Empathy, Comedy, Parody, and Rage

Muñoz writes that “Comedy does not exist independently of rage” (xi). Khemiri gives life to this rage in his work. He demands that the audience sees the ridiculousness of racism and racial profiling by parading all its bombastic pomposity in the form of the “experts.” This contrasts with the empathy Khemiri creates in how he portrays the warmth and fallibility of many of his characters, including the high school students, Arvind the telemarketer, Lara the grad student, the Apple Picker, the Lebanese uncle, and the young boy on vacation. He shows us their humanity in both their strength and vulnerability in the face of racism.

Shattering the signifiers of Oriental Other, Khemiri gives these figures dimension and humanity. The monolithic, monochromatic Other is fractured and becomes not a signifier of enemy but instead of individuals with families, individual students going to school, individuals going to work, individuals with feelings who have a sense of humor despite their pain. These stories are important for majority communities to witness and incredibly significant for the emotional processing of individuals within Othered groups. Delgado and Stefancic stress the power of these counter-narratives:

Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence or blame themselves for their predicament. Others pretend it didn’t happen or they “just let it roll off my back.” All three groups are more silent than they need to be. Stories give them a voice and reveal that other people have similar experiences” (CRT 3rd 50-51).

Khemiri’s audience laughs at the experts and in turn experiences shame and rage when the Lebanese uncle has “GO HOME” written on his forehead. The audience feels the pain and the horror when Little Brother sees the man in the woods burn off the skin on his fingers.

Delgado and Stefancic write, “Stories can name a type of discrimination (e.g., microaggressions, unconscious discrimination, or structural racism): once named, it can be
combated” (CRT 3rd ed. 51). Characters in the play encounter and combat racial profiling. The audience sees the unconscious and unwitting stereotyping of Lara by the graduate student seminar group, their presumption of Lara’s victimhood, and their assumption of their own cultural knowledge. But Lara defies this perception with her demeanor and her story of “Abulkasem,” a famous world-traveling female director.

**Deflating the “Experts”**

Delgado and Stefancic point out that “Critical writers use counterstories to challenge, displace, or mock . . . pernicious narratives and beliefs (CRT 3rd ed. 50). Khemiri does this with the bank of experts. Delgado contends that “[Counterstories] can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel” (“Storytelling” 2415). Khemiri’s audience sees the experts grow increasingly hyperbolic in each of their three scenes. As the rhetoric becomes more and more inflated in their third scene, the dialogue grows faster and louder. In the Chicago production of the experts’ last scene, I directed them to physically scramble over each other as they climb onto the furniture in a screed that blames Abulkasem for all imaginable ills: “Snow removal gets worse and worse”; “Record-low respect for our common traditions”; “Linguistic confusion” (Khemiri, INV ASION! 46). All are heaped at the feet of Abulkasem. The experts become ridiculous. When they study an image of a captured “Abulkasem” they are unable to pick out who he is amongst the other people in the photo.

EXPERT 1: Now let’s see . . . it’s a little hard to tell them apart, but . . . that’s Abulkasem . . . It must be . . . the fourth from the left, with the bandaged fingers and the monocle . . . The one wearing the feather boa . . . Yeah, that’s our man picked like an apple . . . Or maybe he . . . No, he probably is . . . the fourth from the left . . . Well . . . That’s it. (Khemiri, INV ASION! 47)
The audience through Khemiri’s parodying of the experts sees the fallibility in their naming of Abulkasem, and in the Western power structure’s naming of the Other.

**Embodying**

What theatre does in counter-storytelling is place audience and actors in the same room. The narratives are not abstract. The audience sees the “lived” experience directly in front of them. The audience is invited into the world of the characters and, as in Khemiri’s open letter to Beatrice Ask inviting her to step into his skin, we in the audience are invited to step into the skin of the various characters in the play. Whether members of the audience are in the majority power group, or part of the group that is Othered, they are given room and encouraged to empathetically encounter and engage. Delgado writes:

> Stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer together. They allow us to see how the world looks from behind someone else's spectacles. They challenge us to wipe off our own lenses and ask, "Could I have been overlooking something all along?" Telling stories invests text with feeling, gives voice to those who were taught to hide their emotions. Hearing stories invites hearers to participate, challenging their assumptions, jarring their complacency, lifting their spirits, lowering their defenses. ("Storytelling" 2440)

When we as members of the audience walk into the theatre, we usually anticipate a pleasant evening, something comfortable and reassuring. But Khemiri and *INVASION!* strive to get under our skin regardless of its color. This experience offers us as an audience an opportunity to confront the limits of our gaze and to encounter ourselves and the Other in a new way. The audience is asked not to merely digest images and stereotypes but to invest a bit more of themselves in their own humanity and that of others.
CHAPTER FOUR – Who Gets to Tell the Story?

Stories, parables and narratives are powerful means to destroying mindset - the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdom and shared understanding against a background of which legal and political discourse takes place.


The Critics’ Voice

The rehearsals for INVASION! were peppered with laughter and personal stories from the cast, myself, and the assistant director about our experiences of difference. Deann Baker, Silk Road Rising’s videographer, created a short promotional video with interviews from the cast and their experiences of always being asked where they were from and “what” they were—e.g. you don’t look white, you must be foreign (Silk Road Theatre “Teaser”). For me, it was a question of my last name and what nationality it represents, and the stigma and questions that follow my answer. As Lara says in the play, “When people talk origins they are like volcanoes, impossible to stop” (Khemiri, INVASION! 28). The cast, the producers, and I all felt a deep connection to the content of the play. It was an opportunity to share stories and to put on stage important ideas in a way that we hoped would be both entertaining and transformational.

The play opened to positive but mixed reviews—some critics loved it, some thought it was just OK. The Chicago Tribune recommended it, calling it “a clever sometimes wrenching kaleidoscopic journey through the looking glass of prejudice” (Reid Ethnic Assumptions). The Chicago Sun Times praised its “verbal pyrotechnics, deftly delineated characters, and sly humor…that feature sharply etched direction [and] a bristling good cast” and then gave it a “somewhat recommended” review (Weiss, unedited). However, the review in the Sun Times also created a controversy that became heated and extended beyond Chicago. Although Chicago Sun Times critic Hedy Weiss had liked the

35 Photographs from the production can be seen in Appendix A
actors and the direction, she questioned the content of the play, beginning her review with, “The global terror alerts dominating the news in recent days certainly do not help the arguments being made by Jonas Hassen Khemiri in his play.” She then went on to state, “…despite Khemiri’s passion, those still thinking of the horrific terrorist attacks at the Boston Marathon might well be tempted to ask; What practical alternative to profiling would you suggest?” Weiss ended with, “Polished to be sure. But I still don’t buy it.” The review became a flash point that underlined the ideas presented in the play and made it apparent that racism is culturally embedded.

There was an impassioned response to Weiss from the Artistic Director, Jamil Khoury, on his Silk Road Rising Facebook page and on the Silk Road Rising website in which he decried the review as racist. The Chicago Sun Times responded by striking the following sentences from the online review: “But despite Khemiri’s passion, those still thinking of the horrific terrorist attacks at the Boston Marathon might well be tempted to ask; What practical alternative to profiling would you suggest?” (Weiss). The Sun Times instead amended the last line of the review to read, “Polished to be sure. But I still don’t buy the play’s arguments” (Weiss, edited). The Sun Times also added an editor’s note at the end that read, “A previous version of the review contained language about racial profiling that may have been perceived as expressing a political opinion. This is an updated version of that review” (Weiss edited). There was a flurry of online and media responses to both the review and Khoury’s Facebook response. Those of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and other minority groups objected to the review as racist. Others in the press cited the First Amendment and Weiss’s right to her opinion, especially as a reviewer.

The Sun Times addendum did not serve to cool the fervor—it steered it to a First Amendment freedom of speech issue, rather than an examination of the rhetoric that Weiss was perpetuating. In her question, Weiss asked the play to solve the issue of racial profiling, in lieu of questioning why such racism is endemic, and instead of considering the impact on the individuals it marginalizes. It is
overly simplistic to call for a play to solve the problem of racism. The play illuminates what has been invisible to many. It serves to put a human face on those Othered and focuses on the propaganda and rhetoric of racism. What Ms. Weiss and the subsequent response in the Chicago Reader\textsuperscript{36} failed to acknowledge is the history and perpetuation of stereotyping. Racism is an abuse of power and politics to marginalize others.

Khoury subsequently wrote an Op-Ed in the Chicago Sun Times in which he stated, "Racial profiling operates on the presumed innocence of white people and the presumed guilt of people of color. It establishes tiers of citizenship…the ideology of racial profiling can exist only through the medium of racist speech" (Khoury, "Racial Profiling Presumes Guilt."). He continued, "The operative word in ‘free speech’ is ‘free’ but in America speech isn’t free. Speech is a commodity. Speech assumes money and resources and access" (Khoury, “Racial Profiling Presumes Guilt”). It is this access that Middle Eastern Americans are shut out of. Tehranian pointed out that one must either choose assimilation so as not to stick out, or be vilified and profiled, or be denied access by a system that is not interested in the stories of the non-normative (i.e. not White) within its courts, schools, media, and theatres (35-63). My perception of how Other is treated too often by those in power is with a “shut-up and behave” attitude when someone from a minority group (or women) voice a contradictory opinion, or any opinion at all.

INAVSION! gives a face and a voice to those who have been “Abulkasem-ized.” The play is an exploration of racist rhetoric and racism’s toll on individual lives. My goal was to further the conversation that the play begins. To that end, I advocated for post-show discussions after every performance. Now that the cat had been let out of the bag, it was time to undertake the hard work of

\textsuperscript{36} The Chicago Reader published a piece that examined the controversy around Mrs. Weiss’s review. It acknowledged the right of Ms. Weiss to express her opinion, political or otherwise – but did not fully address the prejudice experienced by Middle Eastern Americans (Miner).
confronting the ideas. INVASION! became an opportunity to investigate what racism does to the mind, heart, and body of individuals who are Othered. As part of Silk Road’s mission, post-show discussions originally had been scheduled for two of the four performances each week. But I advocated for having post-show discussions after every performance, so we could give all audiences the opportunity to discuss their responses to the material and to ask questions of the artistic staff and performers. It felt important to have the ideas of the play not end with the performance. We gave the diverse audiences the opportunity to express their thoughts, not only to the artists and staff, but also to each other. This seemed even more important after the controversial review. Both Khoury and executive Director Malik Gillani supported this endeavor.

Khoury’s Op-Ed and the discussions that followed on social media and in the press opened the door for further conversation. As Delgado and Stefancic point out, “[Bridging] the gap in thinking between persons of good will whose experience, perspectives and backgrounds are radically different is a great challenge” (CRT 2nd ed. 46). Weiss, the reviewer, has dedicated her life to reporting on the performing arts. It would be hoped that she goes to each show with the expectation that it will be good. Even though she did not “buy the argument” of anti-racial profiling, the play made its argument on stage and we, as artists, audience members, and activists, were then able to carry on that discussion off stage. Another review of the Chicago production questioned why the production had made changes to the script in order to set the play’s location in Chicago. The review seemed to question the idea of racism and profiling happening in our own Chicago backyard, ironic in the light of Weiss’s review. The question that Weiss asks is totally legitimate, “What other choice to profiling do we have?” The answer is this: to stop.

37 In her essay Dancing on the Hyphen, Lalia Farrah discusses the importance of the post-show discussion, something that she insists on as part of her work as an artist and activist.

38 Khemiri and the translator Wilson-Broyles gave permission for the Chicago production to make several location changes in the dialogue as I had requested to acknowledge prejudice in the United States and in Chicago. The New York production had located the play in a New York setting.
Creating a New Vocabulary: Pancaking Stereotypes

Stopping the perpetuation of stereotypes requires a new vocabulary. As Butler has pointed out, decentering the lens creates opportunities for Others to be heard (Precarious Life, 8). More stories are needed to challenge what is thought of as normative. If stories were not heard from a solely White Western point of view, then exoticizing and stereotyping would be minimized. Decentering the lens could prompt change. We can bomb or shoot someone who is seen as not human, as Butler discusses, but if we see them as human, like us, the violence becomes harder and the demonizing less easy (Precarious Life, 33). New “words” are added to our vocabulary all the time. Words, food, music and culture are often appropriated; for example, our American palate has changed with the addition of hummus and pita as common parts of our diet. This mashed chickpea dip and flat pocket bread originated in the Middle East but now it is ubiquitous in grocery stores and restaurants. We somehow have added and appropriated the food, if not the people. We have made room on our plate. If we can do this, we can also learn to decenter our perspective, enabling us to experience and connect with those seen as Other.

The Chicago production gave voice and provided access “beyond the stock tale” (Delgado “Voices” 109). Delgado writes:

‘voice’ scholarship…can sharpen our concern, enrich our experience and provide access to stories beyond the stock tale. Heeding new voices can stir our imagination and let us begin to see life through the eyes of the outsider. Not only can it broaden our point of view, bring to light the abuses of petty and major tyrannies that minority communities suffer [it] can enable us to see and correct systemic injustices that might otherwise remain invisible. (“Voices” 109)

If those we see as Others are given platforms, we in turn are given the opportunity to understand and connect beyond our own close-minded self-interest.
Making Room on the Playing Field

As Khoury pointed out in his Op-Ed, getting one’s voice heard can present a hurdle to a member of a minority. This becomes especially problematic for creative artists. If we look at which playwrights get produced, who is producing, and how that work is funded, we can see a pipeline that does not allow for much in the way of diversity.\(^39\) It must also be asked, why would an actor or writers of Middle Eastern ethnicity want to go into the arts if the stories that they are allowed to tell depict Middle Easterners as villains or terrorists? If there has not been a tradition of fully fleshed representation, the legitimacy of going into the arts becomes questionable. Economics can also be a barrier; many artists struggle financially. If you are already marginalized by your ethnicity or color, placing oneself in a field where there are limited opportunities for economic success also becomes untenable. Many theatres are funded by grants from foundations and large corporations, which, because of institutional racism and sexism, are still run by men and non-minority groups. Those who control the purse strings may not be interested in supporting stories of Other. Seeing a person that one has demonized being rendered human shakes up the status quo. If you are forced to confront someone else’s humanity at the expense of your own comfort, why bother to look? It is troubling. It is so much easier to invest one’s dollars in stories where the minority is vilified, and your own point of view is legitimized.

One Play Does Not Tell the Whole Story

Ayad Akhtar’s play *Disgraced* was the most produced play in 2015-2016 and one of the top ten plays produced in 2016-2017.\(^40\) It won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, yet many in Muslim

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39 See *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play* (Londen et al)
40 Ayad Akhtar’s *Disgraced* marks only the third time that a playwright of color has occupied the coveted No. 1 spot on *American Theatre*’s list since this counting began. Previously at the top were Lynn Nottage (*Intimate Apparel* in 2005–06) and Yasmina Reza (*Art* in 2000–01 and 2001–02) (Tran). [http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/09/16/the-top-10-most-produced-plays-of-the-2015-16-season](http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/09/16/the-top-10-most-produced-plays-of-the-2015-16-season)
communities were troubled by the content of the play.\footnote{See “On Ayad Akhtar's Disgraced” in the Spring 2016 edition of Arab Stages.} I refer to this play because, as discussed earlier, in many situations Muslim is equated with Middle Eastern. South Asian, Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim somehow, in the common zeitgeist, become all one thing. I question if Disgraced, although well-written and an important story, was embraced largely because it satisfied the rhetoric that already exists—that of the violent brown man. When Disgraced seems to be the primary story being told, instead of one of many being told, it raises the problem of representation. The characters in the play become a stand-in for all minority groups. More stories need to be produced about the experiences of Othered people, both positive and negative, complex, funny, and sad.

**What is the Responsibility in Telling a Story?**

Another of Akhtar’s plays was recently produced in Chicago by a theatre that is committed to diversity. The company hired a dialect coach for the play that was set in Pakistan. In the performance, several of the characters speak Punjabi and Urdu to each other, while the remainder of the play is in English. To a non-Punjabi- or Urdu-speaking audience, the “foreign language” seemed fine, but for anyone who spoke Punjabi or Urdu (like the friend that I saw the play with), it was a jarring experience. The theatre made a good effort in having someone outside the production help with pronunciations and one of the cast members was a Punjabi speaker, but it seemed as if the theatre made an assumption about who the actual audience would be. The theatre inadvertently made its non-Punjabi/Urdu speaking audience its priority and overlooked its Punjabi/Urdu speaking audience. Whiteness became the lens from which the production was created and for whom it was performed. Too often the gaze becomes that of White upon the Other. Whiteness and the English language become the default, inadvertent though it maybe. Giving full voice to diverse groups can require additional time, money, and research that can be challenging to small and large theatres alike.
Taking on the task of diversity has its hurdles, but they still must be faced and embraced to continue to move the story forward.

Akhtar’s work is getting produced, but what other work is out there? Said and other scholars have pointed out the constructed idea of the Middle East—the glomming together of diverse groups of people into one homogeneous identity. Tehranian has remarked upon the vast scope of languages, religions, and diversity of those grouped as Middle Eastern (66). In the United States, because of lack of representation, many from these diverse groups have come together to make themselves visible and to make known the diversity within this multifaceted group, as discussed in the following section.

Staging Difference

In his 1996 address to the Theatre Communications Group’s National Conference, which was titled, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” August Wilson called for the creation, support and work of the “unique and specific” voices of African-American theatre artists and for a recognition of the need for playwrights, theatres, and financial support (33). Wilson made an impassioned call, just as Delgado had done earlier in his 1990 article, “When Is A Story Just A Story: Does Voice Matter?” Delgado emphasized “an insistence on ‘naming our own reality’” (“Voices” 95). Having a voice in the construction and representation of one’s own identity is crucial, not only to shape a larger cultural discourse, but for marginalized individuals themselves to have stories that express a reality that is not always grasped by the majority.

Michael Malik’s book, *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present*, chronicles the history of the Middle Eastern Theatre as written and performed by actual Middle Easterners in the United States. In the last 20 years, there has been a small movement in this direction with the creation of theatres in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Minneapolis, and a

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42 It later became a book by the same title.
Middle Eastern Theatre Makers initiative with the Lark in New York. The work of these theatres is vital, but they cannot do the work alone. Stories by and about Middle Easterners should be on the stages of all theatres along with the work of more women and minority groups. If, as CRT states, racism is part of the everyday, it must be combated by making stories by and about Others part of the everyday. In this way, difference can be normalized. Not only is it important to tell the unique stories of the Middle Eastern experience, it is also important to have Middle Easterners not be the story. A Middle Eastern actor could be cast in Our Town, or Twelfth Night, or any play that reflects the face of the multicultural world that we live in, or at least strive for. In honoring the unique stories of those of Middle Eastern background and other underrepresented groups, humanity is explored and realized.

*An Open Letter and A Middle Eastern American Theatre Makers Bill of Rights*

To that end, Silk Road Rising's Chief Programming Officer and Mission Trustee, Jamil Khoury, and Golden Thread Productions Founding Artistic Director, Torange Yeghiazarian, created an Open Letter and Bill of Rights that were published in October of 2017 in *American Theatre Magazine*. These documents were created through The Lark Play Development Center’s Middle East America: A National New Plays Initiative in New York in May 2016 and in two subsequent meetings of the Middle Eastern and Muslim American Affinity Group (Washington, D.C. in June 2016 and Portland, Oregon in June 2017) as part of the Theatre Communications Group's annual conferences (Khoury and Yeghiazarian). “The Open Letter” acknowledged the challenges of making theatre but stressed the need for more stories by and about Middle Eastern Americans (Khoury and Yeghiazarian). It called for an awareness in casting by making an effort to use actors of Middle Eastern heritage, in “cultural competency” by bringing on board experts who have a detailed

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43 See - Roa Ali’s article “The Arab American Theatre: Still a Struggle for Visibility.”
44 See Appendix C for the Open Letter and Bill of Rights by Khoury and Yeghiazarian.
understanding of the people or subject from the culture being represented, and in “facilitated conversation” both in the rehearsal process and the production, but without feeling the need to “solve global conflicts or theological disputes” (Khoury and Yeghiazarian). This Open Letter offers a way for theatres to more fully embrace difference and offers some ideas for meeting this challenge.

Along with the “Open Letter,” Khoury and Yeghiazarian created a “Middle Eastern Theatre Artist Bill of Rights.” The Bill of Rights contends that Middle Eastern artists have the right to:

1. tell stories,
2. self-definition,
3. not conform to preconceived notions,
4. be complicated in interpretation,
5. not acquiesce to violent or hyper-sexualized representations,
6. explore all aspects of our communities,
7. the right to criticize policies,
8. tell all kinds of stories not just Middle Eastern ones,
9. the right to not be soul “expert” on a project. (Khoury and Yeghiazarian)45

This document provides a framework that gives Middle Eastern artists agency and requires theatres that may not be experts on diversity or the Middle Eastern American experience to use tools that create a more respectful, creative, and collaborative workplace and more nuanced, researched, and thoughtful work in the production. In naming the concerns and issues that confront Middle Eastern artists, the Open Letter and Bill of Rights developed by Khoury and Yeghiazarian provide a direction for making difference both visible and respected.

45 See Appendix C for full text.
Other Initiatives

Other approaches that have created more productions and more opportunities for artists of Middle Eastern background include one-person shows, commissioned plays, and opportunities for new actors to be understudies.

Solo Shows

An initiative that Silk Road Rising theatre in Chicago has created gives Asian, Middle Eastern and South Asians a platform to create and develop their own shows. This innovative program provides an opportunity for actors who have previously been cast in stereotypical roles to tell and create their own stories. It puts them center stage. As part of this initiative, I directed and helped create a production with Ronnie Malley, a Palestinian-American, in which he traced his story as a musician and his family background. He intertwined his own narrative with the story of Ziryab, a musician from 9th century Baghdad, and explored their common threads.

Commissions

The Lark, Golden Thread Productions, and Silk Road Rising also developed a Middle Easterner theatre maker’s initiative workshop that commissioned playwrights of Middle Eastern heritage to create new plays. I directed a workshop of the play, *We Talk, We Swim, We Go to War*, by Mona Mansour. Her play explored Middle Eastern American identity, ethnicity, nationality, and war in a series of discussions between an activist aunt and her soldier nephew.

Understudies

Another practice to which Silk Road Rising is committed is having understudies for every production. These are actors who step in if the performer originally cast in a role cannot perform. In most instances, the understudies are never called to perform; however, this practice serves an important function in giving less experienced actors the chance to watch and be part of a rehearsal process and production. Silk Road Rising takes an extra step by giving these actors an opportunity to
have a special performance of their own. The actors gain experience and the theatre forms a relationship with them. This investment in these actors creates a larger acting pool for future productions, which is incredibly important. More people who have lived experiences become part of the process.

*What Stories Can I Tell that Make Room for People who are Seen as Different?*

Andersonville—a Chicago neighborhood—is where many Swedes settled when arriving in the Chicago area starting in the 1850s. It is the home of the Swedish-American Museum, and until this past winter of 2017, the home of the beloved Swedish Bakery. The neighborhood also is home to the Middle Eastern Bakery & Grocery, Middle Eastern restaurants, and Svea, a Swedish restaurant that makes wonderful potato pancakes. I love this neighborhood where I can get both Swedish vort limpa (a traditional cardamom bread) and Middle Eastern spinach pies. It is a place where I can see both sides of my heritage side-by-side. I can thank the Swedish proprietors with “tack så mycket” and the Arabic grocer with “shukraan.”

This is the same neighborhood where, in 2012, I did the first public reading in Chicago of *INVASION!* The program was produced by the International Voices Project at the Swedish American Museum. Following the reading of the script and during the post-show discussion, a gentleman stood up and asked, “Why is this play Swedish?” I answered, “The playwright was Swedish and Jonas Hassen Khemiri was addressing issues that were happening in Sweden and that I also feel are happening in America.” My assumption was that the audience member had expected an entirely different kind of play. A Swede of color and a Sweden whose people are wrestling with racism

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46 The International Voices Project (IVP) is an organization dedicated to bringing plays from around the world to Chicago. In script-in-hand readings, actors and directors present plays in translation in an annual festival. Many of these plays first introduced to Chicago at IVP have gone on to full productions in the city. IVP website tagline reads “Tell the Story. Change the World.”
seemed as if they were entirely new concepts for him. Delgado and Stefancic write, “Powerful written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity” (CRT 3rd ed. 51). Khemiri’s play INVADION! presents a shared humanity and reminds the audience that we live in a shared and global community.

When is an Arab Not an Arab?

In December of 2017, I was thrilled to learn that a theatre in Chicago was going to produce Khemiri’s I Call My Brothers, a continuation of his work on racial profiling. They were looking for a director. In my interview for the position, one of the artistic directors explained that he had thought about directing it himself, but then he and the other artistic director decided instead to “interview directors of color.” I explained that I am not “of color,” although I am a first-generation Arab-American and a third-generation Swedish-American. I told him that when a terrorist act occurs, my response is to hope that the perpetrator is not someone of Arab descent, because I know this could provoke a backlash which might be directed towards members of my family. My father and uncles have been threatened, been told to go home, been called names, and been harassed at work because of their ethnicity. This is very much what I Call My Brothers is about—the real threats generated towards people of Arab descent, and the fear and paranoia that occurs because of those real threats. The company hired a director who is not Arab-American. In receiving this news, I flashed back to Tehranian’s book, Whitewashed, and his experience of being interviewed for a professorship at a law school (1-3). He had not been hired because he was not considered a minority, even though he was part of a group that has been consistently marginalized. He had a unique perspective that he could have brought to the position, especially with the erosion of rights and the threats to those seen as Middle Eastern having been on the rise ever since 9/11 (1-3).
Comprehending, truly grasping on an emotional level, the visceral and lived experience of a person from an Othered group is not an easy task. We tend to think that all discrimination is the same. It is not. Differentiated racism takes place in many ways. People who are racist, or who have implicit bias, may cross the street because they think that an African American might mug them, or police will pull over drivers who are Latinx because they suspect that they are undocumented. Police may shoot someone who is reaching for his wallet or is holding a cell phone, assuming they are holding a gun. However, when someone who appears to be of Middle Eastern descent is pulled off a plane or identified for special screening, it is because that they are presumed to be a potential terrorist\textsuperscript{47}. Someone with a turban may be discriminated against because they have the misfortune of being lumped together with the idea of Arab, as occurred in the horrible shooting at the Sikh temple in Wisconsin\textsuperscript{48}. The flashing red warning light in many people’s minds is that of Arab/Muslim and all the stereotypes that Western culture has generated, consumed, and perpetuated. Someone with a turban, someone speaking another language, someone with dark hair and an accent can be seen as someone with evil intent. Arab-Americans have not been represented in most media as anything but terrorists, as illustrated in current television shows, films, and video games. Middle Easterners are not shown as complex human beings. Often, they are played by non-Middle Easterners, written by non-Middle Easterners, and directed by non-Middle Easterners. These stories are then set loose into the world and perpetuate a fiction that fails to resemble the actual lives and experiences of real people. These images are digested and consumed, shutting out the very people that they purport to be

\textsuperscript{47} In May 2016, an olive-complexioned, curly haired man with an accent was pulled from a plane that was scheduled to fly from Philadelphia to Syracuse. His seatmate was concerned that he was intently focused on what she perceived to be some strange notations. She alerted the flight crew and the man was pulled from the plane. Guido Menzio was not the Arab terrorist his seatmate, the crew and authorities thought he could be. He is an award-winning math scholar and professor who was intently working on an equation. There is an expression “driving while black” that calls out the racial profiling that occurs for black drivers and the “crime” of driving while black. The phrase “flying while Arab” names the racial profiling that occurs to many who are Arab or who are seen as Arab by those who are in privileged positions of power – those who are seen as white (Rampell).

\textsuperscript{48} On August 5, 2012 a gunman opened fire in a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, killing seven.
depicting. It is important to create story making and storytelling with a diversity that reflects multicultural reality. Delgado and Stefancic write:

Literary and narrative theory holds that we each occupy a normative universe or “nomos” (or perhaps many of them), from which we are not easily dislodged. Talented storytellers nevertheless struggle to reach broad audiences with their messages. “Everyone loves a story.”

The hope is that well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown [and Othered] lives can help readers [or audiences] to bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others. Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others and invite the reader [audience] into a new and unfamiliar world. (CRT 3rd ed. 49)

By changing the story on stage, my hope is that we can change the story in people’s lives.

While I will not be the one who will be directing this additional Khemiri play, I am glad that Chicago will get to see I Call My Brother. Currently, I am in talks with the Swedish American Museum to create an exhibition that will draw upon my work from this thesis. I am hoping this presentation will be in conjunction with the production of I Call My Brother, which is scheduled to be produced in the winter of 2019. My proposed exhibit will be another way that I can continue to tell stories. I plan to do an additional reading of INVASION! at the Swedish Museum in conjunction with the exhibit.

*Does Storytelling Make A Difference?*

In this thesis I have analyzed the play INVASION! and shown how it alters the routinized story of those seen as Middle Eastern/Arab Other. Khemiri reveals the metaphorical man behind the curtain and the machinations and mechanisms of racist rhetoric which diminish the reality of complex lives. In portraying a diverse group of individuals whose very being challenges the idea of a monolithic Other, Khemiri opens a door to a more inclusive representation that extends beyond stereotypes.
But does this storytelling make a difference? In their 2017 article, “Entertainment – Education Effectively Reduces Prejudice,” Sohad Murrar and Markus Brauer reported on two of their experiments on attitude change (1-25). They tested whether exposure to Arab/Muslim characters in an entertaining sitcom and music video could reduce prejudice of White (non-Arab/non-Muslim) audiences toward Arabs/Muslims. The social scientists tested the subjects’ attitudes immediately after the exposure to the content and four weeks later. They used a control group that was exposed to another sitcom and video that did not contain Arab/Muslim characters. Their study concluded that entertainment-education content was “more effective than several established prejudice-reduction methods” (Murrar and Brauer 1). Murrar and Brauer define “entertainment-education” as the “use of television, radio, theatre and literature and other media to alter consumers’ attitudes and behaviors in desirable ways by embedding persuasive messages in the narrative” (1). I argue that persuasive narratives can be as simple as not portraying someone as a terrorist. But these narratives can go even further, revealing the many positive roles that minorities can and do play in society. My hope would be that numerous stories would continue to be developed that show underrepresented groups in all their complexity and nuance49. To truly honor diversity, storytellers must create and reflect the diversity that is the reality. If the majority sees itself reflected in storytelling only as hero and protagonist, and Other only as villain, the majority has no reference point for the other realities that exist in abundance. If the underrepresented see themselves depicted only as villain or not at all, it marginalizes them even further. Embedded racism and sexism is endemic in the stories that are perpetuated in the United States. Disrupting this flawed narrative is a vital part of creating change.

49 The film, Crazy Rich Asians, based on the book by Kevin Kwan is premiering in August 2018. Robert Ito in The New York Times article, “Crazy Rich Asians: Why Did It Take So Long to See a Cast Like This?” talks with the cast and examines why it has taken 25 years for an all Asian cast to be represented in a mainstream Hollywood film. Asian Americans are another underrepresented group in mainstream United States media.
Conclusion

By fracturing the dominant narrative of Other in his storytelling, Khemiri offers a cubist-like look at identity and language, acknowledging the multiplicity and mutability of both. As in a cubist painting, multiple perspectives are embraced. A figure may be seen from the front but may also be seen simultaneously from the side or from the back. The painting, as a whole, offers something far more complex than a two-dimensional image; a cubist painting has multiple perspectives of its subject visible at the same time. Through the repetition of words, the use of multiple languages, the creation of new words, and the embracing of both humor and pathos, Khemiri challenges the narrow confines of identity and language. Via his linguistic manipulations, lines become blurred and new possibilities emerge. In disrupting hegemonic means of signification, he disrupts the relations of power that produced those signifiers. In breaking down these signifiers, he creates opportunity for change. Khemiri’s work is a way of putting theory into practice and into the public sphere. Khemiri’s work acknowledges a multicultural Sweden and resists hegemonic Whiteness as Sweden’s only story.

It is through these new narratives that Khemiri has the power to shift perception, create empathy, and make personal and political difference. The effectiveness of his approach is evidenced by research that validates the power of entertainment-education to change minds. Khemiri continues to address difference in his work as a playwright and novelist in his latest play, *Almost Equal*, and novel, *Everything I Don’t Remember*. Economics and class as well as ethnicity are foregrounded in these works. His newest novel comes out in August 2018.

My mission as an artist and activist is to expand storytelling by promoting inclusive and nuanced depictions of those in Othered groups and by exposing and disrupting stories about race, ethnicity, and identity that perpetuate stereotypes. In this thesis I have shown how Khemiri’s play *INVASION!* brings to life the insights of CRT and other theorists. Through the detailed analysis of *INVASION!* and the Chicago production that I directed, I shed light on how Khemiri goes about
tackling the elements of story and in doing so challenges ideas and perceptions through the use of words, sentences, characters, and narrative. In exploring the context from which Khemiri’s work was written and in analyzing the text, I have demonstrated how Khemiri’s work is also applicable to an American audience. In discussing how the play was received, I show that there is a pressing need to challenge the perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes within Chicago, but also within the United States as a whole. I have explored how counter-narratives are being generated in the work of Silk Road Rising and other minority theatres, and how Jamil Khoury and Torange Yeghiazarian’s Bill of Rights forges a path forward. I have concluded with my own work and the next steps in my story to bring diversity and inclusion into the public sphere. I will continue to expand the conversation about how stories of race, ethnicity, and identity are both constructed and experienced.

Storytelling is how we understand the world. Racist stories and stereotyping influence politics and policy, resulting in discrimination that limits access to housing and jobs, the triggering of hate crimes, and increased mental distress. These stories and stereotypes spur policies that exclude refugees, separate parents from children, and lead governments into wars. Counter-narratives can change the story by exposing embedded racism and by engendering greater understanding and empathy. By fracturing existing narratives and by offering a more inclusive reality with counter-narratives, storytellers and their audiences create an effective way to keep moving the story forward toward a deeper and more encompassing appreciation of our common humanity.
APPENDIX

Appendix A – Photographs from the Chicago Production of INVASION!

Photos Printed with the permission of Silk Road Rising August 22, 2018
Photos credit Michael Brosilow

Figure 1. Open Scene: Senor Luna - about to be disrupted as two students rush the stage. (Actors – on stage Kamal Hans and Amira Sabbagh)

Figure 2. Students take over the stage. (Actors- Dan Johnson and Glenn Stanton)
Figure 3. Yusef and Uncle Abulkasem. (Actors: Dan Johnson and Kamal Hans)

Figure 4. Yusef, Uncle Abulkasem (back) and parents (front)

Figure 5. Arvind sees Lara in the bar. (Amira Sabbagh foreground)
Figure 6. Scene 2, The talk show host introduces the panel. (Actor Kamal Hans with company)

Figure 7. The talk show panel (Scenes 2, 4, 6) ”The Experts.” (Actors: Glenn Stanton, Amira Sabbagh and Dan Johnson)
Figure 8. Scene 3, Lara and her seminar group. (Actor Amira Sabbagh and company)

Figure 9. Scene 3, Lara and her seminar group. (Actor Amira Sabbagh and company)

Figure 10. Scene 5, The Apple Picker and Interpreter. Actors- Kamal Hans and Amira Sabbagh

Figure 11. Scene 5, The Interpreter leaves the stage. Actors- Kamal Hans and Amira Sabbagh
Figure 12. Scene 7, The actor playing Little Brother enters the stage.
(Actors - Dan Johnson and Glenn Stanton)

Figure 13. Scene 7, Little Brother tells his story.
(Actors - Glenn Stanton and Dan Johnson)

Figure 14. Scene 7, Little Brother tells his story.
(Actor Dan Johnson)
Appendix B – Jamal Khoury Chicago Sun Times Op-Ed

Permission by the Author granted August 22, 2018
The Op-Ed appeared in the Chicago Sun – Times on August 21, 2013

Viewpoint
Racial profiling presumes guilt

In the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s slaying and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, Americans are yet again face-to-face with our nation’s ugly legacy of racial profiling. At Chicago’s Silk Road Rising, that legacy plays out on stage in our Midwest premiere production of Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s INVASION! An 80-minute full-frontal assault on the racial profiling of Muslim and Arab men, INVASION! is a torrent of humor, irony, and self-reflection. And it has certainly sparked controversy.

Theater is, ideally, an arena for inciting discourse and dialogue about the urgent matters of our day. As someone who “immigrated” to theater as an activist, I have trouble understanding those in this sector who separate art from public policy and social change. For Silk Road Rising, the politics are the point. It’s about creating art that compels us to ponder, question, debate and act. We believe INVASION! does just this for the problem of racial profiling.

Racial profiling operates under the presumed innocence of white people and the presumed guilt of people of color. It establishes tiers of citizenship based solely on appearance. It violates the Constitution’s 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal protection under the law. And in addition to being morally and ethically wrong, racial profiling doesn’t work. By shifting suspicion from behavior to race, racial profiling syphons limited resources and distracts law enforcement from doing its job. What does work is good old-fashioned police work — tracking suspicious behavior, gathering evidence, collecting testimonies and building partnerships with communities.

Nevertheless, this dangerous and long-discredited practice sure has its proponents, particularly when targeting Muslims, African Americans and immigrants. I believe those proponents are speaking from a place of racial and religious animus, not pragmatic problem-solving (lest we forget the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War). As artistic leader of a playwright-centric theater, I like to think I know something about language and speech. This may explain my resistance to those who couch this conversation within one about “free speech.” It’s not about the injury and harm caused by racial profiling, it’s about the right to be racist. And we use the presumed “sanctity” of “free speech” to defend our right to be racist. The victims of speech matter infinitely less than the “protection” of speech.

The ideology of racial profiling can exist only through the medium of racist speech. Racism is invented by language. American discourse on free speech is notorious for disentangling the so-called exercise of speech from the responsibilities of speech. Our statements have consequences. Islamophobic and anti-Arab speech (in service of racial profiling or otherwise) causes real harm to real people. We all love the adage about fighting bad speech with more speech, but what if no one can hear you? What if fear prevents you from speaking at all? I love the First Amendment, but even the First Amendment does not promise me speech. It protects me from government prosecution after I have spoken. And it was written solely to protect property-owning white males. Period. It’s ethical interpretation depends entirely on us.

The operative word in “free speech” is “free.” But in America, speech isn’t free. Speech is a commodity. The economics of survival are what determine speech. Speech assumes money and resources and access. We sell, barter, auction, and purchase speech in this country. We then translate that speech into perception and reality. The powerful, high visibility, public proponents of racial profiling know all too well the impact of their speech; as a small theater company with meager resources, we know all too well the limits on our speech. The playing field is nowhere close to level, but we’ll grab ourselves some speech whenever and wherever we can. The memory of Trayvon Martin demands it.

Jamil Khoury is artistic director of the theater company Silk Road Rising.
Appendix C - Middle Eastern American Theatre, on Our Terms

Permission Granted to reprint by the author Jamil Khoury, Torange Yeghiazarian and American Theatre Magazine on August 25, 2018
The document was printed online in American Theatre Magazine in September of 2017

Middle Eastern American Theatre, on Our Terms

An open letter and a bill of rights, in the interest of more stage works representing the full diversity and humanity of Middle Eastern Americans.

BY JAMIL KHOURY, TORANGE YEGHIAZARIAN

Over the past two years, two seminal documents have been developed as a result of three convenings of Middle Eastern American theatre artists. The first document is an open letter, "Dear Producers and Artistic Directors of the American Theatre," and the second is titled "A Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights." Given the many artists, activists, and scholars involved in these historic gatherings, our hope is that these two documents will be engaged and discussed within theatre communities across the U.S. and beyond.

The initial convening occurred in May 2016 in New York City, hosted by The Lark Play Development Center under the aegis of "Middle East America: A National New Plays Initiative." The second and third convenings, each organized as Middle Eastern and Muslim American Affinity Group sessions, took place in Washington, D.C. (June 2016) and Portland, Oregon (June 2017) as part of Theatre Communications Group's annual conferences.

Bolstered by the tremendous input and guidance of attendees at each of the three gatherings, these documents were created and compiled by Torange Yeghiazarian, founding artistic director of Golden Thread Productions, and Jamil Khoury, chief programming officer & mission trustee of Silk Road Rising.
Dear Producers and Artistic Directors of the American Theatre:

We know how difficult it is to produce a play in this day and age. Between the budget, the timeline, fundraising, and your artistic priorities, the last thing you need is to find yourself caught in an unwitting debate about representation. We feel your apprehension. After all, you cannot be expected to singlehandedly correct centuries of racism and misogyny.

Our priority is for more plays written by Middle Eastern American playwrights to be produced across the U.S. We want this not only because it’s good for us as a nation to hear from the people who’ve been vilified for decades, but because these are American plays, representing the perspectives and experiences of vastly diverse communities. We want you to enjoy even more success as producers and artistic directors by choosing timely and potent plays that will excite your audiences. We’re here to help you!

Play selection: There are many Middle Eastern and Muslim American playwrights on the New Play Exchange. Many excellent plays are listed there in a range of styles and cast size. Plays with humor, warmth, and three-dimensional characters that reflect your audience’s lives more than you may imagine. You like comedies? We have them. You like heartwarming family dramas? We have them. You like sharp political commentaries? We have them. You need a two-hander due to budget constraints? We have them. You need an epic adventure with a big cast for your students? We have them. You need an experimental play? We have them. You need a historical play? We have them.

Casting: Some of you are lucky enough to live in a city populated with Middle Eastern American theatre talent: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Minneapolis. That said, there are Middle Eastern American theatre artists working in communities throughout the U.S. Look for them, including reaching out to performers who create outside our established theatre systems. They’ve probably already reached out to you. Bottom line: You all should be working with more Middle Eastern American actors, directors, dramaturgs, and designers. If you have a budget to hire out-of-town actors, we are more than happy to offer referrals. If you do not have the budget to hire out-of-town actors, and after a rigorous search still haven’t found any Middle Eastern American actors in your local community, then it’s okay to cast more widely in the interest of telling the story. Keep in mind that peoples of the Middle East are quite diverse and have deep historical and cultural ties to peoples of South Asia, Africa, Mediterranean...
Europe, and Latin America. Reach out to actors in those communities next. We share many experiences, values, and cultural practices. Basically, don’t let casting challenges deter you from producing Middle Eastern American plays altogether. Telling more Middle Eastern American stories has to be first priority. Discuss your casting options with the playwright and together arrive at decisions that honor his or her intentions. Additionally, make sure you have one or more individuals on your production team that can provide cultural competency. Which leads us to...

**Cultural competency:** Cultural competency is the ability to fully dive into the cultural context of a particular story. In the case of Germany and Russia, most American producers feel familiar enough with the history and culture that gave birth to Chekhov and Brecht. This is more difficult when producing a play dealing with Afghanistan, Syria, or Egypt. In these cases, we recommend you work with a cultural consultant—someone who has embodied knowledge of and lived experience with the community in which your play lives, and more importantly, someone who is also familiar with the creative process. The job of the cultural consultant is not to police the creative process or product. The job of the cultural consultant is to provide creative options plucked from within the actual cultural practices, history, aesthetics, and sensibilities of the community in which the play is set. We are happy to serve as or recommend culturally competent dramaturgs and artistic consultants.

Agency is both important and necessary. Cultural competency without agency, the power to impact decision-making, is meaningless. On the one hand, artists from marginalized communities should not be put in a position to constantly represent their community’s experience or validate its representation. On the other hand, you must ensure the artistic and creative agency of the members of the marginalized community involved in your project. It is easiest when you are able to include lead artists (director, designer, dramaturg) from the community in your creative team. When this is not possible, the playwright and cultural consultant must feel fully empowered and supported to impact decision-making.

**Facilitating the conversation:** Plays dealing with Islam or the Middle East are often perceived as politically charged. Bringing together people of different backgrounds and facilitating a respectful, honest, and meaningful conversation is not easy. Stay focused on the play! Your job is not to solve global conflicts or theological disputes. Your job is to tell a good story to the best of your ability. Keep the conversation focused on the play you are producing and the story you are trying to tell. The conversations will often begin from our differences but invariably end with our commonalities.
It’s hard enough to produce a play in today’s political climate. The last thing anyone needs is controversy overshadowing the work and the process, not to mention the fundamental motives or abilities of the producers.

We’re here for you. We’ve been doing this for a long time. Use us as a resource. Use us as community builders. We are happy to share best practices. We are happy to recommend plays and artists that suit your season needs.

Sincerely Yours,

Torange Yeghiazarian, founding artistic director, Golden Thread Productions

Jamil Khoury, chief programming officer & mission trustee, Silk Road Rising

**Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights**

We the artists of Middle Eastern American heritage and culture, in order to form a more just and inclusive American theatre, adopt the following as self-evident truths:

1. We have the right to tell our own stories in our own words without bearing the burden of representing an entire community’s experiences.
2. We have the right to define our own cultural identities, free of coercion, policing, and stereotypes, and to embrace our myriad identities simultaneously.
3. We have the right not to conform to preconceived notions of our cultural identity and to resist political and social judgments in favor of stories that reflect our own truths and understandings.
4. We have the right to bring complicated, nuanced, and layered interpretations to the characters we play.
5. We should not be expected to perform preconceived notions of our identities, nor acquiesce to hypersexualized or systemically violent representations of our bodies.
6. We have the right to examine “negative” and/or “silly” aspects of our communities, religious traditions, and identity politics without being censured or held up as a model.
7. We have the right to tell stories that criticize certain policies of the U.S. government or specific Middle Eastern governments without being accused of being anti-American, racist, or self-loathing.
8. We have the right to tell all stories, including those that are not necessarily about Middle Eastern identity.

9. We have the right to remind artistic decision makers of the following:
   a. Do not single us out to validate or authenticate all content as it relates to our cultural heritage.
   b. Hear our concerns as they relate to our identities with the understanding that we are all here to serve the play.
   c. Do not assume that one Middle Eastern artist’s participation in a project automatically lends approval to all culturally-specific choices that are made.

P.S. We recognize and acknowledge the colonial history of the terms “Middle East” and “Middle Eastern.” We adopt the terms because they are widely understood, and because more geographically specific terms such as “West Asia” and “North Africa” are inadequate and tend to elicit confusion. While we regret having to use terms that place England at the center of the world, we draw strength from defining “Middle Eastern” broadly and inclusively in order to embrace the multiplicity of ethnic and religious identities that span Southwest Asia, North Africa, Central Asia, the Caucasus, parts of Mediterranean Europe, and our Diaspora communities. We understand our respective backgrounds in terms of rich pluralism and interconnectedness. We also define “America” and “American” in the broadest possible ways to include the continents of North and South America.

Furthermore, at this time in history, it’s important that we include American Muslims of all cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, as members of our Middle Eastern American communities.

P.S.S. This writing owes much to the humor and intelligence of Justin Simien’s “Dear White People” and Ralph B. Peña’s “Diversity for Dummies,” published on Howlround.com.
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Anna Christina Bahow