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Modern Family: Circuits of Transmission between Arabs and Blacks

WITHIN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE RELATIONS in America, the trend seems to be to move beyond a Black/white binary in order to redirect conversations to comparative race studies or to include other groups not represented by that binary. However, this “banal pairing,” as Sharon Holland cheekily notes in *The Erotic Life of Racism*, forces scholars to acknowledge the “psychic [and erotic] life of racism” without overlooking its place at the crux of American race relations (7). It is therefore imperative to forego the inclination to move beyond the Black/white binary, especially in the United States, since it provides the space to reckon with racism’s traumatic and enduring histories and structural inequalities. For Holland, the result is an inquiry that reconceptualizes the quotidian nature of racism in erotic praxis and articulations of desire. Yet, in practice, scholarship often neglects one half of the Black/white binary. The result is a set of inquiries, even in comparative race studies, that continue to use whiteness as a standard for citizenship, beauty, and cultural production—even as scholars decry the racism inherent in that ideology. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, what (and where and when) is “the Black” of the Black/white binary?

To be clear, I do not intend willfully to ignore the way that whiteness has functioned as a yardstick, nor do I wish to elide the way that its privilege functions. Instead, I seek to call attention to our scholarly practices when discussing race in cross-cultural interaction. Whiteness operates as a ghostly presence that frames how communities of color interact with each other. Certainly, this framework reckons with the realities of colonialism and racist history to explain necessary conclusions. It forms the “tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 5). This specter lingers in the underlying premise that communities of color strive for assimilation as their main goal or understand their social positioning in the United States solely in relation to whiteness. No less insidious is the way whiteness haunts citational praxis in that our primary theoretical paradigms are created in the crucible of continental European philosophy and perpetuated as singular, or based uncritically on canonical white texts. White-

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ness then remains a central constitutive underpinning of scholarly (ac)claim, even within ethnic studies. What else is possible in a geographical space where the foundational racial split is along the fault lines of Blackness *and* whiteness? What other critical relationships are possible among communities of color in this geopolitical, socio-cultural space?

Consider Blackness. Not as a new standard or as a shibboleth designed merely to replace whiteness. Instead, I draw upon it as another axis of difference, not as a plumb line but as an open space. That is, a turn to Blackness exposes the fissures of the Black/white binary and marks Blackness not as the antithesis of whiteness, but rather as a set of traditions, reading practices, and valuation systems operating alongside, intertwined with, but also independent from those of whiteness. In keeping with this forum's emphasis on "relationality," a turn to Blackness troubles the emphasis on Eurocentric ways of thinking and disrupts the linear progressive narrative with which we are all acquainted. To relate to Blackness as a deliberate choice authorizes a reconceptualization of history, culture, and politics (including and perhaps most especially the democratic experiment of the United States). This turn is of course not new. Historically, Black studies scholars have insisted on such a rhetorical and theoretical move as a way to privilege the experiences of Blackness and attend to racism's deleterious effects. In other fields, Black studies becomes the locus for situating one's ideas within or clarifying their relationship to race relations, imperialism, or post-coloniality. In what follows, I unpack what a turn to Blackness offers scholars who do comparative work on race. That is, I ask how might we relate to Blackness without evacuating it of its materiality or parasitically using it as a gesture toward a radical politics.

Neither Universal nor Exceptional: Theorizing and Tweeting Blackness

Some turns to Blackness result in a series of critical misfires that participate in a set of interpretive work-arounds designed to bypass the intersection of theory and praxis that undergirds concepts emanating from Black studies. They disengage from the historical and material realities of Blackness in order to universalize or sequester, failing to do justice to either the possibilities of theories about Blackness or the material realities of Black people. To wit, this is what Blackness looks like in scholarship when it is considered a problem. The solution: Blackness must reside somewhere between being the eruption of history or its excretion. The impulse to universalize Blackness ignores the material conditions out of which it comes and dismisses the complexities of structural disenfranchisement. For instance, language describing the "new" civil rights eclipses Black freedom struggles, usually in favor of LGBTQIA (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex Asexual) struggles, positioning the former as not only old but already achieved and the latter as distinct (read: there are no LGBTQIA Black people). In 2014, activists fought over the language for this supposedly new movement, sparked by the deaths of Black men, women, and trans* people at the hands of vigilantes and militarized police. The movement garnered attention and created a groundswell using the language and the Twitter hashtag "Black Lives Matter" (#BlackLivesMatter). In an effort to universalize the movement, some attempted to change the hashtag and slogan to "All Lives Matter." The reasons for the change

were varied and multiple, but they all had one common effect: the “erasure of the differing disparities each group faces” (Craven). The same conversations played out exhaustingly on Twitter, where activists explained repeatedly that the difference between the two slogans involved respect for the material conditions of Black people, namely the threat of extrajudicial violence.¹ Moreover, the original phrase “Black Lives Matter” signaled the intersectionality of Black and trans*, Black and female, Black and gay, Black and disabled, and Black and male (among other) lives. Intoning specifically that *Black* lives matter reminded the public that the Black/white binary was foundational to American life and chided anyone who believed in the myth of post-raciality. When the Twitter hashtag and clarion cry changes from “Black Lives Matter” to “All Lives Matter,” historical and material realities get left behind in the effort to garner (white) support for a movement.

The desire to replace “Black Lives Matter” with “All Lives Matter” participates in an erasure of material conditions (of all genders, sexualities, class positions, geographies, and abilities) and attempts to redirect attention elsewhere. The question remains: how does one acknowledge and support a particular struggle without attempting to dismantle or ignore its specificity? To my mind, herein lies the critical and political capacity of relationality and a turn to Blackness. The desire is not to replace one specifically Black struggle with a supposedly larger issue, but rather to draw connections between concerns, since the liberation of one group is bound up in that of another.² For instance, the hashtag “Palestine to Ferguson” (#Palestine2Ferguson) connected the two communities based on their shared interest in navigating militarized states. On Twitter, the groups exchanged notes of support and concern. In addition, Palestinians provided information about how to deal successfully with the effects of tear gas. Though the “to” suggests that the exchange had one vector, it included a set of tweets that clarified why the two communities shared similar concerns. To be fair, the tweets were small in number, but I emphasize them as a way to think about how to make connections in as confined a space as Twitter. Without ignoring the limitations of social media as a genre to distill or even adequately account for the struggles for Black and Palestinian liberation, this Twitter exchange provided an inroad to crafting a solidarity that is neither dismissive nor vampiric. For people who were not aware, it explicitly linked the two militarized countries in an analogy in which the United States is to Israel as Black people are to Palestinians.

Without over-reading the importance of this specific exchange (see Shih 140–64), I wish to point out how it functions as a present instantiation of African American and Arab, specifically Palestinian, political interaction. These exchanges have a long and complex history, evincing a set of shared concerns best understood within a “relational analytic” that attends to the affective weight of the “imperfectly realized analogy” between the two groups’ experiences with state violence (see Feldman). In this example, the analogy foregrounds what may be an ongoing

¹ One of the wonderful aspects of Twitter’s social media platform is that there were multiple people engaged in this conversation. It would be impossible to name all those who participated. On my specific timeline, I watched several people explain these ideas to a large public. Their Twitter handles are @Blackgirlinmain, @Karnythia, @TakiyahNAmin, @ProfessorCrunk, @bethelshaam, and @jJesseWilliams.

² Here I signify on the words of Lilla Watson, Aboriginal elder from Australia, whose sentiment dovetails with the work and poetry of June Jordan and Audre Lorde.

structure of feeling (in Raymond Williams's terms) that describes what Alex Lubin identifies as an Afro-Arab imaginary emerging in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Certainly, we have to wait to describe our current moment. Nonetheless, the tweets signal that the two groups draw connections between their relationships to heavily militarized states. Of course, Malcolm X also made these connections when he linked the struggle of Black people in the United States with African and Asian struggles worldwide, and, to my mind, what Sohail Daulatzai terms the "Muslim International" participates in this longer history by explicitly yoking the interests of Blacks in America to those of oppressed peoples in the so-called Third World. In other words, the Twitter exchange continues to honor differences in material conditions, while highlighting the way one group's oppression and therefore liberation resonates with another's. These conversations, the import of which have yet to be fully realized or understood, reveal "the ways in which these activists and artists have envisioned themselves not as national minorities but as global majorities as they have poetically linked themselves with larger communities of resistance that transcend the limiting structures of the modern nation-state" (Daulatzai xvi).

Yet the impulse to universalize is not the only critical misstep: there is also the desire to sequester and ghettoize Blackness, to render it exceptional. On the one hand, this exceptionalism makes it impossible to create connections between struggles. On the other, it effaces the multiplicity inherent in Blackness itself. Practically, this impulse manifests in the curriculum, when Black studies has a limited place within the academic enterprise; in personnel processes, when "diversity" functions as coded language that does not affect departments or programs other than ethnic studies; and in administration, when representation of Black bodies becomes the substitution for substantive work on issues of access and inclusion. Moreover, these examples describe what happens within the academy only. They say nothing of other professional and social spaces. I want to address this critical misfire by attending to the piffle that the presence of Blackness functions as a proxy for radical political enterprise, and, by extension, that conservative Black people do not register as authentically Black (see Bracey and Wright-Rigeur). Not only does this provide a limited framework for addressing avowed Black conservatives (Condoleezza Rice, Ben Carson, or Herman Cain), but it also does not allow for a way to interpret the political maneuvers and narratives proffered by the putatively liberal Black faces of state power (Ralph Bunche or President Barack Obama).

To assume that a Black person as the representative of state power automatically results in an overhaul of systemic injustice mistakenly synonymizes Blackness and radical politics (broadly defined). This train of thought travels down a well-worn path from Frederick Douglass to W.E.B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King, Jr. These all-male stops endorse Black masculine leadership as the principal determinant of the status of Black people. According to Erica Edwards, this endorsement of charismatic male leadership reduces "a heterogenous Black freedom struggle to a top-down narrative of Great Man leadership" while performing a historiographical, social, and epistemological violence that is fundamentally anti-democratic and structures "knowledge of Black political subjectivity and movement within a gendered hierarchy of political value" (xv). Moreover, this limited narrative not only erases the compromises Black leaders made that disenfranchised other Blacks. It also disappears the multiple forms Blackness can and has taken over time, as well

as how those forms are shaped by gender, region, ability, sexuality, and class. In keeping with Michelle Wright's premise that "the need for definitions of Blackness that do not exclude, isolate or stigmatize is all the more pressing," critics must account for the way that a Black body as the agent of state power assumes the force, power, and aims of the state itself. In other words, Blackness is not exceptional in the sense that it is inherently radical. To be clear, it is not inherently radical since anti-Black Black visibility is lucrative and politically expedient.³ To treat it as exceptional in this regard recapitulates the idea that the "Black body is the quintessential sign for subjection, for a particular experience that it must inhabit and own *all by itself*" (Holland 4). Instead, radicality is only one of the instantiations Blackness takes on, simply part of a constellation of possibilities for Blackness itself.⁴

**Friends Don't Let Friends Misuse Blackness:
A Look at Blackness in Alia Yunis's *The Night Counter***

Circuits of transmission between Black and Arab communities bring these critical issues into sharp relief. Drawing upon Blackness requires a critical vocabulary that white supremacy forecloses. As noted above, exceptionalism and universalism become twin enterprises that undermine connections between marginalized groups, the material conditions of Black people, and the complexity of Black politics. Within Arab American studies, the turn to whiteness has been a useful space to consider Arab Americans' status as legally white but socially other (see Samhan). In a historical sense, whiteness is the most appropriate touchstone for Arab American experiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, since a critical whiteness framework clarifies Arab American engagement with racial formation and questions the utility of a white center given Black presence (see Abdulrahim). Of late, Arab American cultural producers and scholars have turned to Blackness as a useful analog because it not only performs a function similar to critical whiteness studies but also allows for the forging of relationships between Blacks and Arab Americans. When Michelle Hartman asks "how do three literary texts by Arab Americans engage with 'Blackness?'" her question reverberates beyond those specific texts to craft a paradigm in which Arab Americans' explorations of race "reformulate the positioning of Arab Americans within U.S. racial hierarchies, [and contribute] to rethinking these hierarchies and the privileges and inequalities linked to them" (145). In other words, the turn to Blackness allows for Arab Americans and Black Americans to reckon with their varied relationships to each other. This stance problematizes both the impulse to universalism—it relies on the material conditions of both groups for its analysis—and the impulse to exceptionalism—it must reckon with figures like Ralph Bunche (whose Nobel

³ Jared Sexton discusses this concept with regard to the visual economy of Black police officers in film. More generally, his article examines the way Black agents of state power function as agents of the state first, where their Blackness often abets state violence with a fiction of racial inclusion.

⁴ Michelle Wright underscores this point by thinking through the limitations of the linear progressive narrative (upon which the charismatic male leadership narrative rests). She concludes that Blackness must be accounted for through "Epiphenomenal time," which allows for Blackness to take on multiple forms through time and space, and attends to the mercurial definitions ascribed to Blackness itself.

Prize acknowledges his negotiation of four armistice agreements in 1947–48 while eliding his earlier disavowed 1930s writings about a binational solution).⁵

Truthfully, neither community can take for granted the other's support in either historical or cultural terms (see Feldman, Lubin, and Salaita). Yet, to consider these stances mere differences of opinion does a disservice to the way that structural racism for both groups makes antagonism between them attractive. Arab American juridical battles to be classified as white precipitate Toni Morrison's commentary that an anti-Black American ideology is a prerequisite for the assimilation of immigrants in the United States (57–58): the desire for whiteness seeks to avoid the kinds of extrajudicial violence and disenfranchisement Blacks experience. Sarah M.A. Gualtieri's work on the lynching of Arabs in Florida during the early twentieth century and Nadine Naber's scholarship on Arab American businesses in the Bay Area during the late twentieth century bear out the consequences of being viewed as "not quite white" and imply that the reach for whiteness is attractive for reasons of physical and financial safety. Given these repercussions, the embrace of whiteness becomes a seductive option despite and/or because of its inherent anti-Blackness. On the other hand, Black American investment in uncritical patriotism through the military or anti-immigration stances and/or lauding representation in positions of state power often comes at the expense of Arab American concerns about foreign policy (see Daulatzai, Salaita, and Pickens). As Muhammad Ali's refusal to serve and Suheir Hammad's poetry makes clear, Black Americans often get drafted into military conflicts that serve U.S. imperial power.⁶ More to the point, the poverty in Black communities makes military service an attractive option despite requiring violence against (Arab) others.

Nonetheless, the turn to Blackness as an ideological investment yields an alternative set of conclusions about history, culture, and democracy. For Arab American writers, this critical stance reconsiders the fictions of linear progressive history that attend to the failures of whiteness and the conventional immigration narrative of assimilation and triumph. The Arab American writers who have explored these possibilities include, but are not limited to, Alia Yunis, Suheir Hammad, Pauline Kaldas, Alicia Erian, Randa Jarrar, Etel Adnan, Diana Abu-Jaber, Naomi Shihab Nye, Matthew Shenoda, Susan Muaddi Darraj, and Lawrence Joseph⁷—authors who find particular heft in the experiences of Black people and participate in the literary acts of "building bridges, connecting their experience to mainstream America—and importantly to other marginalized communities" (Shalal-Esa 25). These artists and critics engage Blackness as a way of "establishing an identity based on a shared cultural feature, rather than on oppression, discrimination, and

⁵ Alex Lubin points out that, although Bunche is best known as a peace broker who helped create Israel as a nation-state, Bunche's public position on the matter shifted based on changes in the political terrain. In doing so, Lubin recuperates as part of the archive Bunche's 1930s writings, which evince communist sympathies and a belief in a two-state solution.

⁶ Sohail Daulatzai (137–68) expands upon Muhammad Ali's refusal to serve in Vietnam by claiming that Ali's reach toward the Muslim International marked ties to global Islam and by implication Arab American Muslim communities. Suheir Hammad's poetry collections *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* and *ZaatarDiva* point to the inherent contradictions in Black and Brown poor people choosing to serve in the U.S. military because there seem to be no other options.

⁷ This list omits writers of critical non-fiction such as Steven Salaita, Carol Fadda-Conrey, Salah D. Hassan, Keith Feldman, and Michelle Hartman.

disenfranchisement” (Hartman 159). Blackness becomes the generative space for loving critique—of Arabness, Blackness, *and* Americanness—since it troubles the ease with which one can accept or endorse the American dream and all that accompanies it.

In Alia Yunis’s *The Night Counter* (2009) the circuits of transmission between Blacks and Arabs are paramount to the denouement of the novel. In the process, Blackness becomes integral to its understanding of Arab futurity in the United States. The novel drives home the way that the “minority and the diasporic live within the space of increasing global integration brought on by globalizing forces in communication, migration, and capital flow” (Shih and Lionnet 7). Their interaction in Yunis’s text clarifies how the relationships between Blacks and Arabs acquire urgency since dominant centers (ideologically and geopolitically speaking) marginalize the other in their midst during the processes of increased globalization. Here, the anxiety over a possible hybrid future⁸ with its inclusion of Blackness converses with the challenge of Holland’s *Erotic Life of Racism* vis-à-vis Arab American identity. Furthermore, despite the fact that *The Night Counter* depicts the two in a familial context, the question regarding Arab futurity and Blackness within it is not merely biopolitical. Instead, the novel interrogates the possibilities for Black/Arab relationships in the present geopolitical milieu. But rather than advocating an uncritical density of relation or specific set of affinities between Blacks and Arabs, it provides propinquity and asks, “what then?”—where “then” refers to the full spectrum of its adverbial range, including the past, immediate present, and possible future.

The protagonist of *The Night Counter*, Fatima Abdullah, is an aging grandmother who believes she will die in nine days. During her supposed last week on earth, she believes she must marry off her gay grandson and decide who inherits her home in Deir Zeitoun, Lebanon. As part of her decision-making process, she tells stories of Beirut and America to Scheherazade, while Scheherazade validates and amplifies these stories by visiting (and taking the reader to) the various family members whom Fatima describes and bemoans. One of Fatima’s relatives includes a Black, Chinese, and Arab great-granddaughter, Aisha “Decimal” Jackson, whom Fatima did not know existed until Decimal wrote her a letter and traveled from Minneapolis to Los Angeles to meet her. This relationship differs from the Black/Arab interracial romance often explored in Arab American literature (see, for example, novels by Mohja Kahf, Alicia Erian, and Pauline Kaldas) in that it both approaches and resists maternity. The two women must negotiate their relationship to each other and, in turn, the novel navigates how Fatima’s legacy is impacted and/or determined by Decimal’s existence and unwed pregnancy. To be clear, this is not the only Black/Arab interaction within the text. Fatima’s ex-husband Ibrahim has a casual friendship with a Detroit bus driver (Dwayne) that is at once paternal and avuncular. I however focus in the remainder of my essay on the way that Fatima and Decimal’s relationship works through two concepts at the crux of any futurity: sex and time.

Given the novel’s focus on Fatima’s progeny, Decimal’s presence offers a forthright engagement with how to interpret Fatima’s legacy. In this way, the scope of

⁸ I borrow this notion of the hybrid future from Tavia Nyong’o’s *Amalgamation Waltz*, in which he considers the relationship of “hybrid futures” and “mongrel pasts” to the character of American racial questions.

Night Counter pans outward beyond the Abdullah children and grandchildren with whom Fatima is familiar. The novel forces a consideration of how Arab immigrant legacy is yoked to Black presence without bowdlerizing the text of discomfort. In fact, Decimal and Fatima's relationship is marked by both a circumstance (unwed pregnancy) and a concept (sex) with which Fatima is uncomfortable. In this way, Yunis's text opens a conversation about Black and Arab relationships that refuses the utopian ideal of a multiracial future by pressing upon "the historical richness, intellectual intensity, cultural expansiveness, and political complexity of Black experience, including, perhaps especially, its indelible terrors" (Sexton). Decimal meets Fatima initially through a letter for a class assignment, but follows up with a visit to Fatima in Los Angeles. At the end of the novel, Fatima learns about the destruction of her home while surrounded by her surviving children, her gay grandson, and Decimal. During that scene and the moments before, Decimal is the only one of Fatima's progeny who engages her in conversation beyond talk of the weather, learns about her, and is taught by her. In Decimal's letter to Fatima, she specifically references slavery, noting that "Jackson is a slave name," conjecturing that "white Jacksons must have had a lot of slaves to name," and stating that her father (Tyrone) "spent a couple hours talking to [her] about slavery" (Yunis 211). Her naïve musings extend to stereotypes about Black men ("Tyrone's parents were very nice about me being born, but they didn't like Tyrone falling into the cliché of unwed African-American teenage dad") and systemic inequality ("[Brenda] was going to put me up for adoption, but then Gran saw something on the news about how Black kids never get adopted and get messed up in foster care") (Yunis 210). Although Decimal's writings are not exactly penetrating, they directly engage with a way of world-making that refuses to elide Blackness. In other words, one cannot interpret Fatima's legacy as an Arab immigrant without reckoning with the past and present of Blackness in America.

Because it is all too easy to collapse the structural and the individual when thinking about oppression, I pause here to consider how the interaction between them references larger conversations about oppression and racialization that include them. Just after Decimal and Fatima meet, Fatima deliberately searches for the key to her home in Lebanon. The key itself comes to represent the impossibility of recuperation, since, during the search, Fatima narrates a story about her twins' death and, at the end of the novel, we find out that the house has been destroyed in the Lebanese Civil War. Although the twins' death was caused by a tornado, Fatima blames herself and Ibrahim because they wanted to "save them from being Arab and being American" in the wake of the wars in June 1967 and October 1973 (300). Given that Fatima lost her twins on April 4, 1974 (the fifth anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.), her placement of blame foregrounds how her character understands racial difference and the dangers associated with being Arab American. The moment Fatima references also foregrounds an important period in Arab American racial history: post-1967, an influx in Arab immigration (from countries other than Lebanon and Syria) to the United States shifted the demography and troubled the racialization of Arabs as white. Read alongside Decimal's letter and presence, Fatima's loss of the twins (and the house) places into narrative proximity the cultural losses precipitated by slavery and war. As an imperfect analogy that "keeps limitations in view," this relation refuses simple correlation because of the temporal distance, political distinctions,

and differing geographies between the examples (see Feldman). Nonetheless, it foregrounds the way racializing Arabs and Blacks as abject and fungible permits the destruction of property, personhood, and past—losses that are keenly felt and seldom recuperated.

Decimal's particular references to race also reject the erasure of sex. Slavery as a mechanism for producing Black people (relying on the doubled meaning of "had"), clichés of unwed teen Black fathers, and the scant adoptions of Black children all index Black sex as a reason that Decimal exists.⁹ *Night Counter* takes seriously Jared Sexton's contention that the desexualization of interracial relationships foment a utopian multiracial ideology whose existence relies on Blackness as abject (Amalgamation; see, especially, chapter 3). In other words, the Rorschach blot that is interracial sex tends to make an exception of Blackness by marking its presence as evidence of radical politics or sexual degradation. Decimal does neither of these. Rather, she foregrounds interracial sexuality by choosing neither to discipline Blackness itself as the site of sexual transgression and epistemological abjection nor to create a dubious pedestal for it by exalting its putative radicality. Since Decimal is the only one of Fatima's progeny to pay attention to the details about the family home in Deir Zeitoun, Lebanon, Fatima's legacy becomes mediated by a Black presence that not only references an unsavory American past, but also actively participates in the (Arab) future. The Fatima/Decimal relationship thus disrupts the anti-Black American stance Toni Morrison argues is necessary for Fatima's (and her progeny's) complete Americanization.

The denouement of the novel—ending as it does on a slightly awkward note of familial togetherness and dysfunction—also critiques the presumption of a linear movement through time from immigrant to American. Considering Blackness a "when" rather than a "what" marks racial identity as a product of phenomenological experience rather than exclusively a product of linear temporal progression (Wright). As such, Fatima's Arabness and Decimal's Blackness become coextensively created, in tension with, and bearing repercussions for, each other. Decimal's Blackness disrupts the facile and direct line Fatima might draw between herself and her children either as an immigrant success story or as a failure. On the one hand, Fatima's assimilation can never be completed because her family includes—both in a biological and social sense—a Black person who deeply engages with Fatima's Arab past. On the other, Fatima's family becomes quintessentially American because of its inclusion of Blackness, a presence and people at the crux of the American enterprise. Here is where Arabness and Blackness become more than history's excretion. Rather, their presences complicate both assimilation and acculturation narratives. Neither can fully account for the "now" and "then" Decimal and Fatima's relationship represents. In terms of the novel, this moment requires that Fatima reckon with the way her legacy not only includes the trademark bump on her nose and aptitude for mathematics, but also incorporates a young multiracial, Black-identified woman whose epistemology does not dovetail with Fatima's, but who is the only one of her relatives to demonstrate an interest in learning about Lebanon and Arabic directly from Fatima. That is, she is the only one to explicitly yoke an Arab and Black past to a possible future.

⁹ Decimal references her Chinese heritage through her grandmother's marriage to Dr. Wang (as does the third person narration of the text), but does not privilege it as part of the circumstances and identity politics governing her birth.

Conclusion

Here, as elsewhere, Blackness opens the space to consider the possibilities of inter-ethnic interaction. Clearly, these relationships bend under the freight of complex histories, as they must when reckoning with the fissures caused by cultural loss and conflict. Simultaneously, they forge a pathway into the future that avoids the epistemological violence borne out of universalizing or exceptionalizing Blackness. Instead, the critical turn to Blackness rests in the contradictions and ambiguities history has left behind. There is no distillate that neatly describes cross-racial interaction given America's foundational racial boundary. There is no beyond. We can hope for a "then."

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