

6 California feminist art and postnationalist identities

Many Jewish feminist artists lost their culturally distinctive voice in the 1970s, owing to a number of factors: the generous conditions of assimilation in the United States, especially in California; the discourse of feminist art itself; and the formalist hegemony of postwar modernism. Though Judy Chicago draws attention in this book as a feminist artist, her work needs to be seen in the context of other successful Jewish artists who, having shed their very ethnic and cultural specificity in the 1970s, were admitted into the mainstream. This shedding of one's social context resonates with the paradox of how otherwise mutually hostile positions – Greenbergian formalist art and feminist art – both led to an erasure of Jewishness in the 1970s from many artists' work, even if for different reasons. These same forces – universalizing in their own ways – also erased the specific social context of California feminism, though there were notable exceptions to this in the work of Jewish artists such as Martha Rosler (*Tijuana Maid*), Eleanor Antin (her *King of Solana Beach*), and Helen and Newton Harrison (*The Lagoon Cycle*) among others.¹ In some cases, this might result merely in a colonial move at the expense of the local, whereas in other works cited the vision of California was more complex. So in this chapter, I turn to California as a space of culture. In particular, I am interested in how the representation of California changes for Jewish feminist artists in the late 1980s and 1990s and how recognizable markers of California culture appear and disappear in unexpected ways.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, American feminist art in California began to be fractured by the politics of racial and ethnic identity. At the same time, Middle Eastern politics and the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories also began to impinge on certain feminist art practices. Thus, the subject of this work was defined not by state or national boundaries but rather by a postnationalist public sphere. While multicultural exhibitions were numerous during that period in California, there was little focus on Jewish or Arab artists, white ethnicity, or Jewish artistic subject matter that connected to transnational alliances. This chapter looks at Jewishness, feminism, and their relation to the visual arts in California as well as to the Middle East. Unlike the work that came out of an

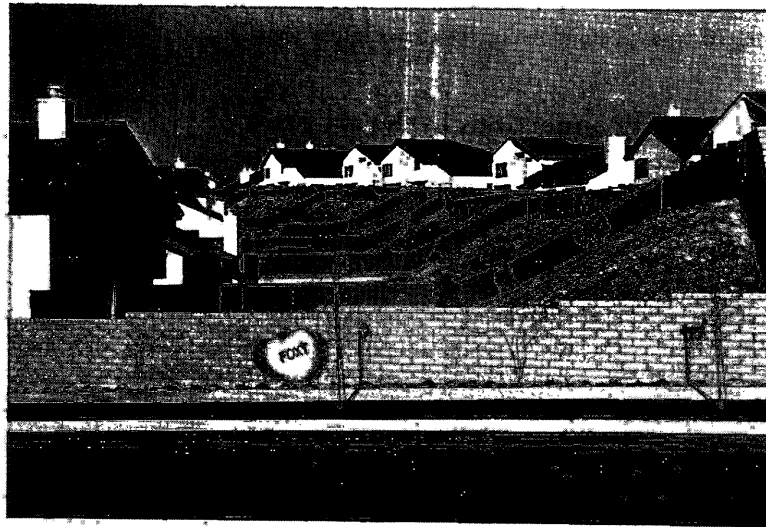
earlier moment, the focus here leans toward the articulation of heterogeneous identities that extend outside the nation-state, embracing a more complex understanding of what postnationalist identities might entail.

Transnational connections in the art work of Ruth Wallen

The trajectory of Ruth Wallen's artwork suggests some of the ways whereby issues of Jewishness, identity, and place entered the feminist art discourse in the 1980s and 1990s in southern California. In dealing with the aesthetic trajectory of Wallen's work as a photographer and performance artist, it is worth stating that she often deals with overtly social content and combines form and content in interesting ways. Her earlier work focuses on the suburbs of San Diego, where, unlike La Jolla and other elite enclaves, Jews were not excluded. For Wallen, the problem lay not so much with the white Christian neighbors, but with the history of the suburbs themselves and how the land was developed with total disregard for the biological and cultural histories of the area.

One of Wallen's earliest site-oriented projects is a semi-autobiographical artist's book ironically titled *I Love Del Mar* (1987) that erases identity and place both literally and figuratively (Figure 6.1).² The book is about her ambivalent relationship to an ersatz suburban subdivision and foregrounds how powerful fantasies that have accrued around the seaside community Del Mar have been displaced onto this inland suburb known to developers as "Del Mar Highlands" or "Carmel Del Mar." Wallen details the unseemly history behind the tomato fields that preceded the building of the suburban tract homes in the area – how harmful pesticides destroyed both the tomato farms and the health of the rural residents and Mexican-American farmers and laborers – and she uncovers how this history became mythologized. *I Love Del Mar* juxtaposes place settings of lush red tomatoes and texts about commodification of tomatoes with images of the building of the new homes in order to mock the real estate developers who advertised this suburb as the epitome of the good life in southern California (Figure 6.2).

Although the issue of Jewishness is not foregrounded, it enters the work obliquely through a photograph of the artist as a child in a Purim outfit and through a personal familial narrative. The figure of her father is central to this narrative: he is a transportation engineer who builds roads in suburban communities in southern California but has other more global colonial dreams of selling trains to China and opening up new frontiers. On the one hand, he represents the colonialist, someone who helped to create Del Mar as an imagined place rather than as a real site of dispute as regards the accommodation of the local peoples. On the other hand, he is represented as a Jewish man from a poor background who wants to help the poor, a figure at the margins who will not be contained within the national culture and has fantasies of exiting. But Wallen also



Tell me about your boyfriend.

Figure 6.1 Ruth Wallen, *I Love Del Mar*, 1987, photograph from installation and artist's book. Courtesy of the artist.

emphasizes another unseemly side of her father in the part of her narrative that addresses familial abuse written from an autobiographical perspective. In these other sequences, Wallen chooses to present herself in the narrative in a compromised position (as a child who was sexually abused by her father) and as caught between two ideals, two lifestyles. She is situated at the center of the contradiction between her seemingly perfect upwardly mobile assimilated Jewish family living out the American dream and the sexual, conflictual, and abusive nature of her own family life and the difficulties of coming into her own while carrying an uncommunicable secret. Just as she uses a series of story lines that relate to each other through multivariant metaphors in her text, Wallen also uses images such as generic candy hearts, lush red tomatoes, and chocolate-covered tomatoes in a visually compelling way to convey through deadpan black humor the underside of suburban life in southern California, conflating the good life with consumer culture – its temptations, inappropriate desires, and abuses.

Wallen's later work in the late 1980s and early 1990s continues her interest in questions of Jewishness, place, and identity, more explicitly in relation to her position as a border artist who worked collaboratively with Las Comadres, a multinational women's collective of artists, educators, and critics practicing in the San Diego–Tijuana region from 1988 to 1992.³ The work of Las Comadres was

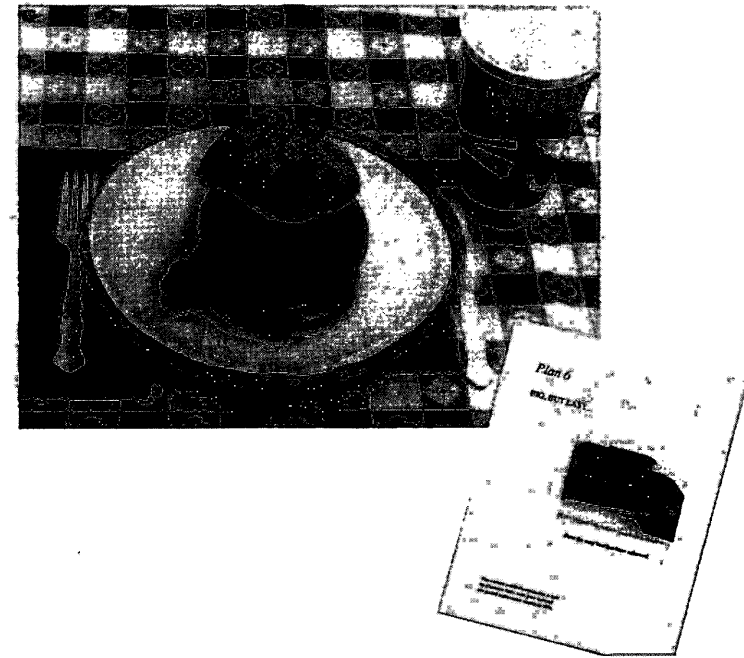


Figure 6.2 Ruth Wallen, *I Love Del Mar*, 1987, photograph from installation and artist's book. Courtesy of the artist.

groundbreaking at the time and became something of a model for artists' collectives elsewhere in terms of dealing with questions of globalization and feminism. Wallen collaborated with the group on a series of projects in response to a number of political events in California that led to increased violence against undocumented Mexican laborers along the San Diego–Tijuana border. In this work Wallen points out the various overlapping histories of Californians, including Americans, Mexicans, and Latinos of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (both Jewish and Catholic). Wallen's work with Las Comadres suggests a shift from an older historical moment when middle-class suburbs could not accommodate the presence of a Mexicana or a non-Spanish-speaking Chicana who wasn't a domestic or a gardener. It foregrounds how habitual attachments to place of previous generations suppressed local difference (in memory, in longing) in favor of global ones; this informed their sense of identity, but could only partially inform the artist's.

Questions of Jewishness enter into Las Comadres' *Border Boda* (Border wedding), a 1990 performance piece presented as part of an installation work

titled *La Vecindad* (The neighborhood), through the work of Wallen and other Mexican and Chicano group members who were part Jewish.⁴ The performance takes as its focus familial relations as well as institutional sites of identification shaping the subjectivities of group members. In works both biographical and autobiographical, the emphasis is on the kind of dialogue or debate that ensues when one identity is positioned against another, whether amongst friends of different ethnic, religious, or racial backgrounds or within the same family and the same gender. This is accomplished through two elements that shape the performance: matriarchal and private stories, and patriarchal and political narratives. The patriarchal narratives often disrupt the matriarchal ones through the presentation of political discussions and even a mock wedding. Both spaces, however, problematize the "idealization" of family while also interrogating family relations, which in both spaces are not always harmonious or homogeneous. The performers deliberately mix up the two spaces, and cross over from one space to another. For example, Wallen and fellow artist Emily Hicks present grandmother stories but also ironical political commentary (Figure 6.3). The performance incorporates oral histories of various members' grandmothers, including Wallen's Jewish grandmother, who immigrated to California from Russia. As Wallen comments:

With Las Comadres, my identity as a Jew became more formative . . . Las Comadres was composed of multicultural and multinational artists so everyone was forced to look at their own identities . . . One of the most powerful



Figure 6.3 Ruth Wallen, *Border Boda*, 1990, video still of Eloisa de Leon, Ruth Wallen, and Rocio Weiss, from multi-media installation and performance. Courtesy of the artist.

moments as a group was telling the stories of our grandmothers. For many of the women in the group, these were Jewish stories and created a further bond between us.⁵

The differences between matriarchal and patriarchal spaces, as a parallel to written/oral histories, serve as a backdrop to the *Border Boda* performance, which revolves around the figure of a Chicana granddaughter and the multiple realities she faces as she negotiates the contradictions and ambiguities of life on the border, both within the confines of her own home and in various public and institutional spaces. Much of the performance takes place in the domestic space of the kitchen, where the Chicana granddaughter, who has recently announced that she will be getting married, is being given advice about her future by her grandmother and her mute aunt, who communicates by singing Mexican folk songs that idealize the family's Mexican past. The extended family is represented by members of Las Comadres, who share stories about their own grandmothers and their life experiences. These stories are about loss and limits, but none of these women is presented as helpless victim. For example, in Wallen's story, her grandmother moves to the United States to receive the education forbidden to her in Russia and becomes involved in the labor movement within the Chicana community in east Los Angeles. These stories work to offer an alternative and more complex conception of the members' shared histories as well as a more heterogeneous set of signs than those by an individual's own biological relatives.

If the kitchen in *Border Boda* is seen as a nurturing space populated by friends and family, the public space, by contrast, is presented as a conflict room, where the young Chicana is educated about the contradictions and inconsistencies of the political realm and how they impinge on women's lives. This part of the piece includes critical commentary by her feminist friends about the polarized political discussions surrounding the border and includes prerecorded news coverage as well as live reenactments of activist events staged by Las Comadres along the border. Linear, nationalistic modes associated with more traditional claims of citizenship are juxtaposed with discussions that try to reimagine citizenship along the border in a more fluid way, one that takes into account the reciprocity and interrelatedness of its people. The entire performance verges on the pedagogical in its demand that the young Chicana learn to analyze how the border works as a neighborhood with multiple levels of organization and meaning. The performance enacts the collective's hope that women who are border citizens can act as translators for each other and use complexity and clarity of judgment to imagine a future beyond that based simply on the dead end of ethnic/racial identity politics or the limited traditional narratives of women's roles within their own biological family, the home, and the nation.

This version of feminist solidarity differs markedly from that practiced by Judy Chicago and her collective in the 1970s. It is no longer enough simply to share

gender. In the case of Las Comadres, women are coming together on a different basis, a basis in which their differences as well as their commonalities are being worked out publicly to create a bond between them.

One of Wallen's recent works, *Family Stories: Excerpts from Palestinian–Jewish Dialogue* (2003) (Figure 6.4), builds on the impact of telling family stories, this time revealing the cross-linkages among members of a Jewish–Palestinian group in San Diego.⁶ With the purpose of creating horizontal or collaborative structures across peoples, drawing from oral traditions rather than just written ones, Wallen's *Family Stories* is both an artist's book and a documentary work. Existing on the web for the Jewish–Palestinian dialogue circles in San Diego County, this project is meant to be viewed from multiple geographical locations, including the Middle East. The aim of this US-based grassroots group is to use dialogue to create a middle ground to educate both communities and promote peace in the Middle East. Wallen's version of such dialogue places Jewish–Palestinian relations within a transnational and comparative framework and tries to understand it in its historical complexity through the use of family photos and stories. Her project documents the change in relationships among group members that occurred in her dialogue group in San Diego in 2003. As Wallen explains:

We started the group as Jews over here and Palestinians over there, but eventually we did develop a sense of extended family through this project. In a certain way, it is ironic how similar some of the families were. I used family



Figure 6.4 Ruth Wallen, *Family Stories: Excerpts from Palestinian–Jewish Dialogue*, photograph from artist's book with text, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

in my artwork deliberately as a way to break down political division but not to deny individual histories.⁷

In a sense, her online book is an extended family album of the dialogue group, but not in the tradition of, say, Edward Steichen's 1955 *Family of Man* photography book which celebrated the merging of cultures to eliminate boundaries altogether. "Family" might provide a metaphor for Wallen's narrative, but it is not used to transcend class, race, gender, or ethnic differences through photographs. Indeed, texts and images are used to give the stories complexity so that each can be placed in a historical and political context. Photography is used here not just as a tool of memory but also to record change. In Wallen's work, the text and image often disrupt each other, creating a whole that is more complex than one of the single parts. This photographic piece is similar to her performance work with Las Comadres in the sense that the performance represents more of a process in the group's evolution and is not time-bound in the way traditional performance or art photography tends to be.

For Wallen, the dialogue process entails movement and change, whereby all parties are forced to understand and define themselves in the light of their experience of "the other" over time. Ideally, dialogue produces the possibility of a multivocal account of the histories of two people. Though Jews and Arabs might initially have little in common and very little interest in each other, the desire for a middle ground is reached through dialogue aimed at excavating the multiple layers of binary thinking that sustain individual and institutional identities and differences. As Wallen explains:

One thing that has become increasingly clear to me is the tremendous fear and distrust of the gentile world in the Jewish community. While I find myself and others explaining that fear to Palestinians, as you will see in these conversations, I think that it is important not to fall back on this as an excuse. Like many of the Jews in the group, my family came from eastern Europe. My parents were the first generation born in this country. I was fortunate to meet many of my cousins who survived the war and lived in the Soviet Union, as is described in the piece, *Russian Lessons*. I heard stories of the many who perished in the holocaust as well as the few who survived. But it is important for healing to occur within the Jewish community, to see ourselves as more than helpless victims of the pogroms, Hitler, Stalin, the Palestinians or whomever.⁸

What worries Wallen is the perception among American Jews that sympathy for the suffering of the Palestinians, or a regard for their case as just, must in some way come at the expense of sympathy for Jewish suffering in modern history. Though every member of the dialogue group might have suffered at one time the

loss of family members as well as their language, one Palestinian member is skeptical about what kind of healing can take place when what Jews and Palestinians have most in common is the way the memory of victimhood is written into each group's life experiences:

Oppression is a universal phenomenon in human beings. What matters is not to let that oppression become ingrained in our history and in our people so that it becomes a justification for a whole national culture that is built from that. Unfortunately I think that has happened to both the Jews and the Palestinians.⁹

Wallen's book, photographs, and website explore the few ironical moments that break through the structures of violent opposition and conflict that plague public discourse on Jewish–Palestinian issues in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, there are stories about Smadar, an Israeli girl murdered by a Palestinian suicide bomber in Jerusalem, and how she left behind a diary written in Arabic and Hebrew, side by side; then there is the narrative of how the funeral of an Israeli general unexpectedly brought together Israeli and Palestinian officials, and the story of a Palestinian refugee's memories of his first meeting with an Israeli soldier, who turns out to be from Yemen and speaks Arabic. It is these kinds of unexpected stories and photographs of group members' telling the stories that provide the glue as well as the hope for the dialogue group – hope that it is possible to move beyond entrenched partisan loyalties and make room for the kind of rational discussion that could lead to peace and coexistence in the Middle East.

Beverly Naidus: the wrong kind of Jew

I had grown up in a family where doing work of social value was both implicit and explicit. My parents, the children of immigrants, were deeply engaged in the idealistic social movements of the thirties. Despite suffering economically during the blacklists of the fifties, my parents raised me to be a socially concerned person and to contribute my skills to make a difference in the world. This upbringing made me quite uncomfortable with an art practice that seemed to manifest itself totally as an upwardly mobile lifestyle or as a black clad, bohemian pose.¹⁰

(Beverly Naidus, 2004)

Beverly Naidus comes out of a tradition of secular European and Eastern European Jews, including Martha Rosler and Ruth Wallen among others, whose artwork is connected primarily to their politics and social activism.¹¹ In her work on Jewishness, Naidus deliberately distances herself from the assimilationist impulse and class narrative that have enabled a generation of Jewish-American artists to

disidentify themselves from American class and racial struggles. As a dark-skinned Ashkenazi Jewish woman who is often mistaken for a non-white non-American, Naidus makes explicit and tangible in much of her work both the pitfalls of "passing" and what it means to be unable to "pass." She foregrounds just how pernicious the issue of assimilation has been for US Jews in her 1996 artist's book *What Kinda Name Is That?*¹² In one of her image and text pieces from this collection, titled *Right Dress Size* (Figure 6.5), a text is superimposed on a detail of an advertisement from the 1950s showing a stereotypical blonde mother and daughter from the period:

The assimilation generation was brought up to conform, to look like the people in the magazines, to be better at being WASPs than the WASPs

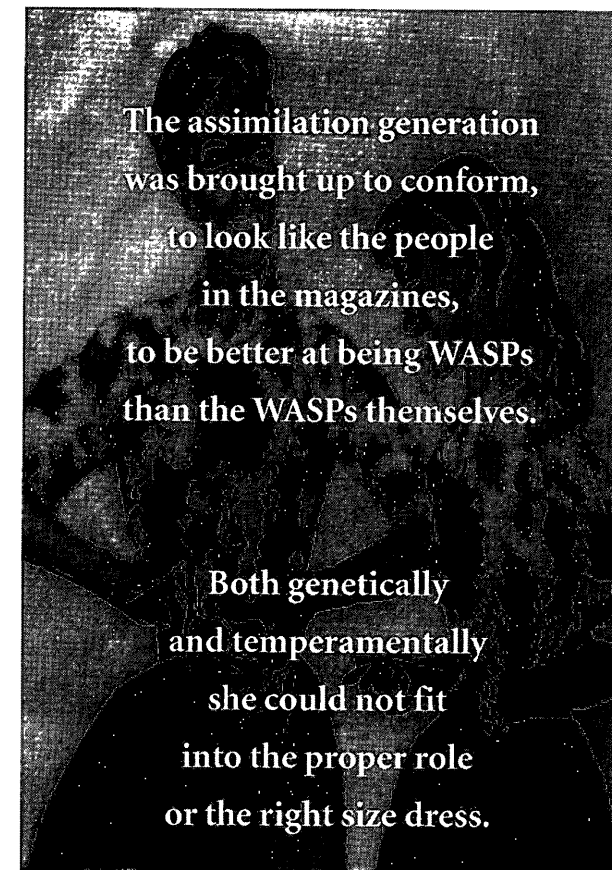
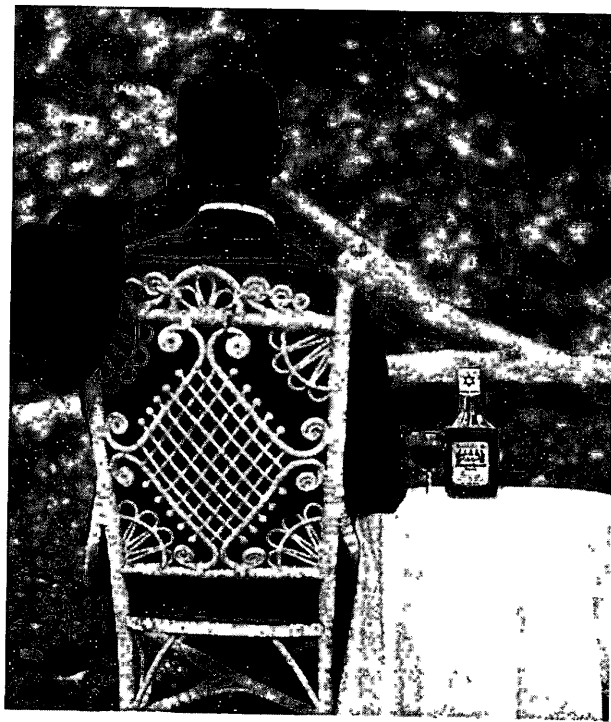


Figure 6.5 Beverly Naidus, *Right Dress Size*, 1995, in *What Kinda Name is That*, 1996, laser prints on paper and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

themselves. Both genetically and temperamentally she could not fit into the proper role or the right size dress.¹³

Indeed, in a later work titled *Neat, Blonde Wife* (2001) (Figure 6.6), in which a male model is posed in a garden with his back turned to the viewer, the text suggests that even with the most elaborate performative efforts, a Jew trying to obtain upward social mobility and to make his Jewishness disappear through radical assimilation was often doomed to fail:

No one could tell he was Jewish from his name or his looks, but he felt that there was something impalpable that gave it away. Even his neat, blonde wife could not erase it.¹⁴



No one could tell he was Jewish from his name or his looks, but he felt that there was something impalpable that gave it away. Even his neat, blonde wife could not erase it.

When dining out enjoy

WINE

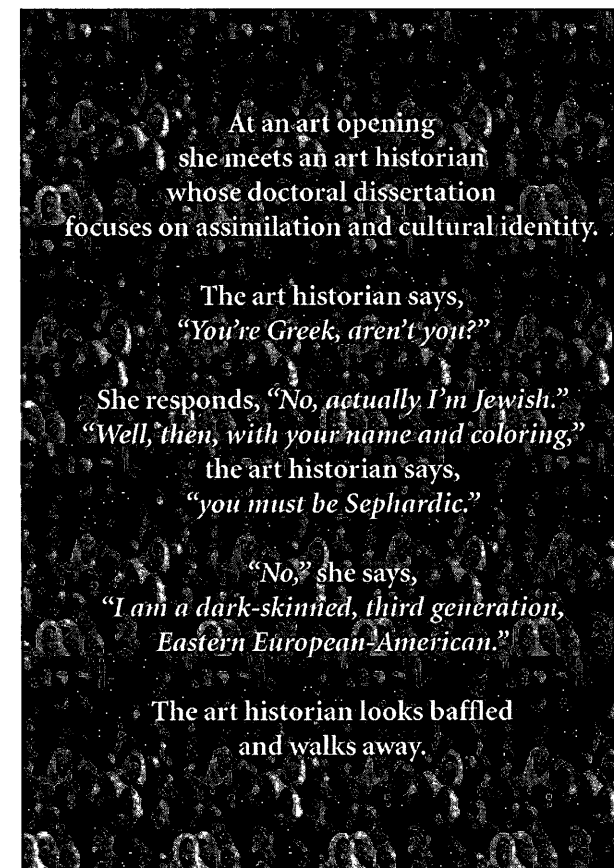
It's so nice to have a nice wine.

Figure 6.6 Beverly Naidus, *Neat, Blonde Wife*, 2001, in *Other: Breaking out of the Box*, 2001, laser prints on paper and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

In another piece, *You're Greek, Aren't You* (1995) (Figure 6.7), Naidus superimposes a photograph of Ellis Island immigrants from the turn of the century with the following text that relates to her experience:

At an art opening she meets an art historian whose doctorate focuses on assimilation and cultural identity. The art historian says, "You're Greek, aren't you?" She responds, "No actually, I'm Jewish." "Well, then, with your name and coloring," the art historian says, "you must be Sephardic." "No," she says, "I am a dark-skinned, third-generation Eastern European American." The art historian looks baffled and walks away.¹⁵

Naidus is interested in how shifting notions of whiteness in the United States have been uneven and she juxtaposes the Ellis Island image – taken at a time when



At an art opening she meets an art historian whose doctoral dissertation focuses on assimilation and cultural identity.

The art historian says, "You're Greek, aren't you?"

She responds, "No, actually I'm Jewish." "Well, then, with your name and coloring," the art historian says, "you must be Sephardic."

"No," she says, "I am a dark-skinned, third generation, Eastern European American."

The art historian looks baffled and walks away.

Figure 6.7 Beverly Naidus, *You're Greek, Aren't You*, 1995, in *What Kinda Name is That*, 1996, laser prints on paper and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

Eastern European Jews were not considered white – with an anecdote from the present to point out how misperceptions about her own racial identity now abound. Because of her darker skin color, she is taken first for Greek and then for Sephardic, neither of which fits into the homogeneous ways that mainstream Jews are now perceived as strictly white and European through assimilation. In a companion piece to this work titled *An Anglo?* (1995), which uses the same image of Ellis Island immigrants, but superimposed with a different text, she tackles the question of Jewishness in relation to the debates around identity politics in California during this period:

She is listening to an acquaintance talk about the cultural diversity in Los Angeles. She winces when this woman describes herself as an anglo. They are both dark jews. She wonders, was this woman never treated like an “other”? Did her privilege allow her to escape the street?¹⁶

Naidus moved to southern California from the East Coast at this time for a teaching position at California State University at Long Beach, and she confronts in her work the relative absence of debate and discussion about white ethnicity and Jewishness in relation to identity politics in the arts in California. The Ellis Island photograph takes on a different resonance in this context since it suggests a shared past, but one that is above all simply an “anglo” past from the perspective of her California acquaintance. Naidus finds the term “anglo” too narrow and limiting to encompass the complexity of her own situation, specifically in California, where she has experienced discrimination because of her skin color. The work in a sense is about how the brand of liberal identity politics in California does little to protect or even describe her. Ironically, in her work titled *The Wrong Kind of Jew* (1995) (Figure 6.8), Naidus feels more welcome in Israel, amongst a group of dark-skinned Jews:

While in Israel she makes many friends from North Africa: Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, and Egyptian – all Jews. They are warm and generous in ways she has never experienced at home. Her fair-skinned cousin from Long Island visits her in Jerusalem and tells her that she is hanging out with the wrong kind of Jews. She is shocked by her cousin and thinks, “you’re not my kind of Jew.”¹⁷

This text is superimposed on the image of a Jewish six-pointed star to question the nature of Jewish-American racism toward North African Jews and to highlight her estrangement from such views. In a later work, *Occupied Territory* (2001), Naidus continues to contrast her own ambiguous positioning in the United States, vis-à-vis her cousin, with her experience in Israel, where she encountered a wider community of Jews who face discrimination based on their skin color and

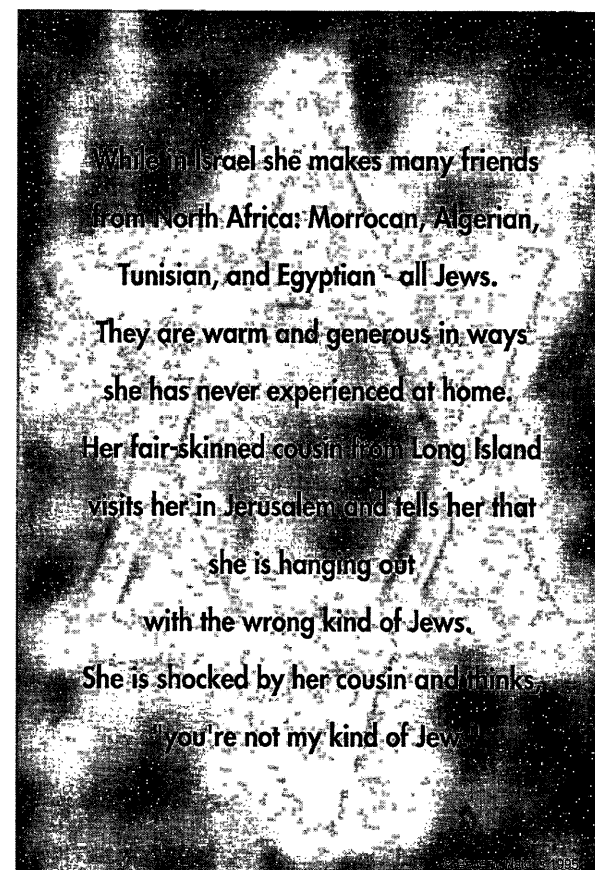


Figure 6.8 Beverly Naidus, *The Wrong Kind of Jew*, 1995, in *What Kinda Name is That*, 1996, laser prints on paper and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

non-European identities. Though Naidus experiences a bond with North African Jews in Israel based on a commonality of skin color and emotional warmth, it is worth noting that her feelings of well-being do not extend to the State of Israel itself. Far from achieving a sense of protection by Israel, she feels more exposed to danger by the state’s position on the Palestinian question and thus aligns herself with the antiwar activists who are working for peace in the Middle East:

Her cousin’s boyfriend carried a gun into the occupied territory. He said he was just doing a job and that these people behaved like animals. She wanted to spit angry words at him, but held her tongue, knowing he would call her a traitor. Years later the memory of this conversation increased her donations to the Israeli peace movement.¹⁸

Naidus expresses another way of being Jewish in her work when she separates herself from the Eurocentrism of many Jews, as well as from a certain kind of Jewish racism toward both Palestinians and North African Jews. Though she was raised on the pro-zionist monologue and had obsessed about the Holocaust when she was a child, like many dissenters Naidus never relied on Israel for a surrogate identity, and as a result she has felt estranged from many mainstream Jewish affiliations and positions on these issues, an estrangement she gives form to in her artwork.

Lidia Shaddow: language, art, and the diaspora

Growing up in Israel in the sixties, I never thought I was good enough because my father was from Iraq and my mother was from Tunisia. In every poem or song we learned, in every play or party in school, I searched for a part that reflected my family's heritage. There wasn't one. "We probably are not made of the good or worthy stuff," I thought to myself for forty years.¹⁹

(Lidia Shaddow, 2003)

For Lidia Shaddow and other Sephardic Jews of her generation, the feeling of "not being good enough" was a fairly common experience. As the children of Arab Jews brought to Israel to perform menial jobs, they were discriminated against by Israeli society. Shaddow's father, like many Arab Jews, came from a prominent family in Iraq; but in Israel, where he arrived as a teenager, he was trained to become a car mechanic.

The differential treatment of Sephardic Jews in the workplace was mirrored in the largely segregated and unequal educational system in Israel. The rich culture of Jews from Arab and Muslim cultures was scarcely studied in Israeli or US Jewish schools and academic institutions in the 1960s. Whereas Yiddish and Hebrew were prized and officially sanctioned languages, Ladino and other Sephardic dialects were neglected. For Shaddow, who grew up speaking neither Hebrew nor Yiddish but rather Arabic and French, learning the official languages of Israel was a struggle:

My art saved me. My parents didn't speak Hebrew. Instead, they spoke French and Arabic. The language was always a barrier both for them and myself. I found it easier to draw since I couldn't communicate through the official languages. This also happened when I moved to the United States because I couldn't speak English at first.²⁰

Given her difficulty with language, it is not surprising that her art practice in California has been predicated not so much on language but on highly affective gestures such as eating, where desire and pleasure are inscribed. Shaddow's many

paintings of family meals, including in which *il forza del destino* (1998) is one example (Figure 6.9), invoke a mood of well-being, where eating becomes a cultural archive of people's bodies, memories, and experiences drawn from her childhood:

My mother comes from a poor family but the table was always full with food. There is a whole culture about food which is very beautiful over there in Israel. As a memory, the beauty of the table was important to me. I have many paintings of just family meals. This culture of eating no longer exists in the United States. It is not seen as American, but rather the culture of a Sephardic Jew.²¹

In 1999, Lidia returned to Arad, Israel, to paint *Double Self-Portrait in the Kitchen*



Figure 6.9 Lidia Shaddow, *il forza del destino*, 1998, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

(Figure 6.10) in which she juxtaposes her American identity with her Arab one.²² In this work, which also involves the preparation of a meal, her whiter American self is significantly diminished by and now in awe of her larger and more expansive darker Jewish/Arab self, which represents female power. This feminist component sets in conflict and tension Western ideologies of Western and Arab femininity. The work creates quite a break from 1970s US feminism in the way it represents the family space as a powerful arena for Arab-Jewish women, given the history of Sephardic Jews in both the United States and Israel. In *Double Self-Portrait in the Kitchen*, Shaddow takes the tools of the domestic worker and the housewife – coffee pot and cup – and makes them tools of aggressive defiance in this extremely vivid and powerful painting. In this way, domestic spaces are penetrated by politics and sites of resistance to the nation-state. Shaddow also suggests here the limitations of the key Western distinction between public and private: no longer can we associate the feminine with the domestic and the private in opposition to the supposedly masculine domains of politics and power.

Part of Shaddow's impetus for charting her separate identities in this manner stemmed from the difficulty she felt, as a Sephardic Jew living in Los Angeles, in communicating the commensurability of her Jewishness and her entitlement to a Middle Eastern difference. In the United States, Sephardic Jews face a hegemony that narrates a single Jewish memory, a European and white one;



Figure 6.10 Lidia Shaddow, *Double Self-Portrait in the Kitchen*, 1999, oil on cork panel. Courtesy of the artist.

this differs markedly from the situation in Israel, where Jews are seen as a fractured population consisting of Europeans, Levantines, Mizrahim, Ethiopians, US-born, Russian-born, and Israeli-born Jews as well as new immigrants. This recognition of a multidimensional Jewishness was comforting to the artist:

When I returned to Israel after a fifteen year absence . . . I saw myself everywhere – in the schools, universities, museums, television, radio, even in the government. It was a liberating, calming, soothing, healing feeling.²³

In Israel today, Jews from North Africa and the Middle East are beginning to enter positions of power in society. For Shaddow, the dominant US media sources convey only one-dimensional representations of all this internal complexity amongst Jews both in Israel and in the United States, and have yet to become as expressive of political, ethnic, and racial differences and contradictions amongst Jews compared to the Israeli press.

Doris Bittar: art and the post 9/11 environment in California

Finding the stories that give a more relational understanding of the multiple histories of Jews and Arabs is a fundamental aspect of Doris Bittar's art. She is, however, the only Arab-born woman in the book.²⁴ Bittar is from Lebanon but spent much of her early life in the New York area before moving to California in 1986, a relocation that had a lasting impact on her artwork and activism:

When I came to California, I left behind an assimilated white identity and found my Middle-Eastern roots. There is a huge Arab community in Southern California and that was important to me. I began using theories coming out of Las Comadres and the Border Arts Workshop for my artwork, but ignored the particulars and adopted them to another border – the border between Jews and Arabs. Coming to California was a way of exploring a particularism and leaving behind the assimilated white universalism I adopted from New York, where I was ironically assimilated as a white Jewish person and where my friends were mostly all Jewish.²⁵

California was a place of “sunshine and freedom that brought me back to my childhood in Lebanon.” But since September 11, 2001, things have fundamentally changed for Arabs such as herself in the United States. Now “the country as a whole has become very restrictive for Arabs.”²⁶ The shift in US government policy toward Arabs and the passage of the Patriot Act have brought a greater sense of urgency to Bittar's work. *Semites*, from 2001–4, features large portraits of Jews and Arabs, living mostly in southern California, but who emigrated from the

Middle East. Many of the portraits are of members of the Jewish/Arab dialogue group that Bittar co-founded with her Jewish husband James Rauch, an economics professor at the University of California, San Diego.

Semites consists of austere-looking life-size pastel portraits covered in veils imprinted with words taken from the subjects' own personal stories. Rather than using veils as a shroud or as a cover to conceal, Bittar uses them to animate these vivid portraits through the words inscribed on them. In a certain way, the veils also bestow a kind of anonymity on the subjects and suggest that the individual identities of the speakers are less significant than the nature of the stories they tell – stories of loss and exile as of shared histories between Jews and Arabs. The work also shows how the often rigid and lifeless postures produced by the conflict in the Middle East and the worsening situation in the United States for Arab-Americans can be changed and brought back to life through dialogue and her highly aesthetic art.

Bittar's work highlights aspects of the Palestinian question that are usually rendered invisible in the dominant media in the United States and Israel. For example, the loss of the Palestinian homeland and the experience of dispossession from the land for Palestinians are typically represented in the media as a series of historic narratives of competing pasts and gestures that seem only to escalate. Bittar's work, by contrast, enables us to imagine a more interactive way of addressing the impacted histories of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, one that is not completely dulled by overwrought feelings and experiences. *Semites: Dialogue 1, Manal and Gila* (2003) (Figure 6.11) presents two portraits hung side by side – one of a Palestinian man and his daughter, the other of an Israeli woman. From the text we learn of an unexpected encounter between two groups that would normally have little to do with each other:

My father, Abdul Rahman, knew that Israelis were coming to visit. He was apprehensive but wanted to be a dutiful host. Then he discovered that Gila was from Zikkim Kibbutz, adjacent to his hometown of Almajdal. He asked about a certain house and a favorite date tree. He then walked away. It was the first time I saw my father weep for Palestine. I followed but he told me, "Go tend to your guests." He paused and said, "I had a good feeling about that girl and now I know why – because she was raised near my home."

Gila, the Israeli woman tells the story in this way:

When I came to see Manal, I did not know her father would be visiting from Kuwait. I quickly learned that he was originally from Askelon, the town near the kibbutz where I grew up. We had the same views of the sea, the same sounds and smells. He described a house and a tree and asked me if they were still standing. Yes, I knew them well. Then Abdul Rahman wept and left the

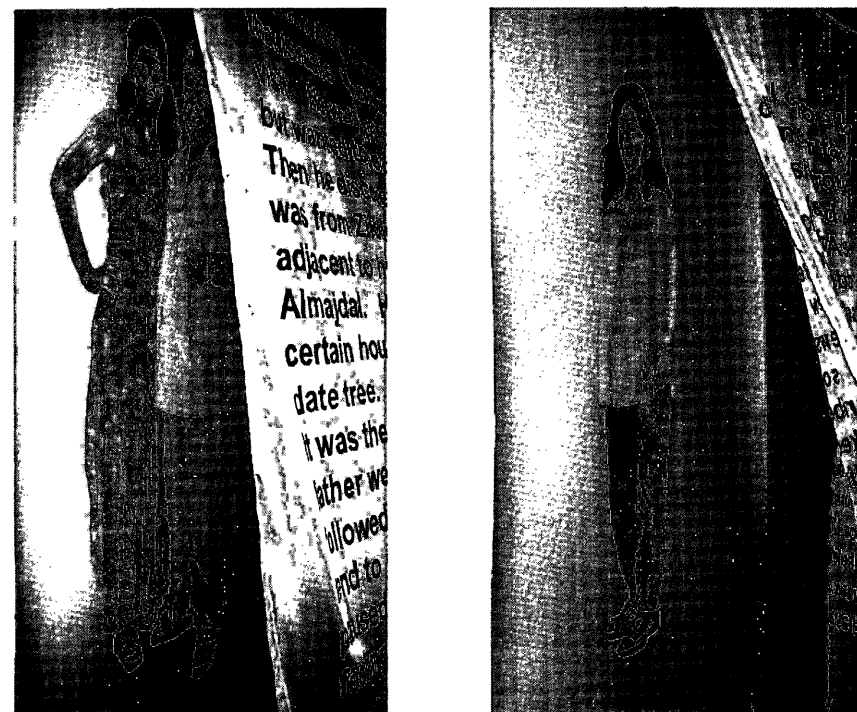


Figure 6.11 Doris Bittar, *Semites: Dialogue 1, Manal and Gila*, 2003, 86 × 54 in., pastel drawing and veil with text. Courtesy of the artist.

room. The house was the home he left in 1948, and the tree was a date palm he planted as a boy.²⁷

Unexpectedly, it was the shared experience of the land, the sea, and the smells that brought about an identification and closeness between Gila and Rahman. For Bittar, it is often such spontaneous and emotional exchanges that enable both groups to redefine spaces of belonging, creating the possibility to imagine coexistence and alternative visions for the future.

Most of Bittar's narratives place women at the center and focus on moments of reconciliation between generations that return women's experiences and relations back to a context that is not shaped entirely by the nation-state and occupation. She critiques the way that the Western press has defined Arab women in limited traditional ways that erase Arab women's more complex history and relation to feminism. In *Semites: Dialogue 3, Manal and Sitto* (2002) (Figure 6.12), she addresses the generational differences among educated Arab women within the same family and how the issue of exile has shaped some of these views. This kind of work extends Bittar's interest in oral history to include representations of the

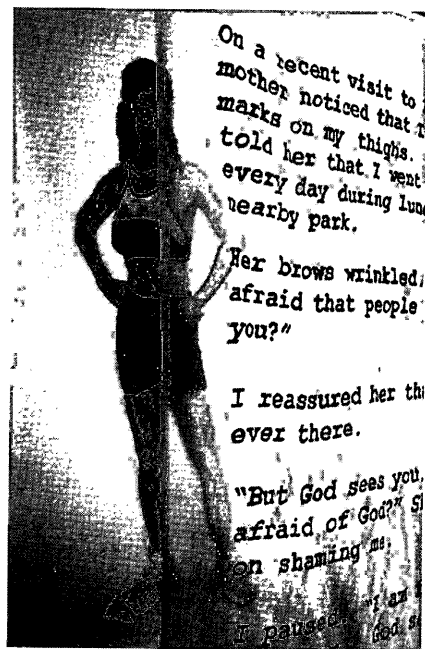


Figure 6.12 Doris Bittar, *Semites: Dialogue 3, Manal and Sitto*, 2002, 86 × 54 in., pastel drawing and veil with text. Courtesy of the artist.

history of feminism in the Middle East. In *Manal and Sitto*, Manal speaks about the generational divide in her own Palestinian family:

On a recent visit to Kuwait my mother noticed that I had tan marks on my thighs. I told her that I went jogging every day during lunchtime at a nearby park. Her brows wrinkled. "Aren't you afraid that people will see you?" I reassured her that no one was ever there. "But God sees you. Aren't you afraid of God?" She was intent on shaming me. I paused. "I am fully naked when I shower. God sees me there, too!"²⁸

The second text specifically raises the issue of how feminism made its mark on Palestinian women in the 1930s:

My grandparents' village in Palestine took part in the women's liberation movement in the 1930s. My grandmother, Sitto, wore her traditional white dress embroidered with the warm colors of the Gaza landscape. Later, in the wilderness of exile in Kuwait, her daughter, my mother, lost the liberated stance of Palestine and eventually wore the Hijab.

As an adolescent, I was forbidden to leave the house with a sleeveless top.

Mother and Sitto fought over me. Mother would cover me with layers of clothes and Sitto would take them off again and again.²⁹

Though both Manal and her mother are highly educated women (Manal has a Ph.D. and is a biophysicist at the Scripps Research Institute, and her mother is a teacher and educator in Kuwait), it was Manal's grandmother, Sitto, who was an active participant in the suffragette movement in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s and worked the most for women's rights. The women's movement during that period extended to Egypt and what was then called "Palestine." Sitto was representative of some of the rural women who were drawn to the movement and fought for Palestinian women's right to vote and the right to remove the veil. Significantly, the feminism of that period was open enough to accommodate a rural Muslim woman such as Sitto, who chose to keep the veil but wrap it around her head rather than have it cover her face, and to wear the traditional handmade and embroidered clothing of her village rather than Western dress.

Manal's mother's life was marked by the loss of the Palestinian homeland in 1948 and her family's move to Saudi Arabia, a more culturally conservative country. As a result, Manal's mother became more traditional than her own mother, choosing to wear the Hijab. Significantly, Bittar's choice to use Sitto and Manal as subjects for portraits and texts suggests ironically that grandmother and granddaughter have more in common than mother and daughter.

Bittar has also focused on rearticulating the place of Jews within Arab Muslim culture. Israeli national identity and US Jewish identity are often imagined as being made up strictly of European Jews, in keeping with the Zionist construction of the Jewish nation. Bittar's work questions the Zionist narratives of a homogeneous Jewish nation that silences the links between Arab Jews and the question of Palestine. The subjects of *Semites: Dialogue 2, Lidia and Rachmin* (2003) (Figure 6.13) are an Arab Jewish man dressed in a traditional Arab robe, and his daughter, Lidia, dressed in Western clothes. The text that accompanies these portraits recounts a significant moment in the father and daughter relationship when Lidia finally reconciles herself to both her Jewish and her Arab origins. The first panel is written from the point of view of the father:

Your great-grandfather was the best shoemaker in Mosul. One day the Ottoman Army asked him to repair 300 pairs of shoes in one week! After a long day he fell asleep in his basement shop. When he awoke most of the shoes were magically repaired. The next night he hid and saw genies come out of the floor to repair the shoes. One genie needed a special needle and declared that he must go to Paris! "But it takes weeks to go to Paris, I have needles here," my grandfather exclaimed as he stood up. When the genies saw him they vanished and the shoes were broken once again. When he told the story to the town folks they named him "Shedo," meaning "bewitched" in Hebrew.³⁰

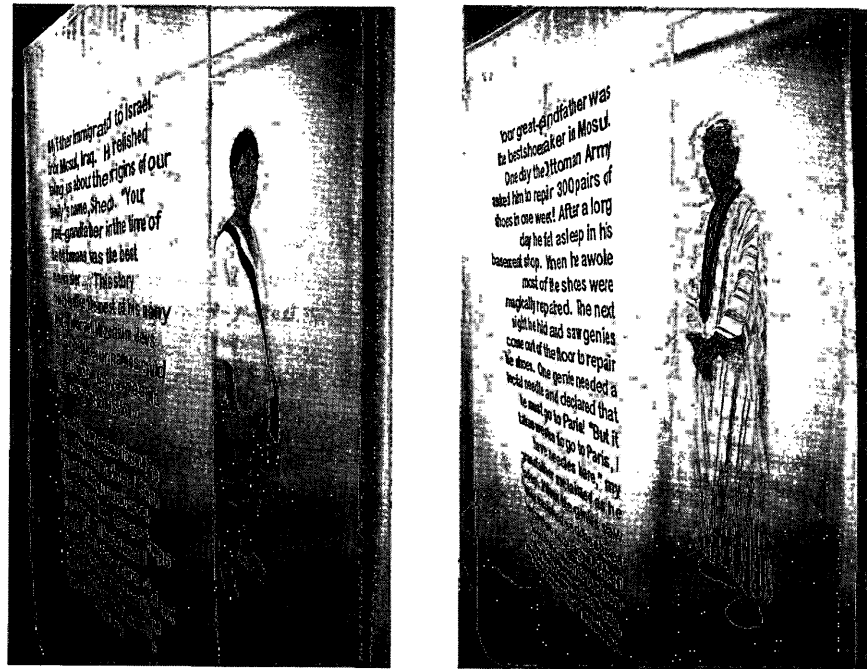


Figure 6.13 Doris Bittar, *Semites: Dialogue 2, Lidia and Rachmin*, 2003, 86 × 54 in., pastel drawing and veil with text. Courtesy of the artist.

The daughter, who had grown up in Israel, never believed her father's story but relates a discovery that changed her heart:

My father immigrated to Israel from Mosul, Iraq. He relished telling us about the origins of our family's name, Shedo. "Your great-grandfather in the time of the Ottomans was the best shoemaker . . ." This story sounded like the rest of his many jokes. In Israel, Mizrahim Jews did not feel like our names could have a history. We yawned and rolled our eyes at his folly.

In America, my sister found the same story in a book on Jewish families of Mosul — just as our father had told us. Goose bumps ran through my body and I wanted to cry. For years I had not believed him and suddenly, the stories I grew up with became real and a part of me.³¹

The daughter's disbelief stems in part from the way that diasporic Arab Jews such as herself, who were born and raised in Israel, were taught to abandon their diasporic culture and its oral history and traditions. On one level, this meant abandoning Arab culture and acquiescing to an assimilationist discourse of modernization in Israel. The results of this educational process left Mizrahim Jews without any knowledge of their particular history as Jews in the Arab world, since

the Jewish history that was taught was primarily European. From such a limited perspective, the iconic and mythic traditions of her father's religious and historical past were absent from Lidia's public education. Only later, in the United States, when Lidia has the possibility of leaving behind the discrimination she grew up with in Israel, can she have a more complex understanding of that space between myth and reality that is so important in terms of her father's Arabic system of history and knowledge.

Some of Bittar's recent artwork based on an archive of stories she has been collecting that focuses on how the post-9/11 environment in the United States has sparked spontaneous conversations and storytelling dealing with both the tragedy for Palestinians of leaving Palestine in 1948 and the dispossession of Middle Eastern and North African Jews of their property in Muslim countries:

Old people are writing and talking in the oral tradition and telling their children what happened to them. That narrative is coming out. At the same time, Mizrahim Jews are talking about their narratives. No one has heard these stories. Both Mizrahim Jews and Palestinians have held back until now . . . Old people are beginning to tell their stories. Many have come from Iraq. Now they are eager to recall these stories and go back to the Middle East.³²

The relation of the artist herself to these stories is not merely scholarly. Bittar came to them not only through her professional art practice but through her own experience of straddling two cultures and embodying the pain and pleasures of living as an Arab in the United States and married to a Jew. As the situation for Arab-Americans worsens in the United States, many Arabs as well as Arab-Jews are considering moving back to countries in the Middle East. Bittar's recording of these conversations and stories through her artwork creates a space of memory that is also historical and cultural as a means to resist the increasing alienation that Arab-Americans are now being made to feel in their own land (the United States), time, family, and person.

Throughout this book, I have focused on what gets erased when Jewish feminist artists lose their culturally distinctive voice or beliefs, as Greenberg did, by assimilating into acceptable modernist aesthetics. What interests me in this chapter is how far we have come from the debunking aspects of Greenbergian formalism, since the erasure of Jewishness as well as the social is no longer practiced by younger feminist artists working today. Unlike the feminist artists from New York, Greenbergian formalism holds very little sway over these women living on the West Coast. Nor do these works disavow internal ethnic and class differences in the way that early feminist art in California did, though the work of Martha Rosler and Eleanor Antin did already foreshadow skepticism about the universalism of women's collectives at that time. The narrative art discussed in

this chapter constructs an argument concerning geography and identity that revolves around questions of displacement. Significantly, many of the artists in this chapter undergo several displacements back to the cultures that they or their families left. Therefore, the social context that they reference isn't simply that of southern California, and the displacement isn't simply from New York or the Midwest.

The fact that I end this book with a discussion of an Arab-American artist is meant to underscore the importance of a transnational and comparative frame, and also a trans-ethnic one. This is a very different framework from that of an older European-based notion of identity which still underwrites a notion of Jewishness that operates on the basis of excluding others. Given the shifting landscape of the post-9/11 environment, it is no longer possible to render a kind of Jewish-American or Arab-American feminist subjectivity solely through a US national framework defined by ethnicity, gender, or the boundaries of the nation-state. It is evident that artistic practices within both the Jewish-American and Arab-American communities in California are structured more recently around multiple horizons of experience and histories and as a result are in a state of transition at this historical moment. The issues raised in this chapter speak to the nature of these transitions and some of the core debates about the future of feminist art practices and feminist art history as both a political process and an academic discipline in the United States. Part of what this transition involves is the need to recognize that the internal dynamics of feminist art practices and academe in the United States does not lend itself to a smooth or simple art history, but to one that has very distinct regional locations (in which New York-based artists tended to be favored) and that this was the direct result of a Eurocentric cosmopolitanism derived in part from a modernist formalism that favored the deracinated individual artist and the urban space of the American city as a privileged space for producing cosmopolitan subjects. However, this chapter suggests that America and its artists cannot be studied only within the territories of the United States and that the question of cosmopolitan knowledges that are feminist and progressive need to be understood in relation to other spaces as well as allegiances to other nationalisms, identities, and networks that are changeable and contingent. Such practitioners are now elaborating a new kind of feminism in the arts and see their identity as connected not to one state but rather to transnational communities. What connects their work is their desire to establish alternative views that give a more relational understanding of the multiple histories of diasporic groups that would make a different kind of cosmopolitanism imaginable through artwork that puts emphasis on particularity, hybridity and openness to difference.

Notes

Introduction

- 1 Many of the artists I have interviewed have welcomed my approach as an opportunity to rethink their earlier work from such a fresh perspective.
- 2 K. Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*, London: Routledge, 1998, 1–2.
- 3 See L. Bloom, "Ghosts of Ethnicity: Rethinking Art Discourses of the 1940s and 1980s," *Socialist Review* 94, nos. 1–2, 1995, 129–63.
- 4 J. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 4.
- 5 Though I have limited the topic to a discussion of US Jewish artists, the veiled role that Jewishness plays in feminist art in other countries is an urgently relevant question. For further writing on this topic, see Griselda Pollock, "Gleaning in History," in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, London: Routledge, 1996, 266–88, and Griselda Pollock, "Painting as a Backward Glance that Does Not Kill," in Greg Hainge (ed.), *Fascist Aesthetics*, special edition of *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 42, 2000: 116–44. Also see Amélia Jones, "The Undecidability of Difference: The Work of Rachel Garfield," in *Rachel Garfield: You'd Think So, Wouldn't You?*, Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Galleries, 2005, 17–32, and Nicolas Mirzoeff, (ed.), *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, London: Routledge, 1999. For further writing on artwork specifically on the Holocaust, see Shelley Hornstein, Laura Levitt, and Laurence Silberstein (eds), *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust*, New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- 6 See D. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, New York: Basic Books, 1995, 1–17.
- 7 Thelma Golden described her 2001 exhibition "Freestyle" at the Studio Museum in Harlem as a showcase of "postblack art" by a new generation of artists who approach racial identity as something to be experimented with, or even left alone, but not as the only central feature of the artists' work. Though the postblack label was not initially meant as an anti-multiculturalism label it has been circulating in the art world as such according to Holland Cotter, "Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?" *New York Times*, 29 July 2005. For a discussion of the problematic emergence of postfeminism in the arts, see Amelia Jones, "'Post-feminism': A Remasculinization of Culture?" (1990) in Hilary Robinson (ed.), *Feminism – Art Theory – An Anthology 1968–2000*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, 496–506. For an excellent comprehensive overview of feminist art

Each monitor appeared at eye level, with the characters onscreen appearing as life-size but cut off at the neck. Each tape ran for ten minutes, and was followed by a song. For example, "Fiddler on the Roof" followed the video of Dew Drop Lady, "Ain't No Sunshine" followed that of Janie Bell, etc. The tapes played simultaneously on all four monitors.

- 22 T. Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997, 20.
- 23 D. Abrams, presentation at the Jewish Museum, 6 November 2002, unpublished text.
- 24 D. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 188.

6 California feminist art and postnationalist identities

- 1 The last fifty years in southern California have seen a dramatic shift from a largely citrus-based agricultural landscape to a residential sprawl of urban and suburban housing, shopping malls, and freeways. Helen and Newton Harrison's *The Lagoon Cycle*, dating from 1972, deals with this shift in the physical environment of southern California. Their project addresses this transformation through the dialogue between two mythological alter-egos: the Lagoonmaker and the witness (Helen Harrison).
- 2 *I Love Del Mar* was an installation at Franklin Furnace, New York, 1988.
- 3 For a more thorough discussion of Las Comadres, see R. Wallen, M. Waller, and A. Mancillas, "Making Art, Making Citizens: Las Comadres and the Post-National Aesthetic," in Bloom (ed.), *With Other Eyes*, 107–32, and J. Berelowitz, "A Feminist Collective Negotiates a New Paradigm for Women at the U.S./Mexico Border," *Genders* 28, 1998. The members of Las Comadres were Kirsten Aaboe, Yareli Arizmendi, Maria Kristina Dybbro-Augirre, Anna O'Cain, Carmela Castrejón, Frances Charteris, Maria Eraña, Laura Esparaza, Emily Hicks, Berta Jottar, Eloisa de Leon, Graciela Ovejero, Lynn Susholtz, Ruth Wallen, Marguerite Waller, Rocio Weiss, and Cindy Zimmerman.
- 4 *La Vecindad* was originally installed at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, in 1990, and subsequently shown at the Bridge Gallery for Contemporary Art in El Paso, Texas, in 1991. In 1993, a new version of the library was included in a large traveling exhibition titled *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico–United States Border Experience*, co-organized by the Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.
- 5 R. Wallen, unpublished interview with the author, 6 November 2003.
- 6 To view *Family Stories* online, see www.sdpalestinianjewishdialogue.org.
- 7 Wallen interview, 6 November 2003.
- 8 See Wallen's website: <http://communication.ucsd.edu/rwallen/dialogue/ruth.html>.
- 9 See *ibid.*
- 10 B. Naidus, "Teaching Art as a Subversive Activity," in M. Powell and V. Speiser (eds), *The Arts, Education, and Social Change*, Cambridge, Mass.: Lesley University and Peter Lang Publishers, 2004, 169–83.
- 11 For an overview of Beverly Naidus's work, see her website: <http://faculty.washington.edu/bnaidus/>.
- 12 Naidus has two artist's books in print: *One Size Does Not Fit All*, Littleton, Colo.: Aigis, 1992, and *What Kinda Name Is That?* Northampton, Mass.: Kinkos, 1995–6.
- 13 B. Naidus, text from *Right Dress Size*, in *What Kinda Name Is That?*
- 14 B. Naidus, text from *Neat, Blonde Wife*, 2001.
- 15 B. Naidus, text from *You're Greek, Aren't You?* 1995.

- 16 B. Naidus, text from *An Anglo?* 1995.
- 17 B. Naidus, text from *Wrong Kind of Jew*, 1995.
- 18 B. Naidus, text from *Occupied Territory*, 2001.
- 19 L. Shaddow, unpublished interview with the author, 30 September 2003.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Double Self-Portrait in the Kitchen* was commissioned by the Arad Arts Project in Israel's Negev Desert in 1999.
- 23 Shaddow interview, 30 September 2003.
- 24 For an overview of Doris Bittar's work, see her website: <http://visarts.ucsd.edu/~dbittar>. For writings on Bittar's work, see J. Saidi, "Art Shows Arabs, Jews Reaching Out," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 February 2003, B6; and R. Pincus, "Doris Bittar at David Zapf," *Art in America*, April 2001, 148–9. For selected writings by Bittar herself, see "Oasis of Storytelling: Narrative as a Tool for Change in Jewish–Palestinian Dialogue" (review of *Oasis of Dreams*, by Grace Feuerverger and interview with the author), *Al Jadid*, Spring 2002, 27–8; "Where Jews and Palestinians Seek Understanding," *San Diego Union Tribune*, 22 August 2001, B5.
- 25 D. Bittar, unpublished interview with the author, 26 October 2003.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 D. Bittar, text from *Semites: Dialogue 1, Manal and Gila*, 2003.
- 28 D. Bittar, text from *Semites: Manal and Sitto*, 2002.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 D. Bittar, text from *Semites: Dialogue 2, Lidia and Rachmin*, 2003.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 D. Bittar, unpublished interview with the author, 30 January 2004.