

**Reframing Home: Diasporic Hybridity, Spatial Aesthetics, and Affective Spectatorship
in Arab-Canadian Cinema**

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that Arab-Canadian cinema constitutes a politically significant cultural formation that actively shapes, rather than merely reflects, the diasporic identities of Arab and Muslim communities in Canada. Analysing fictional and documentary works produced between the early 1990s and the mid-2020s — such as Ruba Nadda's *Sabah* (2005) and *Cairo Time* (2009), Bachir Bensaddek's *Montréal la blanche* (2016), Pierre Sidaoui's *A Scent of Mint* (2002), Nisreen Baker's *Things Arab Men Say* (2016), and *Arab Women Say What?!* (2023) among others — the study contends that these films generate representational spaces in which identity is negotiated and reimagined against Orientalist misrepresentation, post-9/11 racialisation, and the structural asymmetries concealed within Canadian multicultural discourse.

Three analytical frameworks structure the inquiry. The first draws on Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the third space, Brah's diaspora cartographies, and Anzaldúa's borderlands concept to examine diasporic identity as an embodied, processual negotiation expressed through spatial configurations, sensory aesthetics, and elemental metaphor. The second applies Crenshaw's intersectionality paradigm and critical race theory to analyse the interlocking operations of race, gender, religion, and class in the films' representations of Arab and Muslim femininity, masculine vulnerability, and the differential politics of mobility in Canadian urban space. The third builds on Hall's encoding/decoding model to investigate how filmmakers encode counter-narratives within institutionally legible genres, and how those narratives are decoded across the media ecologies that mediate their reception.

The study concludes that Arab-Canadian cinema refuses equally the consolations of nostalgic return and the demands of assimilationist integration, developing instead a formal vocabulary — generic hybridity, archival poetics, testimonial intimacy — commensurate with the complexity of diasporic experience and constitutive of an enduring intervention in the politics of representation in multicultural Canada.

Keywords: Arab-Canadian cinema, diasporic identity, hybridity, intersectionality, representation

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Growing up in a small mountain town, I never once imagined that I would break free from the world I knew — making my way from undergraduate studies, to a master's program, and now to a doctorate. As a child, I wore glasses for my nearsightedness, and the adults around me would joke that I looked like “a little doctor.” It never occurred to me that one day, that throwaway joke might actually come true.

It feels like last year when I decided to choose Arabic as my undergraduate programme. It feels like last week when Canada became my destination for graduate school. It feels like yesterday when I had my first class for PhD. It feels like this morning when I was scratching my head, thinking hard about what to write for this essay.

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AI Usage Disclosure

During the writing of this thesis, Claude (Anthropic) was used in the following capacities:

- Brainstorming possible film titles
- Brainstorming the general structure of the essay
- Linguistic refinement, including grammar correction and vocabulary precision

I want to emphasize that no part of this thesis was generated or drafted by Claude. All ideas, analysis, and arguments are original to the author. The linguistic refinement described above was limited to grammatical and lexical and did not extend to idea generation.

Introduction

In the spring of 2005, Ruba Nadda's debut feature *Sabah* (2005) opened to quiet critical appreciation in Toronto — a romantic comedy whose Syrian Muslim protagonist navigated love, family obligation, and cultural displacement in ways that Canadian screens had never before attempted. That same year, Zarqa Nawaz's documentary *Me and the Mosque* (2005) trained a camera on the gendered architecture of prayer spaces and the Muslim women who contested them. As Pakistani-British-Canadian, Nawaz's work does not belong to Arab-Canadian cinema proper; it is included in this study because its analysis of gendered mosque space and the racialisation of Muslim femininity addresses dynamics — the policing of Muslim women's bodies, the negotiation of religious identity within a multicultural host society — shared across Arab and non-Arab Muslim diasporic communities alike. Together with Nadda's *Sabah*, it announced the emergence of a distinct and politically urgent cinematic formation: one in which Muslim-Canadian and Arab-Canadian voices, though not identical, converge around a common project of representational reclamation. Over more than three decades (1990s-2020s), this formation has expanded considerably — from Michka Saal and Pierre Sidaoui to Bachir Bensaddek's snow-encrusted meditation on Algerian exile in *Montréal la blanche* (2016) and Nisreen Baker's barbershop ethnography *Things Arab Men Say* (2016) and the choral testimonies of *Arab Women Say What?!* (2023). These films, diverse in form and origin, share a common project: the articulation of diasporic selfhood against the grain of post-9/11 suspicion, Orientalist caricature, and the assimilationist pressures embedded within Canadian multiculturalism's celebrated but contested framework of inclusion.

This dissertation examines Arab-Canadian cinema as a site of ideological struggle, cultural negotiation, and aesthetic innovation. It argues that these films do not merely reflect the social realities of Arab and Muslim diasporic communities in Canada; rather, they actively constitute those realities by generating representational spaces in which identity is performed, contested, and reimagined. From the phenomenological textures of domestic interiors and urban landscapes to the intersectional dynamics of race, gender, religion, and class, to the semiotic circuits through which meanings are encoded by filmmakers and decoded by viewers, Arab-Canadian cinema reveals the limits of the multicultural discourse while opening new possibilities for belonging. The three chapters that follow pursue this argument through three interrelated analytical lenses — postcolonial hybridity, critical race and intersectional theory, and media semiotics — applied to a corpus of fictional and documentary films spanning from the early 1990s to the mid-2020s.

The stakes of this inquiry are at once aesthetic, political, and ethical. Aesthetically, these films deserve scholarly attention as sophisticated works that hybridize genre, language, and form in ways that enact, rather than merely represent, the diasporic condition. Politically, they intervene in debates about immigration, belonging, and national identity at a moment when the visibility of Arab and Muslim communities in Canadian culture remains structurally constrained. Ethically, the scholarship these films invite must grapple seriously with questions of voice, agency, and the politics of interpretation — who speaks, who listens, and under what institutional conditions. This introduction situates the dissertation within these overlapping fields, outlines the theoretical frameworks that guide its analysis, presents the corpus and methodology, and surveys the chapter structure.

Canada is home to approximately 750,000 people of Arab origin, constituting one of the largest and most culturally diverse diasporic communities in the country (Statistics Canada, 2021). Arriving in multiple waves since the late nineteenth century — from Syrian Lebanese merchants and labourers in the early twentieth century, to Egyptian professionals and Palestinian refugees in the 1960s and 1970s, to more recent arrivals fleeing the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Libya — Arab-Canadians represent a heterogeneous population whose common identity is less a matter of shared origin than of shared experience within a host society that has alternately welcomed and suspected them (Abu-Laban, 1980; Telmissany, 2023).

The attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed the conditions under which Arab and Muslim communities in Canada and the Western world more broadly were seen and represented. Media scholars have extensively documented the intensification of Orientalist stereotyping in the years following the attacks: the conflation of Arab identity with Islamic extremism, the reduction of Muslim women to figures of either victimhood or threat, and the systematic exclusion of Arab and Muslim voices from mainstream news and entertainment media (Said, 1997; Shaheen, 2001; Alsultany, 2012). The social-psychological consequences of this representational environment have been similarly well-documented; research by Esses et al. (2013) demonstrates that sustained exposure to threat-based media representations of Arab and Muslim communities significantly increases attitudes of social exclusion and dehumanisation among non-Arab-Canadian audiences.

It is within this hostile representational ecology that Arab-Canadian cinema emerged as a significant counter-public formation. The concept of the counter-public, developed by Fraser (1990) as a critical supplement to Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere, designates spaces in which subordinated social groups formulate and circulate counter-discourses that challenge hegemonic representations of their identities and interests. Arab-Canadian films — particularly those produced with the support of institutions such as the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), the Canada Media Fund (CMF), and various provincial arts councils — occupy precisely this counter-public function, albeit in a paradoxical form characteristic of Canadian cinema as a whole. Unlike the independent or community-funded counter-publics Fraser envisions, these films are largely creatures of the state: institutionally enabled, financially dependent, and therefore structurally accountable to the liberal multicultural ideology that underwrites their funding. Yet that dependence does not neutralise their critical force. Arab-Canadian filmmakers consistently exploit the gap between the state's investment in a celebratory image of multicultural Canada and the more unsettling realities their films actually depict, embedding oppositional cues within institutionally legible frameworks. The result is a counter-public formation that operates from within rather than against the dominant cultural apparatus — a condition of constrained agency that is itself a defining feature of minority filmmaking in a heavily state-subsidised national cinema. They create representational spaces where Arab and Muslim diasporic subjects speak for themselves, on their own terms, refusing the simplifications of both Orientalist othering and state-sponsored multiculturalism.

Canadian multiculturalism, enshrined as official policy since 1971 and given legislative

force in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988, occupies a complex and contested position in this analysis. On one hand, Canada's multicultural framework has provided institutional support for minority cultural production — including film funding, broadcasting regulations that favour Canadian content, and academic programs in ethnic and diaspora studies. On the other hand, as scholars including Bannerji (2000), Mackey (1999), and Walcott (2003) have argued, Canadian multiculturalism functions as a liberal ideology of managed diversity that celebrates cultural difference while leaving intact the racial and class hierarchies that determine whose difference counts as culture and whose as threat. Arab-Canadian cinema inhabits this ambivalence, often simultaneously dependent on and critical of the multicultural institutional frameworks that make its production possible.

1 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In examining Arab-Canadian cinema, it is essential to ground the analysis in robust theoretical frameworks that illuminate the complexities of diasporic cultural production. This chapter provides a comprehensive literature review of three interrelated theoretical paradigms that underpin such analysis: diaspora theories, intersectionality and critical race theory (CRT), and media representation theory. Each section traces the evolution of key concepts and debates within these frameworks, highlighting how they contribute to an understanding of Arab-Canadian cinematic narratives and contexts. The review is organized thematically, but the frameworks often overlap—for instance, diaspora experiences are invariably inflected by intersections of race, gender, and class, and the representational practices of media both shape and contest diasporic identities. By synthesizing foundational theorists and current

scholarship, this chapter emphasizes the contributions and tensions of each framework, setting the stage for subsequent analyses of Arab-Canadian films (discussed in later chapters) without delving into specific film texts here. The goal is to delineate how these theories, together, provide a nuanced lens through which to interpret the hybrid identities, power dynamics, and representational strategies evident in Arab-Canadian cinema.

1.1 Diaspora Theories

Diaspora theory offers a vital foundation for understanding how cultural identities are formed and negotiated in migration contexts. Diaspora, in its classical usage, referred to the dispersion of a people from an original homeland (exemplified historically by the Jewish or Armenian diasporas) and implied an eventual return to that lost home. Early definitions emphasized common characteristics: collective memory of the homeland, sustained connections across borders, and a persistent longing to return. For example, Brubaker (2005) noted that classical diasporas often maintained an ideology of return, yearning for a homeland to which not all would actually go back. However, as voluntary and forced migrations proliferated in the late 20th century, scholars began questioning these fixed parameters. Not all contemporary diasporic communities sustain a literal desire for repatriation; instead, many cultivate what Brah (1996) calls a “homing desire” (p. 16)—a yearning for belonging that is not the same as an urge to return to a homeland. The concept of diaspora “places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins” (Brah, 1996, p. 189). In other words,

diaspora implies multi-local attachments: the diasporic subject may feel at home in multiple places or in-between them, without being reducible to a single territorial origin. This shift from a homeland-centric view toward a more fluid understanding of belonging marks a key evolution in diaspora theory.

Hall (1990/2021) encapsulates this paradigm shift with the dictum of “routes” (p. 266) over roots. In his seminal essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence rooted in a homeland past, but “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (p. 260)—an ongoing production molded by history and context. He contrasts a view of identity based on stable roots (essentialist, tied to a place of origin) with one that foregrounds the dynamic routes of migration, travel, and hybridization. Diaspora identities, according to Hall, are defined by fractured trajectories—people continuously positioning and re-positioning themselves in relation to multiple cultural landscapes. This perspective was echoed by Gilroy (1993) in his concept of the “Black Atlantic” (p. ix) which highlighted how African diasporic cultures emerged from transnational circulation rather than singular origins. Overall, the move from roots to routes underscores that for diasporic subjects, identity is less about static origins but more about how you continually navigate and negotiate cultural spaces in between.

Building on this non-essentialist view, diaspora theorists have introduced concepts that capture the hybridity and in-betweenness of diasporic life. Bhabha’s theory of the third space is particularly pivotal. Bhabha (2004) conceives of cultural identity as an “emergent” (p. 222) and “contested” (p. 249) process that arises in the liminal spaces of translation and

encounter. In *The Location of Culture* (2004), he argues that when two cultures meet (as in diasporic or colonial contexts), they produce a hybrid third space of enunciation that is neither one nor the other, but something new and ambivalent. Bhabha famously describes hybridity as destabilizing the authority of purity through mimicry—being “almost the same, but not quite” (p. 123). This in-between position engenders a “double temporality” (p. 219), wherein the past and present are continually reframed through each other. The third space is thus a site of productive ambiguity: it is where new cultural identities are performatively articulated, even as they remain in flux. Diaspora communities often inhabit such third spaces, where they must navigate between ancestral traditions and the norms of their host societies, creating hybrid practices and identities. Bhabha’s ideas, albeit rooted in postcolonial theory, have been widely applied in diaspora studies to explain how immigrant or exilic subjects forge new identities that subvert neat binaries of self/other and home/host.

Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa adds a complementary lens with her notion of the *Borderlands*. In *Borderlands = La Frontera* (2001), Anzaldúa writes from the experience of the U.S.-Mexico border, envisioning the borderland as both a geographic and psychological space of mixed identities. She speaks of living in the “psychic borderlands” (p. 76)—a condition of trauma and creativity akin to a constant cultural collision, “an open wound” (p. 3) where different identities meet and clash. Her concept of *mestiza consciousness* celebrates the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and contradiction, which resonates with the diasporic condition of being stretched between worlds. While Anzaldúa’s work is specific to the Latinx border context, its impact on diaspora theory is significant: it emphasizes that being of mixed or intersecting cultures can be a source of strength and new

vision, not merely a loss or dilution. Together, theorists like Bhabha and Anzaldúa underscore an important contribution of contemporary diaspora theories—a shift from seeing diaspora identity as derivative (a diluted form of some original culture) to seeing it as innovative and performative, actively produced in the contact zones of cultures.

Another cornerstone of diaspora theory is the idea of diaspora space and multi-locality, extensively articulated in Avtar Brah's book *Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities* (1996). Brah argues that diaspora is not just about the dispersion of people, but about the configurations of space and belonging that result. She introduces the term “diaspora space” (p. 204) to describe a social arena where immigrants, their descendants, and those who are positioned as indigenous or native to a place meet and interact. Importantly, diaspora space is inhabited not only by the diasporic people themselves but also by others around them—it is a relational space constituted through encounters. Within this space, issues of home and identity are continually negotiated. Brah distinguishes between homeland as an actual place of origin and home as an emotional or psychic space of belonging. She notes that for many diasporic subjects, home is a matter of multi-locality: one might feel connections to multiple places simultaneously—for instance, to a country of origin (through memories, ancestry, or imagination) and to the country of settlement (through daily lived experience and community). Brah's concept of homing desire (as opposed to homeland-orientated desire) captures this longing for a sense of home that may be fulfilled in diaspora itself rather than through physical return. This perspective helps resolve the tension between longing and belonging—showing that diasporic people often create new homes in their host countries while still maintaining affective ties to their places of origin.

Brah's work also highlights the processual nature of diasporic place-making. Diaspora space is not a neutral container where cultural mixture automatically occurs; rather, it is actively produced through social practices, power relations, and histories. For example, in a diasporic community hub—be it a café, a barbershop, or an online forum—space becomes *place* when people imbue it with shared memories, rituals, and meanings. As geographer Tuan (1977) observed, “space” (p. v) becomes “place” (p. v) when it is endowed with value through human experience. Diasporic places are thus constructed by practices like storytelling, gathering for cultural events, maintaining languages and traditions, and even through everyday material culture (food, music, religious objects, etc.). These actions layer the space with diasporic memory and social ties. Brah emphasizes that diaspora space is inherently a site of encounter—it's where different trajectories of people meet (immigrants, locals, other diasporas), often under conditions shaped by power (such as racial hierarchies or immigration laws). Accordingly, diaspora space can be a site of contest and creativity. It is rife with tensions—between nostalgia and adaptation, between inclusion and exclusion—yet it also enables new cultural formations and solidarities to emerge.

The evolution of diaspora theory over the past few decades reveals certain tensions and debates. One major discussion revolves around the definition and scope of the term *diaspora*. Scholars like Safran (1991) or Cohen (2018) initially proposed criteria to define diaspora (e.g. dispersal from a homeland, collective memory, alienation in hostland, desire for eventual return, etc.), which helped distinguish diasporas from other types of migrant communities. However, as more groups began to be described as diasporas (including those without a single homeland or those not desiring return), some worry that the term risks

becoming too broad or metaphorical, losing analytical precision. Clifford (1994), for instance, argued for a flexible usage of diaspora that acknowledges the diversity of experiences but warned against stretching it to include *all* forms of travel or hybridity. The concept must retain meaning by implying some enduring connection (imagined or real) to a homeland or community of co-ethnics across borders. In response, contemporary theorists often distinguish between diaspora and related terms like transnationalism.

Whereas transnationalism broadly denotes the flow of people, capital, and culture across nations (often emphasizing economic and network aspects), diaspora carries a heavier weight of identity and emotion—it implies an orientation (cultural, emotional, political) toward an elsewhere or an originary community, even as one is rooted in a new locale. Another debate concerns whether diaspora should be considered a condition (a description of a group's location and dispersion) or a stance (a critical perspective). Some, suggest thinking of diaspora as a form of consciousness or positioning—a way of understanding one's identity as spanning boundaries and nation-states (Kokot et al., 2004). In this view, diaspora can be a lens for analysis that even people in the second or third generation (who may have never been to the ancestral homeland) adopt to interpret their place in the world.

Despite these debates, diaspora theory's contributions are significant, especially for cultural and film studies. It has reoriented scholars away from methodological nationalism (the assumption that culture and identity are bounded by nation-states) toward a recognition of hybridity, fluidity, and networked identities. Diaspora frameworks illuminate how artists and filmmakers from diasporic backgrounds produce works that reflect multi-rooted identities and challenge singular narratives of belonging. For example, Naficy's (2001) concept

of “accented cinema” (p. 7) describes how exilic and diasporic filmmakers infuse their films with an accent—a stylistic inflection—that arises from their liminal positions between cultures. According to Naficy, these filmmakers “exist in a state of tension and dissension with both their original and their current homes” (p. 10). This unique perspective leads them to adopt aesthetic strategies that differ from mainstream (oftentimes nationalist) cinemas: for instance, accented films often feature multilingual dialogue, fragmented narratives, themes of memory and nostalgia, and images of border-crossing or displacement. Such films refuse to fit neatly into one national canon, much like their creators refuse to be confined to one cultural identity. In the context of Arab-Canadian cinema, diaspora theory helps us understand the filmmakers’ preoccupation with themes of home(land), identity negotiation, and intercultural encounter. It also helps frame why these films often resist simple categorizations: they are neither purely Canadian cinema in the traditional sense (since they contest the white Anglo-centric narratives of Canadian identity) nor simply Arab cinema (since they are made in diaspora and speak to minority experiences in the West). Instead, they belong to a diaspora cinema tradition—a polycentric, cross-border cultural space of filmmaking. As Alexander De Man (2023) observes, diaspora cinema is best understood *not* as a strict genre or category of films, but as an instrumental framework to grasp how diaspora identities, cultures, and spaces are discursively co-constructed through cinematic practices. This means that examining Arab-Canadian films through diaspora theories allows scholars to see how the films themselves *construct* ideas of identity and community, rather than merely reflecting a pre-given immigrant experience.

In summary, diaspora theories—from Hall’s cultural identity in process, to Bhabha’s hybridity and third space, to Brah’s diaspora space and homing desire—provide critical insight into the lived realities of Arab diasporas in Canada and the imaginative narratives that arise from them. These theories have evolved from an earlier focus on loss and return to a contemporary emphasis on creativity, hybridity, and multi-rooted belonging, though not without internal tensions regarding definitions and scope. Their chief contribution is to insist on the fluidity of identity and the importance of *context*: who we are is shaped by where we have come from, where we are now, and how we continuously shuttle between these realms in memory, practice, and imagination. This sensibility is indispensable for analyzing Arab-Canadian cinema, which so often portrays characters and stories in-between cultures. Diaspora theory attunes us to the layered meanings of *home* and *exile* on screen, the presence of multiple languages and cultural codes, and the negotiation of belonging that characters (and by extension, their real-life communities) undergo. It sets the stage for incorporating other frameworks—such as intersectionality and media representation—by reminding us that no cultural production exists in a vacuum; it is always part of a diasporic web of connections, defined by difference as much as by similarity.

1.2 Intersectionality and Critical Race Theory

While diaspora theory foregrounds questions of home and identity in transnational contexts, intersectionality and critical race theory (CRT) bring into focus the axes of power—race, gender, class, and more—that structure those identities and experiences. Arab-Canadian communities, like other diasporas, are not homogeneous: they are internally stratified and

externally racialized. Intersectionality and CRT offer theoretical tools to analyze how multiple forms of oppression converge and how racial power operates within ostensibly multicultural societies. This section discusses the origins and key ideas of these frameworks, their evolution, and their relevance to studying Arab-Canadian cinema and diasporic cultural production.

Intersectionality originated in legal scholarship and Black feminist thought as a corrective to single-axis analyses of oppression. The term was coined by Crenshaw (1991) who examined how Black women fell through the cracks of both feminist theory (often centered on white women) and antiracist policy (often centered on Black men). Crenshaw observed that “racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, yet they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” (p. 1242). When feminism treated women as a homogeneous category and anti-racism treated Blacks as a homogeneous category, Black women’s experiences were rendered invisible. To address this problem, Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as an analytic lens that insists on accounting for multiple, intersecting axes of identity and oppression. She famously wrote that intersectionality is not a grand “new, totalizing theory of identity,” but rather a way to highlight the *need* to consider “multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 1245). In other words, our social experiences (privilege or disadvantage) are shaped by several factors at once—race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, immigration status, etc.—and these factors interlock to create something qualitatively different than any one factor alone.

The intersectional approach has since become a cornerstone in feminist theory, sociology, and cultural studies. It urges researchers to ask, for example, not just “What is it like to be Arab in Canada?” or “What is it like to be a woman in Canada?” but “What is it like to be an Arab woman in Canada?”—and further, to consider how religion, class, and other dimensions modify that experience. In the context of Arab-Canadian communities, an intersectional lens reveals how gender norms, racialization, religion, and class status mutually constitute one another. For instance, stereotypes about Arab or Muslim women (e.g. that they are oppressed, voiceless, or exotic) are rooted in a mix of gendered and racialized assumptions—what Jiwani (2010) calls the “doubling of discourses” (p.86) that veil Muslim women as *Other* in both racial and gendered terms. Jiwani’s research on Canadian media demonstrates that portrayals of the Muslim veil often cast it as a symbol of female subjugation, thereby justifying paternalistic attitudes, while also marking the wearer as a racial-religious outsider. Such portrayals affect Arab-Canadian women doubly: they may face patriarchal constraints within their communities and Islamophobic scrutiny from the outside society. Intersectionality helps analyze these compounded pressures. It also helps highlight agency and resistance: many Arab-Canadian women actively navigate and challenge these pressures, asserting identities that refuse the binary of oppressed-traditional vs. liberated-Western. Intersectional analysis can thus uncover, as Crenshaw put it, the “intersectional disempowerment” that occurs when different power structures overlap, but it can also illuminate the unique positional insights and strategies of those who live at these intersections.

A key evolution in intersectionality has been its expansion beyond the initial black feminist context to a wide array of social locations. Today, researchers speak of intersectionality in examining, for example, queer immigrant experiences, or disabilities in ethnic minority communities, and so on. This broad adoption shows the framework's heuristic power, but it has also led to debates about maintaining its critical edge. Some critics caution that intersectionality can be co-opted as a mere checklist of identities or diluted into a trendy term detached from its roots in social justice activism. Crenshaw and others have stressed that intersectionality is fundamentally about power—it's not just describing identity for identity's sake, but analyzing how systems of power (racism, sexism, etc.) create hierarchies among different people, even within the same group. In our context, this means looking at how, for example, Arab-Canadian men and women might experience Canadian society differently (due to gendered Islamophobia, among other factors), or how middle-class Arab immigrants' experiences diverge from those of working-class refugees, etc. We must also be attentive to *intra*-community power dynamics: intersectionality directs us to ask how patriarchy or heteronormativity might operate within Arab diasporic communities, at the same time that those communities face racism from outside. Indeed, one of intersectionality's insights is that internal critiques are necessary for true inclusion—as Crenshaw (1997) notes, women of color sometimes have to “split one's political energies” (p. 1252) between battling racism in feminist spaces and sexism in antiracist spaces. In Arab diasporic contexts, this could translate to, say, feminist activists challenging sexism in their immigrant communities while also fighting anti-Arab racism in the broader society.

The application of intersectionality to Arab-Canadian contexts is evident in recent research. For example, Eloulabi's study (2023) used in-depth interviews with Arab-Canadian youth to explore how their Arab identity intersects with gender, religion, and other facets. The findings, in line with intersectional theory, highlighted a great diversity of experiences: participants' sense of being Arab was shaped not just by heritage but also by whether they were male or female, Muslim or Christian, queer or straight, and by their social class and immigrant generation. Such research underscores that there is no single Arab-Canadian experience—identities are multifaceted and context-dependent. From a theoretical standpoint, intersectionality enriches diaspora studies by preventing over-generalization. It asks us to consider, for instance, how an Arab Muslim woman wearing a hijab might encounter different challenges (and draw on different forms of resilience) than an Arab Christian man, even though both are part of the same diaspora.

Critical race theory (CRT) complements intersectionality by focusing explicitly on systemic racism and power structures, particularly as they manifest in legal, political, and cultural institutions. CRT emerged in the mid-1970s and 1980s among American legal scholars (notably Bell, Crenshaw, Delgado, and others) who were dissatisfied with the slow progress of racial reform in the post-Civil Rights era. They argued that traditional approaches to racism were too limited, often perceiving racism as isolated prejudicial acts that could be remedied by colorblind laws. CRT instead posits that racism is not aberrational but ordinary—a common, everyday embedded feature of social systems. In one of its foundational tenets, CRT asserts that racism is deeply ingrained in the fabric of society, including in ostensibly neutral laws and institutional practices. Because it is structural and

systemic, racism does not require individual intent or overt bigotry to persist; it is reproduced through normal operations of institutions, unless actively countered. Bell illustrated this with the idea that racial inequalities adapt to changing contexts and that even well-intentioned laws can leave deeper structures intact (Bell famously argued, for example, that school desegregation efforts often benefited white interests and, when those interests waned, true integration stalled).

Another core concept of CRT is “interest convergence,” formulated by Bell (2005, p. 33). This principle holds that significant advances in racial justice tend to occur only when they converge with the interests of the white majority. In Bell’s view, white elites will tolerate or encourage racial progress *only* when it aligns with their own economic or political interests; thus, racism’s endurance is partly explained by the fact that it usually advantages the dominant group. As an example, during the Cold War, dismantling American segregation was seen as necessary to improve the nation’s international image, thus converging with geopolitical interests. CRT’s broader critique of liberalism includes a skepticism toward colorblindness and incremental change. Scholar Gotanda (2011) and others argued that the ideal of colorblindness—treating everyone the same in law—often means ignoring the real disadvantages and different histories faced by people of color. By refusing to acknowledge race, colorblind policies can actually reinforce the racial status quo (this is sometimes referred to as the problem of racism as neutrality, the notion that ostensibly neutral criteria are not truly neutral in effect).

In applying CRT to a Canadian context, one must consider both parallels and distinctions with the American experience. Canada's official policy of multiculturalism, often celebrated as tolerant and inclusive, has been critiqued through a CRT lens for potentially masking continuing racial inequalities. The colour-blind ethos of Canadian liberal multiculturalism — the idea that the country does not see race, only individual merit and a cheerful mosaic of cultures — can ironically serve to downplay or ignore the deep-seated hierarchies of race, class, gender, and legal status that persist in society. Critical race scholars (Razack et al., 2010) have pointed out that Canadian national narratives often position the country as benevolent and free of racism (especially in contrast to the U.S.), while the realities of Indigenous marginalization, anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, and other forms of racism tell a different story. For instance, the profiling of Arab and Muslim Canadians in the post-9/11 security climate, or the debates around reasonable accommodation in Quebec that often stigmatized Muslim practices, illustrate racism in the Canadian context that is systemic — in media, law enforcement, and elsewhere — yet frequently denied by appeals to the idea that everyone is treated the same. CRT encourages us to interrogate these denials and to reveal how power and privilege operate beneath official rhetoric. A critical race analysis of Arab-Canadian experiences might note, for example, how immigration policies have racialized impacts — differentiating desirable from undesirable immigrants historically — or how media portrayals of Arabs contribute to public consent for discriminatory security measures.

In Arab-Canadian cinema analysis, CRT and intersectionality together allow scholars to see films not just as personal or cultural stories, but as critiques of structures. Many Arab-Canadian films can be read as counter-narratives that expose and challenge systemic

barriers—what one scholar called using cinema as both evidence and intervention. For instance, a film that depicts an Arab immigrant facing job discrimination or surveillance is not an isolated tale of individual bias; it points to larger patterns of racism in employment or policing. By centering Arab characters and their perspectives, these films provide what CRT terms the “voice of color,” suggesting that those who experience racism can offer unique insights into its operation and must speak for themselves in challenging it. In fact, CRT values story-telling and personal narratives (counter-storytelling) as a method to unsettle dominant accounts—an approach well-aligned with diasporic filmmaking where personal and community stories serve to counter stereotypes.

Another important concept linking CRT to diaspora studies is the idea of racialization. Rather than seeing race as a fixed attribute, scholars understand it as a process—certain groups are *racialized* (as, say, brown or Muslim or Other) in particular socio-political contexts. The Arab diaspora in North America offers a clear example: people of Arab origin were not always seen through a singular racial lens (in fact, Arab immigrants in early 20th-century America were sometimes legally classified as white), but especially after 9/11, Arab and Muslim became heavily racialized categories associated with threat and foreignness. CRT’s attention to how race is constructed and deployed illuminates how Arab-Canadians have been Othered in public discourse. This includes recognizing patterns like Orientalism and how they feed into domestic racial politics. CRT also intersects with intersectionality in that it acknowledges the intersecting hierarchies—for example, how an Arab Muslim woman might face both racialization (as Arab/Muslim) and gendered Orientalism (as a woman from a patriarchal culture), as well as perhaps religious

discrimination. Intersectionality ensures we do not treat race in isolation, and CRT ensures we remain focused on power and inequality rather than just cultural difference.

Tensions within CRT include debates about its pessimism vs. optimism. Bell provocatively suggested the permanence of racism (i.e., it's not ever going to go away entirely), which some found overly bleak. Others, like Delgado and Stefancic, have continued to refine CRT by incorporating issues of Latinx experiences, Asian American perspectives, etc., and exploring topics like intersectionality within CRT, and the idea of structural determinism (the structure of legal thought itself reproducing racism). In recent years, CRT has also become a political flashpoint (especially in the U.S., where it has been distorted in public debates); however, in academic and analytic terms, CRT remains a vital, evolving framework that has expanded globally. There is now critical race scholarship in education, environmental studies, and even critical race approaches to international relations. In Canada, we see the influence of CRT in works that question how multicultural policies can sometimes serve as a smokescreen for continuing white dominance (e.g., the critique of colour-blindness vs. multiculturalism, where studies indicate that simply celebrating diversity without addressing racism may foster discrimination in subtle ways).

For Arab-Canadian cinema, using an intersectional and CRT lens means examining how films portray and interrogate power structures at multiple levels. Do the narratives show the characters encountering systemic barriers (like immigration laws, labor market stratification, security surveillance)? Do they reveal how gender and culture interplay in those encounters (like familial patriarchy modulated by the pressures of living as a minority)? Indeed, many

Arab-Canadian films do exactly this—they often explicitly tackle stereotypes and give nuanced representations of Arab-Canadian women and men that break the monoliths imposed on them. For example, films centered on Arab-Canadian women may highlight how these women assert autonomy and voice, pushing back against both external Orientalist caricatures *and* internal community expectations. By doing so, the films are engaging in what CRT would term a critique of dominant ideology (challenging the stereotype of the voiceless, oppressed Muslim woman) and also participating in an intra-group dialogue about gender equality. Similarly, a film about Arab-Canadian men dealing with underemployment or mental health might address the intersection of race and class, showing how economic marginalization and racial prejudice collide, while also challenging notions of hegemonic masculinity. These layers are fruitfully unpacked with intersectional analysis (to see how different identity factors and oppressions converge) and CRT (to connect personal stories to structural critiques).

In sum, intersectionality and CRT bring to the fore questions of justice, power, and complexity in the study of Arab-Canadian (or any diasporic) cultural production. Intersectionality ensures that we consider the full mosaic of identity, reminding us, for instance, that Arab-Canadian is never a single story, but rather a multiple one inflected by gender, class, religion, sexuality, etc., with each axis modifying how a person experiences both diaspora and host society. CRT keeps us attentive to the reality of racism and inequality, urging analysis beyond feel-good multicultural rhetoric to the actual material and representational conditions under which Arab-Canadians live and create art. These frameworks have evolved to be more inclusive (CRT now engages more with issues like

Islamophobia and postcolonial contexts; intersectionality has broadened to global and non-Black contexts), but they have also faced the tension of being co-opted or misunderstood in the public sphere. Nonetheless, their contributions are invaluable: they provide language to discuss oppression that is systematic rather than incidental, and identities that are intersecting rather than isolated. In applying them to Arab-Canadian cinema, we can better appreciate films as not just stories of individuals but as cultural texts that intervene in social discourses, reveal hidden injustices, and imagine alternative possibilities for solidarity and belonging across difference.

1.3 Media Representation Theory

The third pillar of our theoretical framework is media representation theory, which addresses how images, narratives, and discourses in media shape our understanding of social groups and issues. For the study of Arab-Canadian cinema—indeed, any minority or diasporic cinema—questions of representation are paramount. How are Arabs and Muslims represented in mainstream media, and how do diasporic filmmakers re-present themselves differently? What narrative codes and conventions are at play, and how do audiences interpret these representations? Media representation theory provides tools to dissect these issues, drawing from cultural studies, communication theory, and postcolonial critique. In this section, we explore key concepts including the social construction of images, the power of stereotypes and Orientalism, the encoding/decoding model of communication, and the dynamics of audience reception—all of which illuminate the representational stakes for Arab-Canadian creators and viewers.

At its core, representation theory starts from the premise that media images are not neutral reflections of reality, but constructions that carry ideological meanings. Hall (1980), a central figure in cultural studies, argued that representation connects meaning and language to culture—essentially, our realities are produced through representation. In the context of television, film, and other media, Hall introduced the influential encoding/decoding model which posits that media texts are “structured polysemies” (Pillai, 1992, p. 228). This means they are composed of multiple meanings and are structured in a way that privileges certain interpretations (through encoding by creators) but can ultimately be interpreted (decoded) in various ways by audiences. Hall described how media producers *encode* messages using shared codes (drawing on societal ideologies, genre conventions, etc.), creating a “preferred reading” of a text—an interpretation that seems most natural or intended. However, audiences, situated in diverse social contexts, may decode the text differently: some will accept the preferred meaning (dominant reading), some will negotiate it (accepting some aspects, rejecting others), and some will actively resist or reinterpret it (oppositional reading). This model was groundbreaking in moving away from a one-way notion of media effects towards a more interactive understanding of meaning-making. It acknowledges audience agency while still recognizing that power is involved in how meanings get encoded (since not all interpretations are equally supported by the text’s coding).

Applying Hall’s framework to Arab-Canadian cinema, we can analyze how filmmakers encode counter-narratives into their work and how these might be decoded by different audiences. For instance, an Arab-Canadian film might deliberately subvert a known

stereotype (encoding an oppositional stance against mainstream depictions) and invite audiences—especially those from the depicted community—to decode it in a way that resonates with their lived experiences. At the same time, other viewers might miss or misunderstand that encoding if they view through a dominant cultural lens. Hall’s concept of the media text as a site of a struggle over meaning is especially apt for diasporic cinema, which often *contests* dominant portrayals. As Chapter 3 of this dissertation discusses, Arab-Canadian filmmakers frequently embed preferred readings that challenge hegemonic representations of Arabs by providing more nuanced or sympathetic portrayals. These films thus become arenas of ideological struggle: they speak back to widespread media images that have historically been Orientalist or vilifying, and they offer alternative frames through which viewers can understand Arab identities.

One of the longest-running problematic representational frameworks is Orientalism, a concept famously articulated by Said (1978). Orientalism refers to the centuries-old Western tradition of depicting “the Orient” (primarily the Middle East and Asia) as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and a threatening Other. Said demonstrated that Orientalism is more than just a set of unfavorable images but a discourse, a structured way of thinking that justifies colonial and imperial ambitions. In media and literature, Orientalist representations commonly include stereotypes such as the Arab villain (barbaric, anti-Western terrorist), the Arab sheikh (oil-rich, greedy despot), the veiled woman (oppressed, in need of rescue), or the belly dancer/harem girl (hypersexualized and available). These tropes reduce diverse peoples to a few simplistic character types that are imbued with negative or patronizing connotations. Orientalism also sets up a binary: the rational, modern, moral West versus the irrational, pre-

modern, inferior East. Even though Orientalism as a scholarly concept originates in analyzing 19th-20th century literature and colonial-era texts, its legacy very much persists in contemporary media. The Western news and entertainment media's coverage of the Middle East, especially after events like the 9/11 attacks, often falls back on Orientalist frames that present Arab/Muslim men predominantly as terrorists or fanatics and Arab/Muslim women as oppressed or as exotic subjects of fascination.

Jack Shaheen's extensive research on Hollywood, encapsulated in books like *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), documented over 900 films and found that the vast majority depicted Arabs in a negative light—as villains, buffoons, or lascivious characters, almost never as ordinary protagonists. Shaheen concluded that Hollywood has consistently vilified Arabs, recycling demeaning stereotypes across decades. This vilification in popular culture has real consequences: as media scholars note, these images contribute to the social dehumanization of Arabs and Muslims, making audiences more receptive to discriminatory policies or public hostility. For example, one study in the *Journal of Social Issues* found that media coverage emphasizing threats and negative portrayals of immigrants can increase public support for harsh measures and even foster perceptions of those groups as less human or civilized. In the Canadian context, while Hollywood images spill over, there have also been uniquely Canadian representational issues—such as news media framing of Arab or Muslim Canadians primarily through security or “cultural threats” (Esses et al., 2013, p. 519) lenses (e.g., during the “Sharia law debate” in Ontario running from 2003 to 2005, or the Quebec “Charter of Values” controversy occurred in 2013 and 2014, which targeted visible religious symbols). Scholars like Alsultany (2012, 2013) and others have noted that

even purportedly sympathetic media portrayals can contain subtler forms of stereotyping. Alsultany (2012) introduced the idea of “simplified complex representations” (p. 21) to describe how, post-9/11, TV shows and films often tried to present a balance. For instance, including a “good” Arab/Muslim character to offset the “bad” terrorist character as a strategy to appear sensitive. These simplified complex strategies (like having a Muslim FBI agent hero, or a plot where a suspected Arab terrorist is actually innocent and a white character is the villain) give an illusion of nuance or even “anti-racist” messaging, yet they can still reinforce an underlying notion that Arab/Muslim identity is inherently problematic or suspect (needing constant disavowal of terrorism, etc.). In effect, these media texts say “not all Arabs are bad” but leave intact the assumption that Arabness is something that must continually prove it isn’t “bad.”

Media representation theory also involves understanding stereotypes as a specific representational practice. Stereotypes are over-simplified, generalizing representations of a group that fix them into a limited set of characteristics—often exaggerated and usually negative when applied to marginalized groups. As theorized by scholars such as Lippmann (who first coined the term in the media context) and later by cultural studies theorists, stereotypes operate by othering, establishing an us vs. them where the “them” (out-group) are depicted in ways that justify the attitudes or behaviors of the “us” (in-group). Stereotypes flatten complexity and deny individuality; they are often repeated across media so frequently that they become commonsense in the public imagination. For Arabs and Muslims, as discussed, common stereotypes have included being violent, oppressing women, being religious fanatics, or conversely, in some contexts, being greedy oil sheikhs or comic-relief

cab drivers. These images do represent the reality of millions of diverse individuals no more than “mobster” movies represent all Italian-Americans or “kung fu master” tropes represent all Chinese. Yet because of historical power imbalances (Western dominance in global media production, and the geopolitical conflicts that cast suspicion on Arabs/Muslims), these stereotypes have had particularly tenacious life. They contribute to what CRT scholars call the racialization of discourse—making certain ethnic or religious markers automatically trigger specific negative connotations in audiences’ minds.

Countering and complicating these stereotypes are a driving motivation for many Arab-Canadian and other diasporic filmmakers. This is where media representation theory intersects with diaspora agency: the idea that misrepresented communities can take the cameras into their own hands to portray themselves more authentically and multidimensionally. Scholars have noted the importance of self-representation—when minority groups produce their own media, they often introduce perspectives and truths that are absent or distorted in mainstream representation.

Hall’s work on audience reception and meaning-making also reminds us that representation is not a one-way imposition. Diasporic and marginalized audiences often engage in oppositional decoding of mainstream media—reading against the grain to find subtext or critique the portrayal. For instance, an Arab viewer watching a Hollywood terrorist thriller might be far more skeptical of the narrative and aware of its biases than a non-Arab viewer who decodes it dominantly. This insight has led to specialized studies in diaspora audiences and ethnic media. Oh (2016, 2017) argues for a diasporic identity framework in

studying ethnic media audiences, suggesting that diaspora viewers interpret media through the lens of their hybrid identities and experiences. They may seek out alternative media (like Arab-language satellite TV, or YouTube content creators from their communities) to see themselves represented more fairly, or they may form fan communities that discuss and challenge mainstream representations (for example, online forums where young Arab-Canadians dissect how a film or TV show depicted Arabs). In Chapter 3, the role of *paratexts* like film reviews and educational guides is noted; these also shape how representations are received and understood. Representations do not exist in isolation but instead, they are contextualized by critical discourse, by community conversations, by social media debates, etc. An awareness of these reception dynamics is part of a comprehensive media representation analysis. This is—

Media representation theory has also evolved to incorporate the concept of spectatorship and the gaze. Film theorist Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze" (p. 11) opened questions about who is doing the looking in media and who is the object of the look, although her focus was gender (women as objects of a heterosexual male gaze in classic Hollywood), the concept has been expanded. We can talk about the imperial gaze or white gaze that positions people of color as objects of scrutiny and othering. In many Western films, the implied spectator is white, and the camera's perspective often encourages viewers to look at Arabs and other non-white characters through an othering lens, exoticizing or vilifying them. In contrast, Arab-Canadian or other diasporic films might deliberately subvert the gaze: for example, by privileging the point of view of the Arab characters, making the audience empathize with them as insiders rather than view them as outsiders. This shifting of

the gaze is a powerful representational strategy, essentially saying: we will no longer see ourselves through the eyes of the majority (as an object of pity or fear), but instead assert our own subjectivity and vision. Filmmaker and theorist Trinh (1991) speaks of speaking nearby rather than speaking about, as a way to create more respectful and self-representative narratives. In practice, Arab-Canadian cinema often speaks nearby that the films are made by or in close consultation with the communities they depict, and they aim to represent rather than other. They serve as a counter-public sphere (to use Fraser's term) where Arab-Canadian voices can circulate and challenge the depictions dominant in the mainstream public sphere.

One can observe tensions in media representation theory debates as well. A prominent one is the question: Is positive representation enough? Some argue that simply increasing the number of positive or authentic images of marginalized groups in media will reduce prejudice and empower communities. Indeed, there is evidence that diversified, humanizing portrayals can improve attitudes. However, others point out that representation alone cannot undo structural inequalities—there is a risk of tokenism or complacency (thinking racism is solved because a few TV shows have diverse casts). For instance, the phenomenon of “model minority” or “respectable Muslim” characters can create a binary where “good” minorities are celebrated, while those who fall outside narrow norms (e.g., more religious Muslims, or those struggling socioeconomically) are still stigmatized. Alsultany's critique of simplified complex representations touches on this: having a few good Arabs on screen might make audiences feel that fairness is achieved, but it often goes hand-in-hand with continued framing of the broader group as problematic. Another tension is between stereotype analysis and narrative complexity. Some scholars worry that focusing on whether a character

is a “good” or “bad” representation can become reductive. Instead, they advocate examining the complexity of characters and stories: are the characters fully realized individuals? Does the narrative allow them agency, diversity, and growth? By this measure, a character might be flawed or even villainous (which is fine, not every representation needs to be positive) but the key is whether there are dimension and context versus flat caricature. In diasporic cinema, the aim is typically not to create saintly images of Arabs to counter the villain images, but to show Arabs as human—with virtues and flaws, embedded in specific social contexts, worthy of empathy rather than scorn.

Media representation theory’s contribution to analyzing Arab-Canadian cinema is multifaceted. It guides us to scrutinize how the films communicate—their use of symbols, tropes, genres, visual style—and what assumptions they challenge or reinforce. For example, by placing an Arab Muslim woman at the center of a Canadian rom-com, Ruba Nadda’s film *Sabah* inherently challenges the absence of such figures in that genre and plays with audience expectations. As noted in an earlier chapter, *Sabah* encodes certain visual metaphors (like the protagonist covertly swimming in a modest swimsuit under her clothes) to signal cultural hybridity and the peeling away of stereotypes. The analysis would show how Nadda, as the encoder, used familiar genre codes (romantic comedy warmth and humor) but within them, embedded a critique of cultural constraints and a plea for understanding Muslim women beyond clichés. Media theory also reminds us to consider audience positionality: a scene like that in *Sabah* might be read one way by a Muslim female viewer (“this speaks to the quiet rebellions in our lives”) and another way by a non-Muslim viewer (“oh, she’s modern under her conservative exterior”), and another by a patriarchal traditional viewer

(“this is improper”). Diasporic filmmakers are often aware of these multiple possible decodings and craft their films to negotiate them—sometimes with didacticism to correct stereotypes, sometimes with subtle polysemy to invite reflection without alienating multiple audiences.

Finally, media representation theory encourages examining how these films exist within a broader media ecology. Arab-Canadian cinema does not stand alone; it interacts with news media narratives, online media, global film trends, and public discourse. A film might garner certain responses depending on current events (e.g., a spike in Islamophobia or a refugee crisis might make its themes more resonant). The films themselves can influence media discourse—for example, if a Canadian film about Arab women’s experiences gains attention, it could spur news articles, conversations, maybe even policy debates about the issues it raises. In Chapter 3 of this work, there is discussion of how festivals, National Film Board (NFB) platforms, and community screenings function as dialogic sites where representation is contested and renegotiated. Concepts like affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) might be invoked as communities of feeling that form around media texts, such as pride or solidarity among Arab-Canadian viewers seeing their stories on screen, or conversely, discomfort among some viewers confronted with these counter-narratives. Representation theory helps us map these circuits of meaning and emotion: who is represented, by whom, how audiences respond, and what that means for cultural power.

In conclusion, Media Representation Theory provides an essential lens for the analysis of Arab-Canadian cinema’s content and its context. It teaches us that images are never “just

entertainment”—they carry the weight of history, ideology, and potential social impact. By understanding representation, we appreciate why Arab-Canadian filmmakers make certain choices (to counteract a legacy of Orientalism and stereotyping), and we can critically assess how effective those choices are in producing new meanings. The theory emphasizes evolution—for example, noting a move from outright negative portrayals to more complex or tokenized portrayals in the post-9/11 era—and encourages us to see the tensions—such as the gap between representation and reality, or between intention and decoding. For Arab-Canadian cinema, which operates in a world where media images of Arabs have been highly politicized, representation theory underscores that these films are not just storytelling; they are engaging in a form of cultural politics. They are attempts to decolonize the narrative landscape, to replace fear and misunderstanding with nuance and dialogue. As we integrate this with diaspora theory and intersectionality/CRT, we arrive at a holistic theoretical foundation: one that acknowledges the diasporic hybridity of identities, the intersectional power relations that shape experiences, and the representational *battles* being fought on screens and in society. Together, these frameworks will inform our in-depth exploration of Arab-Canadian cinematic works, ensuring that our analysis is theoretically rich, critically incisive, and attuned to the multiple layers of meaning that these cultural products embody.

2 Corpus, Method, and Scholarly Positioning

The films examined in this dissertation were selected through a process of purposive sampling designed to capture the formal, thematic, and authorial diversity of Arab-Canadian

cinematic production with a special focus on the post-9/11 period, while maintaining sufficient depth of analysis to do justice to each work's complexity. The corpus includes 1) fictional features (*Sabah*, *Cairo Time*, *Montréal la blanche*); 2) short and medium-length documentaries (*Things Arab Men Say*, *A Scent of Mint*, *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots*, *Arab Women Say What?!*, *Une Femme de Tête*); and 3) films produced before 9/11 (e.g. Michka Saal). Filmmakers from Syrian, Algerian, Lebanese, and Moroccan backgrounds — both women and men, first-generation immigrants and second-generation Canadians — are represented, reflecting the demographic and cultural heterogeneity of the Arab-Canadian community.

This selection necessarily involves exclusions. Several notable Arab-Canadian fiction films fall outside the scope of this study, either because they engage with themes — such as international thriller narratives or non-diasporic storylines — that do not align with this dissertation's analytical framework centred on identity, belonging, and racialization in a Canadian context. These include Ruba Nadda's *Inescapable* (2012) and *October Gale* (2014), and Majdi El-Omari's *Stand Still* (2013). Similarly, the National Film Board of Canada has produced a broader body of documentary work by and about Arab-Canadians that could not be incorporated within the limits of a single dissertation. The films retained for analysis were chosen on the basis of their thematic relevance to the Arab-Canadian experience, their formal diversity, and their representativeness of different authorial positions, genders, and national-origin backgrounds within the community.

Methodologically, the dissertation pursues a form of close cinematic analysis informed by the theoretical frameworks outlined above. Individual sequences, compositions, editing patterns, sound design choices, generic conventions, and narrative structures are analysed in

detail, with sustained attention to how formal choices produce and contest ideological meanings. This textual analysis is situated within contextual analysis of production conditions, director biographies and interviews, reception histories including critical reviews and audience responses, and the institutional frameworks within which the films were made and distributed. The goal is a form of analysis that is neither purely immanent, treating films as self-sufficient aesthetic objects — nor purely instrumental — treating them as transparent reflections of social reality, but genuinely dialectical: attentive to the ways in which films are shaped by their social contexts and in turn act upon those contexts.

This dissertation makes no claim to comprehensive coverage of Arab-Canadian cinema. The field is larger and more diverse than any single study can address, and significant works and filmmakers, including those working primarily in French-language Quebec or in short film formats not widely distributed, inevitably lie beyond its scope. What the dissertation does claim is that the films it analyses are representative of significant tendencies within the field, and that the theoretical frameworks it brings to bear are sufficiently supple to illuminate dimensions of these films that have not previously been adequately theorised.

3 Chapter Overview

Chapter 1, ‘Diasporic Visions: Theorising Hybridity and Exile in Arab-Canadian Cinema,’ establishes the postcolonial and phenomenological theoretical framework that undergirds the entire dissertation. Drawing on Bhabha, Brah, Anzaldúa, Tuan, Bachelard, Lefebvre, Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed, and Hall, the chapter analyses how a broad range of films in the corpus figure diasporic hybridity through spatial and visual configurations. From the

water symbolism in *Sabah* to the frozen urban estrangement in *Montréal la blanche*; from the domestic negotiations in *Cairo Time* to the sensory archive of mint in *A Scent of Mint*; the chapter reveals hybridity not as a comfortable middle ground but as an ongoing, embodied, and often painful process of negotiation between competing attachments and identities. The chapter also introduces the concept of the accented film — following the theorisation of Naficy (2001) — as a formal category that captures the aesthetic strategies through which diasporic filmmakers mark their work with the traces of their dislocated positions.

Chapter 2, ‘Intersecting Mobilities: Crossing, Constraining, and the Politics of Movement in Arab-Canadian Cinema,’ applies Crenshaw’s intersectionality framework and critical race theory to examine how Arab-Canadian films engage with the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of mobility and constraint. The chapter is structured around three interrelated thematic clusters: first, the representation of Arab Muslim women’s agency in films like *Sabah*, *Une Femme de Tête*, *Arab Women Say What?!*; second, the figuration of Arab male vulnerability and the unsettling of hegemonic masculinity in *Things Arab Men Say* and *A Scent of Mint*; and third, the politics of physical and social mobility — the capacity to move through urban space, to cross borders, and to occupy public life — that structures the cinematic geography of films from *Montréal la blanche* to *Cairo Time*. Throughout, the chapter demonstrates that Arab-Canadian cinema’s engagement with intersectionality is not a theoretical imposition but an emergent response to the lived complexities that the films themselves depict.

Chapter 3, ‘Polysemic Visions: Encoding, Decoding, and the Politics of Representation in Arab-Canadian Cinema,’ turns to the semiotic and institutional dimensions of Arab-

Canadian cinema's political work. Beginning from Hall's encoding/decoding model and its conceptualisation of media texts as "structured polysemies" (Pillai, 1992, p. 228), the chapter examines how Arab-Canadian filmmakers strategically encode counter-narratives, through generic choices, visual rhetoric, narrative structure, and representational strategy, that anticipate and negotiate diverse audience decodings. The chapter traces the operations of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions across the corpus, attending to the ways in which diasporic audiences affirm, contest, and transform the meanings offered by these films. An ecological systems analysis situates these textual and reception dynamics within the broader institutional ecology of Canadian cultural policy, film funding, and broadcast regulation, revealing the structural conditions that both enable and constrain Arab-Canadian filmmakers' representational agency.

Chapter 1: Diasporic Visions: Theorizing Hybridity and Exile in Arab-Canadian Cinema

This chapter elucidates the interconnected theoretical frameworks underpinning the analysis of spatial and visual configurations of hybridity in Arab-Canadian cinema. By interweaving postcolonial, phenomenological, affective, and materialist perspectives, it establishes a cohesive conceptual foundation that avoids redundant explication in subsequent discussions. At its core lies Bhabha's (2004) theory of hybridity and the third space, which posits cultural identity not as a fixed essence but as an emergent, contested process arising from the ambivalent enunciation of difference in liminal arenas.

Hybridity, for Bhabha, disrupts notions of purity through mimicry, "almost the same, but not quite" (p. 86), engendering a double temporality where past and present intersect in disruptive negotiation. Similarly, Brah's (1996) diaspora theory introduces the concept of multi-locality, which signals "these processes of multi-locality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries" (p. 191), positing that identity formation transcends geographic displacement to encompass emotional, psychological, and symbolic attachments. Distinguishing "homing desire," Brah defines it as a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. ... It is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (p. 188). From literal repatriation, Brah contends that diasporic subjects weave identities from memories, imaginings, and engagements with the homeland, the hostland and the diaspora, noting that:

home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust,

balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day... all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (p. 188)

This framework critiques discourses of fixed origins while emphasizing that “not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return” (p. 194), highlighting the dynamic, multi-axial locationality where diasporic identities are constituted through intersecting power relations and lived experiences.

This framework is further enriched by Anzaldúa’s (2021) concept of psychic borderlands, materializing hybridity as an embodied open wound dividing a pueblo, a culture where “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds ... merging to form a third country—a border culture” (p. 3). Describing borderlands as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary ... in a constant state of transition” (p. 4), it emphasizes visceral pain and unrest fostering fragmentation. Yet, it yields a mestiza consciousness that transforms contradictions: “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions ... turns the ambivalence into something else” (p. 81), fueled by “continual creative motion” (p. 82) to synthesize opposites into a “third element greater than the sum of its severed parts” (p. 82), embracing ambiguity for empowerment. These ideas bridge to the chapter’s analysis by framing diasporic cinema’s performative identities as processual negotiations of cultural wounds and ambiguities, enacted through spatial and visual oscillations that implicate viewers in the kinaesthetic reality of becoming. Together, these inform cinematic identity as performative and processual, enacted through spatial ambiguities and visual oscillations implicating viewers in diasporic becoming. Together,

these inform the cinematic depiction of identity as performative and processual, enacted through spatial ambiguities and visual oscillations that implicate viewers in the kinaesthetic reality of diasporic becoming.

First: phenomenological approaches to space and place provide a vital scaffold for visualizing this hybridity. Tuan (1977) distinguishes abstract “space” (p. v) as undifferentiated expanse from “place” (p. v) as endowed with human meaning through experience and attachment, a binary that diasporic subjects renegotiate amid displacement. Bachelard (2014) extends this poetically, conceptualizing domestic interiors as protective “shells” (p. 131) or “caskets” (p. 111) that harbor reveries, while elemental metaphors—like water’s dual capacity for dissolution and rebirth—evoke sensory immersion and transformation. Elia (2005) applies this to Ruba Nadda’s *Sabah* (2005), interpreting water as a symbol of awakening, aligning with Bachelard’s material imagination to render fluidity a medium for hybrid self-rehearsal. Lefebvre (1991) politicizes these poetics, viewing space as socially produced through ideological relations, where dominant structures (e.g., racialized urban landscapes) inflict exclusion. This intersects with Nixon’s (2011) “slow violence” (p. 60)—attritional harm that erodes psyches gradually—and Freud’s uncanny, the eerie estrangement of the familiar, disrupting one’s sense of security and turning the homely into the unhomely (Bronstein & Seulin, 2020). These ideas converge in Bachir Bensaddek’s *Montréal la blanche* (2016), where a snowbound Montreal during a harsh winter amplifies immigrant characters’ psychological distress, transforming their adopted city into an alien, frozen landscape that symbolizes isolation and cultural uprooting. The relentless snow and cold embody slow violence by compounding gradual emotional attrition from past traumas

and integration challenges, while evoking the uncanny through the disorienting estrangement of urban streets that should feel like home but instead provoke dread and disconnection. This example is relevant because it concretely illustrates how environmental and social factors intertwine to manifest these theories, providing a narrative case study of psychic harm in displacement contexts. Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenology grounds these in embodiment, positing perception as corporeal intercorporeality, where sensory experiences (e.g., cold or scent) blur self-world boundaries, fostering a diasporic sensorium as theorized by Howes (2021)—a culturally inflected bodily archive that bridges lost homelands.

Second: affective and material dimensions further entwine these spatial sensorial theories, emphasizing hybridity's emotional and tangible labors. Ahmed (2012) frames affect as circulatory economies that “stick” (p. 4) emotions to objects and bodies, which “has effects on the texture of everyday life and on the intimate ‘witness’ of social relations” (p. 140) rather than residing inherently in subjects or objects. This stickiness manifests as emotions becoming properties of objects through repeated contact and movement, enabling re-orientation towards objects promising confidence, security, and trust or disorientation in alienating gazes that impose fear, disgust, or shame, sticking these affects to racialized bodies and prompting aversion or withdrawal. As Ahmed elaborates, emotions stick, slide, and cohere, shaping social relations through “towardness” or “awayness” (p. 8) where hate might stick to strangers or immigrants, orienting exclusionary policies, while shame under alienating gazes causes a turning away, disrupting one's sense of place. This theoretical lens intersects with Fanon's (2008) white gaze, which overdetermines racialized subjects from without, producing affective exclusion in produced spaces, and complements materialist

views like Miller's (2008), where objects as agents in home construction become sticky with emotions, offering comfort through narrative continuity yet amplifying loss in diasporic contexts. Hirsch's (2012) postmemory complements this, describing inherited traumas transmitted via images and stories, activated somatically in archival engagements.

Third: in addition to the sensorial and the affective dimensions, communal spaces introduce relational co-construction, shifting from individual to collective negotiation. Shabazz (2016) and Mukherjee (2006) highlight barbershops as informal forums for racialized men, shaping narratives of resilience through ritual and emotional labor, extended here to Arab-Canadian hybrid masculinities. Fraser's (1990) "subaltern counterpublics" (p. 67) frame these as oppositional arenas for formulating belonging away from dominant spheres. Counterpublic, as Fraser argues, is "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Such subaltern counterpublics function, in her terms, "as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" but also "as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics," with their emancipatory potential residing precisely "in the dialectic between these two functions" (p.68). While Trinh's (1991) critique of "speaking about" (p. 23) advocates oblique, relational narration over authoritative representation, asserting that one does not speak about it. "For, without a certain work of displacement, 'speaking about' only partakes in the conservation of systems of binary opposition (subject/object; I/It; We/They) on which every reflection of self and other is based" (p. 23), thereby perpetuating dichotomies that objectify and dominate the subject. Instead, Trinh proposes a mode of narration that displaces

such binaries through indirect, relational engagement, where storytelling involves “telling and retelling it” (p. 23) in a way that reflects on itself without seizing or claiming the other, fostering a non-authoritative discourse that bridges gaps without reinforcing power hierarchies. De Man (2023) synthesizes this as co-constructed cultural practice in diaspora cinema, where identity emerges intersubjectively, echoing Hall’s (1990/2021) shift from fixed roots to dynamic “routes” (p. 266). Telmissany (2023) applies this to Nadda’s oeuvre, arguing for reconstructing the West as home through spatial re-orientation, refusing nostalgia or assimilation.

Collectively, these theories form an intertwined matrix: Bhabha’s enunciative hybridity manifests phenomenologically in Tuan-Bachelard-Lefebvre spaces, affectively charged per Ahmed-Fanon, materially anchored via Miller-Hirsch, and relationally co-constructed as in De Man-Trinh-Fraser. Elemental metaphors and violence add sensory and political depth, enabling a nuanced analysis of cinema’s in-between places as sites where diasporic subjects forge contested, embodied homes. In the following sections, we will examine Arab-Canadian films considering these theories through the lens of the diasporic/hybrid spaces they offer to reconstruct. The main questions we will attempt to answer are:

- 1) In section 1: how do Arab-Canadian films conceptualize and represent hybridity as an ongoing negotiation between cultural ambivalence, memory, and identity formation within Bhabha’s third space and related diasporic frameworks?
- 2) In section 2: how do Arab-Canadian films employ spatial configurations, material objects, and sensory aesthetics to transform domestic interiors, urban landscapes, and

elemental metaphors into active sites of hybrid identity negotiation?

- 3) In section 3: in what ways do linguistic hybridity (e.g., code-switching and translanguaging) and narrative forms (e.g., genre subversion and dialogic strategies) articulate the diasporic condition in Arab-Canadian films?

1 Hybridity in Diaspora: Foundations of the In-Between

1.1 The Third Space: Spectrum of Cultural Ambivalence

To begin with, Nadda's *Sabah* offers the most optimistic rendering of the third space as a site of generative potential. The film carves out this space in the public and private spheres of Toronto—most notably the swimming pool and the city's diverse streets—where Sabah, a Syrian immigrant, negotiates her burgeoning relationship with Stephen, a white Canadian. The cultural ambivalence here is productive; Sabah is caught between her family's traditional expectations and her own desires for personal and romantic freedom. The third space is the very process of this negotiation. In the fluid, sensory environment of the pool, cultural and linguistic codes dissolve, allowing for a new self to be rehearsed. The film ultimately resolves this ambivalence in favor of a hopeful synthesis, where Sabah successfully integrates her new relationship into her family life. Nadda thus frames the third space as a site of personal liberation, where the unsettling nature of cultural negotiation becomes a catalyst for growth and a more expansive identity.

Nadda's later film, *Cairo Time* (2009), nevertheless, explores a more complex and bittersweet manifestation of this in-between space. Here, the third space is the temporary, shared world created by Juliette, a Canadian visitor, and Tareq, her Egyptian guide. It is a

space defined by a deep but un-narrated emotional connection that circulates within the specific affective economy of unspoken desire (Ahmed, 2012). The cultural ambivalence is located in their profound connection, which is simultaneously enabled and constrained by their different cultural contexts and Juliette's marital status. Unlike in *Sabah*, the boundaries are never fully overcome. The third space they create is poignantly transitory and unfulfilled; it is a space of intense but fleeting intimacy that leads not to synthesis, but to a recognition of its own impossibility. This portrayal underscores the third space as a site of fleeting intimacy, evoking longing rather than resolution.

Bensaddek's *Montréal la blanche* presents the spectrum's most despondent pole, configuring the third space as a melancholic enclosure. The film's third space is the claustrophobic and mobile interior of Kahil's taxi, a space defined not by a negotiation with a new culture, but by an inescapable dialogue with a traumatic past. The cultural ambivalence here is not a tension between two living cultures, but between a haunting memory of pre-war Algeria and the cold, alienating reality of Montreal. This is a melancholic and static third space. It is not a site of enunciation and becoming, but an echo chamber where two exiles are trapped with their shared ghosts, embodying a state of diasporic melancholia and "stuckedness" (Hage, 2009, p. 97). Bensaddek's film offers a powerful critique, suggesting that for those fleeing profound political trauma, the third space may not be a space of possibility at all, but a prison of memory—a heterotopian bubble moving through a city it can never truly touch.

Similarly, Pierre Sidaoui's documentary *A Scent of Mint* (2002) provides an intimate interrogation of third space, locating the diasporic experience not in a fixed geography, but in

the ambivalent, in-between space where cultural meaning is actively negotiated. This third space is a psychic and temporal arena, created through the filmmaker's ritualistic engagement with his personal archive. The shoebox of photographs in the film becomes the catalyst for this space, where the signs of the past are translated into the present, and a hybrid subjectivity is given voice. By combining the borderlands and the image, we see how Sidaoui constructs a complex and deeply felt portrait of life in this liminal state.

For Bhabha, the third space is a disruptive process of negotiation that challenges fixed notions of identity. Sidaoui's film renders this process tangible via the very act of the filmmaker's looking at his photos and narrating his memories. In these moments, Sidaoui is neither fully in his remembered Lebanese past (the First Space) nor wholly grounded in his Canadian present (the Second Space). He occupies a liminal position, enunciating his story from this hybrid vantage point. The film's voice-over, spoken from the present but describing the past, is the literal sound of this third space—a voice that bridges two worlds and, in doing so, creates a new narrative of self that belongs fully to neither.

This conceptual space is understood more viscerally through Anzaldúa's lens of borderlands where cultures clash and new forms of consciousness emerge. Sidaoui's journey through his shoebox is a navigation of his own internal borderlands. The photos of a carefree childhood in Abey are juxtaposed with the traumatic memory of civil war, creating the psychic wound Anzaldúa describes. The third space, then, is not a comfortable place. It is an ambivalent state where the transition fraught with the pain of what was lost and the uncertainty of what has been gained. The objects that activate this third space—the photographs—also undergo a profound translation. Sidaoui's film, however, demonstrates

how the opposite can be true for the diasporic subject. In the third space of memory, the mass-produced family photograph is re-enchanted with a powerful, singular aura of irretrievable loss and personal history. An ordinary photograph is translated from a simple memento into a sacred relic; its meaning is amplified by distance, time, and loss. It becomes a dense object that holds the aura of the “that-has-been,” a concept Barthes (1981) articulates as the noeme or essence of photography:

The name of Photography’s noeme will therefore be: ‘That-has-been,’ or ... the Intractable ... what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred, (p.77)

emphasizing the photograph’s unique superimposition of reality and the past, where the referent is “the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph” (p. 76). This temporal hallucination—“false on the level of perception, true on the level of time” (p. 115)—intensifies in the diasporic third space, where the image’s evidential power evokes not just presence but irretrievable absence, lacerating the viewer with the punctum of Time as “the lacerating emphasis of the noeme (‘that-has-been’), its pure representation” (p. 96), thus re-enchancing the mechanically reproduced photo with a sacred, auratic density that counters Benjamin’s thesis of aura’s diminishment in reproduction. The documentary masterfully illustrates the third space not as a theoretical abstraction, but as a deeply personal and active process. It is not a celebratory space of easy hybridity but a psychic borderland where the past is constantly re-negotiated. The film’s great insight is to show how this profound space of enunciation is activated by the humblest of

objects—faded photographs which, within the diasporic context, are imbued with a new kind of aura and become the crucial tools for articulating a self forever in a state of becoming, forever in translation.

Overall, as the analyses of these four distinct films demonstrate, the cinematic third space is far from a singular phenomenon. Its meaning is contingent upon the specific histories, traumas, and desires of those who inhabit it. Moving from the generative hope in *Sabah* to the fleeting connection in *Cairo Time* and the paralytic memory in *Montréal la blanche*, it is clear that cultural ambivalence can be a catalyst for liberation, a source of profound longing, or a symptom of inescapable loss. Furthermore, as *A Scent of Mint* reveals, this space can be located not in a physical geography but in the very act of mnemonic translation, where the past is re-enchanted with a powerful new aura. Consequently, these films do more than simply represent diasporic subjects; they enact the temporal and psychic conditions of the unhomely, implicating the viewer in the complex, ongoing, and deeply human process of negotiating a self in a world where the boundaries of home are no longer fixed. They affirm Canadian cinema as a vital site for the enunciation of identities that are forever in translation.

1.2 Multi-Locality: Identity Formation Through Emotional and Symbolic Attachments

In *Sabah*, the protagonist inhabits Toronto while tethered to her Syrian heritage. Her home is divided: the family apartment, marked by Arabic signage, rituals, and her brother Majid's cultural enforcement, contrasts sharply with Toronto's public spaces such as cafés,

the pool, and local bookstores. These sites function as psychological and symbolic zones of belonging. Sabah does not seek to return to Syria physically; instead, her emotional and cultural anchoring shifts toward Toronto, creating a multi-local identity rooted in both tradition and transformation. The film's cinematography and soundtrack reinforce this affective tension: scenes depicting internal reflection often feature oud music or Arabic ambient sounds—echoes of the homeland—while bold camera movement in public spaces underscores her evolving self. This aesthetic approach maps the internal diasporic structure that Brah articulates, wherein diaspora encompasses a “multi-axial performative conception of power that highlights the ways in which a group constituted as a ‘minority’ along one dimension of differentiation may be constructed as a ‘majority’ along another” (p. 186), fostering an internal psychic terrain of fragmentation and reconfiguration across “territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries” (p. 194). Thus, this structure is elucidated beforehand through the interplay of “homing desire” as mentioned beforehand. *Cairo Time* offers a parallel but distinct exploration of multi-locality. Juliette, a Canadian magazine editor visiting for the first time, gradually forms an emotional tie to Cairo. Without familial or ancestral roots there, her homing desires are expressed as a sensory and experiential belonging. Cairo's cafés, the view from Tareq's rooftop terrace, the Nile's evening light, and the mellifluous Arab street sounds—from the muezzin's call to local chatter—all create an affective geography that envelops her. Through lingering long takes and immersive ambient sound, the film constructs Cairo as an emotional space. Contrary to a literal return home, Juliette experiences multi-locality through being and belonging in a foreign environment, aligning with that diasporic identity emerges through engagements with other places—imaginative

and intimate.

While both films depict multi-local subjectivities, they do so through different narrative lenses. *Sabah* presents internal tension, as Sabah navigates between familial obligation and personal desire. *Cairo Time*, on the other hand, depicts external resonance, where Juliette, free from familial constraints, develops inadvertent bonds with the locale's rhythms and intimacies. In both cases, we argue, the diasporic self is not bound to ethnicity or ancestry but shaped by cultural and emotional attachments. Sabah's multi-locality is conflicted; Juliette's is emergent and atmospheric. Both characters, however, articulate their displacement through engagement with place, language, and affect.

Extending this spatial confluence, Nisreen Baker's documentary *Things Arab Men Say* (2016) serves as a powerful illustration of this process, though a more unique analysis emerges when we place Brah's structural framework in dialogue with other scholarly traditions. The film demonstrates that diasporic space is not merely a conceptual confluence but an actively produced place, forged through the entanglement of bodies, objects, and affectively charged performances. The film meticulously documents the process by which space becomes place, a central distinction in phenomenological geography. Space is an undifferentiated, abstract location, while place is space that has been endowed with value and meaning through human experience (Tuan, 1977). The barbershop, as a commercial establishment, begins as a neutral space. However, it is converted into a diasporic place precisely through the activities that Brah outlines: the layering of memory, the sharing of stories, and the negotiation of economic and cultural survival. The film suggests that Brah's "diasporic space" (p. 204) is not a pre-existing condition but the process of placemaking

itself. It is through the repeated acts of gathering, speaking, and grooming that the generic coordinates of the shop are overwritten with the “intimate experiences of place” (Tuan, 1977, p. 136), making it a sanctuary where multiple localities can safely coexist. This “affective economy” (Ahmed, 2012) enables emotions circulate to bind individuals into a collective. Laughter, sighs, and expressions of solidarity are not just reactions; they are circulating affects that “stick” to bodies and produce a tangible sense of community.

This insight finds a powerful ally in Butler’s (2006) theory of performativity, which posits that:

gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency ... rather ... an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a ‘stylized repetition of acts.’ The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (p. 191)

Therefore, gender is revealed as a “constituted social temporality” (p. 191) rather than an ontological essence. The diasporic identity on display is not a stable essence but is performatively constituted through the “stylized repetition of acts,” where, as Butler elaborates:

if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a ‘ground’ will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time,

(p. 192)

emphasizing that such acts are internally discontinuous and their occasional failure exposes the “phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (p. 192). This performativity aligns with diasporic subjectivity by underscoring how repeated, embodied practices—inflected by migration, memory, and cultural negotiation—fabricate an illusory coherence, allowing for subversive possibilities in the gaps of repetition that challenge essentialist notions of origin and belonging.

The communal laughter, for instance, can be seen as a citational practice that reiterates and solidifies a shared identity of resilience. Each joke, each story of navigating racism, is a micro-performance that, repeated over time, brings the diasporic community into being. Furthermore, this performativity is inseparable from the shop’s material culture. Moving beyond seeing objects as passive backdrops, we can turn to material culture theorists like Miller (2005), who argues for a “dialectic of objectification” (p. 9) where people and things mutually constitute one another. The mirror, a central object in the film, is not merely a tool for positioning but an agent in this dialectic, co-producing identity in the dynamic loop between self-perception, the object’s reflection, and the gaze of the community. Similarly, the barber’s chair and razor are not just props; their material qualities—the vulnerability the chair imposes, the trust the razor demands—actively produce a specific sociality of care and intimacy. This material scaffolding enables the verbal and emotional vulnerability necessary for the community’s diasporic dialogue to unfold.

While *Things Arab Men Say* documents the successful creation of a supportive diasporic

place through communal labor in a barbershop, Baker extends this exploration of multi-locality in her companion documentary film *Arab Women Say What?! (2023)*, shifting focus to women's voices in domestic and virtual spaces. Here, the diaspora space is reimagined as an intimate, gendered sanctuary—initially via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic and later in a participant's Edmonton home—where eight women from diverse Arab backgrounds convene for unfiltered conversations. The film portrays these gatherings as affective hubs where “homing desire” manifests not in physical return but in shared rituals like preparing couscous or breaking the Ramadan fast. Participants like Sanaa articulate the psychic borderlands of being “too Moroccan in Canada and too Canadian in Morocco,” embodying the liminal subjectivity Brah describes as woven from memories of the homeland and engagements with the hostland.

This processual placemaking is amplified by an affective economy of solidarity and empathy, where emotions stick to acts of storytelling and mutual support. For instance, Syrian musician Aya's confession of jealousy toward Ukrainian refugees—fast-tracked for resettlement while Afghan and Syrian counterparts languish—circulates as a shared grief, fostering a counterpublic that critiques Canada's hierarchical multiculturalism. Unlike the barbershop's performative masculinity, these women's interactions perform a hybrid femininity through haptic gestures: passing tea, exchanging recipes, or singing folk songs on the oud, which, per Butler (2006), constitute identity via stylized repetition. Baker's observational style, with participants self-filming via their mobile devices, further empowers this performativity, transforming subjects into co-creators and dismantling stereotypes of Arab women as passive or monolithic. By highlighting their rainbow of dialects, faiths, and

experiences, the film reframes multi-locality not as loss but as enrichment, where cultural bereavement (e.g., missing the “scent of mint” from home) coexists with resilient sisterhood. Thus, *Arab Women Say What?!* complements *Things Arab Men Say* by gendering Brah’s framework, revealing diaspora space as a relational achievement forged in the crucible of female solidarity.

If Baker’s film documents the successful creation of a supportive diasporic place through communal labour, Mohammed Belhaj’s documentary *Une Femme de Tête* (2006) presents a stark counter-narrative. It reveals how such spaces are often sites of intense struggle where the diasporic subject is confronted not by cultural difference, but by the systemic violence of the host society. The film offers a sharp and necessary dissection of a crucial, often obscured, aspect of diasporic subjectivity: the phenomenon of professional de-skilling. Through the parallel experiences of Bouchra, a mid-aged Moroccan woman with multiple degrees, and her friend Khalid, who holds a French post-doctorate, the film explores how multi-local identity is profoundly shaped by the institutional invalidation of foreign credentials. This experience transforms the diaspora space from a site of cultural negotiation into one of professional and economic struggle. In the film, Montreal’s professional landscape becomes the primary diaspora space where the central conflict unfolds. For Bouchra and Khalid, their subjectivity is inherently multi-local, but this condition manifests as a painful dissonance. In one locality—Morocco for Bouchra, France for Khalid—they possess a recognized identity as highly accomplished professionals. In their new locality, Montreal, this identity is systematically erased. Their diasporic subjectivity is thus defined by the daily, frustrating experience of inhabiting these two contradictory realities at once: the persistent knowledge of

their own expertise and the societal reflection of their supposed incompetence.

This is more than a bureaucratic hurdle; it is a form of what Bourdieu (2018) termed as symbolic violence according to which the host society's professional orders and hiring bodies exercise the power to define what constitutes legitimate cultural capital. By refusing to recognize foreign degrees, the film's institutions implicitly declare that the knowledge acquired in other educational localities is inferior. This symbolic violence becomes even more acute when Bouchra and Khalid are advised to change their names to something more Québécois. This suggestion strikes at the core of their identity. As Al-Saji (2014) discusses, names are not neutral signifiers; they mark bodies and link them to histories, often subjecting them to surveillance and prejudice. The pressure to adopt a new name is a demand for assimilation at its most profound. This pressure brutally fractures their multi-local subjectivity, forcing a disconnect not just between past achievements and present reality, but between their core identity and the public-facing persona they are encouraged to adopt. The emotional toll of this is immense, echoing what Berlant (2011) calls cruel optimism: a condition where the desire for the good life remains attached to a system that, in return, demands the erasure of the self. *Une Femme de Tête* reframes the narrative of diasporic subjectivity by focusing on the quiet violence of structural exclusion, revealing that the greatest challenge is often resisting a new society's demand that you annihilate one culture to be accepted into the other.

While Belhaj exposes the external, structural barriers that fracture diasporic identity, *Montréal la blanche* turns inward to explore the psychological consequences of such disillusionment. It presents a space defined not by economic struggle but by the inescapable

weight of political trauma and melancholia. The film offers a stark vision of diasporic subjectivity, tracing the overnight encounter between Amokrane, a long-settled Algerian taxi driver, and Kahina, a once-famous pop star from their homeland. To fully unpack the film's argument, we must see its central setting, the taxi, not merely as a diaspora space in Avtar Brah's sense, but more specifically as a heterotopia, in the tradition of Foucault (1986). It is a mobile "counter-site" (p. 24), a slice of Algerian memory moving through Montreal, where the subjectivity of its inhabitants is revealed to be in a state of unresolved and deeply melancholic suspension. The taxi functions as a perfect heterotopia: a real, physical space that operates outside of normative social rules, reflecting and inverting the world it traverses. The world outside the car is "Montréal la blanche"—a sterile and impersonal landscape. Inside, the lighting is warmer, yet claustrophobic. The camera frequently captures the characters' faces reflected in the windows, visually superimposing their troubled expressions onto the alienating cityscape, a direct representation of their multi-local consciousness. This multi-local consciousness is not a dynamic interplay between two living cultures, but a state of being haunted by a traumatic history—specifically, the Algerian Civil War. The film's psychological depth can be understood by moving from nostalgia to the more precise psychoanalytic concept of melancholia.

As distinct from mourning, where loss is processed, melancholia is a condition where the lost object—a country, or a former self—is incorporated into the ego, resulting in a state of perpetual, unresolved grief. Kahina, the fugitive pop star, is the film's melancholic heart. This unresolved loss is also a crisis of diasporic self; stripped of her public status, her sense of selfhood is profoundly fractured, leaving her psychically stuck in a state of perpetual waiting.

The director masterfully uses sound design to amplify this state of melancholic haunting. The diegetic sound of Kahina's songs playing on the taxi's stereo creates a powerful affective dissonance. The music, a relic from a hopeful past, is an auditory ghost, its cheerful rhythms clashing painfully with the grim reality of their lives in exile. I argue that the diaspora space can be a lonely, ghost-filled echo chamber, a place where the self is forged in the unending negotiation between a life that was irrevocably lost and a new one that has failed to truly begin.

In conclusion, the films analyzed above demonstrate that Brah's diaspora space is a profoundly versatile and contested concept. It is not a static backdrop for immigrant life but a dynamic arena whose character is forged in the crucible of social performance, institutional power, and psychic history. As a barbershop in the Arab community is transformed into a sanctuary through affective speech, the diaspora space is revealed as an embodied achievement. As a woman's professional credentials are systematically devalued in Montreal, it becomes a site of symbolic violence and cruel optimism. And as two unsettled souls circle a wintry city in a taxi, it manifests as a heterotopian echo chamber for unresolved national trauma, while for an individual sorting through an archive, it becomes a psychic borderland maintained through the sensory labour of memory. The common thread is that these spaces are actively, and often arduously, produced, defended, and inhabited. Together, these cinematic works move the discourse beyond celebratory notions of hybridity to reveal the material, political, and emotional labour required to construct a sense of self and community when one is subject to the forces of multi-locality.

1.3 Affective Resistance: Negotiating Identity and Counterpublics in Transcultural Spaces

As Sujir (n.d.) argues, film is a medium where cultural boundaries are blurred and new identities are imagined. For Sujir, cinema becomes a site of negotiation, where hybrid identities are visualized and contested. This theoretical approach emphasizes spatiality, symbolism, and visuality. Under this perspective, in *Sabah*, spaces such as the shared apartment and Toronto's swimming pool embody Sujir's transcultural concept. The apartment—with its warm lighting, blend of Arabic tapes and English conversations, and decorative hybridity—becomes a sensorial microcosm of cultural negotiation akin to Sujir's immersive installations. Here, Sabah literally inhabits a space charged with elastic depth, an interplay between the familiar and the evolving. The pool scene deepens this effect. Water here becomes a visceral material anchoring her movement across cultural registers; Sabah's body in water becomes a transcultural gesture, suspended between cultural streams where she feels both rooted and unmoored. *Cairo Time* similarly creates transcultural zones—most notably the rooftop terrace lit by the setting sun. Here, Juliette's presence is minimal; she listens, breathes, and absorbs the spatial atmosphere. Ambient sound—traffic, calls to prayer, and distant conversations—intersects with visual markers like lantern-lit tiles and shifting light. As with Sujir's (n.d.) elastic spaces, this rooftop scene evokes emotional expansion: Juliette becomes permeable, her subjectivity stretching across cultural textures. The film's lingering scenes by the Nile at dusk evoke the same sensorial immersion. Water, light, and air coordinate to create a transcultural embrace—a space where Juliette moves beyond tourist experience into affectively mediated engagement.

While Sujir's lens helps us understand the sensory architecture of these transcultural spaces, Gana's "identity-in-negation" (p. 22) provides a crucial framework for analyzing the political subjectivity that is forged within them. Re-examining the two titles above through this framework reveals how emotional gestures, visual motifs, and spatial practices can become political expressions of selfhood. In *Sabah*, the eponymous protagonist subtly rejects familial and cultural constraints. Rather than overt protest, her resistance surfaces as invisible defiance: slipping on red lipstick despite disapproval, insisting on English dialogue in intimate moments, and quietly pursuing a cross-cultural relationship. These acts resist procedural cultural imposition without explicitly articulating a new identity. As Gana (2009) argues, disidentification can be encoded in the everyday and the unvoiced, forming subjectivity through gesture and posture as much as speech. Thus, Sabah's self-fashioning unfolds not through manifesto but through quiet transgressions that narrate her refusal to be reductively defined. Juliette's journey in *Cairo Time* offers a less confrontational yet significant expression of identity-in-negation. She resists the typical tourist's simplistic engagement with place through sensory immersion and emotional atonement to Cairo. She never declares that she rejects her Canadian identity, but instead, her sustained presence on the rooftop and near the Nile marks a slow boundary drawing between superficial presence and affective belonging. By refusing to remain an outsider observer, Juliette reshapes herself through embracing the complexity of Cairo, reconfiguring identity not as a fixed trait, but as a relational effect.

This notion of silence negation, gestural resistance finds its most complex and communal expression in *Things Arab Men Say*, where the transcultural space of a barbershop becomes a

site of potent affective insurgency and a living diasporic archive. The barbershop first emerges as a classic third place that functions as a subaltern counterpublic. Within this sanctuary, shielded from a dominant white Canadian public sphere, the Arab men can formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities. The film's brilliance, however, lies in how it frames this counterpublic not just as a space of discourse, but as a living archive. The film's prevalent use of mirrors does more than reflect; it creates a layered visual field where multiple faces, histories, and temporalities occupy the same frame. This visual layering, combined with a soundscape where the hum of clippers underpins conversations about exile, transforms the film itself into a sensory archive. The primary mode of this counterpublic and its archival practice is affection. The community is forged through what Papacharissi (2015) calls an "affective public" (p. 6), where solidarity is built through shared feeling. The barbershop's affective economy is saturated with what could be termed a diasporic melancholy—a persistent sorrow for lost homes and fractured families. This shared melancholy, is not a passive state but a potent political affection that fosters a deep, unspoken bond. The men's laughter, then, can be interpreted not just as simple resistance but as a vital form of affective care—a collective strategy for managing this shared burden. This complex emotional landscape enables a collaborative pedagogy of survival. The acts of physical care and emotional vulnerability challenge the stoicism of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) while creating a space for a "continuous process of re- and de-territorialization" (Trinh, 1991, p.5).

Here, identity is never fixed; it is performatively constituted through the stylized repetition of acts—the telling of a story, the execution of a perfect fade, the shared sigh.

These are infrapolitical acts of resistance (Scott, 1990) that challenge both external stereotypes and internal emotional restrictions, making the transcultural space a workshop for forging a more caring and emotionally articulate model of manhood.

In powerful contrast to the barbershop's function as a supportive counterpublic, the notion of quiet, gestural resistance finds a gendered parallel in Baker's *Arab Women Say What?!*, where the transcultural space shifts from the barbershop's homosociality to women's domestic and digital gatherings, becoming a site of feminist insurgency and collective witnessing. Echoing identity-in-negation, the participants disidentify from imposed stereotypes—such as the voiceless, oppressed Arab woman—through candid dialogues that negate reductive labels. For instance, they confront Western misconceptions (e.g., shock at Arabs using spoons, forks, and knives) with humor and critique, as when Nermeen quips, “God grant us the confidence of a mediocre white man,” subverting patriarchal and racial hierarchies via shared laughter. The film's hybrid form—blending Zoom chats with in-person ifṭār meals—enacts Sujir's (n.d.) transcultural cinematic space, where cultural boundaries blur through sensory immersion (e.g., ambient sounds of Arabic dialects and music). This creates an affective public saturated with diasporic melancholy, yet channeled into resilience: discussions on abortion rights and refugee inequities (e.g., favoring Ukrainians over Afghans) circulate emotions of frustration and solidarity, fostering a poethics of resistance. By self-filming, the women performatively constitute hybrid identities, turning vulnerability into empowerment and challenging hegemonic femininity. Ultimately, *Arab Women Say What?!* reframes the transcultural space as a feminist counterpublic, where affective care dismantles stereotypes and builds bridges across cultural divides.

Belhaj's *Une Femme de Tête* examines what happens when the transcultural space fails in its promise of exchange and instead becomes a site of systemic exclusion. Beyond its stark depiction of systemic barriers, the film is a profound study in affective resistance within a dysfunctional transcultural space. The documentary captures not only the professional de-skilling faced by Bouchra and Khalid but, more importantly, the emotional and relational strategies they employ to endure this reality. In this context, resistance becomes less about overt political action and more about the quiet and persistent work of affective survival. The professional world of Montreal is presented as a broken transcultural promise. Instead of valuing the rich capital that Bouchra and Khalid carry, the system demands their invisibility. Their strategy for survival is not one of protest but of a poethics of resistance—the ethical and political work accomplished through everyday practices. Belhaj's camera captures this in the mundane interactions between Bouchra and Khalid: their amicable meet, their candid conversations. In telling their stories, they co-create a counter-narrative that insists on their worth. This act of shared storytelling functions as a form of living and further, an affective archive. The documentary's camera itself becomes the medium for this archival process. Their hardship in common becomes a mobile sanctuary—a functional transcultural space built on the affective labor of mutual validation. This relational work is a form of affective resistance against the coercive pressures of assimilation. The suggestion that Bouchra should change their names is moreover an attempt to manage this affective economy. Her pained refusal is therefore a political act, a rejection of the offer to belong if the price is self-erasure.

1.4 Gendered Hybridity: Embodied Negotiation and Processual Selfhood in Diasporic Narratives

Rebeiz (2022) explores how hybridity is inherently gendered, particularly within narratives shaped by migration, conflict, or cross-cultural interaction. Rather than depicting cultural mixing as a simple fusion, her work emphasizes an embodied negotiation—where women navigate intersecting cultural, gendered, familial, and personal expectations. Though her scholarship primarily addresses literature and digital media, her insights offer a rich framework for reading *Sabah* and *Cairo Time* as cinematic texts revealing gendered processes of hybrid identity formation. Sabah, the eponymous heroine in *Sabah*, negotiates her hybrid identity through embodied spatial and emotional decisions. In the domestic confines of her Toronto apartment—under the surveillance of her traditional family—Sabah wears the hijab, speaks Arabic, and follows ritual norms. But each venture into public spaces marks a significant shift. At the swimming pool, she dons Western-style clothing and moves freely, performing a gendered assertion of autonomy. This physical emergence becomes a site of gendered hybridity. Sabah's gesture-based negotiations—slipping on bold red lipstick in solitude, choosing English during intimate meals, or quiet swimming laps—are not extraneous adornments but material enactments of resistance. These choices carry gendered weight: Sabah is positioned within both familial tradition and diasporic modernity, negotiating respectability and desire in tandem. In *Cairo Time*, Juliette's journey unfolds through subtle emotional alignment with place and people. Initially, she embodies a passive outsider—courteous, composed, and temporally dislocated. But Juliette's gendered hybridity unfolds gradually through embodied presence: contemplative gazes on the rooftop terrace, intuitive listening to the Nile's rhythm, and learning Arabic phrases with tactile care. Her

subjectivity is not declared but emerges through corporeal attunement, highlighting how female experience can articulate hybridity through quiet affective becoming. Rebeiz's lens makes this significant; Juliette does not oppose cultural authority, but she redefines her own agency through resonant spaces and embodied decision-making—creating a hybrid identity through sensory immersion and relational awareness.

This focus on embodied, gendered negotiation aligns powerfully with a broader theoretical shift in diaspora studies. Clifford (1994) reconceptualises diaspora itself not as a static condition but as a dynamic, ongoing process. In other words, diaspora is not as an identity tethered to a homeland, but as a process defined by negotiation, engagement, and ongoing formation within contact zones where cultural identities are continuously transformed and reconfigured (Clifford, 1994). This assertion that diaspora is a processual, negotiated identity resonates deeply in both *Sabah* and *Cairo Time*. In *Sabah*, the protagonist's daily life exemplifies this fluid movement. She oscillates between the private, Arabic-speaking domestic environment and public spaces like the swimming pool. These spatial transitions reflect diaspora waxing and waning. The apartment stands as a repository of collective memory, whereas public outings allow Sabah to reconfigure her identity. These micro-level negotiations illustrate identity as something enacted rather than inherited. Meanwhile, *Cairo Time* offers a subtler portrayal of Cliffordian diasporic negotiation. Though Juliette's presence in Cairo begins as a temporary assignment, it evolves into a profound emotional atonement to her surroundings. This shift is visible in her growing ease with Cairo's rhythms—her relaxed posture on Tareq's rooftop, her lingering gaze at dusk over the Nile. These gestures reflect Clifford's notion of identity shaped through lateral networks and

emotional ties, charting a transition from detached traveler to someone quietly embedded within the social and affective fabric of the city. In comparing these two narratives, both characters enact diaspora as movement and negotiation. Sabah's shifts between familial obligation and urban autonomy map the ongoing struggle of diasporic self-making, while Juliette's sensory-immersive experience charts how even transient positionality can reconfigure belonging. Notably, gendered dimensions are pivotal in both films, exemplifying how diaspora is fully realized when displacement, affect, encounter, and relational ties converge in the ongoing negotiation of place and identity.

If Nadda's films explore this diasporic process through the lens of female subjectivity, Baker's *Things Arab Men Say* transports us into a homosocial space to reveal how this same process of cultural negotiation is profoundly embodied and performed by men. In the film, the barbershop serves as a crucial stage for diaspora: an ongoing process of cultural negotiation and connectivity (Clifford, 1994). When viewed through a gendered lens, the film reveals this process to be deeply performative, as the barbershop becomes a space where diasporic masculinity is not merely reflected but actively constructed, contested, and reconfigured. We can analyze the film as a document of men negotiating their place in the world, and the gender is crucial here. The barbershop functions as a specific kind of gendered interior where the pressures of hegemonic masculinity can be temporarily relaxed. Here, the men can engage in hybrid masculinities, strategically incorporating elements of vulnerability, care, and emotional disclosure into their masculine identities. This hybridity is not just spoken; it is performed. A haircut is not just a haircut; it is a performance of identity negotiation, a material act of inscribing cultural affiliation onto the body. The conversations

themselves reveal the restructuring of gendered labor, as the men discuss their shifting roles as fathers, sons, and husbands. This verbal processing is a form of emotional labor, one facilitated by the affective safety of the space, which is built by the circulation of laughter and empathy. The film thus demonstrates that diasporic process is, for these men, an ongoing, embodied performance of a hybrid masculinity, revealing identity to be fluid and relational—constantly remade through the interplay of bodily presentation, affective exchange, and conversational negotiation.

While *Things Arab Men Say* explores diasporic process through hybrid masculinities in a homosocial space, *Arab Women Say What?!* centers female subjectivity as an embodied negotiation of becoming. The women's gatherings—virtual and domestic—function as contact zones where identity waxes and wanes, oscillating between ancestral roots and adaptive routes. Participants like Aya embody this through performative acts: playing the oud as a weapon of resistance against Syrian war trauma or debating feminism across cultural registers. The gendered hybridity is evident in their corporeal atonement—sharing meals, exchanging glances during discussions on autonomy—highlighting agency forged amid intersecting expectations. This processual self-making aligns with Clifford's lateral networks, as the women navigate multi-locality: Nermeen's airport reflection on “what I miss and what I've missed out on” encapsulates the ache of dual belonging. Their solidarity circulates affective resistance against erasure, transforming diaspora from stasis to dynamic becoming. By owning their narratives, they refute stereotypes, affirming that women's stories are key to narrating diasporic life (Rebeiz, 2022).

While the barbershop functions as a sanctuary for the collaborative performance of a new

masculinity, *Une Femme de Tête* demonstrates how this diasporic process is often a lonely, grinding struggle against systemic barriers, demanding a specifically gendered and intersectional analysis. The film powerfully portrays diaspora as an ongoing and deeply contested process. The film presents a gendered negotiation of this process, centering Bouchra's experience to reveal how structural barriers are navigated differently, reinforcing that women are often key agents in narrating diasporic life (Rebeiz, 2022), a role Bouchra embodies. The film documents the creative, everyday work of diasporic life-making not in grand gestures, but in the small-scale strategies of survival and solidarity: the shared cups of coffee, the mutual encouragement, the steadfast refusal to be defined by rejection. Their friendship itself becomes a crucial part of this process, a mobile site of mutual recognition. By titling the film *Une Femme de Tête* and centering Bouchra, Belhaj invites a gendered reading. Immigrant women often face a double jeopardy, confronting both the devaluation of their credentials and the gendered biases of the labor market. Bouchra's story demands an intersectional analysis as she navigates the system not merely as an immigrant, but as a skilled, middle-aged, Moroccan woman in Quebec. Since intersecting power relations produce distinct experiences, The symbolic violence Bouchra endures is unique to her position, and her strategies of resistance—her intellectual stubbornness, her resilience—are the product of navigating this complex matrix of identity. By filtering a processual understanding of diaspora through this lens, the film powerfully demonstrates that the process is lived on the ground and shaped at every turn by the interplay of gender, race, class, and professional status.

Where Bouchra's story documents a determined, ongoing fight against institutional

failure, *Montréal la blanche* explores the psychological terrain of when this process seems to have already failed, resulting in a state of disillusionment where affective resistance becomes a crucial, if ambivalent, mode of survival. The film is a profound study in the quiet, desperate work of this resistance. When the promise of a welcoming society fails, diasporic subjects must construct their own spaces of meaning. Within the confines of the taxi, Kahil and Amokrane enact subtle but crucial survival strategies, building a temporary transcultural space founded on shared memory. This resistance unfolds through what Gana (2009) might call a “poethics” (p. 29) of the everyday and with De Certeau’s (1984) concept of “tactics” (p. xiv) —small ways the powerless navigate and reclaim controlled spaces. The conversation inside the car is a tactic that reclaims that time and space for personal and political work, becoming a counter-narrative that insists on their humanity. Central to this is the performance of mutual recognition or witnessing. The act of listening validates Kahina’s past and present self in a way the city will not. The car stereo, playing her old music, functions as an affective archive, providing audible proof of a life that has been erased. However, this affective shelter is not purely liberatory as it can also be a symptom of social stuckness. The taxi, while a protective bubble, is also a symbol of their stasis. Their resistance is a double-edged sword: a vital survival mechanism that also reinforces their marginalization. The film’s brilliance lies in its refusal to resolve this tension, showing that for some, the diasporic process is the painful, ongoing work of keeping a self-alive in a space that is simultaneously a shelter and a cage.

Finally, moving from the social stasis of the taxi to the intimacy of the personal archive, *A Scent of Mint* offers the most profound meditation on diaspora as an ongoing, unfinished

process, one embodied by the very act of filmmaking itself. The film's intimate form allows it to embody the theoretical work of scholars like Clifford and Hall, who re-conceptualized diaspora not as loss and return, but as a continuous negotiation of identity. By structuring the narrative around the associative nature of memory, Sidaoui presents diasporic subjectivity itself as a process: a constant becoming forged in the work of narrating a life ruptured by history. The very form of the film mirrors its thematic content. Rejecting a linear account, Sidaoui presents his story as reflections triggered by photographs, a direct cinematic representation of what Clifford described as a life defined by dispersal and the creative practice of making connections. The act of making the documentary is itself the diasporic work. This aligns powerfully with Hall's influential distinction between an identity of fixed roots and one of dynamic "routes" (p. 266). Sidaoui's longing for his childhood in Abey represents a desire for roots, but the film's fragmented form acknowledges that a simple return is impossible. Instead, his identity must be forged along the routes of his life: from Lebanon, through trauma, to Montreal. His subjectivity is revealed not as a fixed point, but as this very itinerary. The unfinished nature of this process is deeply connected to the film's undercurrent of trauma. As Caruth (1996) has argued, trauma is an event lived out in a belated, ongoing way. The film suggests that the work of diaspora is, in many ways, the work of processing trauma—a continuous effort to weave a shattered past into a livable present. Ultimately, *A Scent of Mint* is a testament to the idea of diaspora as a verb rather than a noun. It is a process of doing, making, and becoming. By crafting such a personal film, Sidaoui articulates a subjectivity that, as Ang (2001) might argue, resides in the in-between, an identity whose only home is the ongoing process of its own narration.

1.5 Archival Practices in Diasporic Memory: Co-Construction and Affective Catalysis

Drifting from the diaspora space through social interaction and systemic conflict, *A Scent of Mint* offers a more intimate cartography, locating this multi-local consciousness within the deeply personal and sensory act of memory work. By focusing on the filmmaker's ritualistic engagement with a shoebox of family photographs, the film reveals how this subjectivity is constructed within a psychic diaspora space that is simultaneously a painful borderland and a generative third space. This process is mediated by sensory archives that are both visually and affectively charged. The film's central narrative device—Sidaoui sifting through his photos—is a profound act of “memory work,” as described by Kuhn (2010, p. 299). The shoebox is an active archive, and the process of engaging with its memory texts creates the film's primary diaspora space. This space is multi-local by its very nature; it is a point of confluence where the temporal and geographical distance between Abey, Lebanon, and Montreal, Canada, momentarily collapses. The diasporic gaze upon these photographs, however, is never one of simple nostalgia. Each image is a testament to the it-used-to-be, a past reality now gone forever.

This transformation from the space of memory into a psychic borderland describes a space of constant transition, contradiction, and wounding. Sidaoui looks at an image of a peaceful childhood, but his knowledge of the subsequent war turns that image into a site of conflict. The subjectivity forged here is thus not seamless but defined by the ongoing work of living with this foundational wound. Within this space, the photographs themselves are

transformed. In a dialogue with Benjamin's theory of the mechanically reproduced image, the film suggests that for the diasporic subject, the photograph acquires a new and powerful aura. Its distance from the original moment, amplified by exile and loss, imbues it with a sacred quality. Sidaoui's subjectivity is thus also that of a guardian of auratic objects. Finally, the documentary argues that this multi-local subjectivity is profoundly embodied and sensory. The title, *A Scent of Mint*, points to a memory that bypasses the purely cognitive and is felt in the body, a phenomenological experience explored by Merleau-Ponty (2012). This imagined scent becomes an "affective hook," making the past "sticky" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 125), ensuring the past locality is not just a collection of visual memories but a constant, sensory presence that co-exists with the present reality. This archival engagement, rooted in solitary sensory rituals, sets the stage for exploring how personal repositories foster individual resilience, a theme that contrasts with more relational archival dynamics in other works.

If Belhaj documents the relational strategies needed to endure public and professional erasure, *A Scent of Mint* takes us to the most intimate scale of this struggle, framing the diasporic experience as a quiet, ongoing practice of affective resistance within the private archive. The film shows how the subject, faced with the erasures of time, distance, and trauma, must actively create spaces for memory. Through the intimate ritual of engaging with his personal archive, Sidaoui constructs a private transcultural space where he can confront the ghosts of his past. This resistance is not an act of public protest but a deeply personal, poetic practice of witnessing and narrative reconstruction, illuminated by theorists of affect (Ahmed, 2012), trauma (Caruth, 1996), and the everyday (De Certeau, 1984). The filmmaker's primary mode of resistance is the simple, private act of looking through his

shoebox of photos. This can be understood as what De Certeau (1984) would call a “tactic” (p. xiv)—a small, everyday practice used to reclaim personal meaning within larger structures. This practice has a profound ethical dimension, making it a form of poethics. The transcultural space created by this tactic is primarily a site for confronting trauma. The Lebanese Civil War is the “unclaimed experience” (Caruth, 1996, p. 10) that haunts the filmmaker. The photographs of a peaceful childhood act as triggers for the return of this traumatic history. Sidaoui’s affective resistance is the difficult work of turning this haunting into a narrative, positioning him as a witness to his own past. This entire process is fundamentally an act of emotional curation. The shoebox is an affective archive, and we can analyze Sidaoui’s resistance as the active management of this personal affective economy. He does not let grief consume him; he navigates it, speaks to it, and attempts to assemble the fragments into a narrative that can accommodate both the joy of his childhood and the sorrow of its violent end. Thus, Sidaoui’s archive exemplifies a private, tactile space where diasporic memory is curated through affective labor, highlighting the shoebox as a vessel for both preservation and confrontation.

While Sidaoui’s *A Scent of Mint* locates multi-locality in a solitary, psychic engagement with personal archives—where the shoebox serves as a private “borderland” for re-enchanting lost auras and navigating individual trauma—Michka Saäl’s cinema extends this archival practice into relational, co-constructed realms. Here, archives shift from isolated artifacts to interactive tools, amplifying their role in co-creating hybrid identities through shared affective encounters. In contrast to Sidaoui’s introspective ritual, Saäl mobilizes archives as affective catalysts within intercultural friendships, transforming memory from a

personal wound into a shared, embodied negotiation that exemplifies Bhabha's third space as a workshop of hybridity. The cinema of Saäl offers a vital model for understanding transcultural and affective hybridity, moving beyond conventional frameworks of diasporic representation to situate identity formation at the living intersection of memory, friendship, and embodied narration. Her work exemplifies a "co-constructed cultural practice" (De Man, 2023, p. 24), wherein identity is not a pre-existing state to be depicted but a fluid process made visible through cinematic negotiation. Through an aesthetic that braids archival materials with intimate dramatizations and conversational fragments, Saäl's films consciously turn away from grand theorization. Instead, they pursue a "felt hybridity"—an identity crafted moment by moment through relational, affective intimacy.

To fully appreciate her contribution, we must first situate it within the evolution of diaspora film theory. Naficy's (2001) foundational concept of "accented cinema" (p. 7) provides a crucial grammar for identifying the shared thematic and stylistic traits of filmmakers working in exile or diaspora. Yet, this perspective often centers the filmmaker as a singular voice articulating a condition of being between worlds. Later scholarship, influenced by thinkers like Hall, began to reframe identity not as a matter of fixed roots but of dynamic routes—a production that is always in process. This conceptual shift opens the door to viewing cinema not just as a mirror reflecting a diasporic reality, but as the very site of its construction. It is here, in what Bhabha (2004) called the third space of "enunciation" (p. 54), that Saäl's work finds its true resonance. The notion of co-construction becomes critical to understanding how this theoretical third space moves from an abstract concept to a tangible, lived experience on screen. It reframes the cinematic space as a workshop where the meaning

of diaspora is forged in the relational dynamics between filmmaker, subject, archive, and audience. Saäl's filmmaking is a primary example of this co-construction in action. Her camera does not simply observe a hybrid identity; it participates in its creation, weaving a polyphonic text where the hybridity on display is not a simple fusion of two cultures, but an emergent quality born from the intimate, and often messy, process of cinematic negotiation itself.

One of the most significant tools Saäl uses is her mobilization of the archive. In her hands, archival materials—family photographs, historical newsreels, personal letters—are not inert historical evidence. They function instead as affective catalysts, breathing life into a past that acts directly upon the present. This method cinematicizes what Hirsch (2012) has termed “postmemory” (p. 31) the profound and imaginative connection to a past one has not experienced directly but has inherited through the stories and images of a previous generation. Saäl gives this process a powerful physical form through what can be described as embodied narration. She rarely presents an archival image in isolation; rather, she frames it through the act of being watched, held, and discussed by her contemporary subjects. The camera lingers on a hand tracing a face in a photograph or captures the weighted silence that falls over a room as old footage flickers on a wall. Here, the story is told through the body's response. This technique resonates deeply with Ahmed's work on affect, which posits that emotions are not merely private feelings but social practices that make objects sticky, binding people together. In Saäl's films, archival objects become sticky with emotion, pulling characters into a shared orbit of nostalgia, loss, or curiosity, and making memory a somatic, relational event.

In this way, Saäl's archives transcend the solitary confinement of personal trauma, becoming bridges for intercultural dialogue and embodied postmemory. This archive is activated through Saäl's profound focus on intercultural friendship and intimacy. The relationships she depicts are not merely thematic content; they are the film's central methodology. Her preference for conversational fragments over polished interviews is a key artistic choice, revealing identity as a collaborative performance rather than a stable, internal essence. As characters share meals, tell stories, or lapse into comfortable silence, they engage in the subtle work of co-creating a shared world, a transient community of affect. This cinematic space becomes a subaltern counterpublic, where narratives of belonging can be formulated away from dominant cultural scripts. Building on this relational activation of archives, where the affective charge of materials like personal letters and historical footage meets the intimate spaces of friendship to produce transient communities of affect—manifest in shared meals, bilingual conversations, and comfortable silences—Saäl's cinema reframes the archive as a methodological core for collaborative performance, enabling the subtle co-creation of a shared world away from dominant narratives. This approach, which might describe as a practice of “speaking nearby” rather than “speaking about” (Trinh, 1991, p. 12), is the engine of Saäl's co-constructive project. It is in this synthesis—where the affective charge of the archive meets the intimate space of friendship—that felt hybridity is ultimately produced, understood not through intellectual abstraction but felt in the warmth of a shared meal and heard in the rhythm of a bilingual conversation.

In conclusion, the archival practices illuminated in the works of Sidaoui and Saäl underscore the profound versatility of memory as a diasporic tool, bridging the solitary

depths of personal trauma with the expansive horizons of communal hybridity. Through Sidaoui's intimate shoebox rituals in *A Scent of Mint*, we witness archives as psychic sanctuaries—active vessels for affective resistance, where sensory hooks and auratic objects enable the diasporic subject to curate fragmented narratives amid the wounds of exile and war. In Saäl's cinema, these same archival elements evolve into relational catalysts, fostering felt hybridity through embodied narration and intercultural intimacies that transform inherited postmemory into shared, performative worlds. Together, these approaches reveal diaspora not as a static condition but as a dynamic, co-constructed process, where archives serve as affective conduits for negotiation, resilience, and ethical witnessing. By reframing memory from roots to routes, Arab-Canadian filmmakers like these invite us to envision identity as an ongoing, sensory dialogue—one that honors the past's hauntings while forging transcultural futures in the liminal spaces of the third space. This cinematic archive, in its multiplicity, ultimately affirms the power of affect and co-creation to resist erasure, offering a poignant testament to the enduring vitality of diasporic storytelling.

To conclude this section, the rich and varied landscape of Arab-Canadian cinema powerfully refutes static notions of identity, instead portraying diaspora as a continuous, negotiated, and fundamentally gendered process. Through the theoretical lenses of Clifford and Rebeiz, we see this process unfold in multiple registers. It is present in the embodied spatial choices of female protagonists navigating newfound agency, and in the collaborative performance of hybrid masculinities within the sanctuary of a barbershop. It is visible in the lonely, intersectional struggle against systemic de-skilling, where resilience

itself becomes a form of processual labour, and in the melancholic stasis of a trauma that renders the future perpetually out of reach. Finally, it is embodied in the very act of filmmaking, where the personal archive becomes the raw material for the unending work of narrating a self. By focusing so intently on the process of becoming—on the routes rather than the roots—these films offer a vital contribution. They insist that identity, particularly for those whose lives are shaped by displacement, is never a final arrival but a constant, creative, and often difficult negotiation with the past, the present, and the myriad expectations of gender. This could be expressed through continuous border-crossing.

2 Spatial and Sensory Mapping of Hybridity

In *Sabah*, its domestic interiors and everyday urban spaces are not passive backdrops but are rendered as active, enunciative sites where identity is constantly being negotiated. By establishing a dynamic interplay between the contained, memory-laden apartment and the fluid, kinetic city, Nadda portrays home not as a fixed location rooted in the past, but as a continuous process of spatial and emotional re-orientation in the present. The apartment that Sabah shares with her mother operates as a tactile embodiment of this hybridity, a Bachelardian “shell” (Bachelard, 2014, p.131) that is simultaneously a sanctuary and a site of tension. The production design deliberately juxtaposes cultural signifiers: Quranic calligraphy hangs near IKEA-style furniture, and family photographs from Syria share space with a conspicuously Western coffeemaker. These objects are not just décor; they are active agents in the construction of a diasporic home. Cinematographer Luc Montpellier photographs this interior in warm, ochre lighting and deploys a shallow focus, softening the visual depth to

create an atmosphere of intimacy. This space thus becomes a key enunciative site in the Bhabha-esque sense, where heterogeneous cultural codes coexist. As Bhabha (2004) argues, hybridity entails “the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects,” producing “the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (p. 159). Here, a single object like a divan can simultaneously index Arab hospitality for Sabah’s family and modern Canadian comfort for her non-Muslim lover, Stephen. The film’s camera language mirrors the internal ambivalence Sabah experiences within this space. Nadda’s editing strategy, which alternates between static, tableau-like shots of formal family dinners and mobile, fluid Steadicam takes that follow Sabah dancing alone, visually enacts the code-switching she must perform. The static camera reflects the weight of tradition and patriarchal surveillance, while the moving camera embodies her furtive moments of freedom and self-expression. The cut itself becomes a border crossing between two modes of being, replaying her internal conflict frame by frame.

This tension between stability and movement can be read through Brah’s (1996) articulation of diaspora space—not simply the location where diasporic communities live, but “the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ are contested” (p. 205). As Brah explains, “diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native” (p. 205), making it a relational terrain in which both migrant and non-migrant subjectivities are shaped by the histories of colonialism, displacement, and cultural encounter. Crucially, she emphasizes that this space is “inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous” (p. 205), thereby highlighting the

interdependence of identities often presumed separate. In *Sabah*, the divan becomes such a diaspora space: an object embedded in the social relations where cultural boundaries are negotiated and re-signified. The editing's oscillation between static and mobile frames visually enacts what Brah calls the "politics of location" (p.177) where subjectivity is constituted within the intersection of multiple discourses and where the sense of home is always contingent, always in process. The film's formal structure thus does not merely depict Sabah's private negotiation between Arab and Canadian cultural codes—it inhabits the very diasporic terrain Brah theorizes, where belonging is constantly made and unmade in the movement between frames, gestures, and gazes.

This formal oscillation requires the viewer to experience hybridity not as a stable concept but as a kinaesthetic reality, formally illustrating that identity is produced in the moment of articulation and in the act of "enunciation" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 51). Beyond the home, Nadda choreographs Toronto itself as a transcultural contact zone. This vast, multicultural Space is transformed into a meaningful Place through Sabah's itinerary of encounters. Her journey with Stephen is a process of affective re-orientation, as she forges new paths of comfort and desire through the city. Medium-long tracking shots capture them moving across ethnic enclaves, while the layered soundscape blends sounds from a car radio with the ambient buzz of the street. Nadda's project is often to "reconstruct the West as home" (Telmissany, 2023, p.103), refusing both nostalgic return and wholesale assimilation. The film's urban kinetics make this reconstruction palpable, demonstrating that for the diasporic subject, the truth of home is not a fixed address but a fluid series of encounters across the diverse spaces of the present.

Cairo Time consciously foregrounds the cityscape as a vital third space, where cultures intersect, collide, and transform through mutual encounters. Nadda repeatedly position Juliette in spatial ambiguity—neither entirely foreign nor fully integrated—visualizing Bhabha’s notion of cultural liminality. The film’s expansive vistas of Cairo, captured through carefully composed wide shots that frequently isolate Juliette within crowded urban frames, articulate her simultaneous immersion in and alienation from the host culture. For instance, Juliette’s solitary stroll through the bustling Khan el-Khalili bazaar, rendered in slightly disorienting handheld camerawork, foregrounds her identity as both observer and participant. The editing rhythms reinforce this ambivalence: gentle dissolves and slow fades capture Juliette’s subjective experiences of temporal suspension and spatial disorientation, representing her shifting subjectivity between Canadian visitor and tentative cultural insider.

Having mapped how space performs hybridity, the same tensions now register on the body—in costume, colour, framing, and performance. *Sabah*’s sartorial choices visualise Bhabha’s mode of mimicry with a difference. In familial scenes, the camera emphasises the opacity of her navy hijab: overhead lighting flattens its texture, producing a symbolic barrier. In clandestine meetings with Stephen, the hijab becomes a loosely draped scarf whose translucence allows back-light to outline her silhouette, signalling permeability. A crimson overcoat—inserted via a match-on-action edit linking her bedroom mirror to the city street—serves as chromatic eruption, a visual metaphor for emergent subjectivity. Performance nuance intensifies the effect. Close-ups linger on micro-expressions: a fractional lip quiver when Stephen mispronounces “Sabah,” subtle eyebrow contractions when her brother Majid dictates household finances. These facial micro-gestures function as what I call “silent

enunciative moments,” borrowing from Bhabha’s (2004) concept on enunciation, where resistance surfaces beneath apparent compliance.

Montpellier carefully curates the *Sabah* and *Cairo Time*’s colour palette and visual framing, further embedding hybridity into the films’ visual rhetoric. In *Sabah*, Montpellier’s palette triangulates three chromatic registers: domestically inflected greens, signalling continuity with family and faith; disruptive reds, marking moments when patriarchal authority is challenged; and liberatory blues of poolside and city night scenes, connoting fluid futurity. Cross-cutting between these registers engineers’ cognitive dissonance, refusing the spectator a stable colour-coded morality and echoing hybridity’s refusal of binary closure. Similarly, in *Cairo Time*, warm, golden hues dominate Cairo’s exteriors, imbuing the cityscape with romantic exoticism yet also subtly indicating Juliette’s perception of the unfamiliar cultural setting as simultaneously inviting and impenetrable. Conversely, cool blues and soft pastel tones dominate interior hotel spaces, emphasizing Juliette’s temporary refuge within familiar Westernized spaces. The film’s careful framing consistently places Juliette and Tareq at visual intersections—doorways, windows, balconies—framing them literally at thresholds between private and public spaces, home and abroad. These framing choices not only accentuate hybridity visually but also symbolize ambivalent positions, visually foregrounding third space as inherently transitional and relational rather than static. What’s more, the soundtrack in both films doubles this structure. Family interiors carry a low-mix hum of Arabic chatter punctuated by utensils clinking—diegetic anchors of tradition—while public sequences emphasise water-dampened ambience or street noise, expanding auditory space. Such acoustic hybridity compels the ear to navigate

overlapping sonic codes, mirroring Sabah's own bilingual oscillations between Arabic (home) and English (public intimacy).

Ambivalence manifests distinctly through Juliette's physical appearance and nuanced performance by actress Patricia Clarkson. Clarkson's embodied portrayal strategically conveys Juliette's negotiation between cultural conformity and subtle resistance. Early scenes depict Juliette in modest, conservative Western attire, suggesting her initial compliance with local norms and implicit mimicry of Egyptian cultural expectations. However, as her relationship with Tareq deepens, subtle transformations appear in her dress and mannerisms, signaling increasing hybridity and ambivalence rather than mere assimilation. Significantly, one pivotal sequence captures Juliette preparing for a formal event. Filmed through delicate, close-up framing, the camera focuses on her careful yet hesitant choice of an elegant turquoise gown—strikingly hybrid in its design. The gown simultaneously signals Western fashion sensibilities and Eastern stylistic resonances. Clarkson's restrained facial expressions—subtle hesitations, a tentative smile—performatively enact ambivalence. Here, mimicry emerges not as conformity but as partial resemblance imbued with difference, precisely capturing the ambivalent mimicry as “almost the same, but not quite,” curated from Bhabha's (2004) “not quite/not white” (p. 131).

The interior in *Things Arab Men Say* is neither home nor public institution, but an in-between site where cultural identities are co-negotiated through ritual, speech, and communal presence. Barbershops have historically operated as social hubs for racialized men, serving as

informal health, emotional, and civic forums (Shabazz, 2016). Likewise, Mukherjee (2006) emphasizes their role in shaping cultural narratives and community authority—though within Black American contexts, their role resonates with Baker’s portrayal of Arab-Canadian men. Baker situates her documentary in a microcosm of Arab diasporic pluralism, featuring men from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, and Canadian-born Arabs; hence, a mixture of Muslim, Christian, and secular voices. This deliberate diversity emphasizes cultural multiplicity and emotional belonging, which further resists monolithic media portrayals by foregrounding the heterogeneity of Arab diasporic experience in Canada. The ritual of grooming—buzzers, clippers, razor shaves—is not merely aesthetic; it reflects emotional and narrative labor. Such repeated gestures, captured via observational cinematography over weekends, generate rhythms of story disclosure, revealing intimate reflections on racism, religion, and generational migration. Ethnographic media scholars note how repetitive action in such communal interiors often catalyzes deeper narrative expression (Shabazz, 2016). The barbershop’s mirrored chairs also symbolize thresholds of transformation—both literally in hairstyle and metaphorically in subjectivity. These reflective surfaces become visual metaphors for internal dialogue and diaspora negotiation. Clients enter framed by Canadian multiculturalism; they leave visibly transformed and narratively enriched. The act of grooming thus becomes a hybrid ritual of belonging and self-making, revisiting Bhabha’s third space but anchored in domestic interior. Critically, the barbershop in Baker’s film redefines domesticity away from heteronormative private spheres. Instead, intimacy is cultivated horizontally among male peers through shared history, humor, vulnerability, and critique. This mode of affective solidarity echoes Shabazz’s observations in *Black*

barbershops and extends them to an Arab diasporic context in Canada.

Formally, the barbershop's feel and sound deepen the same argument. It adopts a powerful aesthetic strategy, which privileges embodied practices—gesture, grooming, and sound—to articulate the complexities of cultural hybridity and emotional authenticity. The documentary frames the barbershop as a site of embodied discourse, a concept well-established in ethnographic studies of similar cultural spaces. Research on African American barbershops, for instance, identifies them as therapeutic arenas where social support and identity work are central (Mukherjee, 2006; Shabazz, 2016). Baker builds on this understanding by using the tactile rituals of grooming—the buzz of clippers, the careful scrape of a razor—as catalysts for emotional disclosure. These mundane actions become rituals of diasporic reckoning, transforming the barbershop a healing interior. The film's cinematography amplifies this intimacy through close-up shots of hands and faces, capturing the subtle, nonverbal cues that communicate care, empathy, or discomfort. These micro-expressions and gestures, often reflected in mirrors, create a visual dialogue that resonates with performance theories emphasizing the body as a primary site of affective communication and social alignment.

The acoustic landscape of the film further reinforces its exploration of hybrid identity. The layered soundscape—a mix of clipper hums, laughter, and the interweaving of Arabic and English—constructs a sonic architecture that mirrors the hybrid subjectivities of the men. This auditory environment functions as a cinematic tool, situating the viewer within the affective experience of diasporic life. The ambient sounds are not mere background noise but are integral to the identity formation occurring on screen, a phenomenon documented in

studies on the role of acoustics in mediating social dynamics (Shabazz, 2016). This sonic texture is the audible manifestation of third space, where cultural codes merge to create something new. Finally, the grooming practices themselves serve as a performance of hybrid masculinity. This concept describes masculinities that incorporate elements, such as emotional expression and aesthetic care, that are traditionally outside normative hegemonic models. In the film, the act of grooming is simultaneously a form of status performance and emotional labor, where men engage in intergenerational teaching and dialogue about belonging. The attention to appearance becomes a form of diasporic pedagogy, a way of feeling and performing an identity that is both rooted in heritage and adapted to a new context. Consequently, *Things Arab Men Say* demonstrates that diasporic masculinity is a fluid and felt experience, constantly articulated through the body's interaction with space, sound, and community.

While the barbershop in *Things Arab Men Say* emerges as a third space where diasporic identities are co-negotiated through ritual and communal presence, this spatial configuration finds a gendered and adaptive extension in Baker's companion documentary *Arab Women Say What?!*, where the in-between is reconfigured amid the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions. The film locates its third space in liminal, multi-local environments: the transition from Zoom to in-person meeting. These sites embody multi-locality, blending geographic displacement with symbolic attachments—echoes of Moroccan couscous or Egyptian tea juxtaposed against Canadian suburban backdrops, creating a psychic borderland where cultures clash and coalesce.

Visually, Baker's cinematography privileges haptic elements, foregrounding textures of

domesticity: the clink of teacups, lingering shots of hands passing dates, or grainy iPhone footage self-captured by participants. This material culture actively co-produces identity, as objects like an oud guitar become agents in affective placemaking, triggering sensory memories of homeland while grounding the women in their shared Canadian present. The layered soundscape—overlapping Arabic dialects, laughter, and ambient home noises—mirrors Bhabha’s double temporality, where past traumas (e.g., Syrian exile) interrupt the diasporic now. Unlike the barbershop’s tactile grooming rituals, these women’s spaces enact a feminine hybridity through embodied hospitality, transforming neutral coordinates into a sanctuary of sisterhood. By navigating stereotypes (e.g., as oppressed or exotic) via these visual and spatial negotiations, the film critiques monolithic representations, affirming the third space as a dynamic arena for resilience and belonging. This evolution in Baker’s spatial poetics thus expands the cinematic mapping of hybridity, from male homosocial enclaves to female relational interiors.

This performative framework also gains a feminist dimension, where women’s embodied mimicry manifests as a strategic disidentification from imposed stereotypes, reframing ambivalence as empowerment. Participants enact this through gestural and haptic performances: self-filming with iPhones during Zoom sessions, where hesitant smiles or shared glances mimic Canadian normalcy while subverting exoticized tropes of Arab women as voiceless or oppressed. As Gana (2009) might term it, this is “identity-in-negation” (p. 22)—negating reductive labels via everyday acts like applying makeup or debating abortion rights in mixed Arabic-English, their bodies positioned in domestic frames that blend heritage (e.g., hijab or folk songs) with adaptation (e.g., Western kitchens). The film’s visual

layering—mirrors reflecting multiple faces during conversations, or close-ups on hands tracing recipes—creates a performative archive, where mimicry mocks dominant discourses. For instance, Nermeen’s quip invoking the confidence of a mediocre white man performatively inverts gendered and racial hierarchies, her laughter embodying the not quite of hybrid subjectivity. Unlike the barbershop’s sonic texture of clippers, here the acoustics of overlapping dialects and tears amplify affective dissonance in order to constitute resilient femininity. This embodied resistance critiques media binaries (oppressed victim vs. exotic other), positioning the women’s performances as a lived third space of becoming, where ambivalence fosters solidarity and self-authorship.

Placed here, Saäl’s archival method flows directly into the film’s haptic, relational aesthetics. In Saäl’s cinematic poem, *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots*, the narrative is not so much told as it is felt, surfacing through a series of deeply poetic and visceral aesthetic strategies that privilege embodied experience and relational presence. The film deliberately decenters conventional storytelling, positioning the emotional and sensory landscapes of its subjects as the primary text. Through a carefully orchestrated interplay of material memory, gestural intimacy, and affective soundscapes, Saäl constructs a cinematic world where identity is not a fixed point of origin but an ongoing, corporeal process of becoming. How, then, do these aesthetic choices work to create such a profoundly embodied experience for the viewer?

The foundation of Saäl’s method is her treatment of memory as a material practice. She interweaves Super-8 family footage, home videos, archival photographs, and intimate recreations into a rich, sensory collage. This is far more than a simple chronological

arrangement of evidence; it is a layering of textures that speaks directly to the senses. The grainy, fragile quality of Super-8 film stock, for instance, does not just signify the past; it evokes the very texture of a fading childhood memory, its materiality embodying a sense of temporal distance and dislocation. As Sobchack (1992) argues, cinematic experience is a carnal one, where the viewer's body engages in a perceptual dialogue with the film's body. Saäl leans into this, making the viewer feel the tactile resistance of old film, the organic overexposure of light on a home video, and the tangible presence of the filmmaker's hand in framing the shot. This is not memory as a disembodied mental image, but as a form of embodied cognition, where thoughts and feelings are inseparable from the sensory world. Each medium, with its distinct grain, color saturation, and stability, brings with it a unique affective charge, creating a collage where the past is physically and emotionally present.

This emphasis on materiality extends to the very gestures that populate the film. Throughout it, Saäl and the poet Nadine Ltaif appear in a state of quiet co-presence, their shared world built from small, attentive actions: gazing at domestic artifacts, exchanging letters, pausing over a postcard found in a drawer. These gestures are not merely illustrative; they are performative acts of memory and connection. Drawing on phenomenological thought, particularly the work of Merleau-Ponty (2012), we can understand this as a form of intercorporeality, where subjectivity is not confined within an individual but emerges in the space between bodies. The handing of a photograph from one person to another is an act of shared witness; the gentle adjustment of a picture frame is an act of care. These actions foreground haptic visibility — a mode of seeing that is akin to touch, drawing the viewer's attention to the surface, texture, and weight of things (Marks, 2000). When Saäl's camera

lingers on a hand tracing the edge of a letter, it invites a sensory engagement that goes beyond simple optical recognition. The viewer is encouraged to metaphorically "touch" with their eyes, to feel the weight of the object and the history it contains. In this haptic space, identity formation is revealed as it truly is an enacted, touch-driven process, deeply responsive to the surfaces of the world and the presence of another. It is in the sensitivity of these shared glances and gestures that a relational self is continuously co-constructed.

If gesture constitutes the tactile dimension of this embodied world, sound constitutes its atmosphere. Saäl's soundtrack is as layered and textured as her visual collage, weaving ambient city noise, the distant call of birds, overlapping conversational fragments, and poetic voice-over reflections. This complex soundscape does more than simply accompany the images; it creates a rich acoustic ecology that envelops the viewer. The distant hum of Montréal traffic grounds the subjects in their present reality, while the rustle of leaves or the faint echo of a voice can trigger a temporal leap, connecting disparate moments. The overlapping, untranslated whispers do not serve to convey information but to signal a level of intimacy that exists beyond language — a space of shared understanding the viewer is invited to witness rather than decode. In this way, the viewer not only sees memory but hears its echoes, immersed in a spatial and emotional continuum where the past reverberates within the present, and the sounds of migration and belonging merge into a single, resonant chord.

Bensaddek's *Montréal la blanche* masterfully uses its spatial and visual design to map the internal, psychological state of its characters. The film's representation of hybridity is powerfully articulated through a dichotomy between alienating public spaces and intimate, yet fraught, private places. The film's visual construction of Montreal moves beyond

abstract space (Tuan, 1977) to a socially produced space (Lefebvre, 1991). For the latter, space is always already produced by social relations, capital, and ideology. Bensaddek's cinematography—with its wide shots of empty, snow-swept streets and cold, sterile architecture—depicts a landscape whose “whiteness” is not just a visual quality but a social product, a space politically produced to reflect a dominant culture that, in turn, renders racialized subjects like Amokrane and Kahina invisible or out of place. Their alienation is thus not merely a personal feeling but a direct consequence of inhabiting a space that is ideologically constructed to exclude them, which creates a state of profound affective disorientation. The city of Montreal offers no lines of comfort for the characters. Visually, they are almost always contained within the taxi, observing the city as a passing spectacle. This framing positions them as perpetual outsiders, unable to “be at home” in the public sphere. In response, they retreat into private interiors, the taxi and an apartment, in an attempt to create a meaningful place. The taxi becomes a temporary “shell,” as Bachelard (2014, p. 131) might call it, a protective enclosure for memory and intimacy. However, a critical perspective informed by theories of material culture complicates this poetic vision. For the melancholic exile, objects from the past can be double-edged. Instead of seamlessly creating a hybrid home with the “comfort of things” (Miller, 2008), they may function as painful artifacts in a museum of a lost life, amplifying the sense of loss rather than soothing it.

These spatial choices harden into a corporeal grammar of posture, silence, and duration. *Montréal la blanche* translates its thematic concerns about memory, trauma, and disillusionment into a distinct set of aesthetic strategies and a deep focus on embodied practices. The film's argument is carried less by what its characters explicitly say and more

by how they hold themselves, how they move through space, and how the camera captures their physical presence. Bensaddek employs a minimalist, phenomenological style that compels the audience to experience the characters' psychic state corporeally. By placing theories of phenomenology, performance, and film aesthetic in dialogue, we can see how the film locates its truth not in dramatic events but in the quiet weight of gestures, the texture of prolonged silences, and the embodied routines of diasporic survival.

The film's narrative is anchored in the embodied practices of its characters, which can be understood as a type of everyday performance. As Schechner (2002) has argued, performance exists on a continuum from theatrical ritual to the repeated behaviors of daily life. Within the taxi — a prosthetic shell that extends and confines their bodies — Amokrane and Kahina engage in a ritualized performance of their diasporic roles. Amokrane performs the stoic, hardened survivor, his body's rigid posture at the wheel a testament to years of disciplined endurance. Kahina, in contrast, performs the melancholic fallen star, her weary gestures embodying a world of loss. This is not a deceptive act, but an embodied strategy for managing their fractured identities in the presence of a witness who understands the script.

Yet this understated performance style also points to something deeper: the immense difficulty of articulating trauma. As Scarry (1985) argues, intense physical or psychological pain often resists language, making it fundamentally "unspeakable" (p. 47). The film's aesthetic reflects this. The long silences and minimalist gestures are not just stylistic choices; they are a representation of this linguistic limit. The trauma of the civil war and the chronic pain of exile are expressed not in elaborate monologues, but in the spaces of silence between them. The film thus asks the audience to read their bodies as archives of a pain that words can

only circle, never fully capture.

Bensaddek's aesthetic of confinement and slowness is designed to make the audience feel this condition viscerally. Since film viewing is an embodied encounter, Bensaddek facilitates this through claustrophobic cinematography that traps the characters and the viewer together. Furthermore, the film's pacing aligns with the principles of slow cinema, a form that prioritizes duration and atmosphere over plot (De Luca & Jorge, 2016). By forcing the audience to inhabit the characters' experience of time — as a slow, monotonous, and oppressive weight — the film powerfully conveys their psychological and social stuckness, a condition of waiting for a future that fails to arrive. The slowness is not emptiness; it is the feeling of being frozen in a perpetual present.

The silences that punctuate this slow temporality are perhaps the film's most powerful aesthetic tool. As Chion (2019) reminds us, silence in cinema is never a neutral void but an active element defined by the sounds that frame it. The silences inside the taxi are made heavy and profound by the muffled ambient sounds of the city outside — the hiss of tires on snow, a distant siren. This contrast emphasizes the characters' insulation and profound isolation. The quiet inside the car becomes an acoustic black hole into which their unspoken grief, resentment, and shared history are drawn. It is in these eloquent silences that the film's deepest emotional truths are communicated, forcing the viewer to listen not to what is said, but to the immense weight of what is not.

Where Bensaddek maps the alienating public sphere, Sidaoui's *A Scent of Mint* turns inward, meticulously exploring the diasporic condition through its intimate focus on domestic

interiors and everyday spaces. The film establishes a powerful dynamic between the remembered, vibrant Place of a Lebanese childhood and the quiet, contemplative Space of the filmmaker's present in Montreal. This dichotomy becomes the film's central visual and emotional grammar. Sidaoui's Montreal home is transformed into a veritable "poetics of space," in the words of Bachelard (2014, p. 14), a site where the material culture of memory is used to build a fragile, yet resilient, sense of belonging across continents and decades. The film visually constructs two distinct spatial realities. Through the archival photographs, Abey, Lebanon, is rendered as a rich and deeply meaningful place—a landscape saturated with familial love and youthful freedom.

In deliberate contrast, the film's present-day scenes in Montreal depict a more abstract Space, a quiet, neutral backdrop for the filmmaker's profound interior journey. Sidaoui's home thus becomes a crucial psychological sanctuary, a "shell" (Bachelard, 2014, p. 131) that makes the dangerous work of remembering possible. It is from within the security of this domestic interior that he can dare to confront the violent loss of his first home. The shoebox itself becomes the central object within this domestic space, an artifact whose significance can be understood through a dialogue between Bachelard and theories of material culture. For Bachelard, the shoebox is a poetic object, a casket holding the intimate treasures of a past life. These objects are also doing active social work, providing "the comfort of things" (Miller, 2008) that help construct a narrative of continuity. By containing the immense, chaotic history of his family within this simple, domestic object, he makes the past manageable. The shoebox domesticates the trauma, allowing him to hold his history in his hands. Therefore, Sidaoui's domestic space in Montreal becomes his crucial point of

orientation. It is from this stable present that he can look back, drawing a line from the “there” of his past to the “here” of his new life, transforming the abstract Space of Montreal into a personal Place layered with the rich, if painful, memories of the home he was forced to leave behind.

Michka Saäl’s *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* (1992) exemplifies a sophisticated hybrid documentary form that aligns with what film scholars describe as the essay film. It seamlessly blends modes of personal memoir, poetic reflection, and performative documentary to interrogate cinematic hybridity not only as thematic content but as a deliberate formal strategy. Rejecting conventional narrative structures, the film instead adopts an associative logic that mirrors the very processes of memory and thought. How, then, does this hybridization of form function as a political and philosophical method for representing the complexities of diasporic consciousness? The film’s fundamental structure is built on an essayistic impulse, which presents not a finished argument but “the experience of a thinking process” (Corrigan, 2011, p. 6). Saäl’s film embodies this principle from its opening moments. We begin not with an introduction but with a lingering, tight close-up on a creased black-and-white photograph of a child squinting in the Tunisian sun. Before any context is given, the image cuts abruptly to grainy Super-8 footage of waves crashing on a shore, the sound distorted and distant. A voice-over, perhaps Saäl’s, might whisper a fragmented line like, “A memory has a texture ... not a story.” This jarring, sensory juxtaposition immediately establishes the film’s logic. Saäl ensures the viewer travels not along a plot, but through an associative chain of images and sensations.

To simply label the film an essay, however, is not enough. What traditions of

documentary practice does Saäl draw upon and subvert? Her work blends the poetic mode's emphasis on visual rhythm with the reflexive mode's awareness of its own construction. More profoundly, the film sees filmmaking as an active construction of truth. Consider a sequence where Saäl and Ltaif sit at a table, sifting through a box of old letters. The camera is not a static, objective observer. Instead, a handheld camera moves with them, its subtle tremor mirroring their breath, capturing the intimate glance exchanged as a particular phrase is read aloud. This is not a re-enactment of a past event, but a present-tense performance of excavation. The truth of this scene lies not in the letters' content, but in the visible, tangible act of their shared investigation for the camera. If the film is a performance, then who are the performers, and what is the nature of their collaboration? This question leads to the film's dialogic core, which serves as a powerful political practice. Rejecting the authoritative voice-of-God narration, Saäl structures her film around the intersubjective exchange between herself and Ltaif. Her camera language consistently reinforces this. She frequently employs a two-shot profile composition, placing both women in the frame as they look towards a shared object off-screen—a window, a photograph on the wall. This framing visually rejects a traditional shot/reverse-shot structure, which would isolate them as individual speakers, and instead binds them into a single perceptual unit. Their dialogue is sparse; Ltaif might read a line of her poetry: "We leave, but the landscape stays in our eyes." Saäl might respond not with words, but with a subtle turn of her head towards the window, a gesture the camera holds and validates as a meaningful reply. The film's quiet, seemingly empty moments are essential to this project. How do these pauses and silences contribute to its affective and political power? These interludes are not voids but affective openings. In one scene, the

camera might fix on a simple, domestic object—a porcelain teacup on a saucer—in a static shot that lasts for ten, perhaps fifteen, seconds. No narration intrudes, only the faint, ambient sound of birds outside. The duration of the shot feels deliberate, forcing the viewer out of passive consumption and into active contemplation. What memories does this object hold? Why this teacup? This prolonged, silent gaze is a form of resistance against the documentary impulse to over-explain. It creates a space where truth can emerge from reflective experience. The audience must bring their own feelings to bear on the image, becoming complicit in the act of meaning-making. Ultimately, this complex formal hybridity functions as a kind of cinematic pedagogy. By embodying hybridity in its very structure, *Saäl* offers a model for how to engage with the complex, non-linear, and relational nature of diasporic identity. She teaches not by telling, but by creating a formal experience that requires the viewer to adopt a different, more sensitive way of seeing and feeling.

In conclusion, the rich and varied landscape of Arab-Canadian cinema demonstrates a profound engagement with the poetics and politics of space. This body of work consistently moves beyond using setting as mere backdrop, instead activating it as a central force in the articulation of diasporic identity. As this analysis has shown, these filmmakers deploy a sophisticated and dual visual language. They meticulously configure built spaces—the domestic interior, the urban street, the communal third place—as complex zones of negotiation, where the material culture of home contends with the social production of the city. Here, hybridity is lived, performed, and contested. Simultaneously, they employ a powerful lexicon of environmental metaphors, where the elemental forces of water, snow, and

even scent become visceral correlates for the internal, affective states of their subjects—fluidity, paralysis, and mnemonic haunting. By weaving together these spatial and elemental strategies, Arab-Canadian cinema creates a layered map of the diasporic condition, giving tangible form to the tensions between sanctuary and exclusion, memory and presence, alienation and belonging. It is through this dedicated attention to the “where” and the “how” of experience that these films succeed in visualizing the otherwise ineffable realities of forging a life in the in-between. Taken together, the spatial and sensory registers map a single continuum of diasporic becoming. As this analysis has demonstrated, identity is rendered tangible in the chromatic shifts and sartorial details of Nadda’s films; it is made audible in the layered soundscapes of Baker’s barbershop; it becomes haptic and relational in the poetic, archival textures of Saäl’s cinema; and it is felt in the corporeal weight of silence and slowness in Bensaddek’s stark vision. These filmmakers embed their arguments in the very grain of the image, the nuance of a performance, the texture of sound, and the weight of a gesture. In doing so, they create a cinema that does more than simply tell stories about diaspora; they forge a cinematic language that allows the audience to feel on a sensory and embodied level, the profound and varied realities of living in the in-between.

3 Nomadic Language and Storytelling

In Arab-Canadian cinema, the diasporic condition is articulated through the very architecture of its storytelling. This section explores how filmmakers in this tradition deploy a range of narrative strategies, from the micro-level of linguistic hybridity and dialogic silence to the macro-level of genre subversion. By blending and challenging conventions of language

and genre, the filmmakers forge a distinct “accent of form” (Nacify, 2001, p. 21) that gives cinematic shape to the complex, in-between nature of diasporic life.

In *Sabah*, language functions as far more than dialogue; it is the film’s primary aesthetic and narrative cartography, meticulously mapping the protagonist’s journey from an inherited, communal identity to a negotiated, individual self. The film’s strategic deployment of Arabic and English delineates the cultural and affective territories Sabah navigates. While this linguistic duality is central to the film’s meaning, its theoretical interpretation is not monolithic. In fact, the richness of Nadda’s work lies in its ability to sustain a dialogue between competing scholarly frameworks on diaspora, language, and identity. Is Sabah’s bilingualism a sign of a fractured, diasporic self, or a tool for generative, hybrid creation? Is it best understood as a series of distinct code-switches, or as a more fluid practice of translanguaging? By examining these questions, we can appreciate the film’s nuanced intervention in cinematic representations of diasporic life.

Initially, the film appears to align with the framework of accented cinema. Nacify (2001) argues that films made by exilic and diasporic directors often exhibit a thematic and stylistic “accent” (p. 21), marked by “a sense of displacement” (p. 4) and “a split subjectivity” (p. 16). In *Sabah*, the early scenes, conducted entirely in Arabic, establish this cultural accent. Arabic is the language of the private, familial sphere, a sonic landscape imbued with the weight of duty, tradition, and generational expectation. It grounds Sabah in an identity defined by her relationships to others—as daughter, sister, and caretaker. From this perspective, the linguistic divide seems to portray a classic diasporic split: the Arabic-speaking self, bound to a past in the homeland, and the English-speaking self, navigating the present in the West.

However, the very nature of Sabah's transition between languages challenges a simple binary. How should we theorize this shift? Her movement between Arabic and English as code-switching, a context-dependent strategy used to manage different social interactions (Auer, 1998). Yet, this model, which often implies a choice between two distinct and separate linguistic systems, may not fully capture the fluidity of Sabah's experience. A more recent perspective proposes the concept of translanguaging (García, 2009), which sees a bilingual individual not as having two separate linguistic compartments, but as possessing a single, integrated linguistic repertoire from which they draw dynamically. From this viewpoint, Sabah is not switching but rather translanguaging, using all her linguistic resources to create meaning and navigate her world. The seamless, unmarked quality of her conversations with Stephen supports this reading; her language use is not a symptom of a split, but a demonstration of holistic competence and agency.

This distinction between a split and a holistic self brings us to a central tension in diaspora studies, one staged beautifully within the film. Does Sabah's linguistic journey reflect the melancholic, split subjectivity of Naficy's exilic subject, or does it open a generative third space of cultural translation? While the film's initial premise seems to align with Naficy, its narrative trajectory pushes decisively toward Bhabha. Sabah does not abandon her Arabic-speaking self; rather, she uses her engagement in the English-speaking world to renegotiate the terms of her identity. The space she creates with Stephen—a space of romance, laughter, and swimming—is a quintessential third space, where a new, hybrid identity that is neither purely Arab Syrian nor purely English Canadian can emerge, embodying Bakhtin's (1981) heteroglossia as “the base condition governing the operation of

meaning in any utterance” (p. 428), where language stratifies into diverse socio-ideological voices—“social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions” (pp. 262-263)—reflecting the diasporic negotiation of multiple cultural accents and intentions that alienate words from monolithic origins, fostering a dialogic interplay that resists unitary norms and reveals identity as a dynamic, multi-voiced performance. She is not torn between two worlds; she is actively weaving them together. Furthermore, this act of linguistic world-building carries profound implications for gender and representation. What does Sabah’s growing command of English signify beyond a negotiation of diaspora? It can be read as a quiet but firm act of feminist resistance. Alsultany (2012) has critiqued the prevalence of “simplified complex representations” (p. 21) of Arabs and Muslims, where a veneer of nuance masks underlying stereotypes. *Sabah* defies this by presenting a character whose agency is subtle and internally driven. Her linguistic journey allows her to subvert the stereotype of the passive, oppressed Arab woman. In claiming the right to speak, love, and exist in English, she authors a new personal narrative.

This is also an affective realignment, to borrow from the Ahmed’s (2012) language of “affective alignment,” who contends “love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal” (p. 124). Sabah detaches herself from the affective script of familial duty traditionally associated with her role and embraces the affection of romantic joy and self-discovery. Her choice of language is a choice of feeling, a declaration of her right

to her own emotional life. *Sabah*'s brilliance lies in its capacity to support these layered, and even competing, interpretations. It is at once an accented film that speaks to the burdens of history, a site of fluid translanguaging, a cinematic negotiation between a split self and a hybrid one, and a subtle narrative of feminist becoming. Nadda's achievement is not in providing a simple answer to the question of diasporic identity, but in creating a character whose rich linguistic life reflects the profound and ongoing complexity of the question itself.

Similarly, *Cairo Time* also uses dialogue strategically to articulate cultural hybridity explicitly. When Juliette and Tareq dine at the tea shop, Tareq offers Arabic expressions like "Shu hal ta'am" ("What is this food?") embedded within English sentences. These intra-sentential switches are neither ornamental nor overly pronounced; rather, they perform a hybridized subjectivity, positioning Juliette as guest and learner, while signaling Tareq's bicultural fluency. Another example would be when they are at the tea shop exchange. As Juliette tastes mint tea, she pauses and asks, "What do you call this—mint?" Tareq replies: "Na'na," then smiles and switches to English: "It's better with a bit of sugar." The phrase slip draws her into Arabic sound, reorienting her presence in the cultural space. Interactions between Juliette and Tareq consistently shift between English and occasional Arabic, highlighting Juliette's tentative attempts at linguistic mimicry, coupled with Tareq's reciprocation in English. This linguistic interplay dramatizes enunciation, the act of cultural articulation wherein identities are continuously re-negotiated through speech acts across cultural divides. Moreover, dialogue-heavy scenes, particularly in intimate cafés or during walks through Cairo's streets, often juxtapose verbal exchanges with non-verbal cues captured through medium close-ups or subtle reaction shots. These cinematic techniques

foreground unspoken ambivalence in their cultural dialogue, visually articulating the ongoing process of mutual translation inherent in third space interaction. Juliette's hesitant pronunciations, Tareq's gentle corrections, and mutual smiles visually perform the subtle yet profound processes of cultural negotiation.

Beyond full-scene language switching, Nadda uses intra-utterance changes to convey emotional tension. Early conversations with Stephen contain Arabic phrase "Alhamdulillah," or a startled Arabic exclamation. A particularly resonant shot occurs when Tareq invites Juliette to relax on a rooftop terrace as dusk falls. Between them, English phrases trail and fade; Juliette falls silent, the camera burns in on her expressive gaze. Her stillness—without words—speaks to her unarticulated wonder and the complexities of untranslatable emotions. This silence, framed within the sound of distant muezzin and streetlights, functions as an aural code-switch, where unspoken language becomes a relational medium. These are not mere cultural filler; they signal emotional inflections tied to heritage, slipped into emerging self-expression. Each code-switch becomes a moment when identity fractures and recalibrates—capturing the ambivalence central to Bhabha's hybrid subject. Equally significant are pauses and nonverbal exchanges. In one crucial lake-side scene, Sabah begins an English sentence but trails off, eyes flicking to Stephen as silence descends. The camera holds a close-up, framing her emotional crossroad—not through speech, but through body language and gaze, which substitutes for said words.

The film's foundational reliance on the dialogical mode constitutes a deliberate political refusal of the intrusive, didactic gaze often directed at Arab and Muslim subjects. This aesthetic choice cedes primary authorial control to the subjects themselves, positioning their

speech acts, with all their overlaps and interruptions, as the film's central text. This approach is more than ethnographic curiosity; it is a direct counter to the history of documentary filmmaking that has often framed marginalized subjects as objects of study to be explained or categorized. By privileging unmediated discourse, the film insists that its subjects are the primary theorists of their own experience, capable of articulating their own complexities without the need for an explanatory voice-over or a guiding narrative arc.

This observational framework enables a dialogic structure that performs the very hybridity it seeks to explore. The fluid code-switching between Arabic and English is not simply a reflection of bilingualism but a linguistic enactment of the third space—a liminal and ambivalent site where cultural meanings are constantly negotiated. The language itself becomes a tangible manifestation of an identity produced in-between cultures. For instance, a single conversational thread can move from a lighthearted debate in English over beard grooming—an aesthetic practice—to a serious Arabic reflection on how that same beard is perceived as a signifier of religious extremism in Canadian society. This seamless integration of the personal and the political, facilitated by the film's associative and non-linear dialogue, demonstrates how diasporic identity is not compartmentalized but lived as a continuous negotiation between cultural expression and systemic interpellation.

Furthermore, the film's structural tension between humor and gravity functions as a sophisticated form of genre dialectics. Humor is deployed not as mere comic relief, but as a critical strategy of resilience and a mechanism for forging in-group solidarity. The shared laughter in the face of discussing Islamophobia serves as a collective affective response, a way of processing and resisting the dehumanizing pressures of the external world. This

dialectical process—juxtaposing the traumatic with the mundane and the joyful—produces a holistic and humanizing portrait that refuses to define its subjects solely by their oppression. This is reinforced by the film’s open-ended conclusion, which resists the narrative closure that often domesticates politically challenging content. This lack of resolution mirrors the ongoing, unresolved nature of the men’s experiences and compels the audience to continue the critical work of reflection long after the credits roll.

This accent of form evolves in *Arab Women Say What?!*, where Baker crafts a gendered companion piece that blends cinéma vérité, essay film, and testimonial narrative to articulate diasporic women’s voices. Rejecting expository conventions, the film adopts an associative logic, oscillating between virtual Zoom fragments and in-person gatherings, mirroring the non-linear thinking process of memory and identity. This hybridity enacts accented cinema, with its split subjectivity reflected in code-switching (Arabic-English debates on feminism) and open-ended structure that resists closure, compelling viewers to negotiate cultural liminality.

The narrative’s dialogic core—women steering conversations on refugee inequities or dual belonging—performs what Fraser calls a counterpublic. Here, humour (e.g., quips on white male confidence) dialectically juxtaposes gravity, producing a public sphere that refuses the bracketing of status differentials and instead thematizes them as part of the deliberative process. Self-filming via mobile devices transforms participants into co-authors, subverting the outsider gaze that often exoticizes Arab women. Unlike the barbershop’s sonic layering of clippers and banter, here the soundtrack weaves ambient home noises with folk songs, creating an “affective public” (Papacharissi, 2015) saturated with melancholia yet

channeled into resilience. The film's refusal of voice-of-God narration prioritizes performative truth, where sparse silences (e.g., pauses during iftar) invite reflection, aligning with slow cinema's emphasis on duration (De Luca & Jorge, 2016). This reframes narrative hybridity as what Gana (2009) theorizes as a feminist poethics: "a form of mimetic responsibility or poetic practice... persistently concerned with the articulation of the experiential present and the contingencies of lived experiences by bringing their mimetic differentials into intimate collision with the incessant drone of normative discourse" (p.29). Such a poethics dismantles monolithic tropes through everyday tactics—sharing recipes, critiquing assimilation—that condense and stage a poethics of everyday Arabness and wager on the radical everydayness of everyday life acts as a disruptive and redemptive force, a way of thinking beyond the closure of constituted powers. This accent bridges personal memoir and political testimony, expanding Baker's oeuvre to insist that diasporic stories demand forms as fluid and unfinished as the identities they represent.

The systemic barriers depicted in *Une Femme de Tête* are not merely bureaucratic; they are fundamentally linguistic. The film offers a compelling case study in how diasporic subjects must navigate a world that seeks to control and exclude them through language itself. Through its focus on the conversations that shape Bouchra's life, the film explores how linguistic hybridity and become essential tools for survival and resistance. The film's most trenchant critique, however, lies in its depiction of Bouchra speaking perfect French. The fact that the entire documentary unfolds in this fluent language, yet they are consistently marked as outsiders, reveals that the barrier is not linguistic skill but perceived origin, a phenomenon best understood through the lens of raciolinguistics and power.

The film's Montreal setting is a site of heteroglossia: the coexistence of multiple social languages. Yet, this linguistic landscape is rigidly hierarchical. Institutional French is the language of power, but the film complicates this by demonstrating that fluency alone does not grant access. The most powerful dialogic strategy the film employs is this very juxtaposition: showing their impeccable command of the dominant language followed by their exclusion, which powerfully proves that the problem is not their language but their identity. Bouchra's encounter and the institutions of power thus become exercises in hypocrisy. Their perfect fluency, rather than being an asset, serves to expose the system's bad faith. Dominant listeners are often conditioned to hear race, foreignness, or an accent even when none exists, imposing a racialized identity onto the speaker regardless of their grammatical precision (Flores & Rosa, 2019). Bouchra's French, though flawless, is likely perceived through this filter—always marked as Other against an unspoken, white, native Québécois speaker ideal. The institutional dialogue is therefore a charade. The rejection they face is predetermined not by what they say or how they say it, but by who they are perceived to be, making the language of qualifications and fit a form of critical discourse that masks underlying prejudice. In this context, their use of translanguaging in private takes on a different meaning. It is not a crutch for a lack of French proficiency, but a conscious retreat to a linguistic space where they are whole. This entire linguistic paradox culminates in the brutal logic of the suggestion that they change their names (from Bouchra to more-Western-sound-like Deborah). If even their perfect French is insufficient to overcome the accent that gatekeepers hear in their identity, the final strategy offered by the system is to erase the identity marker itself. The name Bouchra becomes the ultimate site of their perceived foreignness, a linguistic flaw that

no amount of grammatical perfection can correct. Their resistance to this demand is therefore the film's most profound dialogic act. It is a steadfast assertion that they will not be silent, nor will they change the very words that define them, insisting on entering the conversation on their own terms in a society that refuses to hear them clearly.

Bensaddek's *Montréal la blanche* employs a sophisticated hybrid narrative form that intentionally subverts conventional genre expectations to reflect its characters' state of diasporic limbo. The film's power is derived not just from its themes, but from a narrative structure that is as circular, confined, and melancholic as the lives it depicts. By strategically blending and inverting the conventions of the road movie, the essay film, and the minimalist melodrama, Bensaddek crafts a unique generic language. At first glance, the film adopts the structure of a road movie: two individuals on a journey in a vehicle that catalyzes a confrontation with their pasts.

However, Bensaddek systematically subverts the genre's core promises. American road movie is traditionally tied to myths of freedom, escape, and the discovery of self against a vast, open landscape. *Montréal la blanche* offers the opposite. The journey is not a linear escape to a new future but a series of repetitive, aimless circles within a single city. The car, usually a symbol of liberation, functions here as a claustrophobic, heterotopian cage, trapping the characters with their ghosts. The landscape is not a site of discovery but of profound alienation. The film thus functions as a kind of anti-road movie, using the genre's framework only to expose its inapplicability to the diasporic condition of being psychically and socially stuck. If the film rejects the narrative propulsion of the road movie, what provides its structure? Its logic is that of the essay film. The narrative of *Montréal la blanche* is not driven

by external events but by the meandering, associative, and deeply personal dialogue between Amokrane and Kahina. Their conversation is the essay. It circles a central theme—the nature of memory, trauma, and exile—exploring it from multiple, often contradictory, angles without offering a simple resolution.

This essayistic form allows the film to prioritize psychological depth and thematic complexity over the demands of traditional narrative momentum, mirroring the characters' own introspective and ruminative state. Beneath this essayistic surface lies the emotional core of a minimalist melodrama. The story of Kahina—the fallen star, the loss of public adoration, the confrontation with a painful past—contains the essential ingredients of a melodramatic arc. Melodrama should be understood not as an emotional excess but as a powerful mode focused on revealing moral legibility and unspoken emotional truths in a world where traditional authorities have failed. Bensaddek takes this mode of telling and strips it of all spectacles. The high stakes are entirely internal; the film's climax is not a public outburst, but a quiet moment of painful recognition shared between two people in the anonymous intimacy of the taxi. It is a melodrama of glances, silences, and the subtle cracking of a carefully maintained facade. Ultimately, this generic hybridity is the film's central formal strategy. The fusion of the anti-road movie's stasis, the essay film's intellectual reflection, and the minimalist melodrama's internal pain creates a unique narrative form perfectly suited to its subject matter. The film's structure is not confused; it is a precise reflection of its characters' fractured, multi-layered, and hybrid identities.

The narrative form and generic hybridity of *A Scent of Mint* are a cinematic enactment of the diasporic process. By weaving together the reflective mode of the essay film, the intimate

voice of autobiography, and the nostalgic aesthetic of the home movie, Sidaoui creates a narrative that embodies key diasporic principles: the non-linear nature of memory, the ongoing production of identity, and the negotiation of a hybrid third space. The film's dominant mode as an essay film makes it an ideal form for representing diasporic consciousness. Its reflective, associative, and questioning structure perfectly mirrors the experience of a life lived across multiple times and places. This form formally enacts diasporic identity as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a return to a fixed state of being. The film's narrative does not offer the closure of a traditional plot; instead, its open-ended, meditative quality reflects Hall's assertion that identity is a production which is never complete, always in process. The essayistic form allows Sidaoui to represent his subjectivity as this very process of thinking through and making sense of his fragmented routes. This reflective process is grounded in the autobiographical mode, a crucial strategy for diasporic self-narration. By placing his own story at the center, Sidaoui charts a "diasporic journey" (Brah, 1996, p. 179), one that is as much psychic and emotional as it is geographical. The first-person narrative is a political act that resists the erasure or simplification of his specific history within the broader Canadian multicultural landscape. For diasporic subjects, personal archives like photographs and home movies become cherished, almost sacred, artifacts that provide a tangible link to a lost home and a dispersed family. Sidaoui's film elevates this private, diasporic ritual of looking through the shoebox into a public cinematic form.

The narrative's reliance on these static, faded images formally demonstrates how the diasporic present is built upon the constant re-visitation and re-interpretation of these precious fragments from the past, making the archive the very foundation of identity.

Ultimately, the film's genre hybridity is the most direct formal expression of the hybrid subjectivity it portrays. The narrative refuses to be contained within a single generic category, just as the diasporic subject resists easy definition. The film itself occupies a third space; it is a liminal text that exists between documentary and poetry, public history and private memory, Lebanon and Canada. This blending of forms creates a unique generic language perfectly suited to its topic. The film's formal hybridity is not just a stylistic choice but a profound argument: that the experience of diaspora requires a new way of telling stories, one that is as complex, layered, and perpetually unfinished as the identities it seeks to represent.

This chapter has illuminated the multifaceted theoretical and analytical frameworks underpinning hybridity in Arab-Canadian cinema, revealing it as an emergent process forged in the liminal intersections of space, affect, embodiment, and form. Through Bhabha's third space and Anzaldúa's borderlands, enriched by phenomenological, affective, and materialist lenses, the analyses of films like *Sabah*, *Cairo Time*, *Things Arab Men Say*, *Arab Women Say What?!*, *Une Femme de Tête*, *Montréal la blanche*, *A Scent of Mint*, and *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* demonstrate hybridity's spectrum—from generative optimism and fleeting intimacy to melancholic stasis and resilient resistance. Spatial configurations transform abstract expanses into contested places of negotiation, where domestic shells, urban heterotopias, and elemental metaphors (water's fluidity, snow's paralysis, mint's sensory haunting) visualize the unhomely. Embodied practices encode ambivalence in gesture, performance, and sensory aesthetics, while narrative hybridity subverts genres through linguistic translanguaging, dialogic silences, and performative co-construction,

crafting an accented form that mirrors diasporic becoming.

Collectively, these films affirm Hall's shift from roots to routes, portraying identity as relational, processual, and gendered, achieved through affective economies, material archives, and counterpublics that challenge assimilation and erasure. By interweaving individual psychic wounds with communal placemaking, they critique systemic exclusions while celebrating hybridity's potential for re-orientation and solidarity. This foundational matrix not only avoids redundant explication in later chapters but also positions Arab-Canadian cinema as a vital enunciative site, where the in-between becomes a generative arena for forging contested, embodied homes amid displacement. Moving forward, subsequent chapters will apply this framework to deeper case studies, exploring how these configurations evolve across specific thematic clusters in the evolving landscape of diasporic storytelling.

Chapter 2 :Intersecting Mobilities: Crossing, Constraining, and the Politics of Movement in Arab-Canadian Cinema

Canadian multiculturalism is often hailed as a model of liberal inclusion, yet its celebrated colour-blind ethos can conceal deep-seated hierarchies of race, class, gender, and legal status. Drawing on critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality, this chapter argues that Arab-Canadian cinema offers a privileged site for making those hidden structures visible. Through bodies that move—or are prevented from moving—across family rooms, factory floors, mosque partitions, taxis, and international borders, the films examined here reveal how mobility itself is policed by racialized power. In doing so, they dismantle both Orientalist caricatures from outside the community and patriarchal or class logics operating within it.

Building on Crenshaw's (1991, 1997) insistence that multiple axes of oppression must be read together, and echoing Bell's (1992) critique of racism-as-neutrality, the analysis foregrounds three intertwined terrains. Section 1 titled Shattering Stereotypes shows how women-centred films such as *Sabah* (2005), *Une Femme de Tête* (2006), *Arab Women Say What?!* (2023), and *Me and the Mosque* (2005) expose the gendered scripts that racialize Arab/Muslim femininity while staging counter-narratives of agency, humour, and sacred space (mosque). Section 2, titled Masculine Vulnerability On-Screen, turns to *Things Arab Men Say* and *A Scent of Mint* to trace how migration, war trauma, and under-employment unsettle hegemonic models of Arab manhood, making room for tenderness, mental-health discourse, and cross-generational care. Section 3 titled Classed

Mobilities On-Screen maps the politics of movement itself: from the cramped taxi of *Montréal la Blanche* and the passport privilege dramatized in *Cairo Time* to the mosque partitions and refugee double standards debated in *Arab Women Say What?!*.

Across these case studies, cinema functions as both evidence and intervention. Each film combines aesthetic strategy (close-up testimony, archival montage, participatory camerawork) with structural critique, insisting that belonging in Canada is never just a matter of personal attitude or cultural celebration. Rather, it is negotiated at the nexus of national policy, global conflict, labour markets, and intimate kinship ties. By situating Arab-Canadian voices at the centre of that negotiation, the chapter not only enriches film scholarship but also tests the limits of multicultural discourse itself, arguing for a vision of mobility—and of justice—that is genuinely shared.

1 Shattering Stereotypes: Arab Women's Bold Resistance to Racialization

Arab-Canadian films centered on women often highlight female embodiment, the ways women's bodies, desires, and self-presentation become battlegrounds for cultural values, and show how these experiences are shaped by both gender and racialization. Three films in particular, *Sabah*, *Une femme de tête*, *Arab Women Say What?!*, and *Me and the Mosque*, focus on Muslim women's lives, using visual and narrative codes to challenge the notion that Arab/Muslim women are voiceless or wholly constrained. Each of these works demonstrates how intersectional pressures (patriarchal gender norms + cultural/religious expectations + external racism) act upon the female protagonists' bodies and choices, while also illustrating the women's agency and resilience in negotiating those pressures.

1.1 *Sabah*: Unveiling Hidden Desires

Sabah broke new ground by placing a Syrian Muslim woman at the heart of a Canadian romantic comedy—a genre where such a character is virtually unheard of. In Islamic law, a Muslim woman is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim man, whether he follows another or no religion. This rule is rooted in the idea that the husband holds a leadership role in the family, and Islamic jurists maintain that this role must belong to someone who shares and protects the wife's religious commitments. At the same time, any form of sex outside a valid marriage is prohibited in Islam, whether it is premarital or extramarital. Sexual relations are considered a serious moral matter and are only lawful within a recognized marital contract, which is itself a religiously regulated institution. Because of this, marriage and sex are tightly intertwined and jointly regulated in Islamic thought. Marriage is seen not only as a social contract but also as the only legitimate framework for sexual intimacy, lineage, and family life, linking personal desire to religious duty, legal responsibility, and communal order.

Visually and narratively, *Sabah* uses the motif of hidden desire to symbolize the title character's double life and the intersectional constraints she navigates. In an early scene, we see Sabah at a public swimming pool, clandestinely enjoying a swim while wearing a modest swimsuit beneath her hijab and long clothing. This image—a covered woman stripping down to reveal swimwear—is a powerful visual code. It wordlessly communicates cultural hybridity: Sabah is literally in between norms, peeling off the outward symbols of piety and tradition (her hijab and overdress) to indulge in a personal pleasure that is at odds with her family's expectations. The concealed swimsuit acts as a metaphor for her latent sexuality and

individuality, long repressed under layers of obligation and modesty. By using this visual device, Nadda shows, not tells the audience that Sabah's identity cannot be neatly boxed as either a stereotypical submissive Muslim woman or a Westernized rebel—she is both devout and desirous, negotiating a path between the two.

Sabah, while treading familiar territory of cross-cultural romance, feels fresh because of how it captures the in-between lives of its characters with authenticity. Indeed, the narrative arc of the film centers on Sabah's secret romance with Stephen, a white Canadian man. This romance is portrayed through tender, almost dreamy visual sequences—picnic dates by the lake, slow dances in Stephen's apartment, which Nadda films with warm lighting and intimate close-ups to emphasize Sabah's embodied joy. The camera often lingers on Sabah's face and bodily expressions (a smile breaking free, a relaxed posture in western swimwear) to highlight how falling in love rekindles her sense of self that had been stifled by duty. These moments contrast sharply with the cool, tightly framed shots of her at home, where she is literally hemmed in by family members in the *mise-en-scène* (e.g. seated between her overbearing brother and mother at the dinner table). This visual contrast reinforces the intersectional bind Sabah faces: as a woman, she is expected to be self-sacrificing and chaste; as an Arab Muslim in diaspora, any deviation (like dating a non-Muslim man or wearing revealing clothing) is seen as not just personal rebellion but cultural betrayal.

Intersectionality is further evident in how Sabah's family, especially her brother, Majid, reacts to her asserting independence. Majid polices Sabah's behavior in the name of tradition and family honor, effectively racializing her gender transgression as a communal issue. In one poignant confrontation, Majid shouts that "Arab girls don't fall in love; Arab girls marry

who their fathers tell them to.” His words explicitly tie Sabah’s gender role (who she can love) to her ethno-cultural identity. Here, sexism, the idea that a woman cannot choose her partner, is merged with cultural nationalism, the idea that an Arab woman’s choices reflect on family/community honor. Sabah is thus pressured to conform not only because she is a daughter and sister, but because she is seen as carrying the burden of representation for Arab/Muslim womanhood in a Western context.

As Nadda herself has shared in interviews, such scenarios were inspired by real experiences in her Syrian-Canadian family. Nadda once was temporarily disowned by her own parents for defying their expectations. By weaving these personal truths into *Sabah*, Nadda highlights how the immigrant-family setting can intensify patriarchal control: the family becomes a microcosm of cultural preservation in exile, policing women’s bodies as bearers of cultural integrity. Yet, *Sabah* is far from a somber social problem film; its tone is gentle, humorous, and ultimately celebratory of Sabah’s agency. Nadda was careful not to send the message that all Arab Muslim women need is a white guy to liberate them. Indeed, Sabah’s journey is less about Stephen rescuing her and more about her self-actualization—Stephen is a catalyst, but the film makes clear that Sabah’s strength comes from within and from supportive female relatives. For example, Sabah’s niece and sister secretly encourage her small rebellions; the film’s women form a quiet network of solidarity beneath the patriarch’s nose, signaling that patriarchy is neither absolute nor unchallenged even within her Muslim family. One of the most symbolically rich scenes occurs toward the end: Sabah performs a belly dance at a women-only gathering, joyously shimmying her body to Arabic music, and she eventually embraces the dance.

This moment subverts the Orientalist trope of the erotic belly dancer by placing the act in a female, culturally authentic context: it becomes a form of catharsis and cultural reconnection for Sabah rather than a performance for a Western gaze. As Nadda recalls, the belly dance is at the heart of sensuality and is emblematic of the empowerment of women (Elia, 2005). Visually, the camera frames her in full figure, unapologetically reveling in the movement of her hips and torso that she once kept rigid. It's as if Sabah is reclaiming her body on her own terms—not as an object of lust or a site of shame, but as herself.

By the film's conclusion, Sabah chooses to continue seeing Stephen *and* maintains her faith (she continues to pray and wear her hijab, as Nadda makes a point to show). This outcome underscores the film's intersectional message: a Muslim woman can be devout and modern, can seek love and fulfillment without abandoning her culture or religion.

The sexism she faces (the demand for total obedience) is shown to be a social construct rather than a religious inevitability, and by unravelling that knot, *Sabah* challenges viewers' preconceived notions about Muslim women's passivity. As one Canadian critic noted, the film captures the details and texture of Syrian-Canadian life and breathes new life into a classic integration story, precisely because it understands the people it portrays, rather than reducing them to caricatures.

In sum, *Sabah* uses the tropes of a romantic comedy to deliver a quietly radical narrative: the liberation of a middle-aged Muslim woman on *her* own terms, fighting sexism compounded by cultural gatekeeping. Arab women's acts of personal agency in film often serve as resistance narratives, defying both patriarchy and Orientalist expectations

simultaneously.

1.2 *Une Femme de Tête: Defying Discrimination in the Workplace*

While *Sabah* explores the intimate sphere of family and romance, *Une Femme de Tête* shifts the focus to the public sphere of work, highlighting how an Arab woman's identity becomes a site of contention and discrimination in secular institutions. The fact that this film was funded under an anti-racism initiative hints at its thematic core: it explicitly tackles gendered xenophobia in job-seeking, illuminating how racialization operates in tandem with sexism and class hierarchies to marginalize the immigrant Arab-Canadians.

From the opening frames, Belhaj uses visual cues to establish the intersectional markers of her identity: she is shown shaking off her anxieties and girding herself for the job search process. Indeed, as the film progresses, the atmosphere shifts to reveal systemic barriers. Belhaj employs a muted color palette and straightforward documentary style in scenes of her daily routine, contrasting with warmer tones in personal moments, visually conveying that the job market is a hostile environment devoid of the acceptance she might feel elsewhere. Narratively, *Une Femme de Tête* documents Bouchra's struggle for dignity amid hiring discrimination. While the film is short, it packs in a clear storyline: despite her qualifications, Bouchra faces rejection after rejection, sending out hundreds of resumés with few responses, often cited for lacking Quebec experience or due to her non-local name and nationality. Through this plot, the film illustrates how discrimination in the Canadian job market often manifests in gendered and racialized ways—Bouchra's immigrant status and not having local experience become barriers to entry, expressed through exclusionary hiring practices that

violate her professional autonomy and dismiss her expertise.

Belhaj uses testimonial-style close-ups to great effect in portraying the protagonist's resilience. In the most powerful scenes, Bouchra recounts her experiences, her voice unwavering despite the frustration. The camera frames her face in a tight close-up as she talks, emphasizing that she stands alone in sharp clarity, literally making herself seen and heard in a system that would rather overlook her. This cinematic choice underscores the theme of embodied resilience: despite being targeted for her background, she refuses to remain invisible or voiceless. Her testimony transforms her from an object of stereotyping to a speaking subject demanding justice. It's a direct challenge to the monolithic view of non-local women as submissive or acquiescent. As film scholar Shafik (2016) observes, contemporary portrayals by Arab filmmakers often "challenge monolithic views" (p. 1) of Muslim women by showcasing their agency and diversity. In line with Shafik's insight, *Une Femme de Tête* presents this single headstrong working woman as representative of many like her who push back against both xenophobia and patriarchy.

Crucially, the intersectional critique in this film goes beyond gender to include class and immigrant status in the workspace. Bouchra is an immigrant woman of color seeking white-collar work, a social position where power imbalances are pronounced. The discrimination she faces is not abstract; it's enabled by institutional norms like requiring local experience that disproportionately affect newcomers. The film ends with her persistent hardworking in searching for job, while she continues being optimistic about her future. The title *Une Femme de Tête* itself is a French idiom praising her as a woman of grit/determination. This links to broader research in critical race studies on Arab women in Western workplaces. Studies have

documented that immigrant women often face significant employment penalties and bias due to names, accents, or perceived foreignness, but many develop strategies of resistance and find strength in solidarity networks (Arai et al., 2016; Jaber, 2025). The film's storyline correlates with such findings, showing the personal cost of anti-immigrant bias and the importance of formal avenues of advocacy, like the NFB's own initiative producing this film, which blurs art and advocacy.

By highlighting how race intersects with gender in an institutional setting, *Une Femme de Tête* contributes an important piece to Arab-Canadian cinema's mosaic: it shifts away from familial or romantic discourse to structural issues of racism. In doing so, it paints a fuller picture of Arab women's lives in Canada—not only negotiating cultural identity at home (as in *Sabah*) but also fighting for basic respect and equality in society at large. This duality is precisely what intersectionality theory predicts: oppression doesn't come from one direction at a time. As Crenshaw and Maschke (1997) noted in her analysis of black women's experiences, the intersecting roads of racism and sexism create unique challenges not captured by looking at either axis alone. In *Une Femme de Tête*, we see the Arab woman at exactly such an intersection: the racism she faces is more than gendered and the sexism she faces is racialized, construed through stereotypes about immigrant women's fit. The film's note—one woman fighting for her rights and preserving her dignity—aligns with the decolonial feminist narratives, which emphasizes the role of diasporic Arab filmmakers in constructing new narratives of belonging and resistance, rather than perpetuating victimhood (Telmissany, 2020, 2023). *Une Femme de Tête* might be a short film, but it stands as a testament to that idea: it refuses to present its heroine as a mere victim. Instead, she is a

protagonist with agency, fighting not just for herself but for the idea that one can be unapologetically foreigner, female, and Canadian in the job market. By challenging both the discriminatory system in the film and the audience's biases, the film invites viewers to question the fairness of demands for local experience and to empathize with the lived reality behind the political debates on immigrant integration through labor. In a country that often prides itself on multiculturalism, the documentary presses the uncomfortable question: Whose experience is prioritized in our labor markets, and at what cost to minority women?

1.3 Arab Women Say What?!: Voices Unleashed

In Arab-Canadian cinema, the racialization of Arab bodies is often entangled with gendered stereotypes. *Arab Women Say What?!* pointedly subverts these tropes by presenting Arab women as multidimensional individuals rather than the reductive images prevalent in Western media. Historically, Orientalist depictions have cast Arab women as either voiceless, veiled victims or hyper-sexualized harem figures. In stark contrast, Baker's documentary offers what NFB calls a "counter-mainstream narrative" (2023) on the documentary description that embraces the unfiltered voices and embodied presence of eight Arab-Canadian women on screen. Through an intersectional lens, the film foregrounds how gender and race intersect in these women's experiences, challenging any monolithic portrayal of the Arab woman.

Embodiment and voice are constructed via the film's innovative interview aesthetics and intergenerational dialogue. Rather than formal sit-down interviews, Baker employs an observational, participatory style: during the COVID-19 lockdown, the women filmed

themselves in front of their own cameras in their private spaces and later gathered in person in a living room setting. This approach means more than the shifting to the post-pandemic era, but it also allows the women to literally and figuratively hold the camera, taking control of their own representation. Baker notes that once the participants began filming themselves, “they took agency and became the narrators of their stories” (Schachtel, 2024, sec. 5) shifting from mere subjects to active storytellers. The result is a filmic space where Arab women speak for themselves—their bodily presence, facial expressions, and voices all central to the narrative. The *mise-en-scène* of the group conversation reinforces this agency: the women sit together in a comfortable home environment, sharing tea and food, often leaning toward each other in animated discussion. In a telling still from the film, they are gathered around a table laden with Middle Eastern dishes, smiling and engaged. Such imagery frames them not as exotic others, but as relatable friends inviting the audience into their circle. The warm lighting and domestic setting underscore hospitality and openness as key elements of the film’s aesthetic, creating a safe, intimate atmosphere where the women’s voices can flourish.

Crucially, the film highlights intergenerational dialogue both explicitly and through its subtext. All eight participants are first-generation immigrants of varying ages (from young adults to middle-aged professionals), and their conversations frequently touch on experiences relative to both older and younger generations. For example, some women reflect on how they raise their Canadian-born children with pride in their heritage, noting the delicate balance of transmitting cultural values without imposing strictures. Others recall their own mothers’ lessons or the expectations placed on them as Arab daughters, thus bringing the

absent older generation's voice into the room. This dialogic exchange across generations is often implicit—as when one participant observes feeling too Moroccan in Canada and too Canadian in Morocco, a sentiment that immediately draws nods of recognition from others who have lived the generational curse of immigrant identity. In these moments, the women's bodily gestures—a knowing smile, a hand on another's shoulder—convey an embodied empathy that bridges age gaps. The camera framing amplifies this intergenerational solidarity by frequently capturing the women in group shots rather than isolating individuals; we see reactions and affirmations in real time, emphasizing a collective understanding among women of different ages. The film's sound design further supports their voices: there is no omniscient narrator to dilute their perspective, nor intrusive music to dictate emotional responses. Instead, we hear the natural cadence of their speech and even the pauses or sighs that accompany difficult recollections, granting the viewer access to the texture of their voices. This focus on vocal presence aligns with an intersectional feminist ethos—these women are not spoken for but speak themselves, an act of reclaiming voice from a media landscape that has historically silenced them.

One of the most striking examples of gendered racialisation explored in the film is the candid discussion of patriarchy in both Arab and Western contexts. In a free-flowing exchange, the women perform what Baker describes as “a comparative patriarchy assessment between the two cultures” (Schachtel, 2024, sec. 6). They challenge the Orientalist notion that sexism is a peculiarly “Arab/Muslim problem” by pointing out its prevalence in North America as well. Nedra notes that during Canada's COVID-19 lockdown, domestic violence went through the roof—a stark reminder that patriarchy is alive and well, worldwide,

not only an old world thing. This critical point is delivered through on-screen dialogue, with Nedra citing local Canadian news, thereby flipping the script on racialized gender assumptions. The editing intercuts her statement with attentive reactions from the others, underscoring collective validation of her point. Likewise, when the topic of reproductive rights arises, the film deftly links gender issues across cultures: as Carmen observes, abortion was dominating headlines in the U.S. at the time, whereas in many Arab countries—particularly among Muslims—abortion is not a contentious issue when the mother’s life is at risk, since “it’s the mother’s life that we need to preserve.” This nuanced perspective, rooted in Islamic legal and cultural norms, astonishes some viewers’ expectations and serves to dismantle the simplistic binary of a liberated West vs. barbaric East. The framing of this scene is significant—rather than a polemical montage, the film simply shows the women in conversation, seated evenly in the frame. Their dialogue flows naturally from personal anecdotes to general observations, illustrating what Baker calls the “grace [these] women have in addressing challenging issues.” The camera neither sensationalizes nor sanitizes their discussion; it observes quietly, letting the audience witness Arab women engaging in feminist critique with humor and insight. For instance, in one lighthearted yet telling moment, as the friends lament the double standards women face, Nermeen jokes, “Let’s all say a prayer—God grant us the confidence of a mediocre white man.” The film captures the eruption of laughter and nods at this remark, a moment of comedic solidarity that also drives home a serious point about gender and racial privilege.

Through such instances, *Arab Women Say What?!* constructs a portrayal of Arab women that is profoundly embodied—we see their *eyes roll and voices rise in laughter*—and

assertively voiced, insisting that gendered oppression and empowerment must be understood intersectionally, across cultural contexts. By centering these women's self-representations, the documentary effectively dismantles the stereotype of the mute, oppressed Arab woman, replacing it with images of articulate, assertive individuals who navigate and contest their racialized gender identities on their own terms.

In moving from *Sabah*, *Une femme de Tête*, and *Arab Women Say What?!* to *Me and the Mosque* in the next section, this section shifts from portraits of women negotiating intimate, domestic, and conversational spaces to a focus on women's embodied presence within explicitly religious space. In the earlier films, agency manifests through everyday decision making, affective labour, and the re-signification of gendered roles in family and social life, whereas in *Me and the Mosque*, it emerges through women's claims to visibility, voice, and spatial access within the mosque itself. Bringing these works together highlights how Muslim women's agency is not confined to either the private or the public sphere but moves across them: the same interpretive, ethical, and relational capacities that shape romantic, familial, and dialogical spaces also underwrite women's efforts to contest exclusionary architectures and practices in mosques. This continuity underscores that the negotiation of religious authority, gender norms, and belonging occurs simultaneously in domestic interiors, in mediated conversations, and at the threshold of sacred space.

1.4 *Me and the Mosque*: Breaking Barriers in Sacred Places

If the cinemas discussed above deal with the personal and professional realms, *Me and the Mosque* turns attention to the religious and communal sphere, investigating how Muslim

women's embodied experiences are affected by gendered practices within Muslim spaces themselves. Although Zarqa Nawaz was born in the UK, she was raised and educated in Toronto; thus, her works can be productively situated alongside Arab-Canadian cinemas because they similarly open up discursive and visual space for Muslim women in Canada (and the US), including Arab women, to appear, speak, and contest dominant representations. Through its focus on women's experiences in and around the mosque, *Me and the Mosque* stages questions of gendered spatial access, religious authority, and belonging that resonate with concerns articulated in Arab-Canadian films, even when the ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of the women differ. The documentary is a pioneering exploration of an issue that, at the time, was rarely discussed publicly—the status and treatment of women in Canadian mosques—and, by using a first-person, investigative approach laced with gentle humor, it deftly examines the intersection of gender, religion, and race from inside the Muslim community. By foregrounding diverse Muslim women's voices—among them Arab-Canadian women—Nawaz participates in a broader, overlapping cinematic field in which diasporic subjects negotiate Islamophobia, racialization, community norms, and external stereotypes about Islam's treatment of women; in this sense, *Me and the Mosque* operates less as an external case than as a complementary text that extends the chapter's argument about how women use film to reimagine communal spaces, challenge exclusions, and claim interpretive and social agency within Canadian Muslim publics.

The film's structure is part personal journey, part journalistic inquiry. Nawaz sets out across Canada—visiting mosques in cities like Winnipeg, Toronto, and Mississauga—and the US to document and question the practice of gender segregation in mosques, especially the

growing trend of relegating women to separate areas behind barriers or in side-rooms. This topic inherently engages intersectionality: it's about gender roles within a religious context but set within a North American societal framework where Muslims are a minority often under scrutiny. Nawaz introduces viewers to the concept of being unmosqued, a term some Muslims use to describe those (particularly women and youth) who feel alienated from mosque spaces. Through interviews with a variety of voices—young women who stopped attending prayers, older community pioneers who remember when mosques were more open, imams and scholars offering perspectives from Islamic history—the film reveals a pattern: many Canadian mosques, influenced by cultural customs or conservative interpretations imported from abroad, have placed literal and figurative barriers that make women feel unwelcome and invisible in what should be their spiritual homes .

Visually, *Me and the Mosque* is inventive. Nawaz incorporates whimsical animated sequences throughout the documentary to illustrate anecdotes and historical points. For example, when recounting a Hadith about the Prophet allowing women to pray in the mosque without obstruction, a lighthearted animation plays: a cartoon woman cheerfully walks into a mosque as partition walls crumble away. These animations serve a dual purpose. First, they add a feminine, humorous touch to what could otherwise be a very tense subject, thus disarming viewers (especially those within the community who might be defensive) and inviting reflection with a smile—a hallmark of Nawaz's storytelling style. Second, the cartoons metaphorically pull back the veil on patriarchal practices, making the critique accessible and clear. By visually depicting the absurdity of some situations—like women peeking through a small lattice grill to hear the imam because they've been physically

separated—the film underscores the irony that a faith premised on equality in the eyes of God can be so unequal in the eyes of its practitioners.

Nawaz's on-camera presence is another key narrative element. She acts as an earnest, witty narrator-participant, sharing her own experiences as a Canadian Muslim woman. At one point, she stands outside a mosque that once allowed men and women to mix freely, explaining that years later a wall went up dividing the hall—and with a half-smile she remarks on how the wall coincidentally appeared after some influential men in the community complained about women distracting them. Her tone is humorous but pointed. Through such commentary, Nawaz aligns herself with her female interviewees while also making it clear that this is insider criticism born of love. She emphasizes that she cares deeply about the faith and the community—in one touching segment, Nawaz reminisces about how as a child the mosque was a joyful place where everyone, male and female, mingled at potlucks and holiday celebrations. This personal stake gives the film emotional weight: the audience understands that the issue is not about abstract rights, but about a sense of belonging and spiritual fulfillment being denied. When Nawaz's voice occasionally cracks with frustration or sadness, for instance, recalling how hurtful it was to be shushed or physically walled off when praying, it underlines the psychological impact of gender exclusion. The visual of Nawaz standing behind a partition, speaking to the camera as her voice echoes in the empty women's section, poignantly captures how patriarchal interpretations can silence women literally and figuratively.

One of the documentary's strengths is its balance between critique and context. Nawaz interviews several Islamic scholars and imams (including respected female scholars) who cite

historical evidence that early Islam did not mandate segregating women. These interviews are often filmed in inclusive prayer spaces, visually reinforcing their message. By including these authoritative voices, *Me and the Mosque* dispels the myth that those who oppose barriers are un-Islamic. Rather, it situates the gender-segregation issue as a cultural accretion and a matter of power, not a religious necessity. This distinction is critical, because it counters both the conservative insiders who claim religious justification for exclusion and the Islamophobic outsiders who claim Islam is inherently oppressive to women. In doing so, Nawaz performs a delicate intersectional tightrope walk: she is critiquing sexism within her community (patriarchy in mosques) and challenging the racialized narrative imposed from outside (that Islam is monolithic and misogynistic). The intersection of race and gender here is subtle but crucial as Muslim women's oppression in religious spaces is compounded by the fact that broader society often uses those very practices to stigmatize Muslim communities as backward. Nawaz addresses this double bind explicitly in the film: in one scene, she notes that airing these dirty laundry issues is risky because the Muslim community fears that internal problems will be weaponized by critics of Islam. Her brother even cautions her on camera that her documentary might anger many community members for this reason. By including this admonition, *Me and the Mosque* acknowledges the post-9/11 racial context—Muslims in the West are under intense scrutiny, and some respond by doubling down on conservative stances as a form of cultural defense, which unfortunately can mean women's rights are the first casualty of that defensive posture.

In a climactic sequence, Nawaz films a community meeting at a mosque where women and men openly discuss the issue of partitions. The camera pans between the women

(speaking up about their alienation) and the all-male mosque board (some defensive, some thoughtful). Tensions rise as a few conservative men argue that barriers are about modesty, while women counter that nothing in Islam's core texts mandates such separation. The scene is a microcosm of a negotiation process since it's raw and real. By ending on this communal dialogue, *Me and the Mosque* suggests that change is possible through engagement and that Muslim women are not merely waiting for permission; they are actively *demanding a say* in their religious life. Intersectionally, this is significant: the struggle of these women is not only against sexism (the immediate obstacle of the partition) but also against the broader marginalization of Muslim women's voices both within their communities and in wider discourse. The film's existence, in fact, amplifies those voices to national and international audiences, thereby performing a kind of counter-narrative that critical race theory often speaks of—a storytelling that centers the marginalized perspective as a way to challenge dominant narratives (Delgado et al., 2023). Here, the dominant narratives being challenged are twofold: the intra-community narrative that equates piety with female invisibility, and the external narrative that assumes Muslim women accept or endorse their own marginalization.

In examining these four pivotal works—*Sabah*, *Une Femme de Tête*, *Arab Women Say What?!*, and *Me and the Mosque*—representations of Arab-Canadian women on screen emerge as a vibrant arena for contesting racialized patriarchy through the lens of female embodiment. Each film, in its distinct way, illuminates the intersectional forces that shape Arab women's lives in diaspora: the familial pressures and cultural gatekeeping in *Sabah*'s romantic awakening; the institutional xenophobia and gendered exclusion in *Une Femme de*

Tête's battle for professional dignity; the unfiltered, collective voices dismantling global stereotypes in *Arab Women Say What?!*; and the internal religious critiques challenging segregation in *Me and the Mosque*. Together, they reveal that oppression is not monolithic but multifaceted, where gender norms intertwine with racial biases, immigrant status, and religious interpretations to constrain women's bodies, choices, and voices. Yet, far from portraying passive victims, these narratives celebrate agency and resilience—women who reclaim their narratives, bodies, and spaces through humor, solidarity, and unapologetic self-expression.

This section underscores a broader transformation in Arab-Canadian filmmaking: a shift from external Orientalist gazes to insider perspectives that humanize and empower. By foregrounding embodiment, whether through a clandestine swim, a determined job search, candid conversations, or animated critiques of sacred partitions, these films not only resist racialized patriarchy but also invite audiences to interrogate their own assumptions about Arab/Muslim womanhood. In a multicultural Canada still grappling with Islamophobia and inequality, such stories are essential acts of decolonial feminism, fostering empathy and advocating for authentic representation. Eventually, they affirm that true liberation lies in intersectional storytelling: when Arab women take center stage on screen, they don't just survive but thrive, reshaping cultural discourses and inspiring future generations to envision a world where their bodies and voices are fully free.

2 Masculine Vulnerability On-Screen: Reconfiguring Arab-Canadian Manhood

Turning to representations of men, Arab-Canadian cinema offers compelling case studies

in how racialization intersects with masculinity, often uncovering layers of vulnerability and emotion that mainstream depictions of Arab/Muslim men rarely acknowledge. Two notable films, the documentary *Things Arab Men Say* and the autobiographical docu-memoir *A Scent of Mint*, center on Arab men's experiences in Canada. They fundamentally challenge the monolithic stereotype of the aggressive or unemotional Arab man by showcasing honest reflections on identity, displacement, and interpersonal connection. In these works, we see how Arab Muslim masculinity a fixed caricature is not but an evolving performance, one acutely shaped by the pressures of diaspora, e.g. racism, assimilation, intergenerational expectations, and by personal histories such as war trauma and migration. Using narrative and visual analysis, we can observe how these films construct a counter-hegemonic masculinity—one that resists the hegemonic image of the domineering or violent Arab male and instead portrays men as multifaceted and often vulnerable human beings.

2.1 *Things Arab Men Say*—Community, Camaraderie, and Counter-Narrative in the Barbershop

The film's premise is deceptively simple—over the course of the documentary, a rotating group of several Arab-Canadian men with different background chat while getting haircuts at Jamal's Eden Barbershop. This scenario, however, becomes a vehicle for profound conversations and an implicit refutation of mainstream narratives. The barbershop in *Things Arab Men Say* functions as a safe space where Arab men feel free to reveal their hopes, anxieties, and opinions to one another, shielded from the stereotypes that often constrain them in public. By eavesdropping on these candid conversations, the film effectively reframes Arab

men's identity: instead of being viewed through the lens of suspicion or fear, we see them as neighbors, fathers, friends—everyday people navigating life in Canada with humor and heartache.

Cinematically, Baker adopts a fly-on-the-wall observational style. The camera often pans leisurely around the barbershop's modest interior, capturing the rhythm of conversation and the comfortable body language of the men as they lounge in chairs or lean against walls. This visual style establishes a feeling of authenticity and immersion—the audience is almost placed in the room with them, another customer quietly listening. One remarkable aspect is that the film does not cut away to expert interviews or outside commentary; the men are presented as the experts of their own lives. By centering their voices exclusively, *Things Arab Men Say* itself performs a kind of counter-narrative: it privileges what would call a counter-storytelling, where marginalized individuals tell their own stories to counter dominant misconceptions. In fact, at the very start of the film, an opening montage cheekily references how Arab men are usually depicted—snippets from news or TV showing terrorists and stern patriarchs, which then fades into the warm, laughing faces of the actual men at the barbershop, immediately signaling that this film will flip the script.

The content of their conversations ranges widely, painting a portrait of the diaspora male experience. They swap stories of migrating to Canada. One man recounts the surreal experience of seeing snow for the first time, another talks about struggling to find work in his field and ending up driving a taxi. They discuss raising children in a culture different from their own, sometimes expressing vulnerability about whether they're doing the right thing by encouraging integration or holding onto traditions. Significantly, the men broach topics

like racism and Islamophobia quite directly. They share encounters with discrimination: being called names, profiled at airports, or stereotyped at work. Another man mentions how he is often presumed to be a Muslim and thus a potential extremist, even though not all the men in the room are Muslim. This opens a discussion about the conflation of Arab and Muslim in Western eyes and how it feels to constantly bear that stigma. In these moments, the emotional toll of racialization on Arab men becomes evident. Instead of the chest-thumping machismo one might expect from the caricature of the Arab male, we witness earnestness and even fragility: one man admits that hearing about terrorist attacks on the news makes him immediately whisper, “please don’t let it be an Arab or Muslim,” because he dreads the backlash on his family. Another confides that he sometimes feels he has to act extra nice in public to counteract the negative image people might have of men who look like him. These revelations are filmed in close-up, the camera drawing us into the speakers’ faces, which show relief at being able to say these things out loud to sympathetic ears. Such scenes underscore how racialization intersects with masculinity: these men are socially cast as threats, a role that pressures them to censor their own emotions and perform a hyper-aware, non-threatening persona in public. The barbershop, devoid of the white gaze, allows them to drop that guard and openly express the anxiety and hurt that come with always being seen as the Other.

One recurring visual element is the television in the barbershop corner, often tuned to a very Canadian pastime—hockey game. Baker uses this detail cleverly as a backdrop. Here are Arab immigrants bonding over hockey scores and local sports heroes, subtly reinforcing that they are integral to the Canadian social fabric, not outsiders. It also sparks a delightful

sequence where the men jovially debate which hockey team to support, leading to playful ribbing that looks no different than what one might see in any barbershop banter across the country. Such normalcy is precisely the point: the film highlights that Arab men share much in common with their non-Arab peers (love of sports, concern for family, etc.), thus humanizing a group that media narratives have often dehumanized. *Things Arab Men Say* is a corrective to unfair depictions of Arab males, illustrating the necessity of providing platforms for new Canadians to share their voices.

Another theme that emerges in the conversations is the idea of countering patriarchy from within. Interestingly, the film is not oblivious to gender issues; the absence of women in the barbershop is a subject that even the men acknowledge. There's a moment when they realize, with a mix of humor and chagrin, that they've been talking about raising daughters and women's rights without any women present. One of them quips that maybe the sequel should be "Things Arab Women Say," prompting laughter (and indeed, in real life Baker later directed *Arab Women Say What?!* during the pandemic). This self-awareness is important. It shows that these men are not narrow-minded patriarchs; they welcome the idea that women have their own perspectives (and indeed deserve their own space to voice them). However, within the scope of this film, what we see is a more emotional vulnerability among the men themselves. They talk about mental health, and one man shares how immigration and starting over in middle age led him into a bout of depression, something he says "we Arab men don't usually talk about because we're supposed to be strong." The act of voicing it in this supportive male circle becomes almost therapeutic, and you can sense a quiet breaking of another stereotype: that Arab men are emotionally repressed or impervious to psychological

struggle. By showing them empathize with each other's hardships, *Things Arab Men Say* promotes a vision of Arab masculinity that is communal, caring, and emotionally intelligent. This resonates with broader shifts in masculinity studies where scholars talk about hegemonic masculinity (the dominant ideal of men as stoic, tough, controlling) versus more inclusive masculinities that allow vulnerability and nurture (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The men in Baker's film exemplify a move toward the latter, in a culturally specific context. They still take pride in certain traditional markers as many speak fondly of values their fathers instilled in them, like hospitality or protecting one's family, but they are equally keen to break cycles they find harmful. For example, they critique how some of their own fathers never said "I love you" because it wasn't masculine to do so, and they vow to be different with their sons.

From an intersectional perspective, what stands out is that while these Arab-Canadian men do possess male privilege (within their families or cultural circles, their word might carry weight or they might not face sexism the way women do), they experience a form of racialized disadvantage in the broader society. This complicates the typical gender hierarchy: in many situations, these men are not the dominant group but rather targets of suspicion and exclusion due to probable Islamophobia or racism. The documentary illustrates how that position impacts their self-image as men. For instance, a poignant discussion arises about employment. Some of the men, despite being well-educated engineers or professionals back home, ended up under-employed in Canada—a common scenario for immigrants facing credential barriers or discrimination. They express a sense of emasculation at not being able to fulfill the role of the provider to the extent they hoped, having to take on survival jobs or

depend on their wives working as well. In that reflection lies an intersectional insight: migration and racialization (being an immigrant of color in Canada) have disrupted traditional gender dynamics, and while that is challenging, it also opens up space for more egalitarian arrangements, such as shared economic roles in the household. The film doesn't delve into their home lives deeply. The focus remains on the collective public space of the barbershop, but these admissions hint at transformations in how these men perceive masculinity when the external environment doesn't permit them to perform it in the old way. Rather than resulting in frustration alone, some embrace it as a chance to redefine what being a man means in their new context, e.g. being more present in child-rearing, as a couple of them mention doing.

In summary, *Things Arab Men Say* acts as a gentle yet powerful rebuke to the racialized caricature of Arab men. It does so not by preaching or overtly explaining, but by simply letting Arab men be themselves on camera—funny, opinionated, worried, proud, sarcastic, and kind. By documenting their banter about everything from politics to pop culture, Baker's film asserts that Arab men cannot be reduced to the roles popular media assigns them (terrorist, tyrant, or clown). Instead, it invites the audience into a privileged inner circle to recognize shared humanity. One review aptly noted that hearing these men's candid perspectives was refreshing and valuable in an environment where Islamophobia and racism have often drowned out such voices. The documentary's existence within the NFB's catalog, and its positive reception, indicate a Canadian appetite for counter-narratives that humanize those vilified by global events and sensationalist media. As a work of intersectional significance, it demonstrates that tackling racism also involves redefining masculinity: these

men counter the external label of dangerous Arab male by revealing themselves as caring fathers, friends, and community members—roles that hegemonic narratives rarely allow them to play openly on screen.

2.2 *A Scent of Mint: The Softening of Masculine Roles*

Unlike the group setting of *Things Arab Men Say*, this film is a deeply personal journey—essentially a memoir on film—in which Sidaoui retraces his own path from war-torn Lebanon to a new life in Montreal. *A Scent of Mint* blends documentary footage, home videos, family photographs, and reflective narration in 47 minutes. Through these elements, Sidaoui explores themes of displacement, nostalgia, familial love, and the reconstruction of masculinity in exile. The titular “scent of mint” itself serves as a central metaphor: it evokes the aroma of mint tea, a hallmark of home and comfort in Lebanese culture, but also suggests something ephemeral and bittersweet—much like memory.

Visually, the film invites us into Sidaoui’s personal archive. We see old family photos and fading snapshots that he spreads out on a table, the camera panning slowly over them as though browsing through fragments of a life left behind. Each photograph—young Pierre as a child in the sun-soaked village of Abey, Lebanon; his parents on their wedding day; siblings gathered around a big pot in the kitchen—is lingered on, while Sidaoui’s voiceover shares the story or feeling attached to it. This technique not only personalizes the narrative but also physicalizes memory, giving the audience a tactile sense of history. The act of handling photographs becomes a performative gesture of recollection. It also has a gender subtext: in many cultures, it’s the women who are the keepers of family albums and the organizers of

memory, yet here we see a man tenderly engaging in this act of remembrance and archiving. Sidaoui's gentle narration about these photos and what they mean to him reveals a tenderness and vulnerability that one might not expect if one's only reference point for Arab men were the rigid or aggressive figures of popular media. For instance, when he describes a picture of his mother teaching him to cook in their village kitchen, you hear his voice crack slightly—the film lets that emotional tremor sit, making it clear how much he treasures that moment and misses that world.

The narrative spine of *A Scent of Mint* is Sidaoui's chronicle of migration. He recounts how a carefree childhood in Lebanon was upended by the eruption of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, leading to a series of displacements. At 19, he was uprooted from his country altogether, immigrating to Canada in 1982 during one of Lebanon's most tumultuous periods. Through montage, we see images of war like smoke rising from buildings, hurried farewells intercut with the mundane imagery of arriving in Montreal, such as snow-laden streets, unfamiliar faces. The film here uses sound design effectively: the cacophony of war, such as sirens and explosions, gradually gives way to the subdued hum of a Montreal neighborhood, perhaps symbolizing both relief and the eerie quiet of exile. In telling this story, Sidaoui doesn't adopt a macho posture of the stoic survivor; instead, he openly shares moments of fear, loss, and confusion. He admits that leaving his parents and siblings behind was one of the hardest things he's ever done, likening it to losing a limb. He also confesses how in the early years in Canada, he would break down whenever he smelled something that reminded him of home, such as mint, the scent of which wafted from a Middle Eastern grocery and instantly brought tears of homesickness to his eyes. These admissions are accompanied by

recreations or illustrations: a shot of him sitting alone in a modest Montreal apartment, inhaling from a cup of mint tea, eyes closed as a tear rolls down—a quietly devastating image of a man allowing himself to express his feelings and mourn. This stands in stark contrast to the typical portrayal of immigrant Arab men as hardy, never looking back, or as embittered patriarchs. Sidaoui instead embraces a more feminized emotional openness, demonstrating that tenderness and longing are not exclusive to one gender.

Another key element is the role of domesticity and cooking. Throughout the film, Sidaoui frequently reminisces about the aromas and flavors of his childhood—the mint his grandmother put in tabbouleh and the special spices of his mother’s kitchen. At one point, he attempts to recreate a family recipe in his Montreal home, chopping parsley and mint on camera while narrating the memories each step triggers. In these scenes, cooking is depicted not as a woman’s duty (the stereotypical domain of mothers) nor as some macho chef performance, but as an act of love and preservation performed by a son. By taking on what might traditionally be seen as a maternal or feminine role, such as keeper of recipes, nurturer through food, Sidaoui subtly subverts gender norms. He shows that caring and nurturing, whether through cooking or through the emotional labor of keeping a family united across distance, is very much a part of his masculine identity. In one touching sequence, he prepares a mint-infused dish while speaking on the phone with his elderly mother back in Lebanon, who guides him through the steps. The split-screen imagery shows him in his Canadian kitchen and her in her Lebanese one, a world apart yet connected by this shared domestic ritual. The effect is profound: it suggests a hybrid masculinity where being a man can mean being gentle, connected to one’s mother, and engaged in homemaking tasks, without any

sense of emasculation. Indeed, the “scent of mint” is emblematic of that bridge, a traditionally feminine-coded flavor (often associated with mothers or grandmothers brewing tea) that he proudly carries as part of himself.

From an intersectional viewpoint, *A Scent of Mint* delves into how forced migration due to war and resettlement shape an immigrant man’s identity. Sidaoui’s masculinity is not just framed by culture or religion, but by the experience of having been a refugee/immigrant who had to rebuild his life. The film grapples with the question: What does it mean to be an Arab man when the context around you changes completely? In Lebanon, Pierre might have eventually assumed the role expected of him—perhaps take over a family trade, be the backbone for aging parents, marry and carry on the family name in the same town. The war shattered that trajectory. In Canada, he finds himself having to reconstruct home and manhood simultaneously from the ground up. One manifestation of this is his relationship with his father, which he discusses with a mix of reverence and sorrow. His father stayed behind in Lebanon to protect the house and land, embodying the archetypal masculine protector figure. Pierre expresses guilt that he wasn’t there to help him and he was safe in Canada while his father struggled through the war. This guilt is a gendered emotion, tied to the expectation that a son should stand by his father and be a co-protector. It also intersects with race/nationality: Pierre’s inability to fulfill that role is directly due to his position as a diasporan, an immigrant with physical safety but emotional burden. Later, he recounts his father’s passing, which he could only respond to from afar. In coping with that loss, he doesn’t resort to bravado; he shows viewers how he created a small memorial space in his apartment with his father’s photograph and a mint plant beside it. Tending to that plant

becomes a ritual of mourning and connection. Symbolically, the living, growing, fragrant mint plant next to his father's picture bridges life and death, present and past, and again shows how Pierre's way of honoring his father is through a gentle, traditionally feminine act of caregiving (watering the plant, nurturing memory) rather than, say, through a rigid display of toughness.

In a sense, *A Scent of Mint* also queers the stereotype of the Arab male in the broader sense of the word *queer*—not in terms of sexuality, but in terms of deviating from the normative script of masculinity. By centering memory, home-making, emotional vulnerability, and filial devotion, Sidaoui queers the script that society often writes for men (especially Middle Eastern men) as invulnerable or domineering. He stands as both narrator and subject of his story, claiming authority over it in a way that mainstream media typically denies men like him. There is a quiet revolutionary aspect to a scene where a Middle Eastern man cries on screen over a family photo—revolutionary because it demolishes the pernicious racist idea that these men only know anger or violence. Instead, we witness profound love and grief.

One cannot overlook the significance of the NFB's role here too. The National Film Board, through films like *A Scent of Mint*, *Me and the Mosque*, and *Things Arab Men Say*, was actively furthering a Canadian project of representational diversity—providing tools and platforms for filmmakers of color and immigrant filmmakers to tell their stories. This context meant that many of these films took on de facto educational roles as well. For instance, *A Scent of Mint* has been used in classrooms, according to the NFB study guide (n.d.), to discuss topics of diversity, family, and community. By being positioned in educational and

cultural circuits, the film's intersectional messages potentially influencing young minds to question stereotypes and embrace empathy by valuing emotional expression in men, understanding immigrant challenges having a ripple effect.

In summary, *A Scent of Mint* complements *Things Arab Men Say* in carving out a depiction of Arab masculinity that is richly human and consciously intersectional. Where Baker's film gives us group dynamics and sociocultural commentary in a light-hearted tone, Sidaoui's offers introspection, historical depth, and lyrical melancholy. Both, however, converge on key points: Arab men are far more than caricatures, and their identities in diaspora are continually shaped by the interplay of personal history, cultural expectation, and societal perception. These films invite us to see Arab men not as the sum of the labels, such as immigrant, Muslim, Arab, male that might be assigned to them, but as individuals who cry, laugh, cook, remember, and dream—individuals whose emotional landscapes are as worthy of attention as anyone else's.

3 Classed Mobilities On-Screen: Migration Status and the Politics of Movement

Critical race theory and intersectional analysis reveal how economic precarity, immigrant status, and racial profiling intersect to challenge Canada's officially "color-blind" multicultural image (Lee & Greene, 1999). Ostensibly race-neutral or colorblind policies often mask ongoing inequalities, disadvantaging racialized people while pretending not to see race. In the Canadian context, a seemingly inclusive multicultural

policy can obscure the unique barriers faced by immigrants and minorities. By ignoring how race, class, and migrant status affect life chances, color-blind multiculturalism can uphold structural racism under the guise of neutrality. Applying these insights, recent studies use a CRT framework to examine how acculturation and integration are shaped by race and power dynamics (Plaut et al., 2018; Beaman & Clerge, 2024; Kim et al., 2024). In other words, intersectionality and CRT help expose that not everyone in a multicultural society enjoys equal access to opportunity or mobility—disparities often fall along racial and class lines even when unacknowledged by policy.

Films by and about Arab-Canadians illustrate this critique by mapping structural racism onto everyday geographies of movement. Whether it's the grind of working-class immigrants driving taxis through snow-bound streets, the ease of a Canadian's global travel versus a local's rootedness, or women quite literally confined behind mosque partitions, these stories reveal how mobility—the freedom to move, migrate, or simply occupy space—is deeply political. Below, we explore how the films dramatize the politics of mobility at the intersection of race, class, gender, and migration status, effectively critiquing the rosy multicultural ideal from the ground up.

3.1 *Montréal la Blanche*: Taxi Geographies and Working-Class Precarity

Bachir Bensaddek's *Montréal la Blanche* centers on a single wintry night that encapsulates the class struggles and identity crises of Maghrebi immigrants in Quebec. The taxi itself becomes a potent symbol: a site of survival labor for the immigrant driver and a liminal space where two lives in diaspora briefly intertwine. Critics praised the film's "vision

réaliste du déracinement” (Ramond, 2016, para. 2)—a realistic portrayal of uprootedness and cultural loss. By confining its protagonists to a taxi isolated from the festive Christmas outside, the film bears witness to the instability and malaise experienced by first-generation. This realistic depiction of deracination and uprooting grounds the story in class realities: Amokrane’s working-class predicament contrasts with Kahina’s earlier celebrity and current solitude, highlighting different facets of the immigrant experience.

Notably, *Montréal la Blanche* was developed with support from Canadian institutions as it is produced by Productions Kinésis *avec la participation de Téléfilm Canada, SODEC*, reflecting how even immigrant-centered stories rely on state cultural. The film premiered at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2016 and later earned nominations at Canada’s Screen Awards and Quebec’s Prix Iris, showing both domestic recognition and diaspora resonance. Mainstream (francophone) critics often framed the film as a tale of personal identity crisis and reconciliation in a new land. However, the audience may find another layer: the film foregrounds classed labor and systemic hierarchies. Amokrane’s night-shift drudgery and the uneasy taxi confessions with Kahina expose how structural barriers—from foreign credential devaluation to subtle racial profiling—circumscribe immigrant mobility even on the ground. This perspective aligns with CRT’s attention to structural hierarchies: the idea that beyond individual identity struggles, immigrants of color often occupy marginalized positions in the labor market and urban space (e.g. driving cabs through wealthy neighborhoods that their labor services but from which they feel alienated). In short, *Montréal la Blanche* uses the geography of a taxi ride through Montreal to map the intersection of class, race, and migration status. The film’s deracinated protagonists illustrate

how economic survival and cultural displacement go hand in hand, quietly challenging Canada's self-image of easy multicultural integration by revealing the personal toll of mobility limited by structural racism.

3.2 *Cairo Time*—Passport Privilege and Transnational Desire

Ruba Nadda's *Cairo Time* explores mobility from a transnational angle, contrasting a Western traveler's freedom with the rooted constraints of life. The film pointedly juxtaposes mobility privileges: Juliette, with her Canadian passport and financial comfort, can travel the world freely, embodying a kind of cosmopolitan privilege. Tareq, by contrast, is rooted in Cairo—tied down by local responsibilities and, implicitly, by the vastly different mobility afforded to an Arab man of his circumstances. The subtle tension between them includes the knowledge that Juliette will soon move on (she awaits her next flight or her husband's arrival), whereas Tareq's life is anchored in a place many Westerners view as a temporary exotic getaway. This dynamic illustrates a structural racism operating globally—Western nationals often move across borders with ease, while people from the Middle East face stringent visa regimes and social expectations that confine them to their locale. Juliette's visa-free tourism versus Tareq's relative immobility personifies unequal politics of mobility: who gets to traverse world spaces versus who is stuck in place due to passport privilege or economic necessity.

What makes *Cairo Time* especially notable is how it avoids the Orientalist tropes common in cross-cultural travel narratives. As one reviewer observed, "the most important thing to point out is what *Cairo Time* is not: an 'innocents abroad' depiction of a foreigner out

of her depth in an exotic culture” (Brayton, 2010). Instead of portraying Cairo as a mystified backdrop or Juliette as a naïve Westerner overwhelmed by the Other, the film focuses on intimate human connection and Juliette’s personal growth. The city is filmed with nuanced realism—“refusing to sentimentalise Cairo as the stuff of a tourist’s postcards ... even in iconic shots like the pyramids at sunset” (Brayton, 2010), the cinematography and direction deliberately avoid exoticizing clichés. The story “skates right up to the edge of Orientalism, without going over” (Brayton, 2010), using Cairo’s unfamiliarity to Juliette as a catalyst for self-discovery rather than as a mere exotic spectacle. This subversion of Orientalist expectations earned the film critical praise for its authenticity.

In the context of class and migration, *Cairo Time* offers a layered commentary. Juliette’s experience highlights how even a privileged traveler encounters gender and cultural constraints as she initially finds Cairo to be a tough terrain for a woman on her own, needing Tareq’s presence to navigate certain spaces. Meanwhile, Tareq’s character hints at the limited upward mobility at home, despite his education and sophistication. The unfulfilled romance between Juliette and Tareq can be read as an allegory for East-West relations—genuine affection constrained by structural realities and unspoken borders. This resonates with contemporary research on Arab immigrants and cross-cultural encounters. A recent study (Eloulabi, 2023) found that negotiation of identity and belonging is heavily influenced by structural factors and power imbalances, validating the idea that personal relationships (like Juliette and Tareq’s) are shaped by larger racialized contexts. In sum, *Cairo Time* uses the lens of mobility and romance to gently critique how global inequalities (rooted in race, nationality, and gender) shadow even the most personal of interactions. The film invites

viewers to appreciate the beauty of intercultural understanding while acknowledging that not everyone travels on an equal footing—a core insight aligned with CRT’s global outlook on racial privilege.

3.3 *Me and the Mosque: Gendered (Im)Mobilities in Sacred Space*

Zarqa Nawaz’s documentary *Me and the Mosque* turns the focus to mobility within community spaces—specifically, the literal and figurative barriers that Muslim women face in Canadian mosques. In many mosque congregations across North America, women are relegated to the back or behind partitions, and in extreme cases barred from entering certain mosques at all. Nawaz travels across the country interviewing imams, scholars, and Muslim women to examine the space—both physical and social—granted to women in mosques. Using humor, personal anecdotes, and even animated segments, she shines a light on an oh-so-grating little issue in the community: the fact that despite Islam’s theological emphasis on equality and justice, cultural practices have rendered women invisible in many Canadian mosques.

The film reveals a kind of religious immobility: women’s movement and presence in a sacred space are restricted by walls, curtains, and even attitudes. As Elghawaby (2014) noted, these “barriers ... represent both physical and psychological separation”—a tangible divide that makes women feel isolated and unwelcome in what should be their spiritual home. Nawaz interviews older community pioneers who recall earlier days in Canadian mosques when men and women could mingle freely, versus newer leadership that has introduced stricter segregation in recent decades. Particularly striking is the perspective of female

converts to Islam who form a significant portion of new Muslims in North America: many are drawn to the faith by its teachings of gender equity and social justice, “yet many mosques force women to pray behind barriers... and some do not even permit women to enter.” This clash between expectation and reality often leads to disappointment and alienation—so much so that a term “unmosqued” emerged to describe Muslims (especially youth and women) who abandon mosque attendance due to feeling excluded. In *Me and the Mosque*, an interviewee uses the word “unmosqued” to voice a trend that Nawaz found alarming even in 2005: “young people and women are [leaving] mosques in huge numbers” because they see the institutional sexism as incompatible with their values.

By documenting these experiences, *Me and the Mosque* delivers a pointed critique of multicultural policy from within. Canada’s brand of multiculturalism often emphasizes respect for all religious communities, sometimes to the extent of deferring to cultural differences without question. Nawaz’s film, however, argues that one must not overlook intra-community oppressions. The fact that women in some Canadian Muslim communities face gender-based exclusion is a challenge both to those communities and to the broader society that lauds them as models of diversity. In essence, the film asks: What good is a multicultural ethos that celebrates a community’s right to its traditions if those traditions enforce inequity among its members? This aligns with CRT and intersectional feminism, which assert that racism or sexism can be perpetuated not only by the white mainstream, but also within minority communities—and that these issues must be confronted rather than excused by cultural relativism. Indeed, scholars have noted that Canadian multicultural discourse has sometimes been colour-blind or difference-blind to internal dynamics, thereby failing to

support those who might be marginalized within their own ethnic/religious group (Lee & Greene, 1999). *Me and the Mosque* confronts this directly. Through candid conversations and a tone that mixes concern with comedy, Nawaz advocates for a more inclusive interpretation of faith that restores women's rightful place in the mosque—literally removing barriers. By the film's end, the audience is left with a nuanced understanding that the struggle for equality and mobility isn't just about physical travel or jobs; it can be about the ability to move freely and belong in one's local community spaces. In a multicultural society, true inclusion means tackling these tough internal conversations. The documentary's enduring relevance underscores how ahead of its time it was in 2005.

3.4 *What Arab Women Say?!: Intersectional Mobilities in Conversation*

Migration is never a gender- or race-neutral experience; rather, it is stratified by class, immigration status, and the racializing logics of the host nation. *Arab Women Say What?!* uses the stories of its participants to explore the politics of mobility, who gets to move freely, who faces barriers, and how class and status mediate these experiences, within an intersectional racialization framework. All eight women in the film are first-generation immigrants in Edmonton, yet their paths to migration and levels of privilege vary. Baker was deliberate in assembling women from different regions of the Arab world and with varied personal backgrounds, precisely to combat the notion that Arabs form a homogeneous group. This diversity allows the film to delve into how nationality, class background, and reason for migration (refugee vs. skilled immigrant vs. family reunification) intersect with racialization. One participant might be a highly educated professional who chose to immigrate for better

opportunities, while another is a refugee who escaped war. By giving each woman equal footing in the conversation, the film subtly surfaces the class and status differences that shape their Canadian experiences, all under the umbrella of being racialized as Arab.

A key theme that emerges is the contrast in barriers to mobility. The documentary does not shy away from critiquing how Western societies differentially treat immigrants and refugees based on origin and race. In one poignant sequence, the women discuss the Canadian and global response to the 2022 Ukrainian refugee influx versus earlier refugee crises from Arab or Muslim-majority countries. Aya, a Syrian-Canadian musician in the group, admits candidly that she felt jealous of those who had an easier path to immigration compared to refugees from certain other countries. The camera shows Aya strumming her oud (a Middle Eastern lute) and sharing folk songs from Syria as she speaks, an evocative juxtaposition of cultural expression with painful personal truth. Sound and music carry layered meaning here: her gentle music underscores the longing and injustice in her words, as she envies the relatively warm welcome some newcomers receive while recalling the arduous journey of Syrians like herself. The group then turns to the stark double standard they have observed: “Ukrainian refugees were looked at more favourably and were settled more quickly by the Canadian government while many refugees from Afghanistan are still in limbo,” one woman notes matter-of-factly. This conversation is edited to include affirmations and additional examples from around the room—a collaborative testimony of systemic bias in immigration. The women’s tone is frank and somewhat weary; they are describing lived reality rather than abstract policy. Through their dialogue, *Arab Women Say What?!* foregrounds how racial hierarchies inform the politics of mobility: refugees from

European conflicts are often lionized and fast-tracked, while those fleeing wars in the Middle East or Africa face suspicion, bureaucratic delays, and social marginalization. This racialized valuation of suffering is precisely what intersectional analysis brings to light. The film leverages the women's personal observations as a powerful counter-narrative, challenging audiences (especially mainstream Canadian viewers) to recognize the inequities in who is deemed a worthy immigrant. By intercutting this discussion with close-ups of the women's faces—some nodding in agreement, others momentarily downcast—the editing emphasizes the emotional resonance of these injustices. One can sense the collective frustration and hurt, especially when they recount how media and society often render non-European refugees invisible.

Spatial and cultural barriers to belonging are also a crucial part of the film's exploration of mobility. Several women describe feeling a sense of in-betweenness—not fully at home in Canada, yet no longer at home in their countries of origin. Sanaa, a Moroccan-born business analyst, captures this diasporic dislocation succinctly: in Canada she's perceived as too Moroccan, but when she returns to Morocco, she's seen as too Canadian. This quote, featured prominently in the film, speaks to the classic immigrant paradox of dual unbelonging, which is heightened by racialization and cultural expectations. The film's visual framing reinforces Sanaa's words: as she speaks, the camera positions her slightly off-center in the group, as if symbolizing her feeling of being a little bit off in either context. The surrounding women listen intently, some reaching out to touch her arm in solidarity. The film illustrates this condition not only through dialogue but through scenes of the women building their own space of belonging. The cozy living room where they convene, filled with the aromas of

Arabic coffee and home-cooked dishes, becomes a microcosm of belonging that they have constructed together. The *mise-en-scène*—patterned cushions, a tapestry on the wall, an oud in the corner—blends Arab cultural symbols with a Canadian home, visually manifesting their hybrid identities. In this space, they are not off; they belong with each other. The politics of mobility thus plays out not just on geopolitical scales but in intimate domestic ones: while society may marginalize them, within their community they affirm each other’s right to belong.

Class dynamics surface in subtle ways throughout these conversations. All the women featured appear to be relatively middle-class or educated professionals, which likely afforded them the linguistic and cultural capital to immigrate and to participate in a public documentary. Yet, their class status does not shield them from racialization. One anecdote shared by the filmmaker in press reveals how even well-to-do immigrants face prejudice: Baker recalls being turned away by a Canadian salon owner who claimed not to have products for “her skin tone” (Roy, 2023, para. 6)—a blatant act of racial othering she experienced despite her social status. In the film, the women similarly recount everyday incidents where cultural ignorance or racism breached their professional or social life. They discuss how media narratives have portrayed them or their families as outsiders, which underscores an intersectional reality: respectability or success class cannot fully protect against racism. Baker’s choice to feature her circle of friends, who are “fiercely proud and confident women” (Roy, 2023, para. 15) willing to speak out, suggests an awareness that within any racialized immigrant community, class and personality influence who can participate in public narratives. The documentary’s strength is that it leverages the relative

privilege of these eight women to address issues affecting the broader Arab immigrant community, essentially having them speak with and for those who might still be unheard. For example, when they highlight how Afghan refugees remain stuck in limbo, or how an Arab child refugee feels invisible in a Canadian classroom adorned with Ukraine, they are invoking the struggles of individuals beyond themselves, often from less advantaged positions. One woman vividly imagines a scenario: a Palestinian or Syrian child who arrived in Canada years ago, traumatized by war, now watches her school rally in support of Ukraine—“Of course we have complete sympathy for the Ukrainians,” the participant prefaces, “but ... [seeing that] brings out [the Arab children refugees’] invisibility.” The camera lingers on her face as she says this, eyes downcast, and a weighted silence follows. In that silent moment, the film speaks volumes about empathy across experiences and the hierarchies of care that render some lives less visible than others.

In terms of spatial mobility, *Arab Women Say What?!* emphasizes not movement across geography since much of the film takes place in one home but movement across social and cultural boundaries. The women’s initial meetings over Zoom (necessitated by the pandemic) are shown via a mosaic of webcam frames—literally mediated spaces where each participant is isolated in her own box. These early scenes use a straightforward visual language (screen recordings) to convey both connection and separation: the women bond over discussions online, but the physical distance is palpable. When they finally converge in person, the filmmaking approach shifts to a fly-on-the-wall observational mode. Baker deliberately set up cameras in an adjoining room and let the women converse freely without a filmmaker intervening (Roy, 2023). This decision results in a fluid, organic capture of their face-to-face

interaction—the kind of interaction impossible over Zoom. We see hugs, the sharing of food, and spontaneous jam sessions (such as Aya playing her oud for the group). The contrast in editing between the Zoom montage and the real-life gathering is striking: the film cuts from the somewhat static, grid-like composition of virtual chats to dynamic handheld shots of women clinking tea glasses and passing plates. This transition itself is symbolic of mobility—from the constrained digital space to the freedom of physical togetherness, mirroring the journey from isolation to community. It also reminds the viewer that for immigrants, mobility is not just about the journey to a new country, but about finding liberty and voice within that country. The women, having navigated the physical relocation to Canada, are now navigating the social space of Canada as racialized minorities. By carving out their own space reserved for them on film, they demonstrate resilience in overcoming barriers both tangible (borders, visas) and intangible (prejudices, cultural misunderstandings). As Baker describes, *Arab Women Say What?!* ultimately shows the women’s “resilience in dealing with cultural bereavement”—mourning the loss of home and familiarity—by forging new attachments and asserting their right to move, speak, and belong.

In summary, the film gives equal weight to the intersections of class, status, and mobility in shaping Arab-Canadian women’s lives. Through personal narratives of migration and belonging, it paints a complex picture of how these women negotiate freedom and constraint—how, for instance, a passport might grant entry to Canada, but societal acceptance is another journey altogether. The politics of mobility in this context is about more than the act of immigration; it is about the everyday political act of existing and thriving as racialized immigrant women in the Canadian mosaic.

3.5 Counter-Narratives and Postmemory—Storytelling as Mobile Archive

Perhaps the most profound contribution of *Arab Women Say What?!* is in its function as a counter-narrative—a form of collective storytelling that challenges dominant representations and preserves cultural memory for future generations. Within the chapter’s framework of intersectional racialization, this part will examine how the film positions speech, silence, and testimony in relation to diasporic identity formation. In doing so, it engages with Hirsch’s concepts of postmemory—the idea that the second generation inherits the memories of their parents’ exile or trauma—and shows how storytelling can be both an act of resistance and of healing in a diasporic context.

From its very title, *Arab Women Say What?!* signals a break from silence. The phrasing exudes an astonished, almost defiant tone (“say *what?!*”) as if anticipating the surprise of those who have never heard Arab women speak so freely. This reflects the sad reality that Arab women’s voices have long been marginalized or misrepresented in mainstream media. Baker herself was motivated by years of seeing her community spoken about but rarely with. She recalls encountering ignorant views in Canada—for instance, a non-Arab viewer once expressed shock that Arab families sit at tables and eat with spoons, forks and knives just like everyone else (Roy, 2023). Such comments underscore how prevailing narratives have dehumanized Arabs, reducing them to caricatures or erasing their everyday lived realities. In response, Baker has made a career of elevating immigrant voices in film. *Arab Women Say What?!* continues this trajectory, operating as a direct counter-narrative to the tropes of Arabs as terrorists or veiled victims. One way the film accomplishes this is by inviting viewers into

the private sphere of Arab women's honest conversations—a realm that mainstream media never penetrates. By doing so, it reverses the gaze: rather than Arab women being objects of scrutiny, they become the narrators, scrutinizing Western media and society in turn. The absence of cutaway footage keeps the focus on the speakers, as if to say that their interpretation of these images is what truly matters, not the images themselves. This technique transforms the act of storytelling into an act of reclaiming power—they are reframing the media's narrative, offering counter-memories to the dominant discourse.

The film's emphasis on storytelling is also evident in its inclusion of poetry, music, and personal anecdotes as narrative devices. These elements serve as bridges between personal memory and collective history, illustrating the concept of postmemory. According to Hirsch (2012), postmemory refers to the condition of individuals who are raised under the pervasive influence of narratives that predate their own birth, so much so that these inherited accounts displace their own belated personal stories. In a diasporic setting, postmemory can describe how children of immigrants inherit stories of the homeland, exile, and trauma through their parents' words, images, and behaviors. *Arab Women Say What?!* engages with postmemory even though its primary subjects are themselves the first generation rather than their children. The women often speak for the ones who are not on camera—their parents or children—transmitting stories across generational lines. For example, one woman recounts her family's funeral back in her home country, connecting that past to her own present quest for belonging in Canada. Another shares a childhood memory of fleeing conflict, a story she now tells her Canadian-born kids, so they understand the family's journey. These narratives are given space in the film. The use of silence is noteworthy: after a particularly heavy story

is shared, the camera might cut to a quiet shot of the group sipping tea, allowing the weight of the testimony to settle. Such pauses mimic the oral storytelling tradition—the hush in a room after an elder’s tale—creating a reverent space for memory to be absorbed. In these instances, the film’s sound design may drop out all music, highlighting the quiet or perhaps letting a soft diegetic sound (like the clink of a spoon in a teacup) accentuate the stillness. This aesthetic choice honors the unspeakable aspects of traumatic memory; not everything needs to be articulated in words, and the women’s somber faces or tearful eyes often communicate what language cannot. By incorporating these interludes, *Arab Women Say What?!* aligns with a diasporic storytelling mode that values both speech *and* silence as carriers of meaning.

The inclusion of artistic expressions—namely poetry and music—further deepens the exploration of storytelling and memory. In one of the film’s most poignant sequences, a participant, Aya, shares an original poem about resilience and loss:

Open your window to the sun

It is the same sun here and there

And if you don’t live in your country

It will continue to grow within you

Don’t be sad that you are leaving, go

In your country, there are many broken souls

We left so that we can live.

In your country, it is no longer allowed

This scene offers a unique perspective on resiliency through the sharing of poetry. We see the poet, perhaps a younger woman, reciting verses to the attentive group. The camera frames her in a medium close-up, her voice clear and steady, while a gentle score plays underneath, creating an ambiance of intimacy. As she finishes, the film shows the reactions: a contemplative silence, a few nods, someone reaches out to hold her hand. Here, speech and silence intersect powerfully—the poem (speech) evokes a deeply emotional response that renders the others momentarily speechless (silence), indicating a process of collective processing of diasporic grief and hope. This is an illustration of how postmemory can be performed and transmitted: the poet may be articulating feelings and images inherited from her community's past, and through her creative expression, those memories become shared with her peers and with us as an audience. The film thus becomes an archive of these stories and feelings, preserving them as part of a counter-narrative archive of Arab-Canadian experience.

Another memorable instance of cultural storytelling is when Aya plays her oud and sings Syrian folk songs for the group. The *mise-en-scène* in this moment is celebratory and nostalgic: Aya's music fills the room, and some women clap along or ululate in encouragement, temporarily transforming the Edmonton living room into a pan-Arab salon. On one level, this is a joyous affirmation of cultural heritage—an embodied narrative of homeland carried in melody and rhythm. On another level, Aya's act is a form of testimony as well. Just before she plays, she contextualizes her song with a personal revelation (her mixed feelings about the ease of others' immigration). The song then becomes a medium of memory, conveying what words alone might not. The camera weaves between close-ups of

her fingers on the oud strings and shots of the other women's faces, some smiling softly, others with glistening eyes. This suggests that the music is triggering memories among them—perhaps of their own homelands, of songs their mothers sang, of the sound of Arabic music echoing in distant bazaars or family weddings. The film does not cut away or add explanatory voiceover; it lets the cultural performance speak for itself as a narrative act. In academic terms, this could be seen as a decolonial storytelling tactic by using indigenous art forms and oral traditions as counterscripts to the hegemonic narratives that often exclude or exoticize such voices. The very presence of poetry and music in the documentary's structure enacts a counter-narrative practice, privileging modes of expression that are central to the women's identities but typically marginalized in documentary reportage.

Arab Women Say What?! also addresses the theme of silence versus speech within the Arab diaspora community itself. One of the reasons Baker had to lobby her friends to participate is that many in the community are camera shy and distrustful of media due to past misrepresentation. This points to a culture of caution—a survival strategy of staying silent in public to avoid being misquoted or stereotyped. By successfully bringing eight women to speak on camera, the film marks a collective breaking of that silence. Baker promised her friends that she would not censor them and that they could discuss whatever they want to talk about (Schachtel, 2024). This assurance created a zone of trust where previously taboo or private topics could be aired. The women took on subjects like honour killing and personal reproductive choices—topics often deemed too controversial or intimate—because they set the agenda for their narrative. The act of voicing these issues in a supportive all-female space is itself a reclaiming of narrative power. The film shows that once the women began talking,

the floodgates opened: conversations took unexpected turns, revelations came out, and, as Baker noted, poignant moments emerged naturally when the women felt truly free to speak (Roy, 2023). In giving them this platform, the documentary transforms individual testimonies of pain and resilience into a collective narrative that insists on being heard. The women, through their unguarded speech, effectively assert what scholar bell hooks called the politicization of memory—they turn personal memories of discrimination, loss, and struggle into a political statement that challenges the dominant history and asks viewers to rethink their assumptions.

Finally, the film positions these acts of storytelling and memory-sharing as fundamental to diasporic identity formation. The community the women create among themselves—a sisterhood bound by shared understanding—becomes the anchor of their identity in a place where they might otherwise feel unmoored. Baker observes that what “grounds us as immigrants is the community we create with people who have the same experience as us” (Schachtel, 2024, sec. 8). In the documentary, we witness this grounding in real time: as the women swap stories, laugh at each other’s jokes, and comfort each other’s sorrows, they are actively constructing a counter-memory of what it means to be Arab and Canadian. This collective storytelling counters the forgetting or erasure that often comes with assimilation pressures. Instead of silencing their accents, opinions on Middle East politics, or old country customs, the women center them. The film even extends an *invitation* to the audience, especially non-Arab viewers, to listen and learn—to “join us in our living rooms, at our kitchen tables... to see and understand us for who we really are.” This direct address, articulated by Baker, frames the documentary itself as an act of bridge-building through

narrative. It suggests that storytelling in the diasporic context is not just for the community's internal benefit, but also a means to educate and transform the perceptions of the broader society. By sharing their testimonies and memories, the women aim to replace fear and ignorance with empathy and knowledge. In doing so, they align with a long tradition of counter-narrative storytelling in critical race and feminist praxis, using personal narrative as a tool to challenge systemic biases and to humanize the marginalized (Delgado et al., 2023).

In conclusion, *Arab Women Say What?!* significantly enriches each of the thematic areas—gendered racialisation, mobility, and narrative/postmemory—by providing concrete, on-screen examples of how intersectional racialization operates in Arab-Canadian cinema. The film's detailed analysis of embodiment and voice shows Arab women actively countering gendered stereotypes. Its exploration of mobility and migration uncovers the layered barriers and double standards that Arab immigrant women face, emphasizing the interplay of race, class, and politics. And through its embrace of counter-narratives and diasporic storytelling, the documentary preserves the memories and testimonies of a community that refuses to be silenced or simplified. As an academic case study, *Arab Women Say What?!* stands as a compelling illustration of how intersectional racialization can be both the subject of cinematic inquiry and a framework for analysis: the film not only depicts the intersecting axes of identity that shape its participants' lives, but it also embodies an intersectional ethos in the way it was made (collaboratively and conscientiously) and the way it communicates (holistically, through words, images, and sounds). In an era when Arab women are still fighting for nuanced representation, Baker's documentary serves as a vital counter-

narrative—one that, in her words, raises the gaze to see the full humanity of Arab-Canadian women. It invites scholars and audiences alike to rethink prevailing narratives and to acknowledge storytelling as a powerful means of reclaiming identity and agency in the diaspora.

3.6 Diasporic Cartographies—Paperwork Geographies and Mobility

Expanding on the politics of mobility, other narratives by Arab-Canadians highlight the bureaucratic and geopolitical dimensions of movement—what we might call the geographies of paperwork and diaspora. For instance, *A Scent of Mint* is a touching meditation on the pursuit of happiness and the immigrant experience, built around the director’s memories of separation and nostalgia for the home he left behind. Through personal storytelling, it illuminates how forced migration due to conflict becomes a lifelong saga of border crossings, visa applications, and resettlement challenges—essentially, a portrait of mobility dictated by paperwork and political circumstances. The sensory memory of home reflects a common diasporic reality: while their bodies relocate, their minds remain caught between worlds, and their movement is rarely carefree. Unlike a tourist like Juliette in *Cairo Time*, Sidaoui’s movement is one of necessity and survival, supervised by immigration systems and international policies. The contrast is stark and deliberate—one travels by choice to broaden horizons, another travels by compulsion to escape danger.

Scholars such as Telmissany have argued that diaspora narratives serve a political critique by highlighting who gets to call Canada “home.” Telmissany (2020, 2023) notes that stories of Middle Eastern migrants in Canada often expose tensions between Canada’s

welcoming rhetoric and the actual hurdles newcomers face in integration. For example, films and literature about the Arab displaced frequently delve into the paperwork geography—the waiting rooms of visa offices, the language classes, the precarious jobs—thereby documenting how lives are put on hold or livelihoods reset in the process of migration. By centering diasporic experiences, such works question the simplicity of the multicultural celebration. In *A Scent of Mint*, we see how civil war forced Sidaoui and his family to flee, consequently separating him from his parents, brother and sisters, and decades later he is still processing that upheaval. This aligns with the notion that multicultural policy often underplays the trauma of displacement that many immigrant communities carry with them. It's not enough to wave a flag of diversity; one must also understand the journeys—often harrowing—that people undertook to arrive in Canada, and the systemic barriers they might continue to face from credential recognition to subtle racism. By bringing diasporic stories to the forefront, Arab-Canadian creators compel audiences to consider mobility not as a given, but as a privilege not equally granted to all.

Situated in a world of ongoing conflicts and refugee crises, *Arab Women Say What?!* delves into how geopolitical events shape personal identity and community dynamics. Several of the women either lived through war or are deeply connected to regions afflicted by conflict, and their discussion reveals the emotional weight of these experiences. In one poignant exchange, a participant imagines the perspective of a young refugee child from places like Palestine, Syria, Ethiopia or Afghanistan who has escaped to Canada—only to witness how a more recent wave of refugees (from Ukraine) garners overwhelming public

support and visibility. “Of course we have complete sympathy for the Ukrainians,” she prefaces, yet seeing Canadian schoolchildren suddenly don blue-and-yellow ribbons for Ukraine triggers a painful realization for earlier refugees: it “brings out [their] invisibility.” This observation echoes a hard truth about the politics of empathy and asylum: not all refugees are met with equal compassion. The women’s conversation highlights a sense of double standards—Western society rushes to embrace those refugees whom it identifies with culturally or racially, while conflicts in the Middle East or Africa rarely spur the same public outcry or solidarity. Such moments in the film serve as a quiet political critique, insight that Middle Eastern diasporic narratives often expose tensions between Canada’s welcoming multicultural image and the harsher realities faced by newcomers (Telmissany, 2023). Through their lived examples, the women underscore how war and displacement continue to mark them even in Canada: they carry memories of civil wars and uprisings, and they acutely feel global inequities in how their homelands’ struggles are perceived. They speak about media bias as well—recalling how media coverage of conflicts can be very offensive and hurtful with Arab and Muslim populations frequently dehumanized or cast as perpetual villains. For these first-generation immigrants, there is a bittersweet reality that safety and stability in Canada come coupled with a new battle for recognition: fighting to have their stories heard and their humanity acknowledged on equal terms. By voicing these experiences, *Arab Women Say What?!* shines light on the often-invisible emotional toll of exile—the lingering grief for one’s war-torn homeland, and the frustration of seeing that suffering minimized or ignored abroad. In doing so, the film implicitly asks the audience to reconsider who is seen and who remains unseen in our global narrative of compassion.

4 Chapter Conclusion

Across these analyses of Arab-Canadian films focused on women and men, a clear pattern emerges: the intersectional approach is key to decolonizing how Arab and Muslim identities are portrayed on screen. By intentionally depicting the ways race, religion, gender, and other factors intertwine in the lives of their characters, the filmmakers we've discussed dismantle simplistic tropes and replace them with nuanced narratives. In doing so, they not only provide authentic representation for Arab-Canadians but also invite broader audiences to unlearn biases and see the shared humanity in stories that might initially seem foreign. Let us synthesize the insights from the films and consider their wider implications.

Firstly, these films collectively demonstrate that single-axis oppressions morph and intensify when they intersect. Sexism, for example, does not manifest in the same way for a white Christian woman as it does for a Syrian Muslim woman like Sabah or a Moroccan immigrant like the heroine of *Une femme de tête*. For the latter, patriarchal expectations (be dutiful, be modest, be self-effacing) are compounded by cultural pressures (don't betray your heritage, uphold the family honor) and, in many cases, by external bigotry (face suspicion or exoticization in society at large). Sabah's desire for love becomes scandalous not merely because she's a woman asserting autonomy, but because her family racializes that autonomy as a cultural betrayal, labelling her choice of a non-Muslim partner as shameful in a way it might not be in a non-diasporic context. Similarly, the woman in *Une femme de tête* isn't just a target of generic workplace harassment; the abuse zeroes in on her hijab, making it a fusion of misogyny and Islamophobia—her gendered body is attacked in a racialized manner. This

confirms what intersectionality theorists maintain: that attempting to address, say, sexism without acknowledging its racial or religious inflections (or vice versa) will fail to grasp the reality for those who stand at those crossroads. It's noteworthy that the films' protagonists overcome or resist their challenges *because* they navigate those intersections consciously. Sabah negotiates with her family using both the language of personal rights and cultural respect, ultimately finding a compromise that honors her identity. Nawaz in *Me and the Mosque* leverages her dual positioning, as a faithful Muslim and as a Canadian woman accustomed to gender equality, to call for change within mosques. These characters are not choosing between identities; they are embracing hybridity as empowerment. In effect, the films argue that liberation for Arab/Muslim women and men comes not from rejecting one part of themselves (as Orientalist or assimilationist narratives might imply), but from integrating all parts—a stance also reflected in Telmissany's (2023) notion that diasporic filmmakers build “cultural bridges” (p. 103) rather than reinforce binaries.

Secondly, the films highlight that representation itself can be a tool of resistance and healing. In Western media, Arabs and Muslims have often been underrepresented or misrepresented; by taking control of the narrative, Arab-Canadian filmmakers perform an act of cultural decolonization. Instead of letting others define them, they define themselves on screen. This is vividly seen in how the films handle stereotypes. Rather than simply inverting tropes (e.g. portraying Muslim women as hyper-liberated or Arab men as saints, which could swing to another extreme), they add layers and context that problematize the very logic of the tropes. For instance, one might expect *Sabah* to end with its heroine casting off her hijab as a symbolic freedom moment, as per many Western liberation narratives—but she doesn't. She

keeps her scarf and her faith, showing that oppression was never inherent in those things, but in the attitudes surrounding them. Oppression is located in her brother's rigidity, not in her religious identity. Thus, the film subverts the simplistic binary of oppressed-veiled vs. free-unveiled by illustrating a more complex reality. Similarly, *Things Arab Men Say* does not clean up the men to be model minorities or paragons of virtue to appease Western viewers; they are occasionally politically incorrect, they joke, they admit faults. Yet, by simply humanizing them and letting them speak, the film destroys the basis of the dehumanizing stereotypes (because it's hard to buy the Arabs = terrorists line when you've just spent an hour laughing and commiserating with these Arab guys about normal life things). This strategy of normalization through specificity is a powerful decolonizing move. It doesn't exoticize or exceptionalize its subjects; it normalizes them not by sanding down their cultural distinctiveness, but by contextualizing it within universal experiences (family, work, faith, longing). In academic terms, this aligns with what Alsultany (2012) advocates for in media representation: moving beyond token "positive Arab and Muslim characters" (p. 21) towards complex characters who can have flaws and depth. All the films discussed achieve this complexity, which in turn invites viewers (especially those who might hold biases) to question their preconceived notions.

Thirdly, these films collectively suggest that gender is a crucial axis along which the Arab/Muslim diaspora story unfolds, and that exploring gender can open up new understandings of cultural identity. Arab-Canadian women filmmakers like Nadda and Nawaz foreground women's issues (romantic agency, space in mosques). Meanwhile, films by or about men (even when directed by women, as with Nisreen Baker's documentary) focus on

masculinities, demonstrating that discussions of feminism and patriarchy are not just about women's emancipation but also about freeing men from restrictive norms. It is telling that male filmmakers such as Mohammed Belhaj and Bachir Bensaddek also engage with these themes, such as *Montréal la blanche* discussed in this dissertation in other chapters.

Extending Telmissany's (2023) insights to male filmmakers like Bensaddek and Belhaj underscores that intersectional critique isn't solely a feminist (women's) tool, but a human one, applicable to any story where identities intersect. In many ways, the male-focused films echo the female-focused ones in spirit: they too call for understanding individuals in the totality of their contexts. For instance, just as *Me and the Mosque* shows that sexism within the Arab and Muslim communities cannot be viewed in isolation from the external pressures on these communities, *Things Arab Men Say* illustrates that the way Arab men might perform or negotiate masculinity (positively or negatively) cannot be divorced from the societal gaze upon them. A man who feels emasculated by racism might overcompensate with machismo in one context or, conversely, might become withdrawn and gentle in another—either way, the external factor is shaping the gender expression. Recognizing this interconnectedness is vital if we are to avoid one-dimensional judgments.

In tying back to Crenshaw and beyond, it's clear that what these films do is provide counter-narratives that enrich our understanding of intersectionality in practice. They offer stories where oppressions and identities are not abstract concepts but lived realities. For the viewer, whether of Arab/Muslim background or not, the impact is twofold. Arab and Muslim audiences (particularly in Canada) get to see reflections of themselves that are nuanced and validating—an antidote to the alienating or vilifying images that dominate news

and Hollywood. Such representation can be empowering: it says your struggles and joys are real and worthy of art. Non-Arab/Muslim audiences, on the other hand, are invited (perhaps for the first time) into the intimate worlds of their Arab neighbors beyond headlines and stereotypes. This fosters empathy and can challenge prejudice on a fundamental level. Film critic Mullen (2017) noted that *Things Arab Men Say* was especially resonant in the era of rising anti-immigrant sentiment, acting as “an important counterargument to Islamophobia and racism” through the simple act of listening to these men’s stories.

Similarly, *Sabah* and *Me and the Mosque* arrived in the mid-2000s, a time when Western pop culture had few portrayals of Muslim women at all (let alone positive or complex ones); they arguably paved the way for greater curiosity and openness, and perhaps even for later mainstream projects (like the TV show *Little Mosque* or, internationally, films by directors of Muslim backgrounds) to find acceptance.

In conclusion, Arab-Canadian cinema’s focus on intersectional identities, showcasing how Arab/Muslim women and men experience race, religion, and gender in interlocking ways, has proven to be a critical intervention in film culture. It extends the work of academics and activists into the realm of storytelling, where it can touch minds and hearts in unique ways. Each film discussed is, in essence, a piece of a larger mosaic that asserts: We will not be flattened into the roles history and media have tried to assign us. Whether it’s Sabah quietly asserting her right to love, or a group of jovial men in a barbershop asserting their right to belong in Canada without suspicion, or a lone filmmaker piecing together memories with the scent of mint in the air—these narratives all champion the dignity of the individual against the crush of stereotype. They show that oppression may mutate in different forms—

sexism, racism, religious discrimination—but so too does resistance adapt and endure. Arab-Canadian filmmakers and their subjects meet these mutations with creativity, humor, and courage, visualizing on screen what decolonization looks like at the personal level: it looks like a woman removing a wall in her mosque, a man shedding a tear over a lost home, a family embracing a new member across cultural lines. In these human moments, captured lovingly by the camera, we witness the undoing of decades of harmful imagery and the emergence of representations that are truthful, empowering, and intersectionally rich.

Last but not least, the significance of these films extends beyond the community they portray. They contribute to a global conversation about representation: a reminder that no story is complete if told from a single angle, and that our world is made richer by acknowledging the intersecting stories of all its people. Arab-Canadian cinema, still a relatively small but vibrant field, thus punches above its weight as it offers a template for how to tell stories that embrace complexity and foster solidarity. In a time when polarized narratives often pit East vs West or us vs them, these films softly but firmly insist on a more insightful narrative: one of shared struggles, intersecting identities, and mutual respect. As viewers and scholars, we are invited to carry that lesson beyond the screen to approach real-world interactions with the same nuance and empathy these films afford their characters. That is perhaps the highest praise one can give to art rooted in intersectionality: that it not only reflects the world as it is, but also gently pushes us toward the world as it could be—one where everyone's full humanity is seen and valued.

Chapter 3: Polysemic Visions: Encoding, Decoding, and the Politics of Representation in Arab-Canadian Cinema

In an era characterized by escalating geopolitical tensions, pervasive media stereotypes, and ongoing debates over multiculturalism and belonging, Arab-Canadian cinema stands as a crucial arena for cultural contestation and identity negotiation. Emerging in the shadow of post-9/11 discourses that have often framed Arabs and Muslims through lenses of suspicion, exoticism, or victimhood, these films offer filmmakers a platform to reclaim narrative agency, challenge hegemonic representations, and articulate the nuanced realities of diasporic life. At the heart of this analysis lies Hall's groundbreaking encoding/decoding model, which conceptualizes media texts as "structured polysemies" (Pillai, 1992, p. 228)—multilayered artifacts whose meanings are not fixed but emerge from the interplay between producers' ideological encodings and audiences' situated decodings. This framework allows us to dissect how Arab-Canadian filmmakers strategically embed preferred readings that invite dominant, negotiated, or oppositional interpretations, thereby transforming cinema into a site of ideological struggle where interpretations of identity, belonging, and resistance are continually forged and contested.

This chapter delves into a curated corpus of pivotal works that exemplify these dynamics. These films, spanning fiction and documentary, are analyzed within the post-9/11 media ecology, where depictions of Arabs have fueled biases and policies of exclusion, as evidenced by social-psychological research (Esses et al., 2013). By examining how these works bend dominant codes through genre subversion, *mise-en-scène* contrasts, and symbolic

motifs—they illuminate cinema’s role in countering threat scripts and fostering alternative visions of hybridity and agency.

Structured across four interrelated sections, the chapter builds a comprehensive theoretical scaffold. The first section unpacks encoding and decoding processes, drawing on Hall to explore how filmmakers like Ruba Nadda and Bachir Bensaddek employ visual rhetoric, genre hybridity, and narrative arcs to encode counter-narratives that anticipate diverse receptions, from hegemonic affirmations of liberal multiculturalism to oppositional critiques of assimilation. The second section adopts an intersectional lens, inspired by Crenshaw and media scholars like Merskin and Jiwani, to interrogate stereotypes and othering, tracing contested signifiers such as the veil’s mutability, spatial geographies of enclosure and mobility, archival counter-memories, and reclaimed masculinities. Here, we reveal how these films deconstruct Orientalist tropes while reclaiming visibility at the intersections of race, gender, religion, and class.

Shifting beyond textual confines, the third section investigates diasporic audiences and critical discourse, theorizing spectatorship as a dialogic practice informed by media ecologies—from festival circuits to NFB platforms—and mediated by paratexts like reviews and study guides. Drawing on Oh (2017) and Alaazi et al. (2021), we examine how viewers negotiate hybrid identities, affirming resilience while resisting containment within state-sanctioned narratives. Finally, the fourth section employs an ecological systems framework to map the multilayered contexts shaping production and reception: from macrosystems of funding policies and institutional gatekeeping to microsystems of everyday textures like kitchen rituals and taxi confessions. This holistic approach underscores the films’

embeddedness in broader ideological currents, where creative agency intersects with structural constraints.

Through this multifaceted inquiry, the chapter contends that Arab-Canadian cinema transcends mere representation, actively constituting diasporic politics by generating polysemic spaces for dialogue, critique, and transformation. In a Canadian context where multiculturalism often masks asymmetries of power, these films compel us to reconsider the circuits of meaning production, highlighting cinema's potential as a tool for decolonizing narratives, validating in-between identities, and envisioning more equitable forms of belonging in an increasingly diverse society.

1 Circuits of Meaning: Encoding Counter-Narratives and Decoding Diasporic Realities

1.1 Encoding Processes

Hall's (1980) conceptualization of media texts as "structured polysemies" (Pillai, 1992, p. 228) provides a foundational framework for dissecting the layers of meaning in Arab-Canadian cinema, emphasizing that interpretations arise from a continuous interplay between creators' intentions and viewers' contexts. Within this model, the encoding phase involves producers embedding ideological perspectives through deliberate selections in storytelling, visual styles, and form, setting the stage for audiences to engage in ways that either reinforce, adapt, or reject those perspectives. For filmmakers navigating diasporic experiences, this becomes a strategic tool to push back against the intensified post-9/11 media narratives that often depict Arabs and Muslims through lenses of suspicion or helplessness, as underscored

by studies on how such depictions fuel societal biases and policy restrictions (Esses et al., 2013).

Nadda's *Sabah* (2005) and *Cairo Time* (2009) are best illuminated through Hall's theorization of the media text as a structured polysemy. According to Hall, media texts are never transparent windows onto reality; rather, their meanings are first encoded by producers within a preferred ideological framework and then decoded by audiences in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways. This circuit of meaning production is crucial for understanding diasporic cinema, as it moves the analysis beyond a simple tally of positive or negative images to an investigation of the cultural struggle waged through symbols, genres, and representational codes. In this context, Nadda's decision to position her film inside the affective grammar of the romantic comedy is a deliberate and significant encoding strategy. By adopting its familiar tropes, she signals to viewers that what follows is a recognizable drama of courtship and self-realization, rather than a difficult testimonial about immigrant trauma. Such a generic choice is far from innocent. As Telmissany (2023) astutely observes, Nadda sweetens the cross-cultural pill by interlacing Arab-Canadian difference with the reassuring conventions of the rom-com, a maneuver that renders the narrative palatable to mainstream Canadian spectators while still gesturing toward the complexities of diaspora. The strategic use of the romantic comedy genre is an act of naturalization. By encoding Arab-Canadian difference within the highly conventionalized affective grammar of the rom-com, Nadda attempts to bypass the threat scripts usually associated with post-9/11 media. This ensures that the preferred reading of interethnic harmony remains dominant, as the audience is already habituated to the genre's demands for a happy, integrative resolution.

Placing *Sabah* in its post-9/11 media ecology clarifies the precise nature of Nadda's intervention. At the time of the film's release, social-psychological research demonstrates that news and entertainment media routinely circulated a pervasive threat script, in which Arabs and Muslims were persistently framed as menacing Others, a practice that served to heighten public fear and justify exclusionary state policies (Esses et al., 2013). Nadda's film encodes a powerful counter-narrative.

It consciously replaces the threat script with a scenario of interethnic romance that foregrounds ordinariness, domestic intimacy, and the transformative possibility of cross-cultural love. This encoding aligns, at least on the surface, with the tenets of Canadian liberal multicultural ideology. By proposing that romance can function as a universal solvent capable of dissolving ethnic boundaries and personal prejudice, the film actively invites a dominant or preferred decoding.

In this reading, the spectator is positioned to interpret Sabah's journey as a triumphant narrative of individual emancipation—a linear progression away from the perceived constraints of patriarchal tradition and toward a universal, transcendent modernity. The film's *mise-en-scène* works assiduously to naturalize and support that preferred meaning. A distinct visual rhetoric is established to delineate Sabah's two worlds.

Nadda's encoding of the domestic microsystem utilizes dense compositions and low-key lighting to signal traditional constraint to a Western gaze. This serves a dual purpose in the circuit of meaning: it acknowledges the audience's preconceived notions of Arab domesticity while simultaneously setting up a visual contrast that makes the preferred reading of her

eventual liberation more narratively satisfying for the spectator. In stark contrast, the public sites of her burgeoning freedom—Toronto’s waterfront cafés, shopping arcades, and most importantly, the swimming pool where she meets Stephen—are shot in high-key illumination with open spatial layouts that connote possibility and release.

The pool recurs as a potent, baptismal threshold: every dip in its crystalline water marks a further loosening of social and personal constraint, a shedding of her old skin. The high-key illumination of the pool acts as a textual cue that interpellates the mainstream spectator into a specific ideological framework, encoding this space with the visual language of purity and transparency so that Sabah’s transgression appears not as religious betrayal, but as a universally legible moment of Western liberal enlightenment. This visual logic is completed by the film’s costume design, which maps Sabah’s internal transformation onto her external appearance as her wardrobe shifts gradually from dark, loose fabrics to brighter, form-fitting garments.

Montpellier’s camera favours intimate close-ups that solicit a deep affective identification with Arsinée Khanjian. As Mulvey (1975) reminds us, the close-up is never merely descriptive; it positions the spectator inside a gendered economy of looking that can alternately objectify or empathize. In *Sabah*, the framing repurposes this technique to enlist the viewer on the protagonist’s side, encouraging an intimate investment in her desires, hesitations, and eventual self-actualization.

In *Cairo Time*, Hall’s critical understanding of the communication circuit reveals cinema not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a political arena where cultural struggles are

waged through the intentional encoding of symbols, genres, and representational codes. Nadda consciously writes the film squarely inside the idiom of the restrained romantic drama—a generic choice that functions as a significant act of encoding. By adopting this familiar grammar, she signals to audiences that what follows is an intimate meditation on connection, a strategy that deliberately interpellates the viewer away from the threat scripts of geopolitical thrillers that dominate the macrosystem of Middle Eastern representation. This decision is not apolitical; rather, it strategically encodes a “preferred reading” designed to invite spectators to decode Cairo as a site of cosmopolitan tenderness rather than one of Orientalist peril.

This preferred reading is anchored in a liberal-humanist ideology. As Telmissany (2023) argues, Nadda’s features actively “reconstruct the West as home” (p. 105) within the circuit of meaning. This process is initiated through a subtle textual cue: Juliette adjusts her wristwatch to local time long before she masters the city’s streets. In doing so, Nadda encodes a humanist appeal that rebuilds Western notions of belonging through boundary-crossing affections. The film thus naturalizes this invitation to empathy through a carefully orchestrated visual rhetoric designed to stabilize the preferred meaning.

The cinematic experience is engineered to slow time, urging the spectator to inhabit a languid pace that reinforces the preferred decoding of patient discovery. These images—the felucca, the ochre palette, and the sustained close-ups—conspire to create a hegemonic invitation to see the city as a partner in romance. This aesthetic was further conditioned by the macrosystem of production, as shooting in Cairo required navigating state censorship and logistical barriers without a formal co-production treaty. The resulting city textures, secured

at considerable logistical cost, function as the film's emotional substrate, ensuring Cairo is encoded not as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in the process of mutual translation

The encoding process also reflects a strategic interplay with post-9/11 dominant media codes that frequently Orientalize Arab settings, as producers structure the text to anticipate multifaceted audience decodings. Nadda, leveraging her Syrian-Canadian background, encodes Juliette's sojourn in Cairo, awaiting her husband while subtly romancing Tareq, with specific cinematographic codes that subtly disrupt stereotypes, portraying the city's vibrancy through languid shots of its streets and landmarks, not as perilous but as polysemic arenas for cross-cultural empathy. This bending of codes counters the chaos often encoded in Western depictions by rendering Cairo magical and enabling Juliette's adjustment to its rhythms, symbolizing a fluid homeness that bridges divides (Telmissany, 2023). While the film offers reel positives through nuanced portrayals, it remains a structured polysemy that subtly reinforces racist discourses via Hall's preferred meaning, where visual elements like the call to prayer interpellate Muslim subjects within an us versus them dichotomy for a western audience. This encoding thus anticipates the ideological expectations of mainstream audience while inviting diasporic reinterpretations of transnational identity.

Blending dramatic confinement with journey-like progression, Bensaddek sidesteps typical romantic escalations in favor of introspective exchanges, encoding the narrative with Naficy's markers of displaced cinema, such as linguistic shifts and temporal leaps, to evoke a state of ongoing transience. In *Montréal la blanche* (2016), the encoding process adeptly confronts Canadian media codes marginalizing immigrants as Others, utilizing Hall's

framework to structure the text for diverse audience decodings. Bensaddek encodes the Christmas Eve taxi encounters among Algerian immigrants with confined settings and flashbacks, bending dominant codes by portraying characters like Amokrane as resilient unionists rather than passive victims, thereby challenging post-9/11 xenophobic threat script. Gott (2024) concurs, noting the film's ironic title evokes ethnicity and winter, opening translational spaces for belonging amid diversity. Should we decode this setting as reinforcing isolation, the film encodes a global-local hybridity that anticipates exclusionary discourses while promoting a preferred reading of solidarity.

Amid Québec's bruising debates over Muslim visibility, *Montréal la Blanche* stages a single winter night's taxi ride as an experiment in intercultural address. Bensaddek relocates Hall's circuit of meaning to a Québec public sphere where interculturalisme is the official policy ideal, yet Islamophobia remains a lived decoding reality (Bouchard, 2011; Bakali, 2015). By trapping two Algerian émigrés, Amokrane and Kahina, inside a snowbound taxi on Christmas Eve, the film dramatizes the ideological traffic between whiteness, secularism, and diasporic memory. From its opening shot of flakes swirling under sodium streetlights, the film bends Dyer's (1997) insight that cinema has long coded whiteness through regimes of light. Snow renders the city uniformly pale, while the taxi interior—bathed in dashboard glow and bilingual chatter—interrupts that optical homogeneity. The windshield alternately fogs and clears, producing a literal condensation of the visibility politics surrounding Québec's Charter of Values debates; at moments the two protagonists appear spectral against the whiteout and then suddenly hyperlegible, reminding viewers that racial legibility is historically contingent. This visual oscillation is the film's first encoding gesture: whiteness

is not a neutral backdrop but a contested weather front through which North African bodies must navigate.

Genre supplies a second and more technical layer of encoding. Although the premise of a man and woman confined to a car invites romantic comedy expectations, Bensaddek pointedly withholds sexual tension, steering the story toward the conversational density of a chamber drama and the spatial restlessness of a road movie. This hybrid form serves two ideological ends: it keeps mainstream audiences oriented by familiar narrative momentum while foregrounding policy adjacent topics—religious practice, custody hearings, wage precarity—rarely granted centre stage in Québec screen culture. *Montréal la Blanche* displays the multilingual soundscape, episodic structure, and memory flashbacks that mark films made by exilic or diasporic subjects for transnational publics. The taxi functions as an encoded symbol of displacement, mirroring the protagonists' ambivalent integration into the macrosystem Québec society. Within this structured polysemy, dialogue carries the heaviest ideological freight. Amokrane's weary piety, Kahina's secular pragmatism, and the arresting moment when they share makroud and sucre à la crème encode a "concerted adjustment" (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 51): an everyday, informal negotiation of cultural difference that invites the spectator to decode the scene as a model for informal cultural harmonization.

Conversations laden with references to faith, family disputes, and economic instability encode an informal cultural harmonization, effectively linking personal microsystems to wider societal macrosystems. Michka Saäl's *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* (1992) complements this by encoding a merger of firsthand accounts with evocative symbols, such as arboreal imagery, to dismantle the perceived rifts between heritages, contrasting seasonal

harshness with warm recollections to structure a text of shared paths. In her documentary, the encoding process involves a deliberate interweaving of personal testimonies and poetic imagery to negotiate dominant Canadian media codes that often frame immigrant experiences through lenses of isolation or conflict. *Saäl* encodes the narrative around the intersubjective friendship between herself and Nadine Ltaif, using intimate interviews and symbolic motifs like the tree to bend dominant codes (or stereotypes) of Arab-Jewish enmity, thereby re-encoding Montreal's urban landscape into a polysemic space of shared diaspora and reconciliation.

For instance, the film's mise-en-scène juxtaposes Québec's harsh winters with memories of Mediterranean childhoods, not as markers of irreconcilable difference but as textual bridges for cultural hybridity, challenging the hegemonic notions of immigrants as perpetual outsiders. Bédard (2020) supports this encoding strategy by describing the film as an autofiction that investigates Montreal's intercultural web through ethnographic testimonies, where personal history becomes a fragment of collective identity, asserting that filming others embodies "potential other selves" (p. 112). Viewing the documentary as a kaleidoscope of interviews that complexly represents migration trauma and integration, I extend this by emphasizing the symbolic tree as a polysemic signifier dreaming of roots. This encoding symbolizes a transcendence of hatred through exile, though a negotiated decoding that one might disagree if it overly romanticizes reconciliation without addressing ongoing systemic barriers. This encoding anticipates dominant multicultural discourses while inviting decodings that affirm diasporic agency in Arab-Canadian contexts.

The encoding process of *Une Femme de Tête* (2006) strategically engages with dominant

Canadian media codes that portray immigrant women, particularly from Arab backgrounds, as passive victims of cultural oppression. Mohammed Belhaj structures the text around a Moroccan immigrant fighting workplace discrimination, encoding her resilience through intimate interviews and everyday scenes that bend prevailing stereotypes of Arab submissiveness. For instance, the film's mise-en-scène encodes her professional qualifications and legal battles as textual cues for empowerment, explicitly challenging the hegemonic victim script. The description on NFB's official website supports this preferred reading, marketing the film as a moving story of rights and dignity. Hillauer (2005) agrees and notes such documentaries amplify voices against systemic barriers, yet beur and banlieue cinema often risks reinforcing hidden Islam tropes (Tarr, 2005), potentially limiting the film's subversive potential by aligning too closely with multiculturalist assimilation narratives (Tarr, 2005). This encoding thus anticipates dominant discourses on immigration while inviting decodings that affirm diasporic women's agency in Arab-Canadian contexts. From the opening medium close-up that centres her steady gaze, the film encodes a dominant reading of Bouchra as a confident rights-bearing subject rather than a passive victim. Frequent inserts of headlines of newspaper align the narrative with a policy discourse that frames racism as a problem to be solved through existing institutional channels.

Things Arab Men Say (2016) furthers the communication circuit by capturing casual discussions in a communal setting, encoding participants as multifaceted within a restrictive media ecology. Baker encodes conversations among the Arab-Canadian men in a St. Albert barbershop with candid dialogue that deliberately bends stereotypes, portraying them as humorous, reflective individuals discussing family, politics, and integration, instead of

monolithic threat scripts. For example, the film's mise-en-scène in Jamal's Eden Barber Shop fosters intimacy, challenging encoded threats through shared stories of displacement and resilience. The NFB annual report (2016) affirms this strategy, noting the film's unique representation at Arab community challenges post-9/11. While this interpellation links the text to immigration politics, Hollywood narratives persist, potentially complicating the circuit of meaning by failing to fully disrupt hegemonic verdicts on Arabs.

This encoding anticipates exclusionary discourses while promoting decodings of hybrid Arab-Canadian identities. Set entirely in a barbershop in St. Albert, Baker's documentary strings together long, unbroken takes that encode the shop as a counter-public sphere where Arab-Canadian men assemble to negotiate identity, nation and gender. By privileging convivial banter, code-switching between Arabic and English, and shared laughter, the film offers a preferred reading that Arab masculinities are ordinary, affective and self-reflexive rather than threatening. Such encoding directly counters stereotype regimes that cast Arab men as hyper-violent or patriarchal. While the mainstream media continue to reduce Arabs to shallow stereotypes of violence and intransigence; Baker's mise-en-scène replaces those tropes with intimacy and humour, refusing the mainstream orientation of fear. Simultaneously, the silent television tuned to an NHL game acts as a textual cue anchoring the conversation within a white-coded arena of Canadian masculinity, signaling the subtle assimilation pressures these men navigate.

Within the encoding/decoding framework of Hall, *What Arab Men Say's* sister title *Arab Women Say What?!* (2023) emerges as a vital extension of Arab-Canadian counter-narrative cinema, re-encoding the macrosystemic gaze towards female's communal spaces. Baker

structures an intimate gathering—transitioning between virtual and physical microsystems—as a communicative safe haven where identity and gender are dialogically negotiated on the subjects’ own terms. This setting, much like the barbershop for the men, is presented as a counter-mainstream narrative space: over shared tea, food, and laughter, eight women from diverse Arab backgrounds candidly discuss feminism, exile, and belonging, thereby it depicts an unparalleled portrait of Arab women living in Canada. The film’s very title *Arab Women Say What?!* signals an oppositional encoding strategy: it foregrounds Arab women’s voice as something unexpected and urgent, directly countering media codes that have historically silenced or flattened these voices.

Baker’s stylistic encoding (including participant-shot mobile footage) deliberately dismantle the conventional media gaze, encoding a preferred reading of authenticity and participant agency into the text. As Baker herself remarks in her interview with *POV Magazine* (2024), no group is unidimensional, and her intent was to reveal the multi-dimensional realities of Arab women and “dismantle the stereotype of Arab women” (para. 3) through an intimate, self-representational style. The documentary encodes a preferred reading of Arab womanhood as diverse, resilient, and outspoken, in direct opposition to the monolithic, victimized images often seen in mainstream media. By privileging convivial sisterhood, frank testimony, and cultural rituals (sharing home-cooked meals, music, poetry), *Arab Women Say What?!* invites decodings that recognize Arab-Canadian women as ordinary yet empowered protagonists, thereby challenging viewers to reject the terrorist/victim binary and other Orientalist codes.

Pierre Sidaoui’s *A Scent of Mint* (2002) concludes this thread with archival visuals and

introspective voiceover, encoding a narrative that recasts upheaval as quests for fulfillment and blending past evocations with present realities. Sidaoui encodes his own immigration story, transforming family photos from a shoebox into textual signifiers, to bend dominant stereotypes by framing war memories as mediations on family, music, and the pursuit of happiness rather than solely trauma.

The film juxtaposes nostalgic imagery of Lebanese childhood alongside Montreal's urban setting to highlight hybridity to structure a preferred reading of hybridity, challenging encoded notions of exile as perpetual loss. The NFB synopsis supports this preferred meaning, describing it as a touching meditation on the pursuit of happiness and the immigrant experience, emphasizing family separation and memory. Engaging in scholarly dialogue, Bédard agrees, positioning such autoethnographic films in Quebec cinema as blurring personal and collective memory to challenge patriarchal national narratives. This encoding anticipates multicultural discourses while inviting decodings that affirm diasporic resilience in Arab-Canadian contexts.

1.2 Decoding: The Politics of Preferred Readings and Spectatorship

If filmmakers encode their works with preferred meanings and subtle critiques, how are these complex messages ultimately received? No text can fix its meanings once and for all, and the film's invitations are not always accepted. It is in the moment of reception that Hall's theoretical model is most vividly realized. For any media text, spectatorship is not a passive act of consumption but an active, and often contested, process of decoding, where viewers, situated in their own distinct social and historical locations, make sense of a film's structured

polysemy. For Arab-Canadian cinema, this encounter between text and viewer becomes the crucial arena, the crucible in which the political work of representation is ultimately forged. The stakes are particularly high for a community so often misrepresented, where a single film can be burdened with the weight of speaking for many. The same film that offers a moment of profound validation to a diasporic spectator, a rare glimpse of their own reality on screen, may reinscribe familiar stereotypes for another. A narrative of harmonious integration crafted for a mainstream audience might be decoded as a troubling tale of assimilation by a more critical viewer. This section, therefore, moves beyond the filmmaker's intent to explore the dynamic and unpredictable terrain of spectatorship, examining how audiences negotiate, resist, and ultimately remake the meanings of Arab-Canadian cinema.

This encoding anticipates a complex reception. For many Arab-Canadian spectators, whose subjectivities are shaped by a different set of historical and cultural experiences, the very codes that Western audiences may read as liberation—public displays of affection, bright colours, individualist self-assertion—risk signifying cultural dilution or forced assimilation. Through this alternative lens, *Sabah's* happiness appears troublingly contingent on a heterosexual romance with a white partner and necessitates a tacit renunciation of communal norms and filial duties. Such an oppositional reading converges with Shohat and Stam's (2014) influential critique of the "white saviour" (p. 2) template, a recurring colonial narrative in which racialized women are granted agency only within storylines that ultimately center white benevolence and reinforce Western ideals. Thus, while *Sabah* can be decoded as an uplifting tale of integration, it can simultaneously be read as a film that subtly reinscribes the unequal terms of multicultural acceptance in Canada—a model where cultural difference

is welcome, but only provided it softens, privatizes, and transforms itself into a recognizable form of liberal individualism.

Within the circuit of meaning, *Sabah* and *Cairo Time* provide a compelling dual case study in how palatable generic encodings, specifically the romantic comedy and the restrained romantic drama, trigger radically different decodings across mainstream and diasporic audiences. Both films utilize the sweetening of the cross-cultural pill, adopting familiar Western tropes to render Arab-Canadian and Middle Eastern realities accessible to a broad public.

From a dominant-hegemonic perspective, both films are frequently decoded as successful humanistic pleas for mutual recognition. In *Sabah*, majority-culture viewers are invited to interpret the protagonist's journey as a triumphant narrative of individual emancipation and a linear progression toward universal modernity. Similarly, for many Western viewers of *Cairo Time*, the slowly unfurling intimacy between Juliette and Tareq functions as a welcome corrective to the crude terrorist/victim binary that has long structured the representation of Arabs. In these readings, the films succeed by providing reel positives and building cultural bridges that affirm hybridity over the poetics of exile. However, for spectators from Arab-diasporic or Egyptian social locations, these same textual codes may trigger an oppositional decoding that exposes the limits of liberal multiculturalism. In *Sabah*, the very signs of liberation, such as public displays of affection and individualist self-assertion, risk signifying cultural dilution or forced assimilation. This reading converges with Shohat and Stam's (2014) critique of the "white savior" (p. 2) template, where the racialized woman's agency is granted only within a storyline that centers white benevolence and Western ideals.

Cairo Time faces a parallel critique. In an oppositional decoding, the city, for all its aestheticized beauty, becomes a picturesque but ultimately serviceable stage for Western self-fashioning, where Cairo exists primarily to facilitate the white protagonist's emotional rediscovery. The character of Tareq, though sophisticated, may be decoded as a safe and refined good-Arab figure who behaves with a European-coded restraint designed to contain his otherness. As Schiavini (2021) and Alsultany (2013) suggest, these sympathetic portrayals risk creating a post-race illusion, absolving the viewer from confronting systemic racism by presenting a sanitized, consumable version of the Other that requires nothing of the spectator but passive appreciation.

In this oppositional reading, Cairo, for all its beauty, becomes little more than an exotic backdrop against which a white Western woman rediscovers her desire. The Arab hero, Tareq, is celebrated precisely because he is safe, chivalrous, and behaves with a European-coded restraint that contains his otherness. As Schiavini (2021) reminds us, even sympathetic good-Arab figures can reinscribe asymmetrical power relations and gazes when their primary narrative function is to help redeem or service the emotional journey of Western protagonists. From that critical vantage, the preferred reading of cross-cultural tenderness may slide into an oppositional one that exposes how liberal multiculturalism often demands that non-Western spaces exist as picturesque but ultimately serviceable stages for Western self-fashioning.

Between these extremes, many diasporic viewers engage in a negotiated reading. They may affirm the vital space these films provide for the recognition of hybrid identities while remaining critically aware of their structural contradictions. For instance, a viewer might appreciate Tareq's embodiment of a fluid, transnational identity in *Cairo Time* as a resonance

with their own multifaceted belongings yet feel unease at the narrative's centering of the Western gaze. In this polysemic space, the happy endings and cosmopolitan tenderness are decoded not as simple affirmations, but as sites of ideological struggle where the terms of multicultural acceptance are continually negotiated and contested.

Turning to Bensaddek's *Montréal la blanche*, Hall's framework uncovers a delicate balance between dominant multicultural ideals and underlying challenges to narratives of inclusion. In the specific media ecology of the Québec public sphere, where interculturalism is the official policy yet Islamophobia remains a lived reality, the film functions as a structure polysemy whose meanings are activated by the distinct social locations of its spectators.

Within the context of Québec's mainstream cinema culture, the preferred reading often frames the film's taxi-bound conversations as emblems of seamless cultural blending. This dominant-hegemonic decoding is frequently amplified by promotional materials and festival paratexts that celebrate the sharing of stories on a festive Christmas Eve. For majority-culture viewers, the film's humanism and its portrayal of an accidental encounter between an Algerian driver and a passenger are received as evidence that open exchange mends social divides and strengthens communal ties. Local festival accolades bear this out, lauding Bensaddek's compassionate take on nighttime Montréal and its successful avoidance of preachiness (Ramond, 2016). In this reading, the spectator accepts the film's encoded invitation to see the snowy city as a redemptive zone of mutual adaptation.

Where the sharpest divergences emerge, the film's title facilitates an oppositional decoding through its ironic play on racial whiteness. This textual cue prompts non-diasporic

viewers to contemplate policy implications, but for more critical spectators, it may reinforce a sense of rigid exclusion. From this oppositional vantage, omitting explicit scenes of prejudice risks polishing over persistent inequities and sanitizing the lived experience of xenophobia for a mainstream audience. Diaspora online discussions have reflected this tension, questioning the downplaying of entrenched biases against Muslims in favor of an aesthetically pleasing atmosphere.

Adopting a hybrid of chamber intensity and road fluidity, Bensaddek eschews romance for policy-infused talks on religion, custody, and work insecurity, embodying Naficy's accented cinema with multilingualism and flashbacks that capture exile's limbo. Dialogue here stages what Bouchard and Taylor (2008) call "concerted adjustment" (p. 51), translating abstract immigration debates into intimate, interpersonal negotiations. *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* parallels this strategy yet shifts the affective register, fusing testimonial fragments with lyrical voice-over as Saäl centers her friendship with Lebanese poet Nadine Ltaif to probe and begin to heal Arab–Jewish estrangements. The film juxtaposes Québec's snow-laden urban landscapes with Mediterranean imagery to evoke a layered sense of belonging, drawing on what Bédard terms a hybrid poetics of place.

Within this aesthetic, the documentary engages hegemonic ideologies of Canadian multiculturalism: a dominant reading might cast the Arab–Jewish bond as a reassuring narrative of harmonious integration. Yet, Saäl encodes resistant elements in the candid confessions of childhood hatred—Saäl toward Arabs, Ltaif toward Jews—which expose the depth of inherited prejudice and unsettle any easy celebration of unity. In Québec's festival circuits, marketing paratexts tend to foreground the unlikely friendship, reinforcing preferred

readings of trauma overcome and displacement soothed. By contrast, the film's poetic structure—opening with the biblical story of Abraham's sons and returning to it as a refracted motif—invites more negotiated readings that treat diaspora as a fraught third space of acceptance rather than a completed reconciliation.

The final tableau beneath the tree reimagines biblical branches as figures of cultural plurality, suggesting exile as a painful yet generative occasion to encounter and accept the other. In affirming such hybridity, *Saäl* also troubles the patriarchal and homogenizing tendencies of national cinema by loosening the boundaries of collective memory and authorship. Diasporic viewers may recognize and affirm shared Arab–Jewish identifications in this space, while non-diasporic audiences are prompted to question the allure of idealized harmony and to reflect critically on how immigrant lives are represented.

Une Femme de Tête furthers empowerment, chronicling a Moroccan woman's discrimination fight, using interviews and documents to affirm dignity, navigating hegemonic ideologies of Canadian multiculturalism. The mainstream market might interpret the protagonist's struggle as an integration tale, with NFB paratexts emphasizing her fight against racism as aligning with diversity policies, yet Belhaj encodes oppositional elements through critiques of professional devaluation and cultural invisibility, encouraging negotiated readings among immigrant audiences. The film's focus on labor rights contests simplistic assimilation, as suggested in educational guides proposing discussions on Québec's job market for immigrants. Orientalist Other representations in war on terror contexts that might frame her veil or heritage as barriers, absolving systemic racism (Khalid, 2011). Thus, diasporic viewers may negotiate hybrid identities, while non-diasporic ones oppose idealized

harmony, fostering reflection on Arab women's representations. In Hall's terms, viewers positioned within Canada's majority culture are invited to decode the text hegemonically, confirming the nation's self-image as fair and redemptive. A negotiated reading, more likely among immigrants themselves, might applaud Bouchra's resolve yet question the film's neat closure: her filing of hope, while symbolically powerful, hardly guarantees systemic change. An oppositional decoding could go further, treating the state-sponsored sponsorship tag as evidence that multiculturalism locates racism in individual ignorance while leaving deeper power relations intact (Bakali, 2015). Thus, even in its brevity, *Une Femme de Tête* exemplifies the structured polysemy Hall describes: the same footage can reassure some audiences and unsettle others, depending on their social location.

For many diasporic viewers, these films offer a rare and vital space for the affirmation of hybrid identities. In a media landscape that often demands a choice between monolithic tradition and complete assimilation, the nuanced portrayals in this corpus can validate the complex, lived experience of being in-between. Nadda's *Cairo Time*, for instance, allows for a negotiated reading where Juliette's cultural exchanges and Tareq's embodiment of a fluid, transnational identity resonate with viewers navigating their own multifaceted belongings. The film's focus on creating homeness within a Western framework allows for a comfortable exploration of diasporic desire, a feeling of being at home in displacement that is both emotionally and politically significant (Telmissany, 2020, 2023). Similarly, the intimate dialogues in Bensaddek's *Montréal la blanche* can be decoded as a powerful representation of solidarity against a backdrop of alienation. The juxtaposition of one character's despair

with another's call for solidarity fosters a sense of shared resilience, a recognition that community can be forged in the most transient of spaces, like a snowbound taxi. This comprehension is amplified by scholars like Gott (2024), who sees the film as a boundary-transcending text that enables a rich exchange between the local realities of a Québec winter and the persistent, shaping memories of Algerian roots, creating a dialogue between past and present. The documentaries in the corpus offer an even more direct form of validation. The candid barbershop conversations in Baker's *Things Arab Men Say* (2016) allow diasporic men to see their own debates about home, politics, and identity reflected on screen, countering marginalization through shared humour and vulnerability. Likewise, the intimate, memory-based narratives of Saäl's *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* and Sidaoui's *A Scent of Mint* function as cinematic archives of diasporic experience, where personal testimony, family photographs, and poetic reflection counter the grand, often violent, narratives of official history and instead validate the emotional truth of displacement and resettlement.

However, Hall's model reminds us that the process of decoding is rarely simple affirmation. The same texts that offer validation can also be sites of critical opposition, where viewers challenge the film's ideological premises. Even a film as widely celebrated as *Cairo Time* can be subjected to an oppositional reading that sees it as reproducing a softer, more insidious form of Orientalism. Drawing on Foucault's notions of the gaze, one might argue that the film's subtle power dynamics turn spectatorship into an ideological contest. Schiavini (2021) aligns such films with a post-9/11 trend of "sympathetic portrayals" (p. 160) that ultimately absolve Western audiences from confronting systemic racism. By presenting a

sanitized, aesthetically pleasing version of the Other, the film requires nothing of the viewer but passive appreciation. An oppositional decoder, perhaps a viewer sensitized to the “War on Terror” contexts analyzed by Khalid (2011, p. 15), might see the film’s beauty not as a bridge, but as a veil that obscures the enduring realities of Western dominance. This critical gaze is also turned inward. While the camaraderie in *Things Arab Men Say* is affirming on a racial axis, a critical spectator might question the gendered silences within the frame. Whose voices are absent? By centering the male experience as the universal Arab-Canadian experience, the film may inadvertently recenter a patriarchal worldview. Here, the spectator is an active agent, forcing a debate about how a film can be progressive in its racial politics while remaining conventional in its gender dynamics.

The tension between negotiated and oppositional readings is perhaps most acute in state-sponsored films, where the politics of multiculturalism are explicitly encoded. In *Une Femme de Tête*, Belhaj chronicles a Moroccan woman’s fight against workplace discrimination. The film is often framed by NFB (National Film Board of Canada) paratexts as a story of individual triumph—a hegemonic decoding that confirms Canada’s self-image as a just, redemptive society where institutional channels work. Yet, as suggested by the discourse analysis tools of Fairclough (2003), the film’s focus on institutional channels can be read as a containment strategy. From an oppositional viewpoint, the very presence of the NFB logo functions as a textual cue, marking the film as an instrument of state ideology. The film manages dissent by channeling it into approved, non-threatening pathways—like legal filings and human rights commissions—that ultimately protect the status quo.

As Bakali (2015) notes, multiculturalism often locates racism in individual tolerance rather than in deep-seated power relations. An oppositional reading of *Une Femme de Tête* does not deny the protagonist's courage, but it questions the political framework in which her courage is presented. Therefore, the viewers may ask, "Is this a film about justice, or is it a film about the appearance of justice?"

Ultimately, spectatorship in the context of Arab-Canadian cinema is a contentious and dialogic arena. The meaning of these films is not settled by the final credits; it is forged in what Hall describes as the unpredictable and plural act of watching. Whether it is the third space of reconciliation explored in *A Sleeping Tree* or the contestation of labor rights in *Une Femme de Tête*, these films serve as catalysts for political engagement. The films are not merely reflections of reality; they are equipment for living, providing the tools for viewers to navigate, negotiate, and occasionally oppose the national imaginary. This dynamic confirms that the political efficacy of cinema is located not solely in the filmmaker's intent, but in the social location and critical agency of the audience.

2 Deconstructing the Other: Intersectional Subversions of Stereotypes and Reclaimed Visibilities

In the realm of media studies, the concept of the Other has long been a cornerstone for understanding how representations perpetuate social hierarchies and exclusion. Merskin (2024) argues that media actively manufactures the Other by deploying stereotypical imagery that simplifies complex identities into threatening or exotic figures, thereby reinforcing inequalities and justifying marginalization. Jiwani (2010) complements this as she dissects

the “veiled woman” (p. 97) trope as a key mechanism in Canadian contexts, intersecting race and gender to portray Muslim women as symbols of cultural backwardness and oppression, thus othering them within a narrative of Western superiority. These perspectives frame stereotypes as an interwoven matrix of race, gender, and religion, where recurring icons, such as the hijab, domestic interiors, and border checkpoints, serve as visual and narrative shorthand for alterity, condensing multifaceted lives into digestible symbols of difference. However, Arab-Canadian filmmakers resist this matrix through aesthetic strategies like ironic framing and genre play, which expose or invert these icons, disrupting their power. An intersectional method further enables readings of scenes where gendered, racialized, and religious signifiers converge, such as in explorations of Muslim femininity, revealing how these intersections can either reinforce or challenge othering. By analyzing the films selected, I trace the deployment of icons, the subversive aesthetic strategies, and intersectional convergences, demonstrating how these works collectively contribute to a decolonizing discourse that reclaims visibility and agency in Canadian cinema.

2.1 The Mutable Veil: Head Coverings as Contested Signifiers

Perhaps no single image is more central to the Western media’s construction of the Muslim Other than the veil. As a visual marker, it is frequently flattened into a monolithic symbol of female oppression, its diverse cultural meanings, theological interpretations, and the personal agency of the women who wear it erased in favor of a simple, legible narrative of subjugation (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Tarlo, 2010). Colonial legacies continue to weaponize the veil, not out of a genuine concern for gender equality, but to exoticize and inferiorize Muslim

women, a process that Abu-Lughod identifies as central to Western savior narratives.

Arab-Canadian filmmakers, however, engage with the veil and other head coverings not as fixed signs, but as mutable, contested signifiers. By emphasizing that the veil's meaning is context-dependent, these works align with the scholarship of Hoodfar (2003), who argues that veiling can serve as a form of resistance, a claim to public space, or a tool for empowerment. Through deliberate sartorial choices, filmmakers map a complex terrain of identity, surveillance, and assimilation, challenging the viewer to look beyond the surface of the cloth and consider the specific social and political context in which it is worn—or pointedly not worn.

Sabah provides a masterful study in this kind of sartorial nuance, specifically through the hijab's strategic use and eventual transformation. The film instead uses the protagonist's relationship with a simple scarf to chart her internal transformation. In the enclosed, watchful space of her family home, Sabah wears an opaque, dark navy scarf, a visual marker of her dutiful, almost invisible, role within the patriarchal structure. It is functional, modest, and blends into the dimly lit interiors, signifying a self that is defined primarily by familial obligation. When she ventures into the public sphere to meet her Canadian lover, however, the scarf itself undergoes a semiotic shift. It becomes a lighter, translucent, and more colourful fabric, one that she wears loosely, suggesting a negotiated self-display. It is still a marker of her cultural identity, but it is now also an accessory of personal style, a signifier that has shifted from a symbol of familial surveillance to one of emergent, albeit tentative, individuality. As Tarlo (2010) suggest, fashion can be a means of reclaiming the veil from Othering. This subtle shift in the fabric's texture and colour maps a spectrum of identity,

demonstrating that modesty and self-expression are not mutually exclusive. Critically, Nadda avoids the trap of the unveiling as liberation trope. The film insists that the meaning of the garment is produced through its use in specific social contexts. This fluidity represents that veiling practices are as an agentic practice, resisting Western media's monolithic oppression frame, and such transformations are political acts of self-fashioning. However, on the other hand, these shifts can still feed into savior narratives where unveiling signals progress. The film insists that the meaning of such a garment is not inherent in the object itself but is produced through its use in specific social contexts, challenging the simplistic binaries that so often govern discussions of Muslim women's dress.

In Nadda's later film *Cairo Time*, the politics of the veil are subtly examined through a reversal of the gaze. Here, the focus is on the absence of the veil on the white Western protagonist, Juliette, who navigates Cairo with a bare head. The movie repeatedly contrasts her with Egyptian women wearing hijabs, using these visual elements to highlight her unmarked whiteness as a kind of invisible privilege that allows her to blend in or stand out on her own terms. This approach draws attention to how certain bodies, particularly those aligned with Western norms, enjoy a neutrality that renders them unremarkable, while others are marked as exotic or Other through cultural symbols like the veil. Such framing underscores global power imbalances, where visible religious attire becomes a battleground for identity and contestation, yet it risks exoticizing the veiled women as mere backdrop figures rather than fully realized individuals. Unlike local women, whose bodies are culturally and religiously marked and thus subjected to specific social codes, Juliette's effortless mobility through the city, free from the same social or religious expectations,

exposes these hierarchies: her lack of a head covering positions her as an outsider who benefits from uneven gendered and racial dynamics. Rather than portraying the hijab as straightforward oppression, the film ties sartorial choices to broader issues of agency, power, and the ability to occupy public spaces without scrutiny. This contrast draws attention to the global power imbalances inherent in the Western gaze. Visible religious attire often becomes a battleground for identity. Through juxtaposing Juliette's unmarked form against the Othered backdrop, Nadda critiques the intercultural privilege that allows Western subjects to occupy public spaces without the same level of scrutiny. The film reframes the veil not as a symbol of local backwardness, but as a lens through which we can see the often-unquestioned freedoms of the Western visitor.

Baker's film also represents this othering. The documentary was conceived explicitly to combat the reductive trope of the Arab woman as veiled victim or perpetual Other. By gathering women from a rainbow of Arab cultures and backgrounds, *Arab Women Say What?!* actively illustrates that Arabs aren't a monolithic people under that four-letter word, there is a rainbow of different cultures, dialects, foods, tastes, a way of life. This deliberate multiplicity is an intersectional encoding strategy to dismantle the veiled victim trope directly. The participants span various national origins, age groups, professions and personal histories, embodying diversity in religion (not all are Muslim, underscoring that not all Arabs are Muslim), in immigration pathways, and in perspectives on gender roles and society. Such representation directly subverts the homogenizing process of othering. Instead of a singular caricatured Arab woman, the film presents eight distinct Arab-Canadian women who often disagree and debate with each other, thereby complexifying the image of the Arab woman

beyond any single stereotype. Crucially, the women in the film do not just passively represent intersectional identities; they actively discuss and deconstruct stereotypes in-dialogue, performing a kind of meta-commentary on othering. In one notable scene, the group pointedly critiques how Canadian media misrepresent Arabs, highlighting how false representation works to *other* Arabs and Arab women in particular. Here, the documentary echoes with the theoretical frame: the participants identify the very processes of labeling, exoticizing, and stigmatizing that the chapter attributes to Western media's construction of the Other. By voicing their awareness of being Othered, these women reclaim power over the narrative, effectively turning the camera back toward Canadian society's gaze. This reflexive element—Arab women articulating how they are stereotyped—functions as an intersectional counter-discourse. It validates Jiwani's (2010) critique of the veiled woman trope but goes further by allowing Arab women to personally refute and nuancedly respond to such tropes. Moments like "God grant us the confidence of a mediocre white man" exemplify how the film's candid dialogue and ironic humor invert stereotype: rather than being the joke or victim as in Orientalist depictions, Arab women in this scene share the joke on their own terms, exposing double standards. The film's portrayal of these women as confident, self-aware, and even irreverent directly combats the image of Arab women as silenced or submissive. It resonates with the chapter's observation that Arab-Canadian filmmakers sometimes use ironic framing and genre play to subvert icons of othering—here, the genre might be observational social documentary, but the women's use of satire and frank talk is a powerful ironic framing tool to reclaim their image.

2.2 Contested Geographies: The Politics of Space and Place

Beyond the body, Arab-Canadian filmmakers use the representation of space and place to critique dominant power structures. Domestic interiors, urban landscapes, and liminal spaces like cars and hotel lobbies are imbued with political meaning, becoming sites where struggles over identity, mobility, and belonging are played out. These films challenge the often-binary representation of space in Orientalist discourse—the chaotic, dangerous Arab street versus the safe, ordered Western city—by presenting more nuanced and contested geographies where the meanings of public and private, home and exile, are constantly in flux. Said’s seminal work in *Orientalism* establishes this binary as a tool for Western domination, where Eastern spaces are depicted as irrational and timeless to justify colonial control, a view Naficy extends by arguing that diasporic filmmakers reclaim these spaces as hybrid chronotopes that disrupt fixed boundaries. However, Ahmed agrees with the need for reorientation but cautions that such critiques must account for how bodies inhabit spaces unevenly along lines of race and gender, potentially leading to incomplete subversions if power asymmetries persist. Bakhtin (1981) introduces the chronotope as an “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (p. 84), which Naficy (2001) adapts to exile, emphasizing liminal zones as sites of identity negotiation, though some scholars like Shohat and Stam (2014) disagree with overly optimistic hybridity, arguing it can mask ongoing colonial spatial divisions.

In *Sabah*, the spatial politics are starkly, and perhaps provocatively, drawn. The film’s narrative engine is fueled by a series of geographical transgressions that mirror the protagonist’s emotional awakening. Nadda utilizes the *mise-en-scène* to create a

topographical map of patriarchal surveillance and secular liberation, yet she complicates these binaries through a playful engagement with Western genre conventions.

The spatiality of Sabah's family home is established as a site of patriarchal enclosure. Nadda's camera work emphasizes this through low-key lighting, cluttered frames filled with traditional cultural signifiers, and compositions that frequently trap the characters within doorframes or behind domestic obstacles. Following Lefebvre's (1991) concept of "representational space" (p. 33), the space as lived through its associated images and symbols, the home is encoded as a space of both emotional warmth and a suffocating lack of privacy. In this heritage space, the gaze is communal. Privacy is a luxury that the diasporic woman often cannot afford, as her movements are scrutinized to ensure the maintenance of family honour. Naficy (2001) would interpret this domestic interior as a specific chronotope of exilic transition: a site where the accrued space of the homeland is preserved in a state of stasis. Here, the home is not just a place of residence; it is a defensive fortress against the perceived erosions of the host society. This enclosure suggests a suffocating quality that sets the stage for the protagonist's eventual spatial rebellion.

Another enclosed world stands in direct opposition to the public pool, the primary site of Sabah's flirtation with secular modernity and her romance with the non-Arab Stephen. The pool is characterized by bright, open space, clean blue water, and natural light. Visually, it represents a world of transparency and sensual awakening—a stark contrast to the shadowy, opaque interiors of the family home. For Sabah, crossing the threshold from the private home to the public pool is a profound act of spatial transgression. In Soja's (1996) terms, the pool functions as a third space—a site that is neither fully Arab nor fully Canadian, but a hybrid

geography where new identities can be trial-run. It is a heterotopia, a place of rest where the usual social rules are suspended. Naficy's framework suggests that while the domestic enclosure represents the constraints of heritage, this public openness signifies the promises of the host society.

While *Sabah* analyzed the local domestic/public binary, *Cairo Time* extends this critique of spatial politics to a transnational context; therefore, towards spatiality at the crossroads, examining the power dynamics inherent in tourism and the orientations of the body in a foreign landscape. Nadda's camera deliberately inverts Orientalist optics. Hollywood representations frequently employ a chaotic aesthetic to emphasize the irrationality of Eastern spaces, Nadda employs long, languid takes of Juliette wandering the city. These shots produce a phenomenology of space that invites the viewer to inhabit Juliette's touristic gaze—a gaze that seeks the exotic but is confronted by its own vulnerability. This focus on practical navigation disrupts the timeless and eternal East (Said, 1978), replacing it with the lived time of a modern resident. Tareq, the male lead, functions as a figure of accented subversion. In the Orientalist imaginary, the local guide is often a mystical facilitator for Western self-discovery. Tareq, however, offers guarded hospitality and restrained movements. His knowledge of Cairo is presented as professional expertise rather than ancient intuition. While he acts as a “cultural bridge” (Telmissany, 2023, p. 103) that turns discomfort into empathy, a geocritical lens suggests that this mediation still risks re-exoticizing the local subject to serve the Western protagonist's emotional growth.

The narrative unfolds in semi-private cosmopolitan spaces: hotel lobbies, upscale cafés, and the felucca boat. These function as non-places or transnational bubbles where rigid social

codes are softened. Within these geographies, Juliette enjoys a degree of mobility explicitly linked to her identity as a wealthy Western woman. Her ability to wander and sit in cafés is a privilege granted by the intersection of race, class, and nationality—a mobility denied to the local women in the film’s background. Ahmed (2012) notes that orientations in space are “gendered” (p. 145); certain bodies are at home while others are stopped. Juliette’s movement exposes an unequal distribution of spatial justice. This creates a quiet critique of global patriarchy: freedom of movement is a commodity of the global North/South divide.

The scenes on the Nile function as a chronotope, a connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships. For Juliette and Tareq, the boat is a third space of romantic possibility and exilic liminality. On the water, they are temporarily removed from urban surveillance. However, as Abu-Lughod (2002) warns, these romantic escapes can mask a “savior complex” (p. 788). The beauty of the scene obscures the fact that this escape is only possible because Juliette possesses the capital to leave at any time. Ultimately, *Cairo Time* reveals that the transnational encounter is never a meeting of equals. By mapping the city’s uneven permissions, Nadda deconstructs the Other as a geographical subject. Cairo is not a mystical backdrop; it is a modern, gendered space where the Western traveler must confront their own privilege and the invisible borders that determine who is allowed to be at home in the world.

In the documentary *Arab Women Say What?!*, space and place serve as the primary symbolic battlegrounds for negotiating identity. While fictional narratives often use expansive cityscapes to explore displacement, Baker’s work moves the politics of geography into the intimate spheres of the digital and the domestic, transforming these private areas into sites of profound political resistance.

The film's narrative structure maps a distinct spatial trajectory: it begins within the transnational, deterritorialized space of online Zoom meetings and then materializes in the physical, quintessentially Canadian domestic interior of one participant's home. This transition from the virtual to the material underscores how the Arab diaspora is negotiated across global and local scales. Once the women convene face-to-face, the home is encoded not as a site of Othered invisibility, but as a haven of cultural continuity. Baker's *mise-en-scène* revels in the details of home-making—Middle Eastern dishes, Arabic music, and poetry—to imbue the space with what I call a positive confinement. While the private home is frequently viewed in Western discourse as a site of feminine oppression, Baker transforms it into a counter-public sphere. Within these walls, the women claim authority over topics, such as abortion, secularism, and immigration policy, that are often weaponized against them in the public discourse. The domestic sphere thus becomes a political arena where the veiled or private subject asserts a public voice.

The documentary also visualizes the diasporic condition through the poignant admission of feeling neither fully at home in Canada nor in the country of origin. This loss in both sentiment exemplifies the contested geographies of the diaspora. Even as the women sit in a Canadian suburban living room, they mentally oscillate between here and there, reminiscing about or critiquing their homelands while simultaneously navigating their otherness within Canada. This oscillation creates a hybrid diaspora space where an Edmonton home becomes a transnational Arab territory through the persistence of language and memory. These scenes provide a lived counterpoint to simplistic narratives of assimilation. By highlighting these spatial paradoxes, Baker questions the binary of “here = acceptance, there = oppression.”

Instead, the film reveals that the negotiation of space is far more nuanced: Canadian space is shown to be not entirely welcoming, just as original homelands are not entirely rejecting.

The film leverages powerful spatial symbols, such as grape leaves, kibbeh, and the oud, to assert that the homeland travels with the diaspora. The presence of Aya's oud being played next to a Canadian hearth acts as a visual metaphor for cultural continuity across vast distances. This blending of markers challenges the encoded notion of exile as a state of perpetual loss. Through these communal gatherings, the women exercise spatial agency. Rather than being passive subjects in Western spaces of assimilation or Middle Eastern spaces of tradition, they actively construct a hybrid third space that accommodates both. Baker's work thus extends the politics of space to the level of the body and the home, asserting that even in the kitchen or the living room, Arab women possess the right to belong and the right to critique the power structures—both Canadian and ancestral—that govern their mobility and visibility.

2.3 Reclaiming the Narrative: The Diasporic Archive and Counter-Memory

The act of archiving within diasporic cinema is a radical intervention against social amnesia. For the Arab-Canadian subject, the official archive is often a site of exclusion or caricature. Consequently, filmmakers must construct their own repositories of the past, utilizing personal testimony, home movies, and sensory artifacts to create a counter-memory—a version of history that prioritizes the lived, accented experience over the state-sanctioned record.

Saäl's *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* functions as a pioneering work in this mode of archival filmmaking. Saäl's primary archival materials are not dusty state documents, but rather the women's personal memories, supplemented by home movies and family photographs. By weaving these fragments together, Saäl creates a counter-memory that insists on the historical reality of Arab-Jewish hybridity—a reality largely erased by post-1948 nationalist histories and often ignored in the Canadian context. This intervention complicates the simplistic victim/oppressor binary, suggesting instead a shared experience of exile that transcends sectarian lines.

The film's structure is deliberately poetic and non-linear, mirroring the associative and often disjointed nature of memory itself. In this accented archive, time does not move forward in a straight line; it loops, pauses, and overlaps, reflecting how trauma and displacement are experienced. Furthermore, Saäl's own accented voice-over serves as a constant linguistic marker of otherness. By placing her own voice at the center of the narrative, she reclaims authorship and challenges the Western notion of the neutral, unaccented narrator. This introspective narration infuses the film with a raw physicality, disrupting detached storytelling and asserting that the archive is a living, breathing entity. As Naficy (2001) suggests, the accented voice is a hallmark of diasporic cinema, turning the perceived deficiency of an accent into a site of authority and resistance. A recurring motif in the film is the tree, which serves as a powerful symbol for the diasporic condition. The title itself suggests a longing for deep connection and stability in the face of persistent displacement. This motif illustrates the hope for reconciliation through shared, uprooted lives. The documentary demonstrates how diasporic filmmakers turn domestic and intimate

narratives into acts of preservation. By documenting a friendship that should not exist according to official political logic, Saäl protects these memories from oblivion. The film asserts that the meaning of the Arab-Canadian experience is not found in the grand narratives of history books, but in the fragmented, poetic, and deeply political act of remembering together.

In *A Scent of Mint*, the director reconstructs his memories of the Lebanese Civil War by deliberately sidestepping the spectacular imagery of violence that dominates Western media. Instead of ruins or weapons, the narrative is anchored in the scent of mint—a powerful, non-visual marker of childhood and cultural continuity. This choice is a radical act of representation; it refuses the standard visual iconography used to Other Arab subjects (the veil, the mosque, the weapon) and relocates cultural memory in the ephemeral, intimate realm of the senses. The kitchen serves as the central atelier for this archival project. By depicting a male protagonist engaged in traditional cooking, Sidaoui subverts gendered stereotypes of domesticity. Here, the kitchen is not a site of female drudgery but a space of masculine creativity and cultural transmission. The preparation of food becomes a ritual of reterritorialization, where the homeland is recreated through taste and aroma, effectively archiving the sensory essence of a lost world.

Like Saäl's film, *A Scent of Mint* also engages in a critique of the official archive. Sidaoui includes a montage of immigration documents, passports, and forms, presenting them as fetish objects of state surveillance. These bureaucratic artifacts are the state's way of knowing and categorizing the immigrant, a process that racializes legality and reduces complex human lives to a series of checkboxes. By juxtaposing these cold, official documents with the warm,

sensory memories of mint and home cooking, Sidaoui creates a powerful tension between the state's archive (fixed, surveillance-oriented, and dehumanizing) and the diaspora's counter-memory (fluid, sensory, and deeply personal).

The film's aesthetic, marked by disjointed editing, sudden shifts to verse, and an avoidance of the all-knowing narrator, mirrors the meandering nature of life in exile. Remembrances emerge as vivid, fragmentary sensations rather than linear timelines. This autofictional approach dissolves the boundary between personal testimony and collective remembrance. Each interlocutor functions as a mirror in which Sidaoui's own displacement is refracted, transforming the interview into a porous space of shared exile. Furthermore, following Marks's (2000) analysis of the "palpable resonance" (p. 179) of accented narration, Sidaoui and Saäl use their delivery not just as an overlay, but as a physical texture. The voice itself becomes an archival object, asserting credibility through embodied speech rather than objective facts.

While the recurring motif of the yearning tree provides a unifying symbol of hope, this section concludes with a necessary critique. Both Sidaoui and Saäl risk fostering an overly poetic hopefulness that might overlook tangible institutional obstacles. While their third space of reconciliation is profound, it must be balanced against the persistent realities of discriminatory surveillance and imbalanced job markets. Ultimately, these films demonstrate that the diasporic archive is a fraught arena where creative experimentation and incisive political commentary must intersect to protect the Other from both oblivion and caricature.

3 Beyond the Screen: Diasporic Spectatorship, Mediated Discourses, and Negotiated Identities

3.1 Beyond the Frame

After the final cut is made and the cinematic text is complete, where does its meaning truly reside? A film is not a static object with a singular, fixed message waiting to be unearthed. Rather, as Hall's foundational work on communication circuits established, it is a dynamic site of ideological production, a structured polysemy whose meanings are only realized in the contingent and often contradictory encounter with an audience. If the preceding sections of this study have focused on the encoding of meaning through aesthetic strategy and the deconstruction of stereotypes within the text itself, this section turns its attention outward, beyond the frame, to the complex social life of the film. It investigates the crucial processes of circulation, reception, and public mediation through which Arab-Canadian cinema acquires its political and cultural significance. How do these films travel through the world, and how do their journeys through specific media ecologies shape the ways they are seen and understood? Who is their imagined audience, and how do real, historically situated spectators, particularly those from diasporic communities, affirm, negotiate, or resist the representations they are offered? Finally, how is a film's meaning stabilized, contested, or transformed by the critical discourse that surrounds it, from mainstream media reviews and institutional framing to academic analysis and community debate?

To answer these questions, this section builds on the work of scholars who have examined the intricate relationship between media, migration, and identity in the Canadian context. It draws on the critical discourse analysis of immigrant framings proposed by

researchers like Alaazi et al. (2021), who demonstrate how media narratives can either reinforce exclusionary stereotypes or promote cross-cultural understanding by subtly shaping public perception. Furthermore, it employs the diasporic identity framework articulated by scholars such as Oh (2016), who argue that ethnic media function as vital spaces for the negotiation of complex, hybrid selves that defy monolithic categorization. Within this theoretical framework, a film is not merely a text but a cultural artifact, a node in a vast and shifting media ecology. Its meaning is not inherent but is produced through its circulation, debated by its audiences, and mediated by a host of paratextual materials that frame and interpret it for various publics. This approach requires us to see meaning-making as a process that is distributed across multiple sites, a conversation that begins with the filmmaker but is continued by critics, programmers, educators, and viewers themselves. This section will further explore these dynamics through a thematic analysis of the seven films in the corpus, treating them as case studies that illuminate the politics of reception in distinct ways. We will first examine how the specific media ecologies through which these films circulate, from the global arthouse festival circuit and the national broadcaster to the institutional context of the National Film Board and the hyperlocal sphere of Québec cinema, fundamentally shape their public meaning. We will then turn to the diasporic spectator, theorizing viewership not as a passive act but as a dialogic practice of identity negotiation, where audiences actively engage with on-screen representations to affirm their own hybridity while often resisting the very terms of that representation. Finally, we will employ a critical-discourse analytic toolkit to trace how the meanings of these films are mediated and contested in the public sphere, revealing the significant gap that often exists between mainstream reception, institutional

framing, and the lived realities of diasporic communities. Through this multi-pronged analysis, this chapter argues that the political work of Arab-Canadian cinema is ultimately realized not in the moment of its creation, but in the complex, contested, and ongoing social processes of its reception.

3.2 The Film as Node: Circulation and the Trans-local Media Ecology

A film's journey through the world is not incidental to its meaning; it is fundamental. The channels through which a film circulates—the festivals that select it, the institutions that fund it, the platforms that stream it, and the broadcasters that air it—constitute a media ecology that actively frames the text and shapes its reception. Each pathway carries with it a set of ideological assumptions and an imagined audience, influencing how a film's representation of Arab-Canadian identity is positioned and understood. The films in this corpus travel through distinct, though sometimes overlapping, ecologies, and tracing these paths reveals how context is not merely a backdrop but a determining force in the production of meaning. Whether a film is presented as a prestigious international arthouse feature, a piece of national public broadcasting, an educational tool for diversity training, or a local intervention in a specific political debate profoundly affects its political and cultural work.

The mainstream festival circuit, particularly prestigious platforms like the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), represents a powerful media ecology that often frames diasporic cinema for a global, predominantly Western, arthouse audience. Ruba Nadda's *Sabah* and *Cairo Time* are exemplary case studies of this dynamic. The selection of *Sabah* for TIFF immediately conferred upon it a level of cultural capital and legitimacy

within the Canadian film industry, positioning it not as a niche ethnic film but as a significant work of national cinema. This circulation path, leading to mainstream theatrical distribution, encouraged a reading of the film that aligned with Canada's official multicultural narrative. It was marketed and largely received as a charming and palatable cross-cultural romance, a story that affirmed the possibility of harmonious integration. The festival context, with its emphasis on artistic merit and universal themes, tended to smooth over the film's more critical edges, foregrounding the romance plot while downplaying the subtle ways it engages with patriarchal constraint and assimilationist pressure. The film's success in this ecology made it a benchmark for a certain kind of successful Arab-Canadian story, one that could travel easily and speak to a broad audience without causing too much discomfort.

Cairo Time, as an international co-production with a well-known American actress in the lead, circulated through an even more globalized arthouse ecology. Its presence at festivals from Toronto to Tribeca positioned it within a transnational conversation about representing the Middle East, but one conducted primarily for and by the West. This context shapes its aesthetic choices—the languid, picturesque cinematography, the focus on the Western protagonist's emotional journey, which are geared towards an audience that consumes the Other through a lens of aesthetic appreciation and touristic discovery. The festival circuit, in this case, frames the film's representation of Cairo and its Egyptian characters for a global market, encouraging a reading that celebrates its cosmopolitan sensibility while potentially overlooking the subtle Orientalism that underpins its narrative. The film's journey through this specific media ecology thus has a profound impact on its meaning, turning a complex site of cultural encounter into an aesthetically pleasing, consumable product for the international

arthouse consumer.

In contrast to this global circulation, *Montréal la Blanche* is a film whose meaning is deeply embedded in the hyperlocal media ecology of Québec. Its premiere at the Rendez-vous Québec Cinéma and its reviews in French-language publication situate it not within a broad multicultural conversation, but within the province's specific and often contentious debates on secularism reasonable accommodation, and the integration of North African immigrants. This context immediately politicizes the film in a way that *Sabah's* mainstream Canadian release did not. For Québec audiences, the film's dialogues about religious practice, its visual references to the snow-covered white city, and its characters' struggles with precarious labour are not abstract themes but direct interventions in ongoing public conversations. The film functions as a cultural node connecting the specific political anxieties of contemporary Québec to the transnational memory of the Algerian diaspora. Its meaning is therefore produced in a constant dialogue with local newspaper headlines, political speeches, and public debates over identity and belonging, demonstrating how a regional media ecology can generate a far more politically charged and contextually specific reading of a diasporic text.

A third, and equally powerful, media ecology is the institutional and educational circuit of the National Film Board of Canada. As a state-funded cultural institution, the NFB has a mandate to represent the diversity of Canadian experience, and its productions often circulate with an explicit pedagogical purpose. The documentaries *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* (1992), *A Scent of Mint* (2002), and *Une Femme de Tête* (2006) are all prime examples of this dynamic. Their primary mode of circulation is not the commercial cinema but the

public library, the university classroom, the community screening, and the NFB's own extensive digital streaming platform, NFB.ca. This institutional context actively frames these films as educational tools, artifacts designed to foster dialogue and promote understanding. The NFB's paratextual materials—the website descriptions, the educational study guides, the thematic playlists—all work to mediate the films' meanings, often packaging them as success stories of reconciliation (*A Sleeping Tree*), resilience (*A Scent of Mint*), or rights-based empowerment (*Une Femme de Tête*). For example, *Une Femme de Tête*, produced as part of the NFB's Work for All series, is explicitly framed as a tool for diversity in workforce. This context encourages a reading of the film that sees racism as a problem that can be managed through existing institutional channels, a perspective that, while valuable, can also serve to contain more radical critiques of systemic power. The NFB's media ecology, therefore, while providing a vital platform for marginalized voices, also demonstrates how state institutions can shape the reception of diasporic stories to align them with a national narrative of progress and social cohesion.

Finally, a film like Baker's *Things Arab Men Say* illustrates a hybrid media ecology, one that bridges several of these contexts. With its NFB backing, its premieres at major documentary festivals like Hot Docs, and its broadcast on the national public network, CBC, the film circulates through multiple, distinct public spheres simultaneously. For a festival audience, it might be received as a work of observational cinema, a testament to the filmmaker's craft. For the CBC television viewer, it is framed as a piece of public affairs programming, a window into a little-understood community, designed to build empathy and counter stereotypes. For the user streaming it on NFB.ca, it is situated within a curated

collection of films about multiculturalism and Canadian identity. Each of these contexts produces a slightly different version of the film, highlighting a different aspect of its meaning. This hybrid circulation path demonstrates that in the contemporary media landscape, a single diasporic text can exist as many things at once: an art object, a social document, an educational tool, and a piece of public broadcasting. Understanding the political work of such a film requires tracing its journey through all of these interconnected ecologies and analyzing how each one shapes the way it is seen and understood.

3.3 The Dialogic Spectator: Affirmation, Negotiation, and Resistance

If the media ecology provides the context for reception, it is the spectator who ultimately activates a film's meaning. Drawing on Oh's (2016, 2017) framework, which posits that ethnic media are crucial sites for the negotiation of diasporic identity, we can theorize spectatorship not as a passive act of receiving a pre-determined message, but as a dynamic and dialogic practice. For diasporic audiences in particular, watching a film is rarely a simple act of entertainment; it is an act of recognition, identification, and often, critical engagement. Viewers bring their own lived experiences, memories, and political sensibilities to the text, engaging in a complex dialogue with the representations on screen. This process can lead to powerful moments of affirmation, where the film validates a hybrid identity that resists monolithic labels. It can also lead to a more negotiated reading, where the spectator appreciates certain aspects of the film while critically questioning others. And in some cases, it can provoke an oppositional reading, where the viewer actively resists the film's ideological premises. Arab-Canadian cinema, with its diverse range of genres and

perspectives, provides a rich terrain for exploring all three modes of this dialogic spectatorship.

For many diasporic viewers, these films offer a rare and vital space for the affirmation of complex, hybrid identities. In a mainstream media landscape that often reduces Arab identity to a set of one-dimensional stereotypes, the nuanced portrayals in this corpus can feel like a profound act of recognition. The ending of *Sabah*, for example, where the protagonist insists on bringing her white, non-Muslim partner into her family home, is a powerful affirmation of a hybrid self that refuses to choose between her cultural heritage and her personal desires. For Arab-Canadian women navigating similar tensions, this scene offers a cinematic model of integration rather than assimilation, a validation of the possibility of holding multiple worlds together. *Things Arab Men Say* provides a different kind of affirmation. By presenting a group of Arab men talking, laughing, and arguing with humour and self-awareness, the film validates a form of masculinity that exists outside the dominant stereotypes of the violent extremist or the rigid patriarch. For Arab-Canadian men, watching this film can be a deeply affirming experience, a moment of seeing their own conversational styles, their own anxieties, and their own humour reflected on a national screen. The documentaries of memory, like *A Scent of Mint*, offer yet another form of validation. By grounding the experience of migration in the sensory details of food and scent rather than the spectacular trauma of war, the film affirms a non-spectacular, resilient identity. It allows viewers who have experienced similar displacements to connect with a narrative that values the quiet, everyday acts of cultural preservation, resisting the media's demand that they perform their trauma in order to be seen.

However, spectatorship is rarely a simple process of affirmation. More often, it involves a complex negotiation, where viewers may accept a film's premise while simultaneously questioning its execution or its political implications. *Cairo Time* is a prime site for this kind of negotiated reading. A diasporic viewer might appreciate the film's elegant visuals and its sensitive portrayal of Tareq as a sophisticated, modern Egyptian man, a welcome corrective to Hollywood's clichés. At the same time, that viewer might feel a sense of unease at the film's narrative structure, which centers the emotional journey of its white, Western protagonist. The spectator negotiates with the text, appreciating its aesthetic achievements and its nuanced characterization while remaining critically aware of the subtle ways it reproduces a colonial gaze, where the non-Western world serves as a backdrop for Western self-discovery. This negotiated reading is not a rejection of the film, but a more complex engagement with its contradictions. Similarly, a viewer of *Montréal la Blanche* might celebrate the film's powerful depiction of diasporic solidarity and its sharp critique of Québec's political climate, while also questioning its decision to downplay overt acts of racism in favor of a more atmospheric sense of alienation. The spectator might ask: does this subtlety accurately reflect the lived experience of xenophobia, or does it make the reality of racism more palatable for a mainstream audience? This kind of negotiated reading is a hallmark of sophisticated diasporic spectatorship, a practice of reading both with and against the grain of the text.

In some cases, this critical engagement can tip over into a fully oppositional reading, where the spectator actively resists the film's dominant ideological message. This is particularly likely with state-funded films that engage with the official discourse of

multiculturalism. Belhaj's *Une Femme de Tête*, with its NFB branding and its narrative of institutional redress, is a key example. While a dominant reading might see the film as an empowering story of a woman fighting for her rights, an oppositional reading would focus on the film's containment of the problem of racism. A spectator with a more radical political analysis might argue that by channeling the protagonist's struggle into the bureaucratic channels of a human rights complaint, the film ultimately reinforces the power of the very system that produced the discrimination in the first place. The film, in this reading, becomes an example of how the state co-opts narratives of resistance, turning them into feel-good stories that leave the underlying structures of power untouched. The oppositional reading does not deny the protagonist's courage, but it fundamentally rejects the film's political framework. An oppositional reading can also emerge from within the diaspora itself, revealing fissures within the community. A feminist viewer of *Things Arab Men Say*, for example, might read the film oppositionally, not because of its representation of race, but because of its representation of gender. The film's focus on an all-male space, while subversive in one context, can be read as a reinforcement of patriarchy in another. The oppositional spectator might critique the film for making the male experience universal, for silencing the voices of Arab women, and for failing to apply its critical lens to the internal power dynamics of the community. This kind of internal critique is a vital part of diasporic discourse, demonstrating that the diasporic audience is not a monolith, but a diverse and often contentious public sphere.

3.4 Mediating Meaning: The Work of Critical Discourse

A film's meaning is not only produced in the direct encounter between text and spectator; it is also profoundly shaped by the cloud of critical discourse that surrounds it. Reviews in mainstream newspapers, institutional framing by funders and distributors, academic articles, and community discussions on social media all work to mediate a film's public meaning, highlighting certain themes while downplaying others, and positioning the text within specific political and cultural conversations. This process of mediation is a key site of ideological struggle, where different interpretations vie for legitimacy and the public identity of a film is forged. A critical-discourse analytic toolkit allows us to trace this process, revealing the often-significant gaps between how a film is framed by dominant institutions and how it is understood by the communities it purports to represent.

The discourse of mainstream media plays a powerful role in framing diasporic films for a majority audience. An analysis of the reviews for films like *Sabah* and *Montréal la Blanche* in major Canadian English and French-language newspapers reveals a consistent pattern. Critics often praise these films for their humanism, their universality, and their gentle or charming tone. This discourse, while seemingly positive, often works to depoliticize the films. By focusing on the universal aspects of a romance or a story of human connection, these reviews can downplay the films' more specific and critical engagement with issues like racism or patriarchal constraint. This framing, which aligns with the work of Alaazi et al. (2021) on how Canadian media often frames immigrant stories, makes the films more palatable for a mainstream audience but can also strip them of their political urgency. The good immigrant story, in this discourse, is one that ultimately reassures the dominant culture

that social cohesion is possible and that difference can be easily managed.

Institutional discourse, particularly from a powerful cultural body like the NFB, is another crucial site of mediation. The NFB's official synopses, educational study guides, and online thematic tagging all work to produce a specific, institutionally sanctioned meaning for their films. An analysis of the paratextual materials surrounding films like *Une Femme de Tête* and *A Scent of Mint* reveals a consistent framing of these works as pedagogical tools for the promotion of a liberal multicultural project. The films are tagged with keywords like diversity, human rights, and immigration, and the study guides suggest discussion questions that focus on themes of integration, resilience, and cross-cultural understanding. This institutional discourse is powerful because it presents itself as objective and educational, but it is deeply ideological. It tends to package the complex and often painful experiences of migration and racism into neat, manageable narratives that align with the state's vision of itself as a tolerant and inclusive nation. A critical analysis of this discourse reveals the subtle ways in which the state can shape the meaning of even stories of resistance, turning them into instruments for the promotion of a specific national ideology.

Last but not least, there is the discourse of the communities themselves, a discourse that often exists in tension with both mainstream and institutional framing. This discourse can be found in academic journals, which often provide a more critical and theoretically informed analysis of the films, but it is also present in the more ephemeral spaces of online forums, social media, and community Q&A sessions. While more difficult to systematically archive, this community-level discourse is where the most granular and often most politically charged interpretations of the films are generated. It is here that viewers might debate the authenticity

of a dialect, the accuracy of a cultural reference, or the political implications of a particular narrative choice. It is here that the internal fissures within the diaspora, along lines of gender, class, sexuality, and political affiliation, are most likely to emerge. For example, while a mainstream review of *Things Arab Men Say* might praise its candor, a social media thread populated by Arab-Canadian feminists might erupt in a debate about the film's exclusion of women. This community-level discourse, with its passion, its specificity, and its contentiousness, is a vital part of the meaning-making process. It represents the moment when the diasporic community talks back to its own representations, demonstrating that the meaning of a film is never fully settled, but is always open to debate, reinterpretation, and struggle.

The political and cultural work of Arab-Canadian cinema, this chapter has argued, cannot be located solely within the film text itself. It is a dynamic and ongoing process that unfolds in the complex social life of the film, a process best understood through the interconnected lenses of media ecology, diasporic spectatorship, and critical discourse. The journey a film takes through the world—whether it is celebrated at an international festival, broadcast on national television, or used as a teaching tool in a classroom—profoundly shapes its public meaning, framing it for different audiences and positioning it within different ideological conversations. The encounter between the film and the spectator, particularly the diasporic spectator, is a dialogic one, a site of active negotiation where representations are affirmed, contested, and often resisted. And the cloud of discourse that surrounds a film, from newspaper reviews to academic articles to online debates, works to constantly mediate and

remake its meaning, revealing the significant gaps that often exist between official narratives and lived experience.

What this analysis reveals is that the meaning of Arab-Canadian cinema is forged in struggle. It is a struggle conducted by filmmakers to encode complex, nuanced, and challenging representations within a media landscape that often demands simplicity and palatability. It is a struggle engaged in by audiences to find validation, to negotiate identity, and to resist misrepresentation. And it is a struggle played out in the public sphere, where different interpretations vie for legitimacy and the very definition of what it means to be Arab in Canada is debated. The power of this cinema lies not in its ability to provide easy answers or positive images, but in its capacity to generate this struggle, to create texts so rich with contradiction and polysemy that they demand an active, critical, and engaged spectatorship. In doing so, these films do more than simply reflect a community; they create a vital public space for dialogue, dissent, and the ongoing, unfinished work of imagining what it means to belong.

4 Nested Worlds: Ecological Frameworks, Systemic Influences, and the Mediation of Lived Experience

4.1 From Text to World

A film, particularly one produced by and about a diasporic community, is never an island. It does not emerge from a vacuum, nor is it received in one. Its narrative, aesthetics, and very existence are profoundly shaped by a series of nested, interacting environments. To fully grasp the political and cultural work of Arab-Canadian cinema, our analysis must therefore zoom out from the text itself to consider the world in which it is made and seen. This final

section extends our inquiry by adopting an ecological systems framework, which allows us to understand cultural production not as an isolated act of creation, but as a dynamic interplay between an individual and the concentric systems that surround them: the macrosystem of national ideologies, state policies, and industry structures; the mesosystem of community relations and public discourse; and the microsystem of immediate, everyday experience, such as family life and interpersonal relationships.

By applying this ecological model, we can move beyond a purely textual analysis to chart the complex ways in which systemic forces condition both the production and interpretation of Arab-Canadian films. This approach allows us to ask critical questions: How do federal and provincial funding policies, broadcast regulations, and the gatekeeping practices of major film festivals influence which Arab-Canadian stories are told, and how they are told? How do filmmakers embed the specific, micro-level textures of diasporic life, the nuances of kitchen banter, the cadence of code-switching, the sensory memory of a particular scent, within the macro-level narratives of migration, citizenship, and national identity? And how can we, as critics, develop an analytical method that constantly oscillates between scene-specific detail and the systemic forces that give those details their political charge? This section argues that an ecological analysis provides the most comprehensive framework for understanding Arab-Canadian cinema. It reveals these films to be complex cultural artifacts, produced at the intersection of creative agency and structural constraint, and it demonstrates how their ultimate meaning is forged in the dynamic mediation between the intimate textures of lived experience and the powerful, shaping influence of the wider social and political world.

4.2 The Macrosystem: State Funding, Gatekeeping, and the National Narrative

The outermost layer of the ecological model, the macrosystem, comprises the broad ideological currents, institutional structures, and state policies that create the conditions of possibility for cultural production. In Canada, this macrosystem is defined by a unique configuration of state-funded cultural institutions, official multicultural policies, and a powerful festival circuit that acts as a primary gatekeeper. The decisions made within this macrosystem, by funding bodies like Telefilm Canada and the National Film Board, by provincial agencies such as Québec's SODEC (Société de développement des entreprises culturelles), and by the programmers of festivals like TIFF, have a profound impact on the kinds of Arab-Canadian stories that reach the screen. These institutions do not merely support filmmaking; they actively shape it, often favouring narratives that align with a celebratory, harmonious vision of Canadian multiculturalism while creating significant barriers for stories that are more critical, confrontational, or politically complex.

Nadda's *Sabah* is a quintessential example of a film that successfully navigated this macrosystem. Produced with the support of major federal and provincial funding bodies, the film's narrative of a Syrian Canadian woman finding love and personal liberation through a relationship with a white Canadian man aligned perfectly with the macrosystem's preference for palatable, integrationist stories. Its romantic comedy genre, its focus on individual emancipation rather than collective political struggle, and its ultimately reassuring resolution made it an attractive investment for institutions tasked with promoting a positive image of Canadian diversity. The film's success demonstrates how the macrosystem of funding can

function as a form of ideological gatekeeping, rewarding narratives that sweeten the cross-cultural pill and can be easily consumed by a mainstream audience. While the film is a significant achievement in its own right, its journey through the funding system reveals how the macrosystem can subtly steer filmmakers toward certain kinds of stories, creating a cinematic landscape where tales of gentle integration are more likely to be produced than those of radical dissent.

The National Film Board of Canada represents a particularly influential component of this macrosystem, especially for documentary filmmaking. As a state-funded public producer, the NFB has a mandate to represent Canada to Canadians and to the world, a mission that has historically included a commitment to representing the country's diverse communities. The documentaries in our corpus—*A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots*, *A Scent of Mint*, *Une Femme de Tête*, and *Things Arab Men Say*—all bear the mark of this institutional context. The NFB's support provides a vital platform for these stories, ensuring they are produced with high technical standards and distributed through its extensive educational and online networks. However, this support is not without its ideological implications. The NFB's institutional framing often packages these films within a discourse of social cohesion, rights, and reconciliation. While the NFB provides an indispensable space for Arab-Canadian filmmakers, its institutional identity as an arm of the state inevitably shapes the production and reception of their work, demonstrating how the macrosystem can mediate even the most personal of stories.

The province of Québec constitutes a distinct macrosystem with its own cultural policies, funding bodies (like SODEC), and public sphere. *Montréal la blanche* is a product of this

specific ecological context. The film's themes of linguistic negotiation, secularism, and the integration of North African immigrants are not abstract; they are direct interventions in the charged political debates that have defined Québec for decades, from the Quiet Revolution to the more recent controversies over the Charter of Values. The film's production was supported by provincial institutions invested in fostering a distinct Québécois cinematic culture, one that grapples with the province's unique model of *interculturalisme*. This local macrosystem creates a different set of pressures and possibilities than the federal multicultural framework. It allows for a more politically specific and contextually dense form of storytelling, but it also means the film is inevitably read through the lens of Québec's own internal anxieties about identity, language, and the place of religious minorities. The film's very title, with its reference to the white city, is a direct engagement with the racial and cultural politics of its specific ecological niche.

Finally, the international festival circuit functions as a powerful, non-state component of the macrosystem, a network of cultural gatekeepers who play a crucial role in anointing films with prestige and facilitating their global circulation. Nadda's *Cairo Time*, with its international star and its picturesque foreign setting, was perfectly positioned to succeed in this environment. Its selection for major festivals like TIFF validated it as a work of international arthouse cinema, a film that could transcend its Canadian origins and speak to a global audience. However, this success comes at a price. The aesthetics of the international arthouse circuit often favour a certain kind of world cinema, one that is visually beautiful, emotionally restrained, and politically subtle. This can lead to a preference for films that represent the Other in a way that is palatable and aesthetically pleasing to a Western gaze, as

critics of the film's softer Orientalism have pointed out. The festival macrosystem, therefore, while offering unparalleled visibility, can also exert a homogenizing influence, rewarding diasporic films that conform to a pre-existing set of aesthetic and narrative expectations.

4.3 Embedding the Micro in the Macro: Textual Textures and Systemic Forces

The power of an ecological analysis lies in its ability to connect the broad, systemic forces of the macrosystem to the specific, intimate details of the film text. Arab-Canadian filmmakers excel at this, embedding the micro-level textures of diasporic life, such as the everyday rituals, the linguistic nuances, the sensory details, within the macro-level narratives of migration, citizenship, and identity politics. These small moments are not mere background details; they are the sites where the abstract forces of the macrosystem become tangible, where ideology is made manifest in the fabric of everyday life. By developing an analytical grid that links these micro-textures to their macro-contexts, we can appreciate the profound political work accomplished in the most seemingly mundane of scenes.

One of the most potent sites for this ecological mediation is the kitchen. In both *Sabah* and *A Scent of Mint*, the kitchen functions as a key microsystem, a space where family dynamics, gender roles, and cultural memory are negotiated. In *Sabah*, the kitchen is initially presented as a space of traditional female obligation. The micro-level textures of kitchen banter and the communal preparation of food are embedded within a macro-level narrative about patriarchal structures within the immigrant family. However, as Sabah begins her journey of self-discovery, her relationship to this space changes. Her acts of rebellion, such as secretly leaving the home to go swimming, are a direct challenge to the gendered

logic of this domestic microsystem. The kitchen thus becomes a microcosm of the larger struggle between tradition and modernity that defines the film. In *A Scent of Mint*, the kitchen is re-signified in a different way. Here, the male protagonist's act of cooking traditional Lebanese food is a powerful micro-level gesture that comments on a macro-level issue. It works to undo gendered stereotypes about domestic labour within immigrant households, presenting the kitchen not as a space of female confinement but as a creative atelier, a site of memory, cultural transmission, and masculine tenderness. In both films, the seemingly private space of the kitchen is revealed to be a deeply political one, a microsystem where the large-scale forces of patriarchy, cultural preservation, and gender identity are actively negotiated.

The taxi in *Montréal la blanche* provides another powerful example of a microsystem that is saturated with macro-level meaning. The confined space of the car becomes a rolling confessional, a liminal zone where the characters are suspended between past and present, public and private. The micro-level textures of this space are rich with political significance. The constant code-switching between Arabic and French is an auditory marker of the hybrid identity of the characters, a direct reflection of the macro-level linguistic politics of Québec. The simple, intimate act of sharing pastries—the Algerian *makroud* and the Québécois *sucre à la crème*—becomes a tangible enactment of what Bouchard and Taylor (2008) call “concerted adjustment” (p. 51) an everyday, informal negotiation of cultural difference that exists outside of official state policy. This moment of connection, however, is embedded within a larger macro-narrative of economic precarity. The fact that the characters are in a taxi at all speaks to the systemic issue of underemployment for skilled immigrants, a reality

that grounds their intimate conversation in a harsh socio-economic context. The taxi, therefore, is not just a setting; it is an ecological nexus, a microsystem where the macro-level forces of migration, language politics, labour economics, and cultural memory all converge.

The documentaries in the corpus are particularly adept at linking the micro to the macro, often through the use of specific objects or social settings. In *Une Femme de Tête* and *A Scent of Mint*, the bureaucratic document, such as the immigration form, the human rights complaint, becomes a powerful symbol of the state's presence in the individual's life. A close-up on a form is a micro-level visual detail, but it makes the abstract, macro-level power of the state tangible. These documents represent the state's attempt to know, categorize, and control the immigrant subject, reducing a complex life to a series of boxes to be ticked. They are the artifacts of the macrosystem's intrusion into the microsystem. Nisreen Baker's *Things Arab Men Say* uses the social setting of the barbershop in a similar way. The micro-level textures of this space, for example, the convivial banter, the sound of clippers, the shared laughter, the silent hockey game on the television in the background, are all embedded within a macro-level context. The barbershop functions as a counter-public sphere, a safe space where Arab men can articulate their own identities in direct opposition to the threatening stereotypes that circulate in the wider media macrosystem. The hockey game, a subtle detail, is particularly telling. It visually embeds this distinctly Arab-Canadian microsystem within the larger, white-coded macrosystem of Canadian national culture, symbolizing the constant, ongoing negotiation of belonging that defines the diasporic experience.

An ecological analysis, in the final account, provides the most comprehensive framework for understanding the complex cultural work of Arab-Canadian cinema. By zooming out from the text to consider the concentric circles of family, community, and state that surround it, we can move beyond a simplistic reading of these films as mere reflections of a social reality. Instead, they are revealed to be complex artifacts produced at the dynamic intersection of individual creative agency and powerful structural forces. The macrosystem of state funding, broadcast regulations, and festival gatekeeping creates a field of pressures and constraints, shaping the kinds of stories that are deemed worthy of being told and often rewarding those that align with a celebratory, non-threatening vision of multiculturalism. Yet, within this constraining field, filmmakers consistently find ways to assert their agency.

They do so by embedding the rich, specific, and often subversive textures of diasporic life into their narratives. The micro-level details—the taste of a pastry, the cadence of a bilingual conversation, the intimacy of a shared memory, the anxiety of a police encounter—are not just decorative. They are the sites where the abstract, macro-level forces of migration, racism, patriarchy, and citizenship are made real, tangible, and human. The constant oscillation between these layers is what gives Arab-Canadian cinema its unique political and aesthetic power. These films teach us to see the world ecologically, to understand that the private is always political, that the personal is always shaped by the systemic, and that the smallest gestures of everyday life can be profound acts of cultural resistance. By charting this complex interplay of agency and structure, an ecological reading allows us to appreciate these films not just as stories about being Arab in Canada, but as vital interventions in the ongoing struggle to define the very terms of Canadian identity itself.

5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken an exploration of Arab-Canadian cinema as a vibrant and contested domain of cultural production, where the intricacies of encoding, decoding, stereotyping, audience engagement, and ecological mediation converge to illuminate the politics of diasporic identity in post-9/11 Canada. Grounded in Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm, our analysis has demonstrated how films such as Nadda's *Sabah* and *Cairo Time* strategically encode counter-narratives of interethnic romance and cosmopolitan empathy, subverting dominant threat scripts through deliberate generic choices and visual rhetorics that invite preferred readings of integration while opening avenues for oppositional interpretations critiquing assimilationist ideologies. Similarly, documentaries like *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* and *A Scent of Mint* harness personal archives and sensory motifs to reclaim counter-memories, bridging individual testimonies with collective histories to affirm hybridity and resilience against erasure.

Employing an intersectional framework, we have dissected the mechanisms of othering, revealing how contested signifiers—the veil's adaptive symbolism, spatial chronotopes of confinement and flux, and nuanced portrayals of masculinity—serve as sites of subversion. Films like Bensaddek's *Montréal la blanche* and Baker's *Things Arab Men Say* exemplify this by inverting stereotypes through ironic framing and ethnographic intimacy, challenging the intertwined axes of race, gender, and religion that perpetuate exclusion. In recent years, Arab-Canadian filmmakers and writers have turned to personal narratives to challenge stereotypes and share authentic experiences of their communities. A notable example is *Arab*

Women Say What?! that offers an unparalleled portrait of Arab women living in Canada, foregrounding their unique perspectives on identity, home, and politics. It fills a gap in representation, allowing these women to speak for themselves with unfiltered honesty. The result is both a celebration of their diversity and a frank exploration of the challenges they face as immigrants and minorities in a multicultural society. Extending outward, our examination of diasporic spectatorship and critical discourse has portrayed viewing as an active, dialogic process, where audiences, shaped by media ecologies ranging from arthouse festivals to state-sponsored platforms, affirm shared experiences, negotiate contradictions, and resist hegemonic framings. Paratextual mediations, from mainstream reviews depoliticizing narratives to community debates exposing internal fissures, further underscore the polysemic nature of these texts, where meaning crystallizes in the interplay between institutional ideologies and lived realities.

Finally, the ecological systems lens has connected these elements, mapping how micro-level textures, such as intimate gestures of cultural negotiation, like sharing pastries or cooking familial recipes, are embedded within macro-level forces of state funding, policy debates, and gatekeeping practices. This reveals filmmakers' adept navigation of structural constraints, transforming potential limitations into opportunities for critique and agency. For instance, NFB-supported works like Belhaj's *Une Femme de Tête* align with liberal discourses of rights and redress yet encode oppositional cues that question systemic inequities, illustrating the dynamic mediation between creative intent and institutional imperatives.

In summation, Arab-Canadian cinema emerges not as a passive mirror of society but as

an active intervention in the politics of representation, fostering ideological struggles that expose the limits of Canadian multiculturalism while validating the complexities of diasporic existence. These films eschew simplistic positive images in favour of rich, contradictory polysemies that demand critical engagement, prompting viewers to interrogate assumptions about otherness, belonging, and power. As global migration patterns intensify and media landscapes evolve—amid ongoing conflicts, rising Islamophobia, and digital amplification of stereotypes—the insights from this corpus remain profoundly relevant. They invite scholars, filmmakers, and audiences alike to embrace cinema’s transformative potential: as a bridge for empathy, a catalyst for dissent, and a blueprint for reimagining inclusive futures in multicultural nations. By foregrounding the unfinished work of identity negotiation, this chapter ultimately affirms the enduring power of film to humanize the marginalized, deconstruct binaries, and contribute to broader discourses on equity and cultural sovereignty.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine Arab-Canadian cinema not as a collection of films that happen to share an ethnic provenance, but as a coherent, if internally heterogeneous, cultural formation engaged in the ongoing, unfinished work of diasporic identity. The central argument, pursued across the three chapters and through a corpus spanning from *Sabah* (2005) to the choral testimonies of *Arab Women Say What?!* (2023), is that these films do not merely document the experience of Arab and Muslim communities in Canada: they actively constitute that experience, generating representational spaces in which identity is performed, contested, and reimagined in the face of structural exclusion, Orientalist misrepresentation, and the ambivalent embrace of Canadian multiculturalism.

Three analytical lenses have organised this inquiry: the postcolonial theory of hybridity and the third space; the intersectional analysis of mobility, gender, and racialisation; and the semiotic and institutional study of encoding, decoding, and ecological mediation. Each lens has illuminated dimensions of the corpus that the others cannot fully see, but it is their convergence and the productive tensions between them that have yielded the dissertation's most significant insights. The conclusion draws those threads together, consolidates the principal findings, reflects on what the films collectively reveal about the state of Canadian multiculturalism, and identifies the lines of inquiry that remain open for future research.

Chapter 1 demonstrated that Arab-Canadian cinema's most sustained and sophisticated engagement is with hybridity understood not as a comfortable cultural synthesis, the mosaic of official multicultural rhetoric, but as an ongoing, embodied, and frequently painful process of negotiation between competing attachments, temporalities, and modes of belonging.

Drawing on Bhabha's (2004) third space theory, Brah's (1996) diaspora cartographies, and Anzaldúa's (2021) concept of the borderlands, the chapter mapped the full spectrum of this process across the corpus, from the generative optimism of *Sabah's* swimming pool, where cultural boundaries dissolve in the fluid sensory environment of interethnic romance, to the melancholic stasis of *Montréal la blanche's* (2016) claustrophobic taxi, where the third space becomes not a site of becoming but an echo chamber of traumatic return.

What the chapter revealed, perhaps most powerfully, is that this spectrum is not simply a range of individual emotional responses to displacement. It is a structured range produced by the specific histories, class positions, generational locations, and political contexts of the films' subjects. The Algerian exile in Bensaddek's film is not melancholic because he is constitutionally pessimistic but because he is the bearer of a particular postcolonial wound — the civil war of the 1990s — that has no place in the feel-good narrative of multicultural Canada. Pierre Sidaoui's mint-saturated archival reverie in *A Scent of Mint* (2002) enacts a different but equally specific diasporic subjectivity: that of the Lebanese intellectual who comes to Canada carrying not the trauma of forced exile but the complicated nostalgia of voluntary migration, and who must negotiate his identity through the material and sensory traces of a childhood home that no longer exists in the form he remembers. Hall's (1990) insistence that diasporic identity is a matter of routes rather than roots, a production always in process, never complete, finds its most vivid cinematic elaboration in the contrast between these two films: same formal mode, same Canadian city, radically different diasporic temporality.

The chapter's attention to spatial and sensory configurations, to the phenomenological

dimensions of diasporic experience as theorised by Tuan (1977), Bachelard (2014), Lefebvre (1991), and Merleau-Ponty (2012), established that diasporic identity in these films is not only discursively constructed but corporeally inscribed. The cold that encases Bensaddek's Montreal, the water that liberates and threatens in *Sabah*, the scent of mint that haunts Sidaoui's Montreal apartment: these elemental figures are not decorative metaphors but phenomenological arguments about the embodied character of displacement. The diasporic body carries a "sensorium" (Howes, 2021, p. 3) that bridges lost homelands and adopted localities in ways that exceed what conscious memory or linguistic articulation can achieve. Ahmed's (2012) affective economies framework gave this embodied insight a political edge: the sticky affects of suspicion, exoticism, and shame that attach to Arab and Muslim bodies in post-9/11 Canada constitute the affective infrastructure of exclusion, and the films' careful staging of alternative affective economies — warmth, humour, desire, solidarity — is one of their most significant political gestures.

Chapter 2 shifted the analytical focus from the spatial and phenomenological to the social and political, bringing Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework and critical race theory to bear on the corpus's engagement with gender, sexuality, race, religion, and class. The chapter's central finding is that Arab-Canadian cinema's most durable contribution to the politics of representation lies precisely in its refusal of single-axis analysis. The films do not depict sexism or racism or religious discrimination as separate phenomena that happen to affect the same communities; they depict, and in the best cases illuminate, the ways in which these systems of oppression compound and mutually constitute each other in specific,

historically determined lives.

The analysis of *Sabah*, *Une Femme de Tête* (2006), *Me and the Mosque* (2005), and *Arab Women Say What?!* demonstrated this compounding most vividly in relation to Arab and Muslim women. For the protagonist of *Sabah*, the assertion of romantic agency is not simply a feminist act of self-determination; it is simultaneously a negotiation of religious regulation, a challenge to the family's racialized sense of cultural honour, and a navigation of a Canadian society whose liberal tolerance has specific limits when the woman in question is veiled, Arabic-speaking, and Muslim. The veil in these films refuses to function as a stable signifier of either oppression or liberation as it is perpetually overdetermined, read through different interpretive frameworks by different viewing positions, and the films' achievement is to hold these multiple readings in productive tension rather than resolving them into a preferred interpretation. That *Sabah* does not remove her headscarf at the film's resolution, that her liberation is figured as an expansion of her world rather than a shedding of her religious identity, constitutes one of the most quietly radical arguments in the corpus against the Orientalist liberated-unveiled fantasy that structures so much Western cultural discourse about Muslim women.

The chapter's analysis of masculinity in *Things Arab Men Say* (2016) and *A Scent of Mint* opened a related but distinct problematic. The racialized gaze theorised by Fanon (2008), which overdetermines the colonised subject from without, operates with particular force on Arab and Muslim men in post-9/11 media culture, where the terrorist script reduces the full complexity of masculine experience to a single threatening figure. Baker's barbershop intimacy and Sidaoui's archival memoir refuse this reduction, not by producing sanitised

counter-images of virtuous Arab manhood, but by inhabiting the full register of masculine vulnerability — grief, nostalgia, longing, self-doubt, the tender negotiations of cross-generational care — that the dominant representational frame has no room for. The barbershop in *Things Arab Men Say* functions as what Fraser (1990) calls a subaltern counterpublic: a space where racialised men formulate, through the informal rituals of communal life, oppositional understandings of their identities that directly contest the caricatures circulating in the wider mediascape.

The chapter's third section, on classed mobilities and the politics of movement, extended the intersectional analysis to reveal how the capacity to move, through urban space, across national borders, and into positions of social visibility, is itself unequally distributed along the axes of race, class, gender, and legal status. The taxi in *Montréal la blanche*, the passport privilege dramatized in *Cairo Time* (2009), the mosque partition in *Me and the Mosque*: each of these spatial configurations is a visual argument about the differential mobility that structures diasporic experience in Canada. These films refuse the liberal-multiculturalist assumption that belonging is a matter of cultural attitude and personal effort; they insist, repeatedly and with formal precision, that belonging is a structural condition determined by one's position at the intersection of multiple systems of power.

Chapter 3 turned from the films' internal politics to the circuits of meaning production within which they operate. Drawing on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, the argument that media texts are "structured polysemies" (Pillai, 1992, p. 228) whose meanings are

produced at the intersection of producers' ideological encodings and viewers' situated decodings, the chapter demonstrated that Arab-Canadian films are not simply messages that communicate pre-formed meanings to passive audiences but generative sites of ideological struggle in which multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations compete for dominance.

The analysis of Nadda's *Sabah* and *Cairo Time* revealed the strategic sophistication of the encoding process. By inscribing Arab-Canadian difference within the affective grammar of the romantic comedy, a genre whose conventions signal warmth, domesticity, and the promise of cross-cultural resolution, Nadda attempts to bypass the post-9/11 threat script that dominates mainstream representations of Arab and Muslim subjects. As Telmissany (2023) has argued, the generic frame makes diasporic experience legible and sympathetic to audiences who might otherwise bring defensive or hostile interpretive frameworks to representations of Muslim protagonists. Yet the chapter also showed that this encoding strategy carries significant risks: the preferred reading of liberal multicultural integration that Nadda's generic choices invite may domesticate the more radical dimensions of the films' politics, producing oppositional decodings only among viewers already equipped with the analytical frameworks to resist the genre's reassuring pull.

The documentary films in the corpus — *Things Arab Men Say*, *A Scent of Mint*, *Me and the Mosque*, *Arab Women Say What?!*, *A Sleeping Tree Dreams of Its Roots* (1992)— encode their counter-narratives through very different means: the intimacy of testimonial address, the affective charge of archival imagery, the reflexive self-awareness of the essay form. These strategies position their intended audiences as participants in the production of meaning rather than passive recipients of a pre-packaged message. The chapter's analysis of diasporic

spectatorship demonstrated that this participatory positioning is not merely a rhetorical gesture; it reflects the actual diversity of the interpretive communities these films address, whose responses range from affirmation and recognition to contestation and critique. The festival circuit, the NFB streaming platform, the community screening room: each mediating context shapes the decoding process differently, producing variant meanings from the same text and underscoring the fundamentally open, dialogic character of diasporic cinema's political work.

The ecological systems framework deployed in the chapter's final section situated all of these textual and reception dynamics within the broader institutional ecology of Canadian cultural policy. The finding that emerges here is both enabling and sobering: the institutional conditions that make Arab-Canadian cinema possible — NFB funding, Canada Media Fund support, the protected broadcast quotas that create space for minority cultural production — simultaneously constrain the range of stories that can be told and the forms in which they can be told. Films that align with celebratory narratives of multicultural success are more readily funded and more widely distributed than those that mount structural critiques of Canadian racism or challenge the ideological foundations of the multicultural project. Arab-Canadian filmmakers navigate this constraint with considerable ingenuity, embedding oppositional cues within institutionally legible frameworks, using the romance genre to smuggle in critique, deploying the testimonial documentary mode to make systemic analysis feel personal and immediate. But the constraint is real, and it sets limits on what Arab-Canadian cinema can achieve within the institutional frameworks currently available to it.

Taken together, the three chapters sustain a coherent argument about the relationship between Arab-Canadian cinema and Canadian multiculturalism that is worth articulating explicitly in conclusion. The dissertation has demonstrated that Arab-Canadian cinema does not simply illustrate or celebrate multicultural coexistence; it probes, and often exposes, the structural limits of multicultural ideology as it operates in Canadian society. The films in the corpus return, again and again, to a set of questions that official multiculturalism tends to suppress: Whose cultural difference is legible as culture, and whose is classified as threat? What forms of belonging are available to those whose racial, religious, and gender identities place them at the intersection of multiple subordinating systems? What does it cost to be included on the terms that multicultural Canada makes available, and what is sacrificed when the price of inclusion is the moderation or domestication of one's own critical voice?

These questions are not asked abstractly. They are asked through the bodies of specific characters, in the textures of specific spaces, through the formal choices of specific filmmakers working within specific institutional constraints. It is precisely this specificity and this commitment to the particular, the local, and the embodied that give Arab-Canadian cinema its political power and its scholarly interest. The films resist the universalising gestures that would make diasporic experience legible to dominant audiences by stripping it of its specificity; they insist on the full, contradictory, culturally dense particularity of life at the intersection of Arab, Muslim, and Canadian identities, and they ask their audiences — Arab and non-Arab alike — to encounter that particularity on its own terms.

This is why the analytical framework developed across the three chapters, bringing together postcolonial hybridity theory, intersectional analysis, and media semiotics, has been

necessary. No single framework is adequate to the complexity of the films or the political work they perform. The postcolonial lens illuminates the colonial histories that continue to structure the representational conditions within which Arab-Canadian filmmakers work, and the psychic and cultural consequences of displacement and exile. The intersectional lens reveals how race, gender, religion, and class compound each other in the specific lives the films depict, and why single-axis analyses of discrimination or resistance invariably distort the realities they claim to describe. The semiotic and ecological lens situates both the films and their audiences within the institutional circuits that determine what stories get told, how they are encoded, and how their meanings circulate in the broader culture. It is only by holding these three analytical perspectives in simultaneous view, as the films themselves do, that the full scope and significance of Arab-Canadian cinema as a cultural and political formation can be grasped.

Before turning to the limitations of this study and its directions for future research, it is worth pausing to take stock of what the films examined in this dissertation have actually achieved — not what they aspire to, or what their institutional framings claim for them, but what their specific formal and thematic choices have accomplished in relation to the representational politics of post-9/11 Canada.

They have insisted on complexity where the dominant culture demands simplicity. At a historical moment when Arab and Muslim identities have been systematically reduced in mainstream media to a small repertoire of threatening or pitiable figures, these films have

produced representations of Arab and Muslim characters in the full register of human experience: funny and grief-stricken, politically incorrect and tender, devout and conflicted, ambitious and defeated, nostalgic and forward-looking. This insistence on complexity is not a liberal gesture of inclusion; it is a political act of refusal, a refusal of the representational logic that makes some lives fully human and others available for stereotype.

They have given form to experiences that dominant culture renders invisible. The slow violence of winter estrangement in Bensaddek's *Montreal*, the bureaucratic humiliation staged in Belhaj's *Une Femme de Tête*, the spatial constraint of the mosque partition in Nawaz's documentary, the psychic cost of living under the racialized gaze in Baker's barbershop: these are not experiences that circulate in mainstream Canadian cultural discourse. By giving them cinematic form through making them visible, audible, and affectively accessible, Arab-Canadian films perform an act of cultural recognition that has direct political consequences. They say to Arab and Muslim audiences: your experience is real, it is complex, and it is worthy of art. They say to non-Arab audiences: this is what is happening in your city, in your country, in your cultural imagination, and you are implicated in it.

They have developed formal strategies adequate to the complexity of the experience they represent. The generic hybridity that characterises the most formally ambitious films in the corpus. The anti-road movie turned essay film turned minimalist melodrama in *Montréal la blanche*, the autobiographical documentary turned archival poetry in *A Scent of Mint* and the romantic comedy turned cultural critique in *Sabah*, they are not an aesthetic accident or a symptom of formal uncertainty. It is a principled formal argument: that the experience of

diaspora requires new ways of telling stories, ways that are as layered, contradictory, and perpetually unresolved as the identities they seek to represent. In this sense, the formal hybridity of these films is itself a contribution to the politics of representation, but it refuses the generic closures that would domesticate diasporic experience and holds open the productive ambivalence of the in-between.

Beyond its contribution to media and diaspora studies, this dissertation is intended as a contribution to the communities whose cinema it examines. The three questions that recur throughout this study — whose cultural difference is legible as culture, what forms of belonging are available at the intersection of race, religion, gender, and class, what is sacrificed when inclusion requires the domestication of one's own critical voice — give a vocabulary to experiences that many Arab and Muslim Canadians live but rarely see named with this degree of precision in either scholarly or public discourse. To have language for a felt but inarticulate constraint is itself a form of recognition, and it is offered here in that spirit.

This dissertation also constitutes, in a modest but concrete way, an act of canon-building. Arab-Canadian cinema circulates unevenly and is rarely treated as a coherent body of work rather than a series of isolated titles; a sustained critical treatment of nine films across three decades is itself a contribution to the visibility and legitimacy of this cinema as a field worthy of serious attention, one that future scholars, festival programmers, and funding bodies can draw on rather than reconstruct from scratch.

The analysis developed in Chapter 3, in particular, has a use beyond the academy. Its account of how filmmakers such as Nadda and Baker encode critique within institutionally legible forms, using genre to carry political content past the gatekeeping structures that determine what gets funded and distributed, describes strategies that remain live and practically consequential for the next generation of Arab-Canadian media-makers navigating the same funding landscape. Understood this way, the dissertation's analysis of encoding is not only descriptive of a representational strategy; it is potentially instructive for those still working within the institutional constraints it identifies.

Finally, at a moment when Canadian public discourse on multiculturalism tends to oscillate between uncritical celebration and blanket dismissal, the intersectional and historically grounded account offered here gives journalists, policymakers, and community organisations a more precise instrument than either pole affords: not whether multiculturalism works, but what, specifically, it costs, and to whom. If this dissertation succeeds in its aims, it will have offered the Arab-Canadian community not only a mirror but a vocabulary — one capable of naming, and therefore contesting, the terms on which inclusion is currently offered.

This dissertation also has limitations that must be acknowledged honestly. The corpus, while deliberately diverse in terms of form, gender, and cultural background, is inevitably selective. Films produced in French-language Quebec, where the dynamics of Arab and Muslim diasporic identity intersect with the specific politics of francophone nationalism and

the Québécois cultural economy, have received limited attention, and this represents a significant gap. Quebec has produced a distinct strand of Arab-Canadian filmmaking, shaped by the particular institutional frameworks of the NFB's French production programme and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, and by the specific racial and cultural politics of Québécois identity. A study that took French-Canadian and English-Canadian contexts as equally central, or that made the relationship between them an explicit object of analysis, would yield significantly different findings.

The analysis of audience reception in Chapter 3 is largely theoretical, drawing on published critical discourse and review culture rather than on empirical audience research. The decodings attributed to diasporic and mainstream audiences are analytically plausible but empirically underdetermined. Future research would benefit enormously from ethnographic audience studies conducted in community screening contexts, in film festival Q&As, in online discussion communities that would give empirical substance to the theoretical claims about how these films are actually received by different interpretive communities. Such research would also be better positioned to address the generational dimension of diasporic spectatorship: the question of whether second- and third-generation Arab-Canadian viewers bring meaningfully different interpretive frameworks to these films than first-generation immigrants, and what those differences reveal about the evolving dynamics of diasporic identity in Canada.

The dissertation's focus on feature and documentary films distributed through relatively formal institutional channels has meant that the vast and rapidly growing domain of Arab-Canadian digital media production, such as YouTube channels, Instagram storytelling, TikTok

documentary practice, podcast culture, has fallen outside its scope. This domain is where much of the most innovative and politically urgent Arab-Canadian cultural work is currently taking place, often beyond the reach of the institutional constraints that shape the films examined here. A study of Arab-Canadian digital media culture, attentive to the ways in which platform algorithms, networked publics, and informal production practices generate new conditions of possibility and new forms of constraint, would constitute an important complement to the present work.

Finally, the dissertation's analytical framework, for all its deliberate eclecticism, reflects the predominantly Anglophone and Western academy's theoretical canon. While Bhabha, Brah, Hall, Crenshaw, and Ahmed are indispensable interlocutors for the questions this dissertation raises, future work on Arab-Canadian cinema would benefit from a more sustained engagement with Arabic-language critical traditions — with Arab feminist theory, with Arab cultural studies scholarship, with the rich tradition of Arabic-language film criticism that has developed in the diaspora as well as in the Arab world itself. Such an engagement would not only enrich the analytical toolkit available for reading these films but would model a form of diasporic scholarship that takes seriously the critical resources produced by the communities it studies.

There is a moment near the end of *A Scent of Mint* when Pierre Sidaoui holds up a photograph of his family in Lebanon and says, simply, that he cannot go back, not because the country is closed to him, but because the home in the photograph no longer exists. The

people have dispersed, the house has changed, and the child who lived there has become someone else. What remains is the photograph, the scent of mint on a Montreal morning that suddenly transports him back, and the film he is making, an act of imaginative reconstruction that cannot restore what has been lost but can, perhaps, hold it open. This moment crystallises what Arab-Canadian cinema, at its best, is about. It is not about nostalgia for a recoverable origin, nor about the seamless integration into a welcoming host society. It is about the ongoing, unfinished, irreducibly particular work of making a home in the in-between, of inhabiting the third space not as a temporary transit zone but as a permanent, if uncomfortable, condition of existence. The films examined in this dissertation do not resolve this condition; they inhabit it, give it form, and refuse the closures — assimilationist, nostalgic, nationalist, multicultural — that would make it easier to bear at the cost of its truth.

I claim, following Hall that diasporic identity is a production that is never complete, always in process. Arab-Canadian cinema is the audiovisual form of that incompleteness, a cinema that keeps returning to the same questions (What is home? Who belongs? What is the cost of difference?) not because it has no answers but because the questions are larger than any answer, and because the act of returning to them, in new films, with new formal strategies, from new generational and political positions, is itself a form of cultural sustenance. The films examined here have demonstrated that Arab-Canadian cinema has the formal intelligence, the political seriousness, and the human depth to sustain this return, and to make of its incompleteness something genuinely illuminating.

What this dissertation has attempted to show is that this migrant cinema deserves to be taken seriously. Not as a marginal, ethnically specific curiosity but as a significant

contribution to the broader project of understanding how cultural identity is made, contested, and reimagined in the conditions of late modernity. The in-between spaces that Arab-Canadian filmmakers have carved out, in the urban geography of Toronto and Montreal, in the formal conventions of genre and documentary, in the affective textures of desire and grief and humour and solidarity, are not peripheral to Canadian culture. They are one of the places where the most important questions about what Canada is and might become are being asked. The home that these films are building is unfinished. That is precisely why it matters.

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