

Varieties of Muslim Experience

*Encounters with Arab Political and
Cultural Life*

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Introduction: Presenting and Re-presenting Islam

Ethnocentrism is a dirty word—as well it should be. To approach another culture solely from the judgmental perspective of one’s own is both unwise and immoral. But (to paraphrase Lucretius on nature), one cannot throw context out the door and not expect it to rush back in through the window. Indeed, once we recognize that it is from some particular place that, in the best of circumstances, we try to make sense of other cultures, we can actually use that stance to advantage.

The essays in this book start, for the most part, from the perspective of someone from the West who may be struck by certain features of an Islamic culture that appear particularly curious. Whether that curiosity concerns the belief in genies or how a scientist can be a fundamentalist, whether one is struck by the ostensible prohibition on human images or wonders whether something did indeed “go wrong” in Arab political development, the Westerner who is sincere in understanding something about Islamic cultures—even to the point of asking if such a classification is itself helpful—needs responses that account for his or her own cultural background. It is not a matter of raising one’s Western values to ethnocentric certainty any more than it is about reducing differences to claimed universality. And it is certainly not about securing enough data to validate one’s own judgment of other cultures. Rather, realizing that the reader does indeed come at issues with questions and interpretations influenced by a partic-

ular background and experience, it is necessary to render explanations that take these influences into account. Thus without in any sense avoiding the task of any scholar—to make the best sense possible of the subject involved—these essays attempt to address questions in a way that acknowledges some of the starting points from which the sympathetic Western reader may approach the variety of Muslim experience.

Where you stand affects many aspects of the way you interpret another culture, not least when it comes to issues of gender. For purposes of readability, no less than accuracy, I generally employ the male pronoun when referring to activities, such as the intense negotiation of political relationships, that are more commonly practiced by men than by women, and I refer to both men and women when I want to suggest that the activities involve both men and women. When words like “he” and “him” are employed, readers should not read too much into them unless specific issues of gender difference have been highlighted as crucial to the purpose of a given chapter.

It was, I believe, Octavio Paz who once said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide everything into two kinds of things—and those who do not. Without betraying my deep attachment to the latter approach, I would just add that there are indeed two kinds of people whose roles continue to be critical to the sociology of knowledge generally. These two groups (to borrow the language used to describe their history in biological studies) may be referred to as the lumpers and the splitters. The former see similarities and classify things as members of the same group that the latter, seeing differences as more self-evident, would use to separate items into discrete groupings. Indeed, the history of certain disciplines has been characterized, in no small part, by the struggle between these orientations, even to the point where the ascendancy of one over the other has come to define the entire discipline. In physical anthropology, for example, lumpers and splitters have lumped and split entire academic departments; in other fields—such as American, African American, or Women’s Studies—the splitters have used their arguments to consolidate the field against those who might deny them their identity by characterizing one area of study as solely a subset of some other. For students of Arab thought and culture—whether they come out of departments of Oriental Studies or particular social sciences—the tendency has also been toward splitting, and with it has come one of the more peculiar failings of scholarship on this critical region. This propulsion toward legitimization through differentiation manifests itself in numerous ways.

Every discipline or craft has its mysteries, indeed its mystifications.

Elongated training, rites of professional passage, obscure jargon, and in-group gossip may all serve to solidify identity. In the Western study of the Arab world this process takes several distinct forms. The first has to do with the Arabic language itself. Orientalists would often have one believe that Arabic is among the most difficult languages to command. An extensive vocabulary—ranging from the ninety-nine known names of God to the elaborate catalog of a camel's delights—combined with poetic virtuosity, intimate knowledge of how Arabic words often imply their opposite, and practice in the hierarchies of pronunciation that would make a French academician or British snob blush, all contribute to the Arabist's special claims. The mentality of the splitter supports this orientation, which not only claims a need for extensive preparation and pressures toward very limited interpretation but divides the pursuit of knowledge about the Arab world from the very comparisons that have vitalized so many other studies of area history and culture. The result, quite commonly, is to have it said of any part of the Arab world or any moment in its history that it is unlike any other part or time: "the Lebanese are nothing like the Saudis"; "the present is completely different from the medieval period"; "the guys on that side of the hill are not at all like the guys on this side." While such splitters highlight the range of differences, they fail to grasp that it is precisely a range of variation that is indeed being observed. Just as in biology, so too in social and cultural life it is variation that is key, and anyone who is set down in any part of the Arab world and thinks they are among the Eskimo or Hottentots has simply failed to get the point.

The relevance of this for the current study is quite simple: the issues explored here must be addressed in a theme and variation context. Of course, every element is not replicated in every part or moment of the Arab world, and of course the idea that things have remained unchanged for ages simply because they bear attachments across time would be a distortion of the argument. Variation, too, is not essentialization. There are no pure types or irreducible essences to Arab life or language, any more than of any other set of related cultures, and hence no indispensable feature without which the Arabs would cease to be Arabs. Terms such as "Arabs" and "Muslim" are, of course, not without their problematic aspects. If by the former one means not only those who speak a dialect of Arabic but partake of many of the cultural features pointed to in this book, then one may properly speak, as scholars often do, of Arab Jews and Christian Arabs. The characteristics of the latter groupings will, in quite variant ways, be modulated in turn by the orientations reinforced by beliefs and practices associated with

these religious affiliations. While both “Arab” and “Muslim” will be used in broad terms, by and large where there are concepts and resonances in sacred sources reference will be made to Islam as well as Arab cultures; where the ideas or institutions arise more from nonreligious bases the tendency will be to speak in terms of Arabs. In each instance, it is important to remember that throughout the Muslim world it is common for local practice to be regarded as Islamic rather than something set alongside Islam and that, to drive the point home, variation is not essentialization but its very opposite.

Similarly, to say that some of the features discussed are found in other cultures outside the Arab world is to carry particularism to an absurd conclusion. What is being asked of the reader, therefore, is a twofold task. One is to think of the ways in which the themes addressed vary across a shared cultural base. The other is to appreciate that whatever insights these essays provide stem partly from a fundamental anthropological assumption: what binds a culture together is the resonance across such diverse domains as the religious, political, spatial, familial, and legal of features that, for all their variety, partake of shared orientations toward the world of everyday experience.

It is in this respect, too, that I will frequently refer to Islam and Muslims rather than just Arabs. For even though the main examples are drawn almost entirely from that 25 percent of the Muslim world composed of Arabs, and even though Islam is by no means the be-all and end-all of these cultural variants, it is also true that the themes that pervade multiple domains of Arab life find deep and often propelling expression in the context of religious thought. Rather like genetics, one cannot understand Arab societies or polities without recourse to the religious involvement of any concept even though one cannot explain many aspects of Arab, any more than of human, action by means of religion or genetics alone. Because these essays are intended as a point of entry to many features of Arab cultural life as well as an invitation to those familiar with non-Arab Muslim societies to think about the ways they may apply in their realms as well, the title is meant to urge one to think in terms of variation and about the role of religion as a vital ingredient in any observable array.

That said, common themes pervade these essays in much more substantive terms, even when the propositions may appear to be rather generalized. Specifically, I argue throughout that Arabs place great emphasis on the relationships people forge with one another, a point that may hardly seem to distinguish them from many, if not most, other people in the world. But the differences make all the difference. For

there are distinct ways in which these relationships may be formed: some are as unusual as offering a sacrifice at another's door to conduce aid in some enterprise or as common as constructing a friendship that may be called upon later at a time of need. Some appear obvious to the Western eye—like focusing on the individual rather than solidary groups—only to have the Westerner's perceptions troubled by discovering that statements about relationship require some additional action before they can be appraised for their truth-bearing quality, or that causality may take a different course of implications than that found in Western cultures. To suggest that Arabs see bonds of obligation as interchangeable is no more to suggest that they are merely instrumental in their ties to others than it is to claim that underneath a world of differences all people are really much the same. To the contrary, it is by attending to the distinctive ways that ties are formed, the distinctive implications they possess within an overall orientation to the world, and the distinctive differences these orientations make to the way new experiences are created and categorized that my approach to Arab culture may help make sense of practices that elude easy characterization.

Each essay, then, shows another aspect of these common themes. Often, as in the first section of the book, a story helps to situate the problematic elements of Western encounters with Arab culture. Through the story of a dispute on my block between a Middle Easterner and the other neighbors one begins to see how different orientations to relationships may affect cross-cultural communication. Looking at the larger context of Arab culture, the question "what went wrong?" (popularized by the title of Bernard Lewis's book) can be transformed into a question of how the diverse aspects of Arab culture form a coherent vision of life that centers on the ties people negotiate with one another and the implications of a vision of the self as not readily segregated into potentially discordant roles. In this context one may even be able to understand why, when a terrorist kills himself, he may actually be trying to establish the network of relations that is crucial to defining a man and solidifying that web of indebtedness beyond risk of revision. Property, too, can be seen as less a question of one's relationship to things than to others, and with it some suggestions present themselves as to why attachment to particular territories may vary in intensity across the Arab world. Similarly, the emphasis Arabs place on ideas of "justice"—rather than, say, "rights" or "liberty"—also becomes more comprehensible as we grasp that for them justice actually implies equivalence rather than equality.

The second section of the book addresses several matters of literary,

visual, and historical representation that Western readers often find curious. What is it that makes reading the Quran such a difficult and even boring prospect for most Westerners, and how should Westerners understand some of the themes that appear to leap out from this seminal text? Portraiture is often thought to be forbidden by Islam, but that is not strictly true. Why then might Arabs find little or no meaning in such images when Westerners commonly imagine them as revealing important insights into a person's character? When we look at conflicts between Western styles of critical speech and the sensibilities of affected Muslims, as in the Danish cartoon controversy, we see that it is necessary to understand the meaning of prophets—and particularly Muhammad—if we are to fully understand why believers feel so great a need to protect the Prophet from insult. And if a scholar like Ibn Khaldun is held up by Western historians as an example of either the first true sociologist or the first to grasp key universals of human history, how does reading him as a distinctly *Arab* scholar alter our view of his contributions?

The last section of the book raises several aspects of political culture. Why some Arabs with training in science would be attracted to fundamentalism is, of necessity, a speculative issue. But we can hypothesize several reasons, missed by commentators, that are based on the implications of an intensely relational view of the world. Indeed, through such a relational focus we can even speculate as to how a particular social focus may have contributed to the decline of Arab science in the medieval period. Likewise, if one thinks about the relation, say, of Islam to democracy, one must consider what assumptions may underpin Arabs' ideas of society and hence what freedoms might have to be addressed by any reconstituted governmental form. And finally, if one is to think about human rights in universal terms yet respond to local conceptualizations, one should ask how history suggests that the movement from the local to the universal takes place, and why any such development might raise particular issues that affect the prospects, or indeed the desirability, of applying such universalizing norms in the Arab world.

At times these essays may suggest that it is easy to think of the range of Arab cultures as diverging from those of the West by only a few degrees. Similarities can be mistaken for the intimately familiar, yet as Western and Arab cultures continue to follow their own paths, differences may appear more pronounced. "A difference is not a distinction," say the Arabs, and certainly to underscore divergence is not to imply any judgment of superior and inferior. Indeed, as Westerners try

to understand what is different about Arab cultures from their own, they—we—may perhaps appreciate all the more that statement by God transmitted in the Quran, that “had it been Our intention We could have made you all the same.” Mutual comprehension does not require that we all be the same, any more than mutual misunderstanding must necessarily result from differences. To the contrary, it is our difference, both in what we are and in how we come to view one another, that opens the possibility—the far more realistic possibility—for creating mutually enduring ties as well as the local emphases that give meaning to our separate ways.



Junk Democracy: Middle East Meets Middle America

The noise was driving everyone crazy. At odd hours of the day and night, as well as on weekends and holidays, sounds of machinery and crashing metal emanated from the junkyard with mind-jarring irregularity. The problem was not the junkyard itself; we had all bought our homes knowing of its presence. But for the quarter-century I had lived on the street the man who owned and ran the junkyard was an excellent neighbor—thoughtful, quiet, clean, and helpful. Indeed, Tony had described his place, when I was first contemplating buying there, as a “Hollywood junkyard,” and seeing Tony in the summer in his porkpie hat and tank-top undershirt, or having him use his plow to dig us out of the snow when the city had not yet gotten around to us, just added to the slightly eccentric nature of the place.

The street and the people living on it had long been a mix of categories and ambiguities, best symbolized, perhaps, by the fact that the post office calls the little dead-end street by one name and the town calls it by another. Located at the edge of a well-to-do commuter community, surrounded by institutional land and composed of six houses and the junkyard, it is also a designated historic district and close to a scenic towpath and bird sanctuary. Several of the houses were projects of the local historic preservation society: my own house, built in the 1830s, had been moved twice, once in the 1870s and again a century later. My neighbor’s house had, over the years,

been a warehouse and a glass factory, a hippie ashram and the home of a famous jazz critic and radio host. In my own years on the block the neighbors had included a cop, a janitor, an economist at the Federal Reserve, several university faculty and staff, and residents of the one rental house on the block. And, of course, Omar.

Omar appeared rather suddenly. He came from the Middle East and had been living in the area for some years when Tony decided to rent the junkyard to him. The property included a house, but when the wife of the cop who had lived next to the junkyard for forty years died and her husband moved out, Omar bought that house and moved into it. At first we just assumed that, as Tony was getting on in years, the junkyard was becoming too much for him and that he had found someone who would continue to operate it in the same manner he had. That was our first mistake. Our second may have been in the way we spoke with Omar when he began to make a nuisance of his operation.

Conversations with Omar seemed to most of my neighbors to follow a rather peculiar form. All smiles and warm gestures, Omar would tell us how he was going to make the junkyard a state-of-the-art operation, how he was not really engaged in a business but a service to the entire community, how he wanted us to be “his very good neighbors.” “But Omar,” people would say, “the noise is outrageous. We can’t work, we can’t sleep, we can’t have friends over.” “Oh,” he would say, “I will stop that, don’t be worried, don’t be concerned”—and the next day, if not the next moment, the noise would resume. In the past all the junk metal was kept in the back of the property well out of sight, but now piles of scrap and rusting appliances overflowed to the street and onto the property in which Omar was living. He even put out a flyer—on recycled paper, of course, and with a lovely photo of the planet earth, all green and blue and pristine, as seen, rather significantly, from outer space—that urged potential customers to “save all the scrap papers, metals—save the earth,” but concluded with the bone-chilling words, “open 7 days and nights.” “Nothing to worry about,” said Omar, when told that by remaining open all hours of the day and night he was violating zoning laws, noise laws, God’s laws; “I’m going to make it all beautiful. A real service to everybody.” It was here we may have encountered our third difficulty: we tried explaining to Omar our understanding of the meaning of law.

I like to think that the folks who were living on the block were not at all unusual in their understanding and attachment to the rule of law. And, like people generally, the more distressed we became, the more we cleaved to idealized forms and standard phraseology. “The

law exists for everyone alike," we would tell Omar. "If we don't have law we can't have any order." At the same time, we were not unmindful that, in our own area, to say nothing of the world at large, those with greater influence not infrequently got treated a little more equally than others. When, for example, I would say, "Omar, it's against the law," he would respond with an indulgent smile, "I'm just trying to make a living, and all those laws make it hard for a little guy like me to succeed. The law," he would conclude with a rather obsequious shrug, "exists to be broken." "No, no," I would insist, "you can't choose which laws to obey. What if some people stopped for the sign at the end of the street and others chose not to?" "Oh, doctor," he would continue, as if to a child, "the law is just what the rich people get passed for themselves." "No, no," I would again insist, "the law applies to everyone alike." And as I would carry on with my high-minded principles, my irrefutable arguments, my ever more patriotic and law-abiding arguments, Omar would look at me as though I was really quite simple.

At one level, of course, we understood each other perfectly. No one on the block would have been surprised by the idea that those with access to power were listened to more readily than those who had no such entree. Indeed, at the very time the junkyard dispute was raging we were also attending meetings of the local city council, which was considering a new construction project near our properties. Since access to the facility could be routed in one of two ways—through the street adjacent to our own, past some high-density residences and a low income housing project, or around the other side, through one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in town—the dispute seemed to pit the haves against the have-nots. When we learned that the main opponent to the road traversing the richer area was a major contributor to an important local politician and that he also had enough political influence to block a back road that traversed both areas, people on our street were eager to confront the matter head-on. At a city council meeting, our opponent and one of his neighbors claimed that there were children in their neighborhood who might be endangered if access to the new project came through their area. When several speakers pointed out that the children of the poor were at least as important, the elected officials present appeared sufficiently embarrassed to gracefully distance themselves from their more affluent backers. Our faith in the system confirmed, I cited the outcome to Omar.

But Omar was not impressed. He knew that the fight over the project was far from over and that use of the back road we all used to avoid heavy traffic was still blocked as a result of one influential man's ef-

forts. He saw the various meetings and phone calls as our attempt to get into the game: whether we succeeded or failed would be a function of our ability to play it well, and that in turn would depend on who we knew and probably how deep our pockets were. For all my assertions that the law was the vehicle for settling such matters, Omar was unconvinced. Thus when I said that if he wanted the applicable zoning rules changed he should do so through the established legal process, he shrugged, smiled, and said that that was just the way the rich got what they wanted. Like a psychoanalyst who tells you that every argument you make is simply a displacement of deeper anxiety, or a true believer who always finds a way to confirm scripture in the face of scientific evidence, Omar could divert every argument by playing on our own sense that indeed it was not always the case that the rule of law was the deciding factor.

Indeed, to many people it seemed as though Omar was simply unwilling to distinguish truth from lies. After all, he kept telling us he would do things that he did not, or would seem to accept our statements of certainty for their face value and then not abide by the terms. But if, for Omar, truth is not a point but a process, if a statement of certainty is more like a price suggested in the marketplace than a sum that is fixed, if indeed he envisions a statement of absolutes as a structure within which one searches for what part of that statement really matters to the person you are forming ties with, then truncating the process by not having any ongoing ties that turn on its implications could lead only to misunderstanding. There is a saying in the Middle East: You tend to ignore many truths from a liar. Perhaps there was a question, then, that we needed to ask. Had we been ignoring Omar's idea of truth as something that needs to be validated by the actions taken on its basis, and thus thrown out elements of that truth just because some of his utterances seemed to us to be self-evident lies?

Omar was clever enough to call a local newspaper about what was happening. The reporter portrayed Omar, as our neighbor portrayed himself, as a hard-pressed little businessman up against the powerful, who, Omar insisted, were really trying to take over the junkyard and force him out. This cabal of the rich and well connected had even led Omar to present himself at several offices in a manner that was regarded as so offensive that a restraining order was issued barring him from those premises. The other residents, perhaps fearful for their property values, were less than eager to go public with the dispute. So the reporter never learned of the restraining order or that the whole

matter had been set in motion by Omar's repeated violations of the nuisance law.

For those living on the block, of course, the explanation for Omar's behavior tended to be quite simple: Omar is cunning, Omar is crazy, Omar is evil. And, as events began to unfold, there was reason to think that none of these theories was entirely without merit. After numerous contacts with public health and zoning officials Omar was cited and fined for violating various statutes. When he persisted he was hauled into municipal court. Confronted with his pattern of violating court orders he was even put in jail for several days and threatened with further fines. In addition, Omar was far in arrears in paying rent to Tony and, following still further court proceedings, he was formally evicted from the property. In turn, Omar filed suit claiming that Tony had polluted the junkyard, thus endangering Omar's health when he was still renting the junkyard, as well as polluting the adjacent house in which he was now living. This claim engendered a whole new set of delays and legal complications. Omar told people that he thought Tony would settle with him and that he would get to buy the junkyard outright. So little regard did he have for the process he had himself initiated, however, that when Omar refused to allow soil tests on his property to evaluate his pollution claim the judge once again had to intervene and order him to allow the sampling to go forward. The tests eventually proved there was no significant pollution on either property. In the meantime, Omar was also found to have defaulted on a major bank loan.

That winter Omar lived without any electricity, heat, or water; Tony even caught him trying to take service from the junkyard's lines. The neighbors wondered how Omar could use his toilet without any water. When the local officials were apprised of the situation they moved to check the property for violations, but, except for requiring him to remove all the junk from his yard, they were powerless to make Omar reinstate his utilities. Throughout that winter we would see Omar, now rather glum and disheveled, chopping wood, and propping open his front door on the occasional warm winter day. For many months, too, we saw an electrical line snaking from his house to his car. We assumed he was charging the car battery until we realized it was the other way around—he was actually running his lights and TV, as I had so often seen people in the rural areas of the Middle East do, from his car. Any sympathy these circumstances may have engendered was, however, quickly dissipated when Omar was observed stopping prospective buy-

ers of another house on the block and telling them—as he had others before—that all the properties on the block had been polluted by Tony. Threats of a suit for slander of title had little effect. Omar’s own attorney even grew exasperated by attempts to control her client’s behavior, and when he failed to pay his legal bills Omar continued the pollution suit as his own lawyer.

To almost everyone involved, then, the dispute was explainable in terms of Omar’s personality or financial circumstances. “Liberals” all, no one wanted to suggest that Omar’s cultural background was responsible for his behavior, much less stereotype or denigrate Omar in terms of his origins. Indeed, one of the other homeowners on the block was himself from the Arab east while a second house had previously been rented by two different Muslim couples, and none of them had ever had any difficulty in coping with American life. As a result, it was, perhaps, relatively easy for various people, including the local newspaper, to miss the real story—that at least in this particular instance Omar and the rest of the participants were operating with somewhat incompatible views of the order of things. For even if Omar, unlike the other highly educated Middle Easterners who had lived on the street, was unusually obtuse or difficult the question nevertheless arose whether his behavior derived at least in part from cultural experiences that affected the meaning of his acts. If, given his background, he imagined the world quite differently from his neighbors, then the failure of those now living on the block to attend to his concepts and concerns could not be ignored. The possibility certainly existed, then, that this really was as much a clash of orientations as of interests, one in which, personality quirks aside, Omar’s cultural image of power and society came up against the very different images of relationship, law, and politics that informed the views of others on the block, in city hall, and at the local court. To me, after forty years of study of the Middle East, there were familiar reverberations that fit with my own understanding of Omar’s origins—reverberations that have a great deal to do with culture and history and that, in the context of systems that sustain these orientations, I have always regarded as enormously sensible and realistic.

To people from Omar’s homeland interpersonal relations are at the center of human life, and the ways in which those ties have been arranged by those with the resources—financial, familial, political, oratorical—to make their view hold sway are simply performing in the world as it really is. Law, in this schema, is never simply impersonal: the idea of a rule of law and not of men would no doubt seem to Omar internally contradictory. For while regularities may indeed develop and

broad willingness to abide by the same precepts apply, it is only through constantly testing the limits that one establishes the contexts that give principles their meaning. The image of the stop sign—particularly since everyone tends at times to slide through one—was, therefore, a poor choice of analogies with which to persuade Omar of the merits of institutions that, by definition, do not depend on those who inhabit them. Once, standing beside a road in North Africa with a young lawyer, I asked about his view of law in general. He pointed to the heterogeneous array of cars and buses, donkeys and horse carts, wandering pedestrians and ambling hawkers. Law, he said, never works to get people to do the same thing in the same way; it can only delineate some rough boundaries, like the edge of the road or the line down the middle. People always press to advantage, and if they can make their way stick, they are “right.” The pressure to adhere to the limits of the acceptable, he seemed to be saying, is more a function of process than of prescribed result. Law, for this attorney, as for Omar himself, is therefore not an end in itself but part of the process of negotiation. Within the broad rules of alliance formation and divine implication, whatever the traffic will bear is, particularly if enforced by a big man at the center, the reality of law for that particular moment.

Similarly, Omar’s ideas of public goods and of justice itself may well have informed his actions. For many Arabs, as we shall see in chapter 4, the concept of property is defined primarily in terms of the relations formed in connection with it: one’s identity is borne along not by the things one possesses but by the populated world those relations represent. “Public” property is without identity—it is something unpeopled, something over which no one has responsibility since no one’s social identity is conceived through it. For Omar to spread junk out to the street was not to invade a territory over which everyone has obligations but, perhaps, to test whether he could form ties based on that use—and if he could not, then by definition it was, as yet, not identified with anyone. Justice is not, as some Western commentators on the Middle East would have it, a matter of blaming others for one’s own failings. Quite the contrary, it is a matter of others having such interpersonal and reciprocal ties of dependence that no individuals, in the process of gaining advantage, will fail to share their largesse with those in their network of obligations. Omar may have been quite sincere, therefore, in his assertion that he was doing a public service with his junkyard and that he did indeed want us all to be “his very good neighbors.” But neither he nor we were playing the same game. We could not look to one another for interchangeable obligations—of political support or

marital alliance or financial partnership—and hence the bonds of reciprocity necessary to such a relationship could not come into effect. For Omar justice might lie in our negotiated interdependence; for us it lay in our mutual separateness.

Because we had none of the interdependent ties that neighbors might possess in Omar's homeland, none of us could draw on those go-betweens who would likely have been brought into the matter long before our dispute became public, much less a formal lawsuit. When I suggested to my neighbors that we might see if the imam of the local mosque might bring some pressure to bear on Omar, I got no support. When I thought how often I had heard people in the Middle East say that "your neighbor who is close is more important than your kinsman who is far away," I almost rued the fact that being neighbors for us simply meant living adjacent to one another, without any involvement in one another's lives—yet reveled in the fact that I had no other obligations to Omar even as I realized the price to be paid when problems arose. To some Middle Easterners—particularly from older families or higher economic strata—there is some shame in going to court about a dispute, but for many others the legal process is just another aspect of the total engagement in one another's affairs and carries no stigma. In our case, however, the absence of society left only the presence of law.

Omar's view of the way politics works was, of course, not entirely foreign to the Americans on the block, political skeptics all. For we were not unaware of the power of the purse or persuasion in the law, however much we may also have believed in the impersonality of the legal system at large. Oddly enough, we were in exactly the same position as Omar: we lacked the interpersonal connections or financial entanglements to have access to those with discretionary power, just as Omar could not turn to family connections or political patrons who might need his dependence to build their own power base. If his support system was not there, his resort to seemingly outrageous behavior may have been his reaction to a situation of relative anomie and disorder; if our political wisdom could find no traction in the interstices of local politics, we could only assert our idealization of the law. It was not that people like Omar, who have emigrated from the Middle East, adapt poorly to life in the West; the very opposite is much closer to the truth. The Arabs who had lived on the block were extremely cosmopolitan, and (the difficulties of many Near Eastern migrants living in Europe notwithstanding) others with far less education commonly accommodate themselves to the host culture. But however well people adapt to a new culture, they usually tend to do so in ways that resonate with the

assumptions and orientations they have come to accept in their lives. Omar may have failed to grasp the way things work in America—or he may have grasped them all too well. But whether his was an act of personal malevolence or an oddly misplaced attempt to be “our very good neighbor,” his possible expectation that matters should be conceived in terms of interlocking obligations may have deeply informed his approach to our mutual situation. Neither Omar nor we his neighbors were entirely at home in the world we articulated; neither of us was able to move to effect in the world as we would have liked it to be. The fact that our views of law and order simultaneously intersected and diverged may only have heightened our respective lines of argument. But the result, like paths that gradually diverge by even a few degrees, is that eventually the two groups may wind up very far apart indeed.

To a certain extent we may also have approached law with quite different social expectations. People in the Middle East are frequently involved in lawsuits that go on for years, whereas the image of people in this country as highly litigious is actually quite misleading. For most of the Arabs whose legal relationships I have studied, lawsuits do not simply represent a breach of relationships. Rather, they are often part of the pattern of creating and servicing such connections. As a vehicle for marshaling allies and fabricating new forms of mutual indebtedness, as a way of demonstrating one’s position or influence, as a way of testing whatever the traffic will bear and creating new spaces for interpersonal maneuvering, such cases keep open the boundaries of both persons and institutions. Perhaps Omar thought that he really would be “our very good neighbor” if even a lawsuit demonstrated his contribution, his connectedness, his place as a man, if his actions would forge ties, rather than ruin them, or simply shake them up, or cultivate new ground for a new place in a new social order. Perhaps for him, law, like so many other domains of the cultural life to which he was accustomed, could not be rendered separate from the world; perhaps he was unprepared to grasp a world ordered by principles that can appear so impersonal.

“The law exists to be broken,” Omar had said. But of course for most Muslims the idea of law as a thing to be broken is contrary to their deepest beliefs. Islamic law, both as a set of legal postulates, however locally variable, and as an embodiment of common sense, however connected to divine ordinance, is central to their conception of an orderly world. And local custom, which may even take precedence over the sacred law itself, is a vital part of the relations that structure society. But perhaps, as Jessie Allen suggests, the idea of law as something to

be broken implies a larger truth in any culture.¹ For if law and its ritual enactments have the capacity to stand outside the normal flow of time, to create a sense of the orderly out of the disordered events of everyday life, and to displace the uncertainties of the quotidian with metaphoric extensions that link the known with the uncertain—if, in short, the breach of law is both expectable and ironically valuable for the creation of orderly relationships, then Omar's attitude to the law may not be so far from its common function. That merger of chaos and order, or the very rage for order and its ever-present twin, the rage for chaos (as a challenge to existing categories), may, for all its distinctive qualities in any cultural system, be closer to the core of any society's fears and ambitions than many of us are willing to acknowledge. Even if Omar relies on such notions to exaggerated personal effect, it may well be that the approach of many Middle Easterners to law, as to other aspects of social relations, is more direct and consistent given the ways in which interpersonal relations order the world as they see it. Whether he needs a partner in this process or one over whom he can, for the moment, seek an advantage is an open question. But that a distinctive style of reciprocity may underlie his vision of law as an aspect of social life may be one of the crucial differences that separates Omar's worldview from that of his neighbors.

Another winter came, and the electrical cord snaked through the snow to Omar's car, a faint light shining in the house in the evening, the back end of the structure relentlessly falling apart, the uncut wood and chopping block on the front step a parodic doorknocker. The court had dismissed Omar's pollution suit against Tony, and Tony was about to win a suit of his own against Omar for back rent and expenses. Was each entrenched in a situation from which neither could comfortably retreat? Had both reverted to a pattern of endless litigation because they simply had no other alternative, no respected intermediary, who could bring the world back together again? If so, theirs is not alone a story of those caught in the middle, trying to make their way when there are few if any social constraints on behavior, when the price one may have to pay in reputation is low, or when there is little need for mutual reliance in other circumstances. Perhaps, too, theirs is a story of the frustrated exploration of possible relationships, an example of an emotionally provocative encounter between the felt sense of injury and the felt sense of injustice.

The junkyard is gone now, its outbuildings leveled, its long history in the town a thing of the past. For a while Omar was using his place as an auto repair shop, further violating local business and zoning laws. But that winter a chimney fire damaged the house, and local officials refused to allow him back into the building. Soon afterward the bank foreclosed on his loan, and the court formally evicted him from the property. Omar was seen trying to sneak into the house after it was posted as uninhabitable. The police mounted a watch to keep him out and even towed away his backhoe after he left it parked on the street. Barred from the property, Omar was observed sitting in his car through the cold winter night outside his former house. A few neighbors felt a twinge of sympathy for him, a homeless man sleeping in his car—but when they recalled how badly he had conducted himself their sympathy soon dissipated. Omar told some people that he was heading off to New Orleans, where, in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, he would perhaps find his ultimate junkyard. But through the spring he was seen, from time to time, just sitting in his car in front of his former home, barred by a court order from trespassing on the property and by whatever private demons touched us all from talking to others on the block.

The story of Omar and we his neighbors may underscore a broader theme in Western encounters with the Middle East—that so much of each other's behavior may seem no different from that of family and friends who also think that those who can manipulate the system usually get their way despite the formal law. Tony certainly sees the world that way, and so do most of us at various times. To exoticize Omar, to say that he has a totally different vision of the world, would be to distort him into a far more unfamiliar figure than he is. Perhaps if Omar had come from New Guinea or Mars we would have regarded him as so obviously different that we would have been less exasperated simply because we would have had to find a completely different way of relating to him. Indeed, the fact that Omar's cultural approach was really quite close to that of his neighbors may have been a source of the shared frustration: being just different enough, as time and distance pass, all that appears shared becomes increasingly divergent, until one winds up—as in the dispute, say, over the publication of the Danish cartoons satirizing Muhammad, or when one simply does not believe that institutions can have an independent existence—at a point where one is confronted with the difference between a looming rock and a safe way around. If Omar is the stranger he is that most subtle of strangers, the one we recognize so easily in ourselves in certain contexts but

who, when we suddenly encounter him in numerous and unfamiliar domains—like seeing the waitress as the lay pastor or the strong parent as the meek employee—we may be surprised to find we have not credited with his own distinction. Finding similarities is not enough: as one follows the traces of Arab culture through a number of different contexts in this book it may be precisely the tiny differences we discover that make all the difference to our mutual comprehension.

Omar's place on the block has come to an end. One day he was simply gone. I never did succeed in convincing him of my idea of a thoroughly impersonal rule of law, nor did most of the people on the block relinquish their view that Omar was not embroiled in a conflict of cultures but was simply crafty or mean or nuts. Once matters got involved in legal proceedings we all stopped speaking to Omar. We no longer even waved at him as we went past his house. For each there may have been a sense that, having reduced matters to one aspect of the interpersonal, we had in fact made things all too personal. Perhaps, as so many people in the Middle East have confided in me over the years, if we were more entangled we might, in truth, have felt that our individual freedom might be hampered by our mutual indebtedness. Whether it is our differences or our similarities that bear emphasis, though, it is difficult not to feel that our engagement across interests, across cultures, across truths will continue to elude our comprehension just so long as our respective need for certainty raises far fewer questions than our common encounter demands. Nowadays, in the post-9/11 world, there is the possibility, I suppose, of a virtual Omar on every street in America. But if Omar and we his neighbors really do have somewhat different orientations to the world—different views of human nature, society, and the forces that keep it working—then the legal victory of one and the isolation of both may have poignancy that extends far beyond our little dead-end street.