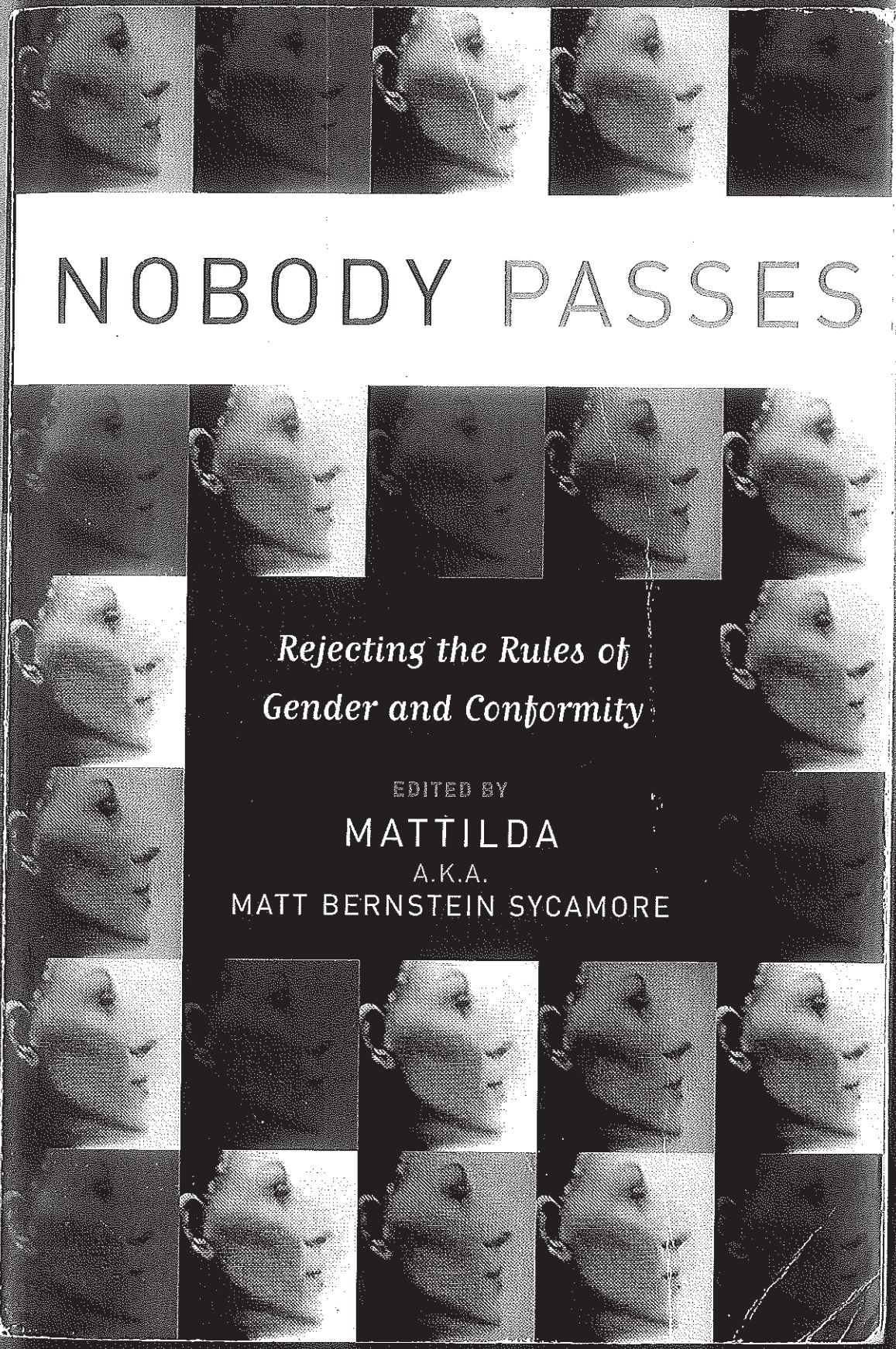

NOBODY PASSES

Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity

EDITED BY

MATTILDA

A.K.A.

MATT BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE

NOBODY PASSES

Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity

Published by
Seal Press
An Imprint of Avalon Publishing Group, Incorporated
1400 65th Street, Suite 250
Emeryville, CA 94608

ISBN-13: 978-1-58005-184-2
ISBN-10: 1-58005-184-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nobody passes : rejecting the rules of gender and conformity / [edited by] Mattilda, a.k.a. Matt Bernstein Sycamore.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-13: 978-1-58005-184-2
ISBN-10: 1-58005-184-7
1. Transsexualism. 2. Sexual minorities. 3. Gender identity. 4. Passing (Identity) 5. Social norms. I. Sycamore, Matt Bernstein.

HQ77.9.N64 2006
306.76—dc22
2006030694

Cover design by Kimberly Glyder
Interior design by Domini Dragoone
Printed in the United States of America by Malloy
Distributed by Publishers Group West

make revo-
seemed to
ed and why.
ve been ex-
nsaction of
something
us at times

NO LONGER JUST AMERICAN

STEPHANIE ABRAHAM

When I was growing up, my Syrian and Lebanese great-grandmothers and I were inseparable. I spent hours by their sides, mostly in their kitchens, inhaling the scents of garlic and thyme; I knew how to make hummus and stuffed grape leaves before I learned to read and write. As Arabic rolled off my great-grandmothers' tongues, they filled my belly with kibbeh naye and tabouleh, and my imagination with tales about what life was like in our homeland. I can recount their stories word for word—how they left the Middle East as young women, what immigration at Ellis Island was like, how no one should ever have to raise their kin so far from home. Of course, the first word I spoke as a babe was *habibti*, Arabic for "beloved." My great-grandmothers instilled

in me the importance of carrying on our culture and taught me to be a proud Arab American woman.

I must confess (being the "good Catholic" my family raised me to be) that this autobiographical snippet is make-believe. Certainly, some Arab Americans have experienced childhood in this way. However, this is one fourth-generation, mixed-heritage Arab American who did not. Don't get me wrong, I didn't make it all up—the basics are true: My people did come from Lebanon and Syria, but by the time I was born my great-grandparents had passed away. My father's decision to leave Detroit, which I call "the Arab American homeland," to settle in sunny Southern California (the quickly growing Arab American homeland), meant that I only met his family once or twice as a child and, unfortunately, I have no memories of meeting his parents. I spent years wishing the imagined details in this introduction were true because I thought it would make me more "authentic." In the past few years I have met many other Arab Americans who, like me, grew up with an authentic experience of assimilation, and through hearing their stories I have come closer to accepting my own.

I grew up in the suburbs speaking English Only and eating Kraft macaroni and cheese. I didn't "look" Arab, and most people read me as white. The only Arabic food we ever ate was pita bread. The only Arabic I heard was when my dad was on the phone with his siblings at Christmas. He would hang up after saying, "Take it easy!" emphasizing the "t" and *easy,* in order to say *tizzi*—which sounds like *tizzo,* a not-so-proper word for a person's behind.

Although I find it hard to believe, I don't think anyone ever said the word *Arab* in my house when I was young. To be sure, it was never

used to refer to my brother or me. It wasn't until my early twenties that I found out that *Ay-rab* and *camel jockey* were racial slurs. I had heard them occasionally thrown around amongst grownups, directed toward my father, always in front of him and always with a chuckle. So I understood them as fun descriptions of what seemed to me to be our mythical past. One day in particular, I remember standing in the kitchen and hearing someone poking at my dad about riding around the desert on camels. I remember he laughed with them. Then he explained to me what he had been told by his elders: "Our Syrian family was from the Humpsey tribe." As a seven-year-old, I was intrigued by the prospects of cruising on camels through the desert, but I never thought about my "Arabness" apart from these occasional conversations.

In 2002, I went back to Detroit with my dad to visit relatives. We went to a family restaurant called Ike's, and indulged in a spread of Arabic dishes. As I dipped my pita bread into a bowl of kibbeh naye (raw meat ground as fine as smooth peanut butter), I realized that I had been eating kibbeh naye my whole life without realizing it, but in an assimilated, passing kind of way. When I was a little girl, if my dad was hungry and wanted a quick snack he would go to the fridge, grab a hot dog, put it in pita bread, and dig in. I didn't know anyone else who ate raw all-beef hot dogs. When my mother fixed hot dogs, she cooked them in boiling water and served them in a bun with ketchup, which I loved. My mom thought my dad's concoction was gross; I thought it was kind of weird, but once I tried it I was hooked. He was happy to share his indulgence with another person in the house; it was our special treat.

That night at my auntie's house in Detroit, the more I thought about my relatives, the more conscious I became of how hard they must have

worked to fit in and how much they had to let go of. Assimilation does not just happen overnight. It seemed as though my dad had assimilated to the point that his children passed without even realizing we were passing, yet the traditions of his foremothers and forefathers were obfuscated, not erased. They certainly morphed as my pops made do with what he had. However, they continued to the extent that when he and I ate hot dogs—possibly *the* national food of the United States—we were reenacting the Middle Eastern feasts of his childhood. Cultures are not static. They adapt and shift in order to survive. People do, too.

: *Not Quite White* :

Orientalism is a specific kind of racism that targets the Middle East and Asia—the geographic region known as "the Orient." Edward Said's influential work on Orientalism pointed out that "European imaginative geography" drew a line between two continents so that the West was powerful, articulate, and masculine while the East was defeated, distant, and feminized. Through this lens, the geographic boundary of the region within Asia called "the Orient" is open to the interpretation of the Western imagination.[1] It is easy to see this dynamic at work today, especially with U.S. foreign policy, wherein Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran are represented as enemy nations that are conflated into one, despite the fact that all three regions have distinct cultures, languages, and histories.

Since September 11, 2001, the paradoxes of Arab American identity have only become more defined. Describing the perception of Arab Americans in a post-9/11 world, Evelyn Alsultany asserts, "Arab bodies are marked with pre-assigned meanings in the United States: suspected

terrorist, presumed religious fanatic, backwards; Arabs are 'other,' existing outside of the ideological scope of 'belonging' within the United States. Located within a racial paradox, Arab-Americans are simultaneously racialized as white and non-white."[2]

Which identity to take, however, remains heavily debated. Some Arab Americans are comfortable with an identity invested in whiteness. Others, in particular many Arab American feminists, identify as women of color even though the census does not allow for this, and even when other women of color do not always acknowledge them. Of course, what determines if a person is "of color" is open to debate. Other mixed-heritage Arab American women I have met who look white acknowledge their privilege while at the same time asserting their ethnicity; if forced to choose, they identify as women of color. Some days I am one of them. Other days, I look in the mirror and cannot deny how I look. How can I choose an identity that has substantive meaning in the world, that acknowledges my privileges and losses, and honors the internal and external complexities of who I am? This question brings home Michael Omi and Howard Winant's point that racial projects are subject to the cultural and political landscapes of a nation and are constantly being recycled and redefined.[3]

In my household there was never really any discussion of our race; it was just assumed we were white. My experience of "othering" came in my early twenties, when I started being confronted with the questions that mixed-heritage people and people of color often get asked: "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" These really mean "What is your national, ethnic, and/or racial background?" Oftentimes these questions are well-intentioned; folks are simply "curious" or are trying

to make conversation. I think I get these questions because I am fluent in Spanish and because I often wear bright-colored shawls, not necessarily because of how I look, although some of my friends would suggest that my curly hair and curvy *tizzo* locate me within the Middle East.

Like most people who get asked these types of questions, I have a plethora of answers depending on my mood: *Arab American* (most direct); *Lebanese/Syrian/Scotch/Irish/English* (way too long); *from L.A.* (so vague they fluster to find a follow-up question); and *fully human* (take that, categorizer!). In these five-second interactions, if I do reveal my Arab background, I usually do not mention that I am of mixed heritage, because when I do I inevitably hear, "Oh, that explains it," as if my features can only be explained by my northern European roots, because I don't "look Arab." Most people don't realize how problematic the concept of "looking Arab" is, or that it is rooted in preconceived notions of race and authenticity. "Those who 'look' Arab or Muslim" has become an even more highly controversial and dangerous political concept since September 11, 2001, as communities and individuals have been targeted based on an Orientalist "lookism."[4] Given the history of colonialism in the Middle East, it is inevitable that there will be Arabs who are light-skinned and blue-eyed, like my Lebanese *sittos* and myself, for example. Figuring out "who I am" is an ongoing process that is constantly shifting.

: *9/11* :

The yoga routine I did in my living room before work was interrupted on the morning of September 11, 2001. I looked at the TV screen and watched the second plane crash into the New York skyscraper. Immedi-

ately afterward, a female newscaster reported, "Yes, it seems that Yasser Arafat has taken responsibility for these attacks." About ten minutes later, she retracted the comment. I knew that it was going to be an especially tough day for Arabs. I wanted to make it known that I would not tolerate any anti-Arab racism whispered in my ear, so I wore a kaffiyeh, the black-and-white Palestinian head scarf, around my shoulders to work.

A few days later an Egyptian man was shot and killed in his store, the "International Market," less than a half mile away from the house I grew up in. I didn't even know there were Arabs in my neighborhood. I heard that he walked toward the door, calling for help, but fell on the sidewalk and died in a pool of his own blood. Although no merchandise or money was taken, the police did not record it as a hate crime. When I went to the store two days later, flowers and candles filled the sidewalk from hundreds of community members. Now, his sister runs the store. Sometimes I buy baklava from her, greeting her with my rudimentary Arabic. She calls me a "good girl" for wanting to learn her language. Once she told me, "He was my brother, you know." I didn't. I have been wanting to ask her about him for years now, but who am I to inquire?

Even if I never ask, I would like to figure out how to tell her how much her brother's death affected my life. Within a week of the attacks I increased my involvement with the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, serving as the Spanish-speaking spokesperson for the West Coast regional office. Most of the work involved combating clichéd portrayals of Middle Easterners in the media. As I became more politically active at that time, people wanted to know why I was there. "Are you Arab?" they asked. Flooded by the feelings of not

being authentic enough, being mixed, being Americanized—being able to say no—I felt like I did not have the right to say yes. However, I could not negate my family's Arab heritage. In many ways, that identity had been negated my whole life, yet I had never been taught to lie about it. So I fumbled to find the words to name it: "Um, yeah, well, I'm mixed heritage, but yeah, I'm Lebanese and Syrian, which technically makes me Arab, so yeah. I mean, yes. Yes, I'm an Arab American." For years, I had longed to resolve what that meant; world events made it so that I could no longer afford not to.

: *Sitto Centennial* :

As I'm writing this essay, I'm making plans to visit Lebanon and Syria. It's been almost one hundred years since my grandmothers arrived in the United States, and no one from my family has ever been back. I've decided that it's time for me to be the first. Erika, one of my best friends, is going with me, excited to go back to what she calls her "sister's homeland." I feel awed by her determination to be my ally, her desire to be by my side. Erika listens to me on the phone as I explain to her our possible itineraries. When I take a breath she uses the opportunity to state plainly, "You seem worried."

I purse my lips, although I want to scream at her, "*Worried!? Of course I'm worried! You would be too if your people had come here and taught you never to look back!*" I am determined not to make my loss her fault, so I sigh loudly, letting her know I'm still on the line. Erika is an immigrant; she remembers what it was like to cross the border from Mexico to the U.S. at age six, running as fast as she could to keep up with her mother and two older siblings. She grew up with Spanish in

the household, hearing the stories of her homeland being told, watching it being remembered. Now, when she travels back she sees family, her mom's *comadres;* she still has connections to the people there—something I've spent so long wishing I had. Still, I know that as a Chicana she has had her own struggle with figuring out her "home." Lately she's taken to calling herself a "citizen of the world."

I feel pressure building behind my eyes as tears try to break free. I decide not to dramatize, but am not ready to have the conversation I truly need. We agree to talk later. What I really want to ask is, *Who am I to go back? Who I am to bridge this chasm between their past and my present?*

I spent years feeling ashamed that I did not look Arab enough, could not speak Arabic, and did not grow up immersed in "culture." I felt like my life did not resemble a real Arab's life, yet I keep reminding myself that I won't be more "authentic" after visiting our village because I already am authentic—in that "I'm me" sense. In spite of three generations of whitewashing, I have not forgotten my people's past and identify as Arab American. Even if it's more about my "imagined community" than my actual one, it feels really important to claim both the land and the people as my own. Even if this doesn't make a difference in anyone else's life, it does in mine, for some reason I can't really pinpoint.

My dad recently told his brother, "I didn't know I was Arab American until I met my daughter." He explained that he had always thought of himself only as American. Then he saw me speak at the Mapping Arab Diasporas conference at the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan, Dearborn. There he felt proud to be an Arab American and realized he could no longer see himself without

that identity. Even though I didn't get a chance to learn directly from my Arab grandmothers, I figured out how to embrace my Arab American heritage, and how to open up the space for my dad to as well. I don't understand how I managed to be the transmitter of culture in my household. However, in this way, it seems my *ʕittoʕ'* legacy lives on in me.