

# HANDS

By Leila Hull '02

*I wrote this paper last spring for a history class on immigration and ethnicity at Bryn Mawr College. At the time I was grappling with the questions of identity as a woman of mixed descent in a globalizing world. However, considering the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the story I tell serves as one example of living as an Arab-American. As the daughter of two American citizens of different ethnic backgrounds, I hope that the story of my two families will present both a story of American diversity and draw a compassionate light onto members of the Arab-American community. I speak only for myself, not claiming to speak for an entire community or nation, simply as an American citizen.*

## Synthesis

One night in Starbucks I noticed that the commodification of coffee has yielded a reclassification of coffee blends along ethnic and national lines. On any given day you can buy a cup of Colombian blend, Java, Sumatra, French Roast, or Italian Espresso. Then I started to wonder what would happen if Starbucks took over the world, and rather than coffee blends being named according to ethnicity, ethnicity would be categorized according to coffee blend. In this world of consumerism and caffeine, people would answer the question “what blend are you?” To that I would answer, “Arabian Mocha Java with a shot of Bailey’s Irish Cream.”

My voice comes from an intersectional language of mixed descent. My identity is a chameleon, rapidly changing to escape the clichéd images of tragic and torn. Yet, I find myself asking the question: if culture is a fluid entity, then why should I define myself in static terms? Bi-cultural, bi-racial, transnational, 3<sup>rd</sup> culture kid, bilingual, Muslim, Palestinian stone-thrower, veiled, fundamentalist, irrational, American, Irish, Catholic, St. Patrick’s Day, strip malls, Barbie, Woodstock? My voice speaks from what Anna Deavere Smith calls “the crossroads of ambiguity.”<sup>1</sup> Here racial and cultural roles are blurred, rejecting the pretense

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Deavere Smith *Snapshots: Glimpses of America in Change* (performance) 4/27/01.

that racial categorizes are mutually exclusive. As a member of the growing multiracial/multicultural American population, I was born into ambiguity. Nicknamed “the crossroads of identity crises,” I avoid that fate by becoming a storyteller. Instead of being prescribed a history and an identity, I construct my own by creating a scrapbook with excerpts from family history, cultural organizations and performances, and mixed race literature. In the form of this scrapbook, my developing voice outlines my ancestral history through my great-great-aunt Mary Reeves, and my Khalo<sup>2</sup> Rifa’at. My story moves to my parents’ marriage as experienced by my two grandmothers. My membership with college organizations like Half- &-Half allows me to include my contemporaries’ voices, and embrace writers of mixed descent.

### **Family Histories:**

As an Irish-American, I am a descendant of some millions of Irish immigrants fleeing starvation and poverty in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland. Earliest records suggest the Fruin family emigrated from a town in southern Ireland named Tipperary. Aside from some scant genealogy, little information remains about my paternal grandmother’s family pre-immigration. As the testimonial of my great-great-aunt Mary Reeves explains, oppressive British rule forbade its Irish subjects to keep extensive records. Thus, the Fruin family’s paper trail began with their immigration records. In the summer of 1850, Mary Reeves’s parents and grandparents immigrated to New York City. Eventually, the family left the East Coast, relocating to Montana, California, Kansas and Illinois.

Mary Reeves’s father, John Fruin, resettled in El Paso, Illinois, and became a patriarchal figure within the Irish immigrant population. A self-proclaimed “self-made

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man,” John Fruin lived out his life as an ardent Democrat, who unbeknownst to his family, donated one hundred dollars towards a memorial for Republican President Abraham Lincoln. His daughter paints him as a religious, successful, honest, well-respected man who encouraged his children to lead educated lives. Coming from a long tradition of teachers, Mary Reeves’s mother further fostered her children’s educational interests. Reeves’s mother, Mary Doherty, was an enchanting Celtic beauty whose “tough wiry constitution” raised eleven children and taught countless others. My grandmother, Lorene Hull, inherited Mary Doherty’s “tough wiry constitution” as she raised eleven children and worked as an English teacher in Illinois. Her children and grandchildren see her as the keeper and educator of the past.

My mother was born into an old Palestinian family, many of whom became expatriates in America during the past thirty years. Unlike the Fruins, the Abu-El-Haj family can trace its family history back to the Crusades. It is a family myth that the Abu-El-Hajs are descendants of Salah-al-Din ibn Ayyub, the famed Muslim leader who successfully defeated King Richard the Lionhearted and reconquered Jerusalem in 1187 CE. In the Arab world, in addition to paper records, one can trace one’s genealogy through one’s name. For example, my Siddo<sup>3</sup> was born Ali ibn Mustafa ibn Ali al-Sultani. His name translates into Ali, son of Mustafa, son of Ali al-Sultani. Derived from Sultan, the name al-Sultani traces it the Abu-El-Hajs back to Salah-al-Din.

My Siddo rejected the al-Sultani blood when he changed his name to Abu-El-Haj. During the British Mandate, my Siddo registered himself and his family as Abu-El-Haj instead of al-Sultani. Translating to “Father of the Pilgrims,” the name was my great-

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<sup>2</sup> Standard Arabic for maternal uncle

grandfather, Mustafa al-Sultani's nickname. He would hire destitute *Hajji*,<sup>4</sup> providing them with employment to replenish their exhausted resources and help them return home. The family historian, my Khalo Rifa'at, adds that some saw Mustafa as a benevolent benefactor, while others believed he exploited poor travelers. Whatever Mustafa's character, my Siddo took his nickname over al-Sultani to distance himself from his large *Kaleel*<sup>5</sup> family, and establish himself as a Jerusalem businessman. Another family myth that is only discussed in hushed tones by my cousins while we compare notes is that my Siddo survived under the British Mandate by smuggling tobacco and cigarettes across redrawn borders. Even with British Occupation, one struggling Palestinian maneuvered enough to become a successful and well-respected businessman, fresh with a new name.

### **My Parent's Marriage:**

My Tata,<sup>6</sup> Wasilah Abu-El-Haj, is a *bakawati*.<sup>7</sup> She tells stories like she breathes; inhaling her experiences and exhaling them from her soul. She recites the stories of the Koran five times a day. She tells me that I have my grandfather's eyes, and then describes to me what his eyes saw. Stories hold her family together as they weave their way into letters and phone calls from Jerusalem to London, DC, and New York. Her grandchildren trade her stories to see who has the same versions. Last summer my Tata told me that I inherited her hands. Her hands are made of warm satin; widowed hands that still wear the gold band of a bride. When she tells a story, her hands illustrate her words as they move from her face

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<sup>3</sup> Colloquial Arabic from Grandfather

<sup>4</sup> Standard-Classical Arabic for Pilgrims

<sup>5</sup> From Hebron

<sup>6</sup> Colloquial Arabic for Grandmother

<sup>7</sup> Standard Arabic for storyteller

to mine, taking me back through the past ninety years. By walking backwards, I find my voice to tell her stories and ultimately my own.

She told me how she refused my father when he asked to marry my mother. A favorite visitor to her house, my American father had secretly been seeing her youngest daughter and had the impertinence to ask my grandmother for her blessing. Emphatically, my she refused saying, “It is not done. You are Christian and she is Muslim, it is not done.” Raised as Catholic, my father rationalized that Allah was the same god as his parent’s god, and that Muhammad had as much a claim to being his prophet as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, or John Smith. My father’s respect gained my Tata’s consent, but not her approval. At the same time, my Catholic grandmother was packing to attend my parents’ marriage.

Lorene Hull had spent that last few years reconciling the fact that her son did not enter the priesthood because he was in the process of reevaluating his religious beliefs. Aware of my parent’s relationship, the news of marriage did not surprise her. Nevertheless, she was anxious to meet my mother’s family. Lorene’s initial impression was marred by an incident when she and my father found his apartment door damaged by a family member who disapproved of my mother’s impending marriage to a Christian. It was my mother’s actions that reassured my grandmother. During a ceremonial reading where tradition barred my grandmother’s attendance, my mother grabbed her hand and guided her into the room, insisting that she be present and participate. Her determination won Lorene’s admiration, which remains strong twenty years later.

In June 1978, Lorene Hull met Wasilah Abul-El-Haj. My Tata says that after meeting my grandmother she blessed my parents’ marriage, because she saw how warmly and sincerely Lorene welcomed my mother into her family. In a letter to me, Lorene writes,

“It’s a big leap from my strong faith and belief that Jesus is the son of God and is divine to considering him just a prophet. Through much prayer, I have grown in my spirituality and am so grateful to God for all the blessings we have received. You and Lena [my younger sister] are just two of them—and we do love and cherish you, your parents and admire your Arab family.”<sup>8</sup>

My grandmothers never spoke the same language, yet understood that my parents made both a church and a mosque places of worship, made Latin and Arabic holy expressions of religion, and made Allah and Jehovah a god.

In December 2001, my Tata spent Christmas with my family in America. A few days before Christmas my father, sister and five-year-old cousin decorated the Christmas tree. Determined to participate, she pulled out her Koran and told the Story of Miriam. Reciting and explaining the classical Arabic, she read how Miriam gave birth to Jesus under a palm tree. She told them how Miriam leaned against the tree, pushing, crying, and fighting and how that tree held her as she gave birth to a Christian prophet. In my living room, my Tata wove a Muslim story to offer an origin for the Christmas tree. Her storytelling merged three generations, two religions, two languages, and exemplified the synthesis of my identity.

### **Half - &-Half and Mixed Descent Literature:**

While identity formation is a constant process, my college years have been a formative period where organizations like Half-&-Half have introduced me to other women of mixed descent. During my freshman year, Bryn Mawr’s mixed race/multicultural group was born in the form of Half- &-Half. Custom’s Week sponsored a pluralism workshop that posed the question, “what do you identify as?” Are you X and Y, or X rather than Y? For me, are you Palestinian-American or Palestinian rather than American. Many resented the question, while others kept changing their answers as they realized the complexity of the

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<sup>8</sup> Lorene Hull, email to author, 30 April 2001.

question. A journalist for *New People Magazine*, Elliot Lewis explains that there are three levels of mixed identification: Yourself, Your Mama, and Society at Large.<sup>9</sup> You may see yourself as X and Y, while a parent might want you to emulate Y, simultaneously society reacts to you as X. While it is idealistic to say that you are whatever you want see yourself as, that decision does not insure that everyone else will agree or understand.

Plagued with these nagging questions two freshmen, Elisa Espiritu and Melanie Chakmakjian, approached mixed members of the freshman class to form a campus club. The group's name was adopted from the book *Half + Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial + Bicultural*. As a group dynamic developed, Half-&-Half fostered a trusted space for members and guests to voice a spectrum of opinions, concerns and questions. In this private space, we developed our voices, which we publicly shared during the Spring of 2000.

During the second semester of my freshman year, Bryn Mawr College sponsored a Diversity Show that included performances from all the cultural and ethnic groups on campus. Half- &-Half decided to perform original spoken word pieces. A week before the show, everyone came to the meeting with thoughts scribbled down on paper. As we all read our work, certain pieces wove together to form one nuanced performance, and our composition was born. In the show, seven members took the stage and each read their piece. Some were prose, others poetry. Some raged, while others resembled stand up comedy routines. Angela Hagwin ('99) wrote and performed a powerful poem entitled *Bastard*:

So don't call me a prostitute/ for exposing nipples who hadn't yet  
learned applications of/ multiplication/ Chinese, Japanese, wanna see

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<sup>9</sup> Elliot Lewis, *Chicken Gumbo for the Multicultural Soul: Hot, Spicy, and Heartwarming Stories on Interracial Families and Ethnic Identity*. <http://hometown.aol.com/enuffsed1>

my boobies/ finger forced faces of orientalism/ meaning still  
undiscerned/ and fornication of miscegenation/ an ancestry of kung  
fu movies/ I come from a long line of Bruce Lees/ And I can't  
remember which Dynasty/ or was it Dallas?<sup>10</sup>

In her poem, Angela responded to societal attacks and innuendoes that bombard her as an Asian-American. Her angry and sarcastic tone simultaneously attacks and subverts the stereotypes and racial roles imposed onto her by society.

In the same performance, Leah Samaru-Charles beautifully took issue with the question, “What are you?” In a performance style that proves her to be a woman in need of her own HBO special, she sarcastically makes a point of not answering. First and foremost she assures the audience that she is one hundred percent human, “Not five percent of this and seven point five percent of that and three point three, three recurring decimal point of what strain of this?????” While an obvious point, Leah asserts her humanity to breakdown the implied separation created by the question “what are you?” Instead of answering outright and solidifying the separation, her answer positions her in same category as her interrogator. Leah continues by asking, “Am I a recipe??; two spoonfuls of this and let it rise for two generations. Add a dab of that and knead them together well. Add a little colour, followed by some spices—spices ones!!!” Leah asks the audience if her ethnic identity is so crucial to their understanding of her that it needs to be broken down and defined like a recipe’s ingredients? Throughout the piece, she deliberately keeps her ethnic identity unknown to make the point, “what’s it to you?”

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<sup>10</sup> Angela Hadwin “Bastard” in *Color Anthology—Fall 2000—A Retrospective Collection*. ed. Sonal Kapoor and Anjali Alimchandani. (Bryn Mawr College, 2000) 14.

Half-&-Half and its performances draw heavily from the example set by other women of mixed descent. Poet, playwright, and activist, Cherríe Moraga writes about committing to both sides of her identity.

*I am committed to communicating with both sides of myself...I sometimes hate the white in me so viciously that I long to forget the commitment my skin has imposed upon my life. To speak two tongues. I must...I refuse to let anybody's movement determine for me what is sage and fair to say...I think: what is my responsibility to my roots: both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds. I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue.*<sup>11</sup>

For Moraga, the internal conflict between white and Chicana is the foundation of her identity. Through her internal discourse, she locates her responsibilities and adheres to them on her own terms. Moraga's intersectional existence is a cornerstone of her writing. As a storyteller, she can weave together two languages, and draw from two cultures. Her work mirrors a collective experience that creates solidarity between women of mixed descent who are trying to reconcile their seemingly oppositional backgrounds. In reading her work, I grow more committed to live as a Palestinian and an American. According to American and Palestinian societies, both halves are irreconcilable since on the world stage the United States is a primary supporter of Israel. Yet, with Moraga's words burned into my head, I have a responsibility to internally conciliate the Palestinian and the American and speak as both.

Claudine Chaiawei O'Hearn's introduction to *Half+Half: Writers Growing Up Biracial + Bicultural* expands on Moraga's insistence for dialogue to include transnational scenarios and the concept of expatriatism. Growing up on two sides of the world, her life closely resembles my own. Living in both the United States and Taiwan, she dances along the loyalty line by asserting her citizenship to both countries and both ethnic identities. Instead

of assigning a single affiliation, O'Hearn is perpetually an expatriate of both. Effectively, perpetual expatriatism is intensified when she is seen as an American in Taiwan, and as an Asian in America. In a world of multiple affiliations, Diaspora, and globalization, expatriate rather than immigrant more accurately describes transnational identities.

In the tradition of my *bakawati* Tata, I am going to conclude with an anecdote that best illustrates the aspects of this scrapbook. Every Thanksgiving some twenty people descend upon my house, most of whom are members of my mother's Palestinian family who immigrated in an expatriate fashion to the United States. The gracious hostess, my mother welcomes guests in with kisses that leaves them smelling like gardenias, while my father makes a display of slaving away in the kitchen on turkey and stuffing. Usually the only American aside from my sister and me, he asserts his Irish-American presence by wearing an American flag as an apron and drinking a Killian's Red. In the midst of setting the table or getting someone a glass of wine, my Khalo Rifa'at finds every opportunity to playfully correct my Arabic. Dinnertime conversation is usually conducted in two languages, where so many sideswiping comments are lost in translation. What is lost is recreated by the younger cousins who trade family stories like gold nuggets. Even outside at the crossroads of ambiguity, there are moments that serve as blankets to cover your soul.

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<sup>11</sup> Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios*. (Cambridge: South End Press, 1983) vi, 58.

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