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“Celebrating Arabs”: Tracing Legend and Rumor Labyrinths in Post-9/11 Detroit

This article examines one instance of a widely spread rumor (incipient legend) circulated via e-mail in northwest Detroit that Arab employees at a Middle Eastern restaurant cheered when they saw television footage of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. It argues that rumor and legend scholars, especially those examining alternative communication paths including Internet transmission, should work to retain the complexity of performance-oriented studies in their comparative analyses. It takes “the middle road” in building a case for examining, whenever possible, the complex intertwining of localized and globalized “folkloric space” for readings that are richly textured and evocative of a variety of social conditions.

Introduction

I REMEMBER THE DOUBLE FORUM “Memory Matters—Responses to September 11th” held at the American Folklore Society meetings in Rochester, New York, in 2002. The forum members confirmed for me that the very process of documentation (whether oral accounts recorded, poems or letters spoken or written, or drawings, photographs, or other objects created and displayed in makeshift shrines throughout the city) worked toward reconstructing meaning, however ephemeral, and, therefore, worked toward some sense of healing out of pain and chaos. Participants argued that New Yorkers’ responses, in the wake of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, memorialized the lives lost and the city shattered a year earlier,
and so became “monumental” in the sense that traumatic history is so framed in mourning devices (Brogan 1998:61–92; Grider 2001; Ellis 2002; Norkunas 2002)." Not so, however, for the rumors and legends proliferating nationally and globally in the aftermath of disaster. These latter reports (in both verbal and visual forms) were, and remain, disruptive, disturbing, and complicated affectively although relatively simple in form (see also Ellis 2002:2). Accounts in various media about the tourist photographed on a rooftop of a building close to the World Trade Center (later proved to be a hoax), about a survivor sliding down the imploding rubble from a top story (later not verified), and about bound, severed hands found on another nearby rooftop (unfortunately later verified) continue to carry, through their own actual or implied iconicity, a sense of irony and horror. They are documentary remains.

This article focuses on a subset of these “antimonumental” accounts, specifically on what Robert H. Knapp called “wedge-driving” rumors in his classic study growing out of an earlier wartime context (1944). It almost goes without saying that rumors circulating on the street and through the Internet about Jews knowing not to come to work at the Twin Towers that day and about jubilant Arabs cheering at the news of the attacks intertwine conspiracy theory with anti-Jewish and anti-Arab sentiment, respectively. Yet I offer a case history from Detroit, one instantiation of the “Celebrating Arabs” rumor following 9/11, not only because its multiple transmission paths, contexts, and outcomes have been documented in a variety of media, but also because its analysis demands readings of the many intricate turnings or windings of people talking in everyday contexts and using e-mail communication in overlapping ways.

“Celebrating Arabs” on the Net

Reports that Arab employees of a Middle Eastern restaurant in the Detroit area cheered and clapped when they saw footage on a television news program that aired during lunch time on 9/11 and that the restaurant was effectively boycotted through an e-mail campaign begun by outraged customers are remarkably similar to accounts discussed by Barbara Mikkelson, one of the webmasters for the Internet urban legend web site (http://www.snopes.com) in the weeks after the attacks. The “Rumors of War” link from the site’s home page, Urban Legend Reference Pages, draws users to specific links about businesses so affected. Mikkelson focuses on the claim that “employees at a Dunkin’ Donut outlet desecrated an American flag, and some people of Arab extraction were observed celebrating the terrorist attack on America” in one link labeled “The Hole in the Middle” (2001a). She also examines a claim that “a Budweiser employee who saw Arabs at a convenience store celebrating the terrorist attacks on America pulled all Budweiser product from that store” in another link labeled “This Bud’s Not for You” (Mikkelson 2001b).

Mikkelson’s editorial comments below clearly indicate her position (already figured in the link labels above) that this rumor is false in all its many redactions:

Large chains aren’t the only commercial entities to have been tarred with this undeserved brush—numerous small firms have had versions of the same slander applied.
to them. According to breathless rumor spread willy-nilly, Arabs have been caught in the act of celebrating the strike against the twin towers and the Pentagon in bagel shops, restaurants, stores, and coffee houses—anywhere customers could conceivably have witnessed such outpourings. False rumors like these run on very fast legs indeed, and spontaneous boycotts have sprung up in their wake. These boycotts do irreparable harm to the many innocent businesses swept up by this wave of lies. (2001a)

Her underlying concern for ethnic American business owners being unjustly accused of unpatriotic acts is without fault, yet John Bodner’s comment, posed in relation to another rumor cycle, that “Snopes.com’s traditional debunking was helpful in explaining the facts of the case but, once again, missed any sociological analysis concerning the functions and nature of this rumor” appears to be on target (2002:1).

Mikkelson, in fairness, does offer a classical functional analysis of this rumor online. When she writes, “Beyond, the myriad of ‘Is it true?’ questions arising from such rumors lurks the larger issue of what such rumors say about the current feeling in America towards Muslims and those from Arab countries” (2001a), she is in line with analyses that posit anxiety in crisis situations as part of the matrix for rumor and legend formation (Allport and Postman 1947; Knapp 1944; Fine and Turner 2001:29–80). When she continues that these rumors “work to confirm that sense of unease, in that they seem to say we’ll never know what truly resides in the hearts of Muslims and Arab-Americans or where their actual loyalties lie” (2001a), she highlights concepts of ambiguity and ambivalence that have also operated in most discussions of these interrelated genres (Dégh [1965] 1995; Shibutani 1966; Fine and Turner 2001:29–52). And when she concludes by saying that these accounts “give voice to deeply felt concerns that otherwise would be difficult to put into words,” she taps into theoretical orientations that value vernacular culture for its power to “speak the unspeakable” (Fine and Turner 2001:15–8).

Mikkelson also reads the subsequent boycotting of the businesses so targeted as a classic projective system (Bascom [1954] 1965:292–3):

Likewise, calls to shun particular businesses named in the “celebrating Arabs” rumor strike a responsive chord with a populace in desperate need to feel it is doing something to aid its country. Those possessed of a particular foreign look thus find themselves the target of a great deal of misplaced anger as those in need of venting some of the poison from their systems latch upon seemingly appropriate targets. One cannot, after all, scoop up a gun and take off to Afghanistan to participate in bringing bin Laden to bay, but one can quite vocally participate in a misaimed boycott. The need for a cathartic release at times overwhelms the need to direct the spew toward only those who truly deserve it. Bystanders become victims, and the truth limps in a far distant second to the need not to feel helpless in the face of a menace that cannot easily be grasped or guarded against. (2001a)

Nevertheless, Bodner’s critique remains justified and can be generalized to rumor and legend studies as a whole: that sociological analyses can be more richly developed and more fully teased out of data that hides its own complexity. I take up Linda Dégh’s call that, because rumor and legend tellers are the arbitrators “of the mes-
sages that are most relevant to modern life, researchers of the legend must try to enter the labyrinth of the alternative communicative vehicles they use, because it is these vehicles that have made the legend so viable" (2001:304; emphasis added). I walk into “a number of intercommunicating passages arranged in bewildering complexity” of one such transmission cycle in order to develop the critique and its ramifications.

The Sheik Restaurant: Ground Zero Mediated in Greater Metropolitan Detroit

The Mediterranean restaurant, the Sheik, located in Orchard Lake Village in northern Oakland County, just north of the affluent northwest Detroit suburb of West Bloomfield, Michigan, is one of those numerous firms that Mikkelson notes lost business due to the “Celebrating Arabs” rumor being applied to them.5 The Sheik is a large, 135-seat family restaurant owned and operated by Dean (Noureddine) Hachem, who emigrated from Lebanon in 1978, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1985. It is part of a richly overlaid and fluid network of Arab-American businesses in the greater Detroit area, some larger and some smaller, most of which are suburban and concentrated in “either grocery or food stores, eating and drinking places, liquor stores, or gas and service stations” (Schopmeyer 2000:82–5, 88). Reflective of specific communities, the businesses may be owned by or may serve clients who are descendants of the earliest Syrian-Lebanese Maronite Christians who settled in Detroit more than a hundred years ago, Lebanese and Palestinian Muslims who are mostly Shia who emigrated later, Chaldeans who are Christian Iraqi, Christian Palestinians, or Yemenis—the most recent Muslim immigrants (Abraham and Shyrock 2000:18–20; Lockwood and Lockwood 2000:517–28; Schopmeyer 2000:61–76). Anthropologist Andrew Shryock comments on the complex divisions operating within these communities when he notes, “Business associations divide along Lebanese and Chaldean lines; mosques divide along national, sect, party and village lines; social service agencies divide along Muslim and Christian lines; public access TV programs divide along all these lines” (2000:605–6).

The Sheik’s name is reminiscent of the first Middle Eastern restaurant in downtown Detroit that had been operated by Lebanese Maronite Christians, originally for the early Syrian-Lebanese community and then from 1944 to 1987 for non-Arab clientele (Lockwood and Lockwood 2000:517–8). The Sheik on Orchard Lake Road, however, opened in the late 1990s, was designed to serve a broad clientele from its inception. A recent on-line description of the restaurant sponsored by AOL Cityguide Detroit categorizes it as “an upscale Middle Eastern eatery where patrons of just about every nationality you can think dine alongside each other.” The description continues, “All the standards are here: crushed lentil soup, baba ghannouj [eggplant dip], shawarmas [beef, chicken, or lamb pita bread sandwiches] and lamb done in several varieties” (2004). The restaurant menu focuses on what foodways specialists William and Yvonne Lockwood call “creolized” Middle Eastern foods, which include many Lebanese dishes—the gold standard for public presentation of Arab food to non-Arab restaurant patrons in the Detroit area and the most acculturated (2000:524–7).

The on-line description opens with statements that appear somewhat unusual,
however, for most city restaurant guides, but, written after the events to be discussed below, foreshadow them: "The Detroit metro area is home to more than 300,000 Arab Americans and around 100,000 folks of Jewish heritage. Amidst this cultural diversity you'll find The Sheik" (2004). Although the figure of 300,000 Arab Americans is somewhat high, published estimates ranging from 90,000 to 250,000 (Schopmeyer 2000:61–73), the most defined Arab-American business and residential areas lie south and east of northern Oakland County. Communities of Iraqi Chaldeans and Christian Palestinians do live in Oakland County, but Orchard Lake is on the extreme northwest edge of the area (2000:62).

Many of the residents of northern Oakland County, however, are Jewish Americans. Estimates for the total Jewish-American population in the Greater Metropolitan Detroit Area range from 96,000–100,000—close to the figure noted above. The history of Jewish Americans in the Detroit area is two-centuries deep and as complicated and divisive a script as the Arab American outlined above. German Jews, mostly men and women who had originally emigrated from Bavaria and Prussia, came to Detroit in the mid-nineteenth century, joining the descendants of a pioneer family who had settled in the area 100 years previously (Rockaway 1986:1–50). These Landsman, who tended to be upwardly mobile and to value acculturation, found the late-nineteenth-century influx of Eastern European Jews, many Yiddish-speaking working class emigrants from Russia, Romania, and Galicia, pro-Zionist and Socialist, problematic; it was a community divided (Rockaway 1986:50–140).

Traces of this divide remain in the affiliations of the synagogues and associations in the area. For example, Temple Beth El, the oldest synagogue in Detroit, constructed by the early German Jewish congregation, is Reform while others, like Congregation Shaarey Zedek, are Orthodox or Conservative with Eastern European roots (Rockaway 1986:30–9; Bolkosky 1991). Other synagogues and associations, including independent, reconstructionist, Sephardic, and secular, have their own histories that intersect and overlay this early division. Jewish business and residential areas also reflect this intertwined pattern of harmony and dissonance (Bolkosky 1991). The movement from near-east-side ghetto to the near-west-side community on Twelfth Street to the western suburbs of Oak Park and Huntington Woods and to the northwest suburbs of Birmingham, Bloomfield, West Bloomfield, and Orchard Lake in Oakland County, however, marks a century of shared economic mobility.

Hachem has stated that more than 80 percent of his pre-9/11 clientele at the Sheik were Jewish American (Brand-Williams 2002; Luckerman 2001), and it is within the immediate context of the restaurant space, embedded in the cultural contexts of Arab- and Jewish-American ethnic groupings in Detroit, that the "Celebrating Arabs" rumor emerged. The complexity of these groupings contests and fragments the "we," the "Muslims" and "Arab-Americans" in Mikkelson's phrase already quoted that "We'll never know what truly resides in the hearts of Muslims and Arab-Americans" (emphasis added) and so functions as its critique. I argue for the continued recognition of the complicated, and, sometimes, tortuous local arrangements of folk groups as a first step in rumor and legend analysis of any media. This position simultaneously agrees with performance-oriented researchers' criticism of the too-homogenous cultural models that appear to be resurfacing in some text-based Internet scholarly
discussions, while disagreeing to some extent with other Internet scholars who bypass the local in their global analyses of the information highway’s archived communication threads (Brunvand 2003; Byrd 2002; Ellis 2002).

The “Celebrating Arabs” e-mail sent initially on September 12, 2001, in the Detroit area only hints at the complex interethnicity outlined above as the sender refers to Arab-American employees as “all the people in there,” to the physician by a surname that could be either German- or Jewish-American, and does not sign the e-mail:

My son-in-law, Dr. David Tannenbaum [pseudonym], called me this morning. A nurse from Henry Ford Hospital where he works went to the Sheik on Orchard Lake Road and Pontiac Trail, to pick up lunch yesterday—and all the people in there were cheering as they watched the TV footage of our American tragedy. Do not patronize this restaurant and please pass the word to everyone you know.\(^7\)

Textually, this message reads very much like the Internet call-for-boycotts, although it is more spare and restrained than most. In one Internet example from snopes.com already mentioned above, the call comes after a brief description of the alleged anti-American incidents at three New Jersey Dunkin’ Donuts franchises: “We are starting a nationwide boycott of all Dunkin’ Donuts. Please make sure this gets passed on to all fellow Americans during this time of tragedy. We Americans need to stick together and make these horrible people understand what country they are living in and how good they used to have it when we supported them” (quoted in Mikkelson 2001a). The formal symmetry between descriptions of alleged anti-American acts and calls for action in these two accounts, however, hides their differences.

**Entering the Labyrinths**

The text of the e-mail message sent about the Sheik restaurant quoted above alludes to the “alternative communicative vehicles” implicated in its own transmission, and so becomes a template for further analysis. “My son-in-law . . . called me this morning” condenses multiple situations in which specific speakers extend oral communication by using “the telephone as the vehicle for exchanging stories” (Dégh [1969] 1995:319). “The TV footage of our American tragedy” is shorthand for the network of local, regional, national, and international television broadcasts that brought Ground Zero as virtual reality to localized viewers and can be extended to other media presentations such as radio broadcasts, newspaper and magazine reporting, as well, in the Detroit case. “And please pass the word to everyone you know” is a microcosm of the e-mail process itself, mapping an extensive and intricate communication exchange “indispensable to the maintenance of legend tradition in our time” (Dégh 2001:298).

**Oral Transmission and Its Extensions**

Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi once wrote, “There is no way to follow the progress of oral transmission in society. Even those who have attempted to track the route of a
single story, that before their very eyes became popular overnight, lost the entangled thread in a labyrinth” ([1975] 1995:178; emphasis added). These statements are applicable to the case at hand as they indicate the almost-impossible task of tracking down the “Celebrating Arabs” story through all its multiple oral conduits locally and nationally, and they concur with Mikkelson’s comment that, “The very nature of gossip almost guarantees that a tale’s originator will not be found nor will any of its early disseminators” before “their creation is spreading outwards in exponential fashion” (2001a). Yet Dégh and Vázsonyi’s and Mikkelson’s statements are no longer applicable in the same way because the e-mail process, somewhat paradoxically, allows for reporting and, in some cases, actually tracing, communication threads both oral and electronic. Mikkelson notes in the Dunkin’ Donut case, “Those to whom falls the unhappy task of quelling the harmful rumors that have attached to their firms at least have a bit of a chance at getting to the source when what was said is distributed via e-mail” (2001a). Both Donald Byrd (2002) and Bill Ellis (2002) confirm the possibilities of tracing folkloric performances through online archived material.

Transmission 1 Reconstructed. In this regard it is significant that the e-mail text simultaneously indicates oral communication between nurse and doctor and leaves a gap by noting only the content of the message and not its communicative frame, making that crucial first exchange both an assumption of speaking and its erasure. One can surmise that the nurse told the physician for whom she worked about the celebrating Arabs once she returned to a Henry Ford Hospital facility located not far from the Sheik, perhaps eating the take-out in a staff lounge if doctors and nurses were able to eat together or, later, once they had returned to their work areas in the hospital. The specific performance dynamics are elided.

Transmission 2 Reconstructed. The e-mail message does report, as noted, that Dr. Tannebaum then telephoned its sender, the following morning, September 12, relaying the information presumably given to him by his coworker. Although the e-mail text indicates that the doctor and the sender are related through affinal kinship ties, it does not indicate the recipient of his message.

Transmission 3. The initial sender composed and sent out the e-mail message the afternoon of September 12 (and, possibly, again on September 13). Although Hachem did not have sophisticated software for tracking e-mails or archived records at his disposal as did Dunkin’ Donuts (Zaslow 2002:A1), he learned of its transmission when customers telephoned the restaurant in the next few days asking about its veracity. One caller also forwarded him a copy that included the e-mail addresses of the sender and of the first recipients with the comment: “I find it hard to believe that you would allow such action in your restaurant, and, therefore, instead of forwarding it, I called you. I will send you all of these that I get so that you can respond to the listed addresses” (State of Michigan 2002: appendix).

The complaint-with-jury-demand that Hachem filed through his lawyers nine months later on June 21, 2002, initiating a lawsuit, named Dr. David Tannebaum and his mother-in-law as co-defendants for defamation (State of Michigan 2002). The mother-in-law, referenced only as “Jane Doe a.k.a. [her e-mail address]” in this document (but named in Brand-Williams 2002), is believed to be the original sender of the e-mail in question and is an active member of one of the largest Reform syna-
gogues in the area. Like many other synagogues, it followed its members northwest from downtown Detroit to West Bloomfield. Its many programs and services include sisterhood and brotherhood affiliates, as do other synagogues in the Greater Metropolitan Detroit Area. This sisterhood is made up of “a group of women who offer social, cultural, educational and volunteer service opportunities” and who are believed to be the first recipients of the e-mail (Luckerman 2001–2004).9

Transmission 4. E-mailings proliferated from this source geometrically. Hachem’s complaint states in article 26, “That the false and defamatory electronic mail communication spread like wildfire to estimated numbers of persons in the thousands” (State of Michigan 2002:4). Despite the similarity of the phrase “spread like wildfire”10 to phrases Mikkelson used earlier to characterize rumor transmission—“breathless rumor spread willy-nilly” and “false rumors like these run on very fast legs indeed,” the transmission of the “Celebrating Arabs” rumor in the Greater Detroit area was not random. There is every indication that the e-mail spread through a network of sisterhood affiliates, and then through other associated list serves within the Greater Metro Detroit Area.11 Its tracks, though labyrinthine, are not untraceable because they illustrate to a marked degree what Dégh has summarized in Legend and Belief: “The use of electronic means does not change the essentially folkloric exchange because the addressees, no matter where they are, remain members of the folk group, and receive the legend from some of the same mind” (2001:298). In this case, “the folkloric space” of the e-mail (Dorst quoted in Ellis 2002) is both cyberspace and the geographic space of northwest Detroit intertwined.

These rumor and legend networks that limn social networks constitute a second basis for a critique of analyses that too quickly assume that “with the increasing popularity of the Internet, computer chat rooms, and electronic mail, anonymous talk has exploded and continues to expand” (Fine and Turner 2001:77; emphasis added). Although I find Gary Alan Fine and Patricia A. Turner’s argument for the anonymity on the Internet contributing to open racial or ethnic dialogue a compelling one for net users (2001:210–29), for example, I think that it behooves scholars studying electronic transmissions to assume that “anonymity” is only a blanket term for bundles of multiple users that may be identified in various ways demographically. This recognition can only contribute to fuller diversified sociological and cultural analyses of rumors and legends so transmitted.

Although the electronic paths of “Celebrating Arabs” can be, and have been, traced to some extent within specific Jewish communities in northwest Detroit, that all their recipients and senders are “of the same mind” is open to question, in academic, cultural, religious, and legal senses. Precisely why individuals read, forwarded, or otherwise acted upon the e-mail (or chose not to do so) is open to various interpretations, although a “cultural logic” of rumor and legend may be threaded throughout the maze. Fine and Turner have asked researchers not to neglect the audience in analyzing rumors and legends of this type (2001:77–8; see also Dégh and Vázsonyi 1973; Toelken [1979] 1996:136–52). Hence, I take up their call as well to remember “pools of recipients’ knowledge”12 in working out possible interpretive approaches.

To do so, I must enter other levels of the labyrinth, because, to my knowledge, no ethnographic accounts or archived chat room discussions on the Internet exist for
responses to this e-mail distribution. What does exist, however, is media coverage in the form of newspaper and television reports of the e-mail rumor’s effect on the Sheik’s business, based on reporters’ interviews with Detroit residents, available in print and on-line formats. First, I look through the media coverage at the reported comments and actions of Jewish residents in northwest Detroit as well as those of the Sheik’s owner in response. Then I examine the reported commentary of leaders in the Jewish and Arab communities. Finally, I focus on the media coverage as an object of study itself in an attempt to construct “a thick description” of the event (Geertz 1973:9), well aware that what has been unreported and unsaid may indeed be at the center of the labyrinth.

Media Coverage I: Dialectic Responses

Transmission Type 5. Although no person has been quoted saying in public that he or she positively believed that the Sheik’s Arab employees cheered on September 11, what is public, however, is the fact that the e-mail message was sent and forwarded, implying some degree of acceptance of its message by some recipients (Fine and Turner 2001:65–6). Others sent mail and voice mails to the Sheik such as, “I hope you guys go bankrupt because of this,”—one such message played back on CNN coverage. Still others heard the e-mail message and boycotted the restaurant. The Sheik’s business went down 50 percent after the e-mail allegation and has remained down as of this writing. The boycott has been and remains remarkably effective. As ostensive action, then, boycotting is one side of the legend dialectic (Dégh and Vázsonyi [1975] 1995; [1983] 1995).

Transmission Type 6. Other recipients and senders of the e-mail were uncertain whether its information was correct; they seem to have internalized the dialectic, in that ambivalent state in which rumor and legend specialists have seen narrative chains develop in crisis situations. Reporter Sharon Luckerman notes, “One woman who contacted the [Detroit] Jewish News said she knew the e-mail could be a rumor, but forwarded it anyway so people could decide for themselves about its veracity” (Luckerman 2001). Another woman interviewed for a CNN news report said, “I just feel funny, just kind of feel funny going there” (CNN 2002), implying that she would not come to the restaurant, just in case the situation were verified.

Transmission Type 7. Not all recipients of the e-mail forwarded it as requested. The Sheik customer quoted above forwarded it to the owner, not to others. Another customer, Joel Becker [pseudonym], quoted in the Detroit Jewish News, stated that he replied to those sending it by condemning their “lynch mob mentality” toward a business owner who had never appeared anti-Semitic (Luckerman 2001). Another customer, Joel Herman [pseudonym], quoted in the Detroit News, said that he had heard/read the rumor, had not believed it, and would continue to eat there. “We know the owners. We have been coming here since they opened. . . . The staff is gracious and we love the food” (Brand-Williams 2002: 2A). These customers have chosen to discount the “Celebrating Arabs” truth claim and revealed their positions in the dialectic verbally and through their actions.

Transmission Type 8. Hachem, the Sheik’s owner, discounted the rumor’s truth
claim, too, of course. His strategies for creating anti- or counterrumors or legends mirror those used by other retailers combating what Fine and Turner have called “mercantile legends” or “mercantile rumors” (Fine 1992:141–73; Fine and Turner 2001:81–112; Turner 1993:165–79). He telephoned patrons who had ordered carry-outs on that day, because their telephone numbers were still available on the restaurant’s receipts, reporting that all customers reached through his informal survey said that they did not see anyone celebrating, only sad faces. He reviewed the restaurant’s twelve security tapes, and, again, found no evidence of employees cheering (CNN 2002; State of Michigan 2002: articles 11–14), precisely the strategy of Dunkin’ Donuts officials (Mikkelson 2001a). The security tapes in both cases become a sort of counterlegend complex visually. He also decorated the foyer of the Sheik with letters of support and with American flags (a tradition intensified by many Arab-owned businesses after 9/11). These latter strategies are also iconic representations countering the impact of rumor/legend with tangible signs of clientele loyalty and national patriotism, but they were ultimately not successful (Zaslow 2002).

Media Coverage II: Community Leaders’ Metacommentary on Rumor Transmission

Hachem also contacted community leaders, outlining the rumor and his denial of it and asking for their support for his restaurant in the aftermath of 9/11. Their reported commentary on the e-mail rumor’s effect, something like the glossing of passages from the Talmud or the Koran, takes on something of the role of oral literary criticism, but in an official, if not elite, framework caught in news coverage (Dundes [1966] 1975). Jewish community leaders, affiliated with various synagogues and organizations in Metro Detroit, referred to the rumor and asked their community members to dismiss it and return to the Sheik in the interest of social justice. David Gad-Harf, Executive Director of the Jewish Community Council (JC Council) of Metropolitan Detroit, in Bloomfield Hills, quoted in the Detroit Free Press, said succinctly, “We really deplore this kind of rumor-mongering” (Laitner 2002:5B). Rabbi Marla Feldman, JC Council Assistant Director, interviewed in the Detroit Jewish News and the Wall Street Journal, expanded his statements by noting, “The vice of slander is condemned in all Jewish writing” (Luckerman 2001). She referenced scriptural traditions that state that spreading gossip, even if true and done without malice, is still forbidden (Luckerman 2001; Zaslow 2002 A1, A9). Don Cohen, JC Council consultant, concurred by stating that the “Celebrating Arabs” e-mail was based on third-hand testimony and no eyewitnesses had come forward (Luckerman 2001).

Jewish civil rights groups (e.g., the Anti-Defamation League’s Michigan Region and the American Jewish Committee) issued a strong joint statement in late October 2002, calling the rumors “just as evil as murder” (Zaslow 2002:A9), warning against damaging allegations (Luckerman 2001). Media coverage also noted that the JC Council’s Gad-Harf and Cantor Stephen Dubov of Temple Beth El in Bloomfield Hills continued to eat at the Sheik as counterboycott statements (Laitner 2002; Zaslow 2002:A9). Yet the boycott continued.
Although Detroit Arab or Muslim religious leaders’ commentary is not represented in this media coverage to my knowledge—and this is an omission that needs examination—leaders in the Arab business communities, especially in the Dearborn area, were consulted. When Adnan Baydoun, managing editor of the Arab-American News, was interviewed in the Detroit Jewish News, his response to the rumor allegations at the Sheik indicated deep concern about the perpetuation of Arab-American stereotypes. He told the reporter that his grandfather had immigrated to the United States in 1900, and that he wanted “the Jewish community to know that his community in Dearborn is just as terrified and disgusted with what happened in New York as other communities in the United States.” He also stated, “Islam does not condone any loss of innocent life, which is stated in the Koran and in our teachings” (Luckerman 2001).

Nasser Beydoun, the executive director of the American Arab Chamber of Commerce in Dearborn, quoted in the Detroit News, connected the situation to other Arab-American business concerns when he stated that the “Sheik’s problems are among the most extreme examples of the backlash Arab-owned businesses faced in Metro Detroit and across the nation” (Brand-Williams 2002:2A). Beydoun, however, noted a difference: most Arab-owned businesses in Detroit have recovered, whereas the Sheik has not (2A). LaShish, a Middle Eastern restaurant chain originating in Dearborn with one facility in Bloomfield Hills, for example, was down only slightly (Zaslow 2002:A9).

As reported in the Wall Street Journal, several Arab leaders in the Detroit area wanted to see the Sheik e-mail incident prosecuted as a hate crime. Noel Saleh, an attorney for the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) in Dearborn, cited a case in which a California man who had sent threatening e-mails to his organization after 9/11, was charged with a hate crime, and, as part of his plea bargaining, flew to Detroit to apologize and do a week of community service at the Center. He later sent e-mails to ACCESS, this time noting how good his experience had been there (Zaslow 2002:A9; Rignall 2000). Perhaps Hachem’s lawsuit for slander, not yet brought to trial, contains that same hope although his business dropped again once news of the lawsuit was made public (Brand-Williams 2002).

Media Coverage III: Reporters’ Metacommentary on Rumor Transmission

Dégh’s statements that “even reportage of the same everyday event bears the earmarks of different journalists. Each professionally told variant . . . bears its teller’s worldview, education, style, imagination, and narrative competence” hold remarkably true in the “Celebrating Arabs” discussion (2001:298). Yet her following statements apply differentially to local and national reporting: “Although they [journalists] address an anonymous, unknown mass audience, rather than familiar individuals of their own kind in small groups, their texts can be regarded as links in an ongoing chain of transmission as much as improvised oral ones in which variants of alternative channels together build a traditional text process” (2001:298–9).

Because its readership is predominantly the Detroit Jewish community as its title indicates, a case can be made that the Detroit Jewish News does address an audience
that is composed of “familiar individuals of their own kind in small groups” to some extent. Hachem came to this newspaper office first for help. Some members of the newspaper staff had already received the e-mail as they were part of the social and religious networks in which it was first circulated. Danny Raskin, the paper’s restaurant reviewer, for example, had received the e-mail and had already encouraged his readers to patronize the Sheik (Luckerman 2001–2004; Zaslow 2002:A9). The Detroit Jewish News carried the first newspaper report that appeared on Tuesday, October 30, 2001. Titled “The Power of E-Mail,” it highlighted the electronic proliferation of the rumor and its serious community consequences. And its subtitle, “Restaurant Owner Denounces Rumor; Jewish Groups Caution against Sending Unsubstantiated Messages,” indicates the position of the staff writer, Sharon Luckerman, who explored multiple responses to the rumor with special focus on Jewish tradition (2001; 2001–2004).

In his Wall Street Journal article of March 13, 2002, Jeffrey Zaslow, a Detroit-based writer, could assume a broader readership based on the national and international distribution of the paper. His piece, “How a Rumor Spread by E-Mail Laid Low an Arab’s Restaurant,” also presents a number of viewpoints about the power of e-mail, drawn from sources related to the Detroit Jewish News piece, yet the addition of “Laid Low an Arab’s Restaurant” in its title indicates both an “out-of-town” perspective and a business focus emphasized in the subtitle: “It Said the Staff Was Jubilant on September 11; Detroit Rallies Behind the Sheik, to No Avail.” Zaslow’s article filled the famous “middle column” of the Journal’s front page for that day, traditionally the “human interest” location to complement the paper’s presentation of “hard” fiscal news (Wells 2002). He drew on and expanded snopes.com’s Internet evaluations of the Dunkin’ Donuts and Budweiser cases to compare the Detroit incidence to other mercantile legends (Zaslow 2002:A9).

Clearly mirroring Zaslow’s Journal coverage, Bill Laitner’s Detroit Free Press article, “Sheik Restaurants Hurt by 9/11 Rumor,” appeared two days later, on March 15, 2002. Its subtitle, “Owner Has Been Forced to Lay Off Many Staffers,” is in keeping with the Free Press’s liberal or Democratic editorial policy, emphasizing as it does the plight of workers in a union town. In contrast, Oralandar Brand-Williams’s article that appeared in the Detroit News, “Arab Restaurateur Sues over Rumors,” some months later, on October 3, 2002, when Hachem’s lawsuit was being served, focused on litigation. The News has traditionally had more conservative or Republican editorial policies than the Free Press, although the present joint operating agreement between Detroit’s two daily papers has blurred the earlier political distinctions between them.

Although local networks, FOX Television, and CNN Cable Networks had national news stories, I focus briefly on CNN coverage here. Airing March 20, 2002, “Newsnight with Aaron Brown” also drew from earlier newspaper reports, most clearly the Wall Street Journal article, although its own research and film teams worked on expanding coverage as well. In a Segment 7 slot, labeled “Food for Thought,” reporter Jeffrey Flock was featured on location, sympathetically interviewing Hachem at his empty restaurant as well as talking with other patrons or potential patrons about what they had witnessed or had felt about the “Celebrating Arabs” allegation. The film footage made visual the earlier discussions in other media and confirmed the intricate relationships operating among various news reports that took the substance, but not the frames of the coverage, preceding them.
Anchor Aaron Brown’s opening statements about rumor, especially rumor after 9/11, made manifest the interlinked positions of most of the reporters on the dangerous power of e-mail, despite their differences indicated above:

Rumors. We’ve heard them all in those scary days after the 11th of September. They’re pretty much a given after big and frightening events. The rumors, the urban legends that keep getting passed from person to person and now, of course, on the Internet. Mostly they’re harmless, the kinds of thing we talk about, or laugh about, at the water cooler at the office. But this is a story that is no joke at all, and it is a reminder of how easy it is to do wrong. (CNN 2002)

The reporters’ responses echo those of all the community leaders they interviewed that both sending and receiving the e-mail and acting upon it through boycott was morally inappropriate and not to be condoned. They understandably echo what Fine and Turner found to be the case for earlier rumor researchers, especially in a wartime context, who saw rumor mongering as pathological, yet none explains why the boycott continues (2001:59).

I take a cue from Fine and Turner’s suggestion to look at the spread of rumor within more recent problem-solving critical frameworks to consider why the truth claim of “Celebrating Arabs” can be seen as a plausible one within northwest Detroit (2001:59–60). It is possible, of course, that the senders and receivers of the e-mail were and continue to be simply prejudiced against Arab-American entrepreneurs, the same type of prejudices Jewish-American shopkeepers and business owners have experienced in the Detroit context themselves (Bolkolsky 1991; Rockaway 1986). Yet specific reasons for accepting its truth claims emerge from the previous discussion. Many Jewish congregations in the area, if not specifically Zionist, do support Israel as part of their religious and cultural goals. The Reform synagogue in which the initial sender and recipients of the e-mail are active, for example, defines itself, in part, through its commitment to the state of Israel and to all Jewish people in the diaspora. One can see synagogue members sending the e-mail and boycotting the Sheik as one more concerted action to protect the Jewish state as they see it.

Certainly the CNN presentation of Palestinians celebrating in the streets of East Jerusalem after hearing about the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that aired that same day could be seen as congruent with the rumor/legend complex from this viewpoint. The plausible connections between the Reuter footage of “Celebrating Palestinians” and “Celebrating Arabs” in Detroit may be as strong as that between the Tuskegee syphilis experiment and African-American rumor/legend complexes about genocide (Turner 1993:108–64; Fine and Turner 2001:113–46).11 In this light, “Celebrating Arabs” in Detroit may be most convincing to those in the congregations immersed in Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even though rumor specialists might see, somewhat ironically, Gordon Allport and Leo Postman’s assimilation processes at work, “transforming information to strengthen its cultural logic” (1957; Fine and Turner 2001:68–9).

The Detroit Arab-American and Muslim communities have also faced the federal indictments of some of their community members as either themselves being or aiding and abetting Al-Qaeda operatives. A recent Detroit Arab-American study
conducted by the University of Michigan with funding from the Russell Sage Foundation found that these communities experienced crises in their overall well-being, including their sense of identity and belonging in the wake of 9/11 (see Baker et al. 2004). The local and the global are inextricably mixed here, too, in an example of what anthropologist James Clifford seems to mean when he writes that “difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth” in our increasingly interrelated world (1988:14). Despite attempts to work through complex differences in the Detroit area, Arab-Israeli conflict continues and is intensified within the broader context of U.S. involvement in the Middle East. The continued boycott of the Sheik Restaurant can be seen as misplaced anger (Mikkelson 2001a; Luckerman 2001), but even more, as a disturbing reminder of the intricate connections between here and there, a supplemental pattern of social conflict that resists premature healing, even as all the attempts to end it must continue.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Labyrinths are usually in the form of a circle with a meandering but purposeful path, from the edge to the center and back out again, large enough to be walked into.

—Lauren Artress (1995)

In conceptualizing the 2002 legend forum at the American Folklore Society meetings in Rochester, New York, Linda Dégh asked participants, “Where do we go from here?” My answer has been that we, especially rumor and legend specialists, need to go into the labyrinth, to take that “meandering but purposeful path from the edge to the center and back out again,” to examine and present in whatever more or less partial ways we can the complexity and richness of lived transactions, whether in oral, print, or Internet forms of communication in all their convolutions. Our conceptions of cultural or folk groupings and their interactions need to diversify at the very moment we are speaking of anonymous transactions on the information superhighway. We need to continue and, in fact, intensify tracing communication exchanges even when those exchanges are exploding on the Internet. And our analyses need to be as complex and as rich as the data we examine whether we reach full conclusions or not.

I envision performance-oriented studies of narratives as vast arrays of “thick descriptions” with equally thick sociologic analyses intertwining with, but not eliminating, equally important comparative data. Despite a healthy dialectical discussion between the merits of performance and comparative research in rumor and legend studies (Dégh 2001:88–97; Brunvand 2003), the need for interwoven analyses of oral and electronic communication remains, prefigured by Dégh’s summary statement that “storytellers in the same community constitute an intricate network” (1995:8). I refigure Elliott Oring’s call for a holistic model for examining folk narratives in individual, situational, cultural, and comparative contexts nested within each other (1986:130–45) as a labyrinth, which “sparks the human imagination and introduces it to the kaleidoscopic patterning that builds a sense of relationship: one person to another, to another, to many people, to creation as a whole” however contradictory and painful that sense may be (Artress 1995:xii).
I would like to thank Sharon Luckerman, staff writer for the Detroit Jewish News, who first brought the "Celebrating Arabs" rumor’s Detroit connections to my attention. Luckerman’s interviews with individuals in both the Jewish and Arab communities in the Greater Metropolitan Detroit Area, her gaining access to the legal documents in the case through the Freedom of Information Act, and our ongoing discussions form a good part of the data base. I, in fact, am a shadow ethnographer, pulling her work into the critical discussion here. Our discussion extends an earlier study of the transmission of Detroit rumors/legends and race (Langlois 1983).

1. Participants in the double forum included Kay Turner, Martha Cooper, Nathan Lyons, Steve Zeitlin, Ilana Harlow, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbie Zelizer, Julia Hirsch, and Robert Baron.

2. I jump into the vexed relationship of "rumor" and "legend" here by noting the two terms’ different disciplinary histories. "Rumor" has been more often used in sociological studies, while "legend" has been more often used in folkloristic studies. More recently, researchers have used the terms either interchangeably or as related in some way. In this discussion, I use "rumor" as "information not yet verified when communicated" but potentially an "incipient legend." "Legend" then is a more fully elaborated narrative (see Mullen 1972; Fine and Turner 2001:6-8; Byrd 2002). I argue, through implication, that rumor can be elaborated into legendary accounts if fuller research into its contexts is conducted; the terms are interchangeable in transmission and will be so used.


4. See http://www.snopes.com/rumors/israel.htm for discussion of the conspiracy theory regarding the alleged 4,000 Israelis not going to the World Trade Center towers on September 11. The "Celebrating Arabs" rumor will be discussed throughout this article (see Mikkelson 2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

5. Both the Sheik restaurant’s name and its owner’s name are used because they have been reported in local and national news, making them a matter of public record. Hachem had a second restaurant, also named the Sheik, located in a less-affluent western suburb, Livonia, which closed, presumably due to the rumor, and a third restaurant, which opened in the new MacNamara terminal for Northwest Airlines at Detroit Metro Airport under a new name, The Mediterranean Grill, presumably for the same reason.

6. Although staff at the Detroit Jewish News currently use the 96,000 figure, Kurt Metzger, the Director of the Michigan Metropolitan Information Center, Center for Urban Studies, College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs, Wayne State University, notes that a local Jewish area study, conducted in 1990, estimated approximately 96,000–100,000 Jewish-Americans living in metro Detroit and, even though the study needs updating, “We can stick with that 100,000 number even today.” Metzger also notes the great controversy with a 2002 National Jewish survey that showed a drop in the national numbers related to the whole issue concerning who is a Jew and what constitutes Jewishness, and that the 2000 U.S. census data do not help because there is no question on religion.

7. The text of the e-mail is drawn from an appendix of a complaint-with-jury-demand Hachem filed (State of Michigan 2002). The same simple text is replicated in full or in part in most of the media accounts discussed here, although the date of the initial mailing is contested.

8. A Detroit News article names five Oakland County residents as codefendants in the lawsuit, served August 30, 2002, giving their full names, and traces the initial oral transmission of the rumor in a more complicated way. In this account, one woman told her male friend about seeing the Sheik employees cheering, who told his mother, a doctor, who then told Dr. Tannenbaum, who then passed it on to his mother-in-law (see Brand-Williams 2002).

9. The name of the synagogue is not mentioned because it is not a matter of public record. Information about the synagogue is drawn from its web site (see also Luckerman 2001–2004).

10. Fine and Turner criticize this metaphorical perception of rumor’s spread: “Rumor, particularly as it emerges during crisis episodes, is frequently described by metaphors associated with riots, notably that of an out-of-control fire. The expression that ‘rumor spreads like wildfire’ is a cliché. Scholars have long
noted that rumors often fuel riots. We also hear of rumors spreading, erupting, and igniting. The metaphor is tenacious and appealing in part because the rumors that emerge during crises can do as much damage as fire" (2001:31–2).


13. Gary Alan Fine and Irfan Khawaja note that there is “substantial evidence that some Arabs in the Middle East did celebrate the attacks joyously and this was caught on film by CNN, although there was a claim, apparently false, that the footage shown was old images from the 1991 Gulf War” (in press; see also Mikkelson 2001c). Ironically in this regard, Reuters and CNN refuted the rumor that “Celebrating Palestinians” was a media hoax with as much intensity as they refuted the rumor that “Celebrating Arabs” occurred in Greater Metro Detroit (Mikkelson 2001c).

14. Three such attempts include hosting the first international conference of Arab and Jewish business leaders, the Arab-American organization Seeds of Peace invitation for former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to speak in the Detroit area, and a joint Arab-American and Jewish-American women’s organization to speak of members’ differences.

15. Hopefully careful not to fall into the part-for-the-whole thinking parodied in an Onion article spoofing Indian/Pakistan conflict that was replicated in a Detroit Amoco gas station/food mart (“Indo-Pakistani Tensions Mount at Local Amoco” 2002). I merge Jacques Derrida’s concept of “supplément” as something culturally residual with Victor Turner’s concept of narrative capturing social conflicts that cannot be resolved (Sarup 1993:38–9; Turner 1976, 1980). I thank Wayne State University colleague Les Brill for the Onion reference.

16. The image I evoke comes from the 2001 Australian-German film Lantana, (directed by Ray Lawrence) in which the convoluted roots and branches of the Lantana tree figure both literally and symbolically in its depictions of complex adult lives that critic Leonard Maltin calls “beautifully nuanced at every turn.”

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