I have thus far highlighted sociological and theoretical issues to generate topics of discussion. I raised these issues in the service of exploring a conceptual Arab American Studies, an undertaking that likely would be developed with some, perhaps considerable, emphasis on literature and literary study. It might be useful, then, to bridge the gap between area study and literary criticism before producing specific fictive analysis.

An Arab American Studies could be rendered comprehensive by virtue of its mere existence, by which I mean its ability to serve as a palimpsest of multidisciplinary inquiry—something of a metaphoric safehouse in which those pursuing some type of academic work in Arab America can attach that work to preexisting scholarship, all of it in turn contributing fluidly or discordantly to a common area study. This body of scholarship would underpin curricular questions and pedagogical imperatives. The point, in my mind, ultimately is to search out something palpable despite its probable inconsistencies, something that can be nurtured from the inside and perceived from the outside as an Arab American Studies. An Arab American Studies, in short, requires a perpetual sustenance.

Arab American literatures produced in the past twenty years encapsulate an extraordinary range of communal ethos and issues, both cultural and political. Although this point implies that critical analysis might commence from the ability of literature to illuminate sociologica rather than through identification of its artistic expressions, I have in mind instead the unusual thematic groundings evident in Arab
American literatures, which can be drawn out and assessed alongside communal ethos and issues in order to illustrate that social evolution in Arab America has visibly influenced literary production in the same community. Thomas Keenan has observed that “literature is not simply a matter of novels and poems, not a given body of work, but a question of reading, its strategies, difficulties, and conditions.” If this observation is correct, then it would be foolish to seek the purity of a literary text because, even beyond the archaic truisms of New Criticism, we must acknowledge that organic and everyday experience underline both textual production and reception, especially in ethnic minority communities whose daily concerns often become literary phenomena.

We can take, for example, the Israel–Palestine conflict, a long-standing imbroglio that has been central to the coalescence of an Arab American entity and has for many decades provided much of the cultural and political substance of Arab America. It should be no surprise, then, that the Israel–Palestine conflict is inscribed thematically in a great amount of Arab American literature, including that of major authors such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Nathalie Handal, Edward Said, Diana Abu-Jaber, D.H. Melhem, Samuel Hazo, Fawaz Turki, and Suheir Hammad. Looking at these inscriptions, however, doesn’t merely inform us that the Israel–Palestine conflict is at least sometimes on the minds of such authors; it informs us rather that the Israel–Palestine conflict is essential culturally to these authors and thus a perfectly normal thing for them to explore sometimes when they choose to produce art. The literary critic in turn can say, not without some controversy but nonetheless with confidence, that it is unnecessary to incessantly compartmentalize politics and art in analysis of ethnic literatures because the politics inevitably become cultural, just as the culture becomes politicized even without the aid of specific politics. That is to say, even the most political and politicized dimensions of world affairs such as the Israel–Palestine conflict manage to carve out attendant cultural paradigms that when expressed in literature often are mistaken for advocacy or polemics but that in reality demonstrate a cultural exposition no more threatening politically than exploring a pastoral childhood in Appalachia or infusing colors and musical choices with symbolism—all cultural items, these, but never neutral, and therefore never apolitical.

I would argue, therefore, that it is possible to extract a sociological epistemology from literature without ignoring its aesthetic integrity. Such an epistemology is pertinent to any contemplation of the role literary criticism might play in illuminating Arab America and ultimately