

REVIEW

Arab and Arab American Feminist Narratives

By Triana Kazaleh Sirdenis

Arab and Arab American Feminisms:

Gender, Violence, and Belonging

Edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber

Syracuse University Press, 2010, 408 pages, \$45 hardback.

NEARLY TEN YEARS in the making, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* gathers activists, artists and academics to give voice to the most rapidly changing and complex issues in the Arab world. It builds upon the work of Joe Kadi's *Food for Our Grandmothers* and Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab*, two pioneering Arab feminist anthologies.

Arab and Arab American Feminisms is based on "theory of the flesh," or the powerful narrative based lens for critically analyzing our social and political world. This anthology guides you through nuanced understandings of Arab perspectives and identities, presenting an unparalleled breadth of experience.

The book focuses on several themes: defying given categories and re-defining others, living within empire, the centrality of Palestine, and exploring themes of diaspora, home and homelands. It speaks to the post-9/11 political and social climate within which Arab (and Muslim) communities exist, thrive, and struggle.

Woven through the anthology are the poetic voices of word mavens Suheir Hammad, Dunya Mikhail, Amal Hassan Fadlalla and others. Hammad bursts open the first section of the book, "Living With/ Within Empire," with her poem *Beyond Words*, which was performed in front of many government officials. Her lyrical tenderness wrapped in the explosiveness of her words, opening with a call out to the pain of war and apartheid, is a powerful beginning.

Youma Chlala's piece, *Between the Lines*, beautifully unfolds the second section of the book, "Defying Categories." She gives voices to a well-recognized struggle amongst Arabs, the straddling of multiple worlds. Beirut-born, Chlala describes an artist dealing with this tension as the poem flows back and forth through different locations and histories:

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*Clip a thousand articles about weather
in Beyrouth, like stubborn hairs, stack
in a box without a lid, hope that fire
rescinds memory, moves back rain.
Righteousness in simple acts of solitude.*

Chala closes the poem with "found a pen that belonged to my childhood, a lake in the south, seven tones of blue, green, green, blue," referring to a peacefulness not always found in this reminiscing. (96)

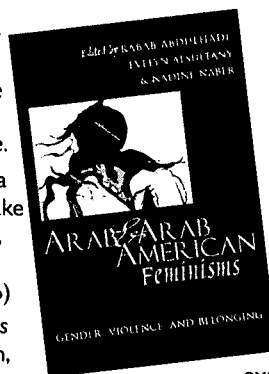
Fadlalla's *The Memory of Your Hands Is a Rainbow* opens the book's final section, "Home and Homelands: Memories, Exile, and Belonging" with this dreamy piece. The inclusion of poetry throughout the book is essential in giving balance to the theoretical, calculated writings. Most importantly, it speaks genuinely to our emotions and struggles in ways that essays often can not.

Racial and Gender Justice

What sets *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* apart is its basis in racial and gender justice, as well as its class analysis. The editors are explicit that this book is written by and for Arab and Arab American women, queer, and transgender people. It also gives voice to other communities seldom brought into this dialogue, such as Arab Jews and people assumed to be, but not necessarily, Arab or Muslim.

Happy/L.A. Hyder's "Dyke March, San Francisco, 2004," is a slice of life piece, shedding light on our heteronormative culture, the misrepresentations of Arab women, and confusions around belly dancing. As if reading from journal entries, Happy/L.A. Hyder guides the reader through a grounded and joyous dance through these misrepresentations and recollections of painful events like the 2006 bombings of Lebanon.

Mohja Kahf's "The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader: How Not to Buy Stereotypes of Muslim Women," is a more analytical representation of the "Defying Categories" section. Similarly, Kyla Wazana Tompkin's essay "History's Traces" offers perspectives of Arab Jews, theorizing an existence based on experiences of diaspora instead of Zionism. These theoretical components of *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* are at times dense but give a necessary ideological grounding, one that may help propel this book through the academic world from which it was birthed.



The most digestible pieces are the interviews, offering perspective and theory in an informal tone, such as Naber's interviews with Anan Ameri of the Arab American National Museum and Joe Kadi. The latter is especially rich, not only because of Kadi's depth of

experience and the production of *Food for Our Grandmothers*, but because it fully encompasses many of our hopes: gender, environmental, and economic justice.

Kadi's work is so visionary because of its completeness:

...Environmental issues are so connected to all other issues — you can't fully make sense of what imperialism did in the Arab world without understanding the environmental degradation that went along with that. You can't make sense of pollution patterns — such as the locations of toxic-waste dumps — in this country if you don't take a hard look at race and class demographics. (247)

Pieces like this are the heart of *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*, calling out for the more nuanced understanding of feminisms or gender justice that the editors propose.

The section "Activist Communities: Representation, Resistance, and Power" illustrates translations of the book's concepts into action. Noura Erakat's "Arabiya Made Invisible" speaks to the struggles of anti-apartheid campus organizing and the silencing of dissent by University of California-Berkeley's Zionist student organizations. This piece is fiery and rightfully so. Erakat gives voice to the weakening tactic of many Jewish organizations to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, but also explains how challenging it is for people of color to be in solidarity with one another.

Other selections give valuable lessons and observations of organizing within activist communities. This section ties theory and political analysis with our everyday experiences on the ground.

The book assumes an audience with a political analysis of Arab culture and history. The reader must also have some familiarity

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Abraham shows how the “containment system” occasionally works effectively to delay news of potentially sensationalistic events, like the arrest of a strangely behaving Arab man with a gun in a Dearborn park, while occasionally overreacting, for example, by censoring free expression of views on American foreign policy in a high school newspaper. This kind of serious and open examination characterizes most of the collection’s essays.

Uneasy Relations

The editors and contributors devote considerable attention to the uneasy relationship between Arab Detroit’s institutions and officials of local and federal governmental bodies, especially the Department of Justice and the FBI, as Arab and Muslim Detroit was, in Howell and Shryock’s words, “transformed, by an elaborate array of legal and extralegal means, into a domestic front in the Bush administration’s War on Terror.” The Justice Department’s Mark Corallo (who would later play such an infamous role in prosecuting local Arabs), said that the Detroit-area investigation was “the largest... in the history of the United States.” (71, 73)

In addition to enduring dramatically increased FBI surveillance and diminished rights and privileges, many established organizations, actually received increased financial support with which, among many activities, they provided “sensitivity training for... the very law enforcement agencies that monitor the Arab community.”

In 2002 a Muslim religious leader remarked that his Dearborn congregation had seen “more positive developments after September 11 than negative ones” because of the increased demand for information about Islam. (71, 72)

This uneasy relationship continued in the rest of the decade. In their 2009 essay (an excerpt from a larger piece), Howell and Jamal examine the “mix of opportunity and constraint” that accompanied the increased attention to Arab Detroit from federal law enforcement agencies and then ask:

If Arab Detroit’s exceptional nature sheltered it from angry, intolerant individuals bent on

revenge, did it also protect Arab Americans from ill-informed federal agents who saw culprits and conspirators around every corner? Did it situate Detroit’s Arab organizations to capitalize on new economic and cultural possibilities that followed (and were part of) the backlash or did it force them to redirect their energies toward defensive educational and legal campaigns? Did it empower Arab Americans to influence policy on the national level now that many Arab ethnic associations were working closely with federal agencies? (88)

The unprecedented, if misdirected, “probe” of Arab Detroit as a possible source of terrorist activities encouraged local Arabs to inform on one another, recruited them as translators, invited organizations to participate in a task force to establish “best practices” for questioning Arab and Muslim noncitizens, and in other ways attempted to build trust and confidence in federal law enforcement.

As Mark Corallo was pursuing his ill-fated prosecution of suspected terrorist cells in Dearborn, the CIA became a sponsor of the East Dearborn Arab International Festival, “its information booth,” the authors wryly observe, “conspicuous [amid] the falafel stands and carnival rides.” (93) Howell and Jamal question whether the benefits of these relationships in any way compensate for their liabilities.

In “Domestic Foreign Policy: Arab Detroit as a Special Place in the War on Terror,” William Youmans argues that the identification of Arab Detroit “as a special place in the fight against anti-American militancy is fictive, that it came out of purely symbolic interpretations of the place, rather than material realities or actual connections to the attacks of September 11.” (269)

Youmans asserts that the “special place myth” was advanced by “frenemies” (“enemies who share mutual commitments”) including not only governmental agencies and law enforcement entities, the media and right-wing anti-Arab activists, but also established elements of the Arab Detroit community seeking to work the system, take advantage of the opportunity to educate and

inform, put their own slants on post-9/11 developments, and attract needed resources to carry out their missions.

While perpetuating the myth brings some advantages to Arab Detroit and its representatives, Youmans suggests, it also places them in competition with one another for these advantages, and adherence to a fallacy advanced by those with agendas that are antithetical to the community’s interests perpetuates other mischaracterizations ultimately harmful to Arab Detroiters.

Sally Howell’s “Muslims as Moving Targets: External Scrutiny and Internal Critique in Detroit’s Mosques” extends the “special place” myth to its inhabitants, who “have achieved a kind of sustained visibility that is highly contradictory.” They prove that America is free and tolerant and that Arabs/Muslims can accept democratic values, while assimilating into Western culture. On the other hand, they show that blessings of U.S. democracy do not apply to groups regarded by the government and its citizens “as the enemy/outsider within.” (152)

Using three case studies, Howell illustrates the ways in which interactions between the FBI and the growing number of Detroit area mosques have not only increased Muslims’ suspicion of the U.S. government, but also intensified divisions within the community. The third case study examines the conflicting reactions of local Arab Muslims to one dramatic event: the FBI’s killing of Imam Luqman Ameen Abdullah, a Black Muslim cleric, in Dearborn on October 28, 2009.

Diverging Communities and Identities

The Detroit area’s Christian congregations and cultural institutions, Matthew W. Stiffler and Yasmeen Hamoosh show, operating without such intense surveillance have continued, if not increased, their pre-9/11 growth. These comparatively affluent, established communities have long experience of negotiating their hyphenated status: part “other”—part “American.” While still affected by 9/11, they are more separated by time, space, religion, class, and disposition from other segments of “Arab Detroit.”

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with intersectionality, Orientalism, and the myth of post-racial America. After the introduction, elementary breakdowns of complex terms are hard to find. This is the one drawback of the text; a portion of it is written in highly academic language. At times, it has trouble explaining complicated issues in a simple way, an ability few feminist writers have mastered.

Despite the complexity of the writing, it speaks to a multiplicity of experiences, breaking away from the fixed lens in which academia often views Arab women. And

again, this lens should not just be about Arab women, so it is with great significance that *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* centers gender justice and includes perspectives by transgender Arabs.

Since this collection was released in the midst of the Arab Spring, the biggest question that remains is: What would *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* look like had it been written in 2012, after this unfolding had begun? Would the same pieces be included? What would be said about the power dynamics of the uprisings and the

“leaderless,” or rather leader-full, structures of these movements?

What do we take from movements that center self-determination and sovereignty but fail to address sexual assault and harassment? In what ways has media uplifted and impeded our efforts? What have we learned from misrepresentations of Arab women and transgender people during this past year? While everything changes rapidly in the Arab world, this last year alone begs for a new body of text, one as empowering and thoughtfully written as this one. §

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