

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*, New York: NYU Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780814758861(cloth); ISBN: 9780814758878 (paper)

Orientalist discourses and simplified stereotypes of Arab culture and politics are deeply enmeshed in foreign policies, popular culture, and everyday practices the US. Numerous studies of media representations and discourse analysis have documented the banality and harmfulness of such negative discourses and practices for Arab Americans (Little 2002; Shaheen 2008; Abraham *et al.* 2011). Recognizing and documenting these issues is necessary, but dismantling them is a slightly different goal. Arguably, one of the most effective ways to break out of pernicious generalizations is to humanize the people that are subject to them. Through an ethnographic study of life in the San Francisco Bay Area for members of the Arab diaspora, Nadine Naber's *Arab America* provides a unique and powerful contribution to studies of Arab Americans. Stemming from a transnational feminist perspective, Naber's book is based on four years of in-depth research on this Arab American community. Naber was also raised in the Bay Area Arab community and thus places her own lifelong experience within her research. The book focuses on activist organization and on young, often second generation Arab Americans with lineage primarily to Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. The intimate details that Naber uses to tell the stories of different Bay Area Arab Americans elucidates the diversity of this community and the politics of identity there. The reader learns not just about Arab Americans, but about the personal lives of Mai, Dahlia, and Aisha, for example. By providing lesser heard narratives, Naber's book is tremendously promising for humanizing Arab Americans and working to break down common stereotypes about a singular Arab people.

In five substantive chapters (about 250 pages of text), Naber weaves together arguments about the politics of Arab American culture. She argues that Arab culture is not something to be located or defined, but something that is continually constructed and articulated. Naber recognizes that Arab culture seems to have some cultural and historic rootedness, and indeed

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many of her interlocutors told a “similar story” (p.5) about their perceived ideals and distinctions between Arab and American culture. Thus, Naber frames Arab American culture as structured, but also fluid. Naber explicates this argument by focusing on how Arab American identity is framed by experiences of migration and displacement. She focuses specifically on how the lives of Arab Americans are wrapped within US geopolitics and imperialism abroad, as well as in anti-Arab orientalist discourses and practices at home.

The first chapter of *Arab America* provides historical context on the Arab migrant community in the Bay Area. Naber tells stories of what she calls the “model minority”, or Arab migrants who came to the Bay Area between the 1950s and 1970s and became a part of the American middle-class. These mostly first generation migrants have many levels of identity associated with, for example, their home country and religion; but as Arab nationalism became influential back in their homeland, a generalized loyalty to the Arab world became a central part of their American identity too. Then, as early as the 1960s, with evolving US geopolitics and involvement in the Arab world and Middle East, this model minority was reframed as “a problem” in America. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Arab Americans were often viewed as threats or potential terrorists. Naber’s elucidates how some Arab Americans’ lives and businesses were affected by this shifting discourse, and how some of them hid their Arab identity in order to avoid being harassed. However, in the 1990s, the same discourse that framed Arab Americans as problems also contributed to the growth of Arab American politics. US sanctions on Iraq, the Gulf War, the Palestinian intifada(s), and later 9/11, fueled a sense of community and political mobilization for Bay Area Arab Americans.

With this background set, Naber then complicates the idea of a singular or authentic Arab culture. She discusses how and why some Arab Americans have maintained traditions that reify orientalist conceptions of Arab culture, focusing specifically on the central role of gender (and its intersections with class, religion, and sexuality) in maintaining them. As gender studies has shown, the female body is often framed as the social and biological producer of culture, and it is

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thus often protected and controlled as cultures transform (Mayer 2000; Ramaswamy 2010). In this context, an authentic Arab culture hinges on the image of Arab women as subordinate and sexually pure. Naber continues to argue that gendered norms and performances of Arab culture, both in the household and in the broader community, intersect with other patriarchal norms like heterosexual standards, parental involvement in children's lives, and an emphasis on family and community. Yet, these norms are perceived by Naber and many of her young interlocutors not as part of some authentic or longstanding Arab culture, but as a way for an Arab culture to be kept distinct from an American one. Ideals of family, gender, and sexuality are powerful in working towards bifurcating Arab culture from American culture. Arab females, for example, are viewed to have virtue compared to "promiscuous" American females, and as such female bodies become a signifier between Arab and American. The binary of "good Arab girl" versus "bad American girl" parallels "good Arab" and "bad American". However, as Naber asserts throughout her book, these cultural ideals are not static or essential, but instead are constituted by American and European orientalist discourses and geopolitics. Naber's detailed stories of Arab American's views on family and gender elucidates how different Arab Americans inherit cultural norms and categories, and then remake them within their local American contexts. Stories of second generation Arab Americans struggling with parental and cultural expectation of how they should dress and whom they should date illuminate the everyday lives of Arab Americans as heterogeneous and changing. Thus, we see that Arab culture is, again, not homogeneous.

The third chapter addresses the role of religion and particularly Islam for Arab Americans in the Bay Area. Naber argues that in the 1990s, as US imperialism spread throughout the Muslim world and as Islamophobic discourses (a view that Muslims are a threat and to be feared) became more common in the US, Islam became an important identifier for Arab Americans. Indeed, in these contexts, many Arab Americans rearticulated their identity as Muslim first, and Arab second. Through her detailed accounts of young Muslim-Arab Americans, Islam is characterized not as some innate and static religion, but as a being flexible and shaped by both

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migration to the US and by political changes occurring in homeland countries. In this chapter, Naber also begins to delve into activism. Within the contexts of US imperialism and Islamophobic discourses, many Arab Americans engaged with activism in order to counter negative discourses about Islam (as well as to protest US policies in Iraq and Palestine).

The fourth and fifth chapters discuss how several Arab American women negotiate reified but also changing ideas of being Arab American. Drawing on her involvement with female Arab American activists working in the Leftist Arab Movement (LAM), Naber examines the internal politics and social inequalities that exist within this activist organization. Through the detailed stories of six female members of LAM, we see how the movement often facilitated the same gendered and heterosexual norms that are pervasive in the wider Arab American community. LAM's political goals focus predominately on external issues like the war in Iraq and Islamophobia, and therefore the organization frequently relegates internal issues of gender and sexual inequality to the margins. However, through a more focused discussion of grassroots activism and artwork, Naber shows how some of LAM's political work embraces feminist and queer anti-imperialist frameworks, which ultimately challenge pervasive gendered and heterosexual norms. Naber concludes by calling for a "diasporic Arab feminist critique" (p.249) as a perspective that allow us to examine how religion, family, gender, and sexuality intersect with each other as well as with historical, political, and economic discourses to create localized and varied performances of Arab culture.

Naber's book, like any good book, opens up as many questions as it answers. As such, my concerns about Naber's work stem mostly from missed opportunities. First, some broader discussion of migrant histories and politics in North America would have helped to contextualize the Arab American experience more broadly. Norms of the patriarchal family and the purity of women are central for many people and groups throughout the US (and the world); without discussing broader trends, Naber teeters on framing Arab Americans as unique. Another concern is that Naber's work is limited to Arab Americans in the Bay Area (a place where activism is

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relatively common—see, for example, Walker 2008). Might the politics of Arab culture of Dearborn, MI, Los Angeles or Washington DC be different? Similarly, her interlocutors trace their lineage primarily to the states of Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, which excludes Arabs from northern Africa and the Gulf. What insights could Naber have made about the internal politics of Arab culture by including a broader sample of Arab Americans? Naber also missed the opportunity to discuss the “Arab Spring”. Though her book was likely in production by the time revolutions began in Tunisia in late 2010, some commentary about this “Arab” movement abroad that certainly had ramifications for Arab Americans seems warranted. Conceptually, Naber frequently highlights the stringency of heterosexual norms for Arab Americans, but queer narratives, unlike gendered ones, are quite limited in the book. Thus Naber challenges gendered discourses articulately and with depth, whereas challenges to heterosexual discourses are much less developed. Lastly, one of Naber’s main arguments is that US imperial actions abroad coalesce with homeland and local politics, but the categories of homeland and locality are not critiqued or developed. Thus some discussion on theories of de-/re-territorialization and about the role of territory for the Arab diaspora would have had great appeal to geographers.

In summary, *Arab America* is a well researched and unique contribution to studies on Arab American cultural politics specifically, as well as activist organizations, diasporic populations, and the politics of identity more broadly. Drawing from a transnational feminist framework, this book provides unique insights into the complexities of lives that are often marginalized. Naber’s book is a welcome contribution to geography, adding to calls in feminist geopolitics to be more attentive to personal stories of everyday experiences (see Hyndman 2007; Pain 2009). Further, as there is a need for more humanizing literature on Arabs and Arab Americans, Naber’s book provides rich and intimate narratives that can help to dismantle pervasive stereotypes. I highly recommend this book for upper-level undergraduate courses and

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graduate studies, and because of its ability to humanize Arab Americans I am hopeful that Naber's work might also be made accessible to broader audiences too.

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