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## Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism

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everything, to start with; in addition, there are specific process structures that orient the narrators in their self-directed search for an answer to the very broad and wide-open question they have been asked to consider. In the specific case study on European identity, the respondents' prompting stimulus was something along the lines of "the ways in which Europe plays a role in the lives of people" (p. 26). As the informants were encouraged to tell their whole story, it was up to them to construct the narrative and select what and how much they wanted to say.

In terms of data analysis too, autobiographical narrative interviews present notable complexities. For the Euroidentities project, the research team evaluated the biographical content of the interviews through sequential structural analysis, although other analytical methods were also explored, including the biographical-narrative interpretative method, narrative ethnography, and the social constructivist approach. In the end, the variety (albeit all belonging to a similar tradition) of analytical procedures and methodological approaches that the researchers applied were meant to bring to the fore the multidimensional aspects of individual biographies and highlight the complex dynamics linking the individual and the social world. According to the authors, the biographical methods open up a whole field of knowledge that other approaches can only approximate; they also allow bridging the gap between structure and agency, an old theoretical and methodological dilemma that has never been put to rest.

The volume engages in an exceptionally thorough explanation of biographical methods, and for those who are interested in this qualitative approach the book will be a must read. For other readers concerned with identity and Europe, however, this methodological emphasis might be more than they asked for, while they will still find the substantive discussion a bit lacking. No doubt, the book raises thought-provoking points on European identity; it rightly encourages us to consider the European dimension of identity formation as still under construction, and the idea the authors put forward of a "European mental space" as

a tool to think about Europeanization is also a stimulating contribution. Yet the book does not delve deeply into these subjects nor does it offer a historical background on the European question. From this point of view, it will hardly satisfy those looking to understanding the general parameters of the issue. For an in-depth analysis of European identity, those readers will have to look somewhere else.

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*Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*, by **Nadine Naber**. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012. 310pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9780814758878.

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The post-9/11 era has seen a flurry of academic interest in the Muslim diaspora to North America and Western Europe. Although based on research in the 1990s, Nadine Naber's *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* is representative of a stream of critical writings that have been prominent in this literature. Indeed, to those familiar with the burgeoning scholarship on Muslim diasporas, the theoretical themes of her book will not come as too much of a surprise. Rather than new conceptual insights, the book's particular strength lies in the multilayered portrait it offers of the history and development of Arab American community life.

*Arab America* is based on observations and 108 interviews conducted by Naber in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1990s with immigrants and second-generation young adults from Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. It is also informed by the author's own experiences of growing up as an Arab American in the Bay area, including her participation in progressive community forums such as the Leftist Arab movement. This is, as Naber proclaims, a "self-reflexive and auto-ethnographic" (p. 248) work in which her own identity as a feminist and progressive activist receives close and deliberate attention. Throughout the book, she also employs the useful strategy of citing other studies, drawn from critical scholarship on

Muslim diasporas, to back up her ideas. But what is missing and might have even further extended the scope of the book is more general information on Arab Americans in the San Francisco Bay area. What is the socioeconomic profile of the community and how does it compare to those in other parts of the United States? Lacking was information on a wider range of political organizations which would better locate and explain the significance for the community of such groups as the Leftist Arab movement.

The first chapter of the book, titled "From Model Minority to Problem Minority" offers a useful account of the history of Arab Americans. This history, Naber contends, is rooted in the late twentieth to early twenty-first century expansion of the U.S. empire in the Arab region through its programs of neoliberal economic expansion and military interventions. The author describes the growing vilification of Arab Americans with the 1970s oil crisis, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the rise of U.S.-led military interventions in the Middle East, disrupting their hitherto unblemished minority image in the United States. Throughout the book, she argues for the need to understand histories of diaspora in relation to those of empire.

The second chapter, titled "The Politics of Cultural Authenticity," takes up what is perhaps the central conceptual problematic of the book. Rooted in the dynamics of Western and more specifically U.S. empire, Orientalist notions that reify Arab culture and its distinctiveness are often also affirmed by Arab American communities and families. The Arab American community is thus marked by a politics of cultural authenticity in which members are asked to conform to certain static ideas of Arab culture that are compatible with those of liberal multiculturalism and middle-class status in the United States. Echoing a theme that has been noted by other immigration scholars (see Espiritu 2003; Purkayastha 2005), Naber describes how women and girls are viewed as vessels and representatives of authentic Arab culture, a role that results in a particular set of pressures and sanctions on them. She writes of the articulation of Arab cultural identity through "the triangulated ideal of the good Arab family, good Arab girls, and compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 65). Arab American girls and

women who transgress community norms are subject to criticisms of disloyalty, not only to their families but also to the larger Arab community.

The third chapter, "Muslim First, Arab Second," describes the emergence of a global Muslim political consciousness and discourse of Muslim social justice among second-generation Arab Americans. The development of a "Muslim first" identification that prioritizes Muslim over ethnic and national affiliations has been widely reported in studies of Muslim diaspora communities in the West. Naber notes the back-and-forth movement between Orientalist and anti-Orientalist discourses that have marked this development. For second-generation Arab Americans, Islam offers a framework for creating meaningful community and contending with the structures of empire and racism that undergird their lives. It also offers a way of contesting narratives of Arab cultural authenticity as young Arab Americans present Islam as a counter-narrative that offers a guide for behavior that supersedes the authority of Arab culture. However, in the course of doing so, they also idealize Muslim community and identity, drawing it in fixed and static terms.

In the fourth and fifth chapters of the book, Naber offers an account of the strategies and conflicts of the Leftist Arab Movement in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1990s. She begins her analysis with in-depth accounts from six Arab American women about their participation and experiences in the movement. These accounts describe the history of the movement and its ongoing struggles. For the activist women and for Naber herself, the problem is how to incorporate a diasporic anti-imperialist feminist approach into these forums.

*Arab America* offers a useful account of the complexities of Arab American community development and politics. Those wanting to know more about Muslim diaspora communities and feminist organizing within them will find it of particular interest.

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*Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*, by **Gina Neff**. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012. 195pp. \$32.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780262017480.

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What advice do you give to young folks about jobs? I could tell them I made some investments in my employability, but it is equally true that I mostly muddled through the uncertain career paths of our times. In Frank Knight's classic formulation, efforts to manage "uncertainty" turn it into "risk." This idea is the starting point for *Venture Labor*, Gina Neff's rich study of New York internet workers who embraced risk during the dot-com boom. This internet cluster, known as Silicon Alley, became the site of new forms of media and work. Neff seeks lessons from this first wave of digital startups even as a new wave tries to capitalize on social media, big data and the like. She wants to understand why such workers came to accept the idea that they are individually responsible for managing employment uncertainties. She offers a synthetic account of agency that contributes to debates about the role of calculation in economic action—a position usually in tension with established claims about action's structurally-embedded or culturally-constituted nature.

Chapter One outlines research on risk, work, and technology by showing how managing uncertainty has become a material necessity: government and corporations reduced supports for workers as the economy was being roiled by financialization, unstable demand, and the spread of flexible organization. What Neff wants to probe are cultural factors that have abetted and shaped the taking on of risk. While previous studies have documented broad cultural attitudes glorifying risk, she wants to explore the understandings of new media workers themselves—"narratives, discourses, ways of

talking about risk" (p. 12). Neff's novel claim is that Silicon Alley workers actively embraced risk in their quest for a measure of control and autonomy. Her reasoning is that "risk and risk-taking in economic life now imply active choices while *uncertainty* connotes economic passivity and forces beyond one's own control [emphasis in original]" (p. 15). Neff labels this sort of risk-taking "venture labor"—"the investment of time, energy, human capital, and other personal resources that ordinary employees make in the companies where they work" (p. 16). She uses an array of methods to study venture labor in Silicon Alley from 1996 to 2002: participatory fieldwork, interviews with 54 individuals (e.g., owners and workers), and network mapping of participants in industry social events (over 8,000 participants at some 900 events). Neff also used trade publications to examine how the local industry talked about itself and studied how the mainstream news framed the industry.

The heart of the book is two chapters which analyze how workers sought to manage risk through their narratives and networks. Chapter Three taps Boltanski and Thévenot's work (2006) on the economies of worth to theorize narratives that surfaced in the interviews. In explaining their employment decisions, individual workers drew on different justifications—"personal ways of evaluating the world" (p. 69). Based on what they esteemed in their jobs and careers, they developed different strategies for managing risk. Neff's interviews revealed three strategies for managing risk: "creative, financial, and actuarial" (p. 69). The creative types had liberal arts and fine arts backgrounds while the other two groups were from a mix of content, software and business occupations. The creative strategy (40 percent of interviewees) saw that the creative projects warrant risk taking because success "could lead to further work and career reputations" (p. 83). One interviewee remarked that projects were all she "had to fall back on" if she lost her job (p. 84). A portfolio should express a unique "look" or "voice"; the risk was putting in time for projects that "suck" (p. 85). Many creative types, who typically came to Silicon Alley before the boom began, felt they had "nothing to lose": jobs there often