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Review: Review of "Arab and Arab American Feminisms"

Reviewed Work(s): Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging  
by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber

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Source: *Social Justice*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (122), Community Accountability: Emerging  
Movements to Transform Violence (2011-2012), pp. 139-141

Published by: Social Justice/Global Options

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41478940>

Accessed: 17-05-2017 14:34 UTC

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# Review of *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*

Mejdulene B. Shomali\*

Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber (eds.), *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

**A** *ARAB AND ARAB AMERICAN FEMINISMS* EMERGES AT A CRUCIAL HISTORICAL MOMENT for Arab populations across homelands and diasporas; the popularly dubbed “Arab Spring,” a shorthand moniker for the revolutions that have been sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa, provides a fitting metaphor for the anthology. Both are transnational efforts, both refuse to decentralize the powerful and diverse voices of Arab peoples, both acknowledge the violence of oppression and liberation, and both look forward with a cautious but determined hope. The anthology is remarkable for its depth and scope, with 32 pieces organized in five sections: Living with/in Empire, Defying Categories, Activist Communities, On Our Own Terms, and Home and Homelands. The themes of gender, violence, and belonging appear across all sections, while others emerge organically, including reexaminations of Orientalism (in Nadine Naber’s “Decolonizing Culture”), as well as critical discussions of culture (in Kyla Wazana Tompkins’ “History’s Traces”) and coalition and movement building (in Therese Saliba’s “On Rachel Corrie, Palestine, and Feminist Solidarity”). Several pieces on class and queerness critically discuss class and sexuality, a topic insufficiently addressed in previous Arab and Arab American feminist texts. They provide a point of departure for continuing these lines of inquiry. The anthology frequently returns to Palestine as a central concern for Arabs and Arab Americans. That emphasis is brave and vital in a global context that continues to ignore the decimation of Palestinian lives and lands while the U.S. administration steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the oppressive and repressive policies of the Israeli military and state.

Carefully edited, the selections are multivocal and stretch generic boundaries between “theory” and “creativity,” rendering poetic and narrative works as inherently theoretical and political and recognizing the artistry and affectivity of academic work. In this way, Suheir Hammad’s stunning poem, “Beyond Words,” is as evocative and provocative as Amal Amireh’s analytically driven “Palestinian Women’s Disappearing Acts: The Suicide Bomber Through Western Feminist Eyes.” The broad scope of writing styles—poetry, narrative, interview, and prose—rhetorically

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enacts a refusal of disciplinary divisions that would place the academic, the personal, and the political in separate spaces. Instead, it performs interdisciplinarity across fictionalized public and private spheres, while taking seriously the imperative of intersectionality to examine oppression from multiple standpoints and across numerous axes. The works and authors are concerned with tracing gender across masculinity and femininity, privilege across class and poverty, and violence across material, discursive, and psychic lines. The collection holds violence in tension with gender and belonging, permitting readers to view their cross-pollination: how gender can create (non) belonging, how belonging is sometimes violent, how violence can be in the body or between disparate bodies. As Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber note in the introduction, the anthology is committed to a “theory of the flesh.” It asks, “what would analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and nation look like if we were to center Arab and Arab American women, queer, and transgender experiences” (pp. xxx-xxx). By moving from the inclusion of diverse voices to centering the diversity of the Arab and Arab American experience, the collection fractures essentialist renderings of “Arabness.” One notable example is the editors’ commitment to collapsing the false binary between “Arab” and “Jew,” readily apparent in Alsultany’s interview with Ella Shohat. It undermines essentialism again by taking its titular ampersand seriously, incorporating authors whose work and bodies travel regularly within and across Arab and American spaces.

The collection builds upon a long tradition of Arab and Arab American feminist thought and practice, hailing predecessors like Joe Kadi’s 1994 edited anthology, *Food for Our Grandmothers*, and Evelyn Shakir’s 1997 *Bint Arab*. Since it draws methodologically and conceptually upon work such as Cherríe Moraga’s and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back*, I locate the collection within the genealogy of the women of color feminist project and the transnational feminist project. However, the editors of, and contributors to, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* are keenly aware that when Arab and Arab American women are present at all, their position in women of color feminist texts and politics is sometimes precarious.

The collection questions the ways in which U.S. politics and culture maneuver the absence of Arab or Arab American women’s voices, the contested racial status of Arab and Arab Americans, the invisibility and marginalization of Arab and Arab American political struggles, and the homogenization and reduction of Arab and Arab American culture through tokenistic or hypervisible representations. For example, Noura Erakat’s “*Arabiya Made Invisible*” eloquently discusses the challenges of anti-Zionist organizing in academic spaces, where support for Palestine or discussion of Israeli policy often results in charges of anti-Semitism and concerted efforts to quiet the author’s supposed manifestations of Arabness. Meanwhile, Amira Jarmakani in “Arab American Feminisms” and Alsultany in “Stealth Muslim” consider how the emphasis on veiling and similar “Arab” icons, such as the *kufiya*, circumscribes authorial voices and affects legibility and legitimacy inside and outside Arab and Muslim communities.

As it engages those themes with expansive breadth, the anthology's audience is capacious. It is pertinent to feminist activists/scholars, offering multiple methodological and strategic models to better understand the complexities and nuances of oppression. *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* is a ferocious and fecund site of highly accessible theory and practice.