

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide by Steven Salaita

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“Remember everything they never learned./ Offer to take them to the library” (53). Majaj’s poems perform this role precisely: they illuminate the cracks that often keep people from learning and understanding the past and present realities of the Arab world and its diaspora. Majaj’s arresting poems serve this purpose by bringing the reader into the light.

Steven Salaita. *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader’s Guide*
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011. Paperback \$19.95

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In this brief survey of several Arab American novels, stories, and writers, Steven Salaita provides a preliminary schema with which to regard the recent upsurge of Arab American fictions. The development of the literary genre of fiction is adding breadth and depth to the already strong body of literature loosely bound under the same category. Salaita provides an important entrée into Arab American literary criticism in this text, which follows an earlier and similar project by the same author, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Culture, and Politics* (2007). Both works ask readers to think critically about Arab American cultural production and give models to do so.

In the introduction, Salaita speculates briefly on what constitutes “Arab American,” noting that while such a delineation might be troubling or limiting, it is ultimately instructive for scholars and teachers who seek to think and teach the presence of Arabs in the Americas. As Arab American studies begins to emerge as a recognizable field in the academic and popular cultures of the United States, the question of who and what is included under the banner of “Arab American” will continually resurface. While not exhaustive, Salaita suggests some tentative guidelines for sussing out the Arab in American literature: “creative work produced by American authors of Arab origin and that participates, in a conscious way or through critical reception, in a category that has come to be known as ‘Arab American Literature’” (4). He later notes that the genre “is a *political* category, not a cultural or historical given” (7). In some ways, this definition is self evident, but one does not need to look too long before recognizing the potential ambiguity inherent within it. Do we take Arab origins to mean from the “Arab” world, the 22 Arab nations? What, precisely, is an Arab American author? Is one “American” by citizenship? Is one American if he is several generations removed from immigration? What does conscious participation in Arab American literature look like? If an author does

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not consider herself participating in such a tradition, can a critic hail her into it? If so, does this process of identifying against authorial desire constitute a violence or violation of that author? If politicization is inherent to the genre, do we risk ignoring cultural, historical, and aesthetic elements that may irrigate it? Does calling this ethnic canon “political” assume the apoliticization of “non-ethnic” texts? These questions, of course, are broader than Salaita’s work per se, but ones he is clearly cognizant of throughout the monograph. Indeed, the definition he provides, which I site above, is porous enough that Salaita knowingly undermines it twice.

Setting aside the broad question of what defines “Arab American,” the monograph continues with eight additional chapters, which function as short essays introducing and commenting on thematically grouped texts. “Uses of the Lebanese Civil War in Arab American Fiction” focuses on the work of Etel Adnan, Rawi Hage, and Patricia Sarrafian Ward. “Exploring Islam(s) in America” provides a detailed engagement with Mohja Kahf’s *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, while “Sex, Violence, and Storytelling” takes up Rabih Alameddine’s three earliest novels in chronological order. The fifth theme, “The Eternity of Immigration,” switches away from the genre of the novel to study the short story collections of Joseph Geha, Francis Khirallah Noble, Evelyn Shakir, and Susan Muaddi Darraj. “Promised Lands and Unfulfilled Promises” focuses on a single author, Leila Halaby, while “Crescent Moons, Jazz Music, and Feral Ethnicity” takes up the work of Diana Abu Jaber. The penultimate theme, “From the Maghreb to the American Mainstream,” looks toward the work of three North African writers: Anour Majid, Laila Lalami, and Samia Serageldin. Finally, true to its name, “Potpurri” puts the eclectic styles of Randa Jarrar, Alicia Erian, and Susan Abulhawa in conversation. All told, Salaita looks at 17 writers and well over 17 texts. The breadth is impressive while his thematic grouping and observations throughout provide some basic frameworks for approaching the literature of Arab Americans in more depth.

Further, Salaita is incredibly generous to novice readers, often explaining literary terms in parentheses and providing brief histories to help contextualize the fiction. As such, *Modern Arab American Fictions* is ideal for an introductory course on Arab American fiction or literature more broadly, and serves as a handy reference for the more seasoned scholar. Along these lines, I would suggest that his observations remain points of departure for the reader, rather than final assessments. Salaita interprets the novels and essay collections within the nascent field of Arab American studies, and can at times, seem to align his analysis with some common wisdom about the lives of “Arab Americans” rather than search for fissures or new interpretations. The book thus enacts and invites readers towards one of Salaita’s major imperatives: increased attention and rigor in the pursuit of Arab American literary criticism. As such, it is a valuable resource for both casual readers and scholars in the field of Arab American studies, Arab American literary studies, and literary ethnic studies.

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