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Book Review: Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism

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Arab America: Gender, cultural politics, and activism. 2012. Nadine Naber. 2012. New York University Press. New York. Pp 310. \$24.00 (Paperback). ISBN 978 0 8147 5887 8.

Reviewed by Adlai S Davids¹

Varied concepts of Arabness exist in the world and especially so in the world's only remaining economic and military superpower, the United States of America. These concepts may have driven much of the USA's involvement in the Middle East and the Arab world, even before the most recent past and especially the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the USA. A framework of analysis called Orientalism, dominated much of western scholarship on Arabs and other Asian peoples through essentialist representations that renders them incompatible with western civilization. It is against this background that Naber analyses middle-class Arab American families and Arab and Muslim social movements, through what she calls an interrogation of 'the dichotomies that ensnares Arab communities as they clamor for a sense of safety and belonging in the United States'.

Naber's interrogation results in an *Arab America* that is built upon five chapters that chronicles views of Arabs as a 'model' immigrant minority at first, then a struggle for cultural authenticity and then to an emergence of a 'Muslim first and Arab second' political activism and the sensitivities and intricacies of running a leftist Arab political movement. The author uses the narratives contained in these chapters as building blocks to reveal the emergence of a diasporic feminist anti-imperialism within Arab political movements in the final chapter.

Naber's denouncement of Orientalism (and New Orientalism), a framework of analysis that view Arabs and 'Orientals' as people incompatible with (Western) civilization and in need of (military) liberation is the key element of her analysis. She argues that anti-Orientalist thought and efforts are so pervasive, that a disproportionate amount of time and energy is spent trying to debunk negative views of Arabs. In turn, little attention is being paid to issues within Arab families and communities, as raising such issues would be deemed as fuel for anti-Arab racism and the reinforcement of Arab stereotypes. Such issues centre on gender, religion, sexuality and family, aspects of which the author argues, are represented as idealized notions of Arabness which are different and sometimes more socially conservative than views held in the Arab countries of origin.

One of the striking features of Naber's research work is not merely her employment of the standard qualitative techniques such as participant observation and intensive interviews, but rather her almost total immersion in the lived reality of her interviewees. This immersion transforms the 'respondents' into her interlocutors and she is no longer perceived as a researcher or outsider to their lived experience. However, throughout this period of privilege and intimacy, Naber does not shy away from dealing with contentious 'cultural' issues that challenges tensions and hierarchies within her Arab American community. These tensions invariably arise when canvassing the views of older immigrants and second generation (mostly US born and raised) young adults. As a result, this chapter is full of insightful and poignant remarks detailing the

¹ Human Science Research Council

lives of people of the Arab diaspora navigating a world 'here' that is significantly influenced by a world 'over there'.

Naber traces the arrival of the first significant group of Arab immigrants to America to the late 1880s, mostly as menial workers who did not want to remain in the USA. Since the formation of Israel in 1948, the displacement from Palestine and civil war in Lebanon led more Arabs to the USA, many of whom started to view themselves no longer as migrants, but as residents. Interestingly, early Arab communities comprised of equal numbers of Muslims and Christians, which renders a usual conflation of all Arabs as Muslim as erroneous.

The emergence of a US imperialist trend in the Middle East and the post 1967 Arab-Israeli war had a local impact on Arabs in the Bay Area of San Francisco. A distinct commitment to the decolonization of the Arab world became evident at that time, with organizations such as the Palestine Solidarity Committee active in political education and awareness on these issues there. Views of and about Arabs drastically changed and Naber suggests that their "general proximity to whiteness was disrupted". This led to a general anti-Arabic sentiment, with infringements on the constitutional rights of many Arabs no doubt fuelled by Orientalist racism.

As the diversity of Arabs in the Bay area expanded, the organisation of Arab social life expanded, sometimes beyond the scope of politics and into business formations and cultural clubs. Here Naber extracts and highlights the emergence of a discontent amongst women then, with the way in which the Arab organizations were run. This sets the scene for later challenges to the acceptance of heteronormativity and the sexism in both family life and Arab socio-political formations in the Bay Area.

Naber's chapter on cultural authenticity typifies the struggle between the older and younger Arab generation in the USA, as to what exactly constitutes essential or real Arab culture. Here the author expands the existence of an inner Arab and an outer American domain. Arab cultural authenticity, the author argues, is deemed to be centered on 'a good Arab family, good Arab girls, and compulsory heterosexuality'. Naber does not shirk in mapping this 'good versus bad/us versus them' sentiment to intra-communal differences between Arab religious groups (Muslim versus Christian) and between Arab nationalities. The author also raises the fact that the associated power discourse of these sentiments permeates into both familial and community settings of the Arab community.

A key difference between the Arab generations of immigrant parents and their US-born children, is the role in which religion and religious adherence shapes identity and opinion. Naber uses the example of Muslim Arabs and the emergence of a 'Muslim first, Arab second' view amongst the second generation of Arabs in the Bay Area. Whereas learning about Islam and immersion in its teachings and precepts were not deemed important to being Muslim to the older generation, younger Muslims felt it an important launch pad for dealing with injustice, oppression, discrimination and exclusion, as well as educating non-Muslims about the teachings of Islam. As a result, key institutions were established with a mandate to deepen Islamic thought and practice for its adherents, as well as the education of non-Muslims about what is deemed controversial aspects of their religion. Naber uses the striking example of objections to inter-racial marriage and relationships between Arabs and non-Arabs and the inherent racism attached to it within Arab communities. Through a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings, the second generation Arabs brought home counter-arguments for inter-racial marriage and exposes the objections to them as cultural and not as religious. An intellectual power shift within this group became evident in their dealings with aspects of gender, sexuality and socio-economic class.

Naber also extrapolates the cultural authenticity and maps it onto the functioning of the Leftist Arab Movement (LAM), an organisation centred on raising issues about the imperialistic war on terror waged on Palestine and Iraq. Naber herself, further proof of her immersion, was a board member of organisations which were integral to LAM and could reference the views of her interlocutors at LAM with her own experience of working there. Through the biographies of the six women, Naber explores their arrival in the USA and their feelings of ambivalence about the brutal militarism of their new home in their respective countries of origin.

The attraction to LAM and their involvement in its activities was not only a way of getting involved in anti-imperialistic activism for the six women, but also as a way of dealing with their feelings of ambivalence. However, the sexism they encountered through a gender-stereotypical division of labour, normative heteropatriarchy, as well as the marginalization of their ideas and suggestions within LAM, resulted in feelings of delegitimization for these women. Naber forthrightly cites an interlocutor's perception that an internalized Orientalism was at play within LAM, equating the Arab men involved as mimicking the behaviour of the very imperialists they were opposing. These and other quotations may be 'dirty laundry' aired in public, but those set the scene for Naber's tracing of the emergence of a diasporic feminist anti-imperialism.

A most salient aspect of the chapter on the development of a diasporic feminist anti-imperialism is the role of art and artistic expression in anti-imperialistic politics. Naber argues that women's opposition to heteropatriarchy in LAM resulted in their shift into leadership positions, with more opportunities to shape its activist agenda. Even though LAM's campaigns for Palestine and Iraq were their main focus, the women leaders employed the artistic talents of other minorities, mainly African-American and Latino, in the Artist for Iraq event. This, Naber states, resulted in a feminist intersectionality, with a both a transnational and an 'at home' focus which also included a gay-rights focus and also an emergence of a queer anti-imperialism. A connection between the fight against US imperialism and the struggle for social justice for all (diasporic) minorities in the USA was thus established in a shift away from only Arab nationalistic causes.

In contrast to what the title *Arab America* suggests, the book is not an attempt to give a general view of all immigrant and second-generation Arabs in the USA. Even though views expressed by Naber's interlocutors were insightful, these emanated from a relatively limited geographic space, mainly the Bay Area of San Francisco. By the author's own description, this area is racially and ethnically diverse, with various political, cultural and religious groupings active in all spheres of American life. Whilst many readers familiar with this seemingly prominent geographic space in the USA will have this background embedded, other readers will not. Geography matters in the reading of this book and is as much as Naber exhibits a *topophilia* for the Bay Area as the site of her research, a description of the location of the site and a reference as to what makes it tick would have been an informative addition to the text.

A voice somewhat missing from *Arab America* (even within this limited geographic space) is that of less politicized Arab Americans. These voices surely do exist within community based cultural and business organisations, but represent Arabs who have become immersed in their host country and have unashamedly chased the 'American dream'. Many Arabs, like Elham that spoke at the Artists for Iraq event, have suffered under (US influenced) repressive Arab regimes and may have chosen to become disconnected and critical of their homeland. Their Arab voices may be strongly in favour of military and economic interference by their adopted country in their countries of origin. The same would apply to Arabs who are Christian who may

have become immersed in evangelical Christian movements, somewhat disconnecting from both their Arab heritage, as well as the mainstream or 'traditional' Christian churches of their parents by becoming 'Evangelical Christians first, Arab second'.

Although this academic work extensively uses the terminology of Arab American and feminist studies, it does not exclude readers with a general interest in the social sciences, from getting an insight into the dynamics of diasporic Arab life in the USA. This text surely makes a significant contribution to Arab American studies and to indeed to the entire 'Nation of Newcomers' series. *Arab America* serves as an excellent example of scholarship on diasporic communities and should spawn similar research in countries where immigrants are frequently subjected to racism, xenophobia and prejudice.