

NADINE NABER, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (New York: New York University Press). Pp. 320. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper. ISBN 9780814758861.

REVIEWED BY ANA Y. RAMOS-ZAYAS, Professor,
Department of Black and Latino Studies, Baruch College, email:
ana.ramos-zayas@baruch.cuny.edu



In *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*, Nadine Naber traces the historical, political, and community-building experiences of Arab Americans living in the San Francisco Bay area with impressive attention to the cultural, religious, and generational heterogeneity of her interlocutors. An important aspect of this timely ethnography is the fact that Naber compellingly demonstrates that the transition of Arab Americans from “model minority” to “problem minority” predates 9/11, a date now associated with the genesis of anti-Arab attitudes and heightened Orientalism. This is critical to Naber’s analysis, as we get to understand that “Articulating Arabness” in the Bay area was firmly grounded in two main instances of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East: the ongoing U.S. support of Israeli militaristic control over Palestine, the occupied territories, and Palestinians living in Israel and the first Gulf War. More significantly, these forms of U.S. international imperialism are always-already complementary to domestic racialization practices that criminalize people of color more generally.

Naber’s ethnographic study begins, in the Introduction and Chapter 1, by laying out the immediate, everyday consequences of the consolidation of U.S. imperial expansion in the Middle East and the role of the liberal left in the U.S. in actively rejecting any form of denunciation of Israeli occupation of Palestine and Palestinian oppression more generally. These conditions are compellingly linked to the ways in which Arab Americans have become “problem minorities” akin to other people of color in the U.S. These processes also serve as context to the author’s biographical narrative and self-positioning, which render *Arab America* a sort of “auto-ethnography.”

One of the ethnography's greater strengths is that it never loses sight of the heterogeneity of Arab American populations in San Francisco. This is no easy task, given that Arab Americans include people of Palestinian, Lebanese, Jordanian, and Syrian ancestry, among others, as well as including immigrants and U.S.-born populations of various generations. More remarkably, Naber accomplishes this without diluting the historical specificity of each group, particularly in the case of Palestinians. Likewise, the reader remains attentive to the ways in which religious difference—for instance, between Christians and Muslims—are not always the most salient source of intra-communal division, but that these presumed divisions are in fact specific to certain contexts and national and international conditions. Although Naber describes her interlocutors as largely middle class and upper-middle class professionals, we do not get a sense of how these class affiliations exist in contradistinction to Arab Americans from working-class or poor backgrounds. An important, but perhaps not greatly developed attempt at addressing these distinctions included a brief discussion on how some Arab American women activists gained leadership positions through their involvement with the Arab American exiles that arrived in the poverty-stricken Tenderloin neighborhood. However, this relationship between Arab American women activists and the newly-arrived and poor Tenderloin residents is theorized along gender lines and not in terms of class.

An important dimension of Naber's ethnography is her thoughtful and careful engagement with the process by which younger Arab American activists have adopted a "Muslim first, Arab second" politics, which in fact superimposes the connection to a global Islam over a more culturally-based Arabness. This is particularly interesting because being "Muslim first" enables an affiliation with African American Muslims. Naber also highlights how younger Arab American generations defend their inter-racial dating choices to their parents by a strategic engagement with Islam; in particular, these younger and more Islam oriented Arab Americans cite sections of the Qu'ran that emphasize the importance of an individual's character and being a "good Muslim" over other aspects of her/his identity, including racial background.

Perhaps the richest ethnographic materials are included in the chapter on "Dirty Laundry," which deals more directly with the role of Arab women in activist politics that tend to privilege men's voices and interests. In discussions of gendered and queer Arabness, Naber aptly situates the moving life histories of a handful of Arab American

women, in all their affective and intellectual powerfulness, in a broader political context. Like it tends to be the case in the social sciences, Naber tacitly equates “gender” with women, and thus we do not really get a clear sense of what shapes complementary forms of masculinity in her population. However, unlike other work in the social sciences, Naber remains attentive to her female and queer interlocutors’ awareness of how liberal (white?) feminists have traditionally stereotyped them as the passive “victims” of the presumed aggression of Arab men. This provides the grounds for Naber’s theorization of the alternative feminism that Arab women embrace and positions these feminist practices in the academic work by other women of color feminists.

Although Naber draws most of her interlocutors from a handful of Arab American cultural and political organizations in San Francisco, her position as a U.S.-born Jordanian activist and, thus, a “native researcher” of sorts enriches her own detailed ethnographic materials. Naber is refreshingly candid and courageous in the articulation of her own anti-imperial political positionality, while privileging her interlocutor’s varied perspectives on gender and queer politics, religious practices, and assimilationist ambitions. At times I wished Naber had engaged the everyday lives—the work and leisure environment, family life and affective entanglements—of Bay Area Arab Americans who did not belong to activist political groups. Likewise, while it is perfectly valid to focus on a middle- or upper-middle professional class, I felt that at times the role of class remained undertheorized; perhaps such a theorization would have been enabled by greater attention to the class-based perspectives of working class voices.

I realize that research projects have to be bounded by time and space constraints. However, I wish there had been a greater effort to situate the histories and everyday functioning of the Arab American activists to other anti-imperialist and anti-colonial projects by people of color in the U.S. The parallels—e.g. how to air “dirty laundry,” questions of “cultural authenticity,” etc.—between the Arab American groups that Naber describes and Puerto Rican nationalists in Chicago (just to name the case I am more familiar with), for instance, suggest that some of the issues these groups face may be a product of specific U.S.-based structural conditions that merit attention. I do not necessarily mean that Naber needed to pay attention to those specific groups, although there is a case that can be made for greater comparative ethnographic work, but rather that there are theoretical insights to be gained from understanding a particular experience in

light of a broader, more universal reality of oppression and resistance. Along the same lines, I was left wondering what kinds of relationships, if any, did Arab Americans have with other populations that are central to life in San Francisco, including Latinas/os of various nationalities; in fact, the significant rates of conversion to Islam among these very populations may suggest new forms of inter-ethnic collaboration and spaces.

Naber's ethnography urges Middle Eastern Studies scholars to respond to Orientalism in ways that allow Arab Americans to gain a position of power and avoid furthering "anti-Arab bashing." Nadine Naber's *Arab America* should be required reading not only in Middle Eastern Studies courses, but also for scholars in Ethnic Studies, Urban Studies, and other interdisciplinary fields that deal with questions of community building, racialization practices, and anti-imperialist struggle.