

RAMY M.K. ALY, *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity* (London: Pluto Press, 2015). Pp. 255. \$97.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper. ISBN 9780745333595.

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In the midst of a robust and growing literature on Arab Americans, research on Arab communities in Europe is rather scarce. Apart from a few notable examples, research on Arabs in Europe tends to focus on predictable themes such as Islam, integration, and transnational political involvement. Ramy Aly's book, *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity*, is therefore a welcomed contribution to the field. The book explores the intersections of gender, class, and race in the experiences of British born or raised individuals of Arab origins in London. Utilizing autoethnography, Aly investigates the ways ethnic subjectivities are produced in various interactions and at different sites. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Aly shows that Arabness is constructed through the repetition of social codes and ethnic norms in daily practices. A focus on performativity displays how these imperfect constructions are negotiated and (sometimes) contested, as these imperfections of performative acts, Aly explains, "have tangible consequences that are both constraining and productive" (97).

Aly's book contains six chapters and an introduction. In addition to a historical overview of the making of Arab London, the ethnographic investigation takes us to schools, university campuses, shisha cafes, dance clubs, and forums for artistic expression to explore the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and class in the learning, doing, and undoing of Arabness. The autoethnographic approach succeeds in negating notions of "identity crisis" and "cultural clash," as the author offers instead to begin the book with the position that "I cannot recall or identify a time where I decided that 'ethnic identity' or 'ethnic community' were important; they seem to have been notions that had always been there" (5). Aly explains that the context of British

multiculturalism forces many individuals to identify as ethnic subjects in order to fit the multicultural framework of ethno-racial diversity. The pursuit of Arabness that follows contradicts the common understanding of being Arab as a linguistic or political form of identity. Rather, Aly analyzes it as a form of connectedness that is produced and reiterated in various contexts and configurations of power dynamics. And, key to this pursuit is the concept of ethnonormativity.

Building on the notion of heteronormativity, Aly sees ethnonormativity as “a deeply embedded set of beliefs about essential sameness and difference that naturalize the notion of ‘ethnicity’ and provide it with the status of a proper (ontological) object with which the expansive potential of self and human relationships are predicated” (199). As such, ethnonormativity is a form of governmentality that constructs one from early age as ethnic with corresponding expectations that one will do ethnic things in ethnic spaces. Throughout the book, Aly demonstrates the ways ethnonormativity coerces individuals into performing Arabness as a strategy for survival given the conditions of their governmentality. As ethnonormativity is inflicted with heteronormativity and class, “conforming to multiculturalism involves seeing society through epidermal colour whereby ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, race and class collapse onto each other to provide a map of social possibilities” (143). The book richly describes various ethnographic narratives of such social possibilities.

In the British context, being Arab is defined by the lack of belonging to recognized racial groups (White, Black, and Asian), and must be performed in various interactions. One such form of interaction is leisure. Investigating the performativity of Arabness in London in sites such as shisha cafes and dance clubs (in chapters 3 and 4) allows Aly to analyze how groups that do not easily fit within racial hierarchies (in places like Britain or the United States) are more easily differentiated based on leisure preferences. As such, sites for leisurely pursuits take on increased significance in understanding the recitations of ethnic identities. They are also the very sites where the policing and negotiations of ethnicity can be observed and investigated.

The main shortcoming of the book is perhaps connected to its very focus. In investigating what makes Aly’s interlocutors Arab, we forget about what makes them British. Given the sociopolitical context of Islamophobia and xenophobia, it is important to remind the readers that the constructions of ethnicities are an outcome of exclusion and marginalization—which Aly successfully achieves. In the process,

however, it is also important to remind the reader that such incomplete and contested practices of ethnicity are also part and parcel of what constitutes Britishness. The book offers clear analysis of the impact of British race relations as a context leading Arabs to become “on the whole ‘hidden’ and unintelligible to the state and society” (197). At the same time, the analysis could have delved deeper into the ways the author’s interlocutors claim Britishness, and strive to be seen and present in British society.

Beyond the London focus, Aly’s approach is particularly compelling for understanding the dynamics of Arabness in various corners where multiculturalism has become a prevailing form of governmentality making *Becoming Arab in London* an essential reading for the understanding of ethnicity in contemporary multicultural societies. With a clear contribution to the study of Arab diasporic communities around the world, the book is relevant to a large body of readers beyond those interested in Arabness. Utilizing autoethnography, Aly allows the reader to understand the author’s motivations and position. This is done without overshadowing the different voices on which the argument is based. Overall Aly succeeds in weaving through the tapestry of narratives, even if some maybe incoherent or incomplete, to provide an enjoyable and thick description of becoming Arab in a city like London. Coupled with rich theoretical discussions, the autoethnographic approach works to make the book perfect for use in the classroom.