

**SARAH M. A. GUALTIERI**, *Arab Routes: Pathways to Syrian California* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). Pp. 206. \$80.00 cloth, \$24.00 paper. ISBN 9781503606173.

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In *Arab Routes: Pathways to Syrian California*, her highly anticipated second scholarly monograph, historian Sarah Gualtieri seeks to “reorient the field of Arab American studies” away from New York as the metaphorical “mother colony . . . [toward] other kinds of family idioms—her unacknowledged lovers, her forgotten half-sisters, her surrogate daughters, and her renegade sons” (4). The book successfully knits together a new, alternative genealogy through Gualtieri’s careful analysis of neglected US administrative records, her fresh interpretation of more heavily used archives, and the inclusion of family and private collections elicited through “archival transactions” between the author and those who entrusted her with their oral histories. By expanding the documentation and theorization of Arab America far beyond Ellis Island, Gualtieri offers a highly original and vividly written history of Syrian diaspora in and through the US-Mexico borderlands. The book inaugurates a convincing mandate for more research spotlighting “intra-American” step migration while also significantly advancing our knowledge of solidarities, coalitions, and intimacies between Arab Americans and other marginalized communities in the United States. It sits among the most important books in Middle East migration studies; in its critical rigor, it is also an essential and indispensable contribution to comparative US ethnic studies.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with a concise introductory chapter that articulates the book’s ambition to show “how [Syrian] migrants retained, adapted, and forged new solidarities in multiracial environments” (5), Gualtieri situates her project alongside other key monographs in Middle Eastern migration studies that have used transnationalism to problematize

traditional host-home binaries.<sup>2</sup> Although it shares a transnational approach with these previous books, *Arab Routes* is distinct for its prioritization of the unruly, transgressive subject who stays in motion, carving “pathways” and “routes” in and out of Syrian California, long after her first departure from the Middle East. Readers meet many such disruptive characters across the compelling introduction, five substantive chapters, and an evocative conclusion.

Chapter one, “The Syrian Pacific,” charts a range of early twentieth-century Arab migratory aspirations to California through Latin America and the US Southwest. Gualtieri subverts any easy understandings of the identities of her subjects and their descendants by complicating their appearance in US state records that, in their bureaucratic objective, attempt to pin subjects in place. Through her close reading of naturalization papers, Census enumeration records, community-oriented business directories and guides, and family archives, she offers readers intriguing evidence of Arab *mestizaje* and *Latinidad*; a web of families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who are not solely “Arab,” nor “Mexican,” nor “Syrian,” nor “White.” The reader comes to understand early twentieth-century Syrian California as fieldsite, metaphor, and provocation for border crossing and multiracial social life that carries across the remainder of the book.

In chapter two, “Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon,” Gualtieri unpacks the whitewashing and erasure of Syrian American defense attorney George Shibley from the historiography and cultural memorialization of the interethnic Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and Zoot Suit Riots. She brings meticulous new detail to Shibley’s biography, connecting his foundational legal and political work on behalf of the Mexican American 38th Street Boys in 1940s Los Angeles to his later advocacy for gay rights and Palestinian freedom. By the end of the chapter, Gualtieri smartly connects her character study of Shibley to the book’s larger argument that a presentist, 9/11-obsessed approach to integrating Middle Easterners in US ethnic studies reinforces false assumptions of Arab Americans as perpetual newcomers.

Chapter three, “Meeting at the Mahjaran,” recuperates nuances of Syrian American expressive culture beyond simplistic analyses of the community’s assimilation into Whiteness. Gualtieri uses the trajectory of television star Danny Thomas as a keyhole into the chapter’s political analysis of Arab American outdoor festivals and community events in the first half of the twentieth century, including their decline by the late 1960s. Chapter four, “Fragments of the Past,”

draws principally from Gualtieri's oral history interviews with descendants of early Syrian Californians, charting their travels and political engagements back and forth between the United States and the Middle East. Scholars of immigrant families will be especially inspired by her insights on the influence of intergenerational contact for identity formation and political mobilization. Chapter five, "Palimpsests in Iconic California," engages visual material from Muscle Beach in Western Los Angeles (including the book's striking cover art), the 2009 Arabic-language novel *Amerika* by Rabee Jaber, and an Arab Californian revisioning of the life and work of historian Alixa Naff. The book's conclusion brings each thread together in a moving meditation on the deceptive implications of the Ellis Island trope for not only Arab American history but for the future of the United States.

As in her foundational first book, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*,<sup>3</sup> *Arab Routes* maintains Gualtieri's longstanding attention to the problems of Arab American ethno-racial liminality. In *Arab Routes'* introduction, she first presents the concept of "Syrian racial palimpsests" to help readers understand the complex layers of performance, practice, and portrayal that have long complicated Syrian and Arab American identities. The palimpsest is not just a theoretical concept but also a methodological imperative for Gualtieri, who digs deep beneath the surface of representation to unearth alternative or divergent meanings in each text, visual, and narrative in *Arab Routes*. In one particularly memorable example, Gualtieri shifts the gaze of race and migration scholars away from census data and naturalization applications to point out that "the US National Archives contain more than twenty-six thousand records of border crossings from Mexico to the United States [in the early twentieth century], the vast majority at El Paso, in which the race is listed as Syrian" (24). *Arab Routes* is full of subtle but significant details like these. Highly recommended for specialist and generalist readers, the book will irrevocably transform the study of Arab and Middle Eastern American migration and racialization for years to come.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See especially Keith Feldman, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Key monographs in Middle Eastern migration studies include: Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon*,

1870–1920 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stacy Farenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908–1925* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019); and John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Sarah M. A. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009).