

**EMILY REGAN WILLS, *Arab New York: Politics and Community in the Everyday Lives of Arab Americans* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). Pp. 224. \$89.00 cloth, \$27.00 paper. ISBN 9781479897650.**

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In *Arab New York*, Emily Wills poses an important and timely question: What does it mean for Arab Americans to engage in politics when they are subjected to political exclusion on so many levels in the United States? In this book, Wills focuses on the “everyday politics” of Arab Americans, which, she argues, occurs “wherever they struggle, argue, or resist the workings of power” (6). The “compulsory” politicization of Arab Americans, as a community experiencing systemic anti-Arab racism, imbues their daily lives with politics (6). The book expands the fields of Arab American and social movement studies by offering a fascinating case study of Arab Americans in New York, the third largest Arab American community in the US but which Wills observes has been less researched than Detroit’s Arab American community, the largest in the nation and the focus of much of the earlier work in Arab American studies. This ethnography focuses on Arab Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, which is home to the largest concentration of Arabs in New York, and is based on research conducted between 2008–2010.

Wills rightly argues that Arab Americans are “differently political” due to what she calls the “discursive misrecognition” of Arab Americans that leads to their silencing and subjection to “forced speech,” such as demands that Arab (and Muslim) Americans denounce terrorism (13). Wills challenges the notion that the majority of Arab Americans are not “politically mobilized as individuals or as members of groups” (5). The author points out that this presumption is based on “formal politics” and suggests that “politics is everywhere for Arab Americans” (5). That said, this is an uncontroversial assertion for scholars in cultural studies, ethnic studies, and American studies;

in many fields, this formal/informal politics binary is outdated, though perhaps it persists in mainstream political science. While the book is not very theoretically innovative outside of mainstream political science, it is ethnographically rich, well-written, and thoughtfully self-reflexive.

Wills focuses on the “Arab community in practice” through fieldwork with community education programs, social movements, and three organizations: the Arab American Association (AAA) of New York, Al-Awda NY: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, and Adalah-NY: The New York Campaign for the Right of Return. This particular approach provides a welcomed contribution to the limited research on contemporary Arab American community and political organizations. The book is well organized, with three sections focusing on the rubrics of everyday lives, everyday contestations, and everyday identities, and is well contextualized in the social and political geography of New York. Wills acknowledges throughout the book her positionality as an “outsider” academic and also as a political activist/ally and volunteer ESL teacher, reflecting on how this position inflected her interactions in the research and thus illustrating the very everydayness of politics the book theorizes.

Wills demonstrates vividly how community organizations such as the AAA provide spaces for producing Arab identities, free of discursive misrecognition and interrogation, through social practices involving food as well as performances such as *dabke* (an Arab folk dance). Astutely, she goes further to argue that for Arab American participants in these spaces “the form of ‘arabiya . . . invoked is, in fact, an American discourse” (72) that fits within the US multicultural discourse of ethnic difference, especially in multiethnic New York—here Andrew Shryock’s work in *Arab Detroit* would have been relevant.<sup>1</sup>

Wills interrogates the internal politics of disciplinary surveillance, particularly of women, and community discourses and contestations of gender norms, exploring how women negotiate both internal and external panopticism (83). Addressing the very visible engagement of Arab and Palestinian American women and young girls in public activism, she explores the complex position of women navigating Orientalist stereotypes and external scrutiny as well as community gossip and disciplining. This analysis would have benefitted from engagement with Arab and Muslim feminist/queer literature.<sup>2</sup> In her discussion of conflicts over gender segregation, as exemplified by public events where Muslim Arab American women

respond to liberal white American critiques of gender segregation and binaries, Wills challenges the liberal feminist critique but without considering how Muslim/Arab feminist critics have themselves challenged “conservative Muslim principles” (96) from *within* the community. So, while Wills highlights the autonomy and agency of Arab American women in negotiating internal and external policing through nuanced case studies, she does so from a perspective that often reifies, rather than complicates, the “insider/outsider” binary vis à vis gender politics. Arab Muslim American women, in this analysis, are trapped between a liberal Orientalist and liberal apologist worldview. This discussion ignores existing scholarship (and activism) related to nonbinary and transgender Arabs/Muslims, not to mention postcolonial feminist literature on how women are expected to embody the nation in diaspora.

The chapter on Palestine activism, focused on identity work produced in political organizing by Al-Awda and Adalah-NY, is important because there is so little scholarly work on the Palestine (solidarity) movement in the US. Wills provides an interesting comparative discussion of the discourse and strategies used by Al-Awda, which she observes highlight a “uniformly held Palestinian/Arab Muslim identity” (115), and by Adalah-NY, which are based on a “notion of solidarity that presumes difference” (127). She is critical of what she describes as the “flattened” Palestinian national identity promoted by Al-Awda but acknowledges that this “idealized” nationalist discourse provides a “communal heaven” for Palestinian and Arab Americans in a context where there is exceptional censorship of Palestinian national identity.

However, Wills does not interrogate deeply enough the very discourse that is used to frame the Palestine question in the US. Wills uses the euphemistic term “conflict” without problematizing it and without engaging with current scholarship on the Palestinian national movement or frameworks used by those involved in the movement, which has increasingly used the language of settler colonialism and apartheid. The book refers only to the “occupation” in Palestine and does not address the oppression of Palestinians within Israel or engage adequately with the Palestinian refugee question, which is again out of step with the movement’s frameworks and the political realities of Palestinians. Given historical and political contextualization of the oppression of Palestinians is lacking; Wills offers few facts about the “formation” of the “state of Israel” and only scattered references to “dispossession” and Zionism (116), a term that is insufficiently

integrated into the discussion of the Palestinian justice movement, although it is a key concept. The analysis of Palestinian/Palestine solidarity activism needs to be better historicized, as Al-Awda represents an earlier generation of Palestine activism and the differences she notes from Adalah-NY are due to some generational differences in the politics of the movement. Wills rightly points to the emergence of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in the 2000s as a unifying political framework, and one that was effectively deployed in Adalah-NY's creative public protests; here, the principles of the BDS movement could have offered a more comprehensive conceptual framework for her political (and discursive) analysis. The legacy of ACT-UP and anti-WTO protests is a helpful one to link to Adalah-NY's performative protests, but more could have been said about the cross-racial solidarities that have linked BDS activism with Black Lives Matter, indigenous rights, and organizing for migrant rights and against border militarization during this period.

*Arab New York's* last chapter, which is based on the author's post-fieldwork media and discourse analysis, presents the clearest analysis of how identity work emerges in social movements in moments of political crisis. Focusing on "digital Arab New York" and transnational political activism in solidarity with the Arab Uprisings, specifically the Egyptian and Yemeni revolutions, Wills offers an interesting exploration of the fracturing of pan-Arab identities and the ways in which Arab Americans engaged with "American political scripts" (really mythologies) of "democracy and justice" (147). Wills doesn't explicitly interrogate US exceptionalism, though she acknowledges the patriotic nationalism expected of Arab Americans in order to enter the mainstream. It would also have been helpful to engage more with the longer history of the tensions between pan-Arabism and nation-specific Arab identities in this chapter, as these are not new debates or fissures (and to problematize the much debated term "Arab Spring").

*Arab New York* poses important, timely, and interesting questions and, despite some gaps, it expands work in social movement and ethnic studies that has till recently not focused enough on Arab American politics. This book will be interesting for anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, and ethnic/American studies scholars.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Shyrock, "Family Resemblances," in *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*, ed. Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 573–610.

<sup>2</sup> See Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2012).